

# Lives after death

## Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography

by Nicolaas A. Rupke

Peter Berg: 2005. 320 pp. \$38.95, £22.80, €32.50

### Steven Shapin

It's said that you only live once, but a great scientist has many lives. These lives are not, however, personal existences but biographies, written by others, that make sense of the life and identify its historical significance. If the scientist is regarded as the founder of a discipline, or the author of a cherished theory or method, then biography can be a continuous creative act, changing in content and character as the science changes over time. Founding myths may be historically flawed but they often serve a function for the science concerned. And if the scientist is also a national hero, then even more is at play in these lives after death.

For Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), biographical life after death has been complex and contested. He was a polymath, or at least a poly-scientist; the only modern discipline that has plausibly laid claim to him as a founding figure is physical geography. His contributions to the field are marked by the names of the Humboldt Current along the west coast of South America, the Humboldt Glacier in Greenland, the Humboldt Mountain Range in Antarctica, and the Humboldt River and Humboldt Bay in the United States. But he also made contributions to natural history: a handful of plant and animal species are named after him, from the Humboldt penguin (*Spheniscus humboldti*) to the spectacular Humboldt lily (*Lilium humboldtii*). He was also a well-known traveller, diplomat, courtier, intellectual and popularizer of science.

Humboldt was a German who spent most of his productive life outside the country and wrote much of his scientific work in French. Together with his elder brother Wilhelm, a linguist who founded the University of Berlin, he has been a major German cultural icon, in the same pantheon as Goethe, Schiller and Beethoven.

But who was Alexander von Humboldt? Nicolaas Rupke doesn't seek a coherent answer to that question, nor does he think there can be one. He has not written a conventional biography but a life of lives, or 'metabiography', a meticulous study of how Humboldt's life was configured and reconfigured according to the sensibilities and needs of the changing cultural settings.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some German scientists saw Humboldt as a darwinian, even though he died before *On the Origin of Species* was published, and even though there is only patchy evidence of his dissent from the anti-evolutionist



A changing picture: perceptions of Alexander von Humboldt depend on the social context of the viewer.

views of such naturalists as Louis Agassiz.

In the years leading up to German unification under Bismarck, Humboldt was a hero to liberal nationalists, despite having served as royal chamberlain to a deeply conservative Prussian court. The Nazis did their best to make Humboldt into a philosophical idealist of their preferred mystical type and, as Rupke says, "a herald of the Third Reich's new socio-political order". The 'de-Nazifiers' of the postwar Federal Republic saw Humboldt as a model of global cosmopolitanism and tolerance, a "good German", and even an active friend of the Jews. In the German Democratic

Republic, Humboldt's early career as a mining engineer was used to embellish his proletarian credentials, and his remarks against slavery established him, according to an East German

text of the 1970s, as an opponent of "every form of racial discrimination, against every form of colonial expansion, and for the brotherhood of human beings of all colours".

More recently, the marxist Humboldt has been replaced with Humboldt the networking pioneer of globalized information economies, a 'green' Humboldt who viewed nature "as an ecological system", and a homosexual Humboldt whose long-suspected tendencies were 'outed' by several gay German writers, although this was disputed by scholars who either insisted on his heterosexuality or claimed that Humboldt had sacrificed sexual pleasures on the altar of scientific asceticism. Finally, the prisms of postmodernist scholarship have revealed a Humboldt who was a practitioner of disunified science and a man with no stable intellectual or political make-up at all, a ragbag of a man from whose life practically any evidence could be plucked to establish almost any identity, point or purpose.

Rupke is right to draw attention to the fact that shifting biographical traditions make one person have many lives, and

his metabiography helps us to appreciate the historical instability of any scientific life, not just one as complex as Humboldt's. The past is never wholly a foreign country, and we make and remake past lives to suit our present purposes. No one whose life and work is of future interest can escape that fate. But one could also say that Rupke has given us a Humboldt just right for our own less certain and more self-conscious times — fractured, multiple and unstable. ■

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# A single survivor

## Lonesome George: The Life and Loves of a Conservation Icon

by Henry Nicholls

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### Rick Shine

Conservation biology is a peculiar hybrid discipline, bounded on one side by hard empirical science and on the other by ageing actresses cuddling cute baby seals. As a result, conservation priorities reflect a sometimes bizarre balancing act between knowledge- and emotion-based perspectives of the natural world.

This tension can occasionally result in an extraordinarily high public profile for an individual organism that can be argued to have some singular importance to conservation because it constitutes 'the last of its kind'. Some kind-hearted humans who are all too aware of the pain of loneliness on a personal level can readily empathize with the tragic circumstances of the last survivor. The animal can then take on iconic status — and (a cynic might say) attract publicity and financial resources out of all proportion to its actual conservation significance. The iconic individuals that evoke empathy from humans are