
Section 2

Nature and Natural
History

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Introduction and Summary

Florike Egmond

If any topic proved to be a recurring one during both the exhibition of John White's watercolours *A New World: England's first view of America* and the conference *European Visions: American Voices*, it was the theme of nature: the study of it, the knowledge and experience of it, its dangers and profits, its potentially fatal powers, the representation of nature, and the way in which exotic people, plants and animals all were regarded as part of 'exotic nature' by the English settlers who arrived in Virginia.

In the session of the conference specially devoted to botany two of these aspects were highlighted. Deborah Harkness looked at the European context from which John White and his companions departed. What kind of botanical knowledge – especially concerning American botany – was actually available in 16th-century London? In Lime Street a community of naturalists could be found, many of whom were refugees from the Southern Netherlands. In some respects this was, in fact, an English outpost of a European-wide network of students of nature, including botanists, zoologists, entomologists and collectors of minerals, rocks and fossils. At its core we find James Cole (or Ortelianus), a nephew of the famous Flemish cartographer Ortelius. Some of these men were the foremost experts on exotic nature at the time, and obtained their information via close contacts with those who actually had participated in the voyages of Drake or Cavendish. John White was in contact with this community, and it is more than likely that he tried to obtain as much information from them as possible about the nature of the New World.

In spite of this, as Karen Reeds pointed out in her paper about White's experience of nature in Virginia, their preparations were insufficient. Their knowledge of the plants, trees, shrubs and climate of the land where they planned to settle, and their information about the type of crops that they might grow seem to have been minimal. Thomas Harriot's *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* relates that the first impression of the settlers upon landing was that of a paradisiacal landscape, a garden of Eden overflowing with edible fruit and vegetables. Yet, this peaceful and abundant paradise soon took on a more daunting aspect. Eventually, White and his companions were almost starving, eating dog's meat made palatable by cooking it together with the strong smelling sassafras.

Why were these men who spent so much time on nautical preparation so badly prepared in this respect? After all, their very survival in the new land depended on it. And how did they actually think they could convince the investors back in England that a settlement colony was a profitable enterprise if they could not even keep themselves alive? These were some of the questions that came up during discussion, which also touched upon the themes of 'ethnography' and representing nature.

White depicted by no means only plants and animals that were economically interesting. Whether his pictures of people were actual portraits of individuals or more generic representations is still a much-debated question. His drawings, however, encompass both local inhabitants, ways of life, plants, crops and animals, thus bringing together human and nonhuman exotica in one series of drawings, as frequently happened in early 'ethnography'. Precisely for that reason it might be interesting to link the debates on generic versus individual representation with similar discussions among the scholars of botanical and natural history illustration.

White's personal connection with the naturalists of Lime Street – which is also evident from the fact that the illustration of the milkweed in John Gerard's famous *The herball or Generall historie of plantes* (London, 1597) was based on a drawing by White – not only implies that he could ask them for information about American plants, but it also means that White could have access *via* these men to the Continental European traditions and styles of depicting nature. In the course of the 16th century a vast number of drawings and watercolours were created on the Continent portraying plants and animals: both local, indigenous ones and exotic naturalia.

Some of the most famous collections of (mainly botanical) watercolours were only discovered, or rediscovered, in the second half of the 20th century. For the area north of the Alps the best-known collections are perhaps the approximately 1,500 sheets of the *Libri Picturati* vols A.16–30 (now in Cracow), which were created during the second half of the 16th century in the southern Netherlands. The rich collector and aristocrat Charles de Saint Omer, who lived near Bruges, commissioned the core (more than 600 sheets) of this collection, which were put together in albums and may have served as a mixture of an encyclopedia of the natural world, a paper museum and an inventory of some of the plants and animals in his collection. In the *Libri Picturati* we find pictures of a few American and Asian plants, barks and spices, besides a vast number of European plants, shrubs, flowers and trees. Almost equally famous are the 1,529 sheets with naturalistic watercolours of plants (now known as the *Codex Fuchs* in Vienna), created between 1538 and 1562, and intended as a basis for the woodcuts in a work by Leonhart Fuchs (1501–66) that was probably going to be entitled *De stirpium historia commentarii*. It never appeared because of Fuchs's death in 1566, and the watercolours were generally forgotten until they were acquired by the Austrian National Library in 1954. The Fuchs watercolours show many European plants, but also include pictures – some of them now held to be the first in European history – of American plants such as the tomato, the pumpkin, tobacco and the sunflower.

Other important collections of botanical watercolours from the second half of the 16th century are the watercolours of plants in the garden of Eichstätt, which served as the basis for

the copperplate engravings used to illustrate Basilius Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* (Nuremberg 1617); the watercolours made by the famous Swiss polymath and naturalist Conrad Gesner (1516–65) – which, like the Fuchs ones, were never used for the great botanical work planned by Gesner because of his untimely death; and the so-called *Camerarius Fiorilegium*, all three now in the library of Erlangen-Nuremberg.

So far, it is unclear why some of the first European pictures of American plants – probably portraits of living plants growing in Fuchs's garden in Tübingen – can be found around the middle of the 16th century in Germany rather than in Spain or Italy, which were after all the more obvious points of first entry for American *naturalia* into Europe. The reason can certainly not be a lack of interest in exotic plants on the part of the Italians or Spanish, as famous collections of botanical and zoological watercolours can be found south of the Alps as well. Yet, several of these collections too were ill-fated. This is true above all for the thousands of watercolours brought back in 1577 by the royal physician Francisco Hernández, who had been sent to America on the orders of King Philip II of Spain to investigate and document the flora of Mexico. The king decided for various reasons that the watercolours were not to be published, and even access to them was rare. A selection of copies of the Hernández watercolours, however, came into the possession of the Italian Accademia dei Lincei, which eventually published them after considerable delay. The Hernández originals were lost during a fire in the Escorial in 1671. The fate of the hundreds of botanical and zoological watercolours made for the Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) was much less dramatic: the printed works for which they served as a basis only appeared decades after the death of Aldrovandi, but the originals still exist and now can even be consulted online: <http://www.filosofia.unibo.it/aldrovandi/>.

Some other Italian herbals of the second half of the 16th

century, such as the album of Pier Antonio Michiel and the works by Gherardo Cibo, mainly depict indigenous plants. But American and other exotic plants can also be found in slightly less well-known Italian collections of watercolours, such as the Codice Casabona, a late 16th-century album of botanical watercolours in the library of Pisa, some of them by Daniel Froeschl.

In terms of artistic standards, detailed observation and portrayal, and naturalism many of these finely limned representations are regarded as unsurpassed. Whether John White had ever personally seen examples of the watercolours created in Continental Europe is unclear, but his contacts with Gerard and with other members of the Lime Street community make it likely that he was at least aware of these modes of representing nature. Whether he closely followed European styles in terms of painting or added elements peculiar to English traditions of limning is a matter to be further investigated. It is clear, however, that his manner of depicting nature in the New World formed part of a typically Old World style of representing nature.

Further reading

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