

# THE PACIFIC CIRCLE



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## PACIFIC CIRCLE NEWS and NOTES

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The Circle's email address is: [thepacificcircle@gmail.com](mailto:thepacificcircle@gmail.com). Contact the editor should you have any questions, requests, or information to be shared with Circle members.

The University of Hawai'i Foundation requests that dues or contributions made by check be made payable to "The U.H. Foundation" with "The Pacific Circle" in the memo space. The subscription and dues rates remain: US\$25.00 for individuals and US\$35.00 for institutions. Only contributions can be made online. Dues must be paid by check or credit card.

The Circle web site includes previous issues, documents from conferences, links to affiliated and complementary groups, and a blog with information about events and publications. There is also an option for searching previous issues of *The Bulletin*. Please visit: <http://thepacificcircle.com>.

The editor keeps issues of *The Bulletin* for potential new members, conference publication tables, and departments. Please notify the editor if you would like a colleague to receive a gratis copy of *The Bulletin*. This has proven an effective way to build our membership and connect folks interested in science in the Pacific.

### **From our President: "The Pacific in Toronto"**

"In his eloquent address to the 2017 annual meeting of the History of Science Society (HSS), held in Toronto, Sverker Sörlin described a "northern turn" in the history of science, the recognition that the north, the Arctic especially, was a good place in which to explore issues of fundamental importance and value. But anyone perusing the program might have assumed instead that it was the year of the "Pacific turn," as more papers focused on that region than on the poles. Indeed, even as Sörlin extolled in his lecture the arctic studies of Andrew Stuhl, that author was assigned to a session dedicated to science in the Pacific, albeit in his case the far northern parts of Pacific.

A few Pacific offerings were scattered among various thematic panels. On Saturday morning, for example, Adrian Young (Denison University) spoke on Pitcairn Islanders, physical anthropology, and "places of captivation" in a session on indigenous hospitalities in the history of science. He argued that in the 1920s, islanders had received Harry Shapiro with hybrid practices of hospitality passed down from Tahitians and British seafarers, thereby making themselves available to his anthropometric solicitations. Inspired by Greg Denning, Young (no relation to the mutineers) was asking how scientists engaged in cross-cultural encounters in the Pacific where there was no beach.

Unfortunately, Young's presentation coincided with a session dedicated to the "Pacific frontiers" of American science and technology, which I chaired and on which I commented. Stuhl (Bucknell University) had promised a paper titled: "In the Wake of the Whalers: American Intermediaries on the Arctic Edges of the Pacific World, 1880-1940." Judging from Sörlin's praise, it would no doubt have been wonderfully illuminating, but Stuhl sadly could not attend the meeting for personal reasons. Instead, Amy Kohout (Colorado College) opened proceedings with a paper on contributions of American soldiers to the production of scientific knowledge in the Philippines during the early-twentieth century. She focused on the field notes, correspondence, and specimens of a number of military geographers and biologists, especially Major Edgar Mearns, a founder of the Philippines Scientific Association. Her recognition that colonial military service provided an opportunity for scientific research, or surveillance, was compelling.

Ashanti Shih (Yale University) followed with a story about conservation science and indigenous dispossession in Hawai'i, notable for its deft use of settler colonialism as an analytic framework. In the early-twentieth century, the proper environmental management of such a "natural laboratory" seemed to require the displacement of the land's original inhabitants. Then Mary X. Mitchell (Purdue University) spoke on: "The Crossroads of American Sovereignty: Suffering and Spectacle in the American Pacific." Mitchell brilliantly examined the impact of nuclear weapons detonations on debates over what forms U.S. sovereignty might take in the postwar Pacific. Advancing science and technology might thus give the U.S. a moral claim to continuing control over the Pacific, and permit indigenous people a minor (and stoic) role in the modern world – even when they felt it was not worth their suffering.

All three papers elegantly demonstrated how science in the Pacific might lend credibility and virtue to U.S. imperial engagement with the region in the twentieth century. In my comments, I noted the exceptional coherence of the panel, and somewhat predictably, I called for greater recognition of indigenous perspectives on these matters. I felt that framing these studies as "frontier" history risked perpetuating binary accounts of knowledge systems and obscuring far more complex exchanges, as revealed in border-lands histories – just as Adrian Young no doubt was observing at the same time as we were talking.

Even if these talks do not constitute a "Pacific turn" in the history of science, the Toronto meeting was a good showcase for the new histories of science in the Pacific. Since HSS meets in 2018 in Seattle, on the Pacific coast, perhaps we can hope for even more Pacific science there?"

