

## **JOSÉ DE ACOSTA (1540–1600)**

### ***NATURAL AND MORAL HISTORY OF THE INDIES (1590)***

#### **Prologue to the Reader**

Many authors have written sundry books and reports in which they disclose the new and strange things that have been discovered in the New World and the West Indies and the deeds and adventures of the Spaniards who conquered and settled those lands. But hitherto I have seen no author who deals with the causes and reasons for those new things and natural wonders, nor has any made a discourse and investigation of these matters; nor have I encountered any book whose matter consists of the deeds and history of those same ancient Indians and natural inhabitants of the New World. Indeed, both of these things are of no small difficulty.

The first, because it deals with natural phenomena that fall outside the philosophy formerly received and argued, such as the fact that the region called the Torrid Zone is very humid, and in places very temperate, and that it rains there when the sun is closest, and other similar things. And those who have written of the West Indies have not claimed this much philosophy, nor have most of them even made mention of such things.

The second, because it deals with the deeds and history of the Indians themselves, and required many and very intimate dealings with the Indians, which was not the case of most of those who have written of the Indies, either because they did not know their language or because they did not bother to learn about their ancient history; hence, they were satisfied to recount a few superficial things.

Because I wanted to have more specialized knowledge of the Indians' affairs, I resorted to experienced men who were very knowledgeable in these matters, and from their conversation and abundant written works I was able to extract material that I judged sufficient to write of the customs and deeds of those people and of the natural phenomena of those lands and their characteristics, with the experience of many years and my diligence in inquiring and discussing and conferring with learned and expert persons.

The remaining books describe what I have been able to discover and what seems worthy of telling about men and their deeds (I mean the Indians themselves and their rites and customs, government and wars, and great events). The history itself will explain how the ancient sayings and doings of the Indians have come to be known, since they had no writing like us, for it is no small part of their abilities to have been able to preserve records of ancient times even though they did not use or possess letters of any kind.

The aim of this work is that, by disclosing the natural works that the infinitely wise Author of all Nature has performed, praise and glory may be given to Almighty God, who is marvelous in all places.

**Taken from José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, translated by Frances López-Morillas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8–12.**