

HUMBOLDT IN THE AMERICAS*

KENT MATHEWSON and ANDREW SLUYTER

Guest Editors

No one would dispute that Alexander von Humboldt has long been a fixture in geography and its allied disciplines. Courses on the history of geography characteristically place him at the premodern pinnacle of geography and at the point of departure for the modern discipline. That Humboldt died in the same year that Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* appeared, 1859, can take on paradigmatic significance. Humboldt thereby becomes, by some accounts, the omniscient progenitor of our many specialized subfields—the last “Renaissance man.” The eclipse of Humboldt's attempt to understand and venerate the manifest unity of a personified Nature—an eclipse encouraged by reductionistic disciplines that seek to explain and control nature's structures—thus seems to some a lamentable loss of holistic aspirations and to others a heroic passage into scientific maturity.

New research has begun to reveal different sorts of Humboldtian legacies, however. With Immanuel Kant's question, “What Is Enlightenment?,” as he titled a 1784 essay, relevant once again, geographers and others are reanalyzing Humboldt's role in the emergence of disciplinary knowledge and power. In a way, that work continues the reengagement with Humboldt spurred by the 1959 centennial of his death. Then biogeographers began to echo the Humboldtian quest for holistic understanding by placing him at the core of an emerging “geocology.” Cultural-historical ecologists began drawing on him in the study of relict landscapes, like those of intensive wetland agriculture in South America, either literally because he provided relevant information or figuratively because he legitimated foreign fieldwork during a time when the discipline increasingly stayed home.

The following contributions on Humboldt in the Americas—a project originally conceived and organized by Kent Mathewson and Anne Buttner to reconsider the legacy of Humboldt's American sojourn—achieve a qualitative difference from that preceding reengagement by not just drawing on Humboldt but also at-

* We would like to thank a number of anonymous reviewers for their services as well as known scholars, including Gary Dunbar, William Koelsch, and Geoffrey Martin, for their advice and editorial suggestions on matters large and small concerning this special issue and its contents. We also wish to acknowledge the hosts and organizers of conferences and the interlocutors in conversations that one or both of us has participated in while planning and bringing this project to completion. Among the conference hosts are: the organizers of the Association of American Geographers Centennial Meeting in March 2004; Robert Peck of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, who arranged a gathering after the association's Humboldt sessions to view the academy's collection of Humboldtiana; Andreas Daum, in concert with the German Historical Society, Washington, D.C., organizers of the conference on “Alexander von Humboldt and North America” in May 2004; and the Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, Graduate Center, City University of New York, which hosted the major international conference on “Alexander von Humboldt: From the Americas to the Cosmos” in October 2004. Individuals whose interest and input were particularly helpful include Aaron Sachs, Ingo Schwarz, and Laura Walls.

✪ DR. MATHEWSON is an associate professor of geography at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803, where DR. SLUYTER is an assistant professor of geography.