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Alexander von Humboldt's Correspondence with Johann Gottfried Flügel

Introduction

Alexander von Humboldt was one of the most popular scientists of his day whose expedition to America from 1799 to 1804 made him world famous. Humboldt corresponded with more than three thousand people—some of them well-known even today, others forgotten. Evaluating Humboldt's correspondence requires an understanding of his contemporaries, no matter whether they are still remembered or not. Occasionally, the editors of Humboldt's letters stumble across people who are almost forgotten even though they were important by virtue of their contributions to their respective fields. Such a man is the German-American Johann Gottfried Flügel whose life and work are worth being remembered.

Flügel was an active and devoted mediator between the Old and the New Continents. He is, however, at most remembered as a lexicographer. As recently as 1994, a short biography of Flügel was published by the Leipzig literary historian Eberhard Brüning which focuses on Flügel's activities as US consul in Leipzig.¹ Even though Brüning did a lot of research into Flügel's life and work, he was not aware of the important correspondence between Humboldt and Flügel. In 2004, the publication of Humboldt's correspondence with Americans has added to our understanding of his many scholarly connections.² This book contains all the letters between Humboldt and Flügel that were known up to that point.

We do not know if Humboldt and Flügel ever met personally. Yet six letters from Flügel to Humboldt and ten from Humboldt to Flügel have survived either as original autographs, autograph copies or in printed versions. The correspondence started in December 1849 and ended in June

1854, about a year before Flügel's death.

Johann Gottlieb Flügel—U.S. Consul in Saxony

Johann Gottfried Flügel was born in November, 1788, in the city of Barby on the Elbe river. At the age of 22 he emigrated to the United States where he made a living as a merchant, but he also actively improved his command of the English language and read American literature. The contacts that he made in the New World were especially important for his future career. In 1819 Flügel was naturalized as a citizen of the United States; however, the same year he returned to Germany and settled in Leipzig. In 1824 he started teaching English at the University, marking the beginning of English and American Studies at the Leipzig Alma Mater. Flügel taught English by reading the works of William Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, Henry Fielding and Washington Irving with his students. Six years later, his main work, the "English German Dictionary," had begun to appear.

In January 1839, President Van Buren appointed Flügel United States Consul in Leipzig. It is certainly fair to say that Flügel's contribution to the establishment of commercial and cultural relations between Saxony and the United States was outstanding. He was one of the most devoted representatives of his "adoptive country"³ of his time. Flügel gave not only the most detailed reports on commercial developments, but he also informed the Department of State in Washington about the political situation of the Old Continent. He never failed to express his American patriotism. The following indicates Flügel's understanding of German politics before the Revolution of 1848 broke out:

Every day examples of the most striking instances appear where these European tyrants trample upon humanity. I will barely mention my excellent friend poor Jordan,⁴ Charles Follen,⁵ Francis Lieber,⁶ Gustavus Koerner,⁷ and hundreds of others besides were stigmatised and pursued as traitors and dangerous revolutionists, the worst of men in their eyes. The United States bestowed on these unfortunate men the justice and the honours they deserved, for they all held places of public trust, and most honourably too; thus that excellent person Dr. Gustavus Koerner presides as Judge of the Supreme Court in Illinois. No, the most arrant demagogues are the European monarchs themselves and their demagogical Stratagems ought to be overwatched and counteracted. Excuse, honoured Sir, the freedom of this letter and be pleased to find an excuse in the fervency of love for my adoptive country.⁸

How to Support American Scientists—a Letter from Humboldt to Flügel

When Flügel received his first letter from Alexander von Humboldt in 1849, he had been consul for ten years. Moreover, since 1847 Flügel had been an exchange agent of the Smithsonian Institution. The correspondence between Flügel and Humboldt was centred around three topics.

- The development of the sciences in the New World.
- The exchange of literature between the United States and Germany.
- Flügel's financial problems.

Here is an example of the way in which Humboldt was able to communicate with American scientists through Flügel.

