Wonder & Disillusion

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The naturalist George Forster was fascinated by plants and animals, but he was also driven by a passionate belief in the rights of all people regardless of race, gender, or social status.

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National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

George Forster (right) and his father, Johann Reinhold Forster; painting by Jean François Rigaud, circa 1780

Reviewed:

The Traveler: One Man's Quest for Humanity from the South Seas to Revolutionary Paris
by Andrea Wulf
Knopf, 484 pp., $38.00

As a boy in the mid-1760s, George Forster traveled with his father deep into Russia. In his teens he sailed with Captain James Cook on the *Resolution* to Antarctic icebergs and Pacific

islands. As an adult he crisscrossed Europe as a famous naturalist, a teacher, a fiery public intellectual, and, in a sad, strange episode late in his life, a revolutionary. Despite Forster's fascination with plants and animals, he was primarily interested in people. Driven by an impassioned belief in the rights of all, regardless of social status or race or gender, he was on a philosophical and political quest "to find what holds us together rather than what sets us apart," Andrea Wulf writes in *The Traveler*. Remarkable for his "immediacy and...directness" and his openness to feeling, he asked repeatedly: What makes us human?

Wulf's interest in this little-known figure was sparked during the writing of *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (2015), her award-winning biography of Humboldt, to whom Forster was a friend and mentor, and *Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self* (2022), her account of the radical intellectuals of Jena, to whom he was an inspiration.* She traces Forster's hatred of despotism to his childhood. Born near Gdańsk in November 1754, the oldest of seven children, he was baptized "George"—the spelling Wulf retains, although he varied it with "Georg" in his later writings. He had virtually no formal education and was taught at home by his father, Johann Reinhold Forster, a Lutheran pastor and naturalist "who believed that science, art, and a scholarly exchange with other learned men was more important than the daily practicalities of home life." Volatile, quarrelsome, dogmatic, and sure of his own brilliance, Reinhold outraged patrons, amassed huge debts, and turned his eldest son into an exhausted workhorse. He stalks this book as he did George's life.

Their first joint venture came when George was ten. In 1763, in the aftermath of the devastating Seven Years' War, Catherine the Great, hoping to increase agricultural production along the Volga, wooed German settlers to Russia with promises that included free fertile land, cottages, and no taxes for ten years. When her agents commissioned Reinhold to report on these settlements, he jumped at the chance, planning to collect unknown plants along the way and putting George in charge of the botanical work. After traveling more than 1,600 miles via St. Petersburg, they found not flourishing communities but settlers suffering from starvation and fever, taxed by a draconian governor, and dwelling in holes in the ground: "graves of the living." Here George encountered "the harsh reality of inequality and despotism—themes that would obsess him throughout his life."

In search of new plants, birds, and animals, the Forsters journeyed east with their Cossack escorts across the steppes to the salt pans of Lake Elton and the dunes of the Ryn Desert. On their return to St. Petersburg Reinhold's critical report about conditions along the Volga was rejected, his promised fee was not paid, and in August 1766, after months of arguing with the Russian government, he and George left, not for home but for England, in Reinhold's words "the land of freedom, where work is rewarded."

George was an intuitive linguist. He had picked up Russian and English on their travels and was now put to work on a translation of Mikhail Lomonosov's history of Russia, which he presented to the Society of Antiquaries in London when he was twelve. Reinhold succeeded

Joseph Priestley as a teacher at the Warrington Academy for religious dissenters, where his wife, Justina, and their six younger children joined them, but he was sacked after quarrels with his colleagues and employers. Although he was almost ill from overwork, George helped the family finances by translating travel books from German and French, including Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's *A Voyage Round the World* (1771), with its glorious descriptions of Tahiti and the Great Barrier Reef.

