



Nature translated: Alexander von Humboldt's work in nineteenth-century Britain

by Alison E. Martin, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, £80, xii + 268 pp., ISBN: 978-1-474-439329

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BOOK REVIEW

Nature translated: Alexander von Humboldt's work in nineteenth-century Britain, by Alison E. Martin, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, £80, xii + 268 pp., ISBN: 978-1-474-439329

Historians and geographers of science have, in recent years, become increasingly attentive to science as a form of communication: a mode of exchange in which processes of transmission and translation are understood to be central to the production, dissemination, and reception of knowledge. What this attention has revealed is that the mobility of scientific knowledge and ideas has very often depended upon their mutability – their capacity to withstand adaptation and recasting in order to correspond more sympathetically to the linguistic, social, or cultural settings in which they are received. In this context, the act of translation – and the creative and intellectual work of the translator – has emerged as an important focus of investigation in developing understandings of the relationship between science and literary labour and in shedding important light on how science, as a cosmopolitan enterprise, historically navigated linguistic barriers to its dissemination. In *Nature Translated*, Alison E. Martin takes these various concerns seriously in offering a detailed and scholarly examination of how, by whom, and with what effect the major geographical works of Alexander von Humboldt were translated for a nineteenth-century British audience that comprised of both specialist and lay readers.

A central premise of *Nature Translated* is that translation is rarely, if ever, a straightforward and mechanical process of linguistic conversion; rather, it typically represents a complex, considered, and sometimes contested textual transformation in which the source is modified by means, variously, of stylistic alteration, material addition or subtraction, and emendation. Understood in this way, translation is never a neutral process – it inevitably bears the imprint of the translator and reveals how, as Martin puts it, ‘their stylistic choices are encoded in assumptions about the text and its author, their own role as mediators of scientific knowledge and the translation’s intended readership’ (p. 39). *Nature Translated* attends to precisely the factors that made the translations of Humboldt’s texts indisputably works of literary coproduction: hybrid objects whose ostensibly individual authorship was, in reality, always underpinned and facilitated by a wide range of literary actors, translators most especially. To an important extent, translators held the power to improve or to injure a text in the processes of its translation – to smooth over errors or infelicities, or, conversely, to draw them to the reader’s attention. Humboldt was fortunate in this respect; most of his translators strove to improve his works and thus to build and preserve his public persona as sagacious polymath and pioneering explorer. As Martin confirms, ‘without the significant input of his British translators, Humboldt’s success in the Anglophone world would have been slower and less spectacular’ (p. 19).

Nature Translated shows us, however, that not all of Humboldt’s translators were also his promoters. The Scottish journalist John Black – whose translation of Humboldt’s *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* (1808–1811) was published in 1811 as *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* – adopted the role of visible and questioning translator, peppering his work with footnotes that ‘queried, corrected and criticised Humboldt’s text’ (p. 42). For Martin, Black’s ‘critical, dissociative stance’ (p. 51) is explained, in part, by what Black perceived to be a conflict of interest in Humboldt’s work – an earlier version of


which had been intended for the Spanish government – but can also be seen to lie in Black’s personal frustration at the particular stylistic challenge the text was seen to present, being a combination of richly descriptive narrative prose and somewhat dry statistical and scientific data. The net effect of Black’s approach – particularly his decision to provide a very literal translation of the original French rather than to adjust the syntax to better suit the grammatical structure of English – was to mark out the work as foreign and to position Humboldt as a fallible witness to nature and to geographical fact.

An altogether different approach to the translation of Humboldt into English is revealed in Martin’s examination of Helen Maria Williams, who undertook translations of two of Humboldt’s most significant works: *Vues des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (1810–1813), published as *Researches, Concerning the Institutions & Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America* (1814), and *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1814–1834), published as *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1814–1829). In many respects, Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* was the text that epitomised his efforts to combine Enlightenment empiricism and Romantic sensibility – to strike a balance between ‘aesthetic and scientific representation in an all-encompassing travelogue’ (p. 75) – and, as Martin shows, this was an ambition that Williams’ cooperative and collaborative translation helped Humboldt to realise. While Black had done little to develop the literary potential of Humboldt’s writing, Williams, by contrast, was considerably more assiduous in ensuring that his work acquired, in her translation of it, a ‘distinctive literary flair’ (p. 79).

Williams’ stylistic approach to the task of translation reflected a number of things, not least her own literary background as a poet and novelist. More than that, however, Williams and Humboldt were then living in close proximity in Paris – an immediacy that permitted frequent discussion (in person, by letter, and, occasionally, by means of explanatory diagrams) of the process and progress of Williams’ translation. In examining the exchanges between author and translator, Martin shows the extent to which a translated text could become a gestalt entity, improved as a consequence of collaboration and the combination of different creative approaches. *Nature Translated* makes clear that Humboldt saw the success of any translation to lie not in its literal faithfulness to the original text, but in its capacity for stylistic enhancement in the process being transformed into a new idiom. *Personal Narrative* was successful, in Humboldt’s view, at least partly because Williams’ ‘complex recasting’ of the original source allowed her own literary voice to become evident in the text (p. 91).

Nature Translated follows questions of style, fidelity, collaboration, and creativity across a range of other translations, most notably of Humboldt’s *Ansichten der Natur* (1808) and *Kosmos* (1845–1862), each published in English under variant titles, in different formats, and with distinct audiences in mind. Martin’s detailed examination of each translation is helpful in revealing the range of motivations and ideas that lay behind the particular choices – scientific, literary, and financial – that were made in their production. What *Nature Translated* makes clear, in its engaging and often forensic attention to the translator’s art, is that studies of translation are of central importance in understanding how scientific and geographical ideas circulated among specialist and popular audiences in the nineteenth century. Translators were key mediators not only between linguistic cultures but also between scientific and literary practice – the making and communication of knowledge being a process that often depended upon the combination of style and substance. *Nature Translated* is a welcome contribution to scholarship on Humboldt in international

context and offers much to interest book historians, historians and geographers of science, and literary scholars.

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