

# Matthew Crampton Human Cargo: Stories and Songs of Emigration, Slavery and Transportation

Muddler Books (164 pages)



*A history of migration, via the  
medium of folk song*



At a time when flimsy boats overloaded with frightened refugees are washing up on Mediterranean beaches on a daily basis,

Matthew Crampton's book is a timely history of the tide of 'human cargo' on the high seas. From slavery and convict transportation to victims of the Highland Clearances and the press gang, as well as those simply seeking a new life across the ocean free from religious or political persecution, he traces the tragedy-strewn saga of migration over the centuries through first-hand personal accounts, sharp analysis and, crucially, the lyrics of two dozen traditional folk songs on the subject.

It's a book about suffering but also about survival, and the use of folk song gives the narrative a unique vibrancy, constituting '*anonymous but authentic records of those who don't get to write history*' and bringing alive their voices and experiences, passed down the generations as a collective memory until they were eventually written down by 20th-century song collectors. The songs range from the well-known to the relatively obscure but, from the slave's call-to-freedom in 'No More Auction Block for Me',

to the lament for a transported felon that is 'All Around My Hat', each tells us something that perhaps formal history cannot. As Crampton admits, such songs '*aren't facts or quantifiable*'; but they contain a deeper truth in their ability to dramatise the human experience, which is why they have continued to be sung long after the events being described.

Crampton adds a few contemporary testimonies as examples of 21st-century human cargo, but does not labour the historical parallels, which speak for themselves. Crampton is also an accomplished folk singer and live performer; if you get a chance to see his story-and-song 'Human Cargo' show, which raises money for the Refugee Council, do not miss it.

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