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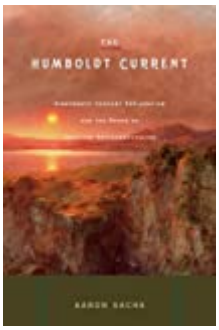

Aaron Sachs. *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism.* New York: Viking, 2006. xii + 496 pp. $25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03775-9.

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The Current Humboldt

This volume will be of great interest to many readers of H-German. Essentially, it is a history of Alexander von Humboldt's impact on American notions of science, nature, and the place of humanity in the world. It is a lament that Humboldt's influence in the United States, while widespread, was not long-lasting and gave way to a fierce Social Darwinism which coupled well with the equally fierce and exploitative capitalism that came to dominate North America by the end of the nineteenth century. For Sachs, this tale is surely a saga of lost opportunities, but telling it also allows him to resurrect their potential and to imply that the roads not taken might still be obtained. So, if one goal of this book is to sketch out a series of intellectual biographies, beginning with Humboldt and then continuing with various American explorers and naturalists who shared his vision of the interconnectedness of all living things, another goal is to use those stories to explain how conservation movements as well as American industry have gotten so much so wrong. Scholars of Germany might use his insights to reflect on their own positions as well.

Sachs has an incredible talent for choosing gripping accounts and spinning out stories of historical nonfiction with a novelist's sense of good narrative tension, punctuated by pithy summations. Indeed, at times this book reads much like Andrea Barret's *Voyage of the Narwahl* (2000) or *Ship Fever* (1996), resurrecting the Teddy Roosevelt-like manliness of nineteenth-century naturalists and explorers who undertook audacious ventures and suffered extreme deprivations in the name of science and self-edification. However, at other times his intellectual biographies read more like autobiographies, as Sachs inserts himself–his experiences on mountains, his emotional reactions to reading the texts of Humboldt and other authors, his sense of frustration with conservationists, scientists, and politicians–into his narrative. Initially this is an effective rhetorical tool. "I couldn't find Humboldt" (p. 8), he states at the beginning of the first chapter, as he describes driving around in the Nevada desert in search of another town named after the man, peaking readers' curiosity about what that desert might have to do with the Prussian who never made it into the American West but seems to be pervasive there nevertheless. Yet that strategy loses some of its effectiveness over the next 300-plus pages; Sachs's passion for exposition

often overwhelms his analysis.

Indeed, his narrative strategy causes him to overstate his case. For example, Germans, and scholars working on Germany will likely be shocked by a central premise of this volume: that Alexander von Humboldt has been all but forgotten. Mike Davis is quoted on the dust cover celebrating Sachs's success at resurrecting "a forgotten giant," while David S. Reynolds credits Sachs with "pluck[ing] from relative obscurity the nineteenth-century Prussian scientist." Those are not just blurbs to increase sales. At the outset of the volume Sachs, while describing Humboldt's experience in a dangerous storm at sea, argues that "as far as the twenty-first-century memory of Alexander von Humboldt is concerned, he may as well have gone down with his ship: many people have never heard of him. But we are lucky he survived" (p. 2). We are lucky, he explains, because Humboldt had the clearest vision of humanity's place in nature, which many people seemed to recognize as they seized on his insights, purchased his books, and made him one of the most popular authors of nonfiction during the first half of the nineteenth century. But the power of what Sachs calls the Humboldt current, "all the confluences of the nineteenth century, the palpable influence of Humboldt's theories on every explorer and scientist who wrote about nature, now," he argues, "constitute barely a rivulet in American intellectual culture" (p. 10). That was the great loss. Still, that loss was not as widespread as he would have his readers believe. For even as he acknowledges much later in the book that Humboldt's legacy has remained strong in Latin America, he underscores yet again that the memory of Humboldt "is more muted in Europe" (pp. 338-339). This assertion will surely surprise the people working at the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the many scholars they support, the students and faculty at Humboldt University, and many others as well.

