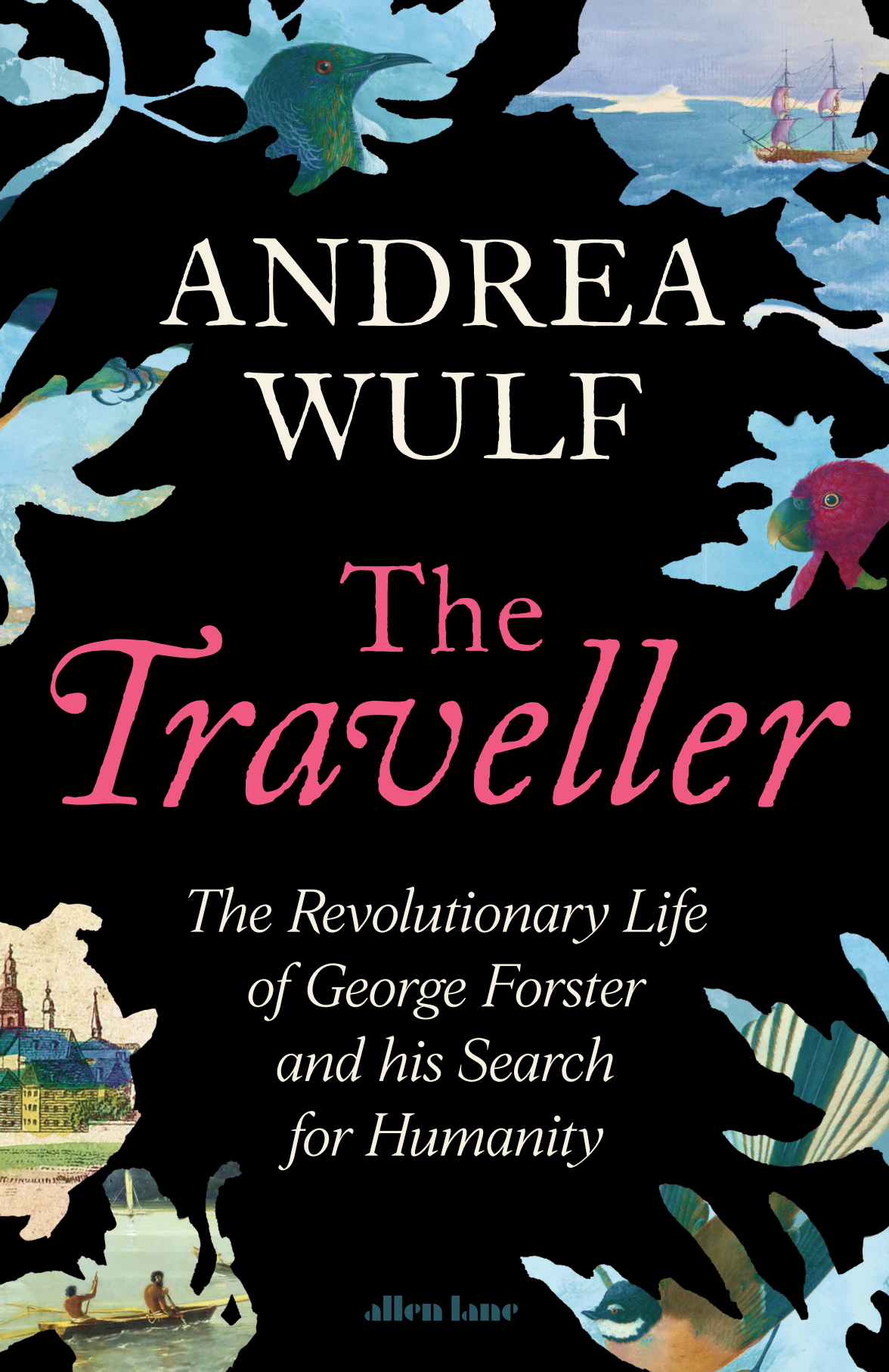




ANDREA
WULF

The
Traveller

*The Revolutionary Life
of George Forster
and his Search
for Humanity*

allen lane

The Traveller



Copyrighted Material

The Traveller

*The Revolutionary Life of George Forster
and his Search for Humanity*

ANDREA WULF



ALLEN LANE

an imprint of

PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

ALLEN LANE

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Allen Lane is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2026

001

Copyright © Andrea Wulf, 2026
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Set in 10.9/14.6pt Sabon Next LT Pro

Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House
Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-71121-7

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

To Reiner

Copyrighted Material

Man is neither good nor evil by nature; but the circumstances into which fate places him, from his very earliest beginnings, can make anything of him.

George Forster

Contents

<i>Maps</i>	xi
<i>Author's Note</i>	xxi
<i>Prologue</i>	I

PART I Setting Out

1 'My little travelling companion': Childhood and Russia 1754–1766	9
2 'We are almost Englishmen': Early Years in England 1766–1772	22

PART II Discoveries

3 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. Antarctica: 13 July 1772–February 1773	35
4 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. New Zealand (Aotearoa): 17 March–7 June 1773	51
5 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. Society Islands: 16 August–17 September 1773	70
6 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. Tonga: 18 September–29 October 1773	92
7 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. New Zealand (Aotearoa) and Antarctica: 3 November 1773–end of February 1774	103
8 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. Easter Island (Rapa Nui) and Society Islands: 11 March–4 June 1774	116
9 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. Tanna: 5–20 August 1774	128
10 <i>Resolution</i> Voyage. New Caledonia, New Zealand (Aotearoa), Tierra del Fuego and Cape Town: 4 September 1774–27 April 1775	141

CONTENTS

PART III Ambitions

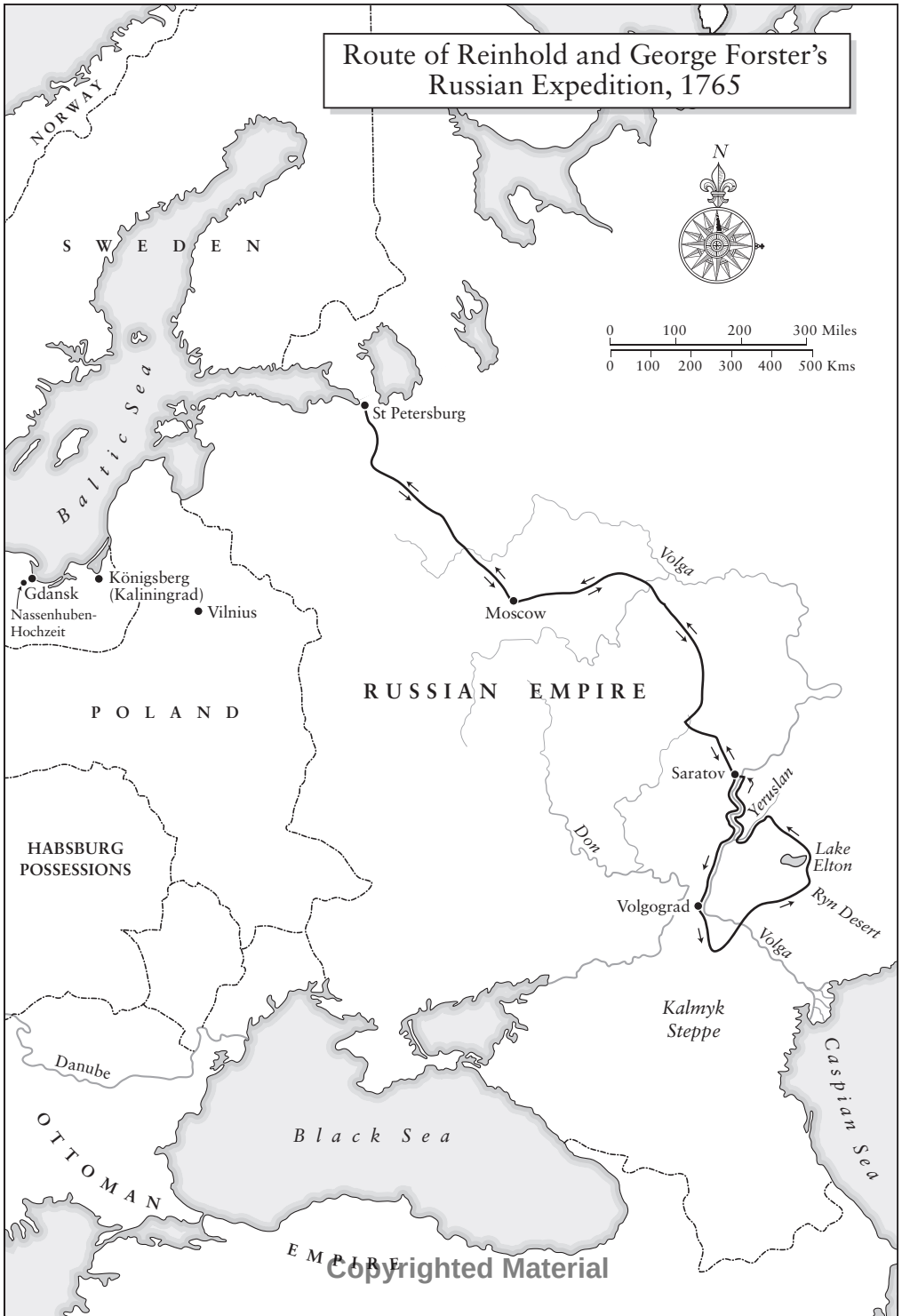
11	'Great Expectations.' Return to England: 1775–1777	157
12	'A magnificent young man.' Trials and Tribulations: 1777–1779	174
13	'I am far too restricted for my way of thinking.' Kassel: 1780–1784	191
14	'The decision, then, is made, and all that is wanting is the subject.' In Search of a Wife: 1784	213
15	'Good heavens, the way I'm celebrated here shouldn't be allowed.' Detours to Vilnius: 1784–1785	225
16	'A tremendous number of frozen heads.' Exiled in Vilnius: 1785–1786	243

