

## Imagining an Idyllic Environment

In his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (1986), Bernard Bailyn devoted sixty-four pages to the Floridas and how British imperialists imagined them during the late eighteenth century. After reviewing the available historical evidence, he concluded:

The sheer exoticism of this strange universe of cypress swamps and grassy savannas, of spectacular natural fountains and hidden lakes, of jungles of live oaks, palmettos, and towering pines crowded with screaming birds, of roaring alligators in muddy creeks, of endless sand barrens and “black, rich, soapy earth”—all of this exoticism, revealed in the reports, oral and written, received after 1763, stimulated in Britons dreamlike visions of Xanadus.

In Bailyn’s opinion, though British subjects knew little else about the peninsula and its hinterlands, such depictions, along with “the forces of greed, ambition, and high entrepreneurial adventure,” prompted immigrants from Great Britain and the other North American colonies to depart for the region and seek their fortunes.<sup>1</sup>

Though accurate, Bailyn’s assessment only partially reveals the complete meaning of the Floridas to most Europeans who had never been there. From the initial explorations by Iberian adventurers until the ouster of Great Britain from the region in 1783, Spaniards, Britons, and Frenchmen viewed the Floridas through the lens of its environment. The vast majority of accounts written by European observers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries concentrated on the flora and fauna of the peninsula. Whether based on firsthand empirical evidence or fantastical speculation, written accounts highlighted the natural setting and its likely benefits for European empires.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, Indians appear in these accounts as peripheral figures. Though depictions of native Floridians in European works will be covered

at great length in subsequent chapters, it is important to note that a sizeable portion of the literature dealing with the environment of the Floridas during this time did not mention native inhabitants at all and the writings that did include references to Indians tended to address them in conjunction with evaluations of the natural setting. Particularly in the earlier works, few European authors distinguished natives from flora and fauna and preferred to treat all as a single collective entity. In these writings, Indians assumed roles as ill-defined custodians of the land and therefore, to many advocates of colonization, implicit facilitators of nature-based profits. Also of importance, these depictions appeared more frequently in accounts written by Europeans who had never been to the Floridas or had visited only briefly. As we shall see, European Floridians gradually depicted the region's natives much differently.<sup>3</sup>

These images of the environment are remarkable for their endurance. The "pristine" lands Spanish explorers first perceived in the sixteenth century and encountered had radically changed by the eighteenth century. Over the decades, European settlers had steadily explored the Floridas and had gradually established numerous forts, farms, plantations, and towns, in the process suffering through wars, disease, starvation, political insecurity, and economic disaster. Cognizant of these changes, a variety of chroniclers with divergent interests amassed data about the Floridas at different times and published their findings throughout Europe and the colonies. Yet the initial images endured.

Clearly, many of these accounts served as propaganda, inaccurate assessments written by individuals to promote their economic, religious, or imperial interests. But this reality provides only a partial explanation. Many people in Europe and, more important, many European settlers maintained their original impressions of the Floridas in order to rationalize a troubling situation they could not fully comprehend or explain. The Floridas were different from most North or Latin American colonies in that they failed to yield the bounties Spaniards, Frenchmen, and Britons desired. That any European group could fail to control the region and prosper from its resources was inconceivable to people accustomed to imperialist and mercantilist views of the world.<sup>4</sup> But the region, which was at the geographical center of the gateway to the Americas, could not easily be ignored. Therefore, rather than admit failure, officials and settlers continuously promoted the potential instead of the reality of colonial settlement in the Floridas. Lacking few other positive factors to applaud, Europeans fixated on the most visible and appealing symbol of the region—the exotic and promising natural environment.

