

**James J. Miller.** *An Environmental History of Northeast Florida.* The Ripley P. Bullen Series, Florida Museum of Natural History. Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida, 1998. xvi + 224 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-1600-9.



**Reviewed by** David McCally

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## It's Environmental, but It's Not History

Although James J. Miller demonstrates an impressive command of Florida's prehistoric past and expresses his ideas in graceful prose, he does not manage to turn *An Environmental History of Northeast Florida* into a history. Readers who want an understanding of the relationship between Native Americans and the changing landscape of Florida will be satisfied, but those who expect an examination of more recent events will be disappointed, because Mr. Miller chooses knocking over the straw man of the pristine environment to engaging in the type of analysis more becoming an historian.

The book divides itself into three parts. Chapter one, "People and the Land," comprises the first section. This wide-ranging chapter contains everything from the author's statement of his purpose for writing the book, "to use the northeast Florida environment as a historical case study of how and why environment and people have developed through time," (p. 2) to a summary of the region's periods of human habitation. In between, the author examines the geology, physiography,

soils, climate, hydrology, drainage, vegetation, and fauna of northeast Florida. As an overview, this works well enough, providing readers with the framework for understanding what follows, but this section also introduces the reader to Mr. Miller's disdain for the idea of a pristine environment based on concepts such as the "balance of nature" and "environmental equilibrium," (p. 6) both of which he frames in the most simplistic context. In Mr. Miller's view, the fact of Florida's climate-driven environmental changes precludes the very existence of any form of balance or equilibrium in the natural world, no matter how fine the nuance given these ideas.

The next three chapters comprise the book's second division, and this section contains the book's greatest strength. In these pages the author provides his reader with a brief exposition of the region's environment, beginning with "the peak of the most recent glaciation of the Pleistocene Epoch, around 18,000 years ago" (p. 42) to the time of contact between Europeans and Florida's indigenous Indians. Mr. Miller traces the evolution of native American cultures from paleo big

game hunters to archaic hunter gatherers to the agriculturalists of the Mississippian tradition, while providing his readers with an understanding of the role Florida's changing climate had in the transitions of these peoples' subsistence patterns and associated cultural adaptations. Mr. Miller is in his element here, and his notes and bibliography will prove extremely helpful to those who want to examine Florida's prehistoric past in more detail.

The book's final section tells the story of the interaction among Europeans, Native Americans, and Euro Americans in northeast Florida, and these chapters prove most disappointing. Stated simply, Mr. Miller cannot bring himself to pass any value judgments on even the most environmentally destructive practices of the historical actors. Indeed, people play no role in Mr. Miller's story; rather, disembodied social forces take their toll on the region's environment, seemingly in the absence of any human agency. In Mr. Miller's story, northeast Florida's timber and naval stores industry simply respond to changing market demands, as steel replaces wood in ship construction, and profits from technological innovation, as railroads open new markets, while the author makes no judgment of the social choices that made such transitions possible. An uninformed reader of this section would have no way of knowing that shady land deals in Tallahassee allowed timber barons to harvest valuable old-growth trees from public lands for a pittance or that the state's legal code allowed the owners of turpentine stills to exploit their workers as ruthlessly as they did the denuded land they left in their wake. Nor does Mr. Miller make any connection between the industry's environmental devastation and the state's poverty after the trees, and the profits they created, largely left the state, leaving behind a clear-cut landscape inhabited by people suffering from pellagra and illiteracy.

In conclusion, James J. Miller's *An Environmental History of Northeast Florida* contains

both good and bad. The book's first two sections provide its readers with an admirable overview of the region's physical features and prehistoric past, while its final section fails badly as history. History involves human beings and human agency, and the historian must evaluate those people and their actions. Rather than perform this difficult task, Mr. Miller has chosen joust with the straw man of the eternally balanced pristine environment, a concept which no serious environmental thinker (even historians) embraces. Environmental history of the sort Mr. Miller has written will never result in the discipline becoming the "useful and valuable planning tool," (p. 198) the author proposes because it is not good history.

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