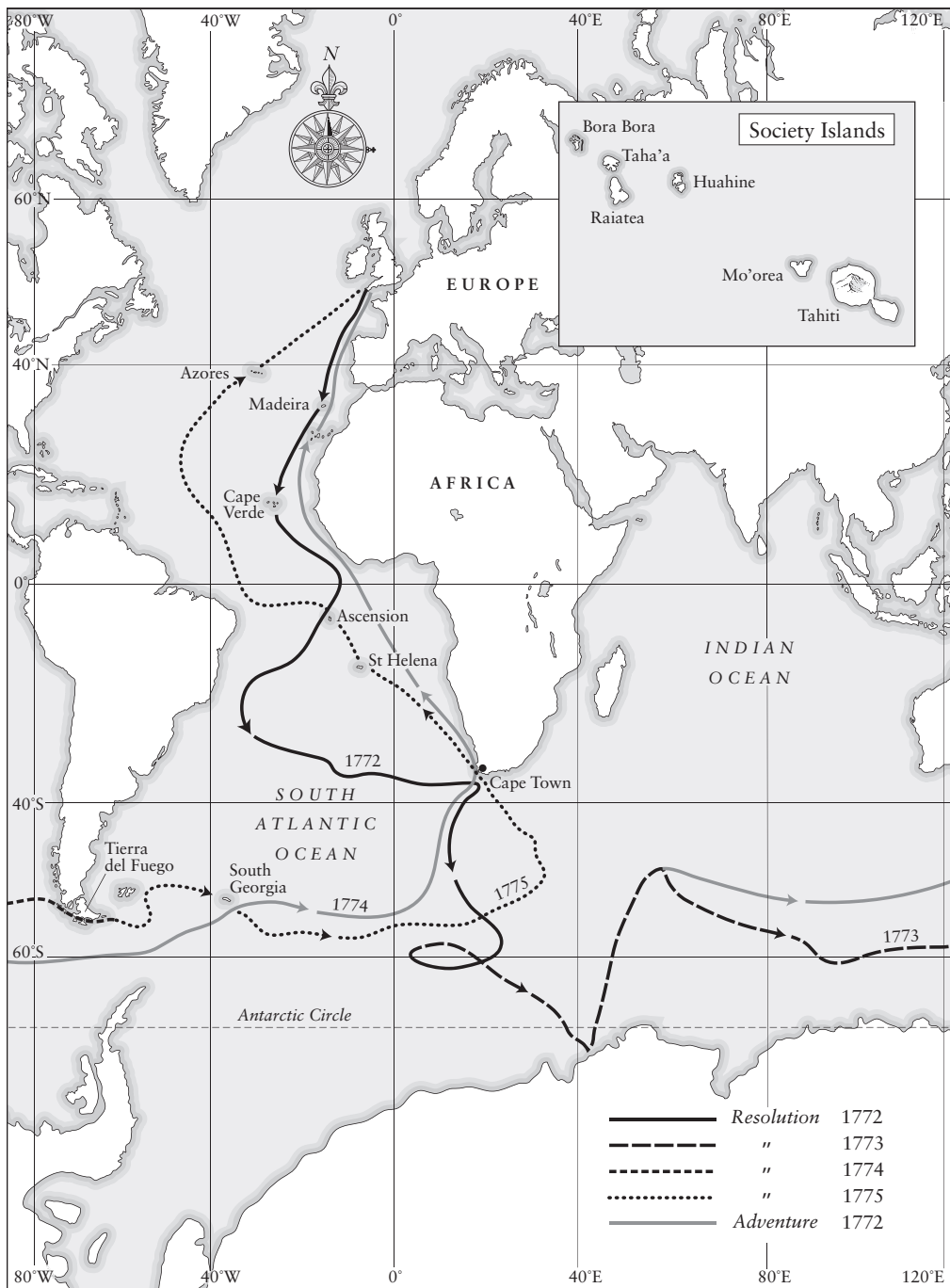
PART IV Revolutions

17	'So, I wait for better times.' Upheavals: 1787–1788	261
18	'Freedom, freedom, boundless freedom in everything.' Mainz: 1788–1790	272
19	'As if I carry the world within me.' Travels: 1790	291
20	'As empty as a hollowed-out pumpkin.' Troubles: 1791–1792	306
21	'The final hour of tyranny has come.' Mainz Republic: 1792–1793	319
22	'What happens, <i>must</i> happen.' Paris: 1793–1794	335
	Epilogue	351

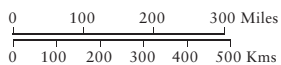
<i>Abbreviations</i>	361
<i>Notes</i>	363
<i>Bibliography</i>	429
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	453
<i>Picture Credits</i>	457
<i>Index</i>	463

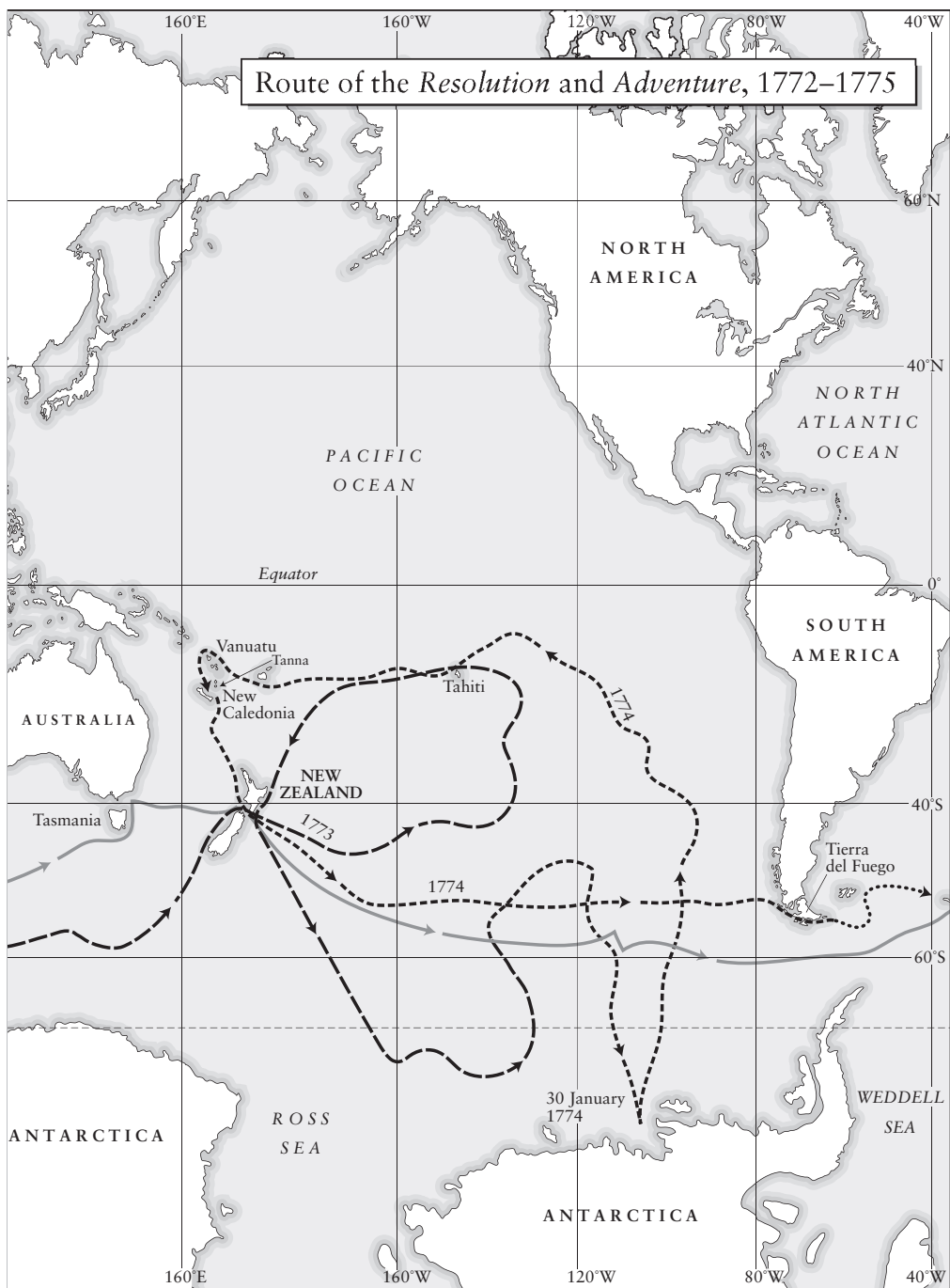
Route of Reinhold and George Forster's Russian Expedition, 1765



