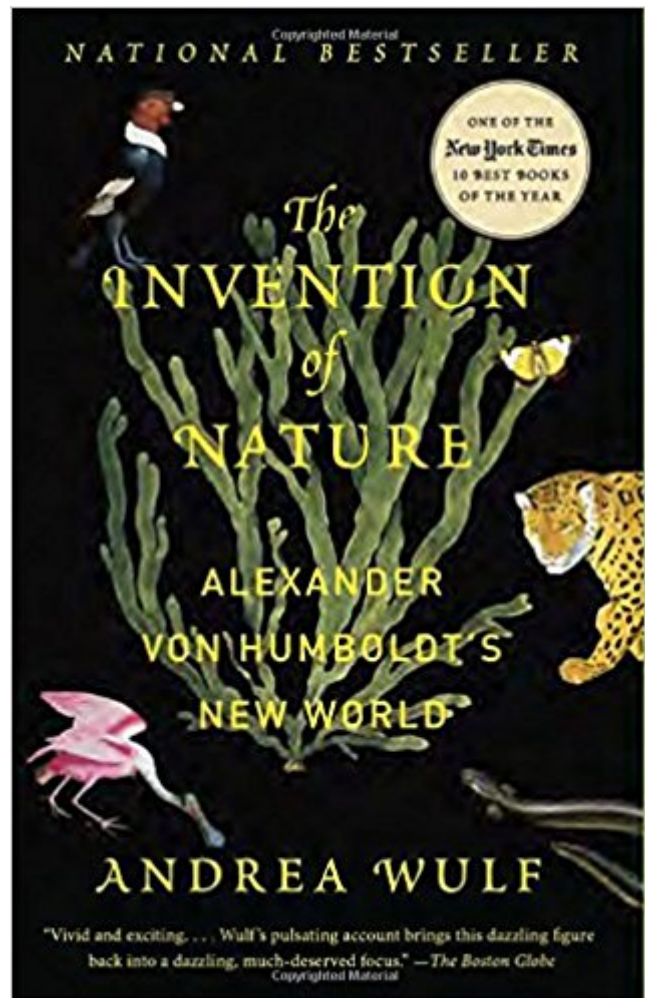




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# The Invention Of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World



## Synopsis

The acclaimed author of *Founding Gardeners* reveals the forgotten life of Alexander von Humboldt, the visionary German naturalist whose ideas changed the way we see the natural world—and in the process created modern environmentalism. NATIONAL BEST SELLER One of the *New York Times* 10 Best Books of the Year Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, The James Wright Award for Nature Writing, the Costa Biography Award, the Royal Geographic Society's Ness Award, the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award Finalist for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, the Royal Society Science Book Prize, the Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction, the Independent Bookshop Week Book Award *Best Book of the Year*: The *New York Times*, The *Atlantic*, The *Economist*, *Nature*, *Jezebel*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, *New Scientist*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Evening Standard*, *The Spectator* Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was the most famous scientist of his age, a visionary German naturalist and polymath whose discoveries forever changed the way we understand the natural world. Among his most revolutionary ideas was a radical conception of nature as a complex and interconnected global force that does not exist for the use of humankind alone. In North America, Humboldt's name still graces towns, counties, parks, bays, lakes, mountains, and a river. And yet the man has been all but forgotten. In this illuminating biography, Andrea Wulf brings Humboldt's extraordinary life back into focus: his prediction of human-induced climate change; his daring expeditions to the highest peaks of South America and to the anthrax-infected steppes of Siberia; his relationships with iconic figures, including Simón Bolívar and Thomas Jefferson; and the lasting influence of his writings on Darwin, Wordsworth, Goethe, Muir, Thoreau, and many others. Brilliantly researched and stunningly written, *The Invention of Nature* reveals the myriad ways in which Humboldt's ideas form the foundation of modern environmentalism—and reminds us why they are as prescient and vital as ever.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

NATIONAL BEST SELLER “Andrea Wulf reclaims Humboldt from the obscurity that has enveloped him. . . . [She] is as enthusiastic as her subject. . . . Vivid and exciting. . . .

