1

'The excellency of the place': English impressions of New England

English impressions of New England on the eve of the 'great migration' were often muddled and unfocussed. Whereas most Englishmen of the seventeenth century probably gave no thought at all to North America, those who did take an interest in the New World drew on incomplete, confusing and sometimes erroneous information. Ordinary Englishmen could not be expected to locate New England in terms of latitude and longitude, nor could they give an accurate account of its climate and resources. Even prospective migrants and colonial investors struggled with information that was patchy and conflicting. Reports of the land north from Maine to Newfoundland mixed with accounts of the very different country south from Cape Cod to the Chesapeake. New England was a blur of contradictory images, of barren rock and beckoning pasture, crippling cold and balmy sunshine. The list went on to mention limitless forest and open meadows, gentle natives and treacherous savages, and by the 1630s, godly saints and cruel schismatics.

Communication was the seed as well as the spore of migration. Intending emigrants needed as much information as possible to prepare them for their endeavour; the news they sent back conditioned the expectations of their successors. This chapter sets out to trace the kinds of information about New England circulating in England in the periods before, during and after the great migration of the 1630s. Printed pamphlets, manuscript letters and oral reports produced a welter of impressions, images and news, of varying degrees of trustworthiness.

English familiarity with New England began in the sixteenth century and grew spasmodically in the early Stuart period. English fishermen had long made use of New England landfalls, and towards the end of Elizabeth's reign they were joined by mariners bent on a different purpose. Influenced by the promotional writings of the Richard Hak-

luyts (uncle and nephew), and building on the experience of the Roanoke settlement of the 1580s, a sequence of sea captains explored the coastline between Virginia and Newfoundland looking for a place to establish a colony. The reports of their voyages, often written to gain funding for future expeditions, presented America as a land of plenty and of immeasurable promise. The stony reality was often obscured in these first flickerings of the American dream. A series of publications early in the seventeenth century reinforced the rosy impressions of an earlier generation of voyagers and publicists by depicting the territory as ideal for English exploitation.[1]

Bartholemew Gosnold and John Brereton spent the early summer of 1602 on the island of Martha's Vineyard where they found a lush and fruitful country. Brereton described the attractions of the region, identified as 'the north part of Virginia', in his *Briefe and True Relation*, which was published soon after he returned to England. Besides fruits and berries, 'an incredible store of vines', and farmland 'in comparison whereof the most fertile part of all England is but barren', Brereton reported all manner of 'commodities' that English settlers could work, and from which English investors could profit. The land was 'full of high timbered oaks . . . cedars straight and tall, beech, elm, holly, walnut trees in abundance'. The island teemed with wildlife, the sea with fish, the air with fowls, and the ground gave promise of a store of useful minerals. Coming to the mainland, almost in raptures, 'We stood a while like men ravished at the beauty and delicacy of this sweet soil.' To bolster these heady impressions Brereton saw fit to reprint Richard Hakluyt's 1585 arguments for colonizing Virginia, and to copy Thomas Harriot's account of the 'merchantable commodities' found there at the time of the Roanoke expeditions. Descriptions of what is now North Carolina became conflated with descriptions of the very different natural ecology of New England.[2]

[1] Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London, 1589); Thomas Harriot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1588). The Elizabethan background is discussed in David Beers Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America, 1481–1620* (New York, 1974); David Beers Quinn (ed.), *The Roanoke Voyages 1584–1590* (London, 1955); and David Beers Quinn, *Set Fair for Roanoke: Voyages and Colonies, 1584–1606* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985). See also Howard Mumford Jones, 'The colonial impulse: an analysis of the "promotion" literature of colonization', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 90 (1946), pp. 131–61.

[2] John Brereton, *A Briefe and True Relation of the Discouerie of the North Part of Virginia; Being a most Pleasant, Fruitful and Commodious Soile* (London, 1602), pp. 5–8, 25–36, 41–5. The text of the second impression, with added materials, is in George Parker Winship (ed.), *Sailors' Narratives of Voyages along the New England Coast 1524–1624* (Boston, 1905), pp. 33–50.