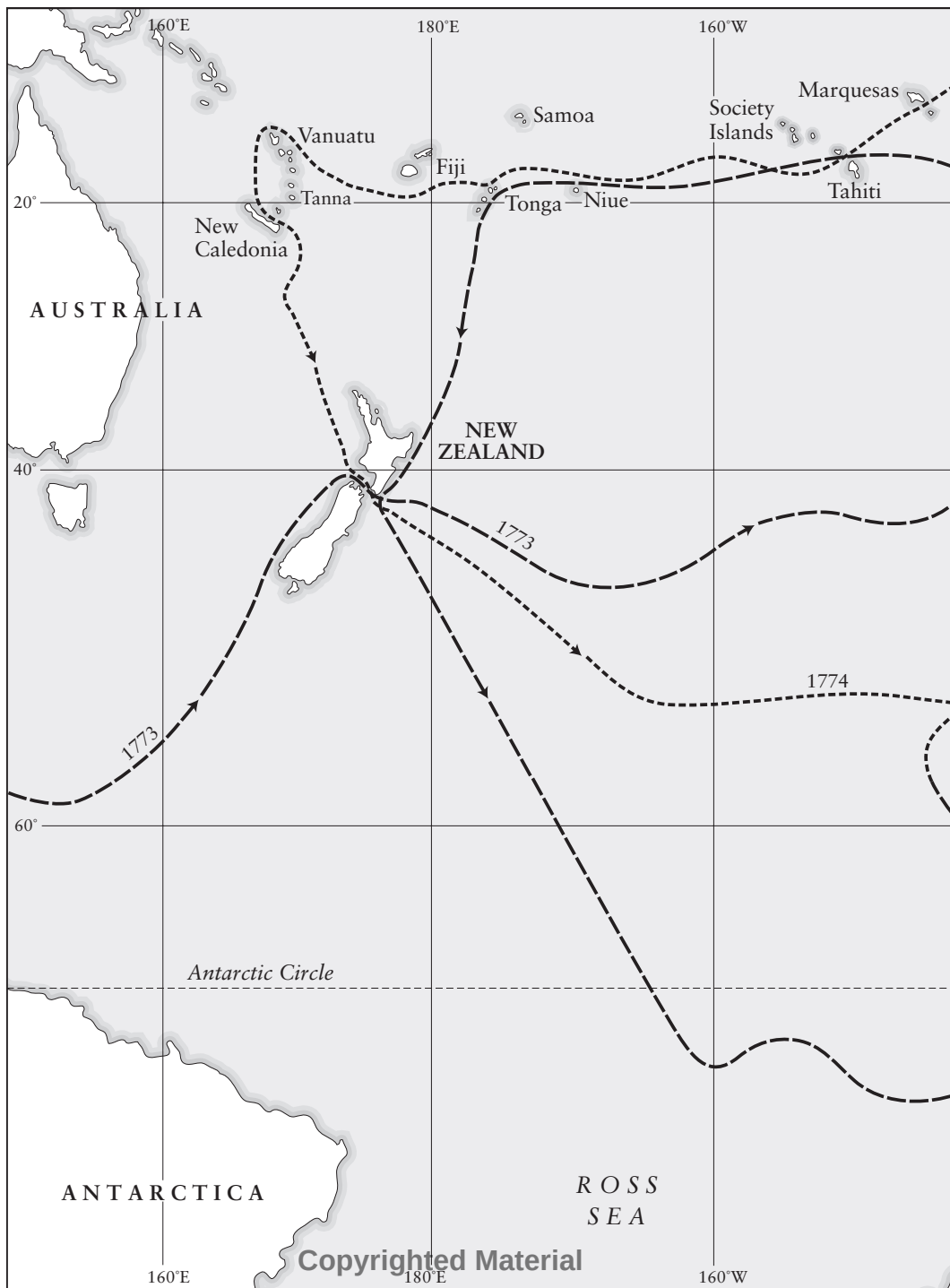


Copyrighted Material





Copyrighted Material



Route of the *Resolution* in the South Pacific Ocean, 1773–1774



———	<i>Resolution</i>	1773
- - - - -	"	1774
.....	"	1775

Easter Island

1774

1773

30 January 1774
71° 10' S

SOUTH AMERICA

Tierra del Fuego
Cape Horn

To South Georgia

ANTARCTICA

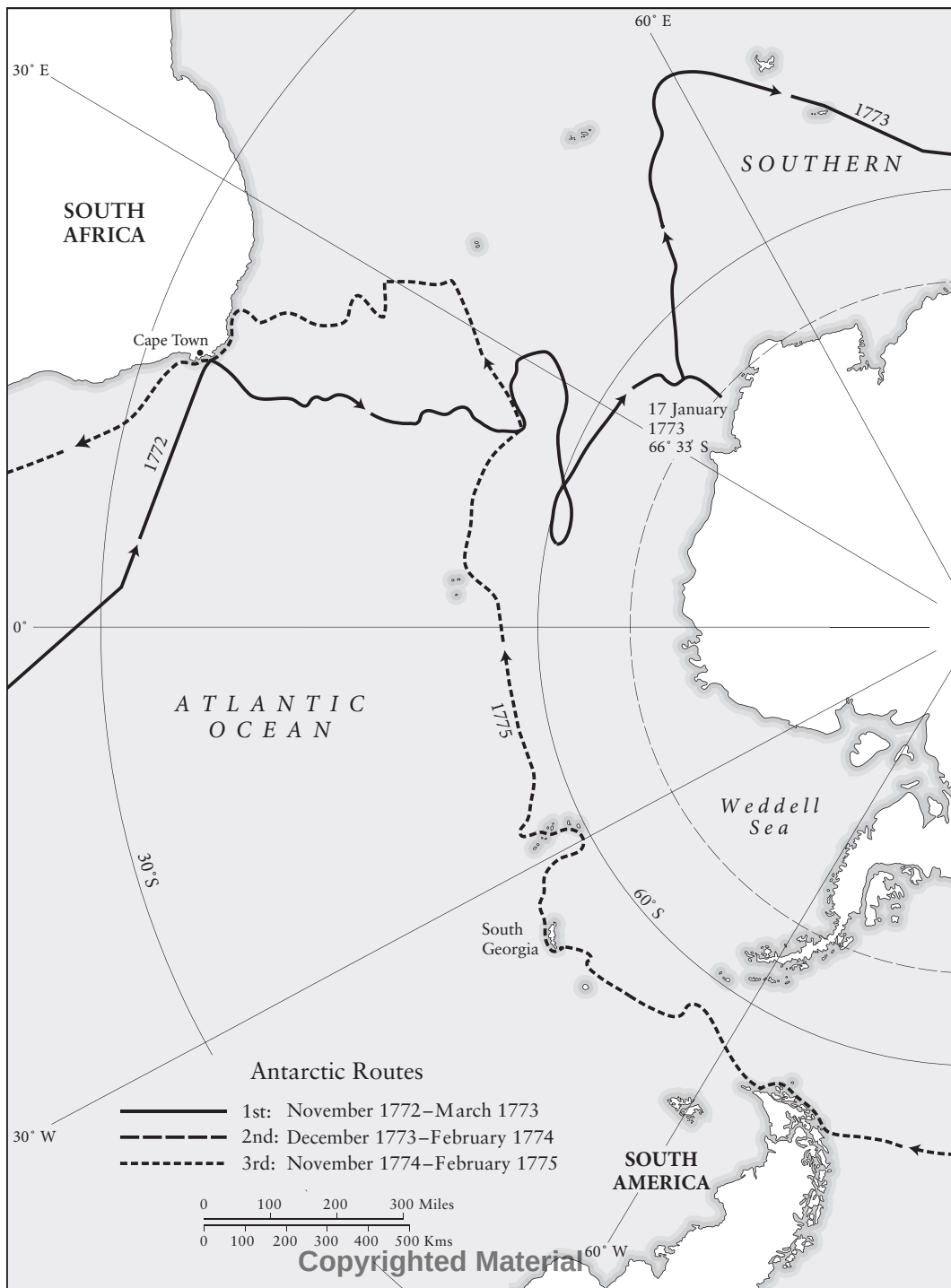
120° W

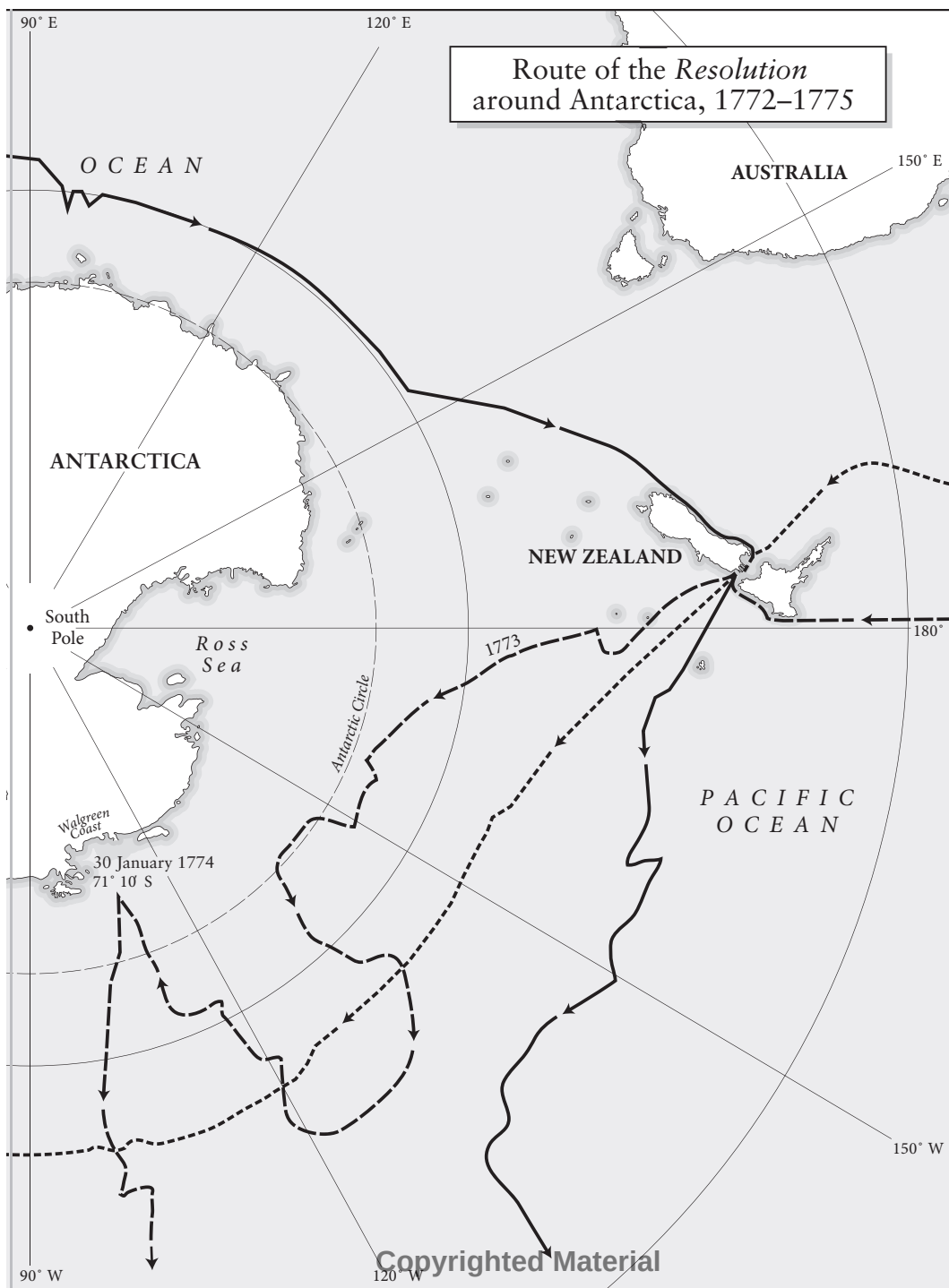
80° W

20°

40°

60°





Europe in the 1780s



NORTH
SEA

KINGDOM OF DENMARK

HOLSTEIN

UNITED
KINGDOM

DUTCH REPUBLIC

Amsterdam

The Hague

Rotterdam

Dunkirk

Lille

AUSTRIAN
NETHERLANDS

Antwerp

Brussels

Liège

Paris

Seine

Meuse

FRANCE

LANDGRAVIATE
HESSE-KASSEL

Düsseldorf

Cologne

Bonn

Koblenz

ELECTORATE
OF MAINZ

Mainz

Frankfurt

Strasbourg

Rhine

HOLY ROMAN
EMPIRE

Stuttgart

Munich

Pontalier

Travers

Neuchâtel

SWITZERLAND

Copyrighted Material

ELECTORATE
OF HANOVER

Hanover

Weser

Göttingen

Halle

Weimar

Fulda



Author's Note

Today, George Forster's name is often spelled 'Georg', following German convention – but in this book he is 'George', as this was how his family predominantly wrote his name, along with many of his contemporaries. He was baptized George, and in his father's letters he was consistently called George. Until he left England in 1778, that was also how George himself spelled his name. After that, he used both variations. His wife, Therese, used both as well, as did Alexander von Humboldt and his publisher Karl Spener. He appeared as 'George Forster' on the cover of *A Voyage Round the World* – in both the English and the German editions.

For ease of understanding and consistency, all distances at sea are given in land miles rather than nautical miles (with apologies to my readers who are sailors).

George Forster lived at a time when many of his contemporaries held what we now regard as deeply racist views. To demonstrate how differently he thought, I have quoted their writings because the words themselves reveal how notions of racial hierarchy and prejudice were normalized in Enlightenment thought. George Forster occasionally used the term 'negro' – then the common descriptive term – and it appears in this book within quotations in that historical sense. Its preservation here serves to maintain historical accuracy and illuminate past attitudes, never to endorse them.

Prologue

A gunshot pierced the calm.

Then there was silence, followed by sounds of a commotion. A man came running towards them, but turned and hid in a bush as soon as he saw George Forster and his companion. Other islanders they passed looked at them with disgust. A woman trembled in fear. George couldn't understand what was happening, but as they hurried on, several men waved their arms, urging them on towards the beach. When they finally stepped out of the jungle, they found two islanders on the ground, cradling a third man in their arms. There was blood everywhere. George saw the gunshot wound just under the ribs. '*Marokee*', the two men cried out and it was obvious that it meant 'he is killed'.

An hour earlier, George had walked through the tropical forest, day-dreaming. He had thought of the previous two weeks and the many hours he had spent with the islanders. They had shared meals of roasted yams and delicious coconut pies with a crust of baked bananas. They had taught each other words, exchanged names, and tried to communicate by pointing and guessing. Young boys, some no older than five or six, showed off their marksmanship by throwing reeds like spears with perfect accuracy, and the men demonstrated their precision with bow and arrow. In the early evenings just before sunset, the islanders lit fires and the women began to cook. To entertain them, George sang German and English songs and they returned the favour by singing harmonious solemn melodies and playing a flute made of eight reeds. It had been, he said, as if they were all 'members of one great family'.

He had been at peace with the world. It was a warm day but a gentle breeze had tempered the heat as George had meandered across the island. Once in a while the dense vegetation of entangled trees, branches, foliage, climbers and epiphytes had opened up, and he had caught a glimpse of a wide valley surrounded by low hills and numerous

Copyrighted Material



View of Tanna when the *Resolution* anchored there in August 1774

plantations. Open thatched huts with roofs that ran down to the ground on two sides were scattered about and thin columns of smoke rose from cooking fires. One islander hummed as he worked a small field. Some villagers sat in the shade of towering fig trees, while others planted yams or dug the soil with tree branches. Banana trees loaded with golden fruit grew under the dappled light of large palms and straight stalks of sugar cane stood upright in small patches of cultivated ground.

It was 19 August 1774 and this was Tanna, a tropical island in the Vanuatu archipelago in the South Pacific, over 1,000 miles north of New Zealand. Nineteen-year-old George Forster was the assistant naturalist and draughtsman on Captain James Cook's *Resolution*. Two years after leaving England and sailing tens of thousands of miles to the Antarctic Circle, New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga and other South Pacific islands, they had arrived at Tanna at the beginning of August – the first Europeans to visit the island.

And then the gunshot.

