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A Review by Weld of *Humboldt's Cosmos*, by Gerard Helferich

Part of the journal section "Reviews and Responses"

Gerard Helferich, *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey that Changed the Way We See the World*. New York: Gotham Books, 2004.

Reviewed by Jeff Weld

The 1799 "discovery" of South America is credited to Alexander von Humboldt, an eclectically educated, ambitious, and antsy Prussian geologist-turned-adventurer whose exhaustive geological, meteorological, archeological, and anthropological surveys conducted over a five year sojourn through what are now Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba, defined this place of great mystery ostensibly by order of King Charles IV of Spain. The voyage that planted Humboldt on the South American coast represented a seed, in hindsight, for the expansion of the Spanish empire into the southern hemisphere of the new world. It was one in a long succession of competitive charges between Portugal, France, England, and Spain for the establishment of colonies, the discovery of natural resources, the extension of Christendom in the form of Missionaries, and for the exchange of human capital.

Helferich's detailing of this epic journey draws heavily from Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* published upon his return to Paris, and from letters home to his brother, Wilhelm. As Humboldt himself was inclined to wordy tangents, Helferich digresses at times to examine the mundane minutiae of the journey, including the explorer's gustatory impressions at nearly every turn, such as while a dinner guest of an Indian leader at a Christian missionary outpost near the Amazon basin. Smoked ant and *chuño*, a dried potato pulp, were on the evening's menu. Helferich revisits, perhaps to the level of distraction, the question of Humboldt's sexuality over the course of the book. The three-volume set comprising the *Personal Narrative* had a fourth volume that Humboldt destroyed on the eve of publication. Helferich suggests the likelihood that material contained in it could have been politically embarrassing, though he doubts the conjecture put forth by some historians that the volume contained personal or sexual revelations. Humboldt had claimed in earlier writing to make no time for romantic dalliance, as the serious study of nature "becomes a barrier to sexuality." Few contemporary scientists live up to such a standard.

Helferich is at his best when juxtaposing insights from Humboldt's private letters with nuanced commentaries of his published (sanitized) journal, alongside historical accounts of the period. This is the matter that elevates Humboldt to an unmatched humanitarian status in an era of Euro-centrism, but which explains the tepid embrace for him upon his return home. Helferich writes, for example, that Humboldt considered the Indian peoples of Colombia to be "debased remnants of an earlier, more advanced civilization" that pre-dated the Spanish conquest of 1492. As great a scientist as was Humboldt (his expedition catalogued thousands of hitherto unknown botanical samples, detailed a

rejuvenating Pacific Ocean current now known as the Humboldt Current; re-drew maps of the western hemisphere; established the science of plant geography, and contributed mightily, by way of Charles Darwin's reading of the *Personal Narrative*, to evolution by natural selection), his compassion for native peoples of South America and his abhorrence of slavery and subjugation earned him permanent Hero status there. After his enlightening and favorable treatise *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (Mexico) was published in 1811, numerous cities and streets were named in his honor. Many of the homes where von Humboldt stayed while in Mexico are today, according to Helferich, museums. Dozens of rivers, mountains, cities, and counties of North America bear his name in honor of Humboldt's "egalitarian, forward thinking message."

Helferich's chronicling of the journey depicts the visceral arduousness and life-risking travails that transform a twenty-year old child of privilege into a gristly voyager. As a boy, Humboldt is described by Helferich as "quiet, moody, and sickly," whom his tutors had pronounced as slow. After working for years in and around the mines near Berlin, Humboldt came to enjoy "tremendous physical stamina and near miraculous health" which he surely needed for making a 6,000 mile journey largely by foot or canoe, through some of the most dense vegetation in the world. Yet even while risking life and limb, Humboldt revealed a more pressing regard for others: while crossing the Rio Narigual on borrowed horses from a wealthy merchant of the Colombian coast, swift current, and possibly crocodiles, dragged Humboldt's horse under to be drowned. Humboldt's near death experience rattled him less, according to Helferich, than did his remorse over losing his host's prize horses.

The sheer determination by which such a journey could be completed was encapsulated by Humboldt's ascent of the jagged Chimborazo in the Andes, at the time believed to be the tallest mountain in the world at 20,586 feet. He succeeded in setting a human altitude record despite gasping in the thin mountain air, hands bleeding on sharp rocks, nose streaming blood, and shivering in below zero temperatures after dressing for only the mildness of the valley from which they had departed. His Indian porters abandoned him at the snow line while Humboldt reached 19,286 feet before finally halting at an un-negotiable crevasse.

Humboldt's Cosmos is much more than an explorer's notebook re-told; it essentially portrays the bittersweet political nascence of the upper South American continent - its natural and human resources ripe for exploitation - from the vantage of an aristocrat humbled by its grandeur and enlightened by its people. The complex character Alexander von Humboldt - scientist, adventurer, humanitarian - is rendered accessible by Gerard Helferich in such a way that we, readers, are present for the discoveries of a lifetime.

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