

## REVIEWS

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## REMEMBERING THE FORSTERS\*

Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798) and his eldest son Johann Georg Adam (1754-1794) have been presented to us in the above work primarily through their memorable journey aboard “His Britannic Majesty’s Sloop *Resolution*” on James Cook’s Second Voyage round the world, from which Britain’s great discoverer and his scholarly passengers brought back detailed accounts of the South Pacific, that were not only to serve the British government well at the time but also can still be acknowledged today as being of exceptional merit.

The research conducted by Krzysztof Konstancy Vorbrich on the Forsters, on their life, scientific work and writings is admirably extensive and extremely detailed. This concerns not only what they themselves achieved and did for posterity but also everything that has been written about this father and son duet as writers, scientists, ethnographers, travellers and, last but not least, translators. They wrote and published in German, English, Latin and French.

It is presumed they knew Polish as well, taking into account the fact that they were from Gdańsk which was then within Polish Prussia, which in turn was – at least at the time of their births – part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Although German-speaking, they were subjects of the Polish king. The complexity of the political, geographical and linguistic situation of the times shows how difficult it has been, and still is, to define the Forsters’ national identity, which K. K. Vorbrich tries to do with the means available to

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\* K. K. Vorbrich, *Memoirs of the Forsters – The Polish-Born Participants of Cook’s Expedition: The Same Voyage, Worlds Apart. Excerpts: Biography; Journals..., Observations..., and Voyage...; Essays Reply... and Letter...; Non-Narrative Legacy*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Contact, Poznań 2009. Pp. 203.

him. Furthermore, his own national affiliation wants to show how important the Polish side of their makeup is in delineating their achievements in both the humanities and science.

The Forsters were of Scottish descent although the Scottish line was already rather distant when Johann Reinhold Forster came into this world. It was his great-grandfather who is known to have come to Gdańsk, having escaped the political upheavals of the 1640s and the following Cromwellian regime of nearly a hundred years earlier. At the time there was a large Scottish and Calvinist community in the Gdańsk Patriciate, often intermarrying and following their Calvinist faith. The language they spoke was German, and with Gdańsk<sup>1</sup> then being part of Polish Royal Prussia there are many foreign claims to the Forsters, especially Johann Georg (most often referred to in English simply as George) being classified as a German or at least a German writer.<sup>2</sup> He certainly wrote in German (although as we know not only) but German the Forsters definitely were not, despite their strong German connections through education, professional careers and political involvement. It is primarily their Polish connections that Vorbrich, in his biographical account of the Forsters,<sup>3</sup> brings strongly to the foreground, stressing the fact that the Forster family served the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth well and what linked them to Poland should be appropriately acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> Rightly so, but in speaking about “their tripartite cultural roots [...] the countries of their ancestors (Poland), their origin (Scotland), and their prolific work (England)” (p. 27), it might be more accurate to say they were of mixed Scottish-Polish heritage (their ancestors were actually from Scotland more than from Poland but they happened to live on what then was Polish soil), with their most prolific writing years falling on the period spent in England. It has to be remembered, however, that they also had strong professional and political links with Germany, never mind their first language being German. Hence it might be preferable to say today they were simply of mixed nationality.<sup>5</sup>

The Forsters moved to England in 1766. Through his extensive writings on the flora and fauna of both Britain and North America, J. R. Foster quickly became well known to British academic circles, becoming a fellow of the Royal Society in 1772. In the same year he was offered the post of naturalist on

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout its history Gdańsk changed hands so many times that for many it may be somewhat difficult to grasp when it belonged to which power.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note the title of Leslie Bodie’s article from 1959: *Georg Forster. “The Pacific Expert” of Eighteenth Century Germany*, “Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand”, vol. 8 (1959), pp. 345-363.

<sup>3</sup> Information on the Forsters as a family, their roots and the lives of Johann Reinhold and his son George can be found both in the Introduction and the chapter entitled *A Biography of the Forsters* (pp. 40-62).

<sup>4</sup> This applies both to Polish historians as well as those from abroad.