Inspired by Brereton's *Relation*, Martin Pring travelled from Bristol to New England the following year and sailed down from Maine to Cape Cod. Pring's report confirmed Brereton's impressions, and published again the useful observation that this part of America had good store of sassafras, 'a plant of sovereign virtue for the French pox'.[3] In 1605 Captain George Waymouth coasted New England and explored up the Kennebec River. James Rosier published an account of his findings in *A True Relation of the Most Prosperous Voyage*, which included yet another glowing account of New England. Like Brereton and his Elizabethan predecessors, Rosier appended a catalogue of 'what profits we saw the country yield', including lists of trees, fowls, beasts, fishes, fruits, plants and herbs.[4] James Davies likewise praised the abundance of fruits and extraordinary lobsters encountered along the northern coastline of New England in a voyage of 1607.[5]

The cumulative effect of these reports was to give New England (or northern Virginia, as it was still called) a highly favourable press. In the years after 1607, while the Virginia Company struggled to breathe life into its difficult southern outpost at Jamestown, New England beckoned as a superior alternative, a virgin land of untapped promise.[6] Wishful thinking, ecological conjecture and the balmy experience of summer coasting produced an image that was seriously at variance with reality.

Competing with this rosy picture, however, was a much bleaker set of impressions. Sir Ferdinando Gorges and Sir John Popham attempted to establish a colony in New England in 1607, but their pioneer outpost was an embarrassing failure. Ill-manned and badly organized, the settlement at Sagadahoc (Maine) was abandoned within a year of its foundation. The colonists found none of the precious metals they expected, and were disappointed with the natural commodities of the region. Moreover, the 'extreme unseasonable and frosty' winter took them by surprise, a sharp contrast to the fine weather of their arrival in August. Against all expectations they found New England to be 'a cold, barren, mountainous, rocky desert', and

[3] Pring's account is in Winship (ed.), *Sailors' Narratives of Voyages*, pp. 52–63. The quotation is from p. 59.
[4] James Rosier, *A True Relation of the Most Prosperous Voyage Made This Present Yeere 1605 by Captaine George Waymouth* (London, 1605), sigs. B2–B2v, E3v–E4.
[5] James Davies, 'Relation of a voyage unto New England . . . 1607', ed., B. F. De Costa and Charles Deane, M.H.S. *Proceedings*, 18 (1880), pp. 82–117.
[6] For the early history of Virgina see Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven, 1934), vol. 1, pp. 98–140; and Edmund S. Morgan, 'The labor problem at Jamestown, 1607–1618', *American Historical Review*, 76 (1971), pp. 595–611.

their experience set back the development of northern colonization for more than a decade. Those who survived the Sagadahoc fiasco spread the view that New England was worthless, cold and untenable, a view that found some favour with the champions of Jamestown. As one apologist put it, 'To justify the suddenness of their return they did coin many excuses, burdening the bounds where they had been with all aspersions that possibly they could devise, seeking by that means to discourage all others.'[7]

Fortunately for the promoters of New England the grievances of the Sagadahoc settlers did not appear in print, but reports about the failure of the northern colony circulated among courtiers and promoters, and found currency in the maritime community and beyond. Colonial investors directed their energies elsewhere. The negative impressions created by the abandonment of the first New England colony remained as an undercurrent, still discernible in the 1630s, while promotional books and pamphlets continued to present a much more positive image.

Captain John Smith, who travelled to the region in 1614, published a characteristically enthusiastic *Description of New England* in 1616. Smith actually coined the name 'New England' and did everything in his power to promote 'this unregarded country'. Although the English had made several probing voyages, 'The coast is yet still even as a coast unknown and undiscovered .... As for the goodness and true substance of the land, we are for the most part yet altogether ignorant of them.'[8] The potential of New England lay as much in its mystery as in its proven resources.

English 'Virginia' stretched from thirty-four degrees to forty-four degrees north, from modern South Carolina to Maine, and technically extended laterally from sea to sea, as far to the west as Drake's 'Nova Albion'. New England, in Smith's depiction, overlapped this territory in the region of forty-one to forty-five degrees, but most properly 'from Penobscot to Cape Cod'. Even for residents the region was something of a blur, while from the perspective of England the area lacked all geographical precision.[9]

[7] William Alexander, *The Mapp and Description of New-England* (London, 1630), p. 30; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, 'Climate and mastery of the wilderness in seventeenth-century New England', in David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (eds.), *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston, 1984), p. 5. For the Sagadahoc experiment see Andrews, *Colonial Period*, vol. 1, pp. 78–97.

