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# **Section 4**

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American History

# American History

## *Introduction and Summary*

Peter C. Mancall

In the late 16th century along the mid-Atlantic coast of North America, the locals had the upper hand. The Americans understood the territory. They had the better access to supplies of food. They knew how to get from one place to another. Their allies could usually be counted on for support in times of crisis. They knew where to hunt for game, when to lower their seines to catch fish, how to burn out the center of a tree trunk to make a canoe, how to maintain the fertility of their fields, when to erect palisades around their towns, how to honor their comrades, and how to propitiate the deities who controlled their world. The Europeans, who arrived in the region often tired and weak from a transatlantic journey, came as supplicants, though they did not realize it. Without American support, many would soon have perished. Europeans attributed their success to what they believed was their superior technology and superior god. Believing themselves to be civilized and the Americans to be savages, the newcomers presumed that those who met them at the shore would soon abandon their primitive ways and embrace the ideas and goods that the Europeans brought. That stubborn vision doomed the earliest English settlers and almost prevented colonization before it began.

It has now been more than 400 years since the first generation of failed settlements. Scholars continue to struggle with how to understand the early sustained contacts between Americans and Europeans. The problem exists because the documentary and material record privileges the views of the newcomers who eventually took control of eastern North America. The English always proposed that they would eschew the brutal tactics that the Spanish had employed in earlier settlement ventures, chronicled so brilliantly by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas' *Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, first published in Seville in 1552. That book appeared in London in an English language edition entitled *The Spanish Colonie* in 1583, only a year before the first English settlers landed on the outer banks of modern-day North Carolina. Las Casas' text inspired what became known as the 'black legend' of the Spanish conquest, a story so violent and stomach-churning that any reasonable reader would recoil from the savage tactics employed by the invaders. The Catholic profession of these invaders touched a nerve among the newly Protestant English, who saw in Spanish-perpetrated horrors the logical result of a degenerate form of Christianity. Rather than kill the Americans, the English reasoned, wouldn't it make more sense to share the benefits of European civilization and Protestant Christianity?<sup>1</sup>

Those were among the most important issues circulating in Elizabeth's realm in the early 1580s when the English launched the first of what would become four expeditions to Roanoke. The second of those journeys produced two

artifacts that have remained central to the modern understanding of what happened when Europeans met Americans in the 16th century: a series of watercolor paintings by a talented artist named John White, and a text – part natural history, part ethnography – by the brilliant young mathematician Thomas Harriot. In 1590, through the guiding hand of the younger Richard Hakluyt, who was at the time the most avid promoter of English expansion to North America, White's images and Harriot's text became fused together and printed in the first European book about the Americas simultaneously published in four languages, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*.

Every scholar who has tried to understand the encounter in coastal North Carolina has had to wrestle with this book. It is, to begin, a very complex text. In the early modern age, authors and illustrators might work together to produce a book, but the visual artist's role was usually subordinate to that of the scholar. The first images of Americans to circulate in Europe appeared in a Basel imprint of the so-called Barcelona Letter of Christopher Columbus. It contained crude woodcuts depicting naked natives cowering from fully dressed, technologically sophisticated Spaniards. The images were obviously added to the text by someone who had no idea what a Taino or Carib looked like in life.

Other contemporary illustrators did a much better job. Take, for example, the brilliant early work of entomology known as *The Theatre of Insects*, the posthumously published masterpiece of Thomas Moffett, which first appeared in an English-language edition (after an earlier Latin imprint) in London in 1658. It is a marvel of 17th-century typography, with insects quite literally walking across many of its pages. Yet again there is no doubt that the text came first, and that the artist then tried to craft images to match the descriptions, quite likely without actual specimens to study. The book alternated the minutiae of text with representations of the insects being discussed. Images served as illustrations for the already existing text, although more effectively than the images of the 1493 edition of Columbus' account.

That was not the case for *A briefe and true report*. Instead, as Joan-Pau Rubiés demonstrates in his characteristically insightful essay for this collection, the visual images and the text had independent points of origin. Obviously White and Harriot knew each other well, and they quite likely collaborated on the production of the 1590 edition. But that book was in all likelihood not the original idea. After all, Harriot published the text, without illustrations, in a small pamphlet in 1588. The next year Harriot allowed Hakluyt to include his work, again without illustrations, in the first edition of the *Principall Navigations, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation*. It was only after it had been printed twice that the collaborative book appeared with Theodor de

Bry's engraved versions of White's paintings. As Rubiés notes, close analysis of the captions for the engravings reveal that this was an after-the-fact collaboration, with those captions most likely written by Harriot (though presumably influenced by Hakluyt).

The organization of the book makes this printing history evident: Harriot's observations on the regional environment (and its potential) and the customs of the Carolina Algonquians precede the engraved versions, which then carry substantial captions clarifying points in the text, or making new observations, to enable the reader to understand each image. Scholars, including some whose work appears here, have made much of the differences between de Bry's engravings and White's work. There can be no doubt, however, that each, as Rubiés stresses, tried to represent the reality that they saw – White on the ground at Roanoke, de Bry from White's images.

