

HUMANITIES CENTER

Mother Nature's Son

Explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt created the modern idea of nature, says author Andrea Wulf.

There are more places in the world named after Prussian explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt than anyone else. Rivers, waterfalls, glaciers, mountains, lakes, bays, counties, and towns across the globe carry his name. The state of Nevada was nearly the state of Humboldt.

Yet he's almost forgotten, especially in the English-speaking world.

That's because his influence on our view of nature is so fundamental that we can hardly perceive it, argues Andrea Wulf, author of *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (Knopf, 2016). She spoke about the book in a public lecture in October. Her talk was part of the Humanities Center Lecture Series, focused this year on the environment.

Humboldt, who lived from 1769 to 1859, was once a household name, the most famous scientist of his day. The centenary of his birth was celebrated across the world. He was a tireless adventurer and astute scientific observer who, Wulf contends, invented the modern idea of nature: a global web of life in which humankind is only one piece among many.

"Humboldt was not known for a single fact or a discovery but for his worldview," she writes. "His vision of nature has passed into our consciousness as if by osmosis. It is almost as though his ideas have become so manifest that the man behind them has disappeared."

He was the first to suggest human-induced climate change. Wulf calls him the unacknowledged "founding father" of current-day environmentalism, who influenced such pivotal figures as John Muir, George Perkins Marsh, and Rachel Carson. And he drew the veneration not only of scientists like Charles Darwin—who called him "the greatest scientific traveller who ever lived"—but authors, artists, politicians, and poets. Among his admirers were Thomas Jefferson, Johann Goethe, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau.

"He's a scientist who's obsessed with



WORLD-WIDE WEB: Alexander von Humboldt's 1806 expedition to Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador helped form his vision of nature as a "living whole." When he sailed home from Latin America, he carried a sketch of Chimborazo, a drawing whose ideas "would change the way future generations perceived the natural world," Wulf writes.

hard scientific data, but at the same time he is saying we need to use our imaginations," says Wulf. "We will only protect what we love—he's driven by a sense of wonder."

She describes him as "one of the last polymaths," whose scientific work was shaped by his conviction that human experience of the natural world was not just a rational pursuit but also a sensory and

emotional one. For him, science and the arts were inextricable.

Ironically, Humboldt was writing his masterwork, *Cosmos*—published in five volumes between 1845 and 1862—just at the time that science was becoming professionalized. He began the book in 1834, the year that the term "scientist" was first used.

As he wrote *Cosmos*, he struggled with the burgeoning body of specialized scientific work. "He sees how it exponentially increases everywhere," Wulf says. He would write to scientific experts, asking them to check over his drafts—but by the end of his life, there was no way any one person could remain atop all the science being produced.



Historian and writer Wulf is the author of five books, including *The Brother Gardeners: A Generation of Gentleman Naturalists and the Birth of an Obsession* (Vintage, 2010), winner of the American Horticultural Society's Book Award in 2010, and *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (Vintage, 2012), a *New York Times* best seller.

To write her newest book, she retraced some of Humboldt's journeys. "He wasn't a cerebral scholar," she says. "He was brazenly adventurous." In following his footsteps, especially in South America, she realized "how much he was pushing his body to his limits."

Fueling his travels was a love of nature that he sought to ignite in others. "At a time when other scientists were searching for universal laws, Humboldt wrote that nature had to be experienced through feelings," she writes.

That her book is shelved among biographies in bookstores makes Wulf quizzical.

"For me, it's never been a biography of Humboldt," she says. "It was always a biography of how we think about nature."  —KATHLEEN MCGARVEY



HUMANITIES DIRECTOR: Historian Rubin will head center.

Rubin Leads Humanities Center

A noted scholar of American history, Joan Shelley Rubin, has been appointed director of the Humanities Center. Rubin is the Dexter Perkins Professor in History and served as interim director from the center's creation in spring 2015. She'll hold the title of Ani and Mark Gabrellian Director of the Humanities Center.

Rubin says that her work with the center flows naturally out of research to which she has long been devoted. "I'm a historian of the dissemination of the humanities, fundamentally," she says. An American cultural and intellectual historian, Rubin is the author of *The Making of Middle-brow Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and *Songs of Ourselves: The History of Poetry in America* (Harvard University Press, 2007), among other projects.

The Gabrellian Directorship is named in recognition of the support of University Trustee Ani Gabrellian '84 and her husband, Mark Gabrellian '79. In addition to the directorship, the couple established the annual Hagop and Artemis Nazerian Lectures, named for Ani Gabrellian's parents and held by the center.

The center, which has a new home in Rush Rhees Library, supports multidisciplinary engagement with literature, history, the arts, and philosophies of cultures past and present in order to foster educated, contributing global citizens. Rubin joined the University in 1995 and specializes in 19th- and 20th-century American history and the history of the book. She serves as the history department's director of graduate studies and also directs the American Studies Program, an initiative she helped found in 2011. Collaboration and exchange are at the heart of the center's efforts to enhance the study of the humanities at Rochester and strengthen ties to related disciplines. But Rubin said that she will also make sure that "the lone scholar, the isolating work of reading a text closely yourself," is also supported.

And she aspires to a wide reach.

"I want our center to touch the life of every University of Rochester undergraduate," she said. "It's a lofty goal but an important one because I firmly believe that an appreciation for the humanities and an understanding of human culture are central to what it means to be an educated citizen."

—Kathleen McGarvey

For more information on the Humanities Center, visit <http://www.sas.rochester.edu/humanities/>.