[8] John Smith, 'A description of New England', in Arber, *Smith*, pp. 175–231; John Smith, 'The generall historie of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles', in Arber, *Smith*, pp. 699, 700, 703, 704.

[9] Smith, 'Description', pp. 188, 192; Smith, 'Generall Historie', pp. 695, 702, 706. For

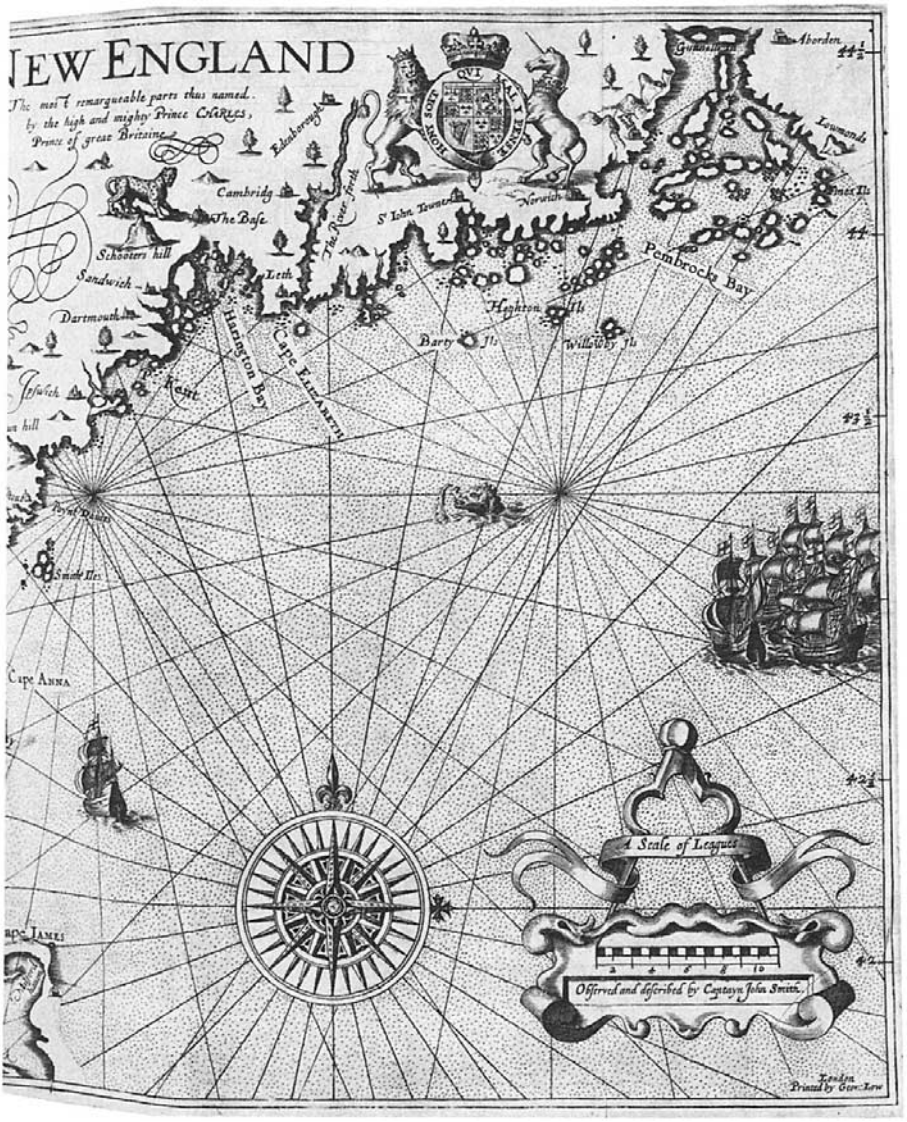

Figure 1. 'Approaching New England'. Detail from Captain John Smith, *A Description of New England* (London, 1616). By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California (RB 3409 STC 22788).

