

*Sandra Rebok*

## **“Ja, Er war unser!”: Alexander von Humboldt and the Freemasons<sup>1</sup>**

While the lack of religion in the work of Alexander von Humboldt, both as the foundation for his worldview and as motivation for his actions, has been the topic of several discussions, his potential relationship to the world of Freemasonry remains uncertain. It is a question that has been occasionally raised, yet it has never been treated in depth. Humboldt appears on some lists of “illustrious Masons,” several lodges carry his name, and to a certain extent, he seemed to embody Masonic Ideals. However, the question is: was he really a member or sympathizer of any secret society? If so, when and where would he have approached a lodge. In Europe, or rather during his extended stay in the New World (1799–1804)? Would membership have been necessary or beneficial for him to carry out his program? Looking at the other side, how was the Prussian explorer seen by Masonic leaders and lodges in the trans-Atlantic world? We also need to consider what a potential affiliation in a lodge might have meant for his scientific work and the professional networks he had built. Could it possibly be an additional explanation for the success he enjoyed with his diverse projects along the nineteenth century? This refers in particular to the United States, where Masonic circles had a more notable influence in society than in Europe? The suspicion has occasionally been raised whether this is the reason why so many special opportunities opened up for Humboldt, why he received exceptional permissions and was able to carry out his scientific activities under particularly favorable conditions. This justifies having a closer look at Humboldt’s potential connections to masonic circles.

Freemasonry played an important role in European Enlightenment thinking.<sup>2</sup> Masonic lodges originated in seventeenth-century England, formally organized with the creation of the Grand Lodge in London in 1717. Over the next several decades, Freemasonry expanded steadily in

other European nations, often intertwined with such Enlightenment ideals as personal liberty and religious tolerance. With direct links in Britain, the American colonies undoubtedly experienced a concurrent growth of Freemasonry, with the first identification of formal lodges dating to a mention in a 1730 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Within a decade, lodges operated throughout the colonies. American Freemasons followed the example of their English brethren, using their membership as a means of earning social status and recognition through their association with an honorable and charitable tradition. In a letter to his parents, early American Freemason Benjamin Franklin remarked that members of the craft “have no principles or practices that are inconsistent with religion and good manners.” As such, American Freemasonry would grow with little in the way of social, religious, or governmental reprisal. Also, the origins of Freemasonry were rather different on the other side of the Atlantic. While in Europe it grew out of an attempt to act against the regimentation by the government, later supported by the ideals of the French Revolution, in the United States Masonic ideals were very influential in the American Revolution and subsequently in the building of the new nation, based on principles of Freemasonry. Masonic lodges were used as gathering places to network with likeminded individuals and to coordinate resistance against unpopular British policies. Besides Benjamin Franklin, other prominent figures of the “Founding Generation” who belonged to the fraternity include Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere, James Monroe, and, most famously, George Washington.<sup>3</sup> It is of note, however, that while a number of early founders and leaders of the young republic were Freemasons, many of the leading personalities of the period did not join. In particular, those who developed the philosophies and intellectual infrastructure of the new nation—among them James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine, George Mason, Alexander Hamilton—were not Freemasons. However, on both sides of the Atlantic, there was a strong connection between the postulates of Enlightenment science and the principles of Freemasonry. Masons laid the groundwork for a revolution that gave the world modern, experimental science and were instrumental in founding the world’s pre-eminent scientific institutions. By the end of the 1700s in the Royal Society in London, particularly during the long presidency of Sir Joseph Banks, himself a freemason, membership had become a mix of working scientists and wealthy amateurs who were potential patrons and could help finance scientific research at a time before government considered itself doing so. Several of these patrons were also Freemasons and met with scholars both at the Royal Society and in lodges.<sup>4</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, it was Benjamin Franklin who perfectly personified this connection between science and the world of Freemasonry. In 1731, he

initiated the first American grand lodge, St. John’s Lodge in Philadelphia, the same year as the establishment of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. Three years later, Franklin re-edited James Anderson’s work, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, likely the first Masonic book printed in America.<sup>5</sup> That was also the year Franklin was elected Provincial Grand Master of Masons in Pennsylvania. In 1743, he founded the American Philosophical Society, the country’s first learned society, modeled after the Royal Society of London, among whose members many Freemasons can be found.

Masonic ties were thus not only influential in the world of commerce or politics but also within the global network of science, where they created useful networking systems.<sup>6</sup> These were mainly “invisible networks,” consisting of powerful connections for those participating in these networks, while at the same time they were not obvious to those standing outside of them. Since Humboldt was a key person for the quest of science in the nineteenth century, establishing new standards of networking for scholarly communication and aiming to the improve society, the question arises as to where he positioned himself with regard to the postulates of Freemasonry.

