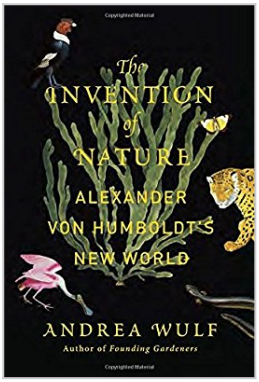

The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World

By Andrea Wulf

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The acclaimed author of *Founding Gardeners* reveals the forgotten life of Alexander von Humboldt, the visionary German naturalist whose ideas changed the way we see the natural world—and in the process created modern environmentalism.

NATIONAL BEST SELLER

One of the *New York Times* 10 Best Books of the Year

Winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, The James Wright Award for Nature Writing, the Costa Biography Award, the Royal Geographic Society's Ness Award, the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award

Finalist for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, the *Kirkus* Prize Prize for Nonfiction, the Independent Bookshop Week Book Award

A Best Book of the Year: *The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Economist, Nature, Jezebel, Kirkus Reviews, Publishers Weekly, New Scientist, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Sunday Times, The Evening Standard, The Spectator*

Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) was an intrepid explorer and the most famous scientist of his age. In North America, his name still graces four counties, thirteen towns, a river, parks, bays, lakes, and mountains. His restless life was packed with adventure and discovery, whether he was climbing the highest volcanoes in the world or racing through anthrax-infected Siberia or translating his research into bestselling publications that changed science and thinking. Among Humboldt’s most revolutionary ideas was a radical vision of nature, that it is a complex and interconnected global force that does not exist for the use of humankind alone.

Now Andrea Wulf brings the man and his achievements back into focus: his

daring expeditions and investigation of wild environments around the world and his discoveries of similarities between climate and vegetation zones on different continents. She also discusses his prediction of human-induced climate change, his remarkable ability to fashion poetic narrative out of scientific observation, and his relationships with iconic figures such as Simón Bolívar and Thomas Jefferson. Wulf examines how Humboldt's writings inspired other naturalists and poets such as Darwin, Wordsworth, and Goethe, and she makes the compelling case that it was Humboldt's influence that led John Muir to his ideas of natural preservation and that shaped Thoreau's *Walden*.

With this brilliantly researched and compellingly written book, Andrea Wulf shows the myriad fundamental ways in which Humboldt created our understanding of the natural world, and she champions a renewed interest in this vital and lost player in environmental history and science.

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Editorial Review

Review
NATIONAL BEST SELLER

“Andrea Wulf is a writer of rare sensibilities and passionate fascinations. I always trust her to take me on unforgettable journeys through amazing histories of botanical exploration and scientific unfolding. Her work is wonderful, her language sublime, her intelligence unflagging.”
—Elizabeth Gilbert, bestselling author of *The Signature of All Things* and *Big Magic*

“*The Invention of Nature* is a big, magnificent, adventurous book—so vividly written and daringly researched—a geographical pilgrimage and an intellectual epic! With brilliant, surprising, and thought-provoking connections to Simón Bolívar, Charles Darwin, William Herschel, Charles Lyell, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh. The book is a major achievement.”
—Richard Holmes, author of *Coleridge* and *The Age of Wonder*

“Alexander von Humboldt may have been the preeminent scientist of his era, second in fame only to Napoleon, but outside his native Germany his reputation has faded. Wulf does much to revive our appreciation of this ecological visionary through her lively, impressively researched account of his travels and exploits, reminding us of the lasting influence of his primary insight: that the Earth is a single, interconnected organism, one that can be catastrophically damaged by our own destructive actions.”
—*The New York Times Book Review*, Top 10 Books of the Year
“Andrea Wulf reclaims Humboldt from the obscurity that has enveloped him. . . . [She] is as enthusiastic as her subject. . . . Vivid and exciting. . . . Wulf’s pulsating account brings this dazzling figure back into a dazzling, much-deserved focus.”
—Matthew Price, *The Boston Globe*