<sup>5</sup> There of course is the additional problem of language which is often linked with adherence to a given nation. We must remember here that “they wrote in several languages, namely in Latin, in the parlance of the Gdańsk-Patriciate, in German of the German Empire, and in English” (K. K. Vorbrich, op. cit., p. 28).

board the *Resolution* which was to take James Cook on his Second Voyage round the world. He accepted eagerly and was allowed to take his son George as his assistant. It is to this voyage and particularly to the memorable contribution the two Forsters made to science and the humanities through their botanical, zoological and anthropological observations, later described in detail in what K. K. Vorbrich calls their Memoirs, that the bulk of the book in question is devoted to. In presenting and discussing these works, Vorbrich both promotes and highlights the significance of their involvement in British discoveries of the South Pacific and shows what a great field scientist Johann Reinhold Forster was. Stress is also placed on how he paved the way for others in the nineteenth century and how his worth needs to be more broadly recognised. His son George, on the other hand, can be perceived as a follower of his father, but also reflecting evident artistic talent both from the point of view of his writing as well as drawing.

The Memoirs in question are:

1. Johann Reinhold Forster's *The Resolution Journal(s) of Johann Reinhold Forster 1772-1775*. These three years encompassed James Cook's Second Voyage but remained unpublished during his lifetime.
2. Johann Reinhold Forster's *Observations Made during a Voyage round the World, on Physical Geography, Natural History, and Ethic Philosophy*, published in London in 1778.
3. George Forster's *A Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop "Resolution" Commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the Years 1772, 3, 4 and 5*, published in London in 1777.

They were supplemented by Vorbrich with three essays, George Forster being named as their author, which were closely related to the above expedition and the works devoted to it. They are:

1. *A Reply to Mr Wales's Remarks* (referred thereafter as *A Reply*), published in 1778.
2. *A Letter to the Right Honourable the Earl of Sandwich* (referred thereafter as *A Letter to [...] Sandwich*), published in 1778.
3. *Cook, der Entdecker (Cook the Discoverer)*, referred to in the discussed work as simply *Entdecker*. This, as we can see, was written in German and, contrary to the previous two, when George Forster held a professorial chair in natural history at the University of Vilna. It was first published in 1787.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In Note 12, p. 24, K. K. Vorbrich sends us for full details of all *Cook der Entdecker*'s versions to the chapter devoted to *Entdecker* and to the bibliography. There is a certain problem here as there is no chapter devoted to this essay as such. The only reference to the work is in the chapter entitled *Selected Issues Discussed in the Forsters' Narrative Writings* (the chapters are not numbered), in which we can learn that: "[...] George Forster's essay *Cook, der Entdecker (Cook the Discoverer)* is important for this thesis for several

What is important here for Vorbrich as well as anybody interested in not only Cook's expeditions but also in those who helped to make those expeditions known to the wider world, is the necessity to emphasise the enormity of the Forsters' written heritage. This heritage also concerns the genre known as travel writing – or travelogue as Vorbrich prefers to call it – which started to gather force in the eighteenth century and to which the Forsters undoubtedly made their own highly significant contribution. Vorbrich makes this emphasis throughout his work, devoting separate chapters to the three “Memoirs” and one to what he calls the Forsters' narrative writings, among which he highlights the three above mentioned essays.

Johann Reinhold's *Resolution Journals* reveals the author as a naturalist, anthropologist, scientist, humanist, and believer in liberty and freedom for all. Through his descriptions of the voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, the South Seas and New Zealand, Vorbrich presents him also as a botanist and ethnologist, showing interest in everything that grew and walked the earth. His field surveys were all faithfully recorded. These *Journals* were finally published in London in 1778 under the title presented above. Due to a quarrel with the British Admiralty after the expedition returned to England, Forster had not been given permission to publish his journals, hence the work *A Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop “Resolution”*, which appeared under George's name in 1777, also based on the same aforementioned *Journals*. As Vorbrich points out, both works show a detailed investigation of nature, fieldwork in botany, zoology and geology, and the study of man and humanity in general. In Johann Forster's *Observations* there are also chapters on what he calls “ethic philosophy”, where emphasis is placed on communication and the importance of being able to speak the languages of the people encountered, the knowledge of foreign tongues generally, and the ability to translate and learn about “the fragile civilisations of the remote Pacific Islands” (p. 87). Of interest here is the last paragraph of this chapter in which Vorbrich quotes J. R. Forster *verbatim*:

Mankind ought to be considered as the members of one great family; therefore let us not despise any of them, though they be our inferiors in regard to many improvements and points of civilisation; none of them is so despicable that he should not, in

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reasons. Of these reasons only three will be mentioned here, the rest of them in a separate chapter. Firstly, the essay deals with the multicultural matters. It has already been implied that it belongs to the cultural heritage of five nations. Secondly, the essay is significant because it is the earliest published work assessing the collective values of James Cook's character and his life's achievements. Thirdly, it serves as a basis for the section in this thesis on the Forsterian chronicle of the European quest for the secrets of the South Sea before the era of Cook. This theme is presented in qualified detail in (Vorbrich K. K., 2008). It is omitted in the present book, however” (p. 130). I am yet to find the separate chapter and can only presume the author got his two works slightly mixed up.

some point or other, know more than the wisest man of the most polished nation [...] (p. 94).