Warwick Anderson  
University of Sydney

### Recent Publications, Honors & Scholarly Activities by Circle Members

Congratulations to...

Alex Golub, "Ben Finney: Anthropologist and Voyager," *The Journal of Pacific History* 52:4 (2017), 524-529.

Jane Samson, "The 'Sleepiness' of George Sarawia: The Impact of Disease on the Melanesian Mission at Mota, c. 1870-1900," *The Journal of Pacific History* 52:2 (2017), 156-171.

George Behlmer, *Risky Shores: Savagery and Colonialism in the Western Pacific*, Stanford University Press, forthcoming in 2018.

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## HISTORY OF SCIENCE SOCIETY NEWS

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The next History of Science Society Annual Meeting will be held November 1-4, 2018, in Seattle, WA. Please visit: <http://www.hssonline.org/>.

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## FUTURE MEETINGS, CONFERENCES and CALLS FOR PAPERS

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20–23 May 2018. North American Society for Oceanic History meeting, to be held in St. Charles, Missouri, USA. This year's theme is "From Rivers to Oceans: Inland Maritime History and the Nexus of Fresh and Salt Water." For further information, please visit <http://nasoh.org/conference/>.

24–25 May 2018. History of Navigation Conference: Navigation, Heroism, History, to be held at the Royal Museums Greenwich, England. Among the themes to be considered are: the construction of navigational heroism, alternative perspectives on the existing canon, gender and the heroic, and new tales of navigational heroism. For further information, please contact [research@rmg.co.uk](mailto:research@rmg.co.uk).

24–26 May 2018. "The Environmental History of the Pacific World," an international workshop, to be held at the Sun Yat Sen University, Guangzhou, China. For further information, please visit [www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/events\\_conf\\_seminars/calendar/180524\\_pacific-worlds/index.html](http://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/events_conf_seminars/calendar/180524_pacific-worlds/index.html).

12–15 June 2018. Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Pacific Division, to be held at Cal Poly Pomona, Pomona, California. Please visit [pacific.aaas.org](http://pacific.aaas.org) for information about schedules, abstracts and workshops.

29–30 June 2018. New Histories of Pacific Whaling, an international symposium to be held at the University of Hawai‘i – Manoa, and co-sponsored by the Rachel Carson Center, University of Oregon and the Centre for Research on Colonial Culture, University of Otago, New Zealand. If interested, please contact Prof. Ryan Tucker Jones, University of Oregon at [rtj@uoregon.edu](mailto:rtj@uoregon.edu) or Prof. Angela Wanhalla, University of Otago at [angela.wanhalla@otago.ac.nz](mailto:angela.wanhalla@otago.ac.nz).

29 August–1 September 2018. Annual Meeting of the Society for Social Studies, to be held in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The conference theme is “Transnational STS.” Pacific Circle members are encouraged to submit proposals in keeping with the following official announcement: “TRANSnational STS encourages presentations, panels, and other events that deepen and extend the transnational character of the Society for Social Studies itself, while engaging issues invoked by both the TRANS prefix (across, beyond, to change thoroughly), and by the problematic and evolving status of ‘nations’ in processes of global ordering.” Questions? Please contact Prof. Emma Kowal at [emma.kowal@deakin.edu.au](mailto:emma.kowal@deakin.edu.au).

6–7 December 2018. “The Sea in the 20th Century: Globalization, Science, Networks and Heritage,” to be held in Lisbon, Portugal. For more information, contact [seaxxcentury@gmail.com](mailto:seaxxcentury@gmail.com).



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## BOOK, JOURNAL, EXHIBITION and RESEARCH NEWS

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*Perspectives on Science* 25:5 (2017) is a Special Issue on “Populations of Cognition – Practices of Inquiry into Human Populations in Latin America,” co-edited by Edna Suarez-Diaz, Vivette Garcia-Deister, and Emily E. Vasquez. The issue includes articles about disease, medical technologies, and classificatory systems.

*East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 11:4 (2017) is a Special Issue on “From Postcolonial to Subimperial Formations of Medicine: Taiwan and Korea,” guest editor, Howard Chiang. Articles cover medical paradigms, pedagogy, knowledge and connections to war.

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## SELECTED RECENT and FORTHCOMING PACIFIC BIBLIOGRAPHY

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*The Oceans: A Deep History*, by **Eelco J. Rohling**, Princeton University Press, 2017.

*White Fox and Icy Seas on the Western Arctic: The Fur Trade, Transportation, and Change in the Early Twentieth Century*, by **John R. Bockstock**, Yale University Press, 2018.