In September 1849, Matthew F. Maury⁹ sent Humboldt "a set of [his] 'Wind & Current Charts.'"¹⁰ Humboldt did not reply immediately nor directly. He only mentioned Maury in a letter to Johann G. Flügel, dated Berlin, June 19, 1850:

I beg you to express to Lieut. Maury, the author of the beautiful chart of the winds and currents, prepared with so much care and profound learning, my hearty gratitude and esteem. It is a great undertaking, equally important to the practical navigator and for the advance of meteorology in general. It has been viewed in this light, in Germany, by all persons who have a taste for physical geography. In an analogous way, anything of isothermal countries (countries of equal annual temperature) has for the first time become really fruitful.¹¹

This appears to be Humboldt's intellectual *modus operandi* of using the indirect and nuanced manner of influencing others' thoughts about new scientific developments. Humboldt's praise of Maury's work was not only copied, translated, and sent to the author; it appeared also in the newspaper *Daily Advertiser* and was reprinted many times. Maury found it so important that he quoted it in his *Explanations and Sailing Directions to accompany the Wind and Current Charts* of 1851.

As we see here, Humboldt's opinion of a scientist like Maury as expressed in this letter to Flügel meant he endorsed the reputation of a scientific field and the person who represented it. Humboldt must have known about Flügel's way of copying information that he received and sending it to people who could use it such as scholars, newspaper-editors, and the American State Department.

The Project of a Canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans

One of Humboldt's favourite ideas was the project of constructing a canal between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The following is another typical example of a letter from Humboldt to Flügel:

I hasten, my respected Doctor, to express to you my best thanks, in a few lines only, (being engaged since yesterday in all the horrors of a removal from Potsdam to Berlin,) for the very interesting journey of EMORY,¹² and for GILLISS'S¹³ notices on the determination of the parallax in Chili and on the astronomical longitude of Washington. I had already written specially to New York for EMORY'S¹⁴ report. For an antediluvian like me, who is attached with his whole soul to the New Continent, through the color of his opinions and his knowledge of the beautiful country,¹⁵ it is refreshing and gratifying to follow the rapid and magnificent development of scientific spirit in the United States, and to have to acknowledge the participation of the Government in a three years' expedition to Chili, undertaken because a Professor in Marburg desires it, and nobody listens to him in Europe.

We are indebted for excellent labors in hypsometry, astronomy, botany, and geognosy, to FREMONT,¹⁶ EMORY, WISLIZENUS,¹⁷ Lieuts. ABERT¹⁸ and BACHE,¹⁹ of the fine coast survey, and to the circumnavigation of CHARLES WILKES.²⁰

In my 'Aspects of Nature,' vol. II, pp. 388-392, I have used *earnest* language on the possibility of an oceanic canal over the Isthmus of Panama. May those words at last find an echo in North America, and be diffused *through the newspapers*. They can be read in English in Mrs. Sabine's translation of Humboldt's 'Aspects of Nature,' vol. II, p. 319, '*Points in which the examination has been neglected.*'²¹ With great respect, I am your most obedient,

A. HUMBOLDT.

BERLIN, DEC. 22, 1849.

This letter, of which the original German autograph is apparently lost, was copied and reprinted several times, both in German and English. The version given here was published in the *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.) of June 14, 1850, Issue 11, 11,636, col. B.²²

As we see, Humboldt occasionally used Flügel's connections for his own purposes. In 1849 the famous Prussian scientist had published the third

edition of his "Ansichten der Natur" (Aspects of Nature). The book contained in a footnote Humboldt's latest opinion on the possibilities of building a canal between the Atlantic and the Pacific. It was J. G. Flügel who saw to it that Humboldt's remarks were published in the U.S. Here are some key passages of the excerpt from Humboldt's work as the *Daily National Intelligencer* of June 14, 1850 had it:

As the taking possession of a considerable part of the west coast of the New Continent by the United States of North America, and the report of the abundance of gold in New California, (now called Upper California,) have rendered more urgent than ever the formation of a communication between the Atlantic States and the regions of the West through the Isthmus of Panama, I feel it my duty to call attention once again to the circumstance that the shortest way to the shores of the Pacific . . . is in the eastern part of the Isthmus

. . . .

General Bolivar, at my request, caused an exact levelling of the Isthmus between Panama and the mouth of the Rio Chagres to be made in 1828 and 1829, by Lloyd²³ and Falmarc²⁴. . . . Other measurements have since been executed by accomplished and experienced French engineers, and projects have been formed for canals and railways with locks and tunnels, but always in the direction of a meridian between Porto Bello and Panama, or more to the west, towards Chagres and Cruces. Thus the *most important* points of the *eastern* and *southeastern* part of the Isthmus have remained unexamined on both shores! . . .

