

Literary Review

JUNE 2026 Issue 552 £5.95

George Forster's Marvellous Travels

Peter Moore

POLITICAL WIVES

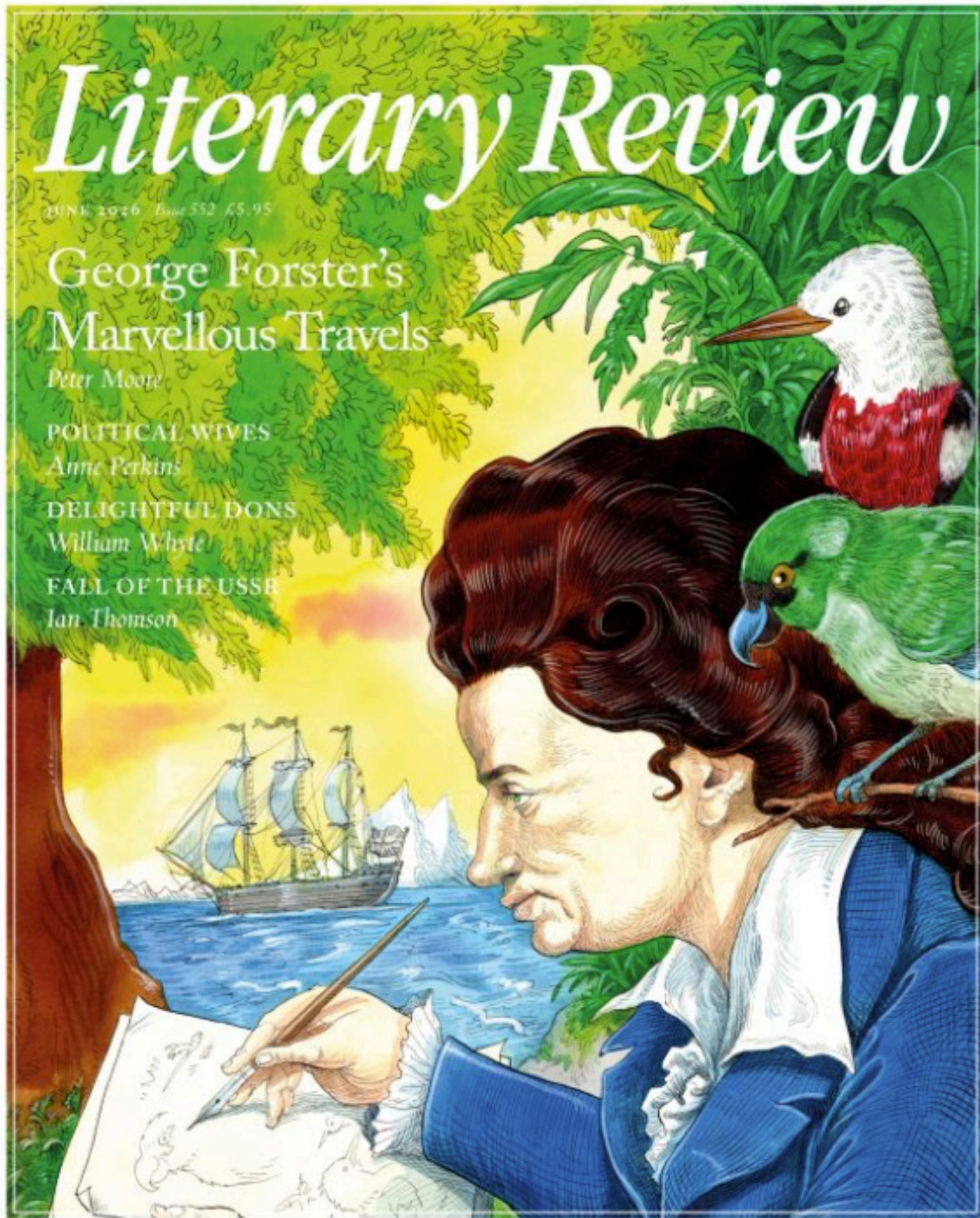
Anne Perkins

DELIGHTFUL DONS

William Whyte

FALL OF THE USSR

Ian Thomson



SEEKING SPINOZA • BEING EMILY BRONTË • CHATTERLEY ON TRIAL
BOOMS & BUSTS • SECRETS OF THE BRAIN • JM BARRIE'S WICKET WIT



Monday 1st June, 2026

HOME ARCHIVE BAD SEX SEARCH SUBSCRIBE ABOUT SHOP BOOKSHOP

Home » Current Issue » Peter Moore

« previous | next »



