

H-Net Reviews

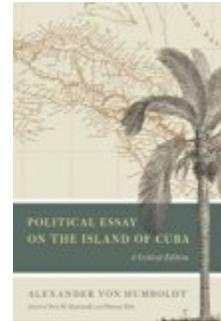
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander Von Humboldt. *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette. Translated by J. Bradford Anderson, Vera M. Kutzinski, and Anja Becker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 496 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-46567-8.

Reviewed by Innes M. Keighren (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Published on H-HistGeog (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Robert J. Mayhew



Reading What Humboldt Really Wrote

It is more than a century and a half since the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt died, yet his diverse contributions to geography, botany, ethnology, meteorology, politics, and economics (among much else) continue to sustain a “thriving industry” of Humboldtian scholarship.[1] Central to Humboldt’s achievements, and to subsequent scholarly interest in his work, was his five-year exploration of tropical America between 1799 and 1804—an expedition that has assumed totemic significance among historians of science and geography. Humboldt’s expedition formed the basis to (and raw material for) a lifetime of subsequent study and reflection. His written account of the expedition—which appeared under the encompassing title of *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1814-25)—occupied thirty volumes and consumed even more years of labor.

Published in French, reflecting that language’s status as scientific lingua franca, Humboldt’s texts fared variably well at the hands of translators. *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* appeared first in English in 1829 in an “idiosyncratic rendition” of which Humboldt largely approved, but was done considerable damage by the pro-slavery newspaperman John Sidney Thrasher (1817–79) who issued a politically skewed translation in New York in 1856 (p. xxii). Thrasher attempted to transform Humboldt’s anti-slavery volume into one that would support his own views on that subject and thus advance his scheme to promote the annexation of Cuba by the United States.[2] Thrasher’s mistranslation provoked

Humboldt’s ire but it proved to be stubbornly venerable—being reprinted in 1966 and 2001 and thus continuing to perpetuate “a gravely skewed image of Alexander von Humboldt for English-speaking readers.” The present volume—based on an entirely new translation of the free-standing 1826 two-volume French edition of Humboldt’s work—promises to redress this problem by allowing its audience to “read what Alexander von Humboldt really wrote” (p. xxiii).

Political Essay is the first of three planned volumes issued by the University of Chicago Press under the auspices of Vanderbilt University’s Alexander von Humboldt in English project. This ambitious collaborative endeavor intends to offer unabridged and annotated translations of some of Humboldt’s most significant works—such as *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* (1810) and *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811)—and to make available supporting digital material, including illustrations, maps, videos, and digital facsimiles. If we can assume that *Political Essay* is representative of what will follow in the series, geographers, historians of science, and literary scholars have much to look forward to. The Chicago edition of *Political Essay* displays the highest standards of collaborative research and represents the collective endeavors of no fewer than six scholars who have contributed variously to the process of translation and in providing the scholarly apparatus that makes this volume particularly valuable.

The book opens with an introductory essay that sets out the background to Humboldt's visits to Cuba, the scientific and political concerns that took him there, and the ways in which his experiences there were captured in print and were subsequently translated. Although no translation can be set apart from the social contexts in which it is undertaken, that which is presented here is—as far as this reader is able to judge—clear, accurate, and readable. An editorial note appended to the volume sets out the ways in which Humboldt's text was translated and “cautiously modernized” in terms of its phraseology and spelling (p. 471).

Humboldt's text is not, straightforwardly, an exploration narrative but rather comprises a series of reflections and assessments on Cuba's natural and human resources, its climate (both meteorological and political), and its history and prospects. That the text as printed was not the text as written in the field is evident from the narrative's shifting temporal perspective—moving at turns between the “retrospective and prospective”—and from the number of post-1804 sources that Humboldt cites (p. xviii). We get the sense, then, of the text as a product as much of work in the library as of work in the field.

The value of this edition is enhanced significantly by the inclusion of almost one-hundred pages of detailed scholarly annotations which offer additional contextual information to Humboldt's scientific work, the sources he consulted, and the contacts and correspondents on whom he depended and with whom he exchanged ideas. For those unfamiliar with the political history of Cuba, the contemporary literature with which Humboldt engaged, or the practice of early nineteenth-century science, these annotations will be particularly welcome.

Those works that Humboldt cited or otherwise made reference to in *Political Essay* have been collated in a bib-

liography that stands as a partial proxy for Humboldt's library (which was largely destroyed by fire in 1865). For scholars interested in what Humboldt read—the ideas he encountered and sources on which he drew—this is a wonderfully useful resource and one that helps to elucidate the intellectual networks of which Humboldt was part. Together with two new indexes—one toponymical, one subject-based—the critical apparatus that accompanies the translated text is systematically arranged, deeply scholarly, and hugely valuable.

Although it is churlish to ask for more, what is missing from this volume's detailed discussion of the production of Humboldt's text is the nature of his relationship with his Paris publishers. We are given a sense that questions of format, price, and audience expectation were to the fore, but it is unclear whether it was Humboldt or his publishers who drove these discussions and whether or not his publishers made any editorial suggestions that shaped Humboldt's writing. Moreover, at the time of reviewing, the book's accompanying digital repository—<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/Humboldt/>--was not yet live, but its promised content seems likely to further enhance the book's value. These small criticisms aside, this book provides a model for the critical transition of historical texts and, in its detailed and thoughtful preparation, constitutes a valuable resource for those interested in the history of geography, science, economics, and politics.

Notes

[1]. Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), ix.

[2]. Vera M. Kutzinski, “Translations of Cuba: Fernando Ortiz, Alexander von Humboldt, and the Curious Case of John Sidney Thrasher,” *Atlantic Studies* 6 (2009): 303-326.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histgeog>

Citation: Innes M. Keighren. Review of Von Humboldt, Alexander, *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34030>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.