### **Was Humboldt a Freemason?**

During the years Alexander von Humboldt grew up, received his professional training and came to pursue his scientific exploration project, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Masonic ideas prospered in many of the places to which his itinerary took him. Numerous were the locations where he might have crossed paths with Masonic circles: in Prussia, where he grew up and where his father, Georg von Humboldt (1720–1779) is reported to have joined the *Petite Concorde* Lodge in March 1754 and to have celebrated the *Johannisfest* [Summer Solstice] on his country estate of Tegel over several years.<sup>7</sup> Georg Forster, his mentor in young years, with whom he undertook his first exploration voyage in 1790 to the Netherlands and England, was an active member of several lodges. Apparently already in 1776 he was accepted by the “Les Neuf Sœurs” in Paris, two years later he joined the lodge “Zum gekrönten Löwen” in Kassel and in 1784 he became involved in the masonic circles in Vienna. As Humboldt recalls in his personal annotations, when he visited London with Forster, it was the Mason Joseph Banks, who was also an important inspiration for the young Prussian, defining his vocation as naturalist and explorer.<sup>8</sup> Later Humboldt studied at the University of Göttingen and the Academy of Commerce in Hamburg, both locations being hubs of Masonry during his student years. Also Weimar and Jena, where the young Humboldt would frequent the circles around Goethe and Schiller, the first being a renowned Freemason, where important places

for the spread of Masonic ideas in Germany. The same applies to Paris and Madrid, the cities where he prepared his further professional path that would take him to the New World. They were known for their marked Masonic activity and several of his key contacts there were Masons. Mariano Luis de Urquijo, the Spanish Minister of State instrumental in obtaining permission from King Carlos IV to undertake his American expedition, was a Mason. Equally, in Spanish America those Masonic circles were widely spread and very active, the preparation of the independence movement. Given Humboldt's liberal position and critical attitude toward the exploitation of colonial society, it is quite likely that he would come in contact with them during the five years he travelled there. Additional opportunities to become involved with those groups must have presented themselves during his visit in the spring of 1804 to the United States, where Freemasonry had an important role in the society. Moreover, the city of Philadelphia, where the Prussian explorer spent his first period in the country, happened to be one of the chief hubs of American Freemasonry, with the American Philosophical Society in its center, as was the other important stop on his itinerary, the new capital city of Washington and the older town of Alexandria, with their own growing Masonic communities.

No doubt in the course of his life Humboldt would come into contact with many known Freemasons, some in important positions such as Mariano de Urquijo; others became close friends, such as François Arago in Paris or Karl August Varnhagen von Ense in Berlin, or they formed part of his extended correspondence network.<sup>9</sup> Many of them were leading thinkers, who believed in the ideals of the Age of Reason and, just as the Prussian explorer himself, directing their efforts toward the improvement of society. Given his personal nearness to several Masons, in addition to the circumstance that several Masonic goals would correspond with Humboldt's own ideas, the question arises, how likely is it that precisely this well-connected cosmopolitan and freethinker did not join any lodge? Also, Humboldt seemed to be working on something bigger than "only" his scientific research, the goal of a constant self-improvement of the mind, combined with civic-mindedness, impressive self-discipline, high regard for learning, and a rather broad, tolerant religiosity. In fact, he seemed to embody the main principles of Freemasonry: the freedom of the spirit and individual realization, the belief in the equality of people without class differentiation, belief in brotherhood, tolerance and respect for other opinions, and, above all, humanity and the promotion of human good in the world. Hence, there are numerous hints that seem to argue in favor of a connection of some kind between Humboldt and Freemasonry. This is apart from the lodges already mentioned, as well as obituaries published in Masonic publications, the Masonic funeral procession in Philadelphia in 1869 or specific objects that have been created to represent this connection, such

as for instance a Humboldt Masonic jewelry box. However, there is no proof that he was ever a member of a Masonic lodge nor that he approached one or even that he sympathized openly with the world of Freemasonry. Given the secrecy of the subject in Europe, it is indeed rather unlikely that any approach to a lodge would be publicly documented. In the United States, however, the situation was different, since being a Freemason was nothing secret and members were often openly known as such. If the famous Prussian visitor had come as a member of a Masonic lodge to America, he would probably have joined a meeting at a lodge in Philadelphia or in Alexandria, and the lodges themselves would have made sure the world knew about it. Even if he had only approached those circles, Masons would have most likely claimed him much earlier, already during the time of his visit, as “one of them.”

Nevertheless, no visit could be proved at lodges there: a search of the records of the Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, one of the oldest Masonic lodges in the United States, founded in 1783 under warrant from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, indicates that Humboldt did not attend their meetings during his visit to the United States, nor was his visit ever mentioned at those gatherings.<sup>10</sup> The other opportunity to join a Masonic gathering in the United States would have been at a prestigious lodge such as Lodge no. 2, F. and A. M. in Philadelphia, perhaps accompanied by some of his new contacts at the American Philosophical Society. While we can learn from the records of this lodge that John Bache, Alexander Bertram and James Wilkinson had already been admitted in 1804, and Peter Du Ponceau, the secretary of the Society, would seek admission, there is again no mention of Humboldt.<sup>11</sup>

The secret nature of Freemasonry in Europe made it rather difficult to reconstruct whether, at some point of his life, even as a young student in Germany, the famous explorer approached Masonic circles or if he ever considered becoming a member of any lodge. Given his silence on this topic, we will not know for certain what he might have thought about these societies and their goals. However, there are more possible links between the Masonic world and the Prussian hero of science than the mere possibility of membership. The question is not only whether Humboldt was a Mason or not, but rather the nature of his evident connection to Freemasonry. What perception did Masonic circles have of the celebrated naturalist and his scientific mission?

One way to proceed and find an answer to all these questions is to look at the topic from various angles and analyze the types of evidence that can be found. It is necessary to study the traces suggesting such a potential link in order to understand how that connection can be explained. It is necessary to look at the sources from inside the Masonic world and listen to their voices.

