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Letters of Alexander von Humboldt

Ludmilla Assing, the niece of Varnhagen von Ense, was the editor of this selection of letters from Alexander von Humboldt to her uncle – to who Humboldt had entrusted the preservation of their correspondence – in the period 1827-58. First published in 1860, Letters of Alexander von Humboldt also contains letters from Varnhagen and other distinguished correspondents to Humboldt. Some passages from Varnhagen's diary are also included to supply a vivid commentary on the letters, which present detailed records of Humboldt's life, activity, and habits of thought, and contain materials of unquestionable importance for portraying an accurate picture of his mind and character. The other letters contained in the volume illustrate his worldwide circle of correspondents. This collection was published after the deaths of both Varnhagen and Humboldt. Explanatory notes and a full index of names accompany this authorised translation from the original German.

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Letters of Alexander von Humboldt

*Written between the Years 1827 and 1858, to
Varnhagen von Ense; Together with Extracts
from Varnhagen's Diaries, and Letters from
Varnhagen and Others to Humboldt*

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT



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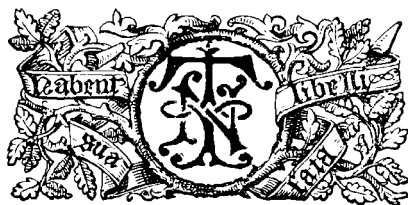
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WRITTEN BETWEEN THE YEARS 1827 AND 1858, TO
VARNHAGEN VON ENSE.

TOGETHER WITH EXTRACTS FROM
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AND LETTERS FROM
VARNHAGEN AND OTHERS TO HUMBOLDT.

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION FROM THE GERMAN,
WITH
EXPLANATORY NOTES AND A FULL INDEX OF NAMES.



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“YOUR last letter, so honourable for me, contained words which I should not like to misunderstand. ‘You scarcely permit to yourself the possession of my impieties.’ After my speedy decease you may deal as you please with such property. We only owe truth in this life to such persons as we deeply esteem, therefore it is due to you.”

Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Varnhagen, 7th December, 1841.

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THE PUBLISHERS' ADVERTISEMENT.

THESE letters have created the most lively sensation all over Germany, where, within a few weeks after their first publication, a fifth edition has already appeared. In the present eventful state of affairs they have been hailed as fresh and startling evidence of the fact, that liberal principles and a strong feeling of German nationality and unity have long been steadily gaining ground, even among the highest classes of Prussian society. Opinions and sentiments, such, for instance, as those recorded in the "Diary" after Letter CXXXIV., become portentous signs of the times when uttered by men in the position of Humboldt and Varnhagen. To this feature of the book, far more than to "the delicious bits of scandal" in it—as has been surmised, the powerful effect which it has produced from one end of the country to the other is mainly to be attributed.

The fair editor of the original Letters has expatiated at some length on the propriety of pub-

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lishing them so soon after Humboldt's death. This is a question with which the publishers of the English version can have no concern. The book having once been brought before the world, the correspondence, and the effect produced by it, become matters of contemporary history, which ought not to be withheld from the public of any civilized country. Some objection may be made that certain passages, which bear upon living persons here, have been retained in the translation. But, as most of the letters containing these personal allusions have already gone the round of the papers, even the suppression would have defeated its own purpose, by creating a suspicion that the original contained passages of greater acerbity than is really the case. And with due deference to the established rules of literary propriety, it might after all be asked which is the more desirable—to be attacked while living and able to defend oneself, or to incur posthumous obloquy, which our surviving friends may or may not feel disposed to ward off from our memory?

P R E F A C E

TO THE FIRST EDITION.

THE following letters of Humboldt contain materials of inestimable importance for forming a true, legitimate, and unveiled picture of his mind and character. It was his will and desire that they should be made public at his death, as will be seen distinctly expressed in the extract on a previous page. Nowhere has he expressed himself with less reserve or more sincerity than in his intercourse with Varnhagen, his long tried and trusty friend, whom he loved and valued above all others. In him he reposed the most unreserved confidence, and although ordinarily in the habit of destroying most of the letters addressed to him, it was with Varnhagen that he deposited such as he considered important and desired to have preserved. He reckoned upon Varnhagen, who was the younger of the two, surviving him.

Varnhagen, however, died first, and transferred to me the duty, now become doubly such, of publishing these wondrous records of the life, activity, and habits of thought of this great man. In fulfilling so sacred a duty it became an act of piety to let every word remain exactly as it was written down. To have

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presumed to alter his expressions would indeed have been to offer an insult to the shade of Humboldt!

Therefore, I have necessarily paid no greater heed to the well-meant desire of my publishers, to make even the slightest alterations, than I did to my own personal wishes and inclinations. One thing only was here to be considered—eternal truth—truth which I owe to Humboldt, to history, to literature, and to the revered memory of him who has bequeathed to me this task. Behold then the bequest, unaltered and entire as it has been deposited in my hands!

