

Alexander von Humboldt



*Letters of Alexander
von Humboldt
to Varnhagen
von Ense*

Alexander von Humboldt

Letters of Alexander von Humboldt to Varnhagen von Ense

From 1827 to 1858. With extracts from Varnhagen's diaries, and letters of Varnhagen and others to Humboldt



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Preface.

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The following letters of Humboldt furnish a contribution of the highest importance to the true, correct, and unveiled representation of his genius and character. That they should be delivered to publicity after his death was his desire and intent, which have found their positive impression in the words preceding this book as its motto. Never has he spoken out his mind more freely and sincerely, than in his communications with Varnhagen, his old and faithful friend, whom he esteemed and loved before all others. In him he placed an unlimited confidence; with him he deposited those letters received by him, which he desired to be saved for their importance, while he used to destroy nearly all others. He presumed that Varnhagen, the junior of the two, would survive him.

Varnhagen, however, died first and transmitted the duty—a doubly sacred one—to me, of publishing this memorable evidence of the life, the activity, and the genius of this great man. In the accomplishment of this charge it was a religious duty to leave every word unchanged as written down. I would have thought it an offence to Humboldt's memory had I had the arrogance to make the slightest alterations of his words. For the same reason I did not think myself authorized to grant the request—however well-meaning it may have been—of the publisher, that I should make such alterations, nor could I accord the least influence to my own feelings or to personal regards. There was but one consideration to be obeyed—the *eternal truth*, for an

adherence to which I am responsible to Humboldt's memory, to History and Literature, and to the will of him who enjoined this duty upon me.

And therefore the legacy, intrusted to my hands, will appear full and complete, as it was received. The interest of Humboldt's letters is sometimes pleasantly heightened by entries in Varnhagen's diary—they will indicate the verbal sentiments of Humboldt in addition to those written by him. Of Varnhagen's letters few only were preserved or could be found. In the little, however, which is known, the noble friendship, the constant, never-ceasing mental activity, the faithful fellowship in their mutual efforts in behalf of science and liberty, in all of which Humboldt and Varnhagen were so many years united, find a sufficient expression.

The letters of many other distinguished and celebrated persons, which are also added, will show Humboldt in his world-wide connexions, in his manifold relations to savans and authors, to statesmen and princes, all of whom approached him with reverence.

LUDMILLA ASSING.

Berlin, February, 1860.

Humboldt's Letters.

1.

HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *September 25th, 1827.*

My Honored Friend:

Allow me to present you with the best copy of my essay^[1] left me.

The end of it will, I hope, secure me your indulgence for the whole.

Tuesday.

A. v. HUMBOLDT.

2. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *November 1st, 1827.*

You recollect having once uttered some affectionate words in acknowledgment of my endeavors to describe Nature vividly and truly (that is, with strict correctness as to what we do observe).

That your words have left agreeable impressions, you will perceive from this insignificant token of my gratitude.^[2]

I have altered nearly all "the Explanations," and added "The Genius of Rhodes," for which Schiller has shown some predilection.

With friendship and the highest consideration,

Yours,

A. HUMBOLDT.

Is it not strange, that Koreff has never acknowledged what we did for him here?

3. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *November 21, 1827.*

Wednesday, at Night.

Trusting more to your friendship for me and to my memoranda, which always guide me in my lectures, than to the notes taken by the students, I send you herewith the entire fifth lecture, together with to-day's recapitulation. I am sure, you will not find anything anti-philosophical therein. You may make whatever use you like of them—except a copy for publication—please send them back before Saturday. That the memoranda were made for my own use only, you will observe by the confusion in their composition—the desire, however, to be always frank, makes me forget any consideration which vanity could suggest.^[3]

A. HUMBOLDT.

4. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *April 15th, 1828.*

Will you allow me to disturb you for some moments between 2 and 3 o'clock this afternoon, that I may ask your literary opinion? My book shall bear the title: "Sketch of a Physical Description of the World."