## **Masonic lodges named after Humboldt**

In general, the naming of a lodge after an individual is considered unusual; most lodges assume the name of the town or county where they are located, or select a name from a symbol or allusion important to Freemasonry. However, when names of individuals are chosen, then most likely it is a fellow Mason of local or national stature. Using the name of a non-Mason is rather exceptional. Nevertheless, over time, numerous lodges on both sides of the Atlantic have decided to be named after the celebrated Prussian. Some of them still exist and could be contacted in the context of this research, while others have changed their name, merging with other lodges, or simply no longer exist. It is revealing to have a look at each of them to see in which historical context and for what reason they received their name, searching for the potential connection to their name-giver. In general, naming is an interesting lens through which to explore culture, and while attributing Humboldt's name to places and ideas happened for many different reasons,<sup>12</sup> the particular question here why this would happen in Masonic circles. In other words, if Humboldt was not a member of any lodge, what were the specific motives and moments for the Freemasons to connect their worldview with the Prussian naturalist? Which principles and moral codes would they signal by choosing his name?

The first lodge in the United States to be named after the famous explorer was Humboldt Lodge No. 79, founded in Eureka, California, on 30 June 1854.<sup>13</sup> We know that it was organized by six Masons at a meeting in Bucksport in April of that year and that a dispensation had to be issued by the Grand Lodge in California to formally establish the lodge. It is the oldest fraternal organization in the county and over the years membership grew from 13 in 1855 to 53 in 1871 and to 323 in 1910, so that the lodge had to look for sites for a new building large enough to accommodate the members. In 1922 the cornerstone was laid for one of Eureka's largest and most impressive buildings, called the Humboldt Masonic Temple. While no specific motive for using Humboldt's name could be found, nor any explanation why the dispensation for the foundation of the lodge was necessary, it seemed to form a general tendency in this particular part of northern California, specifically during these years, to honor the famous Prussian by placing his name on the map: Eureka is the largest city and seat of Humboldt County, founded in 1853, in the same year when Fort Humboldt was established, overlooking Humboldt Bay, which received its name in 1850.

At the end of 1865, Humboldt Lodge No. 359 was founded in Philadelphia as a German-speaking lodge working under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. A few days later, to contribute to the commemoration

of Humboldt’s hundredth birthday in 1869, the lodge erected a monument to the Prussian scientist.<sup>14</sup> In 2002 it merged with another German-speaking lodge in Philadelphia, the Hermann-Lodge No. 125 into the Hermann-Humboldt-Lodge.<sup>15</sup> This was the oldest German-speaking lodge in America, founded in 1810 by several German Masons in order to use their language for all rituals. Due to the anti-Masonic sentiments of the time, like many lodges, the Hermann-Lodge passed through a difficult period during the 1830s and 1840s, but it continued to grow slowly, and due to the waves of German immigrants moving to America, the lodge reached 125 members in 1859. Beside the furtherance of Masonic principles, this lodge found its role as an important German-American institution. It was an important goal in its German heritage to preserve the German language in ritual work, and it maintains an active interest in all German endeavors and undertakings. In this case, the names seem to indicate a connection with their culture and languages as a way to gather immigrants into their own German-American circles.

Shortly afterward, the Humboldt Lodge No. 138 was founded in February 1869 in Rochester, New York.<sup>16</sup> This lodge was part of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, a fraternal order and beneficial society founded in North American in 1819, focusing on doing charitable works, whose members tended to belong to middle and working classes rather than to the generally more privileged members of Masonic lodges. Important for its naming was the year the lodge was founded—in 1869, Humboldt’s birthday was celebrated across the nation with intensive commemorative festivities, making his name even more popular. This could have motivated using it for this fraternal order as well, to draw attention to the creation of the Odd Fellows Lodge at his particulate moment. The fact that the connection to the celebrated naturalist was celebrated not only by Freemasons in the United States, but also by Odd Fellows gives it a wider social scope. Besides being a scientific figure, Humboldt was an outstanding celebrity in the Old and New World, and, for one reason or another, both Freemasons and Odd Fellows found a special affinity to him and felt it was beneficial to establish a link to him.

The next Masonic lodge in the United States named after the famous Prussian was Humboldt Lodge No. 42 chartered on 24 May 1870 with eighteen German founding members, It was one of only six organized lodges in Indiana holding their rituals in the German language.<sup>17</sup> Over the years proceedings could also be held in English, depending on the candidate’s preference, until 1911, when the last degree was conferred in German. On its website the lodge explains that it was named after the “great German scientist, “despite the fact that he was not believed to be a Freemason.” The name of Humboldt was chosen after the Grand Master issued a dispensation on 4 June 1869. A required dispensation means that something irregular needed approval, though

unfortunately the records of the lodge do not indicate who suggested the name, for what reasons, and why the exemption was granted. A request to the lodge answered with the indication that most lodges in Indiana were named after their location, and larger cities with more than one lodge often were named after members, or even non-members with some historical significance, as well as things or ideas with some Masonic connection.<sup>18</sup> However, in view of the date, it might have been related to the Humboldt centennial of that year. Given that the members of the lodge were all German, they might have wished to pay tribute to their cultural heritage and choose his name, given that they considered him to be a good representative of their goals.

Finally, on 12 June 1901, Humboldt Lodge No. 27 was chartered in Lovelock, Nevada.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, in this case no connection to the celebrated patron could be found, and a consultation of the lodge remained unanswered.

