

Why We Need a New History of Exploration: Lewis and Clark, Alexander von Humboldt, and the explorer in American culture



Two hundred years after Meriwether Lewis and William Clark completed the first federal reconnaissance of the Far West, they have become hallowed figures in historical memory. Today they are remembered in every conceivable way: on monuments, road signs, and commemorative coins, in classrooms, museums, and online exhibits. The names Lewis and Clark grace colleges, towns, parks, trails, counties, law schools, research funds, and marathons. Even the U.S. Navy (impressed by their command of dugout canoes?) honors them with their own class of ships. So many books on Lewis and Clark have come out that new works have been forced to take up increasingly arcane aspects of the expedition. Recent titles include: *Venereal Disease and the Lewis and Clark Expedition*; *Seaman: the Newfoundland Dog Who Accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition*; *The Food Journal of Lewis and Clark: Recipes for an Expedition*; *Lewis and Clark Dance Manual and Kit*; and *Lewis Loved Clark?: Intriguing Hints about America's Historic Trailblazers*. For those who cannot keep track of all of this, there is *Lewis and Clark for Dummies*. Clearly Lewis and Clark have reached the tipping point of historical investigation, a moment when the mass of printed material carries a momentum of its own, independent of the underlying merits of the story.

What are the underlying merits of the story? The Corps of Discovery was an

ambitious and ultimately successful enterprise to gather intelligence about the lands and peoples west of the Mississippi. It was not the first government-funded expedition. It was not the first contact between whites and native tribes of the Far West. Nor was it the first party of Euro-Americans to cross the continent. But it did represent something new, a U.S. expedition that bundled the study of nature together with commercial and military objectives. In this, the United States took its inspiration from Europe where state-sponsored voyages of discovery had become standard practice. In their long voyages through the Pacific, James Cook (Britain) and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (France) had become famous ambassadors of science, commerce, and empire. The success of these voyages was not lost on Thomas Jefferson, who viewed the Corps of Discovery not only as a way of understanding the tribes of western America but also as a means of impressing the societies of Western Europe. As much as the Lewis and Clark expedition had practical objectives, it had symbolic ones too: namely, to show the Atlantic powers that the United States had grown out of its imperial pubescence and was coming of age as a civilized nation.

Yet it is easy to make more of these designs than we should. Jefferson had great ambitions for Lewis and Clark, true, and their expedition succeeded by all measures. Yet these facts tell us nothing about the expedition's significance in American culture. In truth, Lewis and Clark were not much discussed by the broader public. Their expedition was not widely reported in the popular press, nor was it talked about in scientific circles. Few Americans could marvel at the natural history of the Far West because most of the expedition's botanical collection was destroyed in transit to the east coast. They could not read the journals of Lewis and Clark because they only appeared in print in 1814 and then in curtailed form. Despite its success in the field, then, the Lewis and Clark expedition left few tracks on the wider culture of Jeffersonian America.

It would take a century for America to fully discover these explorers, introduced to their expedition by the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition of 1905, an event that eulogized the closing of the American frontier and wove the explorers inexorably into the fabric of American history. Since then, Lewis and Clark have become pantheonic figures in the exploration of the West, linking the worlds of Euro-America and Native America and setting into motion the creation of an American empire. Not surprisingly, then, they have also become the symbolic progenitors of all forms of U.S. exploration in the last two hundred years: western surveys, coastal surveys, polar voyages, and missions to the moon.

Returning to the nineteenth century, then, we are left with this question: if Lewis and Clark were not yet the *patres familias* of American exploration, who was? Put differently, when nineteenth-century American explorers left home in pursuit of discovery, who did they see in their mind's eye? Some other buckskin-clad figures roaming over the American West, perhaps? In fact, they saw someone decidedly different: the Prussian polymath Alexander von Humboldt.

From 1799 to 1804, Humboldt explored South and Central America with French naturalist Aimé Bonpland. During that time, the two men surveyed everything that they could swim through or climb over, including the Orinoco and Amazon rivers and mountains from the Atlantic island of Tenerife to the Pacific range of the Cordillera Real. In 1802, Humboldt and Bonpland set a record for the highest human ascent, on Mount Chimborazo, before turning back a few hundred feet from the summit (sick, vertiginous, and bleeding from nose and gums). Through it all, they recorded observations about weather, animals, ocean currents, magnetic fields, ancient ruins, indigenous peoples, and colonial administrations. Even celestial objects weren't safe from their gaze. In 1802, Humboldt recorded the transit of Mercury as it moved across the surface of the sun. Before returning to Europe, Humboldt made a brief stopover in the United States to visit Jefferson where they discussed, among other things, Lewis and Clark. Back in Paris, Humboldt set to work on a series of scientific reports and a five-volume personal narrative. It would take twenty years to complete these tasks, a measure of his industry in the Americas, where he and Bonpland had spent their days and nights in a frenzy of calculation and observation.