Rushing out onto the beach, George struggled to comprehend what had happened. It was difficult to make sense of the different stories that the *Resolution* crew told him, but apparently the dead man had ignored the warnings of a marine who was guarding the beach. When the *Resolution* had arrived at Tanna, Cook had followed his usual practice and

Copyrighted Material

drawn two lines in the sand to mark out an area which the crew would use for landing their dinghies. This line, Cook had tried to explain to the islanders, was a boundary they were not allowed to cross. So when one man had walked towards the line, the marine on guard had pushed him back. Undeterred, the islander had moved forward again, only to be pushed back even harder. He then stumbled but steadied himself and knocked an arrow on his bow. But before he could draw, the marine had pulled the trigger.

George was horrified. 'Instead of making amends at this place for the many rash acts which we had perpetrated at almost every island in our course,' he lamented, 'we had wantonly made it the scene of the greatest cruelty.' Why kill an innocent man for crossing an arbitrary line in the sand? The islander had simply refused to be controlled by a stranger on his own island. But George wasn't surprised, having witnessed how the *Resolution's* crew treated the indigenous people they had encountered in the previous two years. They used their muskets to intimidate them and several islanders had been killed. Many more had been wounded. The Europeans brought death and disease, George later wrote, and he could only hope that 'the intercourse which has lately subsisted between Europeans and the natives of the South Sea islands may be broken off in time'.

Few Europeans approached indigenous people with such an open mind – most explorers viewed them through a lens of arrogance at best, and with brutal disgust at worst. Across the world they had been enslaved, exploited and murdered. In an era when most Europeans regarded indigenous people as lesser beings – even sometimes as beasts – George Forster's attitude shines out in the darkness of colonial history.

At the time, racism was so deeply ingrained in Western society that even Immanuel Kant, the most famous philosopher of his age, published articles in which he declared Black people to be an inferior race who 'have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous'. George Forster, by contrast, believed all humans equal, and due equal respect. There was good and evil in all societies. The world was neither black and white, he explained, nor clearly divided into virtuous and immoral, but instead was a complex tapestry woven from the many shades of human lives.

A liberal thinker far ahead of his time, he was one of the first to talk

Copyrighted Material

about what we now call human rights and believed in the importance of our shared humanity – irrespective of colour, culture or gender. He wrote to his closest friend, Samuel Thomas Soemmerring, ‘what is tolerance, of which we are such ardent advocates, if not the coexistence of differing opinions?’

By the time he was in his early twenties, George Forster was celebrated across Europe. Kings, poets, scientists and revolutionaries wanted to meet him and sought his advice. I became curious about him when I was researching and writing *Magnificent Rebels* and the *Invention of Nature*. He was a trusted friend of Caroline Michaelis-Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling (a protagonist of the former book) and a mentor to Alexander von Humboldt (the subject of the latter). ‘I have spent half a century, wherever a restless, eventful life has taken me, telling myself and others what I owe to my teacher and friend Georg Forster,’ Humboldt said at the age of eighty-eight in 1858. Any man who was admired by the brilliant Humboldt and the formidable Caroline was worth investigating, but it was George Forster’s own voice that pulled me into this story. His description of the murder on the beach in Tanna, for example, made me wonder how someone who was brought up in a society pervaded by racism was able to accept other cultures with such an unbiased mind. And in his letters to his wife, he reveals himself to be more progressive than many men today. ‘So many men seem to be under the delusion that nothing is common sense but their own intuitions,’ he wrote during their courtship, ‘I don’t know this unfair difference between the sexes.’ Today he would be called a feminist and I wanted to understand how he had been able to transcend the conventions of his times in this respect also.

George Forster’s letters portray a man who was honest with himself and the wider world around him. He was a compassionate man who found joy and inspiration in others. ‘I thank God that there is such a delicious thing as human love in this world,’ he said, ‘it lifts us up; it chains us to each other, no matter how distant we are; it is the most comforting, happiest feeling in the world!’ There is an immediacy and a directness to his words that I have rarely encountered in any previous research. He despised hypocrisy and was vocal about his opinions – ‘nothing is so irresistible as the truth’. Unlike most men of his age, he was open about

his emotions, admitting to sadness and weakness – ‘aching feelings of my loneliness’, ‘I also feel voids in my heart’ – his emotions raw on the page. Who was this eighteenth-century man who seemed too modern for his time?

