

The greatest explorer you’ve never heard of

Andrea Wulf tells Susan Mansfield why George Forster, Captain Cook’s naturalist, was so far ahead of his time

At the age of 23, George Forster was a celebrity, known across the Europe of the 18th century as an explorer, naturalist, philosopher, political radical and best-selling writer. Sixteen years later he was dead and all but erased from history. It was there, among the footnotes to others’ stories, that writer and historian Andrea Wulf discovered him and made him the subject of her new book, *The Traveller*. “I do like writing about a forgotten hero,” she says. “Much more fun to write about than someone everybody has heard of.” Wulf did something similar in her bestseller *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World*, which was translated into 27 languages and won a slew of awards including the Costa Award for Biography and the Royal Society Science Book Prize. She presents rigorous historical research in a highly readable style which foregrounds pace and story. “It was really Forster’s voice which pulled me into the story, because he writes in a very different way to other 18th-century writers,” she says. “There’s a rawness and immediacy and directness to his letters that I’ve rarely encountered.” More than this, she felt she was reading the work of a man with a very modern sensibility, one who rejected the endemic racism of his era in favour of equality and common humanity. He seemed like a man ahead of his time, with something to say to us today. The roots of this might lie in his extraordinary story. At the age of ten, Forster was wrenched from his childhood home in Gdansk, in what was then Prussia, to assist his ambitious, volatile father, Reinhold, on a journey through Russia, observing the lives of Germans brought by Catherine the Great



Andrea Wulf: ‘It’s much more fun to write about a forgotten hero’

to settle on the banks of the Volga. “At a time when other children are sitting at school, he is galloping with Cossacks across the Russian steppe and along the Volga river where he sees these destitute German settlers living in earth dug-outs. At the age of ten, he sees the harsh reality of despotism and inequality, and these themes obsess him throughout his life.” At 17, after a move to England, he was travelling again, once more commandeered as his father’s assistant, on Captain Cook’s second voyage to the South Seas. Forster’s account of the three-year journey on board the *Resolution* to the Pacific Islands, New Zealand and the edges of Antarctica. *A Voyage Round the World*, became a bestseller. “The way he writes is very different to what earlier explorers did,” Wulf says. “He’s a born storyteller, his descriptions really sing off the page. You can see the Tahitian dancers, hear the creaks of icebergs. He paints with words.” The way in which he writes about the indigenous peoples he encountered is also strikingly different to his contemporaries. “At a time when most explorers would look at indigenous people with arrogance at best, with total disgust at worst, and would happily shoot them, he approached them with a remarkably unbiased attitude. He refuses to use European morals as a framework to judge others.” “He returned from this voyage with an unshakable belief in humankind and the equality of the races. He’s one of the first to use the term ‘human rights’. We tend to think that bigotry and racism are inevitable in the 18th century, but I think his life really proves that it’s a choice, it’s always been a choice.” Wulf set off on some adventures of her own, following in Forster’s footsteps to the South Pacific, French Polynesia and New Zealand. On Dusky Sound, at the remote southern tip of New Zealand’s South Island, she found, to her great

surprise, a world almost unchanged from Forster’s day. Even the horizontal tree-trunk at the water’s edge, which the *Resolution* crew used as a gangplank, is still in place. “During those moments, time and space collide. I could just imagine George Forster stepping out of the forest with his botany bag full of plants. I felt very close to him.” Moments like this became part of what informed the book, along with thousands of letters and diary entries by Forster and others. “I want to see the landscapes they walked through, but also to understand how it felt to be on a sailing boat for months on end sailing through Antarctica, and what it’s like to walk through an 18th century German market town. All of this becomes the scaffold and then you have to take the scaffold away and leave the story.” Wulf says she took a “zig-zaggy” path to becoming a historian. Born in India, she grew up in Germany, studied Applied

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Cultural Studies and Philosophy there, then History of Design at the Royal College of Art in London. “I’ve always done things in a zig-zaggy way. I started with the history of material culture, and then worked my way into proper history.” After the success of her early books about gardeners and botanist adventurers, she never looked back. Forster – as a prolific correspondent, writer and scholar who brushed shoulders with kings and presidents, writers and radicals – left a detailed paper trail for a historian, notwithstanding the best efforts of his estranged wife, Therese. A strong and highly educated woman, Therese was serially unfaithful and published the first volume of her husband’s letters after his death, burning or redacting those which