Nevertheless, this United States-centric account of Humboldt's importance, the intimate rendition of his influence on a range of American explorers, naturalists, and conservationists, the decline of his influence in the United States, and the sense of epiphany that Sachs himself experienced when he began to read Humboldt's work provide scholars of Germany with a perspective of great value. Although he does not engage these questions himself, he reminds us of the deeply transnational character of German thought in the nineteenth century, the cosmopolitan quality of German science, and its eminence in the so-called new world. While he never mentions notions of *Bildung*, these are clearly one of the gifts he sees Humboldt bestowing on Americans. It is certainly what many of the people Sachs discusses, such as J. N. Reynolds, Clarence King, George Wallace Melville, and John Muir, were seeking when they set out on their own Humboldtian ventures. He briefly mentions Franz Boas as one of the people who carried Humboldtian notions further into the twentieth century than other Americans, providing one vector of discourse that diverged from the dominant Social Darwinism he sees engulfing the landscape by the twentieth century. But what Boas carried forward, of course, were not simply Humboldtian notions, but a strain of German ideas, perspectives, and values that Humboldt shared with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried von Herder, Georg Forster, and many others. What's important, then, is how many Americans appear to have shared these same ideas and interests.

Sachs calls many things Humboldtian. For him, the "Humbolian current" is an "alternative to the mighty rivers of empire" (p. 20). Sachs argues, against much popular post-colonial criticism, that "in the righteous rush to condemn explorers for expanding the apparatus of imperialism, we have forgotten that they also expanded our sympathies" (p. 30). Humboldtians, he insists, demonstrated a notable discomfort with European empires' abuses of both people and environments (pp. 18-19, 69). Instead of hubris, Humboldt and his disciples approached the natural world with humility (p. 27) and a "deep feeling of awe and appreciation for the great variety of landscapes and cultures that [Humboldt's] obsessive traveling enabled him to experience" (p. 13). They adopted a willingness to embrace disorientation (p. 59), an interest in the interconnectedness of many global patterns (p. 51), a pluralist acceptance of human diversity (p. 67), and a "zeal for precise observation and expressive and expansive views, for contact with the world, for connective experiences" (p. 118). The people he discusses shared a "Humboldtian rationale" that drove them to "collect, preserve, and arrange specimens from all over the globe, 'from the minute madrapore to the huge spermaceti', and then figure out how they connected to each other and to 'man in his physical and mental powers, in his manners, habits, disposition, and social and political relations' " (p. 21). In order to do that, they engaged in a "process of Humboldtian submission, exposure, and immersion" during their actions (p. 250), and they harnessed a "combination of empirical and speculative approaches" in their work, "addressing both minute and cosmic concerns" (p. 165). In addition, and one suspects this is most important for Sachs, many of them shared

Humboldt's "social edge" (p. 13). "Humboldtianism," he argues, "inevitably constituted a social vision of nature" (p. 346), and thus many of his subjects also quickly learned to recognize the "limitations of human science" as it developed after Humboldt's death (pp. 137, 206).

What's important for those interested in German Studies is Sachs's reminder that the so-called Humboldt current was incredibly broad and that it had deep and lasting influence across a wide geographical and cultural terrain. Sachs's insights into the nature of that influence are also critical, because they encourage us to take seriously the notion that many followers of Humboldt engaged the wider world in ways that do not fit into the typical postcolonial narrative of Europeans' global encounters. His book thus presses us to rethink how and to what degree the Humboldtian current shaped German attitudes toward non-Europeans; it encourages us to reconsider how that current influenced the attitudes of Germans who sought and continue to seek to go abroad; and it provides us with a fresh perspective for evaluating the ways in which their attitudes have changed over time. Most importantly, if Sachs's assessment of Humboldt contains little that is new for many scholars of Germany, his enthusiasm for what he has found, for the roads not taken, and for the possibility that they might be recovered and followed anew, deserves to be infectious. Indeed, we can hope that many scholars will want to return to Humboldt themselves.

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