UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

Stories around Humboldt and Bonpland’s trip to the New Continent

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We saw the Southern Cross on the night of the 4th of July(...). If a traveler may be permitted to speak of his personal emotions, I shall add, that on that night I experienced the realization of one of the dreams of my early youth.

Alexander von Humboldt

Two hundred years ago, on July 9th, 1804, Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland left the port of Philadelphia, in the United States, on the French frigate “La Favorite”. That day and that place set the end of five years of one of the most magnificent and influential voyages for the comprehension, in the widest sense, of the tropical regions of the New World.

At the end of the XVIIIth century the portion of Middle and South America and the Caribbean ruled by the Spanish crown was almost a terra incognita. In the nearly three hundred years elapsed from the arrival of Columbus very little attention was given to the botany, zoology, geology, geography and climatology of the inland portions of America. The news about their natural world were due mainly to few illustrated priests, and they generally were a mixture of facts and fiction, staying in a midpoint between the textbooks and the bestiaries. The expedition of Francisco Hernández Boncalo was the first and only during the ruling of Felipe II in the XVI century, and it was necessary to wait until Carlos III and Carlos IV to see an impulse to the scientific travels, abruptly finished when Godoy, under the reign of Fernando VII, took the power. The missions of Malaspina, Dombey, Ruiz and Pavón, Mutis, Sessé and Mociño, and Azara, are among the few scientific endeavors undertaken by Spaniards in such mega-diverse region. At the same time, the information obtained was frequently kept in secret, as manuscripts at the Archivo de Indias, the Escorial, and/or in the archives of the religious orders and even the Vatican. Probably as a consequence of this secrecy, the Europeans of the XVIII century had no conscience of America; as an example, in the first volume of the “Encyclopédie…” by Diderot and D’Alembert, the summa of the knowledge of the illustrated Europe published in 1751, the concept “America” was developed in 50 lines (one fourth of the page), while “Alsacia” was in 900 ...

In this context, Humboldt and Bonpland’s journey set the difference. Among the many reasons to support this statement, it is necessary to keep in mind that (1) it was probably the first expedition with neither political, nor military aims; (2) it was privately sustained by Humboldt and had no financial support from any government, academia or society, and (3) the gathered information was soon made available for scholars and the general public. In short, it was not a voyage for expansion, conquest or espionage; it was a scientific expedition. But let Humboldt speak by himself:

“..I had in view a two-fold purpose in the travels of which I now publish the historical narrative. I wished to make known the countries I had visited; and to collect such facts as are fitted to elucidate a science of which we as yet possess scarcely the outline, and which