

3. 'A fountain of knowledge:' Humboldt as an informant to US President Jefferson

Planning his return to Europe in 1804, Humboldt made the decision for one final destination on his five-year expedition. On the initiative of the American consul to Cuba, and following letters that Humboldt had written to U.S. President Thomas Jefferson and his Secretary of State¹, James Madison, Jefferson invited Humboldt to visit him in Washington D.C., the then young capital of the U.S. Both statesmen were interested in Humboldt's observations in Latin America, especially since no other foreigner had been allowed by the Spanish Crown do to such extensive research in the Spanish colonies before.

Humboldt spoke English with a German accent but also German, French and Spanish, 'mixing them together in rapid Speech'. He was a 'fountain of knowledge which flows in copious² streams'. [President Jefferson, Secretary of State, James Madison, and Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin] learned more from him in two hours than they would from reading books for two years. Humboldt was a 'very extraordinary man', Gallatin told his wife. Jefferson agreed — Humboldt was 'the most scientific man of his age'.

The most pressing question for Jefferson was the disputed³ border between Mexico and the United States. The Spanish claimed it was marked by the Sabine River, which runs along today's eastern border of Texas, while the Americans insisted it was the Rio Grande. which forms part of today's western border of Texas. The ownership of a huge swathe⁴ of land was at issue, because in between those two rivers lies the whole of modern Texas. When Jefferson asked about the native population, soils and mines in the area 'between those lines', Humboldt had no qualms⁵ about passing on the observations he had made under the protection and exclusive permission of the Spanish crown. Humboldt believed in scientific generosity and in the free exchange of information. The sciences were above national interests, Humboldt insisted, as he handed over vital economic information. They were part of a republic of letters, Jefferson said, paraphrasing Joseph Banks's words that the sciences were always at peace even if 'their nations may be at war'; the sentiment no doubt suited the President perfectly in this instance.

If the Spanish would hand over the territory that Jefferson claimed for the United States, Humboldt told him, it would be the size of two-thirds of France. It wasn't the richest spot on earth, Humboldt said, because there were only a few scattered⁶ small farms, a lot of savanna, and no known port along the coast. There were some mines and a few indigenous⁷ people. This was the kind of intelligence that Jefferson needed. The next day the

President wrote to a friend that he had just received 'treasures of information'.

Humboldt gave Jefferson nineteen tightly filled pages of extracts from his notes sorted under headings such as 'table of statistics', 'population', 'agriculture, manufacturers, commerce⁸', 'military' and so on. He also added two pages that focused on the border region with Mexico and in particular on the disputed area that so interested Jefferson, between the Sabine River and the Rio Grande. This was the most exciting and fruitful visit Jefferson had received in years. Less than a month later, he held a Cabinet meeting about US strategy towards Spain in which they discussed how the data they had received from Humboldt might influence their negotiations⁹.

Humboldt was happy to assist because he admired the United States. The country was moving towards a 'perfection' of society, Humboldt said, while Europe was still gripped by monarchy and despotism¹⁰. He didn't even mind the unbearable humidity¹¹ of the Washington summer, because the 'best air of all is breathed in liberty'. He loved this 'beautiful land' he said repeatedly, and promised to return in order to explore.

During this one week in Washington, the men talked about nature and politics — about crops and soils and the shaping of nations. Humboldt, like Jefferson, believed that only an agrarian republic brought happiness and independence¹². Colonialism, by contrast, brought destruction. The Spanish had arrived in South America to obtain gold and timber¹³ — 'either by violence or exchange', Humboldt said, and motivated only by 'insatiable¹⁴ avarice¹⁵'. The Spanish had annihilated¹⁶ ancient civilizations, native tribes and stately forests. The portrait that Humboldt brought back from Latin America was painted in the vivid colours of a brutal reality — all underpinned by hard facts, data and statistics.

(The Invention of Nature, pp. 122-4)