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**Review: “The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World” by  
Andrea Wulf**

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## *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*

By Andrea Wulf, London: John Murray Publishers, 2015. Pp. 496, Hardback £25.00, ISBN: 978-0-385-35066-2

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### REVIEWED BY CLARE RICHARDSON

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If you could invite one historical figure to a dinner party, who would it be? Andrea Wulf answers that question with resounding certainty in *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*. Her biography of the Prussian scientist and adventurer makes it hard not to agree that he should be at the top of anyone's guest list. Not because Alexander von Humboldt seems like great company – his tendency to babble relentlessly and his disdain for social formalities made him an initially reluctant celebrity – but because his ideas are foundational to the way we understand the world today across several fields of study. Wulf, a design historian by training who has previously published two books on gardening histories, breathes life into Humboldt's litany of discoveries, follows his death-defying travels from the peaks of the Andes to the plains of Siberia, and highlights the influence of his work on poets, writers, and scientists.

Humboldt was a global thinker whose ideas were nothing short of revolutionary for Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wulf repeatedly – almost incessantly – describes how Humboldt identified previously unseen connections by researching natural features in distant lands and viewing the world as a network of forces. His widely-read books described nature as a global system at work. Rather than group plants according to traditional taxonomy, he used their climate and location to plot zones with similar distributions of flora stretching across the earth. For example, Humboldt noticed a moss species in the Andes that was similar to one in northern Germany. Another group of coastal plants led him to suggest there must have been a connection between Africa and South America at some point in time. Similarities like these helped him articulate an early understanding of tectonic plates. Humboldt warned scientists that failing to consider specimens from far reaches of the planet would be like geologists piecing together the world 'according to the shape of the nearest hills around them.' (p.128) Throughout his career, Humboldt meticulously documented natural features, flora, and fauna across different continents, describing interconnected phe-

nomena thousands of miles away from one another. In nature he saw ‘a reflection of the whole.’ (p.128)

Wulf also focuses on Humboldt’s previously unrecorded connections between the economy, slavery, and colonialism. He saw the mistreatment of people to harvest labor-intensive crops as ‘interwoven with man’s relationship to nature and the exploitation of natural resources.’ (p.106) He became a committed abolitionist following his forays into the Americas, and loathed Americans for their practice of slavery despite admiring their revolutionary spirit. Similarly, his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, published in several volumes from 1808 to 1811, asserted that Spanish colonialism was founded on inequality and premised on the false notion that local peoples were barbaric and unsophisticated. Instead, Humboldt insisted that the indigenous peoples were ‘as capable of scientific discoveries, art and craftsmanship as the Europeans.’ (p.152) In later accounts, his condemnation of Britain’s treatment of its colonies in the South Pacific paralleled his writings on Spanish colonialism in Latin America, where his work inspired Simón Bolívar and the revolutions that liberated the continent. This can be seen in the fact that the revolutionaries viewed science as an inherently transnational phenomenon, ‘a nation without borders’ that could unite people and put independent Latin America on the same page as Europe. (p.174) Today Humboldt has been largely forgotten in North America – partly due to anti-German sentiment and the purging of German cultural influences following the First World War – but his name is widely known in South America as a result of his considerable influence on the continent.

Humboldt was also the first to elucidate the connections between colonialism and environmental degradation. ‘Everything is interaction and reciprocal,’ (p.59) Wulf quotes Humboldt as saying after he comes to understand how Spanish monks depleted future resources by over-harvesting turtle eggs on the Venezuelan coast. Humboldt noted how Spanish efforts to reduce flooding by building a dam out of trees backfired: they failed to foresee how the logging would increase soil erosion, making future flooding even worse. He also recorded how diverting water for local irrigation could deplete valleys further downstream. Wulf writes that ‘he debated nature, ecological issues, imperial power and politics in relation to each other.’ (p.105) These ideas would shape the way we understand the world around us as a web of interconnected phenomena. Humboldt’s ‘invention of nature,’ as Wulf describes his contributions in the book title, refers to the way his work influenced the thinking of his predominantly European audience, shaping their conception of the environment as an interconnected global force.

Although the primary aim of Humboldt’s numerous journeys was the collection of scientific data, he also used the opportunity to write sentimental travel accounts that captured imaginations at home in Europe. However, where Humboldt took care to meticulously record data and file precise reports, Wulf romanticizes the mundane and is at times speculative in her effort to make his scientific missions

sound thrilling. As a result, the book reads more like an adventure novel than a historical biography.

Despite Wulf's gripping prose, her unwavering praise of Humboldt fails to take into account the implications of this sort of narrative. Other scholars have criticized Humboldt as an imperialist wielding scientific tools instead of a sword. Humboldt was a white Protestant man traveling primarily in parts of the Americas under Spanish colonial administration, and despite his anti-imperialist beliefs, his worldview was shaped by these circumstances. Wulf's biography often reports Humboldt's impressions of South America as matters of incontrovertible fact without offering such nuance. By doing so, she casts Humboldt as a hero with the righteousness of science on his side to conquer unknown lands.

To be certain, his work played a pivotal role in the way nineteenth-century Europeans perceived South America. His travel narratives cast him as an adventuring hero, and they helped bring exotic regions of the world into the public consciousness. Mary Louise Pratt has argued that Humboldt kindled the imaginations of his ilk, encouraging further European exploration and involvement in previously distant and foreboding places.

The second part of Wulf's book also loses its captivating pace as it slogs through chapters documenting the travails of the American diplomat George Perkins, writer Henry David Thoreau, naturalist John Muir, and German biologist Ernst Haeckel to show their connections to Humboldt. Some of these relationships are tenuous at best, such as Wulf's claim that Thoreau's *Walden* was a direct answer to Humboldt's landmark 1845 work *Cosmos* based on the fact that Humboldt's 'view of nature gave Thoreau the confidence to weave together science and poetry.' (p.250) These chapters seem unnecessary as Humboldt's influence is well-established in the first half of the book.

Humboldt's achievements in his 89 years of life are dazzling. So too is Wulf's ability to spin at times drab science experiments into a tale of adventure. Although she overlooks the problems of glorifying the Eurocentric vision Humboldt brought back to his home continent, her goal from the start is admittedly to champion the scientist and his accomplishments. The man who inspired Charles Darwin, observed man-made climate change, and wooed crowds of both the elite and general public from Paris to remote parts of the Amazon now has his name plastered on natural features, plants, animals and institutions around the world – including, together with his brother Wilhelm, the Humboldt University in Berlin. The popularity of Wulf's biography will mean that a new generation of readers will remember Humboldt as one of the greatest European thinkers of his time.