According to a correspondent of 1645 the boundaries of New England stretched 'from Virginia southward to the French northward'. But 'New England' was as often equated with the limits of the patent of Massachusetts Bay, an area rendered in an Admiralty deposition of 1636 as 'Mathew Tewses Bay'.[10] Later in the seventeenth century people talked of 'New England' when they might have meant any part of Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Haven, New Plymouth, Connecticut or Rhode Island, or wherever there were English settlers east of the Hudson River. The settlers themselves commonly referred to New England, often abbreviated as 'N.E.', without regard to particular political jurisdictions. The label differentiated their area of settlement from the French to the north, the Dutch to the south, and the other English plantations in the Chesapeake and the Caribbean. 'New England' appeared on the maps long before anyone imagined it as a place of spiritual regeneration.

New England, in Smith's opinion, was 'a most excellent place, both for health and fertility', and blessed with 'an excellent climate'. During the next few years Captain Smith criss-crossed England on a promotional tour, talking with gentlemen, visiting towns and giving away copies of his books and maps. Smith proselytized most vigorously in the West Country, which already had a tradition of interest in America, and he distributed thirty copies of his New England book to the London livery companies. Besides promoting himself, Smith was concerned to persuade people that a northern colony was both feasible and desirable. As an eyewitness, an expert, and a persuasive talker, Smith introduced a diverse audience to his views. He even distributed maps showing the rugged New England coastline comfortingly adorned with familiar English place-names.[11] Little was said of the disappointments of Sagadahoc, as Hakluyt's old arguments in praise of western planting were revived and revised. Pockets of people became aware of New England as a fruitful and potentially profitable territory within the English sphere of influence.

It was not until the 1620s, however, when an English settlement

Nova Albion see W. S. W. Vaux (ed.), *The World Encompassed by Sir Francis Drake* (London, 1854), pp. 115–33, 221–6; and *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1635*, p. 410.

[10] Beinecke Library, Yale University, Osborne Files, 'Newsletter describing English settlements in New England', 24 December 1645 (Robert Child to Samuel Hartlib?); Peter Wilson Coldham (ed.), *English Adventurers and Emigrants, 1609–1660* (Baltimore, 1984), p. 65.

[11] Smith, 'Generall historie', pp. 708, 745, 748. Smith's map, with English place-names substituted for Indian names, first appeared in 1616. Subsequent editions included heraldic elaborations and the locations of actual English settlements to 1635.

actually took root in New England, that information about the land and its qualities became more common. With the establishment of Plymouth Plantation (1620), the projects of the Council for New England (from 1620), the Dorchester New England Company (1623), and the work of the New England Company (1628) which became the Massachusetts Bay Company (1629), news about New England circulated much more readily in old England.[12] Oral reports, letters and manuscript and printed accounts built up a pool of information that was mostly of an enthusiastic, apologetic or promotional nature.

Early accounts of Plymouth Plantation reported success and satisfaction, despite the accidental circumstances of the Pilgims' arrival. (The *Mayflower* was lost, several hundred miles north of its course, when it reached Cape Cod in 1620.) William Hilton, a London fishmonger, wrote home to his cousin in 1621 in praise of Plymouth's natural abundance.[13] The first published account, *A Relation or Iournall of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation Setled at Plimoth in New England*, waxed joyful about 'one of the most pleasant, most healthful, and most fruitful parts of the world'.[14]

In 1622 John Pory, secretary to the Virginia Company, travelled to New England to inspect the territory around Plymouth Plantation. Pory reported on 'the excellency of the place', although he also found some points to criticize. The ground, he found, was 'rocky, rough and uneven', quite unlike the soft tidewater lands of Virginia. The soil was 'passing good . . . yet culturable with hoe and spade rather than with the plough'. An agricultural living could be made in New England, as the Pilgrims had already proved, but Pory recognized that it would take a fearsome amount of work to turn Plymouth Colony into an English Goshen. The land certainly had its charms, including raspberries, cherries, gooseberries, strawberries, 'delicate plums', and 'five several sorts of grapes', enough sweet things to induce salivation. Wildlife, especially deer and turkeys, abounded in a parklike setting

[12] The complex history of the organization of New England colonial enterprise is traced in Andrews, *Colonial Period*, vol. 1, pp. 262–4, 320-2, 354-68; Frances Rose-Troup, *The Massachusetts Bay Company and Its Predecessors* (New York, 1930); and William G. Robbins, 'The Massachusetts Bay Company: an analysis of motives', *The Historian*, 32 (1969), pp. 84–5.