I should like to embody in the title itself the occasion of these lectures, so as to make it understood at once that the book contains more and something else than the lectures. "From reminiscences of lectures in the years 1827 and 1828, by A. v. Humboldt," is considered, I am told, ridiculous and pretending. I do not insist on it; but "Souvenirs d'un cours de Physique du monde," or, "Souvenirs d'un voyage en Perse," seemed simple enough. How shall I arrange the title of the book? "Sketch of the Physical World, elaborated from lectures by A. v. H.:" or, "Partly treated from Lectures?" All that seems rather awkward. Adverbs will not do for titles. What if I add in small type: "A part of this work has *been* the subject of lectures in the years 1827 and 1828?" This is, however, rather long and then *the verb!* "*Occasioned by,*" &c., would perhaps be better. I trust to *your* genius! *You* will help me out of this labyrinth, I am sure! With the sincerest attachment,

Your obedient,
A. HUMBOLDT.

Note by Varnhagen.—I had objected to the first herein mentioned title myself when I once dined at Prince August's, and Humboldt had heard it from Beuth.

5. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *3d of April, 1829.*

I shall call and thank you and enjoy your being home again, and the good effects which the exercise of your new duties have everywhere had. And I will implore *pardon* of your gifted lady, so dear to me through the misfortunes that happened in my own family. It is never allowed to present a book to the King, not even by Prince Wittgenstein. It must go the usual way. But I will entreat Albrecht very, very fervently.^[4] I am quite exhausted and will be off in a week.

Friday.

A. Ht.

6. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *26th of April, 1830.*

I have just come home from Potsdam, and find your dear letter and your present, so very agreeable to me. The “*Zinzendorf*”^[5] will delight me very, very much. He is an individual physiognomy like *Lavater* and *Cardanus*. The recent pietism, which *began* to break out at Halle, made me smile. I rejoice that you will kindly accept my “*Cri de Pétersbourg*”—it is a parody recited at Court—the forced work of two nights; an essay to flatter without self-degradation, to say how things *should* be. As you and your high-gifted wife, my ancient and kind friend, rejoice in anything agreeable that happens to me, I wish to say that the King sends me to the Emperor to attend the meeting of the Potentates. I shall probably go with the Crown-Prince, who will meet the Empress at Fischbach.

Yours,

A. Ht.

Zinzendorf’s *letters* to the Saviour were rather more legible.^[6]

7. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *July 9th, 1830.*

Please accept for yourself and your highminded and excellent lady my sincerest thanks for your new present, so agreeable to me.^[7] I was not personally acquainted with the man whose eccentricities you have so æsthetically described. He was one of those who shine by their personal appearance; their lives are of greater effect than their writings. A man who boasts that his recollections go back to the *first year* of his life (how differently the Margravine judged things, when she says: “J’étais un enfant très précoce—à deux ans je savais parler, à trois ans je marchais!”); a man who owns a guardian angel in a black cloak, like Cardanus—who makes love to old maids, without being drunk, only in order to convert the same to virtue and reading; a man, to whom the *fate* of German professors under German princes appears more tragical than that of the Greeks—such a man cannot but be admired—as a curiosity! The “Kirchen-Zeitung” will never inscribe his name in the list of “the faithful,” and the Schimmelmans will hardly thank you, my most honored friend, that the work recalls the Danish-Holstein saturnalia of sentimental demagogism.

I am very much gratified that you will take “Hardenberg” in hand. It is a difficult but satisfactory task, if you be careful to separate the *epochs*, and provided his life be judged

without party hatred, which seems to have subsided at last, with regard to Hegel in the Academy.

Thankfully yours,
A. Humboldt.

We find in Varnhagen's diary the following entry referring to the above: "Alexander von Humboldt said to Gans, after the July revolution, when he heard him express very exalted hopes of the new government, 'Believe me, dear friend, my wishes go as far as yours, but my hopes are very feeble. I have seen changes of government in France for forty years. They always fall by their own incapacity; the new ones give always the same promises, but they never keep them, and the march to ruin is renewed. I was personally acquainted with most of the men in power, some of them intimately; there were distinguished, well-meaning men among them; but they did not persevere; after a short time they were not better than their predecessors—nay, they became even greater rascals. Not one of all the governments there has kept the promises made to the people—not one of them has subordinated its own interest to the welfare of the country. And until this be done, no power can possibly take a lasting root in France. The nation has always been deceived, and will again be deceived; when it will punish the treason and the perjury of its rulers; for it is strong and mature enough to do this at the proper time.'"