Wulf’s pulsating account brings this dazzling figure back into a dazzling, much-deserved focus.” • [The Boston Globe](#)

“[Makes an] urgent argument for Humboldt’s relevance. The Humboldt in these pages is bracingly contemporary; he acts and speaks in the way that a polyglot intellectual from the year 2015 might, were he transported two centuries into the past and set out to enlighten the world’s benighted scientists and political rulers. . . . At times [The Invention of Nature](#)

reads like pulp explorer fiction, a genre at least partially inspired by Humboldt’s own travelogues. . . . It is impossible to read [The Invention of Nature](#) without contracting Humboldt fever. Wulf makes Humboltians of us all.” • [Nathaniel Rich](#), [New York Review of Books](#)

“Alexander von Humboldt may have been the preeminent scientist of his era, second in fame only to Napoleon, but outside his native Germany his reputation has faded. Wulf does much to revive our appreciation of this ecological visionary through her lively, impressively researched account of his travels and exploits, reminding us of the lasting influence of his primary insight: that the Earth is a single, interconnected organism, one that can be catastrophically damaged by our own destructive actions.” • [The New York Times Book Review](#), Top 10 Books of the Year

“Engrossing. . . . Wulf magnificently recreates Humboldt’s dazzling, complex personality and the scope of his writing. . . . Her book fulfills her aim to restore Humboldt to his place in the pantheon of nature and science, revealing his approach as a key source for our modern understanding of the natural world.” • [Jenny Uglow](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#)

“A magnificent work of resurrection, beautifully researched, elegantly written, a thrilling intellectual odyssey.” • [The New York Times](#)

"The most complete portrait of one of the world's most complete naturalists."

"From Russia to the jungles of South America to the Himalayas, an intrepid explorer's travels make for exhilarating reading. . . . Wulf imbues Humboldt's adventures . . . with something of the spirit of Tintin, relishing the jungles, mountains and dangerous animals at every turn. . . . A superior celebration of an adorable figure."

"Part biography, part vicarious travelogue, part history-of-ideas. . . . Argues, lyrically and compellingly, that the man who gave us the concept of nature as we know it deserves not merely to be remembered, but to be celebrated once again."

"A superb biography. Andrea Wulf makes an inspired case for Alexander von Humboldt to be considered the greatest scientist of the 19th century. . . . Wulf is especially good, [on the ways that] his ideas enjoyed an afterlife. . . . Ecologists today, Ms. Wulf argues, are Humboltians at heart. With the immense challenge of grasping the global consequences of climate change, Humboldt's interdisciplinary approach is more relevant than ever."

"The Economist, Best Books of the Year"

"Marvelous. . . . On one level, [The Invention of Nature] is a rollicking adventure story. . . . Yet it is also a fascinating history of ideas."

"Sarah Darwin, Financial Times"

"This book sets out to restore Humboldt to his rightful place in the pantheon of natural scientists. In the process, Wulf does a great deal more. This meticulously researched work—part biography, part cabinet of curiosities—takes us on an exhilarating armchair voyage through some of the world's least hospitable regions, from the steaming basin to the ice-fringed peaks of Kazakhstan."

"Giles Milton, Mail on Sunday (London)"

"Arresting. . . . readable, thoughtful, and widely researched, and informed by German sources richer than the English canon."

"Colin Thubron, The New York Times Book Review, Editor's Choice"

"In its mission to rescue Humboldt's reputation from the crevasse he and many other German writers and scientists fell into after the Second World War, it succeeds."

"Joy lo Dico, The Independent (London)"

"Luminously written."

"Roger Cox, The Scotsman (Edinburgh)"

"A dazzling account of Humboldt's restless search for scientific, emotional and aesthetic satisfaction."

