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‘The Traveler’ Review: An Enlightening Voyage

George Forster started traveling the world at 10. After sailing around the globe with Capt. James Cook, he acquired a uniquely cosmopolitan perspective on human nature.

By John Banville

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A rendering of the Resolution and Adventure among icebergs in the Southern Ocean by George Forster. STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Presented with the biography of a good man, most reviewers will at once have the fellow’s boots off to reveal what will surely prove to be a pair of clay feet. In the case of George Forster (1754-94), the German-Polish naturalist and travel writer who is the subject of Andrea Wulf’s magnificent book “The Traveler,” the effort will be in vain. Forster was, on Ms. Wulf’s ample evidence, good to the core.

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The Traveler: One Man’s Quest for Humanity from the South Seas to

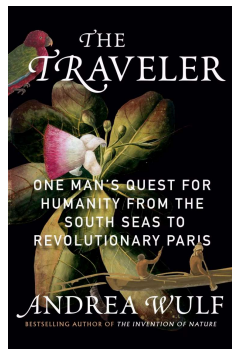
It is a mystery that Forster is so little known in the Anglophone world today, for his career was as remarkable as that of Alexander von Humboldt, the great German

Revolutionary Paris

By Andrea Wulf

Knopf

512 pages



naturalist whose extraordinary life Ms. Wulf recounted in her 2015 book, “The Invention of Nature.” At the age of 17, Forster sailed on Capt. James Cook’s second voyage of exploration. After his return he became famous throughout Europe as a traveler, scientist and the author of “A Voyage Round the

World,” his 1777 account of the journey and the island cultures encountered along the way.

What sets Forster apart from most of his contemporaries was his attitude toward indigenous peoples. In a 1789 letter to a friend, he railed against the attempt to divide humanity into “white, black, yellow, copper-red,” asking “who thinks nowadays in such outdated concepts?” This stance may not seem remarkable today, but for the times in which Forster lived it was almost unique. He was a lifelong opponent of Rousseau and rejected the Genevan philosopher’s notion of the “noble savage.” The possibility of human goodness or greatness, Forster insisted in a 1791 article, “is not bound to any particular place on earth or to a privileged tribe.”

Forster was born in a village near Gdansk, in a German-speaking region of what today is Poland. His father, Reinhold, was a Lutheran pastor, though his true interests were ancient languages, medicine and natural history. George was only 10 years old when his father was offered a novel opportunity. Thousands of Germans, displaced by the end of the Seven Years’ War and facing starvation, had accepted an invitation from Russia’s German-born ruler, Catherine the Great, to settle in the Russian Empire. In 1765, two years after the war ended, the elder Forster was appointed inspector of the German settlements. The position required a journey of more than 1,600 miles into the Russian heartland. The father took the son with him as a companion and botanical assistant. The boy was never to return home; wanderlust was bred into him early.

The irascible Reinhold submitted a highly critical report on the plight of the German settlers—some of them were living in holes in the ground—which led to his leaving Russia without any remuneration. Instead of returning to his wife and family, he moved to London, which he characterized as a “land of freedom, where work is rewarded,” and brought George with him. George’s mother had to sell her husband’s books to feed herself and her remaining six children before they were able to follow.

In England, Reinhold got a teaching job in the north, leaving George in London in 1767, apprenticed to a merchant. By this time the boy was fluent in several languages, and when, a couple of years later, his father lost his job—possibly because of his fiery temper—George supported the family by translating German and French travel books.

Their fortunes turned in 1772, as Cook was about to embark on his second circumnavigation of the globe aboard the *Resolution*. He was in need of a botanist and approached Reinhold. The old boy accepted, signing up his son as his assistant. As Ms. Wulf laconically remarks, “George wasn’t asked.” A month later, the *Resolution* and another ship, the *Adventure*, set sail under Cook’s command to the southern oceans in search of a hitherto unknown continent, fancifully known as *Terra Australis Incognita*.

Ms. Wulf is a thorough researcher, and her detailed descriptions of the ships and the supplies they carried—such as “642 gallons of wine and 1,397 gallons of spirits”—are fascinating. Reinhold and his son were charged with making an illustrated record of the wildlife encountered on the voyage. George’s efforts to adapt to life and work at sea, as laid out in “The Traveler,” are as exciting as anything in the pages of Robert Louis Stevenson.

As the *Resolution* touched land in Australia, New Zealand and the various far-flung islands of the southern oceans, the young naturalist witnessed the depredations wrought upon the native peoples: “I fear that hitherto our intercourse has been wholly disadvantageous to the nations of the South Seas; and that those communities have been the least injured, who have always kept aloof from us.”

Back in Europe after his travels, Forster, still in his early 20s, became a member of the Royal Society and published “A Voyage Round the World.” His success came despite the efforts of his father, who could not resist pushing past his son into the limelight. The long-suffering younger Forster described his father, in an understatement, as having “a tendency toward self-love, pride, and a certain scholarly vanity.”

Forster’s marriage also brought him suffering—he was disdained by his wife and cuckolded by his friends—indeed, his marital situation may have given Goethe the basis for his 1809 novel “Elective Affinities.” Yet Forster maintained his equilibrium and held to his admirably sane conception of the human condition. He argued that “man is neither good nor evil by nature; but the circumstances into which fate places him, from his very earliest beginnings, can make anything of him.”

In 1789 Forster was living in Mainz, in what is now Germany, and he closely followed the news of political upheaval in France. With regard to the French Revolution and its aftermath, Forster’s good sense deserted him. Even the Terror had to be endured, he believed, for the greater good: “Without the rivers of blood, the benefits of the revolution which the world so desperately needs, would never have been realized.”

Then, visiting Paris in November 1793, Forster fell ill with a chest infection. While he huddled by the fire in his overcoat, outside in the city the guillotine was busier than ever—“thirty-two heads in twenty-five minutes on the last day of 1793,” as Ms. Wulf writes—yet he held to his belief that the revolution was just: “What happens, *must* happen,” he wrote in a letter on Dec. 28, 1793. Less than two weeks later he died, at the age of 39; how many men of twice his age have lived a life so marvelous and rewarding?

—*Mr. Banville is the author of “Venetian Vespers.”*

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