

## GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW ESSAY

### THE SEARCH FOR HUMBOLDT

LAURA DASSOW WALLS

HUMBOLDT'S COSMOS: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World. By GERARD HELFERICH. xxiv and 358 pp.; maps, ills., bibliog., index. New York: Gotham Books, 2004. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 1592400523; \$15.00 (paper), 1592401066.

THE HUMBOLDT CURRENT: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism. By AARON SACHS. xii and 496 pp.; maps, ills., bibliog., index. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 0670037753; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 0143111922.

Curiously, both *Humboldt's Cosmos* and *The Humboldt Current* open with a search for a lost Humboldt. Gerard Helferich finds him south of Quito, Ecuador, in the rooms where he once lodged. Or rather, finds his ghost: He and his wife laugh off the innkeeper's warning that the explorer still haunts his suite, but in the night a door creaks open inexplicably, a hiking pole jumps off the wall, and mysterious voices drift into the room from a steep rooftop. The next night sleeping pills forestall further visitations. Aaron Sachs finds not a ghost but a ghost town: Humboldt, Nevada, there on the map but nowhere to be seen in the desert just off Interstate 80. Yes, we North Americans have lost Humboldt, and the goal of both of these volumes is to find him again, to bring the ghost back to life.

Both books succeed admirably. Helferich's book, the more conventional of the two, is a masterful and engrossing retelling of Humboldt's travels in America. It's easy to fall in love with his earnest, yearning, swashbuckling, and sweet-tempered hero—better than any writer I know, Helferich shows us the charisma so remarked on by Humboldt's friends and acquaintances. Although this book, directed to a popular audience, is not a work of original scholarship, it is reasonably well informed, based mostly on standard English translations of Humboldt's writings and the biographies of Helmut de Terra (1955), Lotte Kellner (1963), and Douglas Botting (1973). Retellings of Humboldt's journey practically form their own genre, and what makes Helferich's version memorable is his adept use of time travel. He shows his readers not just what Humboldt saw but also what they might see today through the lens of history: Indians, conquests, missions, revolutions. And, as Helferich shows, Humboldt is everywhere, a hero throughout Latin America “with streets, schools, hospitals, even babies, named in his honor” (p. xvi), one of the creators of the modern world we take so much for granted.

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