CHAPTER FIVE

PLANTS AND ANIMALS: 
THE NATURAL WORLD IN THE DE BRY COLLECTION

When readers turned over the first page of the first volume of the collection, they were immediately treated to the first engraving, that of the Fall of man. A powerful and highly recognisable image, the depiction of Adam and Eve was intended to remind readers of the Garden of Eden, which had been forfeited and supplanted by a degenerated world. Although the European encounter with the New World had given the representation of Paradise a new dimension, the Fall had already been relevant previously as the background to understanding the natural world and the relationship between man, plants, and animals. It had reduced the peaceful cohabitation between men and animals, and the unlimited fertility of the earth to a soil which required cultivation, and fierce creatures which needed to be tamed. Man’s right to rule over both animals and plants had nevertheless remained intact. The natural world was principally created to accommodate humanity, and additionally deserved to be admired and studied as one of the prime demonstrations of Divine omnipotence, the second book of God.1 These notions were still intact around 1600, and the representation of the natural world in the De Bry collection is clearly embedded in this anthropocentric framework.

Meanwhile botanists and zoologists, some of them close associates of the De Bry family such as Carolus Clusius, were searching a scientific answer to traditional conceptions of nature, and overseas expansion provided a major impetus to question existing views. Many new species

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unknown to Europeans had been discovered, while other creatures had been conspicuously absent. In some cases, as with the Asian spices, the natural world had formed the most important reason for Europe’s maritime efforts. Ever since Columbus’ reports, furthermore, the New World abundance of herbs, plants, and trees was widely known. The botanical inventory, essentially unchanged since ancient times, was extended within 150 years from a few hundred to around twenty-thousand species. Detailed descriptions and illustrations of the newly found flora and fauna were indispensable for absorbing their variety and their potential practical applications, a crucial motivation behind scientific naturalism in the seventeenth century. These descriptions in turn generated early attempts to classify the plants and animals of both Europe and the overseas world. Glimpses of this new approach also surfaced in the De Bry volumes, although the categorising methods of natural history really gained momentum only in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The descriptive examination of the overseas world is most apparent in those texts and illustrations of the De Bry collection devoted to exotic vegetation. Hence it is mainly perceptible in the volumes which recount the early Dutch activities in Asian waters, reflecting the predominance of Dutch maritime expansion to the Orient, Dutch pre-eminence in the field of botany, and the close connections between the Frankfurt publishing firm and several leading humanists in the Northern Netherlands. Other contributions to the collection, however, lacked the eye for detail which characterised the representation of flora in these adapted accounts.

This disparity was in part due to a difference in the pace of developments in the disciplines of botany and zoology. Animals continued to fulfil their traditional, symbolic function throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for example in heraldry and popular (emblematic) literature, providing a conventional set of tools to describe man’s moral qualities and deficiencies. A survey of plant life, however, lent itself less readily to symbolic interpretations. It had become a specialised domain of knowledge as early as the 1530s and 1540s,