



Nature translated. Alexander von Humboldt's works in nineteenth-century Britain

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BOOK REVIEW

Nature translated. Alexander von Humboldt's works in nineteenth-century Britain, by Alison E. Martin, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 268 pp., £24.99/£80.00/£24.99 (paperback/hardcover/e-book), ISBN 9781474439336/9781474439329/9781474439350

Alexander von Humboldt scholarship has always been a wide, international, multilingual field. Recently scholars in Europe and the Americas have made efforts to gain a greater understanding of Humboldt's scientific concept. In the 1970s the historian of science Susan Cannon described Humboldt's research method as "the accurate, measured study of widespread but interconnected real phenomena in order to find a definite law and a dynamical cause" (1978, 105), thus coining the term "Humboldtian science". In the 1980s the scholar of Romance languages and literatures, Ottmar Ette, began investigating Humboldt's ways of describing nature. Based on Cannon's ideas, Ette developed a concept of "Humboldtian writing" which describes the interaction of texts, paratexts, illustrations, etc. which Humboldt employed to evoke adequate impressions about natural phenomena upon his readers. A long-standing desideratum in the field of Humboldt research had been a bibliography of his writings. *Alexander von Humboldts Schriften – Bibliographie der selbständig erschienenen Werke* (Fiedler and Leitner 2000) is now a standard work in which we find reliable information about Humboldt's books and their translations. These brief glimpses into certain specific fields of Humboldt scholarship indicate the foundations on which Alison E. Martin's *Nature Translated* builds, in its investigation of the English translations of Humboldt's works during the (pre-)Victorian period.

To look at the emergence of these translations is particularly important because in the Anglophone world Humboldt's books – originally published in French and German – have mostly been discussed in their translated form. However, translation does not just mean the mechanical transformation of a text into another language. Martin rightly argues that translating is – to use André Lefevere's term – a form of creative "rewriting" in a different language. A translated text appears as an "amalgam of the stylistic choices made by the author of the original text and the translator who reconfigures this text" (36), but is of course also influenced by the practical realities of the transfer situation underpinning the publication of a text in a foreign language. Only relatively recently, Martin argues, have historians of science (notably James Secord and Bernard Lightman) placed greater emphasis on the importance of language in scientific knowledge transmission, while theoretical work on style in translation (by, for example, Jean Boase-Beier) has tended to focus on literary prose and poetry. Martin uses the English translations of four of Humboldt's works – the *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* (1808–1811), *Voyage de Humboldt et Bonpland. Première Partie. Relation historique* (1814–1831), *Ansichten der Natur* (3rd ed., 1849), and *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (1845–1862) – to investigate why style was so important to Humboldt, and how his translators negotiated its challenges.

The *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (4 vols., 1811; publisher the Thomas Norton Longman group) was translated by the Scottish journalist and editor John Black (1783–1855) and is the only complete English version of Humboldt's work on Mexico. Black criticized Humboldt's prolixity as typically German and attacked his highfalutin style. Without Humboldt's consent, he added information and ensured that he as the translator would be visible within the text, on the cover and in his own notes, much to Humboldt's

irritation: “Mutual respect, close collaboration and productive exchange were more what he sought than Black’s solitary, confrontational and self-promoting approach” (73).

Martin sees the English translation of the *Relation historique* by Helen Maria Williams (1759–1827), as a “colossal literary and scientific task” (75). Indeed, Williams’s *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (7 volumes, 1814–1831[?]; probably completed after her death by Charles Augustin Coquerel; publisher Longman) is the only complete English version of Humboldt’s work. A serious problem in her efforts to translate Humboldt’s narrative was finding suitable solutions for the scientific expressions. Here, the Irish-American diplomat David Bailie Warden (1772–1845) could offer his support (93–94). Though Warden was probably one of Humboldt’s most important sources of information about the United States, he is almost completely forgotten today and widely ignored in biographies of Alexander von Humboldt. Williams invested a great deal of money, time, and energy in her translation of Humboldt’s work and “is undeniably present, and stylistically ‘visible’, in the more esoteric parts, where Humboldt actively encouraged her to use her expertise as a literary writer to create vibrant, engaging and above readable prose” (113–114). Humboldt understood translation not as a result but as a process, and he acknowledged his translator’s co-authorship.