I began my search for George Forster in libraries and archives through many thousands of letters, pages and words in order to uncover his thoughts, ideas and daily life – but because he was a traveller, I also packed my bags and followed his footsteps through Europe and the South Pacific. I explored European cities with old maps and engravings, trying to work out where he had walked, lived and worked – but I also ventured further afield.

At one point, I found myself sailing towards the crushing surf of Tahiti’s reef in a small outrigger sailing canoe – far too close for my comfort but it felt entirely appropriate because the *Resolution* was almost shipwrecked here. I hiked for several days along Queen Charlotte Sound at the northern part of New Zealand’s South Island to absorb the natural world and experience the place where George Forster had walked in 1773. I was unprepared for the mesmerizing otherworldliness of the forests and it made me realize just how strange it must have been for him 250 years ago. I spent five magical days in Dusky Sound at the southern tip of New Zealand’s South Island – a place so wild and remote that the landscape is essentially unchanged since he stayed there. It was cold, wet and magnificent. I saw the stumps of the trees that the *Resolution* crew had felled to set up their observatory tent, and at the small natural harbour where they had anchored I found the actual tree that they had used as their gangway – still leaning almost horizontally over the water, just as William Hodges, the expedition artist, had painted it. Unbelievable, really, that it still exists. During these moments time and space collided for me.

Everything in *The Traveller* is based on George Forster’s works, diaries and letters, and those of his contemporaries – friends, family and foes. Nothing is invented or imagined, but travelling to the places which shaped George’s early life helped me to understand him. It also reminded me how much of a nomad he was, never truly at home anywhere, but one of the reasons why he so willingly accepted the ‘otherness’ of others.

He was a traveller – in body and mind – a crosser of borders, a dreamer of worlds, a breaker of boundaries, a seeker of truth, a painter

Copyrighted Material

of words and a believer in humanity. He was a traveller without roots to anchor him to a place, to his clod of earth – a lack of belonging that enabled him to think more expansively and be more tolerant than most of his contemporaries. He subscribed to no particular philosophical school or ideology, nor did he feel that he belonged to a nation. Unbound by place, people or establishment, he was able to unfetter himself from prejudice. All he wanted, he said, was ‘to throw more light upon the nature of the human mind’.

The observations he made as a young man on the *Resolution* voyage painted a portrait of the world as one of connections rather than divisions – and at the heart of *The Traveller* is George Forster’s quest to find what holds us together rather than what sets us apart. There was unity, he said, behind this ‘beautiful manifestation of the variety’ of peoples and cultures. He didn’t write from the lofty heights of an ivory tower but as an explorer and with a deep love for humankind, grounding his ideas in observation and experience but also in feelings. He challenged some of the greatest thinkers of his age – Rousseau, Kant and the Comte du Buffon – and was feted across Europe. He embraced the ideals of the French Revolution wholeheartedly and became one of Germany’s leading revolutionaries. ‘One is either for absolute freedom or for absolute tyranny,’ he declared, ‘there is nothing in between.’ His dream was nothing less than a new reality, a hopeful future free of despotism, ruled by equality and liberty, rather than kings and queens.

Some 250 years ago, George Forster began his search for our common humanity, urging that we – as a species – share the right to equality and freedom. No matter who he encountered – whether Māori, Russian, Tahitian, French, Tongan, English, German or Easter Islander – he was aware ‘of the rights which I possess in common with every individual among them’. People might look different, or have different cultures and value systems, but in essence we’re all the same.

The variety and unity of humankind is like music, George Forster wrote, and our vast diversity ‘brings all individual chords to a harmonious composition’. It is our morality – how we treat others – that makes us human. The pursuit of happiness alone was not enough, he said, for ‘the real guide to how we should live is *human dignity*.’

This is his story.

Copyrighted Material

PART I

Setting Out

I

‘My little travelling companion’

Childhood and Russia: 1754–1766

George Forster was ten when he went on his first expedition.

He was a slender boy, small for his age, but what he lacked in physical strength he made up for in tenacity during the five months that he and his father travelled through Russia. In charge of collecting and identifying plants, the ten-year-old would wander off alone, eyes wide open, searching for new discoveries – sometimes climbing trees, at others keeping his head near the ground to study the vegetation with a magnifying glass. When he returned to the tent with full bags, he would press the samples he had found between paper, carefully arranging blossoms and leaves so that he could classify them later. Soon his collection had risen to 700 specimens.

While other children sat on hard benches in orderly rows at school, learning by rod and rote, George found himself galloping on small Kalmyk horses across the Russian steppes and wading through marshes on the banks of the Volga river. He watched a violent wildfire race across the vast grasslands to the east, its ravenous flames consuming everything in its path. He remembered the terror he felt that day for the rest of his life. Instead of studying arithmetic or conjugating Latin verbs, he observed flocks of black herons, wild boars and wolves, and huge Bactrian camels used by the nomadic Kalmyks as pack animals, which evoked the stories of the *Arabian Nights* and Ali Baba. He met Muslim Tatar traders along the Volga, fierce Cossack warriors from the open steppes to the east who wore sheepskin hats, baggy trousers and colourful caftans, and German settlers so destitute that they lived in earth dugouts in the ground. Near today’s Russian border with

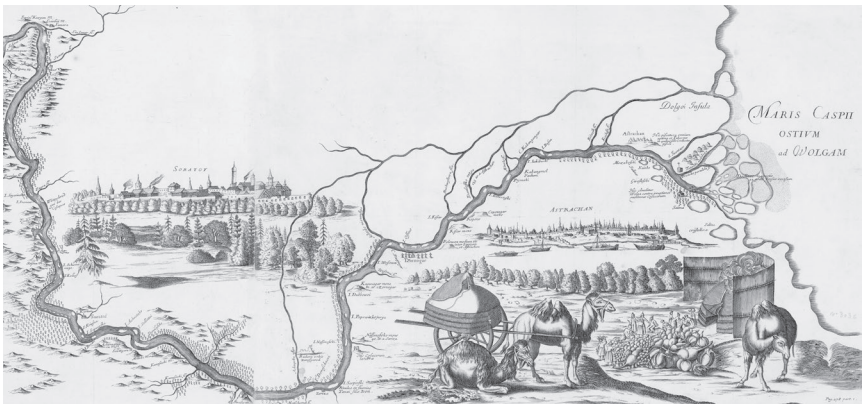
Copyrighted Material

Kazakhstan, he marvelled at Lake Elton, a huge shallow salt lake with a shoreline encrusted in a thick white layer like snow, against water which algae had turned blood red. And in the Ryn Desert just north of the Caspian Sea, he felt piercing winds whip across the dunes, as wild as the land itself.

Russia was on a different scale from the flat gentle countryside where George had been raised near Gdansk, in today's Poland. Everything here was vaster and emptier. The skies, lakes and land were bigger, the distances immense, and the weather extreme. He feasted his eyes and tasted new foods. He ate wild asparagus, drank fermented mare's milk – 'of a nauseous or disagreeable Taste' – and enjoyed the refreshing juice of bog cranberries mixed with water and honey after the long dusty days on horseback.

This was not like learning from the books he loved. He could see, smell and feel that he had entered another world. The food had a different flavour, the languages were unfamiliar, and the people looked nothing like those at home. In Russia, he absorbed a new and very foreign country for the first time. At the age of ten, he became a traveller.

He was born on 27 November 1754 in a hamlet in Hochzeit-Nassenhuben – today's Mokry Dwór in Poland – a parish some six miles south-east of Gdansk in a region that would soon become part



View of the Volga, note the camels in the foreground

Copyrighted Material

of the Kingdom of Prussia.* A sickly baby, George had been fed bread and diluted milk but gained little weight during the first months of his life. He had remained small and prone to illness, and his parents feared for his life. At some point during those early childhood years, he contracted smallpox and his face was scarred for the rest of his life – but he survived and grew up to be a shy, curious child. The first of seven children, he was more content alone in the meadows and forests, or with his nose in books, than with people. His family home was a simple single-storey building with damp and cramped rooms surrounded by large trees in the garden. There were no hills or valleys, just fields and a wide horizon – a flat landscape with a river that flooded regularly.

In the early evenings, while the family ate dinner, young George would wander around the room, looking at the book spines on his father’s shelves. Gold letters shone against the dark leather and George would run his fingers along them, asking how to pronounce the German, Latin and French titles. It wasn’t long before he learned to read. Home schooled by his father Johann Reinhold Forster, a Lutheran pastor, George absorbed the world around him and everything his



Nassenhuben, the parish in which the Forster family lived

* Until the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Hochzeit-Nassenhuben belonged to Royal Prussia – a semi-autonomous region under the Polish Crown that preserved its own local customs, with German as the predominant language in urban areas. After the partition, it was incorporated into the newly established province of West Prussia, governed by the Kingdom of Prussia.

father taught. He was forever scrutinizing and probing, but it was never enough. He wanted to know the names of the beetles crawling in the grass and to understand the songs of the birds in the trees. He pestered his family with so many questions about plants, insects, birds and fish that his father bought natural-history books so that he could explain the Linnean classification system to the boy.

His father often took the classroom outside. Armed with fishing rods, guns, bags for plants and nets to catch insects, they explored the countryside on long walks around their hamlet and Gdansk. Despite the siblings who followed him, George seemed to be the only child who interested his father. But Reinhold Forster was an unpredictable man. Kind and loving one moment, he was also easily provoked, teaching one day with patience and another with the whip. He was proud of his son but also expected him to be better and cleverer than others. Above all he demanded obedience.