Unapologetically in awe of her subject and intent on restoring Humboldt's reputation, [Wulf] brings his ideas to the foreground – their emergence, spread and evolution after his death. . . . Wulf goes as far as to say that modern environmentalists, ecologists and nature writers are still drawing from his oeuvre, even if they have never heard of him. . . . With the environmental movement, ecology and climate science, Wulf argues, we may have entered another period in which connections predominate over isolated proofs, bringing renewed relevance to Humboldt's grand visions of nature, the world and the universe.

• Patrick Wilcken, *Literary Review* (UK) – “Wulf, a historian with an invaluable environmental perspective, presents with zest and eloquence the full story of Humboldt's adventurous life and extraordinary achievements. . . . Humboldt, Wulf convincingly argues in this enthralling, elucidating biography, was a genuine visionary, whose insights we need now more than ever.

• Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review) – “I lavish praise on Andrea Wulf's new book, *The Invention of Nature*. . . . The gist of my praise is simple. Wulf recognized not only a good story but also an important one. She has written a fascinating book about a fascinating man whose work influences our thinking even though his name is no longer widely remembered. . . . Wulf's book is about a long-dead great man but also about ourselves.

• Bill Streever, *The Dallas Morning News* – “Humboldt . . . electrified fellow polymaths such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, discovered climate zones, and grasped the impact of industrialization on nature. In her coruscating account, historian Andrea Wulf reveals an indefatigable adept of close observation with a gift for the long view, as happy running a series of 4,000 experiments on the galvanic response as he was exploring brutal terrain in Latin America.

• Barbara Kiser, *Nature* – “Why is the man who predicted climate change forgotten? . . . German-born Andrea Wulf, author of *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, has made it her mission to put a new shine on his reputation – and show why he still has much to teach us.

• Simon Worrall, *National Geographic* – “Gripping. . . . Wulf has delved deep into her hero's life and travelled widely to feel nature as he felt it. . . . No one who reads this brilliant book is likely to forget Humboldt.

• Stephanie Pain, *New Scientist* – “Exuberant, delightful. . . . Wulf is unquestionably right that von Humboldt – a happy, sarcastic, preternaturally talented polymath – is far less well-known outside of Germany than he should be. If *The Invention of Nature* reaches the wide readership it deserves, we can hope that situation will

change. — Steve Donoghue, *Open Letters Monthly*

“Wulf (Chasing Venus) makes an impassioned case for the reinstatement of the boundlessly energetic, perpetually curious, prolific polymath von Humboldt (1769–1859) as a key figure in the history of science. . . . Wulf’s stories of wilderness adventure and academic exchange flow easily, and her affection for von Humboldt is contagious.

— Publishers Weekly (starred review), Best Books of the Year

“Engrossing. . . . Humboldt was the Einstein of the 19th century but far more widely read, and Wulf successfully combines a biography with an intoxicating history of his times.

— Kirkus Reviews (starred review), Best Books of the Year

“Andrea Wulf is a writer of rare sensibilities and passionate fascinations. I always trust her to take me on unforgettable journeys through amazing histories of botanical exploration and scientific unfolding. Her work is wonderful, her language sublime, her intelligence unflagging.

— Elizabeth Gilbert, bestselling author of *The Signature of All Things* and *Big Magic*

“The Invention of Nature is a big, magnificent, adventurous book — so vividly written and daringly researched — a geographical pilgrimage and an intellectual epic! With brilliant, surprising, and thought-provoking connections to Simon Bolivar, Charles Darwin, William Herschel, Charles Lyell, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh. The book is a major achievement.

— Richard Holmes, author of *Coleridge* and *The Age of Wonder*

“This is a truly wonderful book. The German-speaking world does not need to be reminded of Alexander Humboldt, the last universal genius of European history. The English-speaking world does, astonishingly, need such a reminder, and Andrea Wulf has told the tale with such brio, such understanding, such depth. The physical journeyings, all around South America when it was virtually a terra incognita, are as exciting as the journeys of Humboldt’s mind into astronomy, literature, philosophy and every known branch of science. This is one of the most exciting intellectual biographies I have ever read, up there with Lewes’s Goethe and Ray Monk’s Wittgenstein. And all around the subject is the world, gradually learning to be modern — sometimes it knew it was being taught by Humboldt, sometimes not, but there is hardly a branch of knowledge which he did not touch and influence. Hoorah, hoorah!!

