The English literature of colonization ()

1. The literature of exploration
• First written manifestations: chronicles of travellers and early colonizers

• *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), by Thomas Harriot

• *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608), *A Map of Virginia* (1612) and *The General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* (1624), by John Smith
Characteristics

• Geographical accounts of the new found lands
• The intention was to inform readers about the colonial enterprise in the New World.
• Virginia was their first destination, and profit was their main motivation.
• Chronicles have historical interest. They provide data about the history of colonisation
• Early chronicles relate facts such as...
• 1605: first abortive attempt to establish an English settlement (in what is now Maine)
• 1607: first permanent English settlement, called Jamestown, Virginia, founded by the London Company.
• The settlers chose a location close to the water, hoping to establish a thriving community.
• Disaster dogged the first Virginians for 20 years (starvation, plagues, diseases, quarrels with the Indians...). By the end of 1607 only 38 men survived of the hundred who had landed
• On colonial chronicles:
• Many were not objective
• Accounts used the language of European conventions, in particular the idyllic vision of America as unspoiled wilderness
• Major images from classical sources and Renaissance literature: America as Arcadia, as bountiful natural, and from the Bible: America as the Garden of Eden
• An exception: Captain John Smith did not exaggerate the possibilities for wealth
• His motto was “work or starve” (only the hard-working would survive and succeed)
• Otherwise, he stretched the truth of his stories
• His tale about his relationship with the Indian princess Pocahontas is the most famous one
The Native Population
• When the Europeans arrived, the land was already inhabited by different tribes
• Native-Americans did not yield easily to the newcomers
• Issues of ownership and land occupation became areas of conflict: agriculture (tobacco) versus hunting
• Native Americans began to fight this encroachment
The Indians in the Eyes of the Europeans

- Native Americans had a rich oral literature, but no written literature among the more than 500 tribes.
- The fact that the native population did not have a system of writing was perceived as a sign of their inferiority.
- This reinforced the idea that America was meant for the Europeans.
Images of the native population in the Americas in the 16th century

• Indians perceived as inferior men
• Indians cast in the role of women
• “Indians should honor, obey, fear and love us” (Thomas Harriot)
Images of Native Americans in the 17th century

• In later accounts, the continent is “empty”: Indian presence is ignored, making the natives as only one aspect of the inhuman wilderness.

• The myth that America was “empty” has been perpetuated in contemporary cultural histories of USA: Henry Nash Smith’s vision of the West in *Virgin Land* (1979).
Implications of early images of Native Americans

• The idea of America as “empty” space justified European’s view that God had created America so that Europeans could expand their civilization

• The concept of “Manifest Destiny”, articulated in the 19th century, is crucial in the history of USA
Manifest Destiny

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