"These books transported him to a thrilling unknown world," Wulf writes, and the opportunity for his own adventure soon arrived. In 1772, when the naturalist Joseph Banks declined to accompany Cook on his second voyage to the Pacific, Reinhold took his place as the expedition's botanist, and George went with him. Cook's first voyage, from 1768 to 1771, had officially been planned to witness the transit of Venus from Tahiti as part of an international effort to calculate the distance from the earth to the sun, and the overt aim of the second—to find the rumored "Southern Continent," thought to balance the northern landmass—was also scientific. But as Wulf points out, the underlying goal of all European expeditions was the discovery and claim of new lands "to plunder and make a fortune."

For George, however, the voyage to the South Atlantic was full of wonders: phosphorescence that set the sea ablaze, dolphins chasing flying fish, sapphire blue icebergs turning gold and purple as the sun set, whales diving beneath the ships, and squadrons of penguins on the floating ice. As they crossed the Antarctic Circle, the icy spray turned the rigging into "compleat christal ropes," a midshipman wrote in his journal. Eventually, with the crew suffering from scurvy, Cook turned north to New Zealand (Aotearoa, the Maori name for the North Island). After they anchored in Dusky Sound (Tamatea, on the South Island), Forster's descriptions "sang with joy—the birds, the light air, the sun, the luscious vegetation and the plentiful fish." Many of these birds appeared in his precise yet beautiful drawings.

In the fog of the Southern Ocean, the *Resolution* had lost sight of its sister ship, the *Adventure*, but the vessels were reunited when Cook anchored in Queen Charlotte Sound (Totaranui), off the strait between the North and South Islands. Here Forster learned Maori names for plants and animals and recorded details of tattoos and hairstyles, canoes and dances. Beneath the superficial differences between Maori and British culture, however, he slowly came to grasp a deeper conflict between conceptions of the world. In the mechanistic European system with its defined categories, Wulf writes, "nature could be pressed into grids and measurements." By contrast, in Maori myth and understanding, the boundaries were fluid and all life was interlinked: "Everything—literally everything, from plants and animals to landscape features—was animated by spirits and ancestor gods." Forster himself used the terms "barbarian" and "savage" to mean "foreign," but he did not describe the Maori as inferior and was quick to note the cumulative impact of misunderstandings and prejudices derived from previous voyages. "I fear that hitherto our intercourse has been wholly disadvantageous to the nations of the South Seas," he wrote, "and that those communities have been the least injured, who have always kept aloof from us." This belief deepened as he traveled.

The *Resolution* sailed north to Tahiti, welcomed, Forster said, by a "breeze [that] wafted a delicious perfume from the land, and curled the surface of the sea." From this island group, which Cook had named the Society Islands, they doubled back, sailing 1,500 miles west to Tonga and the New Hebrides, now the island nation of Vanuatu. After a return to New Zealand and another foray into the Antarctic—voyaging farther south than anyone had gone before—they crossed the Pacific to Easter Island (Rapa Nui), with its desolate landscape and mighty, mysterious statues. From there they sailed back to Tahiti, then to Tonga and to New Zealand a third time. Finally, in November 1774, Cook set his course east to Cape Horn, crossed the Atlantic to Cape Town (discovering and naming South Georgia on the way), and sailed slowly north to the Azores and then home.

Wulf's beautifully written account of the voyage, following Forster's captivating record, is carefully attentive to historical and cultural circumstances. She also has a refreshingly down-to-earth ability to stand back and turn the picture around. In Tahiti, for example, while the islanders and Europeans felt a mutual curiosity, only one set of impressions survives. If the British crew scoffed at local habits, surely the Tahitians reciprocated? Since the Tahitians were particularly keen on cleanliness and disliked hairiness, Wulf observes, "it doesn't take much to picture how the hairy, sweaty, bearded and lice-infested Englishmen suffering from infected gums and stinking breath would have been perceived."

