



Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey that Changed the Way We Se

Gerard Helferich

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The thrilling story of the charismatic explorer who Simon Bolivar called “the true discoverer of South America” and the daring expedition that altered the course of science.

From 1799 to 1804 German naturalist and adventurer Alexander von Humboldt conducted the first extensive scientific exploration of Latin America. At the completion of his arduous 6,000-mile journey, he was feted by Thomas Jefferson and presented to Napoleon, and, with the subsequent publication of his findings, he would be hailed as the greatest scientific genius of his age.

Humboldt's Cosmos tells the story of this extraordinary man who was equal parts Einstein and Livingstone, and of the adventure that defined his life. Gerard Helferich vividly recounts Humboldt's expedition through the Amazon and over the Andes, highlighting his paradigm-changing discoveries along the way. During the course of the expedition, Humboldt cataloged more than 60,000 plants, set an altitude record climbing the volcano Chimborazo, and became the first to study the great cultures of the Aztecs and Incas. In the process, he revolutionized geology and laid the groundwork for modern sciences such as climatology, oceanography, and geography—and his contributions would influence future greats such as Charles Darwin and shape the course of science for centuries to come.

Published in time for the bicentennial of the expedition's completion in May 1804, *Humboldt's Cosmos* is a dramatic tribute to one of history's most audacious adventurers, whom Stephen Jay Gould noted “may well have been the world's most famous and influential intellectual.”

Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey that Changed the Way We Se Details

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Bill says

I would have given the book a five but the author plays the "I can't quite bring myself to state the obvious, that Humbolt was gay" card. His homosexuality is obvious to any gay man reading the book. Granted it has little to do with his work but his infatuations with young men and his travelling companions comes up over and over again. I also wish the author dealt with his obscurity in modern times with more than a few pages. I thought this to be one of the more facinationg aspects of the whole story. On the whole very readable and very well written.

Chris says

I don't read a ton of biographies, so I don't have much experience with which to compare this telling of Alexander Humboldt's life. The biography does reasonable due diligence recounting his early life, his amazing travels in South America, and capping it off with his publication efforts and political life back in Europe. You can tell where the writing was drawing heavily from Humboldt's own journals, such as detailing weather conditions while at sea and frequently describing exactly how maddening the mosquitoes were in the Venezuelan rainforest (I can imagine each journal entry beginning with "Day [XX], Mosquitoes still hellish."). Helferich seems mostly interested in the anthropological aspects of Humboldt's journey, detailing the state of every missionary and city and going on tangents about the histories of the Aztecs and Mayans. Along with the mixed progressive and antiquated views Humboldt had toward native peoples. Which is all definitely interesting, but I was disappointed in the scarcity of natural history presented - which is odd because Humboldt was a NATURALIST. The author at least does some justice to Humboldt's numerous impressive summit climbs and how he related ecosystem shifts along the elevation gradient, and about Humboldt's contributions to magnetism and mapping efforts. Yet we hear very little about the flora and fauna. Personally, I'd rather learn about the crazy wild plants and critters of the rainforest, not the old geezers at the missionaries. Heck, I think Humboldt first described the oilbird and I don't think the species is ever mentioned in this book. Oilbirds are nocturnal, cave-dwelling, echolocating bat-like birds that eat palm oil and locals would cook the chicks to make oil - how do you pass over awesomeness like that?? I was really interested in the epic passage through the Andes but that part of the trip gets pretty glossed over. I'm not sure whether the omissions are due to lack of data/journaling from Humboldt or simply reflect the author's personal interests. To his credit, Helferich builds a reasonable case of why Humboldt was so famous in his own time yet nearly forgotten in ours despite his expansive and varied contributions to several branches of science.

Keith Younger says

Nice summation of Humboldt's scientific journeys at the beginning of the 19th century, but the author has no physical sense of direction, which results in quite a few errors in the text.

Larry Kilham says

I traveled a lot in Latin America in the 1960s, so I was particularly interested in this travel story. Many places the author described were just as I saw them. Humboldt was a remarkable scientist who we could use today to provide perspective about our environmental mess.

Steve Weileman says

What an amazing story. I was familiar with the name but never completely understood the share breath of what Humboldt accomplished. Great read that I would certainly recommend putting on your 'to-read' list.