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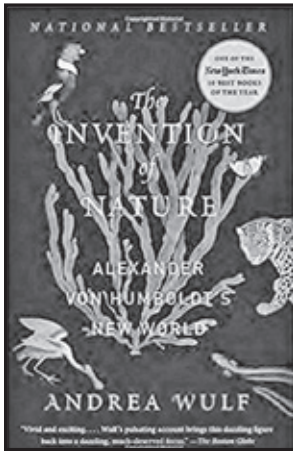
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**BOOK REVIEW**


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Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, New York: Vintage, 2016 and Knopf, 2015, PP. xix + 552, Paper, US\$17.00 and Canadian \$23.00, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, ISBN 978-0-345-80629-1.

Andrea Wulf begins her biography of Alexander von Humboldt with an arresting scene from June 1802: Humboldt and three companions “crawling on hands and knees along a high narrow ridge that was in places only two inches wide,” while beneath them was “a 1,000-foot drop” (1). They were crossing the heights of Chimborazo, the high mountain peak in the Andes, still about a thousand feet from the summit but rewarded with a magnificent view when the fog lifted. Their feat was one of the wonders of Humboldt’s journey through the Americas. But Humboldt experienced more than just a breathtaking sight. At that moment, writes Wulf, he “began to see the world differently. He saw the earth as one great living organism where everything was connected, conceiving a bold new vision of nature that still influences the way that we understand the natural world” (2). This, then, was the polymath scientist’s moment of revelation. Wulf recounts the story to define her book’s aim of returning Humboldt to his stature as the prophet of attempts ever since – by Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Ernst Haeckel, and John Muir, just to list some of the featured stars of later chapters – to understand nature as a unified totality.

Wulf has done impressive research, reading widely in Humboldt’s own works, traveling to archives, and making her own climb on Chimborazo. The result is a book that retraces the course of Humboldt’s life along roughly chronological lines. It recounts the early years in Berlin with his icy mother; the rapid intellectual advances of the late adolescent, who gobbled up scientific readings and reproduced experiments; and the adventures of the tireless field worker taking notes and gathering specimens on his trip through the Americas. Wulf can be a dazzling stylist, and in particular her South American narrative, retelling Humboldt’s own accounts of the journey, shakes the dust off old tomes and tired translations. She brings to life his panoramas of nature in its tropical depths and mountain heights, which captivated the

young Darwin and generations of lesser naturalist travelers. Humboldt's once-great reputation has faded in much of the world, though it remains intact in Germany.

(Transparency alert: I write this as a recipient of a Humboldt Research Prize, awarded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.)

Absorbing Wulf's vivid prose, readers can feel like partners in Humboldt's experiences of nature and transformation of them into tables, texts, and global comparisons, his work enlivened, as Wulf points out in a recurring theme of her book, by its synthesis of aesthetic vision and scientific method. At the same time, she gives plenty of space to Humboldt's political and social commitments: his lifelong adherence to the principles of the French Revolution, campaign against slavery, dislike of the stuffiness of Berlin, and generosity toward younger scientists. To have made Humboldt's life and work attractive to a wide audience is an achievement that merits praise and thanks.

Audience appeal, however, cannot be the sole measure of a book that surveys a life of scientific achievement. If Humboldt's writings were a contribution to science, what was the science – or more precisely, what was the concept of “nature” that Wulf puts front and center in the Chimborazo revelation, in which he realizes that all of nature is connected? For the statement that “[e]verything was connected” (101) she leans heavily on *Cosmos*, a work begun some four decades later, which she projects backward onto the earlier moment. But this is a classic biographer's fallacy. Later recollections are deceptive, partly because autobiographical sources may be consciously shaping their life into a meaningful narrative, partly because of the unconscious work of memory. An intellectual biographer may make use of an author's testimony, but also has to see around it. That is the historian's craft: to challenge, contextualize, and insert the author's words into a larger fabric of historical knowledge. There is no hint of that here. Instead the description of the Chimborazo revelation resembles a cinematic lead-in. It is offered right at the beginning of Wulf's book like a film preview, and then repeated as the climactic moment in her narrative of Humboldt's youthful journey.

