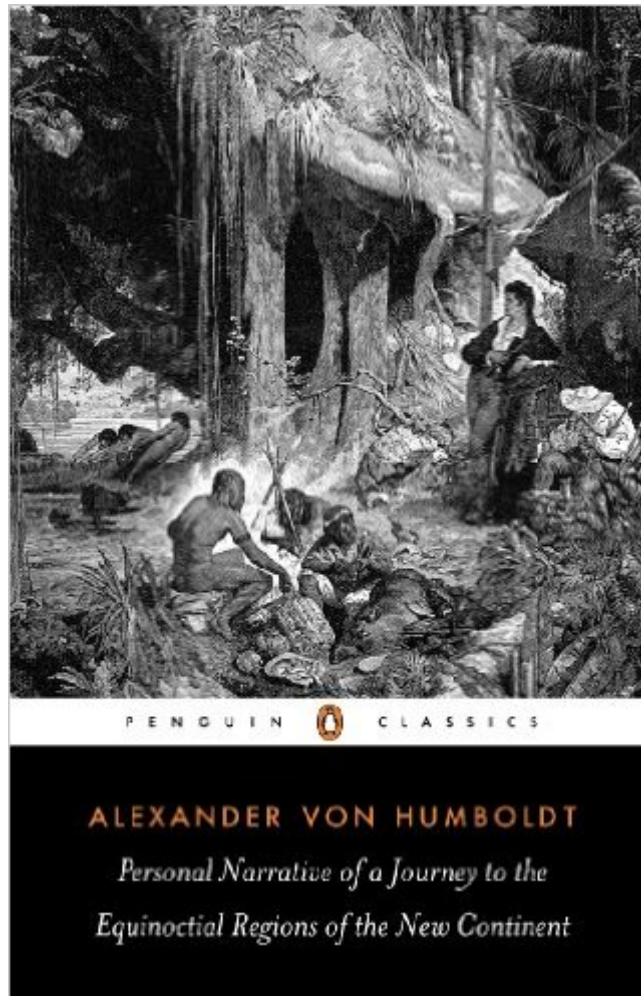


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Personal Narrative Of A Journey To The Equinoctial Regions Of The New Continent: Abridged Edition (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

One of the greatest nineteenth-century scientist-explorers, Alexander von Humboldt traversed the tropical Spanish Americas between 1799 and 1804. By the time of his death in 1859, he had won international fame for his scientific discoveries, his observations of Native American peoples and his detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna of the 'new continent'. The first to draw and speculate on Aztec art, to observe reverse polarity in magnetism and to discover why America is called America, his writings profoundly influenced the course of Victorian culture, causing Darwin to reflect: 'He alone gives any notion of the feelings which are raised in the mind on first entering the Tropics.' For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Much as I'm glad to have at least some of von Humboldt's very important travel writings available, this edition is sadly emasculated. While it does include the initial phase of Humboldt's South American expedition, the narrative is cut short at mid-point, von Humboldt's stay in Cuba. It's inconceivable to me that the editor would have omitted all of the author's writing on his exploration of the Andes, and in particular the volcanoes of South America. Those excluded descriptions are not

only fascinating to read today, but were also what most inspired readers in von Humboldt's own day. As a matter of fact, von Humboldt's account of the Andes so inspired the 19th-century imagination, that the era's greatest landscape painters, such as Frederic Church, actually travelled to South America specifically to witness and depict the vistas which von Humboldt had recorded in print. The integral von Humboldt, in contrast with the one presented here, wanted not simply to view and record exotic cultures and climates, but far beyond this to attempt as much as possible to experience the totality of the Cosmos in microcosmic form. The closest von Humboldt came to this impossible experience was his rapid ascent of the large volcanoes of South America, insofar as in this manner he could pass, virtually, through all the Earth's various climates in a single day--an astounding and Romantic feat completely unavailable to anyone using this edition as an introduction to von Humboldt. But none of the above can be glimpsed even remotely by the reader equipt with only the Penguin edition. Because of the premature truncation of the text, one entirely loses sight of von Humboldt's overarching project, which was not merely a geographical description of the Earth's surface, but rather a geodetical construction of the World as an organic Unity. Thus abbreviated, von Humboldt appears scarcely different from his Enlightenment precursors; we lose all view of him as writer who has passed through defiles of Romanticism. Not the real von Humboldt at all. Rather than making one rash cut down the middle, the editor would have served the reader much better by extracting key episodes from von Humboldt's entire journey. As I said above, something is generally better than nothing at all. But in this particular case, not much better.

Alexander von Humboldt (of the Current fame) was a famous polymath during the age of enlightenment. Like many noblemen, he used his money and leisure time in esoteric pursuits, such as collecting flora & fauna and trying to find the deeper meaning of it all. This particular volume has been well-translated from the original - there is none of that stilted 'I haf von the Cherman translated been' style - it reads conversationally (assisted by the editing-out of long passages where Humboldt takes one of his many diversions) yet it also gives us an idea of what the man was really like. There is an extensive set of notes at the back, not just references, but elaboration of the point, which I found very illuminating. His travels to South America span 5 years, during which time he collects and measures EVERYTHING - for at this time in history, no-one knew what was going to be pertinent or useful to science or economy. There are some amazing descriptions where he was the first educated person to see places; the problems of travel in uncharted, trackless & mountainous country make terrific reading. We may scoff at the zeal of the man, but if Hiram Bingham hadn't done the same, we wouldn't have the fantastic ruins of Macchu Picchu to study. We also learn of the

relatively tight circle of 'scientists' at that time - almost everyone knew everyone else, either via letters, Society writings or personal contact - and they knew it all; there was as yet no division between geology, biology, zoology etc - it was just 'Natural Philosophy' and one studied the lot (of course some dedicated themselves to a favourite pursuit). What is amazing to us now is the most simple things were unknown; for example, a sailor at death's door deep in the bowels of the ship, 'miraculously' recovers when taken on deck, out of the fetid miasma of the orlop - well, who wouldn't?... There are many similar incidents. Slightly heavy going at times, because of the writing style of the period, it is nevertheless chock full of interesting snippets and amazing discoveries, giving a great insight into the mind and motives of a typical adventurous philosopher of the time.

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