In contrast to Lewis and Clark, Humboldt received immediate, international acclaim for his accomplishments. Even before he had returned to Europe, reports were circulating about his expedition. (Still in the field, Humboldt read about his progress in an American newspaper in 1804.) Interest in Humboldt's journey only grew with time. By the 1810s, Humboldt's voyage had become a common subject of books, newspapers, women's magazines, and journals of every kind: medical, scientific, agricultural, and religious. As Humboldt published data from his voyage, it began appearing on maps, in atlases, and in geography textbooks. His *Personal Narrative*, first published in French then translated into English, became an international bestseller, cementing his reputation as the world's greatest living explorer. Launched into the stratosphere of public attention in 1804, Humboldt did not descend to earth until his death in 1859.

At first glance, Humboldt-mania seems hard to explain. He does not seem the kind of explorer that would be the stuff of legends, especially in the United States. After all, he was not a tough, home-grown pioneer but a young Prussian aristocrat, who moved in the intellectual circles of Göttingen and Weimar. He traveled not as the leader of a national expedition like Lewis and Clark or Britain's James Cook but as a wealthy private citizen. He did not explore the American West, the region most critical to U.S. interests, but worked in regions to the south. Moreover, Humboldt's mission to Spanish America seems to have had modest objectives. New Spain and New Granada had already been described, mapped, and surveyed by the Spanish and Portuguese since the era of Christopher Columbus. If we take exploration to mean "the investigation of unknown regions" then Humboldt was three hundred years too late.

But discovery is a relative term. Spain and Portugal closely guarded their colonies from their rivals. As a result, the Ibero-American empires remained *terra incognita* for most Europeans and Anglo-Americans. So when Humboldt gained Spain's permission to travel these regions for the purposes of study, the

literate classes on both sides of the Atlantic took notice. His reports were widely read and discussed by educated men and women. What readers took away from these reports varied considerably. For some, living through one of the most violent, revolutionary periods in Western history, Humboldt offered escape. Readers took comfort in his manifold, mysterious descriptions of the Americas, a world enchanting because of its distance from war-ravaged Europe. "The ambitious and malignant passions have raged with an unparalleled intensity, throughout the civilized and Christian world, and deluged the wide field of Europe with blood," wrote one reviewer. "It is some little relief to look away to those remote parts of the world, to which the narratives of travellers enable us to carry our imagination."

But others seized upon Humboldt's writings precisely because of the connections he forged between New World and Old. Humboldt did not mince words about the cruelties of colonial rule, a feature that made his works popular with social critics pushing for reform. The young Venezuelan Simon Bolivar, who would eventually lead the South American revolt against Spain, was so inspired by Humboldt that he called him "the true discoverer of South America." When it came, the independence of the Spanish colonies only enhanced the value of Humboldt's narratives. As the new countries opened themselves to the world, scientists, traders, and diplomats turned to Humboldt's work to learn more. "The eyes of Europe are turned upon South America," wrote one British journal in 1818, "and every authentic account respecting that immense continent is received with great and general interest."

Humboldt inspired reformers outside of South America as well. Abolitionists, in particular, circled every grim passage he wrote about slavery to press for reform in the United States and Britain. In a letter to the editor of Boston's *Christian Observer*, one reader reprinted Humboldt's entire description of slavery in Venezuela because it "may tend to expose in its true colors this unprincipled and cruel traffic." They cheered when Humboldt made these connections explicit in his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, where he praised the United States in all its aspects except—glaringly—for its toleration of slavery. Translated into English in 1811, *Political Essay* became a manifesto for abolitionists in the United States. Considering the extension of slavery into Missouri, the editor of Boston's *Panoplist and Missionary Herald* asked how Europe's greatest thinkers would resolve the question: "If our southern brethren object to our deciding the question, might we not appeal to the wise and philanthropic in other countries? How would a Gregoire in France, a Humboldt in Germany, a Galitzin in Russia, a Wilberforce in England, decide the controversy?"