Regardless of when and how Humboldt came to his revelation, its contents shift from page to page. At different moments in the text, the connectedness of nature refers to “the earth as one great living organism” (2); the emanation of natural phenomena from ““an eternal, all-encompassing power”” (72); the pantheistic philosophy of F.W.J. Schelling (150-151); the comparative study of ecozones (102); the struggle for existence between animal species observed along the Orinoco (76); and Ernst Haeckel's monism (370-371). But these do not add up to a cohesive concept of connection. Among other disparities, global comparison of natural phenomena brings together local instances in order to determine distance as well as analogy; it uses precise scientific method in order to isolate causal mechanisms and



has nothing to do with the pantheism of a Schelling.

When Wulf ventures beyond her subject to larger generalizations about intellectual history, the result is erroneous simplification. “Humboldt,” she writes, “was turning away from the human-centered perspective that had ruled humankind’s approach to nature for millennia,” citing Aristotle and Linnaeus, Francis Bacon and Descartes as her witnesses (67). Did these Western thinkers speak for all “humankind”? Whatever happened to Buddhism and, more broadly, Indian thought, which was being rediscovered and admired in Humboldt’s early nineteenth-century Germany? Not that the author’s views on Western thought go beyond cliché: “In the eighteenth century ideas of the perfectibility of nature dominated western thinking” (67). Yet Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), a central Enlightenment text, has a very different message of skepticism toward the notion of perfectibility; at the end of the novella, Candide and his friends cultivate their garden as a retreat from the mess that is the world, not to transform it. Enlightenment thinkers grappled with the limits and dangers as well as the promise of improving nature.

Another manifestation of “nature” in the book is Humboldt’s attraction to men. It was well-known in Humboldt’s own time and ever since that he had a succession of close relationships with male companions such as Aimé Bonpland, who went with him on the journey to the Americas; Carlos Montúfar, who followed him from Ecuador to Paris; and the chemist and physicist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac, whom he met in Paris shortly after his return in 1804. Wulf’s discussion of these relationships is uneasy. Readers get a delicate discussion of homosexuality which takes note of the friendships but comes down on the side of a sexless Humboldt, his passion reserved for science (95-96). No mention is made of the Romantic flouting of social norms or of the tumultuous love lives unfolding in his circle – for example, to cite two figures who have large roles in this book, in the lives of his brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and his friend, Goethe. By limiting the discussion of Alexander von Humboldt’s sexuality to his personal proclivities and did-he-or-didn’t-he dimensions, the book bypasses the significant historical issues raised by one individual’s behavior. Gender studies have made it clear for decades that terms like “homosexual” and “heterosexual” are historical, not timeless natural categories, and have different meanings in different circumstances.

Wulf notes that “Humboldt’s declarations tended to be strong” even for an era of emphatic male statements of friendship (95). But that general observation should serve as a starting-point for more specific questions. How open could one be about a homoerotic relationship in the early nineteenth century – in particular, in the medium of private letters? What were the laws governing same-sex relations in France (Humboldt lived for decades in Paris) and Prussia? How much freedom was allowed to a privileged and celebrated individual such as Humboldt? Were there homosexual



milieux in Paris or Berlin that he joined or avoided? As the author overlooks questions like these, the book takes on a rather lifeless quality, with Humboldt and other figures acting out roles derived from our time rather than the drama of their own age, with its confluence of contradictory mores of eighteenth-century libertinage, growing emphasis on upper-class propriety, and Romantic revolt against respectable conventions.

One wonders how a new biography could bypass the history of gender as it surveys a life of masculine brio and yearning for male intimacy. The answer may have to do with the absence of serious engagement with the scholarship on Humboldt and his era. The bibliography lists many of the important books written about Humboldt and his age. But they are almost completely absent from the footnotes, and by extension, the text. There is no little visible dialogue with other recent writers about how to make sense out of the historical moment, which almost defies characterization as protagonists struggled with conflicting principles in an age of revolution and restoration. They looked back to the Enlightenment and received the Romantic cross-currents of their own time; sympathized with the French Revolution's call for liberty and equality; clung to their privileged status; and struggled to make sense of the reactionary politics of the post-Napoleonic era. These are complicated themes that today's scholarship still teaches us to view afresh.

Should a book for general readers pay any attention to expert debate? Or would doing so diminish its liveliness? Actually, the reverse is true. The humanity of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century only grows in dialogue with scholarship's reflections on the age; the literature on exploration has made bold advances in the past thirty years; human sexuality takes on new dimensions as we learn from a rich recent literature about its temporally diverse forms. Humboldt himself was – as Wulf rightly emphasizes – one of the most sociable of human beings, never more at home than in conversation. Natural science thrives on discussion; historical writing does too. By going it alone, Wulf's book leaves out essential ways in which Humboldt's age connects with our own.

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