Section 1

Economic and Cultural Contexts
The publication of the essays collected in *Cultures of Natural History* a little more than a decade ago may be said to have both consolidated and triggered a way of looking at the emergence of the human and natural sciences with an emphasis on the cultural context(s) within which they arose and developed. It can be seen as a shift from a ‘tunnel vision’ of the steady progress of a disinterested science to one that takes into account the various, sometimes conflicting interests and pressures within which such developments – both progressive and retrograde – arose. In line with this approach – and sometimes in polemic with the *éminence grise* of John White studies, David Quinn – Stephen Clucas places Thomas Harriot’s *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* firmly within an economic framework rather than in one of a disinterested search for knowledge. By implication, the drawings of John White may be taken to show a similar interest in the economic implications of the new colony.

A significant part of the exhibition *A New World: England’s first view of America* was devoted to the parallels between the dress of the human figures among the John White drawings and parallels in Western dress as evidenced in costume books, pamphlets and *alba amicorum*. The context in which Michael Gaudio situates the John White drawings is that of dress and costume – words whose connotations of habit and custom extend into the world of ethical and moral values too. In the case of Native Americans, dress extends to the painted or tattooed skin as well, an area where John White and others could draw parallels with the ancient Picts (as discussed by Sam Smiles).

Stephanie Pratt’s discussion of the John White drawings places them in a more rigorously art-historical framework and stresses how certain features – the pose of *The flyer* for instance – betray the influence of European Mannerist conventions. The notorious ‘Renaissance elbow’, present for example in the White drawing of *An Indian werowance*, is another case of the European filter through which White portrayed his non-European subjects. But besides responding to a particular context, the drawings in turn left their imprint on subsequent renderings, and this *Nachleben* forms the second component of her paper.

Besides these particular cultural contexts, there is another context into which the John White drawings can be inserted – one that, curiously enough, was not brought up during the conference itself. I am referring to the existence of other bodies of images displaying a similar content – renderings of human beings, plants and animals, i.e., what counted as ‘natural history’ in the 16th century – that are roughly contemporary with the White drawings. One such example is the so-called Drake Manuscript *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library and probably dating from the early 1590s. Since Drake visited the area covered by John White on his way to rescue the failing English colony at Roanoke in 1586, the manuscript is obviously of relevance to the White illustrations. The 199 separate images on its 134 leaves represent plants, animals and people of the Caribbean – the very area through which White sailed on his way to the North American mainland. In particular, the watercolour of an *Indian of Loranbec* (Fig. 1), probably to be located near what is now South Carolina, invites comparison with John White's figures. The artist, it is true, is no gentleman limner as White seems to have been, but we should put brackets around the issue of artistic skill: even the humblest ‘vernacular’ images may still be of relevance for comparative purposes.

Another manuscript, this time one that was completed in the very year of the White voyage, 1585, is the 125-folio *Whale Book* by Adriaen Coenen (now in the library of the Royal Zoological Society, Antwerp). Coenen, an official beachcomber in the Netherlands, was no gentleman limner.
either, but he did frequent the Dutch nobility of his day and was on personal terms with William Prince of Orange. In spite of its title, this manuscript includes far more than whales alone; since the sea was taken to contain marine equivalents of the creatures that populated the land, Coenen regales the viewer with fanciful aquatic equivalents of lions, cows, horses and others.

Adriaen Coenen also completed a much larger manuscript that he called the Fish Book (now in the Dutch National Library in The Hague). Predictably, this manuscript likewise ranges over a much wider field than the title suggests. Though his style is clearly more ‘vernacular’ than that of John White, comparison of Coenen’s rendering of the puffer fish with that by John White (Figs 2–3) shows a common interest in a creature that was regularly to be found in the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities. The Fish Book also includes portraits of Inuit (Fig. 4), probably based on an unidentified pamphlet, but with features that are not found in other visual records, such as the actual scene of capture of an Inuit man in a kayak (Fig. 5). Moreover, Adriaen Coenen had himself seen two Inuit on display in The Hague in 1567, and his mention of them is the only evidence known to us for that particular display. Since both the John White drawings and the Sloane volume include renderings of Inuit (Fig. 6), which are obviously iconographically related to the same corpus of images as those by Coenen, this is another area in which further research is called for.

In the field of costume books too, a genre that emerged in the course of the 16th century, it would be worth considering manuscripts as well as printed sources. One such manuscript is the autobiographical Trachtenbücher of the Augsburg banker...
Matthäus Schwarz, the last entry of which is dated 16 September 1560.\(^5\)

The Drake Manuscript, Coenen’s *Whale Book* and Schwarz’s costume book have appeared in quasi-facsimile editions by now. But there may be more unpublished and unattributed manuscripts from this period in collections that could throw light on other aspects of the John White drawings.

Stephanie Pratt draws attention to the remarkable fact that, although John White could presumably have had access to two American Indians in England who had been captured during the first Virginia expedition, they do not appear to have sat for him. Whatever the explanation for this, it is the context that appears to have been of prime importance. He does represent American Indians when they are situated in the context of the exotic and faraway soil of Virginia; he does not when they are situated in the familiar – though exotic to them – context of Elizabethan England. At times the context in which the subject is set seems to have played a more determinant role than the subject itself.

**Notes**