The book, however, cannot be understood in isolation. As Ernst van den Boogaart demonstrates so well, the 1590 edition reflected the tradition of so-called 'costume' books. It is no coincidence that the title page inserted in the middle of the book introducing the images notes that the reader will find 'the true pictures and fashions' of the Americans described by Harriot. The costume book had already become a useful device for theatrical staging but it was also a kind of ethnography. Hakluyt's older cousin (also named Richard) recognized the utility of the genre when he instructed the English explorers Arthur Pet and Charles Jackman to take such a book (in all likelihood Hans Weigel's *Habitus Praecipuorum Popularum*, published in Nuremberg in 1577) through the Northeast Passage to China with them in 1580. That mission failed, as did every other attempt to find such a route to East Asia. But Hakluyt believed that this illustrated volume, with its hundreds of pictures of Europeans (and assorted other people, including Tupinambas from Brazil) would allow the Chinese to see 'those things in a shadow'.<sup>2</sup>

Van den Boogaart does more than remind us that *A briefe and true report* needs to be understood as a certain type of book. It also needs to be seen as a cultural product of a particular place and audience – in this case, de Bry's Frankfurt, where many in his potential audience, who inhabited a city with a vibrant tradition of botanical literature, would be drawn to the observations of American flora.

Although de Bry produced the book in Germany, it is without question English in its conception. No one makes that point more effectively than Sam Smiles, who situates the last pictures in the volume (of the Picts and other ancient Britons) in contemporary antiquarian debates. Smiles recognizes that the appearance of the book at this particular time reflected not only English expeditions to North America but also a cultural response to Britain's history, in particular to William Camden's efforts to supplant the nostalgic version of Britain's past, created by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century. Camden's *Britannia*, first published in 1586 (at the urging of the brilliant Flemish cartographer Abraham Ortelius) provided the intellectual context for seeing the Picts as the true ancient inhabitants of Britain and not, as Geoffrey had it, as figures on the margins. That intellectual transformation had to take place for the last cultural lesson

of *A briefe and true report* to work: the Algonquians could become civilized because the barbarous Picts had long ago become Britons; had the Picts always lived on the margins then there was no lesson to be applied to the Americans. This context, available only through close examination of contemporary English texts, makes the last part of the Harriot/White/Hakluyt/de Bry project make sense.

Understanding the European context of *A briefe and true report* – the relationship between image and caption, the importance of the local publishing climate and the ways that this book reflected current learned opinion – is crucial, but is not enough on its own. To understand what the encounter meant we need to read these texts against the grain, using White's paintings, de Bry's engravings and Harriot's words to extract what the encounter meant to the Algonquians, a people eventually destroyed by colonization. Michael Leroy Oberg tackles this task with inventive gusto, using these works and others (including Hakluyt's volumes) to produce a new version of what took place on the ground in the mid-1580s. The English, he reminds us, were invited guests in Roanoke. When they outwore their welcome, as they eventually did (especially when they decided they would execute and decapitate the man known first as Wingina and later Pemispan), the Algonquians decided to take matters into their own hands. In essence, they determined the course of events and hence wrote history as they saw fit. They did not write on paper, and so scholars have often seen them as historically mute. But they knew exactly what happened to the famous 'lost' colonists. There is no mystery here, at least not if we approach the subject from the vantage point of the Americans.

Rubiés, Smiles, van den Boogaart and Oberg all wrestle with texts and images. But the enormous intellectual chasm that separates the late 16th century from the early 21st century can only be closed if scholars use all of the tools in their arsenal to understand what happened at that moment of encounter. Audrey Horning's thoughtful essay, part archaeological report and part political manifesto, reveals what we can learn from looking at material remains as well as European books and images. Did White and de Bry, trained through analysis of antiquity, classicize the Algonquians and their settlements? Archaeological digs that reveal the shape of dwellings suggest that they might have, though the record is sufficiently rich (as she shows) that it is possible they did not introduce as many alterations to the historical record as scholars have long believed. Field work in the region where the English landed has revealed much that corresponds to *A briefe and true report*, suggesting again the extraordinary value of that document's text and images for understanding one of the earliest encounters between Americans and the English.

All books and images are products of a particular culture. Each work communicates to the reader or viewer through what Rubiés aptly calls 'rhetorical codes'. Scholars have examined *A briefe and true report* for so long within English and European contexts that they have missed many of the signs that it communicated. The reappearance in the public eye of the original watercolors, which coincidentally also marked the 400th anniversary of the English founding of Jamestown, forces us to think again about how we can comprehend the views of the indigenous. They controlled the initial encounter, at least until the moment when European diseases began to

devastate their bodies. The Algonquians believed that the newcomers came with others, 'invisible & without bodies', as Harriot put it, who 'did make the people to die in that sort as they did by shooting invisible bullets into them'.<sup>3</sup>

That explanation made sense in an Algonquian cosmos, along with the idea that the English were not born from women and that others would soon come to seize their territory. Though it was not produced by the hands of a Carolina Algonquian, the effort by Harriot and White to represent what this world was like enables us to continue our struggle to understand how now-silent and long-gone native peoples crafted American history.

**Notes**

- 1 A generation later, in Jamestown, the English would reveal their own capacity for cruelty. For an eyewitness account see M. Nicholls, 'George Percy's "Trew Relacyon": A Primary Source for the Jamestown Settlement', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 113, 2005, 213–75; for an analysis see P.C. Mancall, 'Savagery in Jamestown', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70, 2007, 661–70.
- 2 Hakluyt to Pet and Jackman, in Hakluyt, *Principall Navigations, Voiages, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, London, 1589, 460–6.
- 3 T. Harriot, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*, Frankfurt, 1590, 29.