“I could not possibly have been placed in circumstances more highly favorable for study and exploration than those which I now enjoy. I am free from the distractions constantly arising in civilized life from social claims. Nature offers unceasingly the most novel and fascinating objects for learning.” — Alexander von Humboldt

November 1st brought forth an interested and engaged group of readers to consider an extraordinary book — THE INVENTION OF NATURE: Alexander von Humbolt’s New World, by Andrea Wulf. Maggie, who recommended the book at our last meeting, led off the discussion. Her interest was triggered by the discipline that allowed Humboldt to make scientific observations leading to conclusions about the evidence for climate change, long before the current controversy.

The book is a deep dive into the late nineteenth century world of scientific exploration. On one level, it is a biography of an illustrious hero of the natural sciences. But it is also a historical portrayal of a dynamic era in which important scientific discoveries were redefining the nature of man and ecological relationships in the natural world.

As suggested in the above quotation, it was a period when a single mind could still master an encyclopedic range of knowledge; the scope of which would soon be subdivided into a myriad of technical disciplines. It was a continuation of the scientific revolution; which we noted earlier in our reading of the biography of William Smith, the pioneering geologist.

Humboldt was favored with a short interlude of quiet between wars: thirty years when international travel and unfettered scientific collaboration could take place on a grand scale. His hyperactive mentality seized upon opportunities and garnered support for global expeditions, writing, and publications that would transform human understanding of planet.

On the other hand, cautioned Harold, Wulf’s grand and heroic portrayal possibly overlooked some of Humboldt’s personal excesses. For instance, the claims of his scaling the frozen, upper reaches of an Andean volcano in bare feet after his shoes were torn apart by rough terrain. “Could be a panjandrum here,” mused Sue.

But others repeated, “Great read, couldn’t put it down,” etc.

After putting it down, I chanced to scan Humbolt’s VIEWS OF NATURE (1850), his most popular field account. I came away with even greater admiration for Wulf’s lyrical and highly readable narrative; a depiction of a brilliant pioneer assembling and explaining scientific data on a global scale.

Our book choice for the next meeting is a continuation of sorts. LAB GIRL, by Hope Jahren (2016) is a memoir of a practicing laboratory scientist. It is a deeply personal account of the pursuit of science in the laboratory, in contrast to the field studies cited above. It addresses the collaborative and specialized nature of modern biological sciences. In this age of egregious, upsetting news, I believe it fills a need for more reliable and understandable treatments of the world of science.

On this day, there were six paperback copies of the book available at the Bookworm. Ask for our book club discount. I look forward to seeing you at Spezia on Wednesday, January 10, 2018 at 11:30 a.m.

BobR

11/6/17