8.

VARNHAGEN TO HUMBOLDT.

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Berlin, *January 23d, 1833.*

Certainly it was I who met your Excellency some time ago at the sunny hour of noon and who recognised you too late, as I was recognised too late by you. How I should have liked to run after you, but it would not do, the distance was already too great. I would have liked to have told you something concerning Mr. von Bulow at London, which I had just got from the best authority, and which I thought would be new to you, as it was to me. It was about the danger in which that bold ambassador was for some time, and which, according to a declaration of the King, had passed over. Since then your Excellency has heard it from other sources, and my information will be but stale.

Now we Prussians are also gratified at last by a general representation of the people, or, to speak more correctly, we had it a long time ago, only we did not know it! Bishop Eylert has lifted the veil from our eyes. He is the first to speak out the great truth, like a second Mirabeau, in clearness of thought and boldness of words. I can vividly imagine how the "Rittersaal," nay, the whole palace, was shaken to its foundation, when he thundered that powerful truth to the assembly, that the representation of the whole people, of all the classes and interests, ought to be found in that solemn lodge of the Order of Knights! I bend my head in deep reverence to such a colossal boldness, to such a

new unheard-of combination, by which other miserable institutions, until now regarded as national representations, as for instance Parliaments, Assemblies, Cortes, and the like, were annihilated and blown into nothingness! I have listened to the orator from the silent mouth of the official gazette only; but your Excellency was present without doubt at the solemnity and pitied me, to be sure, and will say, what in ancient times was said when a speech of Demosthenes was read: "Oh! had you heard it delivered by him!" And the smiling approval, the gracious satisfaction of the high audience, the amazement of all present at the wonderful discovery, how much the impression must have been heightened by all that!

Oh, our Protestant parsons are on the best road, they promise to leave behind their Catholic brethren as they were when in the most flourishing condition of their priesthood. Such hypocritical black coats make us the laughing-stock of the world. Representation of the people or no representation, may we have it, or may it be denied, I care little about it just now, but that such a scoundrel should assume to call the meeting of the Knights of an Order a national representation, is an attempt which should be rewarded by the lunatic asylum or the State prison. And there is not even a song, a street ballad, a caricature, to make merry of such a monstrosity—all is silent!

But as this is the time of sleep, I will go to bed and wish you and myself good night and sweet dreams.

With the highest respect, &c.,

V.

See A. v. Humboldt's note to Rahel, Varhagen's wife, of the 1st of February, 1833.

9.

HUMBOLDT TO RAHEL.

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Berlin, *February 1, 1833.*

My speedy reply has no good foreboding, my dear friend. When anything is to be done in this country, it wants fourteen months' maturing—after that there is hope. The inclosed letter, which, however, you are entreated not to leave in the hand of your lady friend, explains all. I was listened to in my words and letters kindly and promisingly. This morning, however, the drawings—those beautiful drawings—were sent back. The underlined word in the accompanying note might give some hope; but I like better to give myself up to illusions than to nourish them in others, and the firmness with which Beuth, who alone has to decide in the matter, sticks to his will, bars all prospects. That I have done my best in the matter, as you yourself have desired it, does not require further words—this should be a sort of *historical faith* with you. Please send me a word of comfort about my dear Varnhagen—the only brilliant star in the literary world of our country—*that* country in which, as the bishop *with the drawn sword* says, even the *most eminent talents*, as such, ought to have no distinction whatever! I do not wonder that such things are spoken out, but what depresses me is the vileness of the society in which we are here living, and which is not even aroused by such contemptible assertions. May both of you preserve your nobler selves.

A. Ht.

10. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, 3d of Feby., 1833.