The famous naturalist was also used for Masonic interests in Germany. In 1873 the *Humboldt-Loge* was founded in Leipzig, initially under the name of *Apollo-Loge*, as a lodge of the Ancient Order of Druids.<sup>20</sup> The founders of this community chose the name of Druids, the “wise men” of the ancient Celts known for their concern to increase knowledge and take responsibility. Their declared goal was to promote humanity, tolerance, human rights and friendship among members. Nevertheless, on 1 November 1887, the Apollo Lodge was renamed *Humboldt-Loge* and it is likely that with this gesture the founders sought to symbolize their concern for science, the arts, wisdom and love of nature. The lodge continued to act under their new name until 1936, when it was dissolved along with all German Druid Lodges. In 2009, again on 1 November, eleven men gathered in Leipzig to officially revive the lodge. They did this on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Humboldt’s death in 1859, another date that received much attention in general society beyond scholarly circles. To justify this naming, the website of this lodge referred to the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who described Humboldt as “one of those wonders of the world that appear from time to time, as if to show us the possibilities of the human mind.”

A different case is the *Johannisloge Licht und Wahrheit*, which belongs to the Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Germany. It was founded in Hamburg in 1925 and continues to operate today. Although this lodge does not carry Humboldt’s name, in this case a connection has also been made with the celebrated explorer. On their website, a famous quotation is posted—“The most dangerous of all worldviews is the worldview of people who have not looked at the world”—erroneously attributed to “the Freemason Alexander von Humboldt.” In their reply to a request for a further explanation of this statement, the lodge referred to the fact that Humboldt is listed in many

popular lists of “famous Masons.”<sup>21</sup> This seemed to have been sufficient to claim him as a Mason, although it does not justify the wrong identification of the quote. They also pointed to the circumstance that several lodges in Latin America have chosen Humboldt as their name patron and stated that this usually only happened if the eponym had been a Mason, or alternatively an important ruler in the region. In other words, having been claimed as a patron for a lodge in a way justified the use of his name for other occasions as well. It was a symbolic act that incorporated him into the Masonic world, and once this has happened, the very same act was used as a justification for this connection. The interesting aspect here is that the naming has been motivated by different reasons compared to the previous cases: it was not linked to a specific Humboldt commemoration, nor to the topographic presence of the name in the area, nor was it a way of expressing the German-American heritage of immigrant groups. Instead it seems that over the years Masons have succeeded in establishing a solid connection to Humboldt so that now he was considered as one of their own, without questioning it any more.

### **Humboldt in the Masonic Press**

Another important source that shows how Humboldt was seen in Masonic circles are articles in German Masonic journals. What aspects of his scientific work and character would attract those circles? Two articles published in the *Freimaurer-Zeitung* during the commemorative year 1869 are interesting in this context. In one of them, under the title, “Masons without apron,” the author Moritz Zille argues that while some Freemasons lived and acted as if they had never used the Masonic apron, there were other men that behaved like Masons without belonging to any lodge.<sup>22</sup> Zille was a pedagogue, a vehement defender of a liberty of belief and religious position, who developed a broad Masonic activity and was known as a prolific Masonic author. The Freemasons thus recognized that outside their association there were persons who lived beyond the “prejudices of their religions” and acted in a humane and cosmopolitan manner whether or not they carried an apron or formally became members of a Masonic association. Zille continued his argument by saying that such persons could be regarded as a part of the Masonic *Geistesbunde*, their spiritual association. He welcomes these wise men, who “guide humanity to noble education and civilization by a gentle paternal hand.” Freemasons are proud of these honorary members, he states, they consider these “noble non-Masons to be equal to them” and recognize the principles of their cause as lying beyond the borders of their community. According to this author, one person who stands out in this group as “real citizens of the world,” an “ornament of humanity,” was Alexander von

Humboldt, who therefore is considered to be an excellent example of those “Masons without apron.”

A few months later, at the commemoration of Humboldt’s birthday in September of that year, a speech held by a Mason was published in the same journal.<sup>23</sup> This text is quite specific with regard to the particular aspects that Freemasons appreciated in Humboldt, which would not differ from his perception within other groups in Germany.<sup>24</sup> In this eulogy the author focuses on the Prussian’s contribution to the knowledge of the “perfect unity of natural practice,” and to the fact that he had shown the people the unity of the world in which we were living. Based on strict scientific practices, the explorer had described the most sublime of physical and historical development, reflected in his last significant oeuvre, *Cosmos*. He highlights in particular Humboldt’s holistic focus, his vision of humankind as a whole, his efforts to eradicate prejudices, independent of race, religion, nationality or color, which Humboldt develops extensively in this oeuvre, and as quoted by this author. It was Humboldt’s “service to humanity,” and his scientific justification of the humanistic ideal that constituted a central argument for the author, given that this postulate was a key task for Freemasons.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the author considers it to be important to make his life known, and calls on all Freemasons to celebrate Humboldt’s name, independent of whether he was a formal member of Masonry or not. The famous world-citizen, who believed in the progress and upraising of humankind, loving humanity, should be incorporated within the Masonic community, he argues, given that as a person he embodied Masonic ideals and that as a scientist he provided the scholarly foundation for their principles.