‘I had no say in what I would have liked to do, to choose the circumstances of how I would appear in the world,’ George recalled. ‘I was born, raised, and entirely unnoticed and through no fault of my own, my thinking was given a direction; and behold! Now I’m thinking like this and not differently . . . I couldn’t and wasn’t allowed to change these circumstances and so I bowed my head to fate.’ And although he only



Reinhold Forster

Copyrighted Material

attended formal school for a few months in St Petersburg at the age of eleven, his father’s love of knowledge and adventure gave George a better education than most boys would ever receive. At the same time, Reinhold’s volatility and quarrelsome personality affected his son. A pattern was set. Observing how his father fought, shouted and fell out with friends and strangers alike, George learned to be happy by making others happy.

Reinhold’s own life had been overshadowed by a demanding father. He had never wanted to be a pastor. As a young man, he had longed to study natural history and ancient languages, and if not those at least medicine, but he had been forced into theology by his father. In early 1754, at the age of twenty-four, Reinhold had married his cousin Justina Elisabeth and exactly nine months later to the day, George was born. When his isolation in the backwaters of Prussia became too painful, Reinhold reached out to the world with his pen, forging connections with scholars in Germany and across Europe. Distracted by his fascination for science and antiquity, he often neglected his parish duties and left preparing his sermons to the last minute. As he worked through Saturday nights, fuelled by coffee, Reinhold would finish in the early hours and then often fall asleep at the pulpit while his congregation sang hymns. Justina Elisabeth had quickly learned that her husband had ambitions extending far beyond their life in Hochzeit-Nassenhuben. While she bore seven children in nine years (one died in infancy),* trying to feed and clothe them on Reinhold’s modest salary, he spent his small inheritance after his father’s death on books, accumulating a library of 2,500 fine volumes. George grew up with a father who believed that science, art, and a scholarly exchange with other learned men was more important than the daily practicalities of home life.

George Forster was born into a world electrified by ideas – a period we now call the Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung* in German – and a time when philosophers, scientists and writers believed that reason illuminated the

* George’s siblings were Carl, or Charles (16 February 1756), Virginia (10 July 1757), Antonia (19 September 1758), Wilhelmina (12 February 1760), Wilhelm, or William (12 December 1763) and later, while George and his father were travelling, his youngest sister Justina (22 June 1765) was born. Given the gap of more than three years between Wilhelmina and Wilhelm, it’s likely that the baby that died was born in 1761 or 1762

path towards human progress. Knowledge was no longer the privilege of a few cloistered scholars or the guarded secrets of the Church, but instead had become a shared pursuit for those who dared to ask questions. The intellectual landscape of this new age had been shaped by the Scientific Revolution of the previous century, when Isaac Newton applied mathematics to the natural world, revealing a universe governed by discoverable natural laws. The authority of demonstrable knowledge was proclaimed and his work inspired generations to apply reason and observation not just to the heavens, but to every aspect of human life.

Across Europe, thinkers were stirred by a sense of possibility, advocating self-determination and independent enquiry. At the close of the seventeenth century, the English philosopher John Locke urged that we ‘made use of our own Thoughts’. Instead of blindly following doctrine, tradition or the opinions of others, he encouraged people to observe the world and come to their own conclusions. Those who didn’t question accepted truths and norms, he argued, could be more easily manipulated and were not in control of their own destiny. Sixty years later, in 1751, the Scottish philosopher David Hume explained that truth didn’t reside in abstract theories. As an empiricist, he believed that no preconceived concepts or innate ideas existed in our mind but that all knowledge came from experience. It was the beginning of a revolution of the mind. Writers, scholars and scientists opened their eyes to the world around them, seeking understanding through systematic investigation, rational thought and empirical evidence.

In France, Diderot and D’Alembert were compiling their monumental *Encyclopédie*, in which they defined a philosopher as someone not bound by religion, tradition or authority, but one brave enough to think for himself. ‘Reason determines the philosopher,’ they wrote. Also in France, Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* dissected the anatomy of power and exposed its dangers. This wry observer of men and institutions understood the fragility of liberty and introduced a radical new idea: the separation of powers. The legislative, executive and judicial branches, each acting independently, would check one another to prevent tyranny. Montesquieu imagined a nation not in the hands of a single sovereign but a republic governed by laws, a careful choreography

of checks and balances – an idea that would influence the revolutions in America and France.

But the Enlightenment wasn’t confined to books and lofty theories. It spilled over into streets and coffee houses, into the drawing rooms of salons and reading societies – vibrant centres of discussions where the latest books, pamphlets and newspapers were read and debated. Literacy rates rose, the book trade expanded, and despite censorship, ideas began to circulate more freely. Inventions from telescopes to lightning rods and new agricultural implements gave people the conviction that they could control nature, fuelling the confidence of the age. In 1753, a year before George’s birth, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus introduced a standardized system for naming plants, and two years later Samuel Johnson finished his groundbreaking *Dictionary of the English Language*. Language, knowledge and nature were ordered into neat categories based on what could be observed. It was a time brimming with optimism and curiosity, when people thought that they could grasp the workings of the universe and improve the human condition. Soon, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant would encapsulate the spirit of the time in a single phrase: ‘*Sapere aude* – Dare to know!’ In his influential essay ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, Kant declared that the courage to think for oneself was the very essence of Enlightenment philosophy.

This was the world that George entered, guided by his father. They spoke German at home but ‘Germany’ as a unified nation did not yet exist. Instead, the German territories were part of the sprawling Holy Roman Empire, made up of more than 1,500 individual states, ranging from tiny principalities to powerful nations such as Prussia and Austria, which competed for influence, territory and dominance. It was a region of political fragmentation set within an age of global rivalry, as Europe’s great powers expanded their overseas empires, carving up the world for profit, and in the process annihilating ancient cultures and peoples. Explorations and the transatlantic slave trade fuelled Europe’s economies as Africans were enslaved and shipped to the Americas to work on plantations and in mines. As gold, silver, tobacco, sugar, coffee and spices were transported across the oceans,

Europeans maintained that they were repaying the world by bringing civilization to it.

But there was also upheaval in Europe. In November 1755, exactly one year after George's birth, a violent earthquake, followed by a tsunami and fire, almost completely destroyed Lisbon, one of Europe's largest and wealthiest cities – shaking Enlightenment belief in a world governed by reason and the benevolence of God. No matter how much scientists and thinkers understood, or how many inventions had made life more efficient, nature could not be mastered. 'Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well", And contemplate the ruin of a world,' the French philosopher Voltaire lamented in his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*. Six months later, the even more destructive Seven Years' War began, the first truly global conflict with its origins in familiar divisions between Prussia and Austria, and the gathering imperial contest between Britain and France.

Britain and Prussia were allied on one side, and France, Russia, Austria and Sweden on the other. Political power was at stake but so too were Europe's commercial ventures abroad: the colonies in North America, sugar production in the West Indies, the slave trade in West Africa, and the possession of India. Battles were fought as far apart as the forests of Saxony, the wild Ohio River Valley in North America and the Rio Negro in South America, as well as in India, the Caribbean and Manila. In November 1758, just as George turned four, the war even reached the rural seclusion of Hochzeit-Nassenhuben, when Russian troops allied to Austria against Prussia set up camp around Gdansk.

By the end of the war in 1763, maps had been redrawn. Overtaken by Great Britain as a major colonial power, France was no longer Europe's most dominant force. The French lost their foothold in North America when they had to cede the Louisiana Territory to the Spanish and their colony in Canada to the British.* France kept its sugar islands in Guadeloupe and Martinique but had to retreat from India. Spain lost Florida

* In 1763 the French relinquished the Louisiana Territory to Spain but received it back in 1800. Three years later, the United States purchased the vast tract – more than 800,000 square miles that stretched west from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains and from Canada in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south – from France for \$15,000,000.

to England and Prussia’s strength grew, challenging Austria’s influence in Europe. Around one million people had died during the war and hunger stalked the continent. Fields and harvests had been destroyed, cities bombarded, and punitive taxes raised to pay for troops and for the war damage.

That was why thousands of war-weary Germans decided to avoid starvation by accepting Catherine the Great’s invitation to settle along the sparsely populated banks of the Volga river in the Russian Empire. In early 1765, Reinhold Forster learned from the Russian representative in Gdansk that Catherine the Great was looking for a German-speaking inspector to investigate the settlements. Marooned in the rural hinterland of Gdansk and with dreams too big for the constraints of a pastor’s life, Reinhold wanted to travel and applied immediately. Though he often offended and upset others, he was also charismatic. Well-read and curious, he could be charming when he chose to – his deep warm voice adding to the illusion of a kind and earnest man. The Russians were soon convinced and by early March 1765, Reinhold had received his expenses and prepared his departure. He had also decided to take the opportunity to collect botanical specimens and make natural-history observations both at the Volga and the steppes hundreds of miles to the east, aiming to win the approval of European scholars. Determined to make a mark, Reinhold never doubted his abilities – nor those of his eldest son.

Ten-year-old George, he resolved, would be ‘my little travelling companion’, responsible for the botanical work. George had no choice in the matter but was swept up in his father’s excitement. They were going on an expedition – an adventure far from the small world in Hochzeit-Nassenhuben. George’s mother, Justina Elisabeth, was left behind, pregnant and in charge of five young children under the age of nine.

Father and son set out on 5 March 1765, travelling more than 1,600 miles via St Petersburg and Moscow to Saratov, a garrison town on the western banks of the Volga which was the administrative centre for the Germans who had settled along the river to the south. Shortly after Catherine the Great had ascended the throne, the German-born empress had advertised her offer to settlers in newspapers and sent recruiting agents across the German states. In a bid to increase agricultural production,

Copyrighted Material

she wanted to attract hard-working German farmers and peasants to wrest fields from the wilderness along the Volga. She had promised free land, no taxes for ten years, a cottage for each household, fertile soils, freedom of religion, interest-free loans, local self-government and no military service. The first settlers had arrived in 1764 and quickly realized that life by the Volga was not as golden as her pledges. To silence the discouraging rumours, Catherine wanted a detailed report from Reinhold on the living conditions in the settlements.