A vivid commentary on Humboldt's letters is supplied by passages in Varnhagen's Diary—the latter giving us the spoken as well as written expression of Humboldt's thoughts. Unfortunately but very few of Varnhagen's letters have been preserved or come to hand. Those we have, however, bear fully the impress of the noble friendship, the ever-active interchange of thought, the true fellowship of common labour in the cause of science and freedom, which bound Humboldt and Varnhagen together for so many years.

The letters of numerous other famous and distinguished persons, which are added, exhibit Humboldt in his wide-spread intercourse with the world, in his manifold relations to Scholars and Men of Letters, to Statesmen and Princes, all of whom sought him, and paid him homage.

LUDMILLA ASSING.

Berlin, February, 1860.

P R E F A C E

TO THE THIRD EDITION.

ALTHOUGH it cannot be within my province to seek to reply to the verdict which certain journals have made it their business to pronounce on my having committed to the press the Humboldt-Varnhagen correspondence, I yet feel it incumbent upon me to notice at some length the protest of Alexander von Humboldt himself, inserted in the daily papers by the late General Hedemann, against any unauthorized publication of his letters. I am the more prompted to do this, as that protest has been published by the General with pointed reference to this publication; and, therefore, with the evident intention of producing the erroneous belief that the letters directed to Varnhagen were included in that protest. In justice to myself I must not allow such a belief to gain ground, although there is enough in the protest itself to refute it.

In this document, a portion of which has only been communicated by the General, Humboldt first of all states that more than two thousand letters were written by him every year to all sorts of persons.

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He therefore says, "I contest the pretended right even of those who by chance or purchase have become the possessors of confidential letters of mine," and then he protests against such letters being printed, even after his death.

It was of course quite natural that Humboldt should have denied the right of unrestricted publication of his letters to those who had become possessed of them by purchase or by gift; nay, more, considering the immense extent of his correspondence, even to those to whom they were originally addressed; but this by no means excludes the supposition that he might have expressly conferred such a right in any *special case*, and that consequently it might have been conferred in the present instance.

Now that such a special case existed with regard to the letters directed to my uncle, is undeniably shown by the passage affixed by me as a motto to the book, from a letter dated 7th December, 1841, of which I will quote here only the following words: "*After my speedy decease you may deal as you please with such property.*"

Such a publication, therefore, is not at variance with the protest; on the contrary, the one confirms the other. In the protest, Humboldt expressly prohibits the printing "of such letters only as I have not myself set aside for publication." It is therefore evident, from that very document, that letters may, and even *must* exist somewhere, which Humboldt himself had set aside

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for publication. The letter of December 7th, 1841, clearly points out *where* those letters existed.

Thus, instead of clashing, that protest and the present publication go hand in hand.

The permission for publication, qualified by the express clause “in case of death,” is granted as explicitly as possible in the letter of December 7th, 1841.

It may be suggested that, in granting that permission, Humboldt had perhaps no distinct recollection of what letters he had sent to my uncle in former years; yet Humboldt, at all events, was thenceforward perfectly aware of the special authorization given once and for ever, and all the letters, the publication of which has been so strongly commented upon, upon the ground of their containing objectionable matter, are of dates posterior to December, 1841.

The intention of having such publication effected after the death of Humboldt was always entertained by both men. Both of them, as I have in the most positive manner been informed by Varnhagen, would in the course of years revert again and again in their conversations to this subject, and I have occasionally myself been present whilst it was under discussion.

No one has a right to impugn such a statement on my part.

Any one who is willing and able to see, will find throughout the correspondence itself the clearest evidence of Humboldt's having always acted on the supposition that these letters would be published

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after his death; nay, that he not only sanctioned it, but that he felt greatly interested and desirous himself that their instructive contents should be brought to the cognizance of the public amongst whom he had lived, soon after his death.

Ample proof of this intention occurs all through the book. I will content myself with quoting a few passages only. In the letter of 28th January, 1856, (p. 246), it is said: "I hand over to you, my dear friend, *as your own*, Madame de Quitzow," (nickname for Princess Lieven, see letters CLXIX. and CLXXII.).

When Humboldt says in the protest, "I contest the *alleged right*, even of those who by chance or purchase have got possession of confidential letters," and on the other hand declares, in the passage quoted just now, that he was depositing the letter in Varnhagen's hands, "*as his own*," just as he says in the letter of December 7th, 1841, "you may deal as you please with such *property*," there is ample and irresistible proof of how little that protest applies to the letters sent to Varnhagen, as it could never have occurred to Humboldt to speak of an *alleged right*, where he had granted the right of property himself, and in explicit terms.

On the 1st April, 1844, Humboldt writes to Varnhagen, (p. 110): "What I in my careless conceit destroy is *saved* in your hands." Humboldt, we may gather from this, wished himself that these instructive documents should be preserved for the benefit of

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his contemporaries, and he sent them to Varnhagen, for the very purpose of saving them from being burned, as was his usual custom of dealing with the shoals of letters which he was in the habit of receiving.

On the 30th November, 1856, Humboldt writes, (p. 265): “Pray take care of my pupil’s letter” (a letter of H.R.H. the Duke of Weimar), “as well as of the paragraph in which I am mentioned as being discussed in the Belgian Chambers as a Materialist and Republican, who must be put down!”

