

They arrived at Quito, Ecuador, on January 6, 1802, and spent the next several months sorting out the new collections acquired along the way. In May, Humboldt and an Indian whose name is unknown climbed an active volcano called Pichincha, something only one man had done before as near as Humboldt could determine. Then on June 9, 1802, he, Bonpland, a number of Indians, and a young Spanish naturalist named Carlos Montufar, who had joined the expedition in Quito, set out to climb Chimborazo, the extinct, snow-capped volcano, elevation 20,561 feet, the highest mountain in Ecuador and then thought to be the highest mountain anywhere on Earth.

Humboldt and Bonpland had by now been in the mountains long enough to know what they were about and to be in exceptional physical condition. They were very likely the finest mountaineers in the world, since mountaineering as a sport and the whole philosophical concept of mountain "conquering" had yet to dawn on the nineteenth-century mind. But again, as on the Orinoco, they set off with little in the way of equipment as we know it, no special clothing, and with little or no knowledge of the mountain itself. Yet "by dint of extreme exertion and considerable patience" they very nearly made it all the way to the top.

How Humboldt and his companions went up, the route they took, is not at all clear from his account. But in many places, he writes, the ridge was no wider than eight or ten inches. On their left a snow-covered precipice shone like glass, on their right "a fearful abyss" dropped away a thousand feet or more. "At certain places where it was very steep, we were obliged to use both hands and feet, and the edges of the rock were so sharp that we were painfully cut, especially on our hands." Much of the time they were shrouded in mist so thick they were unable even to see their own feet. Then all at once the air would clear for an instant and the dome-shaped summit would stand out before them, gleaming in the sunshine. "What a grand and solemn spectacle! The very sight of it renewed our strength."

At 15,000 feet Bonpland captured a butterfly. At 15,600 feet the Indians, with one exception, refused to go any farther. At 16,600 feet Humboldt spotted an ordinary housefly. Above the snow line, at about 16,900 feet, rock lichens were the only sign of life. The next reading was taken at 17,300 feet, at a spot where the ridge was just barely wide enough to set up the barometer and two of them could stand side by side in safety.

They were stopped finally by an impassable ravine. Nauseated by the thin air, they were all so dizzy they could barely stand. Their lips and gums were bleeding. The time, Humboldt says, was an hour after noon. Again the barometer was set up. The temperature, they found, was three degrees

below freezing, which both Humboldt and Bonpland, "from our long residence in the tropics," found "quite numbing." The altitude where they stood was 19,286 feet, higher than anyone had ever been before, even in a balloon.

They had attained the top of the world, they thought. For Humboldt it was a supreme, indescribable moment. Nearly thirty years later, in 1828, when the surpassing magnitude of the Himalayas, long a subject of much conjecture, was verified by the first reliable instrument surveys, Humboldt was noticeably stunned. To a friend he wrote, "All my life I prided myself on the fact that of all mortals I had reached the highest point on Earth."

Chimborazo itself would not be climbed for another seventy-eight years. In 1880, Edward Whymper, the British mountaineer and artist, the first man to climb the Matterhorn (in 1865), would reach the top of Chimborazo, following what he figured to be Humboldt's route. That Humboldt had come as far as he did, Whymper found extraordinary. Darwin, after a brief hike in the Chilean Andes, at an elevation of about 13,000 feet, would write that it was "incomprehensible" to him how Humboldt had done it.