Forster was intrigued by the islanders' cultures and perspectives. Often he made local friends: he became close to the seventeen-year-old Hitihiti, who boarded the *Resolution* in Raiatea, near Tahiti, and he got to know the energetic and affectionate Mai, in his mid-twenties, who joined the *Adventure* in Huahine, in the same archipelago. (During his stay in England, where he was mistakenly called "Omai," Mai was feted, admired, and painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds.) Both Forster and his father collected dialects, and he noticed how Hitihiti and Mai, though from islands far apart, could talk to each other easily after adjusting some words and pronunciation. Their beliefs and myths also had marked similarities. From this he inferred that the peoples spread across the ocean "must have had one common origin."

He later developed this theory in *About the Breadfruit* (1784), a treatise, Wulf notes, that illustrated "how the tendrils of botany reached into culture, ethnography, history, linguistics and human migration." Curious about the local breadfruit trees, which were propagated from cuttings because their large fruits were seedless, Forster deduced that the plant, which in Indonesia and the Philippines had seeds in small, spiky fruits, "could only have been brought eastwards by humans" and improved by centuries of cultivation and breeding. This suggested that the Polynesians themselves had migrated from Southeast Asia, "a theory confirmed more than 200 years later by DNA and archaeological studies."

The *Resolution* arrived off the English coast on July 30, 1775, having covered, by Cook's estimate, around 75,000 miles, roughly "three times around the Equator." The Forsters, father and son, were reunited with their family, sorted their collections, moved to a new house in Percy Street near the British Museum, met fellow naturalists, were presented to George III,

and ransacked their detailed journals for their writings. Within four months George produced his botanical listing, *Characteres Genera Plantarum*, published by Benjamin White (brother of the naturalist Gilbert White), whose bookshop was a hub for natural history and who was keen to publish a full narrative of the voyage. This had to be written by George, as Reinhold had signed an agreement with the Admiralty that stipulated—to his rage—that he could only write about natural history and that Cook should write the main account. Needing cash and without consulting him, Reinhold sold all George's priceless drawings to Joseph Banks: 301 botanical and 271 zoological works "of exotic birds, penguins, dolphins, flying fish and sculptural blooms."

In weakening health, George raced to finish his book. His drawings gone, Wulf says, he had to "paint with words," and he produced a text alive with stories, people, and haunting descriptions. *A Voyage Round the World* came out on March 17, 1777, just six weeks before Cook's more lavish *Voyage Towards the South Pole*, illustrated with engravings and plates of animals, birds, and plants copied from Banks's hoard of George's drawings.

He did not hold back from criticism, his anger fueled by dismay at such things as the coerced sexual "trading" of young girls in Tahiti (which would lead to the persistent myth of the island's "innocent" sexual freedom) but above all by the expedition's violence. The book's list of islanders killed and wounded is, Wulf says, "shockingly long." She prefaces her book with a dramatic account of the incident in August 1774 on Tanna, in the Vanuatu Islands, when an islander blundered across the lines drawn in the sand to mark the landing area for the crew's dinghies. When a sailor pushed him back, he fitted an arrow to his bow and was instantly shot and killed. "Instead of making amends at this place for the many rash acts which we had perpetrated at almost every island in our course," Forster wrote, "we had wantonly made it the scene of the greatest cruelty."

Later he explained, "I wanted to put a stop to the unjust prejudice...by which we in Europe claim virtue for ourselves alone and attribute nothing but wicked deeds and evil nature to the savages." But he was also often critical of indigenous people. He had seen dirt and disease and cruelty to women, cannibalism and mutilation, flotillas of warriors that mocked Rousseau's notion of the noble savage "whose heart is at peace," and filthy, shivering children in Tierra del Fuego whose misery refuted any ideal of living in harmony with nature. "The traveller wanders through all four continents," he wrote, "and nowhere finds the endearing tribe that was promised to him in every forest and every wilderness." Human nature was mixed everywhere: "The passions and innate qualities of human nature are much the same in every climate."

