

saying, 'no it is better not. She would only ask me to take a letter to Albert'. The Prince and Princess of Wales, his parliamentary and cabinet colleagues, his friends, the high aristocracy and many others attended his funeral. Mr Gladstone did not.

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METABIOGRAPHY, INTERESTINGNESS AND GENUINE COMPLEXITY

Alexander von Humboldt: a metabiography. Nicolaas A. Rupke, 2005. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Berne, Brussels, New York, Oxford and Vienna: Peter Lang; ISBN 3631539320, 320 pp., £22.80, cloth.

I had not encountered metabiography before reading Nicolaas Rupke's exemplification, but I have been impressed by the insights that it has produced. Metabiography does not set out to reveal the essential person by constructing a chronological narrative of their life in the conventional way. Rather it looks at the way the person has been presented, or represented, by different biographers at various periods of time. Rupke reveals that the vast literature on Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), mostly in German, presents a plurality of representations, each expressing the interests of biographers working during particular phases of German history. Thus, before the emergence of the German Empire, Humboldt was presented as a political liberal, sympathetic to the project of German unification. Under the Empire, however, and into the period of the Weimar Republic, he was seen as a supreme example of German cultural genius, whose research in South America not only preceded that of Darwin, but also prefigured the theory of evolution. It was an easy step for Humboldt's scientific achievements in botany and geology to be used during the Third Reich to show the superiority of German intellectual achievement and how the combination of the national soil (*Boden*) and racial blood (*Blut*) produced great geniuses. His friendship with Goethe (from 1794) was used to link him to German idealism and the notion that human knowledge is a unity, as opposed to French rationalism and the break-up of knowledge into separate disciplines. Humboldt's francophilia, and the fact that his major scientific works were written in French, were a problem to all German nationalists, but the Nazis dealt with this by stressing the purity of Humboldt's *Blut*. With the end of the Second World War and the division of Germany, two distinctive portraits emerged. In socialist East Germany, Humboldt, the former mining inspector, was turned into a supporter of the proletariat and his aristocratic connections were played

down. He was also linked to progressive humanism, as represented by the 'revolutionary democrat' J.G.A. Forster, who not only sailed on Cook's second voyage and published an account but was also an active supporter of revolutionary France. Humboldt's comments on slavery in the New World were taken to show that he was not only an abolitionist but opposed to capitalism as well, while remarks on the governance of Spain's South American colonies proved his anti-imperialist views. In West Germany, by contrast, Humboldt's long residence in Paris, his stay on the east coast of the USA and his correspondence with English-speaking scientists and politicians turned him into the very model of a cosmopolitan liberal scientist. His participation in Jewish salon society, his friendship with Jewish women and his support for Jewish emancipation helped in the de-Nazification of the FRG. The de-Nazification programme was also helped by the claim that Humboldt was one of the founders of modern geography. This was a historically new claim but could be justified by his travels in South America and Siberia. Thus, the great scholar-scientist helped to rehabilitate a subject which had not only been used to justify the Nazi policy of finding *Lebensraum* in the East, but had also collaborated in planning German settlement there. Rupke said that Humboldt the Marxist died with the breaching of the Berlin wall in November 1989 and the end of the GDR a year later. His cosmopolitanism was stressed in united Germany, but this time it was connected to the worldwide flow of information through his network of correspondents and his belief in liberty. Although he rapidly became a 'Green' idol in Germany for his ecological insights, an image previously confined to the English-language literature about him, reunification also brought various attempts to deconstruct Humboldt. Many cracks emerged in the accepted portraits as scholarly deconstruction of the old images showed. For example, the evidence did not really support either the claim that he was the father of independence in South America or that his abolitionist stance was more than a warning to the Spanish government about what would happen if slavery was not reformed. Finally, Rupke shows how the inevitable 'outing' came. Humboldt never married and he left most of his estate to his long-time valet.

The metabiographical approach to Alexander von Humboldt reveals the genuine complexity of the subject, the diversity of his life and the many facets to his character. A great deal is learnt about him, but kaleidoscopically, as it were. Well-known pieces of research fall in a different pattern each time they are shaken. At the same, the metabiographical approach makes clear the constructed nature of each representation. No single image is comprehensively true. Taken together, though, they present the subject in the round. Rupke has also documented how different biographers bring out different aspects of their subject, and how their choice – whether conscious

or not – reflects the wider concerns of the society and the times within which they write. Other famous men and women might be examined in the same way with great benefit.

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A POETRY OF THE MUNDANE

The year of magical thinking. Joan Didion, 2005. London: Fourth Estate; ISBN 000721684X, 227 pp., £12.99, paper.

This is a fluid and moving book about the sudden death of the writer Joan Didion's partner of 40 years, John Gregory Dunne, aged 71, who was also a writer. It is also about her attempt 'to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself' (p. 7). This happened as they were both coping with the re-occurrence of a life-threatening illness of their adopted daughter Quintana Roo Michael, which eventually caused her death at the age of 39. A tragic episode for Didion in what might otherwise be considered an enormously productive and satisfying life.

The elegance of the prose is unmistakable, as is the ability to write poetically about mundane events. For though painful, what could be more mundane than facing the death and illness of loved ones? It is a certainly something that Didion must have expected in the case of her husband since he had over a decade's medical history of heart disease (labelled by a doctor 'the widowmaker'), and had a pacemaker implanted only six months before his death. The response of Didion is to go into denial and the 'magical thinking' refers to her reluctance to accept that he will not return. The achievement of the book is that a seemingly transparent narrative plus the strategic employment of bits of factual information (on heart disease, psychological theories of grief and so on), together convince the reader that this is how it really happened and this is how it really is.

Didion herself promises truthfulness – 'The way I write is who I am' – and this promise is reiterated over and over again, by Didion herself in her manner of telling, and by reviewers on the back cover who draw attention to her 'desperate honesty' (Colm Tóibín), and her precision which is 'as a diamond drilled bit' (Nick Laird). Truthfulness in autobiography was also