

## WHY WAS HUMBOLDT FORGOTTEN IN THE UNITED STATES?\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In the nineteenth century Alexander von Humboldt was acclaimed as “the second Columbus” and “the scientific discoverer of America.” His prestige and fame were such that on 14 September 1869, the hundredth anniversary of his birth, a grand celebration was held with parades, speeches, concerts, and the unveiling of memorials in cities across the country. Humboldt’s popularity in the United States endured for the remainder of the nineteenth century, but he dropped from public consciousness in the twentieth century. To account for the eclipse of Humboldt’s fame in the United States three hypotheses are discussed: a shift in the character of scientific endeavor; the quality of Humboldt’s written work; and the rise of anti-German sentiment with a concurrent rush to “de-Germanize” the United States in the early twentieth century. *Keywords:* anti-German sentiment, Alexander von Humboldt, Humboldt Centennial Celebration, Humboldt in the United States.

*Humboldt was one of those wonders of the world, like Aristotle, like Julius Caesar . . . who appear from time to time, as if to show us the possibilities of the human mind, the force and the range of the faculties—a universal man.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1869, quoted in Nelken 1976

Today U.S. geographers, particularly those with a historical bent, are reasonably familiar with Alexander von Humboldt’s travels, his scientific and literary output, and in particular his observations of plant communities on the slopes of Chimborazo that laid the foundation for the fields of biogeography and eventually ecology. Those same geographers, though, along with most other people in the United States, are much less familiar with Humboldt’s profound influence on nineteenth-century U.S. writers and artists, on scientists, educators and explorers, and on politicians, as well as on the public at large.

In literature and the arts it is astounding to find so many who took to heart Humboldt’s assertion that there is an “ancient bond which unites natural science with poetry and artistic feeling” (quoted in Bunkšė 1981, 146). Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, Julia Ward Howe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and William Prescott all found inspiration in the German naturalist’s work, and they readily expressed their admiration and intellectual debt to their “hero of knowledge,” “the scientific discoverer of America” (Walls 2001).<sup>1</sup>

The landscape painters of the Hudson River School responded to Humboldt’s call to integrate careful and precise observation with an aesthetic response to na-

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