Book Review

The Invention of Nature

For a great book on a rainy day, try The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World by British author Andrea Wulf. Invention is the story of the brilliant and tireless 19th century explorer and scientist, Alexander von Humboldt for whom many places and things in the world have been named (e.g. Humboldt County, State Park, squid, current, etc.).

In 1799, Humboldt traveled to South America, where he scaled the Andes, charted the tributaries of the Amazon, and collected thousands of plant and animal species. On his return to Europe, he authored several books which received worldwide attention and acclaim. In these comprehensive works, von Humboldt presented several new and essential ideas which strongly inspired many of the greatest leaders and thinkers of his century- Thomas Jefferson, Simon Bolivar, Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, just to name a few. Invention also provides us with fascinating mini biographies of these important figures.

In a captivating writing style, von Humboldt discerned the existence of definable, worldwide ecological zones, articulated the “web of life” concept or unity of nature, and exposed many instances of the collateral, destructive effects of man’s exploitation of nature, particularly those caused by deforestation. Thus, the “invention” of nature was really the presentation of new ways of seeing and understanding nature.

In short, Invention is a great read and makes a pretty convincing case that von Humboldt was an important and essential forefather of the modern day environmental movement.