For more than twenty years I have had inquiries made from me on the subject of the problem of the Isthmus of Panama, by associations desirous of employing considerable pecuniary means, but the simple advice which I have given has never been followed. . . . Seeing the importance of the subject to the great commerce of the world, the research ought not, as hitherto, to be restricted to a limited field. A great and comprehensive work, which shall include the whole eastern part of the Isthmus, and which will be equally useful for every possible kind of operation, for canal or for railway, can alone decide the much-discussed problem either affirmatively or negatively. That will be done at last, which should, and, had my advice been taken, would have been done in the first instance.²⁵

In today's historiography of the Panama Canal project, Humboldt's role appears only—when mentioned at all—as a footnote. Humboldt's

conversations on the topic with President Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison in 1804 as well as his discussions of the importance of a waterway between the oceans are almost as forgotten as his expertise, which was in high demand among canal planners. Only recently has the edition of Humboldt's correspondence with the geographer Carl Ritter shed new light on the topic.²⁶ Ulrich Päßler, editor of this correspondence, has pointed out Humboldt's and Ritter's shared attitudes towards man's interference with nature for the benefit of humankind:

Humboldt understood the Central American Isthmus as a natural space whose potential for global communication lie in contrast to its topography, unfavorable to such connections. In Humboldt's and Ritter's view this contradiction could be resolved by human intervention, namely the construction of an interoceanic canal that had been discussed since the sixteenth century. . . . Human intervention in a natural space, viewed as imperfect, seemed legitimate . . .²⁷

Humboldt as a Reliable Friend of the American Consul in Leipzig

Humboldt's way of organizing his own scholarly work was closely connected with his efforts to form a wide network of cooperation and communication among scientists. As far as the United States was concerned, the American consulate in Leipzig played a key role, as it distributed current scientific literature from the New World throughout Europe. In return, the active Consul sent books and letters from Europe to America. Often Flügel asked Humboldt to forward books to the library of the Prussian King or to scientists in Berlin. When the Berlin Academy of Sciences failed to send books as compensation for received materials, Flügel wrote to Humboldt who actually intervened. It is astonishing that Flügel did not hesitate to ask the eighty-year-old Humboldt for help in these relatively trivial questions. But even more surprising is Humboldt's reaction. Though bothered by court service, endless communications and lots of visitors who consumed his precious time, he often took care of Flügel's requests.

In many letters to Humboldt, Flügel complained that he put a lot of his own money into his official correspondence and the distribution of literature in Europe. The consul hoped that a word from the famous Humboldt would improve his difficult situation. However, we do not know whether or not Humboldt could really help on this subtle question.

One way in which much of the Flügel-Humboldt correspondence has become known to us has been its publication in the so-called "Memoiren

Alexander von Humboldt's," published in Leipzig in the year 1861.²⁸ More than thirty years ago, the Alexander von Humboldt scholar Kurt-R. Biermann was able to show that this compilation with such a misleading title contains many frauds.²⁹ The passages in this book, however, that are related to Flügel are doubtlessly authentic. This could be shown by comparing some letters reprinted in the "Memoiren" with surviving autograph letters. Thus it is likely that the "Memoiren" were compiled by people who might have been in contact with the Flügel family. Flügel died in 1855. His son Felix was his successor. It is possible that Felix Flügel supplied the editors of the „Memoiren“ with authentic material such as copies of Humboldt letters perhaps retained by Johann G. Flügel, newspaper clippings and other documents.

Final Remark

The correspondence between Alexander von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Flügel illustrates one way in which the Prussian scientist established his international network. Flügel was instrumental in supplying Humboldt with recent research material. In return, he could count on Humboldt's sympathy and moral support. Humboldt used his world fame and Flügel's connections to politicians and the press in the United States to spread his own knowledge and to give support to American scientists in their struggle to win the reputation they deserved.

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Notes

¹ Eberhard Brüning, "Das Konsulat der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika zu Leipzig: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Konsuls Dr. J[ohann] G[ottfried] Flügel (1839-1855)," *Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse* 134,1 (Berlin, 1994).

² Ingo Schwarz, ed., *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: Briefwechsel* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2004).

³ Brüning, 66.

⁴ Sylvester Jordan (1792-1861), politician and lawyer, had been sentenced to five years in prison for political reasons.

⁵ Karl Follen (1796-1840) came to the U.S. in 1824.

⁶ Franz Lieber (1800-1872) in the U.S. since 1827.

⁷ Gustav Körner (1809-1896) emigrated in 1833 to the U.S.

