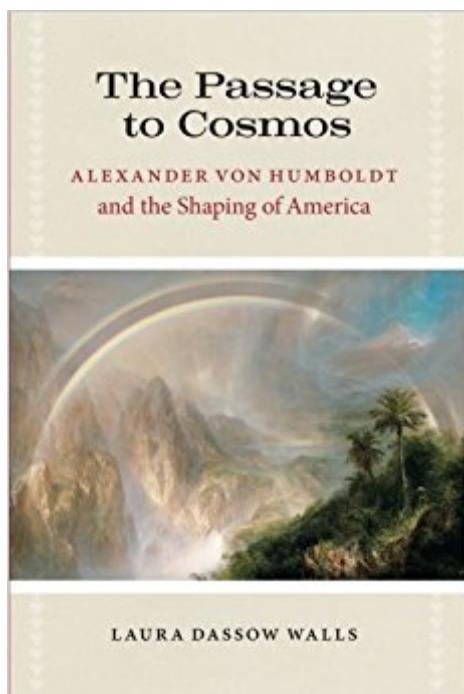


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The Passage To Cosmos: Alexander Von Humboldt And The Shaping Of America



Synopsis

Explorer, scientist, writer, and humanist, Alexander von Humboldt was the most famous intellectual of the age that began with Napoleon and ended with Darwin. With *Cosmos*, the book that crowned his career, Humboldt offered to the world his vision of humans and nature as integrated halves of a single whole. In it, Humboldt espoused the idea that, while the universe of nature exists apart from human purpose, its beauty and order, the very idea of the whole it composes, are human achievements: *cosmos* comes into being in the dance of world and mind, subject and object, science and poetry. Humboldt's science laid the foundations for ecology and inspired the theories of his most important scientific disciple, Charles Darwin. In the United States, his ideas shaped the work of Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, and Whitman. They helped spark the American environmental movement through followers like John Muir and George Perkins Marsh. And they even bolstered efforts to free the slaves and honor the rights of Indians. Laura Dassow Walls here traces Humboldt's ideas for *Cosmos* to his 1799 journey to the Americas, where he first experienced the diversity of nature and of the world's peoples and envisioned a new cosmopolitanism that would link ideas, disciplines, and nations into a global web of knowledge and cultures. In reclaiming Humboldt's transcultural and transdisciplinary project, Walls situates America in a lively and contested field of ideas, actions, and interests, and reaches beyond to a new worldview that integrates the natural and social sciences, the arts, and the humanities. To the end of his life, Humboldt called himself "half an American," but ironically his legacy has largely faded in the United States. The *Passage to Cosmos* will reintroduce this seminal thinker to a new audience and return America to its rightful place in the story of his life, work, and enduring legacy.

Book Information

Paperback: 424 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; Reprint edition (November 15, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226871835

ISBN-13: 978-0226871837

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.1 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #317,891 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #262 in Books > Biographies &

Customer Reviews

"By recovering the excitement of Humboldtian explorations and travel experiences, Walls wins back Humboldt for the 21st century. Through her account, he joins forces with present-day heroes such as Edward O. Wilson and his "Cosmos" of a sort, "Consilience", all of them reorienting and transforming disciplines and divisions that threaten "to leach the poetry out of our technologically driven lives." Walls reclaims for the present a man whose personality and work had a formative influence on the cultural landscape of antebellum America and whose legacy may to good effect be used in addressing current affairs. I recommend "The Passage to Cosmos" as a fine piece of Humboldt scholarship, a heartfelt plea for environmental holism, and an enjoyable read."--Nicolaas A. Rupke, "Science" --Nicolaas A. Rupke "Science" "Not the least of the qualities of Dassow Walls' erudite and wide-ranging narrative is that she enables us to understand something of the man's genius and polymathic range. Humboldt's fundamental assumption, she tells us, was that neither humans nor nature could be understood in isolation."--Jeremy Jennings, "Times Higher Education" --Jeremy Jennings "Times Higher Education" "By recovering the excitement of Humboldtian explorations and travel experiences, Walls wins back Humboldt for the 21st century. Through her account, he joins forces with present-day heroes such as Edward O. Wilson and his "Cosmos" of a sort, "Consilience", all of them reorienting and transforming disciplines and divisions that threaten "to leach the poetry out of our technologically driven lives." Walls reclaims for the present a man whose personality and work had a formative influence on the cultural landscape of antebellum America and whose legacy may to good effect be used in addressing current affairs. I recommend "The Passage to Cosmos" as a fine piece of Humboldt scholarship, a heartfelt plea for environmental holism, and an enjoyable read."--Nicolaas A. Rupke "Science" "Not the least of the qualities of Dassow Walls' erudite and wide-ranging narrative is that she enables us to understand something of the man's genius and polymathic range. Humboldt's fundamental assumption, she tells us, was that neither humans nor nature could be understood in isolation."--Jeremy Jennings, "Times Higher Education" --Jeremy Jennings "Times Higher Education"

Laura Dassow Walls is the William P. and Hazel B. White Professor of English at the University of

Notre Dame and the author of several books, including, most recently, Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth.

Walls had done it again, that is to examine mankind's relationship to nature through some of the greatest proponents of nature: Thoreau, Emerson, and now Humboldt. Although Humboldt was probably the least literary of the three, Walls presents him as the most mindful of the intimate interrelationships among science, all arts, politics, and human dignity. He was more scientific than Thoreau or Emerson and perhaps more objective in writing about the cosmos. While his writings are not readily available today, Walls has made his thoughts, feelings, and controversies with his contemporaries completely accessible in *PASSAGE TO COSMOS*. Her inspiration is contagious.

This is a book that anyone who is interested in either literature or science should read. It's helped me understand the contours of the contemporary world.

Humboldtian thinking and appreciation is more needed now than ever. And, Walls' book is a excellent contribution. The writing is insightful, well-documented, comprehensive, and even riveting at times. This could have been a dry, sit-on-the-shelf exploration of this great individual's work and impacts, but in the author's expert hands it becomes an eye-opening essential read for anyone interested in fostering a healthier, saner planet.

Laura Dassow Walls captures the spirit of Humboldt in moving prose. She writes in a style that reflects Humboldt's own cosmic view of the universe as he travels the Western World. Her style is personal, warm, passionate, and exciting. You come away from each reading with a wonderful sense of place. She is so much involved in this study that at times I cannot separate her from the great explorer himself. In other words, her work is subjective, filled with admiration of one of the giants of the 19th century. I appreciate her fearless willingness to bring her own history into his, thus writing with the cosmic and unifying sense of connectedness that so often evades biography. She writes of Humboldt because she respects not only his unifying approach to nature but because his work has touched a deep part of her own sense of oneness with the creation. In these pages one can sense the evolving roots of the transcendental science of Thoreau. Make no mistake about it, this is a very personal work, but the research and documentation is exhaustive. I applaud her for her energy and spirit of enthusiasm exhibited in this work. Humboldt once again comes alive through these pages. Tom Potter, President, Thoreau Society

Alexander Humboldt was a remarkable man. However the author made his book heavy dry reading and I was only able to plough through half of it. It's only for those who really want to learn about the man despite its authorship

This is an excellent academic book; it's a detailed study of Humboldt via art and various forms of writing. The author has a lit background, but this is a bit more biographical and focused on art than it is "literature and science" work. The book has a rich agenda: locating environmental thought and history in empire as opposed to nation. I see this as an important book in environmental criticism.

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