A few years later, another Masonic journal, the *Mitteilungen aus dem Verein Deutscher Freimaurer*, published an article that offers interesting insight on Humboldt’s significance for Freemasonry.<sup>26</sup> Here the Prussian is presented as one of the “most universal spirits of our nation,” as a person “that deserves the highest merit for the goals of Freemasonry,” with a character free of selfishness, “deserving the admiration of the Masonic world to a special degree.” In the eyes of the author, Humboldt was truly the master builder of the temple of humanity, whose spirit will remain in the world, and whom “every Mason should feel inclined to celebrate.” The author attributes to him a Masonic heart and describes him as the “greatest benefactor of humankind.” In particular, he praises him for his popularization of the sciences, for his liberation of mankind from prejudices and delusion, and his fight against hate and persecution. Since these are also the postulates of Masonic humanism, this turns him into a role model for Masons as well. Humboldt had used the greater part of his wealth for charity, and he promoted aspiring talents by encouraging responsiveness. In addition, he fostered the free development of

the human spirit, independent studies and humane aspirations, and therefore, concludes the author, “this genius should be the leader of all Freemasons”. The name of Humboldt adorns each lodge, he argued, and thus masons should feel the obligation to prepare a yearly celebration of the Prussian explorer, to commemorate him as one of them and to consider him to be a “connection with the great historic development of humankind.”

These examples taken from two Masonic journals provide us with a revealing impression of how Humboldt was perceived in those circles, allowing us to understand continuous references to the famous explorer in the Masonic world. In spite of the fact that both are German journals, they not only reveal a German—or European—view of Humboldt, but also can probably speak for his perception in secret societies in general, on an international level. American Freemasons might have expressed themselves in the same way, since they did not have substantially different reasons for incorporating Humboldt into their own interests. However, with regard to the United States, he had an additional role as a link between German and American culture.

### **Masonic Humboldt poems**

The merchant and poet Friedrich Emil Rittershaus (1834–1897) co-founder and master of the chair at the “Lessing” Lodge in Barmen (1878–1886) and longtime president of the Association of German Freemasons, is noted for his Masonic poems.<sup>27</sup> In the context of the Humboldt commemoration in 1869 he waxed prolific and wrote several pieces: in the German popular journal *Die Gartenlaube* he published a short article about the celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic,<sup>28</sup> he produced a poem “For the Humboldt Festival in America” put to press in New York,<sup>29</sup> and he dedicated another composition for the Humboldt Lodge in Philadelphia, to be used for festivities celebrating his birthday.<sup>30</sup> The first poem is a general praise of Humboldt, where Masonic connotations can be read between the lines, without more specific statements. It has a rather nationalistic orientation, where Rittershaus points to the fact that ten years after Friedrich Schiller’s hundredth birthday was celebrated in 1859, now Germans could unite again “in one great spirit,” and feel with “conscious pride” that they were “one nation’s children.” Humboldt, whom he calls “the champion of the sciences” and “a citizen of all worlds,” was considered to be “one of ours, of our land,” who now gave the opportunity to see again a “German’s honor’s rise.” The second poem, however, written for the Humboldt Lodge, is a clear representation of the Prussian explorer as a “Mason in spirit” and reveals what Masons were fascinated about him. “Yes, he was ours!—*Ja, Er war unser!*” Rittershaus argues here as well, but this time

he was referring not to the German nations, but to the world of Freemasons. Without the symbol of any lodge he was considered as a “real bricklayer, who knew how to swing the hammer well, with strong, powerful strokes!” he praised the fact that Humboldt dedicated his life to the sciences in order to understand the foundation on which the world is based. He tore away the “curtain’s rotten folds of superstition” and was consecrated to building the “great cathedral of knowledge,” while leading humanity to free-thinking and fighting against the injustices in the world.

All these examples reveal repeated arguments used by Freemasons in favor of Humboldt, unveiling how they saw him to be helpful to their causes. It also becomes clear that, in those circles, he was considered not to be a formal member. However, given his prominence, his influence, but also his outstanding personality, Masons converted him into an inspiration and example to follow. Humboldt was seen now as the Grand Master of Natural Sciences, guiding natural science into new paths.<sup>31</sup> However, his mission did not end here; it was oriented to the much larger goals of transforming society according to Enlightenment ideals. Particularly in the United States, Freemasonry, while building a new nation, was an important factor in transforming American society and culture.<sup>32</sup> It was no surprise that Humboldt was assigned an important role in shaping the nation’s ideas of liberty equality and the pursuit of knowledge.

### **Humboldt as a Masonic role-model to follow?**

It becomes evident that the Prussian’s impact on the United States was too significant, and his own ideals were in many ways too close to Masonic goals not to be touched upon by Freemasons. This explains the large number of lodges using his name establishing every possible connection to the celebrated naturalist. In the end, it was not decisive whether the famous explorer himself had approached these groups, whether he had joined any lodge or whether he had ever contemplated doing so. It was not even important how he positioned himself toward Freemasonry, since this appropriation was not based on any comment by Humboldt, as it would happen with other topics, when certain reflections were taken as proof of his moral support for specific causes. Freemasons considered that he shared some ideas, that he was useful to them, and in this way perceived him to form part of their group, by adopting him as a Mason “without apron.”