It was therefore Humboldt himself who urged the preservation of these documents. As he took no interest in autographs, he could only have wished them preserved for the sake of their contents; witness the paragraph respecting the debate in the Belgian Chambers, as a record of the character of the times, all of which plainly marks his desire to have them laid by for the purpose of publication after his death.

Whenever Humboldt wished that the publication of one of the letters sent to my uncle should be put off until after the death of himself or of *the writer of it*, he expressly states so. Thus, in sending the letter of Arago he appends the remark (p. 63), “To his gifted friend Varnhagen von Ense, with a very urgent request to avoid any publication of it, as being an autograph letter, until after Arago’s death.”

That the letter would and should be published is treated by Humboldt as a matter of course. Only as Humboldt might die before Arago, and the letter,

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even in that case, was not to be published in the lifetime of its writer, the further exceptional clause is added in the present instance, that publication must not take place before Arago's death. Such an additional caution does *not* occur with reference to other letters, as, for instance, to that of Princess Lieven, or that of the Grand Duke of Weimar, &c.

If, on the other hand, a letter of a third person was not to be published, on account of its peculiar contents, even after the writer's death, Humboldt, remembering the permission given to Varnhagen, expressly stipulates that *the document should be returned to him*. Thus, with regard to the letter of July 4th, 1854 (p. 221):—"I inclose a very crabbed letter of poor Bunsen, which you will keep very secret, and kindly *send back* to me by-and-by to my *Berlin* residence."

In the same way, for instance, in a letter of 9th September, 1858 (p. 313), Humboldt requests the return of "three curiosas" he is sending—one of them a letter from Queen Victoria. There are other passages also to the same effect.

It is impossible to imagine a more stringent and more complete series of proofs of Humboldt's positive wish and expectation that the letters sent by him to Varnhagen should be published after his death. The fact forces itself the more strongly on our conviction, if we remember that the two men had, besides, such frequent opportunities personally of conversing upon the matter.

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It may be asked, why did Humboldt specially wish for the publication of the letters sent to my uncle?

A plain and distinct answer to this question is given in the letter of December 1841, in which spontaneously granting to my uncle the *wholly unsolicited* permission to publish the letters after his death, he says: "We only owe truth in this life to such persons as we deeply esteem, therefore it is due to you." The logical counterpart of which is: In *death* we owe it to *all*, and first and foremost to our own nation.

Why did Humboldt wish for this publication at all?

Read (p. 266) the postscript to the letter of November 30th, 1856, where, sending to Varnhagen a notice bearing on his character and political opinions, which he was anxious to have preserved, he says: "What men believe or disbelieve is usually made a matter of discussion only *after their death*."

It was, moreover, his wish that his convictions should not be liable to be discussed. He had willed that the picture of his mind should go down to posterity pure and unfalsified.

A giant intellect, so fervently venerated and acknowledged by his nation, that the mere fact of his views being known on certain questions may exert the most powerful and incalculable influence on the people and its progress; it was that very reason which made him wish that the whole people should

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be granted access to the workings of his innermost mind.

He knew well, in laying this injunction on my uncle, to what trusty hands he was confiding his request.

As to the Diaries of my uncle, they too are not to be considered as the jottings of mere idle moments. He repeatedly exacted from me the positive promise to publish them. Discussing this subject, shall I ever forget in what animated and impassioned speech he inveighed with crushing argument against those who indulged a mistaken tender regard for an individual at the expense of duty to the people and to historical truth! Foreseeing very clearly the objections which have now been raised against the publication, he described most accurately and pointedly their mental and intellectual sources.

This is all I have to say. For myself the question is settled by the fact that I have only executed the behests of both the great departed.

And I trust I am right, if, with due respect to all to whom respect is due, two such great, illustrious names as those of Humboldt and Varnhagen are to me much better authority than the opinions of those who have objected to the publication.

This is my first and last word in this affair. I cannot be expected to answer polemical attacks. It would also be the more hopeless to try and come to an understanding, as difference of opinion in this matter naturally springs from a total di-

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vergence of principle and thought. I readily acknowledge the right of an opinion adverse to the publication in those of my opponents, to whom a tender regard for persons of exalted rank appears a higher duty than what is due to the people and its welfare, to the establishment of retrospective historical truth, and to the development of future political progress. With them it is impossible to argue. But if others, who profess to entertain liberal principles, chime in with that opinion, I cannot consider it my business to open their eyes to the state of their own minds.

LUDMILLA ASSING.

Berlin, 10th March, 1860.

By way of postscript to this perfect justification of the publication, the following letter of gift is now added :—

Berlin, 7th of December, 1856.

To my dear niece, Ludmilla Assing, who for many years has bestowed upon me most loving care and attendance, I have in gratitude presented all my books and manuscripts, all my literary papers and

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collections, and have delivered these things to her complete, whilst my hand is still warm, so that she may even now dispose of them according to her own best judgment. If a few of these objects are still in my own keeping, it is only for the purpose of gradually arranging, selecting, and rendering them more complete. This act of donation I testify with my own hand.

KARL AUGUST LUDWIG PHILIPP VARNHAGEN
VON ENSE.

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