

BOOK REVIEW

# **The naturalist whose sharp eye was matched by his deep conscience**

A rich new biography celebrates George Forster

By John Kaag  
Published June 10, 2026







ANDREA WULF'S 'THE TRAVELER' • ILLUSTRATION BY ILANA ZAHAVY FOR THE GLOBE; ADOBE STOCK; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



The 19th century is having a moment. Remakes of Shelley’s “Frankenstein,” the resurgence of “Wuthering Heights,” the continued popularity of “Bridgerton”’s Regency-era themes — Victorian drama is back. This is not, I suspect, just a matter of nostalgia and distraction. To understand the modern world, one often has to go back to the moment the Enlightenment began to fray at the edges, yielding to the visceral experience of the Romantic era. The Romantics, like so many of us today, were worried about the increasing detachment and over-intellectualization that defines modernity, which leave us unmoored from the natural world and each other. In Andrea Wulf’s latest biography, [“The Traveler: The Revolutionary Life of George Forster and his Search for Humanity,”](#) we are invited to witness this transition through the eyes of a man who was nearly written out of history. George Forster — the assistant naturalist who circumnavigated the globe with Captain Cook at just 17 — emerges not as a mere chronicler of discovery but as the primary intellectual ancestor of our contemporary ecological and humanitarian conscience.

For readers of Wulf’s earlier work, [“The Invention of Nature,”](#) Forster’s presence feels like a necessary haunting. In that book, Wulf introduced us to Alexander von Humboldt as the father of ecology, the man who saw the world as a living organism. But as Humboldt himself confessed at 88, he never stopped telling people what he owed “to my teacher and friend George Forster.” It was Forster who first taught him to see nature not as a static collection of disjointed limbs but as a “magic net of countless threads joined by countless knots, where each thing is connected to all and all to each, a system of divine concordance.”

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While the Enlightenment was busy trying to name the world into submission, Forster was learning to walk the deck of the *Resolution* with bent knees and outward-splayed feet, waddling like a duck, recognizing that “to be human was the glorious pride of twenty-five million people” — a radical equality that applied to the Māori and the Parisian revolutionary alike.

Forster’s life was defined by a restless, early exposure to the world’s vastness. At age 10, he was already galloping across the Russian steppes, identifying plants while his father, a German naturalist, explorer, and pastor, alternated between patient teaching and punishment. This was not a childhood of school benches and rote learning, but one of wading through marshes on the banks of the Volga and watching wildfires race across grasslands. This upbringing created a polyglot who could speak the language of European salons as easily as he could decipher the vocabularies of the South Seas.

When he finally joined Cook’s *Resolution* at 17, he entered a world so alien it broke his body while expanding his mind. George spent three years on an ocean that was rarely pacific, enduring the “chilling horrors” of the Antarctic Circle, watching icebergs grind together “as if the whole earth was cleaving asunder,” surrounded by formations that looked like “the wrecks of a shattered world,” with an ocean that seemed “incensed at the presumption of a few intruding mortals.” Yet amid this extremity Forster began to see nature as an active living power that defied the static categories of his father’s natural history.

The core of Wulf’s book lies in Forster’s refusal to see the world as a collection of discontinuities. While his crewmates dismissed the people of the South Seas as “poor mean despicable looking wretches,” Forster looked at their “lively intelligent countenance” and recognized a shared, equal humanity. He spent hours with islanders, coming to feel that they were all “members of one great family” — an intuitive ethnography that searched for what holds us together rather than what sets us apart.

The most visceral moment in the biography occurs on a beach in Tanna, where a marine shoots an islander for crossing an arbitrary line in the sand. Forster was horrified: “we had wantonly made it the scene of the greatest cruelty.” He insisted that “virtue and vice are relative concepts,” and that the civilized Europeans were often the ones lacking in humanity. This radical empathy led him to challenge Immanuel Kant — who never left his birthplace — when Kant declared Black people an inferior race who “have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous.”

His refusal to endorse the mainstream (and misguided) notions of conventional justice, drove Forster into the heart of the French Revolution. He joined the Jacobin Club, became a leading voice in the short-lived Mainz Republic, and vowed to “live and die as a republican.” His loyalties, Wulf makes clear, were determined by his beliefs, not by place. He died at 39 in a Parisian garret, writing to his estranged wife that he was “starting all over again, without knowing how and with what ... since I’m cut off from all of Europe, burdened with debts, without any means, without support, and almost without hope.” He had wagered everything on the belief that to be free means to be human, and he paid the price knowingly.

In our own fractured age, George Forster’s recovered legacy is a vital reminder of what we stand to lose in our artificial partitioning of the world. What a contemporary described as “cosmopolitanism personified,” he felt no allegiance to a single nation but to humanity itself. “The Traveler” is an invitation to step out of our studies and experience the world — with its attendant risks and rewards. In rescuing Forster from the margins of history, Wulf offers us a thinker who understood, long before any of us could, that we are, despite appearances, part of “a system of divine concordance.”

## **THE TRAVELER: One Man’s Quest for Humanity from the South Seas to Revolutionary Paris**

By Andrea Wulf

Knopf, 512 pages, \$38

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