

## [A New World for a New Nation](#)

The Promotion of America in Early Modern England

von  
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## Introduction

In the early 1580s, almost a century after Christopher Columbus first set foot on the New World, England had no substantial or legitimate claim to the territories that we now know as America. Less than a century later, England had not only become an empire but she had also displaced her most powerful rivals in the international arena. But well before England established any legal right to the vast territories of the Americas, a select group of Englishmen managed to create and develop an empire-oriented consciousness. For a whole century *little England* had had to take a back seat and observe how the Spaniards and the Portuguese, her most direct competitors, extended their dominions and their prestige, thus achieving undisputed control not only over the newly-found territories beyond the Ocean Sea, but also over traditional European and Eastern markets. However, this situation underwent a fundamental change toward the end of the sixteenth century, a time when the Tudor establishment finally decided to challenge those who posed a threat both to the economic and to the religious stability of a previously weak and isolated nation. The 1580s witness the first serious English attempts at expanding the borders of the insular nation. More importantly, this is the period in which an impressive corpus of literature was produced with the clear objective of *convincing* Englishmen of their inescapable destiny: becoming an empire.

England's ultimate success in challenging the other European powers in the New World and in establishing permanent and expandable colonies was neither immediate nor easy. Actually, no English colonial attempt came to fruition until the second decade of the seventeenth century. And a key element of that later success was the creation of a contingent of ideological forces joined in the attempt at promoting risky enterprises towards the New World. The present study concentrates on the most prominent and influential New World promotional works in the period between 1580 and 1625. This is the era of adventurers such as Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, Thomas Cavendish, Humphrey Gilbert, and John Smith, of artists such as John White and Theodor de

Bry, of theoreticians such as John Dee, Richard Hakluyt, and Thomas Hariot, of writers such as William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser, and, finally, of rulers such as Elizabeth I and James I. All together, in a composite effort, made the creation and the expansion of an English imperial nation possible, and many of them did so with words rather than deeds. Of course, words in this particular case served the interests of direct physical involvement in the New World. But what makes these writings special is that during this period they could not be based on fulfilled achievements of the English nation but, rather, on the experience of recurrent hardship and failure. Promoting English expeditions to the American territories became a matter of presenting these territories as a new Paradise, a new land of opportunity that God in His providence had destined for the enjoyment of Englishmen, even though no Englishman who had attempted it had ever succeeded in turning such opportunity into real profit. The propaganda that preceded the establishment of English colonies in North America was based on a fantasy of success, on a guarantee that the providential destiny of an imperial English nation would be fulfilled if only Englishmen applied themselves to the task hard enough and piously enough.

The first chapter of this work provides the reader with a general overview of both the historical and literary contexts in which the nascent English nation was constructed in relation to the New World. Even though this does not claim to be a historical work proper, it is necessary to understand the political implications that the Westward expansion across the Atlantic had in England during this period. The sources for the study of this Westward movement are multiple and varied, almost always colored by the specific intellectual or ideological frameworks in which different historians belonging to different periods worked. Despite acknowledging the impossibility of offering a totally neutral account of how history unfolds, this study tries to approach English New World enterprises from a safe distance, one which rather than attempting to explain why the English finally engaged in the American venture will just allow for the illustration of how and to what extent they did so. It offers the reader a panorama of the voyages from England to North America between 1580, this being the year in which the main advocate of New World enterprise, Richard Hakluyt, started his promotional labor, and 1625, when Hakluyt's successor, Samuel

Purchas, brought out his major compilation of voyages coinciding with England's final success in the establishment of permanent colonies in the New World.

The second section of the first chapter is purely concerned with the description and enumeration of what we understand by promotion literature on the New World. The corpus of writings that constitutes the focus of this study is thus delimited in its scope, and at the same time this helps comprehend the range and the variety of the subject at hand. Even though this type of literature had its origins well before the period under analysis, we will see how it was precisely during this period that the tropes, motifs, and propagandistic strategies that make these writings fundamental for the understanding of England's colonial success took final shape. An important component of this approach to the literature at large is the question of Ireland. As we will see, Ireland was immediately adopted by promotional writers as the main referent in their effort to explain what could be found across the Atlantic to those at home. The New World experience was thus envisioned in a continuum with the Irish experience, and the peoples found in America were often catalogued according to predetermined categories coined by the English while they were trying to subdue the Irish territories. Also the question of Spain will initially turn up in this section of this study, since, as we will see in more detail in subsequent chapters, the English managed to construct a model of discourse in opposition to that previously adopted by Spain. Especially after the Armada episode, England became bolder in confronting the Iberian enemy, and the New World promotion literature is a clear illustration of how the discourse of the new nation paved the way towards a subsequent domination overseas.

Chapter two deals with the names behind the literature. Starting with the most prominent among these, Richard Hakluyt, this section offers some bio-bibliographical sketches which explore the motivations behind the literary work, the reasons that pushed these authors to become part of a nation-building enterprise whose ultimate consequences would start being manifest shortly after many of these authors died. Richard Hakluyt never traveled to the New World, but he stayed at home to become the most traveled man in England. Although his work was mostly the compilation of other sources, he rose above his contemporaries as the apostle of English colonization of the New World, and well after his

