



Alexander von Humboldt: How the Most Famous Scientist of the Romantic Age Found the Soul of Nature

Maren Meinhardt

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Maren Meinhardt's biography of early nineteenth-century scientist Alexander von Humboldt shows how he came to have more places and objects named after him than any other person. The text focuses on the scientist and explorer's travels in a concise and perceptive way, embellished by hints at his personal life.

Humboldt, who died midway through writing the fifth volume of his magnum opus, *Cosmos*, was a successful civil servant who longed for direct participation in science. His mother's will gave him the financial independence to travel everywhere from the Americas to Siberia as a naturalist. Wherever he went, he surveyed the local geology, flora, and fauna and recorded meteorological data. Among his innovations are a safety lamp and respiration apparatus for miners and maps of temperature zones. Humboldt also discovered altitude sickness and the oceanic current off the west coast of South America. He is considered to be the father of ecology for his considerations of how species interact with their environments.

This narrative opens as Humboldt returns from five years in South America and earns popular praise for feats like climbing the Andes's Chimborazo mountain, though he didn't make the summit or complete the write-up of his travels. It establishes a goal of demythologizing the subject, appraising him in the context of Enlightenment philosophy and German Romanticism. Quotes from his letters and journals bring his adventures to life, and period illustrations of places and creatures important to him are an added delight.

Rumors about Humboldt's personal life—around his sexual orientation, and whether he fathered two of his cook's children—are treated with sensitivity, acknowledging the impossibility of drawing firm conclusions. Humboldt “winks at us across two centuries,” Meinhardt concludes, his life and works defined more by “the unfinished and the open” than by facts.

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