

a vote at the HPGRG Annual General Meeting (Tuesday 6 January 1998, at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference, Kingston University).

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**ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY**  
(with The Institute of British Geographers)



**HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEOGRAPHY  
RESEARCH GROUP**

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**NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 1997**

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**CONFERENCE REPORTS**

**New Perspectives on Alexander von Humboldt, Gottingen University, May 1997**

On Thursday, 29 May 1997, the Institutes for the History of Science and Medicine in Gottingen University held a three-day symposium on 'New Perspectives on Alexander von Humboldt', under the directorship of Professor Nicolaas Rupke. Fifteen major papers were presented, together with a plenary paper by Professor Rupke, around three main headings: 'Towards a Geography of Humboldt's Fame'; 'Humboldtian Visualizations'; 'Body, Gender, and Self-Experimentation'. The first theme addressed questions bearing upon the historical geography of Humboldt's reputation, considering in the main the questions: 'Why did Humboldt become famous to the extent he did at particular periods and in particular countries, and what purposes did venerating him serve?' In the second session, contemporary engagement with the novel interest in non-verbal representation in the sciences was brought to bear in discussing Humboldt and his place in nineteenth-century scientific visualization. In the third session, papers ventured into the hitherto largely taboo domain of Humboldt's sexual proclivities additionally exploring such issues as self-experimentation and, more generally, addressing the extent to which questions of body and gender matter.

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) has always been difficult to pin down. Various categories as explorer, mountaineer, geographer, meteorologist, geophysicist, botanist, physiologist, ethnographer, political advisor, travel writer and German patriot, he has, moreover, been differently received and debated by different national 'traditions' of scholarship. It is not easy, argued Michael Dettelbach (Smith College/MPI fur Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin) readily to identify a 'Humboldtian science' (cf. the claims by Susan Faye Cannon). The point reached again and again in respect of his scientific work was Humboldt's diversity, his refusal to affirm later historiographical tendencies at classification. In contrast, a clearer picture did emerge of Humboldt's affective and private life. Lectures on Humboldt's homosexuality, self-experimentation, and obsession with form - be that in nature or in art - revealed a man as interested in exploring and describing the world of experience as he was in experiencing the world and describing it.

The Symposium was outstandingly successful in every respect: there wasn't a weak paper, the hospitality was lavish (the Symposium was generously sponsored by the Volkswagen-Stiftung), and the organisation first-rate. A small exhibition entitled 'Humboldtian Scenes and Scenery' displayed the many Humboldtian treasures from the Gottingen Library and provided a focus for social circulation outside the formal sessions.

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