Above all else, Humboldt became a hero to science. His omnivorous appetite for knowledge extended to all major disciplines, including natural history, archeology, ethnography, astronomy, and meteorology. The massive body of facts contained within his essays and *Personal Narrative* made him the definitive source on all things Spanish American. As a result, the scientific and popular presses of the United States and Europe quoted him liberally on almost every

conceivable subject, from the incidence and treatment of disease, the origins of American Indians, the causes of earthquakes, to the discovery of new exotic species. All of this ensured that Humboldt would never be seen as just another itinerant naturalist, a mere cataloger of new specimens with Latin names. The Humboldt who roamed South America in the pages of American magazines in the 1820s was something new, a walking cabinet of curiosities, a collector of marvelous facts on every conceivable subject: fish-vomiting volcanoes, milk-secreting trees, diseased tonsils, and mountain-sized piles of guano.

It would be easy to go too far here, to over-inflate Humboldt's impact on American society and to repeat, in effect, the mistakes that we have made with Lewis and Clark. So for the record, let me note that Humboldt was not the first scientist-explorer. Nor was he the first one to unleash a torrent of data on the American public. This honor belongs to James Cook, whose voyages were chronicled in American books, newspapers, and geography primers (where it was hard to miss the jagged routes of *Endeavour* and *Resolution* etched all over the Pacific Ocean). Nor was Humboldt yet celebrated as the great poet-philosopher of Nature he would later become. His work did not exactly soar in his adopted French and lost further altitude in English translation. "We have derived more instruction than we have pleasure," wrote one reviewer of *Personal Narrative*, a work that did not "amuse the imagination or agitate the passions." Another complained that Humboldt "possesses less beauty than any traveller we remember."

For Americans sensitive to their deficiencies of culture and education, however, passion and beauty could wait. There were obvious differences between Humboldt and the ordinary American, but there were points of connection too. Like many of them, he was an ardent democrat, a lover of the republic, living all too close to a threatening wilderness. If *Baron* von Humboldt still had the whiff of *ancien régime* about him, he was not above getting his hands dirty. These qualities endeared him to his readers and made his differences palatable, perhaps even appealing. It was hard to approach *Personal Narrative* merely as an escape into the barbarous wild. Reading Humboldt at a time when America was eager to shake off its reputation as a republic of untutored farmers was not just a diversion, I suspect, but an act of self-improvement.



Fig. 1. Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt, by Rafael Jimeno y Planes (ca. 1800). Courtesy of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Click image to enlarge in a new window.

In the 1820s, the discovery narrative was still an unstable thing, not yet settled into a fixed structure of excitement and calamity, of bear attacks, mutinies, and fevers. The idea of the traveler was also in flux, a category that had come to encompass every itinerant from Joseph Banks, science officer of the *Endeavour*, to British lads on vacation. As the concept of traveler lost definition in the eighteenth century, "explorer" entered the vernacular to

delineate it, to distinguish the serious investigator of the unknown from more quotidian voyagers, the doe-eyed ingénues of the grand tour. Humboldt arrived upon the world stage precisely at this moment, when the connotations of explorer were taking form in the English-speaking world. He was not, of course, the only investigator of the unknown. But he quickly became the best known one. In the constellation of possible roles for “explorer,” then, Humboldt figured prominently, even archetypally. He was the thinking man’s explorer, the embodiment of travel in its highest form. He offered an adventure in erudition, a voyage beyond the frontier, it was true, but one that would also take the reader up the ladder of civilization in the process.

If Humboldt became the archetypal explorer for Americans, what form did this archetype take? He routinely found praise for his “juvenile vigor” and “good constitution.” Yet these observations always prefaced more lengthy descriptions of Humboldt’s mental faculties. In the eyes of his reviewers, Humboldt’s success as an explorer did not follow from rugged physique. He triumphed because of an “understanding duly prepared by education,” and “a faculty in speaking modern tongues.” Of Humboldt’s skills on a horse or with a rifle, the record is silent. Reviewers do tell us that he was “skilled in general physicks, and particularly attached to chymistry.”

