
1-10 A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1588)

Thomas Harriot

The Roanoke voyages of 1584–1588 together constitute England's first major effort to establish a colony in North America. The effort failed, and the famous "lost colony" on Roanoke Island off the Carolina coast has fueled much speculation in the four hundred years since its disappearance. We may never know the fate of the colonists; however, Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588) offers some insight into English–Indian interaction in the beginning of the colonial period. Harriot, a scientist of some note and onetime tutor in the household of Sir Walter Raleigh, was a member of the 1585 expedition to Roanoke. In addition to making astronomical observations and providing advice on navigation, Harriot studied the natural life and native inhabitants of the region. The selection here describes the dramatic impact that epidemic diseases had on the Indians' perceptions of the English and their religion.

Source: Thomas Harriot, excerpt from *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Copyright © 1972 Dover Publications.

... There was no town where we had any subtle devise practiced against us, we leaving it unpunished or not revenged (because we sought by all means possible to win them by gentleness) but that within a few days after our departure from every such town, the people [Native Americans] began to die very fast, and many in short space. [I]n some towns about twenty, in some forty, in some sixty, and in one six score, which in truth was very many in respect of their numbers. This happened in no place that we could learn but where we had been, where they used some practice against us, and after such time; the disease [was] also so strange, that they neither knew what it was, not how to cure it; the like by report of the oldest men in the country never happened before. . . . A thing specially observed by us as also by the natural inhabitants themselves.

Insomuch that when some of the inhabitants which were our friends and especially the Wiroans [Chief] Wingina had observed such effects in four or five towns to follow their wicked practices, they were persuaded that it was the work of our God through our means, and that we by Him might kill and slay whom we would, without weapons [or] . . . com[ing] near them.

And thereupon when it had happened that they had understanding that any of their enemies had abused us in our journeys, hearing that we had wrought no revenge with our weapons, and fearing upon some cause the matter should so rest: did come and entreat us that we would be a means to our God that they as others that had dealt ill with us might in like sort die; alleging how much it would be for our credit and profit, as also theirs; and hoping furthermore that we could do so much at their requests in respect of the friendship we profess them.

Whose entreaties although we showed that they were ungodly, affirming that our God would not subject Himself to any such prayers and requests of men: that indeed all things have been and were to be done according to His good pleasure as He had ordained: and that we to show our selves his true servants ought rather to make petition for the contrary, that they with them might live together with us, be made partakers of His truth and serve Him in righteousness; but notwithstanding in such sort, that we refer that as all other things, to be done according to His divine will and pleasure, and as by His wisdom He had ordained to be best.

Yet because the effect fell out so suddenly and shortly after according to their desires, they thought nevertheless it

came to pass by our means, and that we in using such speeches unto them did but dissemble the matter, and therefore came unto us to give us thanks in their manner that although we satisfied them not in promise, yet in deeds and effect we had fulfilled their desires.

This marvelous accident in all the country wrought so strange opinions of us, that some people could not tell whether to think us gods or men, and the rather because that all the space of their sickness, there was no man of ours known to die, or that was especially sick. [T]hey noted also that we had no women amongst us, neither that we did care for any of theirs.

Some therefore were of opinion that we were not born of women, and therefore [were] not mortal, but that we were men of an old generation many years past . . . [and] risen again to immortality.

Some would likewise seem to prophesy that there were more of our generation yet to come, to kill theirs and take their places, as some thought the purpose was by that which was already done.

Those [of our generation] that [they thought] were immediately to come after us they imagined to be in the air, yet invisible and without bodies, and that they by our entreaty and for the love of us did make the people to die in that sort as they did by shooting invisible bullets into them. . . .

Some also thought that we shot them [the Native Americans] ourselves . . . from the place where we dwelt, and killed the people in any such town that had offended us . . . , how far distant from us [they may be].

And other[s] said that it was the special work of God for our sakes, as we ourselves have cause in some sort to think no less, whatsoever some do or may imagine to the contrary. . . .

[T]heir opinions I have set down the more at large that it may appear unto you that there is good hope they may be brought through discreet dealing and government to the embracing of the truth, and consequently to honor, obey, fear, and love us.