[13] Hilton's letter is in Smith, 'New-England's trials', in Arber, *Smith*, pp. 260–1.

[14] *A Relation or Iournall of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation Setled at Plimoth in New England* (London, 1622), sig. A3. This collection of reports was advertised as 'writ by the several actors themselves after their plain and rude manner, therefore doubt nothing of the truth thereof'; sig. A3v. For the history of Plymouth see William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1963), and George D. Langdon, Jr., *Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth 1620–1691* (New Haven, Conn., 1966).

of fine woods and plentiful grazing. Most striking, however, was the wholesomeness of New England's water and air, a feature that impressed nearly every English visitor to the region. Pory had come from a Virginia racked with disease, a colony tormented by dysentery and malaria, to this more northerly land where people seemed to thrive. The robust settlers of Plymouth made a powerful impression. 'This healthfulness,' wrote Pory, 'is accompanied with much plenty both of fish and foul every day in the year, as I know no place in the world that can match it.'[15]

Pory shared his findings with the governor of Virginia and with the Earl of Southampton in London, and the news spread among English merchants and investors. Though not printed, Pory's report soon passed into the public domain to join other accounts of pristine New England. During the 1620s the mercantile and maritime communities in Stuart London gathered increasingly detailed information about New England, and anyone interested in America could dip into this pool of knowledge and impressions. Town libraries, like that at Dorchester, were increasingly likely to have books about American travel and exploration.[16]

Other early visitors to Plymouth brought home enthusiastic accounts that could only whet the appetite of prospective settlers. Emmanuel Altham, captain of the *Little James*, spent a festive summer in New England in 1623 and wrote home to his brother about the vitality and good cheer of Plymouth Plantation. Everyone was 'in good health, and neither man, woman or child sick'. Altham had attended William Bradford's wedding in August 1623, a celebration that conjures visions of the merry men in Sherwood Forest rather than dour pioneers in a hostile wilderness. 'We had about twelve pasty venisons besides others, pieces of roasted venison and other good cheer in such quantity that I could wish you some of our share.'[17]

[15] Sydney V. James, Jr. (ed.), *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth . . . John Pory, Emmanuel Altham, and Isaak d Rasieres* (Plymouth, Mass., 1963), pp. 6–17; William S. Powell, *John Pory, 1572–1636: The Life and Letters of a Man of Many Parts* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1977), pp. 83, 93, 96, 98.

[16] Dorset Record Office, B2/28/1, 'A catalogue of the bookes in the library of Dorchester, with the givers, taken in the yeare 1631'. Another glimpse of the circulation of print concerning New England appears in the diary of the Suffolk minister John Rous, who recorded in June 1630, 'I saw a book at Bury at a bookseller's containing a declaration of their intent who be gone to New England, set out by themselves, and purposed for satisfaction to the king and state (as I conceive) because of some scandalous misconceivings that run abroad'; Mary Ann Everett Green (ed.), *Diary of John Rous . . . 1625 to 1642* (London, 1856), p. 54. Rous had evidently come across Winthrop's *Humble Request*.

[17] James (ed.), *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth*, pp. 23, 29.

Like others of a commercial bent, Altham had his eyes peeled for 'what profit is to be raised here'. He found no shortage of prospects. The fishing, he reported, 'is beyond belief', with cod, turbot, sturgeon, salmon, bass, trout and eels for the taking. The land sprouted cedar, beech, pine, oak, 'as good timber as ever I saw'. Sarsparilla, sassafras and berries abounded, 'all which are worth good store of money in England'. Sarsparilla, he noted, 'was of two shillings a pound, at the least' in London, 'and we have here enough to load a ship'. Altham warned, sensibly enough, that 'none of these commodities can be got without a little pains, and the most pains and cost is to be stowed at the beginning'. But he had no doubt at all that 'a better country was never seen nor heard of, for here are a multitude of God's blessings'.[18]