“[Makes an] urgent argument for Humboldt’s relevance. The Humboldt in these pages is bracingly contemporary; he acts and speaks in the way that a polyglot intellectual from the year 2015 might, were he transported two centuries into the past and set out to enlighten the world’s benighted scientists and political rulers. . . . At times *The Invention of Nature* reads like pulp explorer fiction, a genre at least partially inspired by Humboldt’s own travelogues. . . . It is impossible to read *The Invention of Nature* without contracting Humboldt fever. Wulf makes Humboldtians of us all.”
—Nathaniel Rich, *New York Review of Books*

“A magnificent work of resurrection, beautifully researched, elegantly written, a thrilling intellectual odyssey.”
—Christopher Hart, *The Sunday Times* (London)

“The most complete portrait of one of the world’s most complete naturalists.”
—Mark Cocker, *The Spectator* (UK)

“From Russia to the jungles of South America to the Himalayas, an intrepid explorer’s travels make for exhilarating reading. . . . Wulf imbues Humboldt’s adventures . . . with something of the spirit of Tintin, relishing the jungles, mountains and dangerous animals at every turn. . . . A superior celebration of an adorable figure.”

—Simon Winder, *The Guardian* (London), Best Books of the Year

"A superb biography. Andrea Wulf makes an inspired case for Alexander von Humboldt to be considered the greatest scientist of the 19th century. . . . Wulf is especially good, [on the ways that] his ideas enjoyed an afterlife. . . . Ecologists today, Ms. Wulf argues, are Humboldtians at heart. With the immense challenge of grasping the global consequences of climate change, Humboldt's interdisciplinary approach is more relevant than ever."

—*The Economist*, Best Books of the Year

"Marvelous. . . . On one level, [*The Invention of Nature*] is a rollicking adventure story. . . . Yet it is also a fascinating history of ideas."

—Sarah Darwin, *Financial Times*"This book sets out to restore Humboldt to his rightful place in the pantheon of natural scientists. In the process, Wulf does a great deal more. This meticulously researched work—part biography, part cabinet of curiosities—takes us on an exhilarating armchair voyage through some of the world's least hospitable regions, from the steaming Amazon basin to the ice-fringed peaks of Kazakhstan."

—Giles Milton, *Mail on Sunday* (London)

"In its mission to rescue Humboldt's reputation from the crevasse he and many other German writers and scientists fell into after the Second World War, it succeeds."

—Joy lo Dico, *The Independent* (London)

"Luminously written."

—Roger Cox, *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh)

"A dazzling account of Humboldt's restless search for scientific, emotional and aesthetic satisfaction. Unapologetically in awe of her subject and intent on restoring Humboldt's reputation, [Wulf] brings his ideas to the foreground—their emergence, spread and evolution after his death. . . . Wulf goes as far as to say that modern environmentalists, ecologists and nature writers are still drawing from his oeuvre, even if they have never heard of him. . . . With the environmental movement, ecology and climate science, Wulf argues, we may have entered another period in which connections predominate over isolated proofs, bringing renewed relevance to Humboldt's grand visions of nature, the world and the universe."

—Patrick Wilcken, *Literary Review* (UK)

"Wulf, a historian with an invaluable environmental perspective, presents with zest and eloquence the full story of Humboldt's adventurous life and extraordinary achievements. . . . Humboldt, Wulf convincingly argues in this enthralling, elucidating biography, was a genuine visionary, whose insights we need now more than ever."

—Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

"Arresting. . . . readable, thoughtful, and widely researched, and informed by German sources richer than the English canon."

—Colin Thubron, *The New York Times Book Review*, "Editor's Choice"

"I lavish praise on Andrea Wulf's new book, *The Invention of Nature*. . . . The gist of my praise is simple. Wulf recognized not only a good story but also an important one. She has written a fascinating book about a fascinating man whose work influences our thinking even though his name is no longer widely remembered. . . . Wulf's book is about a long-dead great man but also about ourselves."

