

**ADDRESS DELIVERED ON THE
CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY
OF THE BIRTH OF ALEXANDER
VON HUMBOLDT**

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Address Delivered on the Centennial Anniversary of the Birth of Alexander Von Humboldt by
Louis Agassiz

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LOUIS AGASSIZ

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DELIVERED ON

THE CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY

OF THE BIRTH OF

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT,

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE

BOSTON SOCIETY OF NATURAL HISTORY,

BY

LOUIS AGASSIZ.

WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE EVENING RECEPTION.

BOSTON:

BOSTON SOCIETY OF NATURAL HISTORY.

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ADDRESS.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—

I AM invited to an unwonted task. Thus far I have appeared before the public only as a teacher of Natural History. To-day, for the first time in my life, I leave a field in which I am at home, to take upon myself the duties of a biographer. If I succeed at all, it will be because I so loved and honored the man whose memory brings us together.

Alexander von Humboldt was born in Berlin in 1769, — one hundred years ago this day, — in that fertile year which gave birth to Napoleon, Wellington, Canning, Cuvier, Chateaubriand, and so many other remarkable men. All America was then the property of European monarchs. The first throeb of the American Revolution had not yet disturbed the relations of the mother country and her colonies. Spain held Florida, Mexico, and the greater part of South America; France owned Louisiana; and all Brazil was tributary to Portugal.

What stupendous changes have taken place since that time in the political world! Divine right of possession was then the recognized law on which governments were based. A mighty Republic has since been born, the fundamental principle of which is self-government. Progress in the intellectual world, the world of thought, has kept pace with the advance of civil liberty; reference to authority has been superseded by free inquiry; and Humboldt was one of the great leaders in this onward movement. He has bravely fought the battle for independence of thought against the tyranny of authority. No man impressed his century intellectually more powerfully, perhaps no man so powerfully as he. Therefore he is so dear to the Germans, with whom many nations unite to do him honor to-day. Nor is it alone because of what he has done for science, or for any one department of research, that we feel grateful to him, but rather because of that breadth and comprehensiveness of knowledge which lifts whole communities to higher levels of culture, and impresses itself upon the unlearned as well as upon students and scholars.

To what degree we Americans are indebted to him, no one knows who is not familiar with the history of learning and education in the

last century. All the fundamental facts of popular education in physical science, beyond the merest elementary instruction, we owe to him. We are reaping daily in every school throughout this broad land, where education is the heritage even of the poorest child, the intellectual harvest sown by him. See this map of the United States;—all its important traits are based upon his investigations; for he first recognized the essential relations which unite the physical features of the globe, the laws of climate on which the whole system of isothermal lines is based, the relative height of mountain chains and tablelands, the distribution of vegetation over the whole earth. There is not a text-book of geography or a school-atlas in the hands of our children to-day which does not bear, however blurred and defaced, the impress of his great mind. But for him our geographies would be mere enumerations of localities and statistics. He first suggested the graphic methods of representing natural phenomena which are now universally adopted. The first geological sections, the first sections across an entire continent, the first averages of climate illustrated by lines, were his. Every school-boy is familiar with his methods now, but he does not know that Humboldt is his teacher. The fertilizing power of a great mind is truly won-

derful; but as we travel farther from the source, it is hidden from us by the very abundance and productiveness it has caused. How few remember that the tidal lines, the present mode of registering magnetic phenomena and oceanic currents, are but the application of Humboldt's researches, and of his graphic mode of recording them!

This great man was a feeble child, and had less facility in his studies than most children. For this reason his early education was intrusted to private teachers, his parents being wealthy, and of a class whose means and position command the advantages denied to so many. It is worthy of note that when he was a little fellow not more than seven years old, his teacher was Campe, author of the German *Robinson Crusoe*. We can fancy how he amused the boy with the ever fresh story of *Crusoe* on his desert island, and inspired him even at that early age with the passionate love of travel and adventure which was to bear such fruit in later years. Neither should we omit, in recalling memories of his childhood, his tender relation to his older brother William. These two brothers, so renowned in their different departments of learning,—the elder as statesman and philologist, the younger as a student of nature,—were united

from their earliest years by an intimate sympathy which grew with their growth and strengthened with their strength. They went together to the University of Frankfort, the younger being then seventeen, William nineteen. After two years at Frankfort they went to the University of Göttingen, where they passed the two following years. In these four pregnant years of student life Alexander already sketched the plans which occupied his active mind for more than threescore years and ten.

The character of the German universities is so different from ours, that a word upon his student life may not be out of place here. Untrammelled by prescription and routine, every branch of learning was open to him. Instead of being led through a prescribed course of study, an absolute freedom of selection in accordance with his natural predilections was allowed him. The effect of this is felt through his whole life; there was a universality, a comprehensiveness in his culture, which could not be obtained under a less liberal system of education.

Leaving the University at the age of twenty-one, he began to make serious preparations for the great journeys toward which all his hopes tended. Nothing has impressed me more, in reviewing Humboldt's life, than the harmony