

## HUMBOLDT'S TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CURRENCY: RECENT UPWELLINGS, COMMEMORATIONS, AND CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

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Over the past two centuries Alexander von Humboldt and his multiple legacies have inspired episodic recognitions and assessments of varying intensities and durations. Word of his ascent of Mount Chimborazo in 1802 vaulted him into the consciousness of the greater European world, and he maintained a celebrity status therein for the next six decades. The twin peaks of this long first phase of accumulated acclaim were 1859, the year of his death, and 1869, the centennial of his birth. Both brought widespread tribute and commemoration, as partially recounted in articles and reviews in this special issue of the *Geographical Review*. Lesser rounds of recognition and reappraisal surfaced a century later—in 1959 and 1969. Much of this activity was generated in Latin America, where Humboldt's visage and visions of liberatory politics and field-driven natural sciences had never faded. Europeans, especially Germans on both sides of the Wall, answered the call to evoke his memory on these bicentennial occasions. Curiously, North Americans let these moments pass without much comment or commemoration. The turn of the current century has been markedly different, for it has seen an upwelling of interest, commentary, observance, and publication coinciding with the bicentennial of Humboldt's epic travels in America's equinoctial regions (1799–1804) and his visit to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. en route home to Europe.

Although a complete accounting of the events is not feasible here, recording some of the highlights is both possible and appropriate in light of this special issue. Interest in Humboldt's life, work, and ideas over the past two centuries has qualities of an oscillating current, with lulls and pulses. Some of the pulses have clearly breached academic parietals, exciting segments of larger society from time to time. The 1869 observations spilled out into the streets and found permanent form in statuary in a number of parks and plazas on three continents. Others have refocused scholarly attentions. Starting in the mid-1990s and continuing to date, an upswing in scholarly interest in Humboldt has occurred. This revived engagement has generated wider attention to Humboldt, his world, and his work. The two books featured in the review essay by Laura Walls, "The Search for Humboldt" (*Geographical Review* 96 [2006]: 473–477), are the main North American agents here. Gerard Helferich's (2004) engaging *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World* has not changed the way we see Humboldt, but it has reintroduced him to a large new anglophone audience. Aaron Sachs's (2006) exuberantly crafted *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* may not achieve

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