PETER MOORE

Out of the Armchair

The Traveller: The Revolutionary Life of George Forster and his Search for Humanity

By Andrea Wulf

Allen Lane 512pp £30

An exemplary tour of the High Enlightenment might go something like this. You'd begin in the streets of 1760s London to feel the pulse of Georgian commerce. You'd then hop aboard one of Captain Cook's colliers and cruise through the Pacific, having encounters every day. Returning to Europe you might watch Benjamin Franklin in diplomatic action at Passy and dine with Casanova in Vienna, before sailing up the Rhine with Humboldt. Having inspected the Soho Manufactory in Birmingham and admired the picturesque scenery of the Peak District, you'd cross the Channel just in time for the grand and bloody finale in Paris.

Only this isn't a fantasy. This is the singular and spectacular trajectory of George Forster, subject of Andrea Wulf's irresistible new biography. 'George', as he is called throughout, was an unlikely person to lead what Wulf terms a 'revolutionary life'. Born in 1754 in a hamlet outside Gdansk, he was a shy and curious child. Long after he won fame as a traveller and naturalist, people described him as calm and tolerant, kind and gentle.

Part of this reserve was due, no doubt, to his overbearing father. Reinhold Forster was an able linguist who gained a reputation as a travelling natural philosopher in the 1760s with a journey into the Russian Empire almost as far as the Caspian Sea. He was also proud, hot-tempered and querulous. Once, in a passionate moment aboard HMS *Resolution*, he challenged a bemused Captain Cook to a duel. While Cook regarded Reinhold as foolish, many of the common hands aboard simply thought him ludicrous. Tales of his endless threats, in heavily accented German, passed into naval lore. A caricature, made later in the century, pictured Reinhold facing backwards on a donkey, shouting, 'I vil tel de Kinck of you.'

One thing Reinhold Forster did have going for him was his prodigiously clever son. George, too, had a gift for languages. In time he came to operate with ease in German, English and French – with Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Swedish not far behind. He wrote with flair, drew with expression and thought with subtlety. 'I enjoy talking,' he once wrote, 'but rarely do so; I communicate openly yet maintain self-control.' When, in May 1772, a Royal Navy surgeon

SIGN UP TO OUR NEWSLETTER

Receive free articles, highlights from the archive, news, details of prizes, and much more.

SIGN UP

Categories

Biography,
Enlightenment

READ MORE BY
Peter Moore

Rocking the Boat

Raising the Flag of
Freedom

Mysteries of the Deep

Freeze Frames

Where Every Man is
an Island

Object Lesson

He Never Sat an
Exam

Treasured Island

Scorbutic Sketches

Marooned with a
View

From Plymouth to
Polynesia

'Great South Land of
the Holy Spirit'

"Stuttard brings ancient Athens to vivid life."
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

HUBRIS
PERICLES, THE PARTHENON,
AND THE INVENTION OF
ATHENS
DAVID STUTTARD

A
STRIKING NEW
PERSPECTIVE
ON ANCIENT
ATHENS

LEARN MORE »

Harvard

knocked on their London door, wondering whether Reinhold might be persuaded to join Captain Cook's *Resolution*, soon to sail for the South Seas, George's life was transformed.

This was the second of Cook's three voyages to the Pacific, and the captain's great biographer, J C Beaglehole, argued that 'for variety of experience it transcends most other voyages ever made'. It included three 'ice edge' cruises into the empty high latitudes as Cook searched for the fabled 'Southern Continent', and two 'tropical sweeps', from bases in New Zealand and Tahiti, that carried the ship's company to Tonga, New Caledonia and Easter Island.

Having already written so elegantly about Alexander von Humboldt's travels through South America, Wulf is well equipped to re-create Forster's experiences aboard the *Resolution*. There is a briskness to her prose and a simplicity to her structure. The narrative races forward in crisp chronological style. Her own view of this history is in sympathy with George's. She shares his sense of wonder at the beauty of emerald islands like Tahiti as well as his outrage at the violence perpetrated by the sailors who were taking part in what was clearly a colonial project.