It is difficult to find any reflection or judgment by Humboldt concerning Freemasonry. It seems that not only in relation to religion, but also regarding Masonic beliefs he preferred to keep his opinions to himself. Beside occasional comments on the negative effects of Catholic dogmatism, he chose to leave

religion out of his science. To a certain extent, this would certainly align him with Masonic sentiment, avoiding dogmatism of all sorts, and encouraging brotherhood across religious affiliation. However, the fact that Humboldt did not express religious convictions in his works as a primary source of authority and legitimacy should also be understood in the context of Enlightenment postulates. Without doubt, as was the case with Darwin and his evolutionary theory a few years later showed, keeping his work out of potential religious debates definitely had its advantages. His silence on Freemasonry might have been motivated by similar motives. Interestingly, it seems that the lack of religiousness in his work opened the way for his “adoption” by Masonry.

Being based on Enlightenment philosophy, Freemasonry is and stands for man’s search for wisdom, brotherhood and charity; it was also viewed as an enlightened conduit for self-improvement, religious tolerance and freedom. Men would join for multiple reasons—besides being attracted by those principles as such, forming part of these groups could also be seen as helping their social and business activities, to expand their own professional networks and to belong to an exclusive club. For Humboldt, however, there was not really any reason to join a lodge, since a membership would have added little to his situation. As a successful and internationally renowned scholar, he lived a largely self-determined life, was perfectly able to create his own networks and, given his name and fame, all groups, associations or institutions were open to him anyway, without any need to rely on those specific connections. Moreover, he was extremely busy with his scientific work and tended to subordinate everything else to scholarly goals so that he probably would not have had much time to dedicate to additional causes. He might have preferred to use salons as social or intellectual platforms rather than lodges to establish his professional networks. Also, Humboldt sought to change society through the production and promotion of knowledge rather than through politics as the Masons envisioned. Therefore, in spite of a certain parallel series of goals, he had no need for a formal connection to Freemasonry.

The Prussian’s appropriation by the Freemasons was not a unique case. Another example of an outstanding person who was frequently, yet falsely, claimed to be a Mason was Thomas Jefferson—Humboldt’s primary connection during his visit to the United States. Jefferson’s contacts to fraternal organizations has often been misunderstood, though in fact, some comments are to be found in his correspondence suggesting that he had a rather negative opinion of Masonic groups.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, several lodges were named after him. Interestingly, there were similarities in these two men: neither Humboldt nor Jefferson showed any attachment to any religion or desired to be part of a specific group; neither were “joiners” who could easily adapt to becoming part of a group. They were personalities who would rather establish groups and

networks themselves, attracting and incorporating others. Becoming a Mason or not, as well as the level of social or ideological implication, thus depended much on one's own personality. George Washington is another good example illustrating this—a man who was indeed a Freemason, but whose duties and obligations meant that he had little direct participation in Masonic activities during his life, without any high-profile exceptions. As a Brother, though, he always openly supported Masonry, while Jefferson was never a Mason despite the fact that he embodied certain Masonic ideals.

The question of Humboldt's reception by the Freemasons raises another interesting fact, if we take timing into account: it was really in the second half of the nineteenth century that we find more Masonic references to him, and this was also the time when lodges were named after him. This certainly does not mean that he was of less significance to the Masonic world during his lifetime. The explanation lies in the evolution of Masonry over time. In the United States this development was also strongly related to the pace of German immigration: after the Anti-Masonic period of 1827–1835, when Freemasonry was attacked from many sides, in the 1840s and '50s the nation passed into a period when younger generations questioned Freemasonry and the extent of its involvement in society and politics. There now came a revival of Freemasonry, endowed with new energy and a different orientation and intellectual heritage, focusing on the new opportunities arising from westward expansion and successive waves of immigration. German, Scottish, Dutch and French newcomers assumed or sustained their membership as Masons, forming their own lodges to suit their languages and ethnicity. By 1850, Masonic membership had recovered from a difficult time, and in 1860 the number of American Freemasons had increased to more than 193,700, reaching a Golden Age of fraternity in the United States extending from 1865 to 1910.<sup>34</sup> This was the time when they expanded again and used the name—and even more importantly, the ideological connection to the famous Prussian for this process.

It was particularly among German immigrants that Freemasonry flourished, in connection to their ideals regarding a better world, but certainly also in a more pragmatic sense as a social network for those who had left all their networks behind. In fact, some of the most famous representatives of German ethnicity were Masons, such as Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, member of both Holland and Trinity Lodges in New York City, or Carl Schurz, who became a member of Hermann Lodge No. 125 in Philadelphia. Masonic German-American ties were attractive to immigrants and helpful for their integration into the new society. Once again, this was not Humboldt's situation. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan naturalist had a crucial importance for German immigrants, and he would become a unifying figure in the

United States, providing a useful identification and model for them in their new home country. The fact that lodges were named after the famous Prussian in other nations underlines his significance as an identifying figure, a cultural reference for Germans abroad. In the United States they praised his memory, which allowed them to be German and American at the same time, just as Humboldt had seen himself as half-American. Keeping this memory alive and recalling its importance from East to West would serve to unify the vast country in its very diversity. For these reasons, German-American communities across the nation have been a strong force in organizing Humboldt centennials in the United States.<sup>35</sup>

However, Humboldt provided even greater potential connections as a figure unifying Germans and Americans, between the American East and the West, but also between science and society. In addition, he was seen as a gatekeeper to European knowledge. The fact that he offered an even larger projection screen through his international scale as a European and cosmopolitan scholar is another factor that contributed to his appropriation by distinct groups, the Freemasons being only one of them. This is a basic difference between his perception through German Freemasons as contrasted to American ones: while in Germany lodges were named after Humboldt viewing him as a Masonic ideal, in the United States he was seen as a promising link to German science, culture, even politics. Last but not least, the fact that he was claimed by Masons after his death, and not during his long life, is another important aspect to consider. During his lifetime Humboldt could have protested against this “adoption,” as he would do whenever he saw his name used for causes he did not support.