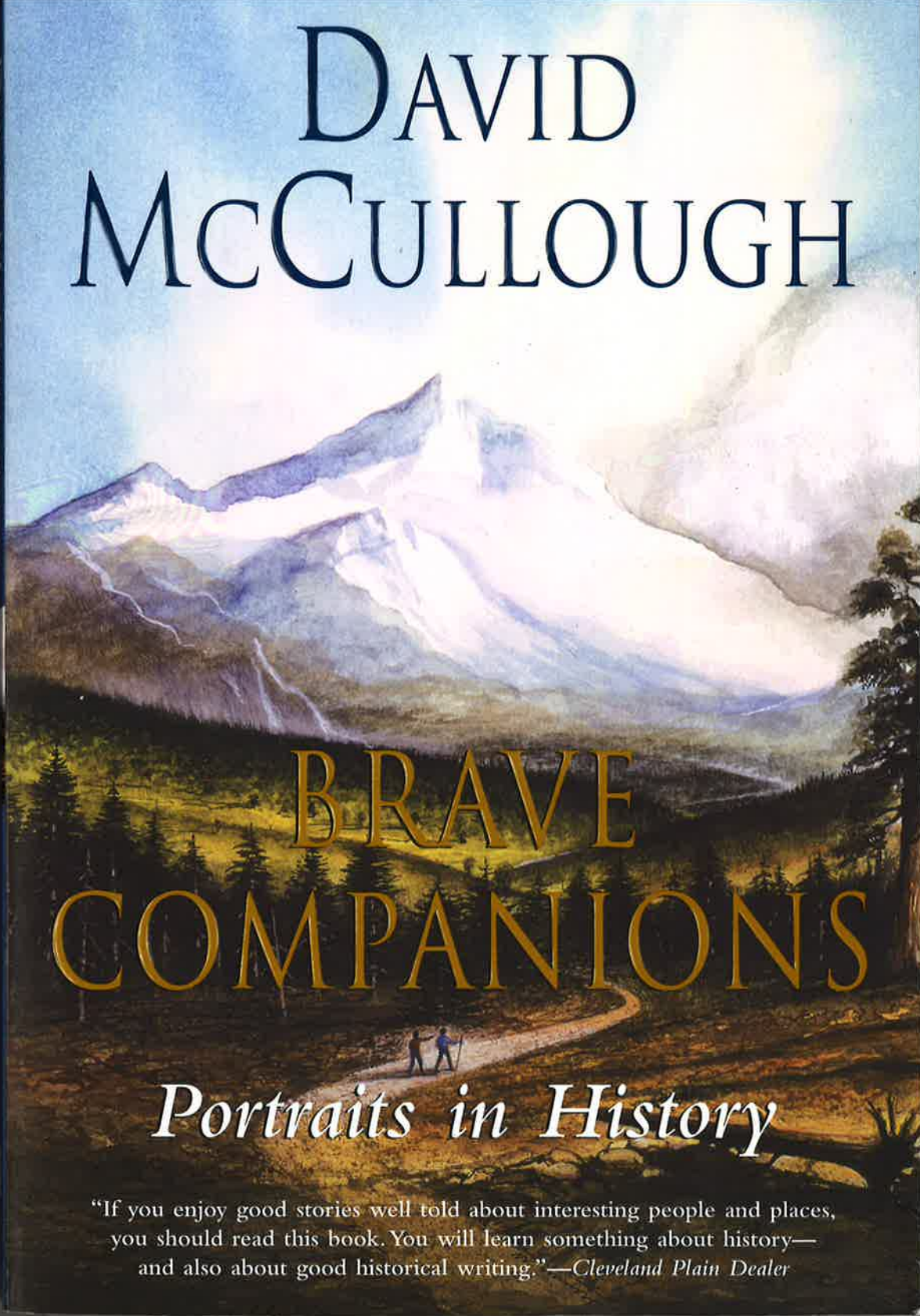
Humboldt and the others in his party descended from Chimborazo in a great hurry—the first 3,600 feet in all of an hour, according to Humboldt, a claim Edward Whymper would declare preposterous. And like our own men on the moon, they busily gathered up all the rocks they could carry. "We foresaw that in Europe," Humboldt said, "we should frequently be asked for a fragment from Chimborazo." Whether he had such a memento with him when he arrived at the White House is not known.

From Chimborazo the party pushed farther south, into the valley of the upper Amazon. Then they were climbing again into the rarefied air of the Andes, traveling now, on occasion, along the "wonderful remains of the Inca Roads" and taking, as it happens, about the same route as the present-day Pan-American Highway. The Inca Road and the thought of the effort and ingenuity it represented left the two Europeans feeling strangely humbled. Nothing built by the Romans had ever struck Humboldt as so imposing, and at one point, according to his calculations, *this* road was at an elevation of thirteen thousand feet. At Paramo and Cajamarca they examined Inca ruins. No ignorant savages were these, he concluded.

He was immensely taken, too, by the giant condors that circled overhead, high above all the summits of the Andes. How was it possible—physiologically—he wondered, for a creature to fly in circles for hours in air so thin, then descend all at once to the level of the sea, "thus passing through all gradations of climate."

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOHN ADAMS

DAVID McCULLOUGH

The background of the book cover is a classic landscape painting. It depicts a majestic mountain range with snow-capped peaks and rugged, rocky slopes. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, suggesting a bright but slightly overcast day. In the foreground, a dirt path winds through a valley filled with dense evergreen trees. Two small figures, likely hikers or travelers, are seen walking along the path, providing a sense of scale to the vast landscape. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greens, and earthy tones, with the snow providing a stark white contrast.

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