Images of Humboldt tell a similar story. Artists portrayed the explorer as the picture of manly vitality: a broad-chested figure of solid proportions, with tussled hair and high forehead framing a ruddy, youthful face. Yet none of these artists portray Humboldt as a man of action. There are no scenes of him fording rivers, scaling mountains, or battling wild animals (though he did all of these things). Rather, the painted Humboldt is one caught in the act of observation and analysis. Rafael Jimeno y Planes’s portrait, dating from around 1803, captures Humboldt sitting outside at a table on which are placed a sextant, mineral specimens, and sheets of manuscript paper (fig. 1). Humboldt regards us contentedly with hands folded, as if he has just finished a large meal (geology perhaps?).

The Humboldt of Friedrich Georg Weitsch’s 1806 portrait perches on the edge of a rock in the jungle (fig. 2). He looks poised for action, except for the oversized folio book on his knee and the pink flower clasped in his hand. No animal hunt here; we have stumbled upon the baron pressing flowers.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Alexander von Humboldt, by Friedrich Georg Weitsch, 126 x 92.5 cm (1806). Courtesy Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.

By 1850, the vision of Humboldt as a bookish, erudite explorer had reached its zenith. Gemälde von Eduard Ender’s [*Urwaldlaboratorium am Orinoco*](#) (Jungle Lab on the Orinoco) places Humboldt in what was, by now, a familiar scene: a work table in the middle of the rainforest. But the dense jungle background looks

spacious compared to the foreground: a crush of objects—papers, specimens, and instruments—so cover the explorer’s table that they now spill to the floor around his feet. Bathed in light, attended by Bonpland, Humboldt seems almost magisterial in his primitive “urwaldlaboratorium.” Indeed, Humboldt’s pose bears more than a passing resemblance to [Ender’s 1855 painting of Emperor Rudolph II](#), who sits at his own table of instruments, attended by the astronomer Tycho Brahe. Ender’s Humboldt painting remained in Europe, but engravings based on it circulated widely in literature on both sides of the Atlantic. Words and images of the explorer, then, illustrate a similar point. Humboldt was idolized as the nineteenth-century’s über-explorer *because* of his cerebral skills and courtly cultivation, not in spite of them.

Humboldt’s ability to inspire artists, writers, and scientists has never been a secret in Europe or South America, where scholars have scrutinized Humboldt with the same feverish intensity as we have poured over Lewis and Clark. In the last few years, a small group of scholars (including Laura Walls, Katherine Manthorne, and Susan Schulten) have taken up Humboldt as a figure who loomed large in North American culture, particularly in fields of American science, art, and letters. Most recently, Aaron Sachs, author of *The Humboldt Current*, has shown how a cadre of nineteenth-century American explorers took up the Humboldtian cause, particularly in his sensitive and holistic approach to native peoples and natural environments.

That Humboldt became an iconic figure in the nineteenth century, particularly in the eyes of his American audience, now seems clear. But it is Humboldt’s iconic status as an explorer that occupies us here. Why? Specifically, what do we gain by toppling Lewis and Clark off of their pedestal and installing Humboldt in their place?

We can begin to correct a view of nineteenth-century exploration that has been distorted by Lewis and Clark’s Pacific expedition. For most of the 1800s, the American West did not uniquely, even predominantly, occupy the nation’s imagination as a theater of discovery. During this time, the United States fielded dozens of expeditions to every region of the planet: Africa, South America, Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific Ocean, and the Polar Regions. These expeditions employed the broadest possible notions of the term “discovery.” For example, the U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838-42) pursued geographical discovery in Antarctica, while the U.S. Astronomical Expedition (1849-52) spent its nights observing planetary transits from its base in Chile. The U.S. Grinnell Expedition (1850-52) hoped to discover a specific person, Sir John Franklin, who had gone missing in the Arctic in 1845. For Lieutenant William Lynch, on the other hand, discovery was historical. Under his command, the U.S. Expedition to Jordon and the Dead Sea set out to discover, among other things, the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The American explorers who led these expeditions constituted a diverse group. Their ranks included doctors, journalists, and military officers. As public figures, however, they rarely took on the image of the western pioneer or the

tough backwoodsman. More often, they displayed themselves as men of science and culture. One might argue that this reflected an appreciation for science and culture in general, rather than an appreciation of Humboldt in particular. Yet, in case after case, explorers linked themselves to Humboldt by name, dedicating their narratives to him, visiting him in Europe, and naming dozens of geographical discoveries in his honor, from Nevada's Humboldt River (John Fremont, 1848) to Greenland's Humboldt Glacier (Elisha Kane, 1854). Fremont showed such intellectual promise that he was eventually dubbed "the American Humboldt," by his peers, a term of high praise also conferred upon Kane as well as explorer Bayard Taylor.