—Bill Streever, *The Dallas Morning News*

“Humboldt . . . electrified fellow polymaths such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, discovered climate zones, and grasped the impact of industrialization on nature. In her coruscating account, historian Andrea Wulf reveals an indefatigable adept of close observation with a gift for the long view, as happy running a series of 4,000 experiments on the galvanic response as he was exploring brutal terrain in Latin America.”

—Barbara Kiser, *Nature*

“Why is the man who predicted climate change forgotten? . . . German-born Andrea Wulf, author of *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World*, has made it her mission to put a new shine on his reputation—and show why he still has much to teach us.”

—Simon Worrall, *National Geographic*

“Engrossing. . . . Wulf magnificently recreates Humboldt’s dazzling, complex personality and the scope of his writing. . . . Her book fulfills her aim to restore Humboldt to his place ‘in the pantheon of nature and science,’ revealing his approach as a key source for our modern understanding of the natural world.”

—Jenny Uglow, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Gripping. . . . Wulf has delved deep into her hero’s life and travelled widely to feel nature as he felt it. . . . No one who reads this brilliant book is likely to forget Humboldt.”

—Stephanie Pain, *New Scientist*

“Exuberant, delightful. . . . Wulf is unquestionably right that von Humboldt—a happy, sarcastic, preternaturally talented polymath—is far less well-known outside of Germany than he should be. If *The Invention of Nature* reaches the wide readership it deserves, we can hope that situation will change.”

—Steve Donoghue, *Open Letters Monthly*

“Wulf (*Chasing Venus*) makes an impassioned case for the reinstatement of the boundlessly energetic, perpetually curious, prolific polymath von Humboldt (1769–1859) as a key figure in the history of science. . . . Wulf’s stories of wilderness adventure and academic exchange flow easily, and her affection for von Humboldt is contagious.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review), Best Books of the Year

“Engrossing. . . . Humboldt was the Einstein of the 19th century but far more widely read, and Wulf successfully combines a biography with an intoxicating history of his times.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review), Best Books of the Year

“This is a truly wonderful book. The German-speaking world does not need to be reminded of Alexander Humboldt, the last universal genius of European history. The English-speaking world does, astonishingly, need such a reminder, and Andrea Wulf has told the tale with such brio, such understanding, such depth. The physical journeyings, all around South America when it was virtually *terra incognita*, are as exciting as the journeys of Humboldt’s mind into astronomy, literature, philosophy and every known branch of science. This is one of the most exciting intellectual biographies I have ever read, up there with Lewes’s Goethe and Ray Monk’s Wittgenstein. And all around the subject is the world, gradually learning to be modern—sometimes it knew it was being taught by Humboldt, sometimes not, but there is hardly a branch of knowledge which he did not touch and influence. Hoorah, hoorah!!”

—A. N. Wilson, author of *The Victorians* and *Victoria: A Life*

“Andrea Wulf’s marvelous book should go a long way towards putting this captivating eighteenth century German scientist, traveler and opinion-shaper back at the heart of the way we look at the world which

Humboldt helped to interpret, and whose environmental problems he predicted. She has captured the excitement and intimacy of his experiences within the pages of this irresistible and consistently absorbing life of a man whose discoveries have shaped the way we see."

—Miranda Seymour, author of *Noble Endeavors: A History of England and Germany*

About the Author

ANDREA WULF was born in India and moved to Germany as a child. She lives in London, where she trained as a design historian at the Royal College of Art. She is the author of *Chasing Venus*, *Founding Gardeners*, and *The Brother Gardeners*, which was long-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize and awarded the American Horticultural Society Book Award. She has written for *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. She appears regularly on radio and TV, and in 2014 copresented *British Gardens in Time*, a four-part series on BBC television.

www.andreawulf.com

Five months after his arrival, Humboldt finally left Quito on 9 June 1802. He still intended to travel to Lima, even though Captain Baudin wouldn't be there. From Lima Humboldt hoped to find passage to Mexico, which he also wanted to explore. First, though, he was going to climb Chimborazo – the crown of his obsession. This majestic inactive volcano – a 'monstrous colossus' as Humboldt described it – was about one hundred miles to the south-west of Quito and rose to almost 21,000 feet.[7]7