## **Conclusion**

In examining the connections between Alexander von Humboldt and freemasonry, we come not only to the conclusion that he most likely was not a Freemason, but also that a formal membership in Freemasonry would not have truly mattered to his worldwide success and acclaim. Nevertheless, Freemasons made of Humboldt what they needed: he was the personification of their Enlightenment-era ideals and thus a perfect fit for their goals. It is thus not surprising that they considered him to be one of them. Masons knew that if a famous and beloved personality like Humboldt would be associated with them, if the celebrated hero of science was connected to their causes, this would considerably further their goals and raise public acceptance of Freemasonry. Therefore, he was claimed by them as a “Mason in spirit,” just as other groups tried to connect him to their own interests. Given his broad concerns and holistic orientation, Humboldt offered a platform

for many different projections and was used for many distinct purposes.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, reading the various sources gives the impression that it was not merely an instrumentalization, but rather that Masons seemed to see in him a sympathetic mind and wished that he were a Mason: given his personality, his actions and goals—he somehow had to be a Mason, at least in spirit! The fact that Humboldt did not express himself on secret societies, particularly not in a critical way as he did with religion, turned out to be helpful to construct that image.

In any case, the celebrated cosmopolitan had much to offer Masonic circles in Europe, even more in the United States, where a young nation was being built on those ideals. With his work he delivered the scientific base for many of their principles, and with his strong humanistic ideals, not based on any dogmatic belief, he was it easy to be appropriated.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Humboldt anticipated future developments and potential needs of the young republic for the exploration of the American West. This included the need for a thorough study of nature, significance of scientific progress and technological advancement, international trade and communication strategies.<sup>38</sup> While other persons may have contributed to one of the pillars of the growth of the nation, his holistic approach touched all these points.

However, this does not mean that Humboldt's success, particularly in the United States, was based on the identification of masonic circles with the cosmopolitan Prussian and his pursuits. Already in 1804, when he came to this country after completing his five-year expedition through Spanish America, he had reached an extraordinary level of fame that would have been enough to explain his enormous impact. Based on his fame, his achievements, and the power obtained through the knowledge in his possession, over following decades he was able to build his expansive and influential networks in the United States. This was the basis on which over following decades he was able to build strong ties and expansive networks in the United States that were based on his position as a cosmopolitan scholar and on the power obtained through the knowledge in his possession. American Masons American Masons might have been interested in him already during his stay in their country and might have facilitated some important connections. Yet it is important to note that it was only in his last years. However, what is not to be denied is the role of Masonic circles in the United States in spreading Humboldtian thinking in nineteenth-century America by expanding his name and pointing to the wide span of his impressive achievements.

*Madrid, Spain*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article was elaborated in the setting of a Baird Society Resident Scholar fellowship awarded by the Smithsonian Libraries in Washington DC. Research has been carried out in the Dibner History of Science Library and the American History Library at the Smithsonian Institution as well as the International Center for Jefferson Studies in Charlottesville, Virginia. I would like to thank the staff of both institutions, who has been helpful for this research. In particular my appreciation goes to Tim Winkle, historian and curator at the Smithsonian American History Museum, and expert in the field of Freemasonry, who generously gave his time to discussing several aspects related to my research.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Die Politik der Geselligkeit: Freimaurerlogen in der Deutschen Bürgergesellschaft 1840–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000). Margaret C Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Hagger, *The secret founding of America: the real story of freemasons, puritans and the battle for the new world* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2007); David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: freemasonry in American culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Alain de Keghel, *American Freemasonry: Its Revolutionary History and Challenging Future*. (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lomas, *The Royal Society, freemasonry and the birth of modern science* (London: Corgi Books, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (Philadelphia, 1734).

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Harland-Jacobs, “‘Hands across the Sea’: The Masonic Network, British Imperialism, and the North Atlantic World,” in *Geographic Review*, 89:2 (April 1999): 237–53; James W. Daniel, *Masonic Networks and Connections* (London: The Library and Museums of Freemasonry, 2007); Paul Elliott and Stephen Daniels, “The ‘School of True, Useful and Universal Science’? Freemasonry, Natural Philosophy and Scientific Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,” *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 39: 2 (June 2006): 207–29.

<sup>7</sup> Karlheinz Gerlach, “Freimaurer im friderizianischen Preußen (Part VIII). Alexander Georg von Humboldt (1720–1779),” *Bundesblatt* 94:5 (1996), 34–37.

<sup>8</sup> Ottmar Ette, *Alexander Humboldt. Das Buch der Begegnungen: Menschen—Kulturen—Geschichten. Aus den Amerikanischen Reisetagebüchern* (München: Manesse, 2018), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Eugen Lennhoff, Dieter A. Binder and Oskar Posner, *Internationales Freimaurer-Lexikon* (Munich: Herbig, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Tim Winkle (American History Museum, Smithsonian Institution) for organizing a visit to the Alexandria lodge and making their records accessible to me.

