

**Andreas W. Daum, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Concise Biography*,
Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024, 224 pp.
ISBN: 9780691247366**

This book's aim is ambitious: to write a concise biography of Alexander von Humboldt (the book only has 153 pages, excluding appendices), without lapsing into superficial interpretations and analyses that reduce his figure to that of the brilliant genius detached from reality or "heroic" narratives, such as Andrea Wulf's Humboldt as the one who "invented nature" (2015). Translated from the German original (2019) with some changes, this succinct biography is divided into seven chapters complemented by a chronology, a useful guide to sources and further reading and a selected bibliography of Humboldt's works and secondary literature. The apparatus of notes is light but has numerous references to sources and works cited. The account starts from Humboldt's early years and training, passing through the experience in the Prussian mining service, the American journey, the periods spent in Paris and Berlin, the trip to Russia and Asia, up to the last years of his life. Information is also provided about his private life and affective relationships, to show that the image of Humboldt as an "emotionally unresponsive workaholic" is a later stereotypical one. What emerges is a portrait of a man with multifaceted interests and skills, reluctant to office work and "in constant movement" (p. 30).

Daum's book belongs to the strand of biographies in context, devoting ample space to describing the cultural, social and political context in which the scientist was trained and carried out his activities, but also to the encounters and figures – family members, scholars, politicians, sovereigns – who inspired him or influenced his ideas. The purpose is to enable the reader to understand that Humboldt's path was the result of personal attitudes and insights combined with a specific socio-cultural and political-economic framework. The author draws attention to a Europe that was undergoing rapid change between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, marked by political upheavals and revolutionary turmoil, the formation and affirmation of nation-states, the industrial revolution, significant changes in civil society, as well as the specialization and professionalization of scientific disciplines, particularly the natural sciences, and the gradual transition from an 18th-century sensibility typical of the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism to a 19th-century, more typically Romantic one, which directly affected ideas in the philosophy of nature.

One of the considerations at the core of the book concerns the legacy of Humboldt's work. The author questions the category of "Humboldtian science" (coined by historian of science Susan Faye Cannon in 1978), arguing that it is misleading in that it corresponds more to an ideal than to the research method actually followed by Humboldt, emphasizing how personal interests and circumstances that were not strictly scientific influenced his theories more than a supposed systematic approach. Rather, his science was situational, in motion, experimental, based on field work, and admitting doubt and error as the engine of advancement. It was a science of its own time, when not only were the boundaries between the various natural sciences not clearly defined, but neither were those between the natural sciences, philosophy and literature. Particularly relevant for Humboldt was, for example, his encounter with Schiller and Goethe, who influenced his conception of nature and his idea that there need not be "opposition between empiricism and natural-philosophical ideas" entailing an aesthetic experience of nature (p. 91). Moreover, without denying Humboldt's indisputable contributions to

the geography of plants, the study of the relationships between climate and vegetation distribution, and the development of an ecological approach to the study of nature, Daum argues that, in retrospect, Humboldt's scientific legacy was not as game-changing as that of other figures of equivalent renown, such as Charles Darwin, the Prussian scientist's aim at conveying a "cosmic synthesis" of the physical world having been only achieved in a fragmentary way.

Another central theme of the book concerns Humboldt's relations with politics, which, thanks to the fact that he often did not take a clear political stand on various issues, allowed him to gain favour with the governments of various countries and thus to conduct his research rather freely. This, combined with his expertise in Prussian cameralism, the mining sector and resource extraction, proved to be crucial in obtaining permission to travel through the Spanish colonies in America between 1799 and 1804 and to Russia and Asia in 1829. Although decisive for Humboldt's scientific thinking and career, the journey to America is not presented here as the sole source of his theories on nature, like other accounts did. Furthermore, the author emphasizes how, especially in this case, it is important not to indulge in idealized narratives or, on the contrary, in presentist readings such as postcolonial critiques of Humboldt's position towards colonialism. Instead, nuances and contradictions need to be taken into account to avoid ending up in simplistic and biased interpretations: neither did Humboldt condemn colonialism entirely, nor did he look at South America exclusively with "imperial eyes", being aware of the ecological costs and social inequalities caused by the colonial system. Daum also pays attention to the massive task of rearrangement of the notes and material collected during the trip and the process of "delivering to the public" the results of the research conducted there. The reception of Humboldt's work is analyzed in the light of the evolution of knowledge in the 19th century and the rise of popular science.

Overall, the portrait that emerges from Daum's account, despite its conciseness, conveys the complexity of Humboldt's figure, providing plenty of insights and a fresh look at his place in the history of science. The book is an excellent starting point for those approaching Humboldt for the first time and wishing to gain an overview of his biography and contributions to the history of science without sacrificing rigour, but also an important reference for those wishing to explore certain aspects of his life and work in greater depth.

Zoe Lauri

Università di Bologna
zoe.lauri2@unibo.it