Charles says

This is a great book about Alexander Humboldt's voyage in 1799 -1804 to northern South America, Mexico and Cuba. He did a great deal of scientific work -- geography, ecology, geology, anthropology, all in an integrated way. The voyage ended with him visiting Jefferson in Washington just after Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark off on their voyage, which in many ways was similar to Humboldt's. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Humboldt was world famous as a result of his explorations, and he deserved to be.

I wish only that the book had been longer and gone into more detail about Humboldt's experiences.

Elgin says

I had never heard about von Humboldt but read this book after hearing it discussed on NPR. This guy led an amazing life. The story of his explorations into the Amazon interior are amazing. Von Humboldt was also a true scholar and renaissance man.

Cmorden says

Amazing all the things that Humboldt had done. He is largely forgotten now days, but his body of work is really incredible. This reviews much of that and also aspects of his personal life and relation with Bonpland.

Kate says

Nice, readable overview with lots of quotes from original sources. I don't think I could read the actual writings from Humboldt which he published to wide acclaim in his lifetime; his style is too laborious. But the story of his adventures and discoveries is incredible. This author points out many firsts that Humboldt discovered which have now been assimilated into scientific thought that is used today.

keatssycamore says

Not sure if it's the writing, but Humboldt comes off a little like the stereotypical German tourist. This strikes me as both good and bad (as German tourists tend to be). Example: the mastiff he decides to take into the jungle with him. His "pet" is ultimately (and maybe inevitably?) eaten. Shows a kind of willfulness while at the same time showing the cheerful way he would face privations on his journeyings ("Just need my dog and I'll be fine").

Valerie says

Darwin stated that von Humboldt's narratives inspired even a confirmed homebody like Darwin himself to want to travel.

Von Humboldt was one of the first to realize that the mesoamerican societies of Central and South American had been civilized by anybody's standards, and that the depredations of the conquistadores and their successors had led to considerable degradation--which he believed could and should be reversed.

He wasn't immune to prejudice, of course--but he was more inclined to look for historical reasons for things, rather than put them down to inexorable genetic heritage.

An interesting story, and generally well told

Bruce says

Alexander von Humboldt, Prussian Baron, was the first European to explore the wilderness of South America, taking scientific measurements and making observations over a five year journey. In his observations he noted the similarities of plants in areas of similar temperatures, created isotherms and started the field of plant geography. Humboldt's obsessive cataloguing was used by Darwin an early admirer of Humboldt's travels. A generalist, he revolutionized several disciplines - biology, geology, geography, anthropology - and his breakthroughs in hard sciences transformed oceanography, volcanology, magnetism and other fields. In his endeavors he related physical characteristics (weather and soil to human issues. He was perhaps the first European to recognize the debasement of the indigenous peoples of America by colonization and established the fact they were descended from advanced civilizations. Most individuals do not recognize the contributions this man made to the advancement of science and should read this work to familiarize themselves with this scientific generalist.

Riley says

This book is uneven and often superficial. I will try to read a real biography of Humboldt. This is more like a sensationalist educational TV special on him. We learn too much detail at times, such as names of many places he stopped in Venezuela, which are not on the book's maps and are of no importance. As another reviewer has noted, Helferich seems geographically confused. It was very interesting to learn or be reminded of Humbolt's many accomplishments and "firsts" and of his importance to science. There is unnecessary

speculation about his sexuality through the book. There are many digressions into history, before and after Humboldt, which feel like padding. In particular there are many pages on Peru and its history, and about 20 pages on Mexico which are superficial and full of errors, all not related to Humboldt.

Patricia says

Humboldt to me was a someone I had never heard of. Now, I am amazed at the things this man accomplished in his life. How much richer the whole world would be if we had more men like this. A great education in a very enjoyable format.

The thrilling story of the charismatic explorer who Simon Bolivar called "the true discoverer of South America" and the daring expedition that altered the course of science. From 1799 to 1804 German naturalist and adventurer Alexander von Humboldt conducted the first extensive scientific exploration of Latin America.

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Kevin says

I actually didn't have very high expectations for this book--thought it would be superficial travelogue. It certainly wasn't great, but much better than that. The descriptions of the incredible discomfort and apprehension H. and his traveling companions had to go through. I can feel the clouds of mosquitoes hovering around. The amazing thing about these exploring guys is that they really had practically no idea what they were walking into, and that was fine with them. It's hard to imagine that kind of thing now, when we know everything there is to know about anywhere. Our only adventure is not the unknown, but whether we can survive what we know we'll be getting ourselves in to.