The concept of race, originally a neutral mode of classification, had swiftly taken on moral coloring. Racism, as Wulf's summaries make clear, percolated through Enlightenment thinking. It is found in Carl Linnaeus's categories of *Homo sapiens* ("*Africanus* is black, phlegmatic and lazy, and *Europeanus* sanguine, wise and muscular"); in the comte de Buffon's idea of degeneration from an original human prototype as a result of differences in climate

("harsh environments made people stronger but also less civilized"); and in Immanuel Kant's 1775 essay "On the Different Races of Men" ("all Negroes stink" and are "lazy, soft and dallying"). Forster rebuffed such theories all his life. In 1786 he attacked Kant's "Determination of the Concept of a Human Race," which proposed a hierarchy based on skin color, with white at the apex. Challenging Kant's idea of a single human progenitor on the grounds that one simply could not know, he also took aim at the story of Adam and Eve, dismissing the Bible as "an old book against which no one may write." One point was paramount: no race had the right to oppress another. This was even clearer with regard to slavery, which he denounced as "inhuman, unnatural and truly abominable."

Forster's book was well received, and at twenty-two, already elected to the Royal Society, he seemed to have the world before him. On a trip to Paris, where visitors flocked to his rooms and he joined a lodge of Freemasons, then a radical, democratic group "bound to tolerance and equality," he made new contacts, including Benjamin Franklin, who became a good friend. But family life in London was hard, and in 1778, largely to escape his father's dominance, Forster left to build a new career in the German states. As a professor of natural history at the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel, about ninety miles south of Hanover, he took refuge from dull routine in visits to nearby Göttingen, with its fine university libraries and congenial society. Swiftly he developed his own scientific and political theories. While translating a volume of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, he complained to his students that natural history "has been turned into a meaningless drivel of nomenclature, artificial terms and systems." Instead, he wrote in *About the Breadfruit*, nature was a dynamic, interconnected entity, 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."

As he neared thirty, Forster decided he needed a wife, and in 1784 he became engaged to Therese Heyne, the "wild, free-spirited" daughter of a Göttingen friend. She had already fallen for him and may well have proposed to him herself. But when he left for a position as professor of natural history in Vilnius, 850 miles to the north in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, traveling slowly and making many detours, including an enjoyable stay in Vienna, the volatile Therese became bored. She took a handsome young librarian, Willie Meyer, as a lover. When Forster returned to Göttingen before their wedding, she persuaded him that they could live as a loving threesome, "an alliance of the Trinity." Heartbroken but perhaps desperate for love, he agreed. When they married in September 1785, Meyer was their witness.

Therese, however, went with him to "provincial and backward" Vilnius, and their daughter Röschen was born a year later. In Vilnius he worked relentlessly. His projects in 1786 included an article attacking Kant's racial theories, two botanical treatises in Latin, lectures on zoology and mineralogy, an essay on Botany Bay, and a translation of Cook's account of his third and final voyage. But he was restless, and when he was invited to go on a four-year voyage to the South Pacific, China, Japan, and America commissioned by Catherine the Great, he was almost incredulous at the "sweet thrill of the idea." The contract seemed sound, so he and

Therese sold their furniture, packed their things, and returned to Göttingen. But after they waited there for months, the expedition was canceled because of Russia's war with Turkey. It was a time of emotional turmoil: Forster was bedeviled by continuing demands from Reinhold, now living in Halle, and by the rekindling of Therese's affair. When Meyer was finally persuaded to leave, she was bitter, resentful, and appalled at the idea of any physical contact with her husband. The Forsters were coolly reconciled—their second daughter, Clara, was born in 1789—but a year later Forster was cajoled into yet another threesome, with Therese's new lover, the Saxon diplomat Ferdinand Huber, with whom she had two children, both of whom died in infancy.

