

Biography
The Invention of Nature

Andrea Wulf
(John Murray, £25 *£22)

NO visitor to Berlin can avoid the austere neo-Classical Humboldt University that squats on Unter den Linden. Whether any sightseer lingers to examine the marble statues of the brothers, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, in whose honour the university is named, is another matter. Outside Germany, explains Andrea Wulf in this stimulating biography of the younger of the siblings—the geographer, naturalist and adventurer Alexander—the Humboldts are ‘largely forgotten’.

She sets out to recover from obscurity a man hailed by contemporaries as the ‘Prometheus of our days’. Born in 1769 into the Prussian nobility, Humboldt became a fulcrum of knowledge and learning, his writings a reference point for scientists, writers and politicians throughout Europe.

Darwin described how Humboldt’s narrative of his South American expedition of 1799–

1804 ‘stirred up in me a burning zeal’. Goethe took Humboldt as a model for Faust and Wordsworth and Coleridge marvelled at his efforts to integrate Nature and experience. Jefferson turned to him for advice on the frontiers of the United States and Bolívar relied on his maps to drive the Spanish from South America.

The extent of Humboldt’s fame in the 19th century might seem perplexing now. He made no great discovery and bequeathed no lasting theory to posterity. His verbosity meant that a steely single-mindedness was required to complete even a sentence of his writing. And, although celebrated as an explorer, he spent most of his life holed up in Paris and Berlin.

By presenting Humboldt in his milieu, Miss Wulf goes a long way towards explaining his renown. As a polyglot aristocrat of independent means, he could cross borders and obtain audiences with monarchs, statesmen and scholars everywhere. His one great expedition came at a time when Europe had turned in on itself and was starved of information about the world beyond. What was arguably

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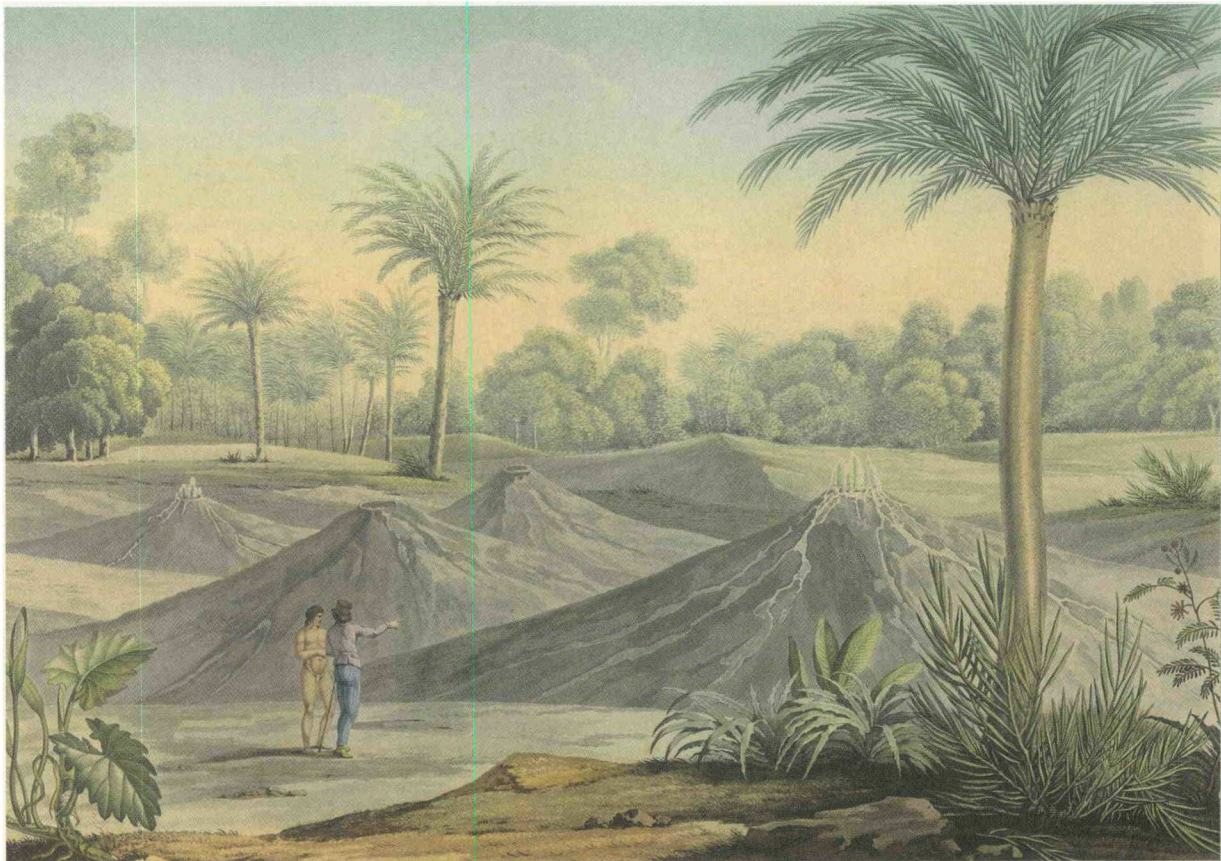
his most important contribution to science—his demonstration of the connection between climate, elevation, latitude and biological distribution—offered a view that transcended nation and state.

His notion of the unity of Man and Nature had appeal at a time when religion was in retreat, new countries were being forged out of wildernesses and people were demanding liberty. The hardships he endured while pursuing his ideas—scaling the remote Andean volcano Chimborazo and experimenting on himself with electric eels—endeared him to artists and poets.

The Invention of Nature elegantly captures a cosmopolitan who straddled the Enlightenment and Romanticism—a pioneer of quantitative methods who nevertheless held that ‘what speaks to the soul escapes our measurements’. *David Gelber*



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The experience of Nature: Humboldt's own illustration of his visit to Turbaco, Colombia