This is not to say that Europeans did not point out negative aspects of the Floridas. Explorers and colonists often reported on the difficulties they encountered while traveling in the region or attempting to establish settlements. But most negative references surfaced in correspondence with friends, family members, or patrons living in Europe. Unlike more-positive appraisals, these complaints rarely appeared in published works. Whether through circumstance or conscious manipulation, references that downplayed the region's advantages did not get much public exposure.<sup>5</sup>

### **Iberian Impressions**

Iberian impressions of the Floridas emerged during a period characterized by rapid expansion and ongoing insecurity. When Juan Ponce de León first claimed the region for Spain in 1513, the nation he represented had existed as a coherent entity for less than two decades. In a variety of regards, its unity and durability were still in question. Following the final expulsion of Muslim armies from Iberia in the 1490s, the various Christian kingdoms of the region slowly and grudgingly acquiesced to their inclusion in part of a larger national body led by the sovereigns of Castile and Aragon. The only "Spanish" identity that existed was still in its formative stages, and allegiances to the Crown proved fleeting. At the same time, spurred on by technological advances, papal prerogatives, daring adventurers, and devastating diseases, the nascent state gained imperial control of much of Latin America. Resulting mineral and agricultural riches filled the coffers of the burgeoning global power and broadened expectations about the New World among Spaniards while fears of European competition and destruction of the empire as a whole loomed large in Spanish consciousness.<sup>6</sup> The Floridas took shape in the Iberian mind against a backdrop of rapid transformation, great expectations, and national fear.

The first widely publicized work to mention the region originated, not surprisingly, in Spain. Written by Peter Martyr, *De Orbe Novo Decades* became available to the public in 1530.<sup>7</sup> Few works about North America existed up to that point, and Martyr's research is notable for the sources it used. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Martyr based his book on firsthand interviews with individuals who had actually traveled on the continent. One of these interviewees, an indigenous resident referred to as "Francisco of Chicora" by the Spanish slave traders who captured him off the coast of present-day South Carolina, provided significant detail about the geographical landscape

of the Floridas. Information obtained from one of the peninsula's earliest Spanish explorers, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón, complemented the Indian's account. Together, their observations provided much of the basis for Martyr's conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

Although *De Orbe Novo Decades* rarely referred to the Floridas directly, the information it contained initiated commentary on the peninsula's geographical features. Martyr believed the Floridas to be composed of one or more islands, indicating the paucity of accurate data he had. The author contended that Ponce de León first visited the region and "named it Florida, because he discovered it on the Feast of the Resurrection, which is called Pasqua Florida." This description would appear in most accounts pertaining to the region well into the eighteenth century. Martyr characterized these islands as "the daughters to Cuba or Hispaniola" and as "the guardians of what is believed to be a continent, their rocks forming a breakwater against the ocean storms." Thus, the Floridas offered protection for other possessions of the Spanish empire, an idea that would influence settlers and officials for centuries. Though these remarks were important in the construction of future European images of the region, the author's most enduring contribution to later myths was his reference to the riches of the Floridas. Seemingly as an afterthought, he wrote, "In most of these islands the Spaniards found gold in the form of grains."<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent Spanish accounts elaborated on the natural wealth of the Floridas. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo depicted Hernando de Soto's campaigns through the peninsula (1539–1543) in a lengthy work titled *La historia general y natural de las Indias*, which he wrote around 1547, though it was not published on a wide scale until much later. Based on the journals of Rodrigo Rangel, Hernando de Soto's personal assistant during the expedition, Oviedo's account undoubtedly surfaced in various other forms throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.<sup>10</sup> Rangel's information supplemented Martyr's evidence regarding the peninsula's wealth, though Rangel emphasized food resources as well. Describing the panhandle region, Oviedo wrote, "The Province of Apalache is very fertile and abundantly provided with much corn, kidney beans, pumpkins, various fruits, much venison, many varieties of birds and excellent fishing near the sea." He added that while they contained many swamps, the Floridas in general appeared to be a "pleasant country."<sup>11</sup>

Luis Hernández de Biedma, another member of Hernando de Soto's contingent, recorded his experiences shortly after returning to Spain in the 1540s. Like Rangel's account, Biedma's work circulated publicly only on a limited scale until Richard Hakluyt produced an English translation in 1609, though

oral versions probably surfaced from time to time. In his description of Cabeza de Vaca's impressions of the Floridas, Biedma reported "that it was the richest countrie in the world." The author substantiated this claim by listing the many natural treasures he himself saw while accompanying Hernando de Soto: "There are also in Florida a great store of walnuts, and plummes, mulberries, and grapes . . . The fruites are common to all: for they grow abroad in the open fields in great abundance, without any neede of planting or dressing."<sup>12</sup> Not only could Europeans obtain a variety of foods from the region, but apparently they could do so with very little effort.