Were this just a matter of correcting the historical record, we could tuck this debate into the footnotes of *Lewis and Clark: Historical Overview and Bibliography* (one of eight bibliographies on Lewis and Clark published since 2000). But more is at stake. Lewis and Clark have become the symbolic touchstone for every kind of modern expedition, from NOAA to NASA. Native born, of humble origins, these two men explored lands on a critical frontier during the early years of the republic. In doing so, they established a pedigree that is almost impossible to top. In making them the fathers of national exploration, we have brought order to the weird carnival of expeditions fielded by the United States in the 1800s. When we remember to talk about them, the colorful ranks of explorers who traveled the world have become linked to Lewis and Clark in our historical memory. When seen as the inheritors of a Lewis-and-Clarkian vision of exploration, these explorers have begun to appear more similar than dissimilar, sharing the inherent curiosity, restlessness, and forward-looking attitude of the Corps of Discovery.

No wonder that policy makers and NASA administrators routinely trot out Lewis and Clark when proposing ambitious new projects. They serve not merely as the ornaments of history but as pieces of evidence in a specific argument—that expensive expeditions deserve funding because the will to explore is a part of our national character. As this line of thinking goes, exploration is something that we have to do in order to be true to our human nature. "The cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose," stated President George W. Bush days after the destruction of space shuttle *Columbia* in 2003. "It is a desire written in the human heart." Within a year, the president had followed up this address with another, a directive to begin the most ambitious multibillion dollar project in NASA's history: the renewed exploration of the moon and the manned exploration of Mars. He began his address with Lewis and Clark.

Two centuries ago, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark left St. Louis to explore the new lands acquired in the Louisiana Purchase. They made that journey in the spirit of discovery to learn the potential of the vast new territory and to chart the way for others to follow. America has ventured forth into space for the same reasons. We've undertaken space travel because the desire to explore is part of our character.

By framing exploration as “part of our character,” Bush offers an answer to a common criticism of manned space flight. Hurling living beings into space and then returning them, still breathing, to earth is expensive. Why take on such risk to life and treasure when unmanned craft can do much of the same work for a fraction of the cost? By making exploration about national character rather than science or money, proponents of manned exploration can largely ignore this question as well as the excellent work now being done by robotic orbiters, rovers, and landers.

One wonders whether Lewis and Clark, who took such pains to do their scientific work correctly, would have approved of their current roles as the poster children of American exceptionalism. And what would Humboldt have to say about his own erasure from the annals of American exploration? I expect he was too much of a gentleman to grouse publicly. Yet he would have spoken up about our current policies of exploration. Nurtured by German and French Romanticism, Humboldt saw the voyage as more than the sum of its scientific parts. It was a distinctly human event, a lesson about attaining self-knowledge as much as attaining knowledge about the world. He would have doubted, I think, the capacity of robots to appreciate the sublime, to embody the internal transformation so sought by wanderers, explorers, and pilgrims alike. And for the rest of us, would he have thought that the wonders of extraterrestrial nature could be conveyed by telemetry? Doubtful. Still, Humboldt was a humanist first, a defender of people forgotten by their rulers. The vision of humans walking upon the cold dust of Mars would have thrilled him. That Americans, his favorite people, would have to pay so much to bring this vision to life, I suspect, would have given him pause.

Further Reading:

Over the past few years, scholarship on Humboldt’s role in North American life has come to life. Aaron Sachs takes up Humboldt’s influence on American explorers in *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2007). How Sachs’s approach connects to current debates in environmental history is the subject of Susan Schulten’s essay [“Get Lost: On the Intersection of Environmental and Intellectual History,”](#) *Modern Intellectual History* 5:1 (2008): 141-152. Just out, Laura Walls’s *Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago, 2009) examines Humboldt’s most famous work, *Cosmos*, and its influences on writers and scientists. Despite my frustrations with the celebration of all things Lewis-and-Clark, there are some excellent treatments of these explorers in American life, one of which is John Spencer’s “‘We are not entirely dealing with the past’: America Remembers Lewis and Clark,” in Kris Fresonke and Mark Spence, eds., *Lewis & Clark: Legacies, Memories, and New Perspectives* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004). For those eager to hear the baron speak for himself, Johns Hopkins Press recently came out with a reprint edition of *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe v. 1&2*. This edition also comes with fine introductory essays by Nicholas Ruupke (v.1) and Michael Dettelbach (v.2).

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