

# ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT'S IMAGE AND INFLUENCE IN NORTH AMERICAN GEOGRAPHY, 1804–2004

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**ABSTRACT.** Alexander von Humboldt is universally identified as a key figure in laying the foundations for modern geography. His main sites of research and scholarly production were centered on Europe, Latin America, and Russia. He drew on global sources of geographical data and knowledge in constructing and producing his voluminous works. Although he only briefly knew North America firsthand—at the outset of his career, in the late spring of 1804—he maintained a lifelong interest in the realm, especially in the United States. In turn, many North American scholars were admirers and followers of his perspectives, practices, and publications. Although geography did not emerge as an institutionally based discipline in the United States until the late nineteenth century, Humboldt's influence and impact on its antecedents were considerable. Contrary to conventional wisdom, his authority and influence in geography persisted well beyond Humboldt's death in 1859. His vision of demonstrating nature's unity in diversity and his enlightened views on social issues have continued to appeal to select sectors and actors in North American geography, especially Latin Americanists, historians of the discipline, and, more recently, proponents of an engaged, critical geography. *Keywords:* diversity, exploration, geography in the United States, history of geography, Alexander von Humboldt, science studies.

Alexander von Humboldt's impact on and intervention in North American intellectual and scholarly life largely began with his arrival in Philadelphia on 24 May 1804. There was some prior awareness of Humboldt on the part of the North America's own Enlightenment scholars, particularly Thomas Jefferson, who knew that Humboldt was on the way back to Europe after five years of travel in what he later termed "the equinoctial regions," where he had amassed a store of knowledge and specimens from the American tropics (Schwarz 2001). But the profound nature and extent of this knowledge and these collections became clear to his North American hosts only after his arrival. By most accounts, Humboldt made strong and favorable impressions on those whom he met while in the United States (Friis 1963). These favorable first impressions were extended and reinforced by correspondence between Humboldt and a number of North American scholars over the next half century and by the stream of publications he produced (Walls 1990). By the time of his death in 1859, he was a venerated figure of mythic proportions in the eyes of many North Americans, both scholars and educated citizens (Walls 2001). The same was true in Latin America, Europe, and Europe's settler outposts. The encomiums have continued up to the present, with eminent figures from Charles Darwin (1859) to Stephen Gould (1989) putting him at or near the top of their personal pantheons of intellectual heroes.

Much has been made of the proposition, almost an axiom now, that Humboldt's immense prestige and position as a universal man of science and letters nonpareil

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