References to the Floridas also appeared in Portuguese publications because of that Iberian nation's interest and early participation in exploration ventures. While living in Portugal during the 1550s, the anonymous Gentleman of Elvas completed *Relaçam verdadeira*, his chronicles of Hernando de Soto's Florida experiences. He too asserted that Cabeza de Vaca praised the Floridas in discussions with Hernando de Soto, calling it "the richest land in the world."<sup>13</sup> In his history of Portuguese global exploration, colonial official Antonio Galvão echoed these descriptions, again focusing on the mineral wealth of the region. Referring to Ponce de León, Galvão wrote, "And because the land seemed to yeeld gold and silver and great riches, he begged it of the king Don Fernando, but he died in the discouerie of it, as many more have done."<sup>14</sup> Although he focused on the benefits of the Floridas, Galvão alluded to the price Europeans might pay for obtaining them.

As Spain began to colonize the region, more-detailed reports on its environment appeared in Europe. One of the first works to deal with settlement attempts appeared in 1567 under the title *Vida y hechos de Pedro Menéndez de Avilés . . . largamente se tratan las Conquistas y Poblaciones de la Provincia de la Florida*. Written by Spanish professor Bartolomé Barrientos, this study concentrated on the life of the first Spanish governor of the Floridas, Pedro Menéndez Avilés, and the fledgling coastal outpost of St. Augustine. More critical of the environment than earlier commentators, Barrientos pointed out many of the treacherous natural features of the region. Yet overall, he continued to support patterns established by earlier observers. "The coastal islands are covered with trees . . . and abound in game," he wrote, and "around them there is an abundance of shellfish, flounder and oysters." According to Barrientos, certain agricultural products of the Floridas resembled those found in Spain. He wrote that "there are also wild vineyards, cereals, and palmettos like those of Andalucia." Besides food sources, the region contained vast amounts of useful timber: "Because pine groves are numerous a quantity of tar and pitch is

available. The wood necessary to build houses, ships, and boats, for which we now send to Germany, is abundant.” More appealing, “this timber could be easily and cheaply transported to Spain.” The author also mentioned evidence of new riches found in the Floridas. Several colonists discovered “strings of coral beads . . . turquoises, and emeralds” not far from their settlements. Such jewels only added to the bounty of the land. He concluded that “the country as a whole has a good climate, and is salubrious.”<sup>15</sup>

But the most influential Iberian publications of the seventeenth century concentrated on the early exploration period of the Floridas rather than on ongoing colonization attempts. In 1605, Garcilaso de la Vega finished *La Florida del Ynca*, his examination of Hernando de Soto’s Florida entrada. Like Barrientos, Garcilaso compared the region’s produce with that found in Iberia. According to his account, Hernando de Soto found “fruits not common to Spain, such as various kinds of cherries” as well as “many species of beans and squash . . . and other varieties of vegetables.” Unlike earlier observers, Garcilaso pointed out the appropriateness of the Floridas for animal husbandry. “The land is very suitable for raising all kinds of livestock,” he wrote, because, “it contains good forests, pasture lands with fine streams, and swamps and lagoons with quantities of rushes for cattle.”<sup>16</sup> With this observation, the evolving image of the land gained an additional positive attribute.

No Iberian study that referred to the Floridas had a greater impact on popular images than Antonio de Herrera’s *Historia General de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas tierra firme del mar Oceano*. This massive eight-volume study published between 1601 and 1615 offered Spaniards a comprehensive narrative of the empire’s conquests up to the seventeenth century. Despite its length and attention to detail, however, its depictions of the Floridas differed little from those first publicized almost a century earlier. Herrera reiterated that Ponce de León named the region because of the spiritual day of its founding, though he also added that the name seemed appropriate since the land “had a very beautiful view of many and cool woodlands.”<sup>17</sup> The main distinction between Herrera’s description of the region and those discussed previously was the author’s discussion of Pánfilo de Narváez’s experiences on the peninsula. Information gained from the explorer’s journals substantiated opinions already advanced. Herrera wrote that the “Country is cold, and has good Pasture for Cattle” and possessed “great Woods” that could be exploited. The only new information referred to the many “wild Creatures” of the Floridas, one of which surely amazed readers since it carried “its young in a Pouch, under the Belly.”<sup>18</sup>