

Introduction

On August 1, 1804, the frigate *La Favorite* anchored at the Garrone River near Bordeaux, carrying two men who had just completed a four-year exploration of South America. They mapped a reputed link between the tributaries of the Orinoco and Amazon river systems. They climbed the high Andes and crossed the burning desert of the llanos. They brought back 40 crates of animals and plants never before seen in Europe, as well as thousands of pages of notes, drawings, and measurements. Immediately on entering the harbor, Alexander von Humboldt, who had financed the expedition, took charge of what he assumed would be their shared future. In a matter of weeks he selected items from their collections for an exhibit at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle (National Museum of Natural History) in Paris, impressed the Institut de France with a dramatic talk on the capture of electric eels, lobbied government officials, and began the process of lining up publishers for a long list of volumes that would rival the results of Napoleon's conquest of Egypt. Out and about in fashionable Parisian salons and drawing rooms, he fascinated guests with stories of adventures with wild Indians and on simmering volcanoes.

If Alexander Humboldt stepped eagerly onto the stage of European intellectual history, Aimé Bonpland, the French botanist who had been at his side for five years collecting and describing plants and animals, retreated. When he left Paris with Humboldt in 1798, France was a fledgling republic. Now under the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, it was an imperial power. Treasure from foreign conquests paraded through the streets. Monumental building projects were under way. No, he would not join Humboldt at Napoleon's coronation as emperor in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, which anyone with any sense would realize was a ridiculous show. Yes, he understood that it was important to profit from a moment of return from exotic locations to attract an audience for one's writings. But botanical work takes time. Each plant has to be carefully cataloged and its classification confirmed. And yes, he would give a paper at

the Institut, but its subject would not be howling monkeys or electric eels, but the complex chemistry of a palm high up in the Andes, which produces a vegetal wax that native people use to make candles.

For five years the two had rarely been out of each other's sight. For five years they had worked amicably and productively together. Humboldt recorded temperatures, altitudes, lengths, and pressures with his expensive array of scientific instruments; Bonpland, the botanist, had his eyes on the ground, looking for interesting and useful plants. If Humboldt hoped for something more intimate than friendship with the young Frenchman, he quickly learned to be content with Bonpland's affectionate, energetic, and observant presence. There were no embarrassing passionate misunderstandings, only the pleasure and intimacy of productive life together, the two of them alone, except for guides and porters, negotiating tropical rivers, climbing the Andes, settling down for long periods of time in rented houses. If it was Humboldt's inheritance that had financed the expedition, never did he fail to acknowledge that its success was as much due to Bonpland's energy and competence. Never did he fail to praise Bonpland as a scientific collaborator or hesitate to give him credit for the work of finding, preserving, describing, and identifying plants and animals which provided an important part of the scientific basis for their joint publications. As Humboldt put it in his *Personal Narrative* of the voyage, "I was supported by a brave and learned friend whose keenness and equanimity never let me down despite the exhaustion and dangers we faced" (PN, 5). Unlike the urbane Humboldt in his top hat and frock coat, in forests and on rivers Bonpland was in his element, collecting new and useful plants, talking to locals, rescuing Humboldt from drowning, collecting live animals as pets, disappearing on excursions with local guides.

Back in Paris things changed. Humboldt began his climb to the pinnacle of fame in Europe. Bonpland contemplated crowded, seething, militant Paris with increasing skepticism. He consulted with friends and colleagues at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle and the Jardin des plantes. He rented an apartment in a quiet neighborhood. He went to work on the thousands of plant specimens in his crates and the hundreds of pages of descriptions and notes in his journals. By December he had arranged and classified a herbarium of 6,200 plants for Humboldt to present to the Muséum. By the next spring he had ready a first installment of plates and descriptions for a two-volume illustrated *Plantes équinoxiales* to appear at the same time as Humboldt's *Essay on the Geography of Plants*. When Humboldt traveled to Italy to see his brother, and then on to Berlin to renew his allegiance to the Prussian King, Bonpland stayed in Paris, taking care of publishing business, negotiating with printers and engravers, editing Humboldt's manuscripts, and correcting Humboldt's French.

Trapped in Berlin during the French occupation, Humboldt continued to turn out copy. He consoled fellow Prussians with romantic descriptions of tropical landscapes in his popular *Aspects of Nature*. He recruited a young astronomer to edit and correlate his astronomical observations for a *Recueil d'observations astronomiques*. Finally permitted to return to Paris, he completed his *Geography of Plants* and published a much augmented version of the *Political Essay* he prepared for the Spanish Viceroy of New Spain. But botanical copy from his coauthor Bonpland was slow to appear. Humboldt was impatient. Where was the second volume of *Plantes équinoxiales*? More important, where were descriptions in Latin of the thousands of new species of plants that would be the basis for Humboldt's theories of nature? Yes, Bonpland was naturalizing many of those plants as director of estates and gardens at Empress Josephine Bonaparte's estate at Malmaison, but was there any reason why an administrative post should interfere with publishing? Finally, with Humboldt hiring other botanists to describe and classify plants that Bonpland collected, Bonpland, having proven himself incompetent, retreated to the wild riverlands of Argentina and Humboldt went on to become one of the heroes of European civilization. As one of Humboldt's admirers cleverly put it: Homer, Hesiod, Humboldt; Aristotle, Aquinas, Alexander.