I am eternally grateful and affected by your noble letter. Grace and euphony of language should always be joined to purity of character and gracefulness of manners.

My brother was here for two days, but almost always under the shock of the waves, dashing from the Court. Princes have the right to pray without ever being deprecated. He ordered me to tell you, dear friend, how very sensible he is to the flattering nature of your offer; but he is just now so much occupied with the publication of the quarto edition on the affinity of Asiatic languages with the Sanscrit, that he cannot accept what he considers, nevertheless, as highly important. He desires, in honor of the celebrity of the great departed one,^[8] that *you* should undertake the task. I am painfully concerned to hear that you enjoy, together with your ingenious friend, but a small bit of health, which you kindly lend each other—something of a mutual self-instruction, or Azais-compensation, which afflicts me very much. I have received a long letter of Mrs. Cotta. It seems she will assume the editorship of the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, an anti-salique enterprise altogether. Is it not strange, how, at certain epochs, a certain principle seems to penetrate all mankind? Resuscitation of reverence for the past, not-to-be-disturbed love of peace, distrust in the possibility of amelioration, hydrophobia against genius,

religious compulsion for unity, mania-diplomatica for protocols.... Cardines rerum.

Note by Varnhagen.—I had replied in Rahel's name, who was prevented by sickness, to the note of the 1st inst., directed to her, and in a postscript had expressed the desire Minister de Humboldt should write the critique of *Faust*, just then to be published for the *Jahrbücher der Kritik*.

11.

HUMBOLDT TO RAHEL.

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Berlin, *February 9th, 1853.*

I have seen Beuth once more, to remind him of his ancient friendship with L. His opinion is, that it would be advantageous for the family to separate the architectural subjects from what belongs to landscape merely, and also to leave out the engravings. Only the architectural drawings were of any use to his institute, and if the family wanted the money, he would be enabled to purchase to the amount of some hundred Thalers (perhaps four to five hundred?). However uninviting such an offer may be, I thought it my duty, dear friend, to impart it to you. In case of acceptance, Beuth wishes to deal forthwith with some agent, who should come and see him in his house.

May the sun of gentle spring give you both warmth, cheerfulness, and vigor! The "Byzantine empire" (ours I mean) is seriously divided into two parties about "Bunsen's Psalm Book," and "Elsner's Collection of Hymns!" The military power and the adjutants are in favor of the "Collection of Hymns." As for myself, I have not yet made up my mind.

Saturday.

A. Ht.

12. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Saturday, March 9th, 1833.

To a mind like yours, noble friend, solitude and calm are necessary. You draw only upon yourself. Think, that I received the painful news^[9] only last night by Prince Carolath. You know what a warm-hearted, long-proved, and kind friend I lost in her, the honor of her sex! how amiable she was, when lately she instructed me to transact the little business with Beuth. So experienced in all the vicissitudes and illusions of life, and yet so cheerful, and so gentle! With such an intellect, so full of soul, and so true of heart! The world will appear to you a solitude for a long time, but the consciousness of having imparted to such a lovely woman, until her very last breath, all that genius, and heart, and gracefulness of intercourse like yours can afford, will be a balm to your wound, dear Varnhagen. I conjure you, take care of your health!

A. Humboldt.

13. HUMBOLDT TO VARNHAGEN.

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Berlin, *December 3, 1833.*

Pardon, a thousand pardons, for not sooner returning the classical studies of Friedrich Schlegel. I studied them diligently and I am convinced that many views of Grecian antiquity, which modern authors ascribe to themselves, are buried in writings dated from 1795 (a deucalionic time of yore!). Angelus Silesius, whom I have but now learned to appreciate, has also gratified me and my brother very much. There is a piety in the book, which breathes on the mind like the balmy air of spring, and the mysterious and hieroglyphical marks of your departed wife, render your gift doubly dear to me.

Spiker,^[10] very curiously mistook the genitive in the "astronomical observations of Alexander von Humboldt," for my signature, when he informed the public of Oltmann's death. I will pass it over, however, without correction.

With everlasting affection, yours,
A. Humboldt.