death his work was still considered to have laid the theoretical and even mythological foundations for the establishment of the English nation and empire. But many others also took part in this ideological and predominantly intellectual enterprise, thus giving shape to England's New World discourse both through their direct physical involvement in Westward ventures and, more importantly, through their literary labor. We will come across names such as Thomas Hariot, John White, and Theodor de Bry, all of them responsible for having promoted England as a colonial power in the international context. Also, we will come into contact with the writings of Walter Raleigh, one of Hakluyt, Hariot, and White's patrons, but also one of the most influential courtiers who looked upon the New World as the source of England's validation as a powerful nation. We will consider the work of William Crashaw, the most prominent amongst the Puritan promoters of voyages to North America. Finally, and already illustrating a transitional phase from a pre-colonial to a purely colonial discursive approach, the chapter closes with the work of John Smith, perhaps the best known adventurer in early seventeenth-century England and one who experienced the first English colonial success in the New World. All these men were self-conscious participants in England's colonial race in America, and all of them shared the goal of turning their nation into the rightful substitute for Spain in the international arena. To all of them England owes her later affluence and power. However, all they could do while they were alive was to project impossible dreams, fantasies that not even they could ever expect to become reality. But this was the power of their discourse, as is the power of all discourse: to transform the unimaginable into something real.

Chapter three is dedicated to presenting some of the fundamental formal aspects of the literature under study. The authorial grounding of narratives that dealt with utterly strange realms of experience and that more often than not portrayed a success that most readers knew to be non-existent posed a serious problem for these writers. Truthfulness and verisimilitude were two aspects that promotional writers constantly emphasized, and the prefatory matter commonly preceding the account of actual voyages illustrates the extent to which these authors were conscious of their readership. The question of the eyewitness is a common denominator in all European colonial discourses in this period, but it is

in the English case that we come across some of the most characteristic examples of how authority based on personal experience and observation was dealt with as a real problem. The eyewitness was still emphasized as an incontestable source of authority that commanded belief, but at the same time the cracks in these authors' claims to truthfulness show how even they were aware of an inescapable fact: their readers had never seen any of the wonders contained in their writings. Therefore, confronted with this momentous inconvenience, promotional authors did not hesitate to divert the attention of their readers towards aspects such as their use of a simple and unadorned style, one free of ornament and possible manipulation, so as to avoid the criticism of those who might not believe in what they wrote.

But these writers were not just promoting ventures to the New World. They also wrote for their patrons at court. And they took advantage of their aristocratic audience to promote themselves within their own emerging nation. Self-promotion is inextricable from the promotion of the New World in these writings. The Tudor period was characterized by social mobility, by the lifting of some social barriers that until then had been immovable for members of the lowest groups in society. It is by now commonplace to acknowledge how playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Middleton, as well as actors such as Richard Burbage, managed to escape the constraints imposed by their humble origins thanks to their work in the theater. The same can be said about many of the writers with which this study is concerned. At different levels of prominence, the Richard Hakluyts, John Whites, Thomas Hariots, or even John Smiths of this period obtained affluence and prestige that would have been unthinkable had it not been for their promotional labors.

Chapter four constitutes the cornerstone of this book. After establishing the historical and literary backgrounds, as well as the formal and authorial aspects of this literature, the discussion proceeds to the careful and systematic identification of the main rhetorical tropes that promotional writers used in order to present their material as desirable and attainable. Supplementing the work of scholars such as Michel de Certeau, Hayden White, Walter Mignolo, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Shannon Miller, Mary Fuller, Thomas Scanlan, David Armitage and others, this chapter explores the dominant metaphors

through which the New World was first ideologically conceptualized and then made ready for immediate consumption and exploitation in this period of English cultural history. The New World was not an always-already formulated concept in the English mentality of the period, but had to be made so by means of recurrent and well known tropes. The intrinsic otherness Europeans found in America was first tamed, domesticated, and only then inscribed into a manageable discourse, one which would allow this reality to be manipulated and put to the service of imperial interests. In the English case the whole picture becomes much more complex and interesting in that England, as a late comer, found herself forced to reinvent the ways in which other Europeans had achieved control over the new lands. English promotional writers of the period were obliged to make use of the previous experience of their European competitors (sometimes even praising and recommending to their readers the imitation of specific traits of their rivals) but, at the same time, they had to present England as radically different so that their legitimate claim to already occupied territories could withstand criticism and attacks from abroad. The other these promotional writers encountered in the New World was not exclusively limited to the naked and culturally different native Americans, but also included the European powers against which England had to measure herself so as to establish her moral and legal authority on the colonizable lands. One of the most important consequences of this ideological play is the way in which the English nation emerges, not only in opposition to the native Americans they try to subject, but also in contrast to other nations traditionally considered to be culturally similar. To a certain extent, what we observe in this specific kind of literature is the way in which England transcended her own old worldness in order to become progressively more identified with the new worldness of the New World. By expanding her borders and encompassing the New World within them, the new England became a New World in the eyes of these promoters. This served to validate, at least discursively, the also new identity intrinsic to a nascent religious faith.

The approach this study takes to England's New World discourse as shaped in the promotion literature of the period does not follow the traditional format previous works on the subject have adopted. Many of the rhetorical tropes intrinsic to travel literature and, more specifically, to

literature dealing with English voyages to America, have been discussed in isolation in some of the studies that this project acknowledges as important sources. However, the present work tries to do something else: instead of just pointing to these tropes as discrete components of a process based on simultaneity, our contention here is that these tropes progressively gave shape to a reality that could not be dealt with all of a piece. In all, this new type of approach echoes what Hayden White has identified as the process through which narrative makes sense out of strange or threatening experiences: from a metaphorical apprehension of the new reality (that encountered in the New World), these writers moved towards a metonymic and synecdochic description and classification of their narrative material only to conclude with an ironic reflection on their own discursive enterprise. In the process, these authors not only made their narrative material desirable but also, and more importantly, they gave shape to a new national self on which a new English identity could be constructed.