In Saratov, Reinhold and George were given an escort of four Cossacks and a soldier – probably for surveillance as much as for protection. The local governor was not keen to have a prying foreigner moving freely through his region. At the end of May, they began their journey south, some 250 miles along the mountainous western bank of the Volga to Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad, today Volgograd), visiting six newly established colonies en route. This was frontier land, previously home only to small groups of Cossacks and Kalmycks. Brown bears and wolves roamed through the settlements and few provisions had been made for the German colonists. It soon became obvious to the Forsters that the rumours had not been false or malicious but an accurate portrait of the settlers' day-to-day lives.

Over the next few weeks, as George and his father slowly made their way south, they saw just how tough the settlers' existence really was. Conditions were abysmal, with people starving and dying from fevers. It didn't help that the region was overseen by a corrupt governor who ruled arbitrarily, imposing taxes that had never been agreed with the central authorities and fabricating reports for the government in St Petersburg. When the first settlers had arrived the previous year, they discovered that there weren't even houses or timber as Catherine's advertisement had announced. Not only had the promised houses, seeds, ploughs and cattle never materialized, but Russian officials and soldiers intimidated the settlers into not reporting their grievances to St Petersburg. Finding themselves in the wilderness with few tools and no shelter, the Germans had resorted to digging large holes in the ground which they covered with branches, brushwood and soil. More trench than habitation, 'these graves of the living', as they called their new homes, were windowless hovels in which they couldn't even stand. The

Copyrighted Material

soils may have been fertile but the climate here was hellish with long freezing winters, torrential spring floods, and brutally hot summers. ‘So this is the paradise,’ one settler said, ‘that the Russian recruiters promised us.’

While Reinhold interviewed the Germans, taking notes about the lack of basic necessities and complaints about the governor’s ruthless rule, George watched and listened. It was impossible for the impressionable young boy not to be moved by the stories they heard from hungry children and emaciated parents. Along the banks of the Volga, George saw the harsh reality of inequality and despotism – themes that would obsess him throughout his life. This was the beginning of – as he once described it – ‘my inclination to observe people’s hearts’. The abject poverty of the German settlements along the Volga made such an impression that, twenty years later, he would tell his wife of his disgust for the governor of Saratov – ‘a wicked, despotic and selfish man’, George said, ‘who kept the colonies in servile dependence to plunder them and fill his own coffers’.

The past shapes the present and future, George would say, for ‘everything that happens is determined by what came before and is connected to what follows’. The seeds of the beliefs that shaped George Forster’s life were planted in Russia.

He never returned home. Almost eight months after they had set out from Hochzeit-Nassenhuben, George and his father arrived in St Petersburg, at the end of October 1765, to present their findings. They had travelled more than 3,800 miles. From the settlements on the Volga’s left bank, they had crossed and covered hundreds of miles east across the vast steppes to the blood-red waters of Lake Elton, and beyond to the sand dunes of the Ryn Desert, to collect plants and observe animals. At Lake Elton they had even discovered a new species of bird, a coal-black lark (*Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*) that sang in a series of drawn-out whistles – ‘very fat in autumn and of an exquisite Taste,’ Reinhold wrote without a trace of irony. They had seen otters swimming in the rivers, bought coins and ancient manuscripts from the local Tatar merchants, and learned that the most delicious caviar came from the Beluga sturgeon in the Volga and the Caspian Sea. By the end of their journey,

Copyrighted Material

they had described and classified more than two hundred plants (although five hundred of George's carefully collected specimens were destroyed during a river crossing), twenty-three mammals and sixty-four birds, as well as numerous reptiles, insects and fish.

This was also the first time that George had been away from his mother and siblings, alone with his father's terrible temper. Reinhold was never going to be an easy travelling companion, but matters became serious when at one point he turned against their Cossack escorts. All his life George had seen how his father criticized, blamed and complained about others. But this was different because there was no patient wife here to calm Reinhold's outbursts. There is no record what sparked his anger – a disagreement, an offensive word or exhaustion – whatever it was, he was so furious that he aimed his loaded rifle at the heavily armed men. George could do nothing but watch the drama unfold, caught between the terror of Reinhold's spiralling aggression and the looming danger of the Cossacks' retaliation. Then there was a sharp bang. Reinhold had fired the gun, wounding the interpreter. The Cossacks could have shot Reinhold but they held back. Perhaps the injury wasn't serious, or more likely Reinhold's commission from Catherine the Great protected him. Nonetheless the confrontation had put father and son in grave danger. They were lucky there were no further consequences.

But trouble was waiting for them in St Petersburg. The Chancellery for the Guardianship of Foreigners, the government department that dealt with the settlers, was not pleased with Reinhold Forster's critical report about the living conditions along the Volga and the accusations he had levelled against the governor of Saratov. Unfortunately for Reinhold, a cousin of the governor worked at the Chancellery. He soon discredited the entire report and the Russian government refused to pay Reinhold's fee. For Reinhold this was clearly an anxious moment, but for his part George went for the first time in his life to school, learning Latin, French, Russian, maths, geography, history and penmanship. Instead of being taught by his impulsive father, he was now in a classroom with boys his own age – children from merchants and professors – at the German Petrischool for Languages, the Arts and Sciences.

His father was growing increasingly frustrated. When the Russians finally offered half of what Reinhold had expected as his fee, he was

Copyrighted Material

insulted and rejected the lower payment, threatening to publish a letter about the settlers’ dismal conditions in foreign newspapers which would discourage any prospective candidates. He never had a chance against Catherine the Great’s government. In August 1766, after months of fighting and with neither side willing to compromise, Reinhold decided to move to London – without receiving any remuneration at all, because he stubbornly continued to turn down the smaller fee.

Why London? Why England? ‘We are almost Englishmen,’ Reinhold claimed, citing the Forster family’s descent from an ancient Scottish family and particularly from an ancestor named George Forster, a Yorkshire Royalist who had fled to Prussia in the 1640s during the First English Civil War. Proud of his British roots, Reinhold had therefore baptized his son ‘George’, rather than ‘Georg’ as is common in German. He had always felt a connection to the country that many Germans regarded as the birthplace of the Enlightenment and free thought. ‘So I went to the land of freedom, where work is rewarded,’ Reinhold later told a friend.

Since 1689, following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, England had been a constitutional monarchy with a powerful Parliament. Across Europe it was regarded as a seat of liberty. The English prided themselves on their freedom of religion and press (at least compared to other countries) as well as a justice system based on the law of *habeas corpus*, which ensured that a person couldn’t be imprisoned without trial or explanation. With most of Europe still in the firm hand of absolutism, England’s constitutional monarchy and celebration of liberty was so strikingly different that one German visitor had felt ‘himself transported to another planet’. Numerous German artists, scientists and musicians, the composer Georg Friedrich Händel and astronomer William Herschel among them, had made their home in England.

Reinhold Forster wrote to inform his wife that he was taking George to London. Justina Elisabeth and the now six other children were to remain in Hochzeit-Nassenhuben. Soon after, the church authorities lost patience and installed a new parish priest, ordering Justina Elisabeth and the children to leave the rectory. With neither money nor support, she was forced to move the family in with relatives in Gdansk and began selling her husband’s books to buy food.

Copyrighted Material

‘We are almost Englishmen’

Early Years in England: 1766–1772

When they stepped off the ship in London on 4 October 1766, father and son had only 3½ guineas – just enough to pay for a month’s lodging, no food included. Britain’s wealth taunted them. As they walked the narrow streets, eleven-year-old George would have seen hats, gaudy ribbons, glittering jewellery and framed maps in the large shop windows. Hundreds of candles illuminated clocks, bolts of shiny silk and polished silverware. Inside the shops impeccably dressed gentlemen and elegant ladies with corseted waists and rustling petticoats emptied their purses at the counters.

Three years earlier, at the end of 1763, Britain had risen from the ashes of the devastating Seven Years’ War as the most powerful empire in Europe, eclipsing Spain and France. Fuelled by the colonies’ riches, London was the heart of one of the world’s largest economies. The Thames was congested with ships that brought tea and silk from China, sugar and coffee from the West Indies, spices from the East Indies and corn, cotton and tobacco from the American colonies. In the numerous coffee houses, merchants conducted their business and customers read the many newspapers published in England. The coffee may have been served weak – ‘an atrocious mess of brown water’, as one tourist observed – but liquors were enjoyed strong.

Their first few days were busy. They immediately went to Carl Gottfried Woide, an old classmate from Reinhold’s school days in Berlin and now a pastor at the German Reformed Church in London. Woide generously organized lodgings for them in the house he was renting in Denmark Street in Soho, enquired at the British Museum if there was a

Copyrighted Material



View of London and the Thames

vacant position for Reinhold (there wasn't), lent him money, and introduced him to friends and scholars.

George's new home town was boisterous, frenzied and dirty. One million people lived in the British metropolis and every time he stepped outside, the boy was confronted with carriages, chaises and carts that clogged the streets. Porters delivering goods and carrying luggage manoeuvred through the crowds, pushing and crying, 'By your leave', and moving so fast that they regularly knocked pedestrians to the ground. Fiddlers played at street corners and watchmen called out the hour of the day. Pickpockets his own age wove through the teeming streets, trying to steal a few coins, and young girls sold flowers. One German tourist was astonished by the many beautiful women who offered their services on the street. 'Indeed one can have it gratis,' he wrote home, 'all pell-mell at any hour of the day in any street, got up in any way you like, dressed, bound up, hitched up, tight-laced, loose, painted, done up or raw, scented, in silk or wool, with or without sugar.' There were cockfights, drunken brawls and prostitutes, but also bejewelled hands on gilded carriage doors and fashionable men in embroidered silk coats. Butchers threw out entrails and bones, the contents of chamber pots were flung out of windows, dead rats putrefied in puddles, and maids dumped garbage into the streets. Mud,

Copyrighted Material

horse manure, straw, human faeces, dog shit and household rubbish ... the perfume of prosperity.

