

2018

## **Book Review of Humboldt's Mexico: In the Footsteps of the Illustrious German Scientific Traveller, by Myron Echenberg**

Andrew Sluyter  
*Louisiana State University, [asluyter@lsu.edu](mailto:asluyter@lsu.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.lsu.edu/geoanth\\_pubs](https://repository.lsu.edu/geoanth_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

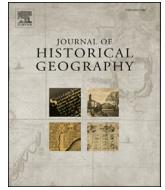
A. Sluyter. 2018. Book review of Humboldt's Mexico: In the Footsteps of the Illustrious German Scientific Traveller, by Myron Echenberg. *Journal of Historical Geography* 59: 100-1

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Geography & Anthropology at LSU Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of LSU Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [ir@lsu.edu](mailto:ir@lsu.edu).



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg)

## Review

**Humboldt's Mexico: In the Footsteps of the Illustrious German Scientific Traveller, Myron Echenberg. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston (2017). 236 pages, CANS\$39.95 hardcover.**

Alexander von Humboldt remains of great interest in the study of the emergence of modern geographic thought and practice because he pioneered the projection into the field of the observational practices of the Enlightenment laboratory, thereby further challenging the textual authority of the Classical episteme. Isoline mapping of instrumental field measurements of atmospheric pressure and temperature as well as his other innovative methods became essential to geography and the other modern field disciplines. Since the Columbian quincentennial, now more than two decades ago, mounting research under the rubric of postcolonial studies has vastly enhanced our understanding of the role of Humboldt's journey through the tropical Americas in the emergence of field-based disciplines in relation to the colonial and post-colonial contexts in which they came to thrive. That extensive effort contrasts fundamentally with the antecedent, largely triumphalist literature on Humboldt.

Myron Echenberg's treatment of Humboldt's two years in Mexico represents a quaint return to the triumphalist literature. The subtitle — 'in the footsteps of the illustrious German scientific traveller' — reveals not only the author's hagiography but his method. He follows Humboldt's itinerary from his arrival through his departure. Part 1 (pp. 1–98) traces Humboldt's journey, in the company of Aimé Bonpland and Carlos Montúfar, from 'Arrival in Mexico, 23 March to 12 April 1803: From Acapulco to Mexico City.' Part 2 (pp. 99–154) continues with a series of excursions made while resident in Mexico City: 'Visits to the Mexican Heartland, 14 May to 10 October 1803: Silver Mines and Active Volcanoes.' And part 3 (pp. 155–197) largely concludes the book with the journey 'Homeward Bound, 30 January to 7 March 1804: Demography, Disease, and Departure from Veracruz.'

Much of the account comes directly from Humboldt's *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*, written in French and published in 1811 in Paris as two volumes plus an atlas. Echenberg quotes at length from Humboldt's account, one passage running on for nearly four full pages (pp. 94–97). Oddly, Echenberg quotes from an English edition, commonly known as the *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, attributing the translator's sometimes questionable word choices to Humboldt. The decision to rely on someone else's translation of the principal primary source is never explained even though originals and facsimiles of the *Essai politique* remain readily available. Moreover, Echenberg's chronological organization clashes with the thematic organization of the *Essai politique*. In fact, Humboldt's travel journals seem a much more appropriate primary source for a project organized as a daily

narrative. The Berlin State Library acquired the journals from the Humboldt heirs in 2013 and has since digitized them in their entirety and made them available at <http://humboldt.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de> (last accessed 13 June 2017) as high-resolution, full-page images of the text, tables, and diagrams. Yet the two journals that pertain to the Mexican segment of the journey do not appear anywhere among Echenberg's citations.

Interspersed among the chapters that follow Humboldt through Mexico are others on an eclectic mix of topics that a few readers might find interesting. For example, the second chapter of part 1 compares Humboldt with Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralist of the early twentieth century, and finds many points of unlikely similarity. Other chapters list museums and other types of tourist attractions somehow associated with Humboldt: Taxco's Casa Humboldt, a plaque commemorating his visit to Guanajuato, statues of him in Mexico City, and so on.

This book has many relatively minor problems. The index often points readers to the wrong pages. Obvious typos mar the text, such as missing spaces between words: 'Especiallyin' (p. 88). Many errors of fact and interpretation occur, for example, the cold winds known as *nortes*, meaning northers, that occasionally reach Veracruz during the winter do not blow from the direction of the Caribbean — which is due east (p. 195). Inadequate citation generally prevents determination of secondary sources and therefore whether they or Echenberg's misinterpretation of them resulted in the errors. Illustrations abound but only a single map (p. x). It shows Humboldt's route but at such a small scale that only its general features are apparent, notably odd given that Echenberg's method involves following the scientist's entire journey through Mexico. The mismatch between map and method occurs because Echenberg did not draft the map to suit his purpose. Instead, the map comes from an article I authored about the relationships among the texts Humboldt drew on, the people and landscapes he interacted with, and the texts he produced.<sup>1</sup> To facilitate analysis, that article included detailed maps of parts of his route through Mexico, each one keyed to a locator box drawn on the overview map. Echenberg's version of my overview map alters some of my labels but retains the boxes I drew to locate the detailed maps, even though he does not include them in a book motivated by tracing the details of Humboldt's journey — in his 'footsteps', no less.

The greatest problem, however, remains that the book fails to make any contribution to our understanding of Humboldt. In the brief concluding chapter, after the forty-eight chapters of parts 1–3, Echenberg does engage some of the postcolonial literature. Quite

<sup>1</sup> Note that Echenberg uses the map without acknowledging his source, but it is clearly figure 1 in Andrew Sluyter, Humboldt's Mexican Texts and Landscapes, *Geographical Review* 96 (1996) 361–381.

surprisingly, he characterizes me as one of Humboldt's 'defenders' (p. 214) against such supposed 'attackers' as Mary Louise Pratt, the literary scholar who wrote one of the key texts of postcolonialism. In reality, my contributions to the postcolonial literature regarding Humboldt quite clearly align with Pratt's purpose: to understand — not to judge — Humboldt's decisive role in a process that greatly transformed the world and persists in its effects. Postcolonial studies, as a whole, has done much to explicate the process through which Humboldt became so influential and consequential, reviving scholarly interest in him and many another 'illustrious ... scientific

traveller', German or otherwise. Echenberg seems so intent on an anachronistic return to hagiography that he mischaracterizes post-colonial scholarship as an attack on Humboldt and thereby misses an opportunity to make any sort of intellectual contribution of his own.

Andrew Sluyter  
*Louisiana State University, USA*