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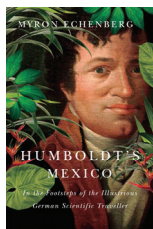
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Myron Echenberg.  
*Humboldt's Mexico: In the  
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 German Scientific Traveller.*  
 288 pages. McGill-  
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Alexander von Humboldt (1769 – 1859) was a Prussian geographer, a naturalist, and an explorer. Between 1799 and 1804, he travelled extensively in Latin America. His description of the journey was written up and published in an enormous set of volumes.

Humboldt graduated from the Freiberg School of Mines in 1792 and was appointed to a Prussian government position in the Department of Mines. At Freiberg, he met a number of men who proved important to him in his later career, including Spaniard Manuel del Rio, who became director of the School of Mines in Mexico City.

Humboldt sought authorization to travel to Spain's colonies in the Americas. With the accession of the Bourbons to the Spanish throne they embarked on the reform in Spain and Spanish America. They already authorized and funded expeditions to the Viceroyalty of Peru, to Chile, New Granada. New Spain, etc., to gather information about plants and animals, assess economic possibilities, and provide plants and seeds for the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid. When Humboldt requested authorization to travel to Spanish America with his own financing, it was granted, a feat in itself. As a result, Humboldt was given extraordinary access to crown

officials and written documentation on Spain's empire. Spain under the Hapsburg monarchy had guarded its realms against foreigner travellers and intruders. Humboldt was granted access to crown officials and written documentation on Spain's empire.

Myron Echenberg presents a guide with historical and cultural context to Humboldt's travels in Mexico. The adventures range from inspections of colonial silver mines and hikes to the summits of volcanoes to examination of secret Spanish colonial archives in Mexico City and scientific discussions of archaeological sites of pre-Hispanic cultures.

The book is divided into three parts: 1. Arrival in Mexico, 23 March to 12 April 1803: From Acapulco to Mexico City; 2. Visits to the Mexican Heartland, 14 May to 10 October 1803: Silver Mines and Active Volcanoes; 3. Homeward Bound, 30 January to 7 March 1804. Demography, Disease, and Departure from Veracruz. The book ends with Humboldt's Legacy, A Guide to Publications by or about Alexander von Humboldt in Mexico, A Guide to Readings on Humboldt, Citations, and Bibliography.

It is not clear why the author selects the picture on the dust cover although better pictures of Humboldt are known. Also, it is not clear why there is duplication of pictures in the text. Finally, the author did not write enough about Humboldt's role with Manuel del Rio who discovered the metal vanadium in a mineral from Zimapan. In fact, it was Humboldt who gave a sample of the Zimapan mineral to the German chemist Friedrich Wöhler in 1803. The metal was discovered in an iron ore by

the Swedish chemist Nils Serfström who was working in Berzelius' laboratory. Berzelius then wrote to his student Wöhler that the metal described by Del Rio is the same as that described by Serfström. This is a well known story in the history of chemistry but probably not known to other historians and to the general public: vanadium was discovered in Mexico. Further, it is one of the most important contributions of Humboldt for Mexico and therefore

should have been stressed. The book makes an enjoyable reading because it reminds us of the old times in Mexico.

Myron Echenberg is Professor Emeritus of History and Classical Studies from McGill University in Montreal. He got PhD from University of Wisconsin at Madison. His area of specialization: African History, French Empire in Africa, and the Social History of Medicine in Africa.

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