As Humboldt, Bonpland, Montúfar and José rode towards the volcano, they passed thick tropical vegetation. In the valleys they admired daturas with their large trumpet-shaped orange blossoms and bright red fuchsias with their almost unreal-looking sculptural petals. Then, as the men slowly ascended, these voluptuous blooms were replaced by open grass plains where herds of small llama-like vicuñas grazed. Then Chimborazo appeared on the horizon, standing alone on a high plateau, like a majestic dome. For several days as they approached, the mountain stood out against the vibrant blue of the sky with no cloud smudging its imposing outline. Whenever they stopped, an excited Humboldt took out his telescope. He saw a blanket of snow on the slopes and the landscape around Chimborazo appeared barren and desolate. Thousands of boulders and rocks covered the ground, as far as he could see. It was an otherworldly scenery. By now Humboldt had climbed so many volcanoes that he was the most experienced mountaineer in the world but Chimborazo was a daunting prospect even to him. But what appeared unreachable, Humboldt later explained, 'exerts a mysterious pull'.

On 22 June they arrived at the foot of the volcano where they spent a fitful night in a small village. Early the next morning, Humboldt's team began the ascent together with a group of local porters. They crossed the grassy plains and slopes on mules until they reached an altitude of 13,500 feet. As the rocks became steeper, they left the animals behind and continued on foot. The weather was turning against them. It had snowed during the night and the air was cold. Unlike the previous days, the summit of Chimborazo was shrouded in fog. Once in a while the fog lifted, granting them a brief yet tantalizing glimpse of the peak. It would be a long day.

At 15,600 feet their porters refused to go on. Humboldt, Bonpland, Montúfar and José divided the instruments between them and continued on their own. The fog held Chimborazo's summit in its embrace. Soon they were crawling on all fours along a high ridge that narrowed to a dangerous two inches with steep cliffs falling away to their left and right – fittingly the Spanish called this ridge the *cuchilla*, or 'knife edge'. Humboldt looked determinedly ahead. It didn't help that the cold had numbed their hands and feet, nor that the foot that he had injured during a previous climb had become infected. Every step was leaden at this height. Nauseous and dizzy with altitude sickness, their eyes bloodshot and their gums bleeding, they

suffered from a constant vertigo which, Humboldt later admitted, ‘was very dangerous, given the situation we were in’. On Pichincha Humboldt’s altitude sickness had been so severe that he had fainted. Here on the *cuchilla*, it could be fatal.

Despite these difficulties, Humboldt still had the energy to set up his instruments every few hundred feet as they ascended. The icy wind had chilled the brass instruments and handling the delicate screws and levers with half-frozen hands was almost impossible. He plunged his thermometer into the ground, read the barometer and collected air samples to analyse its chemical components. He measured humidity and tested the boiling point of water at different altitudes. They also kicked boulders down the precipitous slopes to test how far they would roll.

After an hour of treacherous climbing, the ridge became a little less steep but now sharp rocks tore their shoes and their feet began to bleed. Then, suddenly, the fog lifted, revealing Chimborazo’s white peak glinting in the sun, a little over 1,000 feet above them – but they also saw that their narrow ridge had ended. Instead, they were confronted by the mouth of a huge crevasse which opened in front of them. To get around it would have involved walking across a field of deep snow but by now it was 1 p.m. and the sun had melted the icy crust that covered the snow. When Montúfar gingerly tried to tread on it, he sank so deeply that he completely disappeared. There was no way to cross. As they paused, Humboldt took out the barometer again and measured their altitude at 19,413 feet. Though they wouldn’t make it to the summit, it still felt like being on the top of the world. No one had ever come this high – not even the early balloonists.