— A. N. Wilson, author of *The Victorians* and *Victoria: A Life*

“Andrea Wulf’s marvelous book should go a long way towards putting this captivating eighteenth century German scientist, traveler and opinion-shaper back at the heart of the way we look at the world which Humboldt helped to interpret,

and whose environmental problems he predicted. She has captured the excitement and intimacy of his experiences within the pages of this irresistible and consistently absorbing life of a man whose discoveries have shaped the way we see. •Miranda Seymour, author of *A Noble Endeavors: A History of England and Germany*

ANDREA WULF was born in India and moved to Germany as a child. She lives in London, where she trained as a design historian at the Royal College of Art. She is the author of *Chasing Venus*, *Founding Gardeners*, and *The Brother Gardeners*, which was long-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize and awarded the American Horticultural Society Book Award. She has written for *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. She appears regularly on radio and TV, and in 2014 copresented *British Gardens in Time*, a four-part series on BBC television. [www.andreawulf.com](http://www.andreawulf.com)

On first reading, I made the mistake of taking Wulf's book primarily as a biography of Alexander von Humboldt: It is that (and a good one), but foremost it is an argument for a new understanding of nature. I should have paid more attention to the first part of the book's title: "The Invention of Nature" Alexander von Humboldt's New World. Ms. Wulf is making the case that a proper understanding (not simply appreciation) of nature includes, perhaps requires, a passionate enthusiasm for nature, as well. She shows Humboldt as the embodiment of that new understanding -- romantic and poetic, as well as scientific. She then traces his influence in subsequent scientists, including Darwin, but even more in Thoreau, Marsh, Haeckel and Muir --- partly in their science, but particularly in their embrace of his enthusiasm. There is an inevitable tension between writing a personal biography and analyzing the intellectual/cultural history of an idea, i.e., a new "invention" or way of thinking about nature. On the whole, Wulf succeeds on both counts, and her book is both a pleasure to read and a genuine contribution to our history of thinking about nature. But the tension in her purposes does require some concessions. Wulf deserves applause for her effort to restore Humboldt to his rightful place "in the pantheon of nature and science." The man was nothing short of remarkable and recognized as such in his time. It is unfortunate, and curious, that his fame has been largely eclipsed in the last century. Partly, this is a matter of accessibility: Not only was he remarkably prolific, but much of the work is simply unavailable to English-language readers. Some recent popular books have helped, e.g., Gerhard Helferich's 2011 "Humboldt's Cosmos," but much is either narrowly focused, outdated or unavailable outside research libraries. Wulf's remedy is the best contemporary biography of Humboldt, and that alone would make this book worth reading. Her

