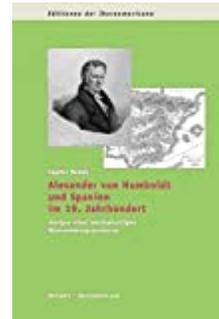




**Sandra Rebok.** *Alexander von Humboldt und Spanien im 19. Jahrhundert: Analyse eines wechselseitigen Wahrnehmungsprozesses.* Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert Verlag, 2006. 264 pp. EUR 36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86527-240-9.



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## The Spanish Humboldt

This is a useful book. It details some of Alexander von Humboldt's actions and experiences during his five-month trip to Spain in 1799 and his continued interactions with Spain and the Spanish during his subsequent travels to the Americas. It also describes the reception of Humboldt and his work in Spain after his return to Europe in 1804 and through much of the nineteenth century. Not all of this information is new, but Sandra Rebok pays particular attention to the influence of Humboldt's time in Spain on his self-perception, and she underscores the importance of Spanish records from the *Conquista* to his impressions of Spanish America. In particular, she focuses on the similarities in the work of the sixteenth-century Jesuit Jos  de Acosta and Humboldt's desire to study the totality of the universe, and their shared interest in the interconnections between natural history and the history of humanity. Although Humboldt left no detailed records of his time in Spain, she argues that we can discern the influence of these sources on his perspectives. With these insights, she provides us with a nice addition to his ever-expanding intellectual biography.

While Humboldt was in Spain, he confronted a land that was both European and distinctly different from the Europe he knew. He traveled to Spain to make arrangements with a Spanish bank for his expedition to the Americas, but he also made connections with the Spanish court and an array of diplomats and scientists. Moreover, he used Spain as a place to test many of his instruments and engage in geological studies, and he wrote essays on his findings. The holdings of Madrid's botanical garden and other scientific institutions proved essential to his preparations, and his time in Spain provided him with a convenient way to immerse himself in the Spanish language and Spanish customs before crossing the Atlantic. In that effort, he proved much more successful than his brother, Wilhelm. While Alexander von Humboldt wrote of the ways in which he became increasingly comfortable with the Spanish language, likening it to his *Muttersprache*, his brother left the peninsula with a markedly critical impression of what he had seen and an enhanced realization that he was thoroughly Prussian.

Alexander von Humboldt also evidenced a keen un-

derstanding of diplomacy while in Madrid, one that he took with him abroad. Rebok credits his talent for reading the political landscape and his ability to present himself as an ally of the Spanish court with procuring him open access to Spanish territory and considerable state support. That relationship, she argues, combined with his understanding of how to tread lightly in Spain and its domains, accounts for his self-censorship while traveling, and some of the resulting limitations in his work. Even after returning to Europe, he eschewed pointed comparisons between Prussia and Spain, and refrained from endorsing his brother's critical language. Instead, he gained praise from Spaniards across the political spectrum for taking Spanish science seriously and discussing with enthusiasm the competencies, abilities, and *Geist* of people he encountered in Spanish territories. His criticisms of Mexico (which receive little attention in this volume) certainly rankled, but by showing a genuine interest in Spanish lands, peoples, science and institutions, and by taking seriously the Spanish sources from the time of the *Conquista*, the tactful von Humboldt gained continual backing and a lasting legacy in Spain and the Spanish states he visited.

Anyone who has read Nicolaas A. Rupke's *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (2005) will not be surprised by Rebok's argument that there were many Humboldts, or at least many ways in which he was received by different members of the Spanish press, the sciences, and the state. Nor will they be surprised to learn that in Spain, like in Germany, individuals and organizations instrumentalized his work and his reputation to promote their own ideas and themselves. Likewise, readers with a more theoretical interest in notions of the self and the other will find rather predictable her argument that impressions of the other are contingent on the subjectivities of the self. Many may find the reading tedious. The book is, above all, a detailed rendition of what she set out to find and lists what scholars can expect to encounter if they follow her trail through the sources. This organization leads to a great deal of repetition, and it makes the book more of a reference work on one aspect of Humboldt's legacy than an extended argument about the implications of his interactions with the Spanish and Spain. If, however, her central purpose was, as she writes, to fill a gap in the burgeoning literature on Alexander von Humboldt, and tell us more about his relationship to Spain, it certainly achieves that goal.

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