showed her in a poor light. “Luckily for us historians there are plenty of other letters left which she did not burn or edit heavily so that we can construct this story,” Wulf says. “But, actually for me that was the hardest bit of the project because I thought Therese was going to be another one of those strong-minded, free-spirited, fabulous women – which she is, but she’s also very selfish and conniving, and a liar!” Forster came to work as librarian at the University in Mainz, close to the French border, nine months before the French Revolution. When the French annexed Mainz in 1792, seeing his ideas for a more equal society at last take political form, he threw his lot in with the revolution and became Vice-President of the Republic of Mainz, the first democratic republic on German soil. “He’s not a scholar in his ivory tower,” Wulf says. “What he has seen during his travels has given him this lifelong belief in freedom and equality and he stands up for his beliefs. He gives speeches that are very widely publicised across the German states – his friends and family are absolutely horrified. It’s a very dangerous gamble.” And it doesn’t end well. Forster was on a diplomatic mission from the Republic to Paris when Prussia retook Mainz, and he suddenly found himself an outlaw accused of treason. He died in Paris a few months later after a short illness. Blacklisted in his home country, he slipped quickly into the margins of history. But the circumstances of his death also reflect the way he lived, never putting down deep roots in any land. “This is why this book is called *The Traveller*,” Wulf says. “He was a perpetual outsider, always on the move, always in transit. I think that’s also the reason that he embraces the otherness of others.”

The Traveller: The Revolutionary Life of George Forster and his Search for Humanity by Andrea Wulf is published by Allen Lane, £30. Andrea Wulf will be at the Edinburgh International Book Festival on 17 August at 10:30am



Charlotte Higgins, Gordon Brown and (right) Sarah Perry are just some of the stars of the festival’s wide-ranging non-fiction line-up

Non-Fiction Highlights

The programme for this year’s Edinburgh Book Festival encompasses current affairs, politics, history, science, sport, memoir and much more. BBC Chief International Correspondent **Lyse Doucet**, so often a voice of sanity in a turbulent world, and winner of this year’s Women’s Prize for Non-Fiction for *The Finest Hotel* in Kabul, brings her unique perspective and experience to the stage (27 August) and will also interview former Prime Minister **Gordon Brown** (28 August). **Fergus McIntosh**, chief fact-checker at *The New Yorker*, will talk about truth in journalism (23 August) and will join **Lewis Goodall**, from the podcast *The News Agents*, and others for a panel on the future of news (22 August). Goodall and **Edward Wong**, the *New York Times* diplomatic correspondent, will talk about the state of UK-US relations (22 August).

On the key subject of technology, journalist **Cory Doctorow** and Wikipedia founder **Jimmy Wales** will reflect on the idealistic early days of the internet, and how far it has travelled since (17 August). **Yi-Ling Liu** offers an insight into the Chinese internet (15 August) and writer **Michael Pollan** and neuroscientist **Anil Seth** will discuss consciousness in a machine-led world (23 August). As important as the headlines themselves are the human stories behind the headlines. **Asne Seierstad**, author of the bestselling *The Bookseller* of Kabul, will talk about the life of ordinary Russians under Putin (24 August), while **Charlotte Higgins** explores art and culture in Ukraine, looking at the roles they come to play in a country at war (22 August). **Molly Crabapple** tells the little known story of the Jewish Bund, a left-wing

movement in Europe active in the first half of the 20th century which fought the Tsar, rejected Zionism and resisted the Nazis (28 August). And two Book Festival favourites, **Philippe Sands** and **Colm Tóibín**, will join forces to remember Argentina’s Dirty War (30 August). A number of acclaimed fiction writers feature at the Book Festival this year with non-fiction titles. **Louis de Bernières** will take about his memoir, *Smelling of Rooks*, about a writer’s life in Norfolk (27 August), while **Mark Haddon** will present his, *Leaving Home*, about growing up in the East Midlands (15 August). **Sarah Perry**, author of *The Essex Serpent*, will talk about Death of an Ordinary Man, a tender, honest account of the death of her father-in-law (22 August). Booker Prize winner **Anne Enright** will talk about her essays, collected over



a lifetime in *Attention: Writing on Life, Art and the World* (15 August), while leading essayist **Brian Dillon** brings his new book, *Ambivalence*, about his formative years in Dublin and the books which shaped him (24 August). **Doireann Ní Ghriofa**, author of *A Ghost in the Throat*, brings to life the true stories of the inmates of Cork’s Victorian asylum (15 August). And there’s much more: broadcaster and historian **David Olusoga** reflecting on his career (24 August); leading sports journalist **Simon Kuper** on World Cups past and present (20 August); and scientist **Daisy Fancourt** and choreographer **Wayne McGregor** on why the arts are good for our wellbeing (22 August), while the nation’s favourite psychotherapist **Philippa Perry** presents a live edition of *Ask Philippa* (15 August).

Susan Mansfield