About two decades later, a new English version of the *Relation historique* began to appear, translated by Thomasina Muir Ross (1795 or 1796–1875). The translation of Humboldt’s work (published in 1852/1853; publisher Henry G. Bohn) was the culmination of Ross’s career (126). Although it appeared under the same title as Williams’s work, it was much shorter, consisting of only three volumes. Martin discusses the many omissions and changes intended to make the book more popular. For instance, Humboldt’s statistics and measurements were regarded as obsolete and left out (117). All in all, Ross made the book more readable while she was able to retain many of Williams’s linguistic and stylistic achievements. Taking these factors into account, it is important to point out that “Ross’s judicious editing and Bohn’s savvy marketing of this second translation of the *Relation historique* enabled Humboldt to reach a far greater audience than the Longman edition had ever attracted” (148).

In 1849 the third and final edition of *Ansichten der Natur* was published by Cotta in Stuttgart. The first two editions (1808 and 1826) were never translated into English. Now the Longman group and Henry G. Bohn were eager to publish competing English translations. Longman’s translator was Lady Elizabeth Juliana Sabine (1807–1879). Bohn employed Elise Otté (1818–1903). Both women were experienced translators and their names appeared on the title pages, Sabine’s title being *Aspects of Nature* and Otté’s *Views of Nature*. Martin outlines the importance of this work in Humboldt’s oeuvre. “Humboldt’s ‘survey of nature at large’ aimed to bring all the sense impressions together in the mind’s eye of the reader to recreate ‘the enjoyment which the immediate aspect of the tropical countries afford to the susceptible beholder’” (154). To illustrate the difficulties which the translators had to face, Martin gives several examples: Humboldt liked to play with compound nouns such as “Naturgefühl” (literally “feeling of nature”). Otté adopted the solution “the faculty of appreciating nature”, whereas Sabine circumscribed Humboldt’s expression as “the vivid appreciation and sentiment of nature” (180). Despite the differences, both translations had one important aspect in common: “They shared a desire to reinforce the spiritual associations in the *Ansichten der Natur* so that it would meet the expectations of more conservative British readers” (185). Central to Martin’s analytical method is therefore a comparison of the various versions of Humboldt’s books as much as the social environments in which the texts were created and read. The fact that most English translators of Humboldt’s works were women, and that their

names were visible indicate social changes in Victorian Britain and have important implications for research on translation, science and gender.

In 1845 the first volume of *Kosmos* was published by Cotta. The series of five volumes (2nd: 1847; 3rd: 1850/51; 4th: 1858; 5th: after Humboldt's death 1862, mainly the index) became the most important literary work of Humboldt's oeuvre (192). In 1849 three versions of volume I were on the British book market. One had come out as early as 1845, the translator being the eye surgeon Augustin Prichard (1818–1898). A year later the translation “under the superintendence” of Sir Edward Sabine was published by the Longman group. In fact, his wife Elizabeth Sabine did the translation work itself, but she “could rely on her husband's scientific competence” for specialist terminology (198). Elise Otté's version was part of Bohn's publishing program and appeared in 1849. Martin points out that Otté had the advantage of being able to use and sometimes correct previous translations, which subsequently ensured that her work was widely published and re-published and a more recent edition of Volume I and II by Nicolaas Rupke (1997) was indeed based on Otté's text.

Alison E. Martin's book is an outstanding and profound contribution not only to Alexander von Humboldt research, but also to the history of literary translation. Moreover, it sheds new light on the role of educated British women as scientific mediators between different cultures in Europe. Broad in scope, the text ranges across many disciplines, making the notes and the bibliography (15 pages) in themselves valuable sources of information. Martin's work is “Humboldtian” insofar as it generates knowledge mainly by comparing Humboldt's original works with the translations and by comparing the various English versions among themselves. Some biographical sketches add valuable information beyond the standard *Bibliography*. It goes without saying that *Nature Translated* with its specialized topics cannot be “popular” in the sense of Andrea Wulf's (2015) *The Invention of Nature* or Ottmar Ette's (2018) *Das Buch der Begegnungen*. But it represents an important new standard work in international Humboldt scholarship.

Notes on contributor

Ingo Schwarz studied Russian and English in Berlin; since 1989 he has worked as researcher on Alexander von Humboldt at the (East) Berlin Academy of Sciences, today Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities; he edited or co-edited some of Humboldt's correspondence with famous American, German and Russian scientists.

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