So the story goes as it is told in recent books celebrating Humboldt as an environmental hero. Aaron Sachs in *The Humboldt Current* compared Humboldt's influence to a mighty river, an intellectual torrent that sweeping through the Western world, flowing into the settlement of North America, the exploration of remote parts of the globe and on into the nature writing of John Muir. According to Gerard Helferich, Humboldt "changed the way we see the world." In a best-selling biography, Andrea Wulf named Humboldt the "Inventor of Nature." Laura Walls heard in Humboldt's prose Nature's very voice: "For the Humboldtian scientist the doing of science combined rigorous and exacting labor with the joy of poetic revelation and an almost spiritual sense of revelation, as if nature borrowed the mind and the hand of the scientist to describe its own most beautiful laws and structures" (Walls, 8). As one reviewer put it, "rediscovering Humboldt is by this point a subgenre unto itself."¹ Bonpland was all but forgotten, mentioned briefly, "gone native" somewhere in South America.

So the story goes, but in the course of doing some research in the history of botany, I began to question it. Nor, I soon found out, was I alone. In the early years of the twentieth century Ernest-Theodore Hamy, editor of Humboldt's *Lettres américaines* and one of the founders of the science of ethnography in France, came to a similar conclusion. As Hamy put it in a preface to his 1906 biography of Bonpland and collection of Bonpland's letters,

I came to know Bonpland through Humboldt. It was gathering materials for my edition of the *American Letters* of the celebrated Prussian savant that I first came across biographical details that made me love his travel companion almost as much as Humboldt himself. The more I went on in my study of Humboldt's *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent*, the better I came to understand the importance of the role played by our compatriot. . . . In the end I came to have a high idea of services rendered to science and humanity in the midst of many troubles that made me decide to devote to the long and active career of this explorer and naturalist the detailed monograph he merits. (AB, vi–vii)

For me, reading Bonpland's letters, it was his voice, so different from Humboldt's often stilted, formal, flowery French, certainly different from Humboldt's flights of romantic passion, and refreshingly free from the sting of bitter sarcasm found in so many of Humboldt's later letters. Bonpland's prose flowed, easy, expressive, energized by intimate working engagement with the natural world. After decades of separation and deep disagreement as to the aim of botanical science, his letters from South America to Humboldt in Berlin were written with a rush of sympathy for a friend and comrade, who could never be forgotten no matter how far their lives and ideas had diverged. If only Humboldt could be with him in his orange groves at São Borja for the annual making of orange flower water. If only Humboldt could travel up the Paraná River and discover with him plants like the astonishing maize of the water.

It was not long before I was searching in rare book rooms for copies of Bonpland's botanical publications, going from descriptions of plant parts to his commentaries on the origins, local uses, conservation, and beauty of plants. I traveled to Argentina to see some of the sites he explored, spent a month in Paris leafing through his handwritten field journals at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle. I read his manuscripts on the preservation of wild groves of forest yerba, the companion planting of orchards, the organization of a model farm. All the time I was coming to like Bonpland, not just as much as I liked Humboldt, but more than Humboldt, who in person and in print could be as pompous and irritating as at other times he was endearing and inspiring.

But as time went on, what interested me more than the men themselves was the contrast between two very different approaches to the natural world. In his last, most famous work, *Cosmos*, Humboldt paid tribute to an ecological science focused on universal patterns and correlations. His subject, he said, was not orchards, farms, or forests, but "Nature" as it was viewed and appreciated

by “sensitive” and “civilized” European men able to rise above crass utilitarian concerns. As the first volumes of *Cosmos* came off the presses in Berlin and Paris, Bonpland in the river provinces of Argentina was leaving another legacy, not in print but on the ground—a legacy of sustainable agriculture, partnerships between European scientists and native people, development of local products, and community environmental planning. If Humboldt contemplated Nature from the lofty pinnacle of German idealism and European civilization, Bonpland’s lost work, *Nomenclature de Bonpland*, walked the rich earth of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil with descriptions of five thousand tropical plants, their Latin, French, Spanish, and Guarani names, and new and surprising facts concerning native medicines and indigenous products. As Bonpland’s friend and biographer, Adolphe Brunel, put it:

Humboldt lived, shone, and died in the midst of the salons of the highest. He sought the most refined of the pleasures of civilization. He was the intimate friend of kings who succeeded to the throne of Prussia and had the favor of Emperor Nicolas of Russia. More than once he was proud to be associated with and serve on their diplomatic missions. Bonpland only passed through the honors and pleasures of the “great world” and the political world. Then he returned with delight to plunge back into the heart of untamed nature. (Brunel, 34)

I wondered. Was it Bonpland who was past his time, mired down in the “first half of the nineteenth century” as a last European visitor to Bonpland’s property at Santa Ana wrote back to Humboldt in Berlin? Was Bonpland lazy, just not up to the challenge of botanical work as is claimed by many of Humboldt’s current admirers? Was Bonpland wrong to put his hopes for the future in the new world of the Americas, rather than in the old world of European “civilization”? Wrong to have seen the key to that future not with the princes of industry or romantic nature lovers, but in restorative, creative, community work on the ground? Or was it Humboldt, champion of trade and development, so certain of the superiority of European civilization, who might need to be left behind if we are to come to terms with our current environmental crisis? History can grow stale, ossify, the same tale told over and over, cited and recited from reputable sources, repackaged to reinforce a message we think we understand. In this twenty-first human century, with the window rapidly closing on the possibility of preventing catastrophic climate change, with forests burning, and industrial farming methods seemingly fixed in place, new

inspiration is desperately needed, narratives that might give substance to an environmental message addressed not to a nature-loving elite, but to working women and men struggling to make a living on compromised ground.