⁸ Flügel to James Buchanan, July 8, 1847, in Brüning, 61.

⁹ Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873), astronomer and oceanographer.

¹⁰ Maury to Humboldt, Washington, Sept. 9, 1849; in Schwarz, ed., 257-58.

¹¹ Extract from a letter from Baron von Humboldt (from the *Daily Advertiser*) in *Littell's Living Age: Boston, Philadelphia, New York* 28 (1851), no. 357, p. 545, printed

also in Schwarz, ed., 269-70.

¹² William Hemsley Emory (1811-1887), astronomer and topographer.

¹³ James Melville Gilliss (1811-1865), naval officer, astronomer.

¹⁴ Emory, William H., *Observations, Astronomical, Magnetic, and Meteorological: Made at Chagres and Gorgona, Isthmus of Darien, and the City of Panama, New Granada* (Cambridge: Metcalf and Company 1850) in Henry Stevens, *The Humboldt Library: A Catalogue of the Library of Alexander von Humboldt* (London, 1863); rpt. Leipzig, 1967, 199 (no. 2668).

¹⁵ In the version of this letter printed in Nathan Reingold, ed., *Science in Nineteenth-Century America: A Documentary History* (New York: Hill and Wang 1964), 159, the omitted passage reads "a country spotted only by its legalizing of Slavery."

¹⁶ John Charles Frémont (1813-1890), explorer and politician.

¹⁷ Friedrich Adolph Wislizenus (1810-1889), physician and explorer.

¹⁸ James William Abert (1820-1897), army engineer and explorer.

¹⁹ Alexander Dallas Bache (1806-1867), physicist, since 1843 superintendent of the United States Coast Survey.

²⁰ Charles Wilkes (1798-1877), naval officer and explorer.

²¹ The passage omitted here reads in a complete autograph translation of the letter: "I feel thankful of being remembered by the valued and talented Dr. L[iebrecht]. So many other things have failed with me in this world—that I am pleased to hear of those successful," Schwarz, ed., 263. The folklorist Felix Liebrecht (1812-1890) was supported by Humboldt and obtained a position as professor of German in Liège, Belgium, in 1849.

²² See Schwarz, ed., 262-63. In that edition, the publication of the letter and the passage from "Aspects of Nature" in an American newspaper could not be verified; I wish to thank my colleague Ulrich Päßler for calling the printing in the *Daily National Intelligencer* to my attention.

²³ John Augustus Lloyd (1800-1854), British engineer and surveyor.

²⁴ Falmarc, Swedish surveyor.

²⁵ This text follows, as Humboldt had recommended in his letter to Flügel, Alexander von Humboldt, *Aspects of Nature, in Different Lands and in Different Climates; with Scientific Elucidations*, transl. by Mrs. [Elisabeth] Sabine (London, 1849), 2:319-23.

²⁶ *Alexander von Humboldt – Carl Ritter: Briefwechsel*, ed. Ulrich Päßler (in collaboration with Eberhard Knobloch) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010).

²⁷ Ulrich Päßler, "Die Perfektibilität des geographischen Raumes: Alexander von Humboldt und Carl Ritter über den zentralamerikanischen Isthmus," *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Zeitschrift der Deutschen Gesellschaft für die Erforschung des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* 34,2 (2010): 232-39, quotation 235: "Den zentralamerikanischen Isthmus interpretierte Humboldt als Naturraum, dessen Potential für die weltweite Kommunikation im Widerspruch zu seiner für solche Verbindungen nachteiligen Topographie stand. Für Humboldt und Ritter war dieser Widerspruch durch den Eingriff des Menschen—den Bau eines interozeanischen Kanals, wie er seit dem 16. Jahrhundert diskutiert wurde—auflösbar. . . . Der menschliche Eingriff in einen als defektiv empfundenen Naturraum erschien legitim . . ." (English translation by U. Päßler).

²⁸ *Memoiren Alexander von Humboldt's*, vols. 1-2 (Leipzig: E. Schäfer, 1861).

²⁹ Kurt-R[einhard] Biermann, "Die 'Memoiren Alexander von Humboldt's,'" *Monatsberichte der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 13 (1971): 382-92. In some bibliographies Julius Loewenberg (1800-1893), geographer and biographer of A. v. Humboldt, is mentioned as the author of the "Memoiren." As Biermann showed, Loewenberg cannot be held responsible for that compilation.