Within this story George Forster has traditionally been assigned a marginal role. The old view is that, while intellectually gifted, he was too weak-willed, superficial and romantic to be considered a serious voice – 'south German rather than Prussian,' says Beaglehole, who thought it a shame that his father knocked the stuffing out of him at such an early age.

Wulf's first purpose in *The Traveller* is to explode this view and to reframe George, 'the traveller', as a quiet but perceptive presence aboard the *Resolution*. She shows him to be a skilled and reflective observer, weighing the great intellectual and moral questions the voyagers confronted. What, for instance, drove the Māori to cannibalism? How could a seemingly connected people, the Polynesians, have spread themselves over the scattered islands of the Pacific without a knowledge of writing or metal tools? Then, most profound of all, how should these new peoples be understood? What was it that made humans human?

Wulf evaluates George's responses to each of these conundrums. In contrast to the acerbic views of his father or the clipped practicality of Cook, George emerges as the most sympathetic of the voyagers to the indigenous peoples of the Pacific. Studying similarities among the Polynesian languages and spotting the ubiquitous breadfruit tree for the clue it was, George was among the first to comprehend that the massive region had been settled in a vast migratory wave from Southeast Asia.

These people, he further came to believe, were not the fabled 'noble savages' Rousseau had described, who existed on some sliding scale between barbarism and civility. The 'nature of man may differ depending on the climate,' he would later assert, 'but in essence all are specifically the same'. Even, somewhat startlingly, when it came to cannibalism George

Libraries: subscribe to Literary Review



Complete archive

Fully searchable

iOS/Android compatible

IP-authenticated

Remote access available

Start Your
Free Trial

@Lit_Review



LITERAR
Y
REVIEW

27 M€

Those who work in private equity are serious about confidentiality, despite the often enormous consequences of their actions.

@Simon_Nixon searches for the weak points of this guarded industry.

Simon Nixon - Hush Money

Simon Nixon:
Hush Money -
The Asset Class:
How Private
Equity Turned
Capitalism
Against Itself by
Hettie O'Brien

hesitated to pass moral judgement. To many this was unquestionably a horror, but 'no matter how gruesome', Wulf explains, George believed that the 'Europeans had no right to judge something they didn't understand'.

George was still only twenty when the *Resolution* returned to Britain. He had 'already seen more of the world than most people ever would', Wulf writes with considerable understatement. There followed the inevitable honours and book deals as, now a newly minted Enlightenment celebrity, he began his quest for financial security and domestic happiness. While both seemed obtainable, neither would come. For having finally shaken himself clear of his father, George fell into the arms of the thoroughly unsuitable Therese Heyne in Göttingen. An angry father was substituted for an angry wife and, worse still, an angry wife with a wandering eye.

This double misfortune has strongly shaped how George is remembered. But in *The Traveller* Wulf presents a refreshingly different picture. She shows her subject to be at the centre of intellectual circles, making exhilarating tours across Europe and sparring in the German literary magazines with ignorant practitioners of 'armchair philosophy'. In one thrilling episode, he squares up to Immanuel Kant, arguing that writers like him 'should work from observation rather than develop abstruse theories with no foundation in reality'.

This was the power of 'the traveller' in the 1780s, as Europe entered a revolutionary age. Where Kant and Rousseau theorised, Forster drew on experience. In this lucent, affectionate retelling of his life, Andrea Wulf makes a convincing case for George as a thinker who has too long been dismissed or ignored. A humanist, moral and kind, he had many of the qualities required when 1789 came. Tragically for George, who lived out his final days in Paris, exhausted and alone, at the height of the Great Terror, he did not quite possess them all.

VISIT OUR BOOKSHOP

Browse our selection of reviewed and recommended books

BUY HERE



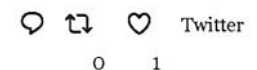
The greatest creation of Louise Bourgeois was herself, says @darwent_charles.

In this month's issue, he asks whether a clear picture of such a shape-shifting artist is possible.

Charles Darwent - Latex & Lace

Charles Darwent: *Latex & Lace - Knife-Woman: The Life of Louise Bourgeois by Marie-Laure Bernadac* (Translated from French by Lauren Elkin)

literaryreview.co.uk



Literary Review Retweeted



Delighted to see the first review of 'Coronations & Defenestrations' in @Lit_Review.

Many thanks to Anthony Teasdale for taking the time to review the book.

If you're a kind-hearted sort who commissions/writes book

reviews, and would be interested in a copy, do let me know.



7 25