particular service, however, is in providing an excellent summary of his principle ideas and new way of thinking about nature. From this foundation, she proceeds to make a strong case for his influence on subsequent generations of scientists and nature writers. Because Wulf is focused on Humbolt as the progenitor of a new ("invented") way of thinking about nature, a more comprehensive, and perhaps more complex, examination of the man gives way to the theme of influence on successors. This is not a defect in the book: It is a choice by the author to focus on the theme of a more subjective and impassioned understanding of nature, as embodied by Humbolt and then his successors. But it does mean that a more purely biographical "life" of Humbolt remains to be written. Wulf's shifting focus from the man to the theme creates some tension. At times, Wulf works so hard at restoring a deserved luster to Humbolt and his ideas that she may go too far. One might get the impression not only that all his ideas were original, but that much (if not most) of subsequent nature science was derivative of Humbolt, from Darwin's thinking on evolution to contemporary climate science. Indeed, many of Humbolt's astute observations can find an echo in contemporary nature science. But many of his ideas regarding geology, species and the complex interaction in nature were "in the air" and under discussion at the time. In addition to some genuinely original concepts (e.g., climate bands or zones), Humbolt's great contribution was to focus and lend excitement to this new thinking. No small thing that! Moreover, Humbolt certainly was an inspiration to many subsequent (but equally original) scientists -- my own first inklings of Humbolt's influence came from reading Darwin's account of being inspired by Humbolt's South American explorations. In short, Humbolt not only made major substantive contributions to science, but his remarkable travels and passion for nature inspired many then and since. But how much contemporary science derives from his work, and why his contribution is nowadays less appreciated, is a larger and still open question. This points to an additional caveat: In making the case not only for Humbolt's historical influence but contemporary relevance, Wulf sometimes leaves the impression that we are listening to her pronounce on contemporary issues, e.g., climate change, in Humbolt's voice. As noted, Wulf is making an unapologetic case for a subjective understanding and appreciation of nature. When Wulf relates the tale of an occasion when John Muir "jumping around and singing to 'glory in it all'" derides a hiking companion for evidently too "cool" an appreciation of nature, she leaves no doubt where her sympathies lie. Fair enough, so long as one recognizes that this stance occasionally colors her treatment of Humbolt, as well as his successors. Since I suspect that most prospective readers are (like me) inclined to sympathize, this is unlikely to be a problem for most. A final, non-trivial recommendation: In addition to being strong on substance, Wulf writes a very nice and expressive style, highly readable and nearly always interesting. This is a needed and well-done



biography. As to Wulf's broader argument about the legitimacy and importance of including subjectivity and passion in our scientific understanding of nature, she makes a strong case and (needless to say) makes it passionately.[Note: I re-wrote this review significantly upon reflecting on some thoughtful comments and responses by other readers -- thanks!]

This book is pretty much everything you'd want from a scientific/explorer biography. It has adventure (Humboldt, we learn, was the most experienced mountaineer of his time), deep personal narrative (largely from excerpts of his own letters and notes), details about his scientific discoveries, and -- bonus -- an analysis of both corresponding contemporary scientific thought AND contemporary \*art\*. We learn, for example, that one of Humboldt's friends was the poet Goethe, and that his, Humboldt's, insatiable curiosity about the natural world cannot be separated from his more aesthetic feelings about this world. The book follows a chronological pattern, beginning with Humboldt's childhood; but it swiftly progresses to his first journey to South America. Readers looking for action, who want to get right to what started to make Humboldt so amazing, will not be disappointed with this relatively quick glance at his early years in Germany. The book is also loaded with grayscale images corresponding to Humboldt's travels, making pleasing breaks from pages and pages of text. My only complaint on this front is that the captions do not generally make it clear whether these images are contemporary. One of the best features, I think, is the relatively objective quality of Wulf's narration. Two examples here on this: First, these early scientists often gleefully experimented on animals, and Humboldt was definitely no exception. But we get no PETA-like frowns from Wulf -- she only relays what Humboldt was, in fact, doing, and how \*he\* felt about it. Second, there are certain details about Humboldt's life that point towards his being either asexual or homosexual. Wulf provides these details not only with Humboldt's own remarks (towards his male scientific partners and friends in letters, for example), but also through others' contemporary observations about his character. Yet pleasingly, she does not really insinuate that he was anything at all; she does not say he was "probably" this or that. Instead, Wulf allows readers to make their own judgments if they should wish. (i.e. Maybe he was in love with his work?) This relative objectivity is a mark of good, or even great biography that will outlast decades -- all the clues, but not really any overt -- and importantly, unprovable -- interpretations. Readers who enjoy science, literature, and outdoor adventure books should at least take a look at the previews of *The Invention of Nature*, for it's all of those genres rolled into one very good, very engaging read. With every new destination that Wulf chronicles here, I was excited to learn what Humboldt would see, do, and learn next.

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