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Review: The Invention of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World

By Andrea Wulf

Reviewed by Ryder Miller

New York, New York, USA

Wulf, Andrea. *The Invention of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. 473 pp. US\$ 30.00. ISBN 9780385350662.

Journalist, author, and historian Andrea Wulf argues in *The Invention of Nature* we should remember German Naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and his impact on environmental thought. Humboldt was a scientific superstar in his day who had a penchant to be interdisciplinary. He was adored by the masses and was known by many famous people including Simón Bolívar, Thomas Jefferson, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He influenced most of the major natural historians and preservationists, including Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Ernst Haeckel, and John Muir. All of them had read some of his books and built upon some of his ideas. Wulf even looked at some of the notes they wrote in their personal copies of Humboldt's books.

Humboldt visited South America, learned things about plants and the wild, wondered about the cosmos, was involved in politics, described nature, and saw the world as a living thing. We do not usually think of the Earth as a living organism, but maybe we can still envision a Mother Nature that is lashing back at us because of the changes we are making.

During his time, Humboldt was profound, entertaining, and enlightening. He wrote books about his explorations and became a public lecturer. Science has since gone in a different direction with more of a drive for scientists to focus and specialize. He was not a specialist and the field has progressed since his time. Wulf writes:

Humboldt gave us our concept of nature itself. The irony is that Humboldt's views have become so self-evident that we have largely forgotten the man behind them. (p. 8)

Many of his books, which sold out when first published, are not widely read today. It is great to see Wulf cheerleading here, especially of old naturalists and preservationists, who seem to be lessened in stature in this age which might have lost hope and concern. Less folks are also making it out into the wild and semi-wild these days. The book is not just about Humboldt's adventurous life and his accomplishments, but also revels in the accomplishments of the others who followed and were inspired by him. One finds wonderful treatments of Humboldt's contemporaries and successors including Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Ernst Haeckel, and John Muir. It is fun to revel in their accomplishments also.

Those interested in environmental history are in for a treat with this book because it gives the reader and student a real grounding in the foundation of the environmental movement. In addition, sections of it could be used to showcase specific figures. The treatment of Humboldt and the others are complementary as they should be. Humboldt also has the pessimism to judge some of our misguided actions. During his time, there were more unanswered questions and a naturalist could appease the curiosity of the public. People still believed that there were wildernesses left and nature to explore and the goals were to preserve wild places. He also warned us about what we might do in the larger Cosmos out there, but perhaps we need to find someone who could convince us with a well thought out game plan for a future there. Not all will accept Humboldt as a founder and a hero, however, but as Wulf presents, he is definitely part of this history.

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