

BOOK REVIEW

**Oliver Lubrich and Thomas Nehrlich (eds.), *Alexander von Humboldt: Writings in English*, 2 vols.**

**Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society Press, 2025. Pp. 760, 680. ISBN 978-1-60618-016-7, 978-1-60618-018-7. \$45.00, \$45.00 (hardback).**

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These two volumes offer a compilation of 250 English-language articles by Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) that were translated from the original German or French during his lifetime. A single article, from 1789, was newly translated for this edition. Some of the pieces are but a few lines long, others extend over many pages. The chronologically arranged selection, from 1789 to 1824 in Volume 1 and from 1825 to 1859 in Volume 2, represents 120 of over 1,000 English-language translations that appeared in some 1,200 periodicals, all before 1859. The first twenty pages of each volume contain identical introductions, editorial notes and acknowledgements, and the last fifteen pages contain (again identical) lists of Humboldt's major works, chronologies of his life and indices of personal names, but neither place names nor topics. The bulk of the volumes consists of the reproduced translations, most of them without indication of either source or date. Readers have to find years and places of publication by scanning the pages-long chronological lists of article titles at the end of each volume. The year and source, for instance, of Humboldt's 'Comparison of savage and civilized life' on p. 955 can be found by matching this precise title on p. 1299, where it appears without a reference back to p. 955.

The basis for the selection of the translations to include is Oliver Lubrich and Thomas Nehrlich's German ten-volume edition of Humboldt's collected writings, which came out in 2019 ([www.humboldt.unibe.ch/text](http://www.humboldt.unibe.ch/text)). The chronological arrangement of the articles means that texts on similar topics or concerns to which Humboldt returned throughout his life are spread throughout the two volumes. Among these are his ascent to the Pico del Teide in Tenerife, the Chimborazo and the habits and languages of indigenous people. As an example, the only way for a reader to find what Humboldt wrote about the 'dirt eaters' is to scan the 250 titles and find that the dirt eaters are the topic of pieces that appeared in 1810 and 1821 and are printed on pages 223 and 537. There is no other way. To find the various descriptions of the Teide (spelled Teyde in these volumes), Chimborazo or Cuba, one has to leaf through the title lists. It turns out that there are five descriptions of the Teide ascent in the first volume, none in the second.

What is a reader to take away from these 'minor contributions' (in the editors' words, p. xxvi)? Minor they are, because all Humboldt's important contributions, for example, on the isothermal lines, the various species of *Cinchona* (the bark of which was the only effective malaria treatment until the Second World War), or mineralogy and volcanoes have also appeared in his books. On the other hand, two thirds of his short pieces have no equivalent

in his major works. Some of these short pieces are curious, once encountered by chance – for example, Humboldt on porcelain production. That Humboldt's articles appeared in newspapers all over the world – with at least 1,540 translated into English and a similar number into Spanish, many appearing without his knowledge, permission or proofreading – made him among the most international and sought-after writers of his time, a reputation that Humboldt cultivated and that was important to him. Perhaps most importantly, Humboldt's empirical observations and scientific insights were disseminated mostly in international periodicals, including specialized scientific ones, because his original major works were printed in small editions and were exceedingly expensive.

For Humboldt scholars, it can be interesting to compare how his observations on a topic develop over time. Thus, in a letter written from South America in October 1800, he talks about the 6,000 plant collections made by Aimé Bonpland and himself, each with some duplicates (each duplicate representing the same plant individual or nearby individuals of the same species), with the 6,000 collections perhaps representing 4,200 estimated species, a number that could not be known until the collections had been studied back in Europe, as Humboldt truthfully points out. In an account that appeared in the *Literary Magazine* in 1804, the volume of botanical collections had changed to 6,000 different species, an estimate that, if true, would imply that Bonpland and Humboldt during their years-long journey never collected the same species twice, which is implausible and would have been counter-productive since it would have prevented any insight into the natural geographic ranges of species, a topic on Humboldt's mind since his student days and one of the explicit questions during his travels. As it happens, we do not know the precise collecting sites and current whereabouts of roughly half the plant collections made by Humboldt and Bonpland.

The volumes are beautifully produced, set in a large font on thick paper, with generous margins and leaving empty pages. The lack of place and topical indexes, however, combined with the chronological rather than thematic organization, makes it difficult to envision how these volumes will be used.