In 1788 the Forsters had moved to Mainz, west of Frankfurt and seventy miles from the French border, where George became head of the university library. To his dismay, the library turned out to be in chaotic disarray and consisted largely of theological books, the rarest of them already "half eaten by beetle larvae." He was depressed, full of self-doubt, longing for a new opportunity and fresh ideas. News of the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 inspired and reinvigorated him. "It is wonderful to see," he told his father-in-law, "what philosophy has put into people's minds and then brought to fruition in the state." That year he was jubilant as he traveled with the young Humboldt down the Rhine and across Belgium to England, and on his return he wrote even more vehemently about race, slavery, and the rights of man.

From this point, Wulf's account gathers momentum. Despite their rocky marriage, the Forsters' home in Mainz was a vibrant center of revolutionary fervor, and while many of his friends, distressed by the bloodshed and the trial of Louis XVI, had a change of heart about the Revolution, Forster never wavered. In October 1792, when the French revolutionary armies approached Mainz and most of the population fled, he was eager to greet them. As a member of the town's newly formed Society of the Friends of Liberty and Equality, he declared in a widely published speech that the people of Mainz had metamorphosed "from oppressed, abused, and silently obedient subjects into proud, outspoken and free citizens, daring champions of freedom and equality." A few days later he was made vice-president of the city's provisional republican government.

While Therese took their daughters to Neuchâtel in Switzerland for safety, George's speeches grew ever more fervent, attacking the despots of Europe and calling for "Vengeance! Vengeance!... vengeance upon the murderers of our souls." He edited and largely wrote a revolutionary newspaper and became a member of the new parliament that founded the Mainz Republic—the first independent republic in Germany. In March 1793 he set off for Paris at breakneck speed as one of a delegation requesting that the new republic become part of France, which gained him a lasting reputation as a traitor to Germany.

But as he traveled, Prussian troops were approaching Mainz, and in Paris he found factional rivalry instead of harmony, with the newly established Revolutionary Tribunal sending thousands to their deaths, including many of its own supporters. "If one can't persecute, denounce, and have others guillotined," Forster told Therese sadly, "one is nothing." When she

asked him to write a history of the Revolution, he said, "I cannot do it...ever since I realized that there is no virtue in the revolution, it disgusts me." He translated the new French constitution into German and English, but his friends were not French politicians; they were foreign radicals such as Thomas Christie, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Belgian revolutionary Théroigne de Méricourt, whom he described as "a simple, noble, resolute character full of spirit and enthusiasm."

His own spirit and enthusiasm were failing. Mainz was retaken in July 1793, and Forster was declared an outlaw. Months went by. A visit to Therese and his daughters briefly restored his optimism about the future of France, which he extolled in his *Parisian Sketches*, a series in the form of letters explaining the Revolution to a German friend. But he was ill, burdened with debt, living in meager lodgings, and losing his strength. Wulf gives a poignant description of him in Paris, bedridden with a chest infection, wrapped in blankets and a fur coat, sitting alone "in front of the smoky fire in his garret, continuing to write *Parisian Sketches* and long letters to Therese." In late December 1793 he began taking opium for his pain and sleeplessness. He died on January 10, 1794, age thirty-nine.

Wulf tells Forster's story with sympathy underpinned by detached analysis. As well as tracking him through libraries and archives, she followed his trail across Europe and the South Pacific, her travels adding depth to his striking impressions. Her text brings every scene to life, from Tahitian shores to London alleys, from the dusty library of Vilnius to the hectic streets of Paris. With clear maps, fine illustrations, and meticulous notes and bibliography, this is a work of scholarship. But it is also an exhilarating work of historical imagination, recording the life of an extraordinary traveler, writer, and revolutionary figure with rare vitality and power.

Jenny Uglow

Jenny Uglow is a biographer and cultural historian who frequently writes about the relationship between the arts and the history of science.

1. See Nathaniel Rich, "The Very Great Alexander von Humboldt," *The New York Review*, October 22, 2015, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Symphilosophizing in Jena," *The New York Review*, October 20, 2022. ↩