By contrast to the vast, clear skies that George had seen over Russia's steppes, in London the many coal fires that heated the homes made the air so hazy that even in the autumn, when the days were still long, the lanterns outside the houses were lit at four in the afternoon. London's parks provided much-needed space and air. In St James's Park, about a twenty-minute walk from the Forsters' lodgings, cows grazed and customers could buy fresh milk at the stalls, while hundreds of people promenaded along shaded paths – artists, maids, merchants, ladies and dukes alike.

George lived in his father's adult world. Barring the few months in St Petersburg, he had never attended school. In London he became his father's 'keen-eyed assistant', forced to translate texts to earn some money. A polyglot even at a young age, George had picked up English from the sailors during their long sea journey from Russia. Already fluent, he was immediately set to work by his father to translate and abridge a history of Russia by the esteemed polymath Mikhail Lomonosov from Russian into English.

Soon, Reinhold paraded his wunderkind to scholars in London. On 21 May 1767, George found himself presenting a copy of his Lomonosov book to the learned men of the Society of Antiquaries. Was he proud, nervous or terrified? Small for his age, he would have looked even younger – an earnest boy with thick brown curls wearing his best clothes among all the studious men in their powdered wigs. Exactly two years earlier, George and his father had mounted their horses and had begun their travels through Russia. Instead of neatly dressed and coiffed scholars who studied ruins and ancient artefacts, George had been in the company of rough Cossacks, Russian peasants and impoverished German settlers. He had already seen more of the world than many of the men in the room. But his childhood was over.

While Reinhold was trying to find a job in London, they lived off the proceeds from the Tatarian coins, Kalmyk manuscripts, fossils and idols which they had brought from Russia. But by late May 1767, eight months after their arrival in London, they had run out of money. When

Copyrighted Material

Reinhold had sold everything, he accepted a teaching position at the Warrington Academy in northern England. At £60 a year, the salary was modest but it was at least a regular income. Situated in a small town midway between Manchester and Liverpool, the Academy had been founded ten years before to teach the religious dissenters who at that time were not allowed to study at Oxford or Cambridge universities (then the only two in England). Unlike Oxford and Cambridge with their focus on the Classics and theology, these new schools had a much broader curriculum. Prioritising experimental science, modern languages, history and economics, they provided a more practical education and fostered critical thinking. Assured by several letters of recommendation from London friends that Reinhold Forster was ‘agreeable and easy’, the trustees of the Academy were pleased that this ‘learned foreigner’ had agreed to join.*

It was at this point, more than two years after he had last seen the long-suffering Justina Elisabeth, that Reinhold wrote to Gdansk, instructing his wife to pack their belongings and come to England with their six other children. He had also decided that it was time for his eldest son to learn a trade. So in late June 1767, when Reinhold travelled to Warrington, he left George behind as an apprentice to a merchant who traded with Russia. The twelve-year-old boy found himself alone in London. By now fluent in German, French, English and Russian, he had to copy letters and invoices, and deliver parcels to the merchant’s clients in London. It was a hot summer. As George ran through the busy streets, pushing through the crowds and forever worried that he would be late, his health began to suffer. Abandoned by his father and overworked by his employer, he lost weight and became exhausted. It would be three long months before his mother, brothers and sisters arrived.

Since her husband’s departure, in March 1765, Justina Elisabeth Forster had given birth to another child and managed the family’s move to Gdansk. Now she organized the journey to England, barely

* Reinhold replaced Joseph Priestley who had taught at Warrington for the previous five years and who experimented with electricity, later becoming famous – among many other things – for discovering oxygen. A progressive and liberal thinker, Priestley would also become an outspoken supporter of the American and French Revolutions.

surviving on what little money Reinhold had sent her. Physically, she was slender and delicate, but her determination was steely and her patience almost super-human. When she and the six children finally arrived in London in early September, George hadn't seen them for two and a half years, almost a lifetime at his age. This was also the first time he met his youngest sister, Justina, who hadn't been born when he had left for Russia.

After two nights in London, George took his mother and siblings on the journey north in the stagecoach. It took several days to travel the 200 miles to Warrington, and as only George was able to speak English he handled everything, securing seats and managing the cumbersome daily loading and unloading of their luggage. There were bags, trunks, hats, coats, food and his six siblings aged between two and eleven. The children had to be fed and entertained during the long bumpy drive. Whenever they stopped for the night, George had to negotiate food orders and sleeping arrangements in the notoriously overcrowded inns along the stagecoach routes, where travellers often had to share bedbug-infested straw mattresses. It was difficult enough for adult travellers to deal with the greedy landlords and harried waiters, but George was a twelve-year-old boy in charge of seven other people. His three-month apprenticeship had taken its toll and when the family finally arrived in Warrington, Reinhold was troubled to see how thin and emaciated George had become. Instead of sending him back to London, he decided to let him stay.

At last, the family was together again. They moved into a house near the Academy, the rooms noisy with the chatter of seven children as well as six young students who boarded with them to provide a much needed additional income. For a while George even attended lessons in mathematics, physics, history, religion and drawing as well as his father's classes. To supplement his meagre salary, Reinhold began moonlighting at two other schools alongside the Warrington Academy. To fulfil his weekly commitments, he enlisted George as a French, German and geography tutor. 'I intend to come only one time a week,' he told a friend, '& send my Son George twice.' George had to follow his father's orders. By now thirteen and still shy, he found himself in a classroom, instructing boys a head taller than him.

The arrangement didn't last. Almost inevitably, Reinhold had soon

Copyrighted Material

managed to upset his colleagues and employers – ‘this worthless set of people’ – and creditors were knocking on the door. He also hated teaching, telling a friend that he resented being ‘confined to a wretched School & the Follies & Tricks of Young Monkeys’. His pupils were unruly and difficult to control, often playing practical jokes on their teacher who spoke English with a heavy German accent. Whatever Reinhold’s letters of recommendation had stated, the trustees quickly realized that he was the opposite of ‘agreeable and easy’.

In spring 1769, less than two years after his arrival in Warrington, Reinhold was sacked and George found himself translating German and French travel books into English to contribute to the family income. At a time when the vast majority of people rarely ventured beyond the villages and towns they lived in, let alone their countries or continents, travel books had become a hugely popular literary genre. Reinhold saw a business opportunity and mustered his eldest son’s linguistic talents. George’s grasp of the language was phenomenal, a friend wrote, ‘no foreigner has ever been able to write English as he did’. George was not consulted. ‘I was yoked too early,’ he later said. ‘I had to work when I should have been learning.’

The skill of translating was much more than a mechanical word-by-word formulation of sentences. Not only did George have to immerse himself in these other worlds in order to capture them in English, but he had also to adapt his own voice to that of the author – in a strange way, the original text demanded the same obedience that his father expected from him. But at the same time, it also allowed him to travel the globe and escape reality, away from the family’s constant need for money and the demands of his irascible father.

Stuck inside the noisy house in Warrington surrounded by siblings, students, papers and books, George now sailed to the shores of Java and encountered jungles filled with tigers and crocodiles in Pehr Osbeck’s *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*. All his life he had been driven by curiosity – he wanted to observe, investigate and understand, always thirsty for knowledge. The translations involved long hours at his desk, yet they also fired his imagination. His daily life might have been miserable, but these books transported him to a thrilling unknown world. He walked through the wild forests of the American colonies when he

worked on *Travels in North America*, a lively account by a Finnish-Swedish botanist named Pehr Kalm. Carefully considering each word of Kalm's three volumes, George's mind filled with the roaring white curtain of the Niagara Falls and lofty trees. He paddled along rapid crystal-clear rivers and travelled by horseback along rocky paths. But it wasn't just nature. Kalm also wrote about the harsh frontier life of colonial settlers as well as about the Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee as they call themselves) and other Native Americans he had encountered, providing portraits of their customs, society and agricultural practices.

George also translated Captain Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's *A Voyage Round the World* – a rapturous portrait of beautiful islanders in Tahiti, turquoise waters and nature that provided plenty. As his pen filled the pages, he sailed through dangerous storms and accompanied Bougainville to Tahiti, Vanuatu and the Great Barrier Reef. Working on these books, George later said, enabled him 'to travel with them in thought'. We can only imagine how the adolescent boy felt when he translated Bougainville's descriptions of seemingly lascivious Tahitian women or sailors contracting venereal diseases. One woman, Bougainville wrote, excited the crew when she 'carelessly dropt a cloth, which covered her, and appeared to the eyes of all beholders, such as Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian shepherd, having, indeed, the celestial form of that goddess'.

At the end of 1770, the Forsters moved back to London, taking lodgings next to Reinhold's old school friend Woide, who had moved to Somerset House Stable Yard near the Thames. On 13 December, three days after their arrival, father and son went to the Royal Society, the nexus of British scientific enquiry where, since its foundation in the 1660s, fellows met to learn about new scientific discoveries and exchange ideas with like-minded men. Reinhold Forster knew the Royal Society well, having attended the weekly meetings during their first stay in London. But now he wanted to introduce his son and present George's translations (though Reinhold's name was on their covers). So they made their way to Crane Court, a short fifteen-minute walk from their lodgings in a little cul-de-sac off Fleet Street, where the fellows met every Thursday. The president directed the meetings from a large armchair at one end of a long table, with a bust of the Society's first royal patron, King