<sup>11</sup> Norris S. Barratt and J. F. Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania, 1727–1907*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Grand Lodge F. & A. Z.M. Penn, 1909).

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich-Dieter Oppitz, “Der Name der Brüder Humboldt in aller Welt,” in *Alexander von Humboldt, Werk und Weltgeltung*, ed. Heinrich Pfeiffer, 277–429 (Munich: R. Piper, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> <http://humboldtldodge79.org/humboldt-lodge-no-79-free-accepted-masons/> [last access on 27 October 2018]

<sup>14</sup> Information generously facilitated by Prof. Frank Trommler (University of Pennsylvania), based on his lecture “Wisdom! Strength! Fraternity! Philadelphia’s still existing Hermann Lodge of 1810,” held at the 33rd Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies 2009 in New Ulm, MN, at his reception of an Outstanding Achievement Award of this society.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.masonpost.com/pa/hermannhumboldt-125/> [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>16</sup> <https://facebook.com/pg/Humboldt-Lodge-138-IOOF-14818/about/> [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>17</sup> <http://humboldt42.com> [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>18</sup> E-mail received from this lodge on 29 December 2016 in reply to my request.

<sup>19</sup> <http://nvmasons.org/lodges/humboldt-27/>. [last access on 27 October 2018]. Lovelock was in Humboldt County, Nevada, in 1901, which was divided and Lovelock's area renamed Pershing County in 1919 during the anti-German vogue of that time. Ironically enough, the town of Humboldt south of Lovelock became part of Pershing County, while the county seat of what was left of Humboldt County is Winnemucca.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.druiden-orden.de/geschichte.html> [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>21</sup> E-mail received from the lodge on 9 December 2016 in reply to my request.

<sup>22</sup> Moritz Zille, "Die Freimaurer ohne Schurz," *Freimaurer Zeitung*, no. 13 (27 March 1869): 97–99.

<sup>23</sup> Br Redner der Loge "Zur goldenen Krone," "Erinnerung an Alexander von Humboldt," *Freimaurer-Zeitung*, no. 38 (18 September 1869): 297–302.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolaas Rupke offers an excellent analysis of different forms of appropriation of Humboldt in German history: Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> "Erinnerung an Alexander von Humboldt", 300.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Beyer, "Alexander von Humboldt und seine Bedeutung für das freie Maurerthum," *Mitteilungen aus dem Verein Deutscher Freimaurer 1881–1882* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1882), 74–85.

<sup>27</sup> Emil Rittershaus, *Freimaurische Dichtungen* (Leipzig: J. G. Findel, 1870).

<sup>28</sup> Emil Rittershaus, "Zum Humboldtfeiertag in der alten und der neuen Welt," *Die Gartenlaube*, 37 (1869): 577–78 ([https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Zum\\_Humboldtfeiertag\\_in\\_der\\_alten\\_und\\_neuen\\_Welt](https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Zum_Humboldtfeiertag_in_der_alten_und_neuen_Welt)) [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>29</sup> Emil Rittershaus, "Festgedicht für die Humboldtfeier in Amerika am 14. September 1869," translated by Kate Kroeker-Freilingrath (New York: L. W. Schmidt, 1869), reprinted in Rex Clark and Oliver Lubrich, *Transatlantic Echoes: Alexander von Humboldt in World Literature* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 181–83.

<sup>30</sup> Emil Rittershaus, *Freimaurische Dichtungen*, 1870, 19–22 ([http://freimaurer-wiki.de/index.php/Rittershaus\\_Freimaurische\\_Dichtungen\\_2](http://freimaurer-wiki.de/index.php/Rittershaus_Freimaurische_Dichtungen_2)) [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>31</sup> Deanna Spingola, *The Ruling Elite: a Study in Imperialism, Genocide and Emancipation* (Publishing place unknown: Trafford Publishing, 2011), 88.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen C. Bullock, *Revolutionary brotherhood: Freemasonry and the transformation of the American social order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.monticello.org/site/research\\_and\\_collections/fraternal-organizations](https://www.monticello.org/site/research_and_collections/fraternal-organizations) [last access on 27 October 2018].

<sup>34</sup> Mark A. Tabbert, *American freemasons: three centuries of building communities* (Lexington, Mass.: National Heritage Museum; New York: New York University Press, 2005), 73 ff.

<sup>35</sup> For information on how the centennial of Humboldt's birth was celebrated in different places in the United States, see: Cora Lee Nollendorfs, "Alexander von Humboldt Centennial Celebrations in the United States: Controversies concerning His Work". *Monatshefte* 80, no. 1 (1988): 59–66; Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 304–5. Andreas Daum, "Celebrating Humanism in St. Louis: The Origins of the Humboldt Statue in Tower Grove Park, 1859–1878." *Gateway Heritage* 15.2. (Fall 1994), 48–58.

<sup>36</sup> Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Hanno Beck, "Zur Humanität Alexander von Humboldts," *Eleusis. Organ des Deutschen Obersten Rats der Freimaurer des Alten und Angenommenen Schotischen Ritus*, 33 (1978): 260–65.

<sup>38</sup> Sandra Rebok, "Humboldt's exploration at a distance", *Worlds of Natural History*, edited by H. Curry, N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and Emma C. Spary (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 319–34; Arlen J. Large, 'The Humboldt connection', *We Proceeded On*, 16:4 (November 1990), 4–12.