Looking down Chimborazo’s slopes and the mountain ranges in the distance, everything that Humboldt had seen in the previous years came together. His brother Wilhelm had long believed that Alexander’s mind was made ‘to connect ideas, to detect chains of things’. As he stood that day on Chimborazo, Humboldt absorbed what lay in front of him while his mind reached back to all the plants, rock formations and measurements that he had seen and taken on the slopes of the Alps, the Pyrenees and in Tenerife. Everything that he had ever observed fell into place. Nature, Humboldt realized, was a web of life and a global force. He was, a colleague later said, the first to understand that everything was interwoven as with ‘a thousand threads’. This new idea of nature was to change the way people understood the world.

Humboldt was struck by this ‘resemblance which we trace in climates the most distant from each other’. Here in the Andes, for example, grew a moss that reminded him of a species from the forests in northern Germany, thousands of miles away. On the mountains near Caracas he had examined rhododendron-like plants – alpine rose trees, as he called them – which were like those from the Swiss Alps. Later, in Mexico, he would find pines, cypresses and oaks that were similar to those that grew in Canada. Alpine plants could be found on the mountains of Switzerland, in Lapland and here in the Andes. Everything was connected.

For Humboldt, the days they had spent travelling from Quito and then climbing up Chimborazo had been like a botanical journey that moved from the Equator towards the poles – with the whole plant world seemingly layered one on top of the other as one ascended the mountains. The vegetation zones ranged from the tropical plants down in the valleys to the lichens that he had encountered near the snow line. Towards the end of his life, Humboldt often talked about understanding nature from ‘a higher point of view’ from which those connections could be seen; the moment when he had realized this was here, on Chimborazo. With ‘a single glance’, he suddenly saw the whole of nature laid out before him.

When they returned from Chimborazo, Humboldt was ready to formulate his new vision of nature. In the Andean foothills, he began to sketch his so-called *Naturgemälde*, an untranslatable German term that can mean a ‘painting of nature’ but it also implies a sense of unity or wholeness. It was, as Humboldt later explained, a ‘microcosm on one page’. Unlike the scientists who had previously classified the natural world

into tight taxonomic units along a strict hierarchy, filling endless tables with categories, Humboldt now produced a drawing.

‘Nature was a living whole,’ he later said, not a ‘dead aggregate’. One single life, he said, had been poured over stones, plants, animals and mankind. It was this ‘universal profusion with which life is everywhere distributed’ that most impressed Humboldt. Even the atmosphere carried the kernels of future life – pollen, insect eggs and seeds. Life was everywhere and those ‘organic powers are incessantly at work’, he wrote. Humboldt was not so much interested in finding new isolated facts but in connecting them. Individual phenomena were only important ‘in their relation to the whole’, he explained. They were the parts that made the whole.

Depicting Chimborazo in cross-section, the *Naturgemälde* strikingly illustrated nature as a web in which everything was connected. On it, Humboldt showed plants distributed according to their altitudes, ranging from subterranean mushroom species to the lichens that grew just below the snow line. At the foot of the mountain was the tropical zone of palms and, further up, the oaks and fern-like shrubs that preferred a more temperate climate. Every plant was placed on the mountain precisely where Humboldt had found them.

Humboldt produced his first sketch of the *Naturgemälde* in South America and then published it later as a beautiful three-foot by two-foot drawing. To the left and right of the mountain he placed several columns that provided related details and information. By picking a particular height of the mountain (as given in metres in the first left- and right-hand column), one could trace connections across the table and the drawing of the mountain to learn about gravity, say, or the blueness of the sky, humidity, atmospheric pressure, temperature, chemical composition of the air, as well as what species of animals and plants could be found at different altitudes. Humboldt showed eleven zones of plants, along with details of how they were linked to changes in altitude, temperature and so on. All this information could then be linked to the other major mountains across the world, which were listed according to their height in the fourth column to the left.

This variety and richness, but also the simplicity of the scientific information depicted, was unprecedented. Humboldt was the first scientist to present such data visually. The *Naturgemälde* showed for the first time that nature was a global force with corresponding climate zones across continents. Humboldt saw ‘unity in variety’. Instead of placing plants in their taxonomic categories, he saw vegetation through the lens of climate and location: a radically new idea that still shapes our understanding of ecosystems today.

Users Review

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