Altham wanted to spread the word. He instructed his brother in England to share the news with family and friends. 'I pray, sir, let them read this letter, either the same or a copy of the same.'[19] Altham's enthusiasm would find a widening audience of readers and listeners, to join with different ripples of information emanating from other encouraging accounts of the New World. It had to compete, however, with more pessimistic accounts of New England. 'Some say you are starved in body and soul; others, that you eat pigs and dogs that die alone; others, that the things here spoken of, the goodness of the country, are gross and palpable lies.'[20] Supporters of Plymouth Plantation on both sides of the Atlantic did their utmost to suppress such hostile opinions.

According to the favoured interpretation, New England promised wholesome air and brimming larders for the settlers, and enormous profits for the merchants and investors. Doubts about the barrenness of the soil or the harshness of the winters were overshadowed by the general confidence and enthusiasm. One writer of the 1620s praised the land as 'gorgeously garnished with all wherewith pregnant nature ravishing the sight with variety can grace a fertile field'.[21]

Captain John Smith went into print again in 1620 with *New England's Trials*, and followed it with a greatly expanded new edition in 1622. Here he celebrated the voyagers to New England – eighty ships within these last eight years – and praised the success of the colonists at Plymouth. In 1624 Smith published his great work, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England and the Summer Isles*, which went through half a dozen printings by 1632. This was both a history of American

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 24–8, 37.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[20] Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, p. 374.
[21] Alexander, *The Mapp and Description of New-England*, pp. 30–1.

colonization and a prospectus for its further development. Smith was prolific, enthusiastic and authoritative, and his writings became, alongside those of Hakluyt, the standard work on America for English readers.[22]

Adjectives like 'excellent' and 'abundant' flowed freely across John Smith's pages. New England, according to Smith, boasted abundant resources, excellent harbours, bountiful woods and a health-giving climate. Furthermore, he advised, 'The ground is so fertile that questionless it is capable of producing any grain, fruit or seeds.' After more than a generation of attention for its raw materials, the land of New England was now being trumpeted for its agricultural possibilities. New England could be considered a suitable, nay, desirable, place for English settlement, and not just for long-distance commercial exploitation. Such claims would rouse the interest of land-hungry migrants as well as commercial investors.[23]

The pace of publication quickened as New England changed from a land of distant discovery to a place of active investment and colonization. Sir William Alexander published *An Encouragement to Colonies* in 1624, which was reissued in 1630 as *The Mapp and Description of New-England*. This supported a northern settlement, New Scotland, and promoted the aristocratic schemes of Sir Ferdinando Gorges. Gorges, Captain Smith's erstwhile employer, envisaged a feudal New England focussing profit and honour on himself.[24]

In 1625 an extravagant piece of puffery came off the London presses, entitled *New-England, or a Briefe Enarration of the Ayre, Earth, Water, Fish and Fowles of that Country . . . in Latine and English Verse*. The author, or perpetrator, was William Morrell, who had travelled to the New World as chaplain with Robert Gorges in 1623. New England, he wrote, was 'grand-child to earth's paradise', a land of 'sweet air' endowed with 'nature's bounties' and 'peace and plenty'.[25] Morrell's verse celebrated a naïve and idyllic image of America. It is not certain whether anyone was swayed by this poetic encomium, but it added to the climate of hyperbole and expectation.

[22] Smith, 'New England's trials', in Arber, *Smith*, pp. 233–72; 'Generall historie' in Arber, *Smith*, pp. 273–784.

[23] Smith, 'New England's trials', p. 237; Smith, 'Generall historie', pp. 708, 712. Virginia too, at this time, was being transformed from a garrison outpost to an agricultural settlement.

[24] William Alexander, *An Encouragement to Colonies* (London, 1624); Alexander, *The Mapp and Description of New-England*; Sir Ferdinando Gorges, *America Painted to the Life* (London, 1659).

[25] William Morrell, *New-England, or a Briefe Enarration of the Ayre, Earth, Water, Fish and Fowles of that Country . . . in Latine and English Verse* (London, 1625), pp. 13–17.