

HUMBOLDT AND THE HABITABILITY OF CANADA'S GREAT NORTHWEST*

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ABSTRACT. Alexander von Humboldt's influence in British North America during the nineteenth century was filtered mainly through British imperial applications of "Humboldtian" sciences, including geomagnetism and biogeography. The best-known examples include Edward Sabine and John Henry Lefroy, Royal Artillery officers who, during the 1830s and 1840s, transformed British North American outposts and territories, including Rupert's Land, into Humboldtian sites and regions in Great Britain's imperial "magnetic crusade." Important groundwork had already been laid by John Richardson, who applied data accrued during John Franklin's overland Arctic expeditions during the 1820s to systematize Humboldtian inquiries into the habitability of Canada's Great Northwest. Despite both the relative decline of Humboldtian sciences by midcentury and Humboldt's own reservations about the political ramifications of his science, his "cosmic" outlook circulated in Canada to refine territorial expansionists' scientific arguments justifying annexation of Rupert's Land after the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company expired in 1869. *Keywords:* biogeography, Canada, geomagnetism, Alexander von Humboldt, John Henry Lefroy, John Richardson, Rupert's Land.

Such is the spirit of the method by which I persuade myself that it will someday be possible to connect, by empirical and numerically expressed laws, vast series of apparently isolated facts, and to reveal their mutual dependence.

—Alexander von Humboldt, 1846–1848

Much like their contemporaries elsewhere, British North Americans during the first half of the nineteenth century expressed widespread admiration for Alexander von Humboldt as the "Nestor of Philosophers," and "Prince of Modern Science" (JEUC 1849, 174; Kemp 1860, 209). The grand scale of Humboldt's long-lived international celebrity challenges historians of Canada in particular to trace out his legacy there in meaningful ways. Humboldt never visited British North America, and, unlike examples in other settler states, no communities of German immigrants in Canada took up his cause (Daum 2000). British North America lay far removed from the tropical regions that confirmed Humboldt's profound appreciation of the earth's rich diversities.

Yet precisely its northern location as a transcontinental terra incognita made British North America an ideal venue for Humboldtian inquiries. During the early nineteenth century Humboldt's "cosmic" vision drew these territories and their inhabitants into a worldwide scientific network, not only as passive subjects but also as active contributors to knowledge. This vision served, in turn, to ease an overarching concern about British North America's future: How far from the earth's temperate zones did nature invite European settlement?

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