

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

1. Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America*

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Whenever I first visit someone's house the first thing that I find myself doing is scanning for bookshelves. The absence of books can tell one almost as much as their presence, and if a new friend has an interesting collection, oh the joy of discovery and immediate connection! Observation suggests that Natural Historians are often great readers. Some of them are also great writers. The difficulty often is in making time to find the books that you really *ought* to read, both for general knowledge and also for inspiration and re-engagement with our particular many-headed practice.

In order to facilitate this process I will be writing an irregular column in which I highlight or review books that I have found interesting, useful, or inspiring. I would like to encourage readers of the *Journal of Natural History Education and Experience* to suggest additional books that I should read, as well as perhaps submitting reviews of their own. There are at least 101 fascinating Natural History books that everyone interested in the natural world should read before they die. Done monthly, it should only take us a little over

8 years or so to work through the entire list. I hope it will be fun!

For the first book, I would like to start big with *von Humboldt, A. 1852, (Ross, T. trans.) Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America, During the Years 1799-1804. by Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland. Vol. 1-3. London. H. Bohn.* Say what? I am sure some of you will think. Humboldt? Isn't he the guy that things get named after? Wasn't he some sort of count Way Back When that we *ought* to have learned about in History but didn't really? Yes, and yes. Humboldt was indeed the cause of the Humboldt Range, the Humboldt River, Cal State Humboldt, etc. etc. He was also a genuine Baron and confidante of the King of Prussia as well as a friend to the Czar of All the Russias, and had it not been for Humboldt's generosity and genius it is probable that Louis Agassiz might have died an unknown Swiss geologist instead of coming to America and founding both the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and the National Academy of Sciences.

In the mid-19th century anyone who was anyone had heard of Humboldt, most had read Humboldt, and it was widely expected that if only the great man could finish his masterpiece *Cosmos* there might finally be one book that covered everything from atoms to the outermost universe. Long before this however, Humboldt was a Natural Historian with a yen to travel. The *Personal Narrative* is his most “popular” book, and Darwin, Wallace, Bates, Hooker and John Muir all credit it with giving them the urge to go abroad and see what was to be seen. In fact, Muir’s *Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* was intended as a prologue to a repeat of Humboldt’s travels in South America. Fortunately for the Yosemite however, Muir developed malaria in Florida, and decided to go to California instead.

Humboldt initially had no intention of going to South America. He had planned on visiting Egypt. When politics got in the way of that voyage, he then proposed to visit Morocco and climb the Atlas Mountains. Upon being informed that the local ruler was in the habit of imprisoning and torturing visiting Europeans, he wisely turned to Spain and received a previously almost un-heard of free pass to any of the Spanish Dominions in the New World. Accompanied by his trusty friend, the Frenchman Bonpland, he set off in 1799 for what is now Venezuela, where he spent much of the next five years exploring northern South America, with side visits to Cuba and an eventual interview with Thomas Jefferson in the United States.

In Ross, Humboldt seems to have been blessed with an excellent translator. The *Personal Narrative* is indeed a personal

travelogue, but it is also a cracking good story, and the translation maintains the level of excitement, enthusiasm, and sheer love of adventure that seems to have been inherent in Humboldt’s nature. Along with accounts of particular locations and adventures, we get delightful tangents on everything from geology to social customs. We find out how to catch electric eels (drive a herd of horses into an eel-infested pond and once the eels have used up their charge shocking the horses, one can catch them quite easily). We also learn all about the making of curare-tipped arrows, the view from the Peak of Tenerife, the difficulties of conducting Natural History collecting from an 18-inch wide dugout canoe, the perils of ascending the highest peaks of the Andes without Oxygen, and much more. Throughout the journey, Humboldt exhibits a sense of fun that carries the reader along with him and makes one reach for maps (or perhaps Google Earth) to work out just where the adventurers are at a particular moment and what perils may lay before them. The three-volume series also give fascinating insights into local cultures during the declining years of Spanish rule. One can sense the rise of nationalism in pre-Bolivar South America, and, while Humboldt always maintains a tactful separation suitable for a guest, he also makes it clear where he stands on issues such as slavery and respect for indigenous people’s rights.

Reading Humboldt it is easy to see how Darwin could have been hopelessly enthralled by the prospect of a visit to the jungle (Darwin and Henslow had originally planned on following Humboldt’s footsteps as far as the Canary Islands, before Henslow’s family responsibilities and the offer of the *Beagle*

voyage allowed Darwin the chance to do far more). Although he never developed as earthshaking a concept as Natural Selection, Humboldt's time in Tenerife and later in the Andes helped to crystallize his ideas about plant distribution, climate, and elevation that made him, in many respects, the father of Biogeography. One can feel these ideas ticking over in his head as he travels through the headwaters of the Amazon, or reaches almost to the summit of Chimborazo. One would have to be a pretty dedicated stay-at-home *not* to want to go and see all of this for oneself after

reading the *Narrative*. Modern readers, used to a more linear thread of storytelling, may find themselves a bit taken aback by Humboldt's tangents and level of detail in some things and lack of detail in others. My advice is to relax, read a small bit at a time, and allow yourself to be carried away by the flood tide of someone who may have been the last true Renaissance man that we will ever see.

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