Vorbrich saw these words as being “less of an earnest entreaty than a warning that all men are equal”, and as being “true to his Polish upbringing” (ibid.). We could also say that his Scottish background might have pointed towards his love of freedom and desire that all men be equal. These traits can be found to be very strong in both nations and have their reflections in the political and literary events in eighteenth-century Poland and Scotland.

In the chapter devoted to George Forster’s *A Voyage* (pp. 95-128) Vorbrich gives us a very detailed analysis of the narrative in question, also taking into consideration the author’s German translation of his own work and comparing it with the original English version. It is unfortunate, however, that the examples are given in a footnote and not in the text proper.

*A Reply, A Letter to [...] Sandwich, and Entdecker*, discussed in the chapter on the Forsters’ narrative writings, record events related to the post-voyage literary and political controversies in which the Forsters became involved. They also clearly show George Forster’s dispute about his right to publish views on morality and freedom and his father’s struggle for his right of freedom of expression as well as right to publish his own account of James Cook’s second expedition.

In reference to freedom and national allegiance, there has unfortunately appeared what some might treat as a slip of the pen on the part of K. K. Vorbrich, but which in actual fact can be somewhat misleading. In the Conclusions (pp. 153-160), which actually include a summary of the whole work as well, we can read: “[...] for reasons known best to themselves the Forsters moved back to the country of their ancestor. As the English overran Scotland, the Forsters decided to become English” (p. 153). It so happens that the English never overran Scotland. What happened at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in 1707, was the Union of Parliaments, which came about due to certain Scottish decisions, albeit highly pressurised by the English.

However, looking at the book as a whole, we can see that the aim of Krzysztof Konstancy Vorbrich’s 2009 *Memoirs* has obviously been to bring the Forsters’ Polish and British heritage out of oblivion and to show how valuable their contribution to science and the humanities has been. The extensive work and detailed research put into this deserves full acknowledgement. My main regret, however, is that nobody thought of making the same contribution in editorial work. For the book to be a pleasure to read and not only to be a source of encyclopaedic information, it would require thoughtful proofreading,<sup>7</sup> stylis-

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<sup>7</sup> A rather uncomfortable mistake leading to misunderstanding on the part of the reader can be seen, for example, on the very cover of the book: *ESSAYS REPLY...* . The colon that is missing after *ESSAYS* may seem a minor detail but it actually makes all the difference. The same applies, for example, to the definite and

tic suggestions, and a certain amount of reorganisation. The table of contents, for example, can be found on pp. 202-203, between the Bibliography and the Appendix. In English-language books, we learn what is to follow in a given book at the beginning and not somewhere nearer the end of the work. Excerpts from reviews on the work (on the back cover) should have been translated into English. A rather interesting phenomenon is also the inclusion of the said reviews in full (in Polish by the way) at the beginning of the publication, which a non-Polish speaker will obviously not be able to read anyway.

The Appendix consists of a large number of extremely interesting and appropriately chosen reproductions. All the pity that they can be found at the end of the book and have not been incorporated into the text proper. They would have made the work more reader-friendly and would also have highlighted much of what has been discussed at so much length. Yet one more comment of criticism has to be made here and that concerns the number of footnotes (also notes within notes) included in the work. Footnotes are always extremely useful for extra explanation and elucidation but they cannot overwhelm the presented discussion. For the benefit of the book, the balance here should have been overturned, especially as a lot of the information included in the footnotes could have easily enhanced the writing proper and would have added fluency to the narration. The same would apply here if the work under discussion were to be presented as an academic dissertation.

It is the word “dissertation” that the author tends to use throughout what has been published in book form. And this appears to be what has led to a certain degree of misunderstanding. What can be prepared for the purposes of an academic dissertation does not necessarily have to be appropriate for a book which is addressed to the general reader. Books, even academic works like this one, are also governed by certain publication norms.

One of these norms is also including an Index that may be divided into name and subject or, which is more common nowadays in English-language academic publications, a general index that would take in proper names, titles of works discussed and the most important topics and incidents appearing in the publication. The extremely large Bibliography – taking in many more works than were actually referred to in the text proper – could have been cut down somewhat to the advantage of this much needed Index.

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indefinite article that is not always used correctly in the discussed work. So-called little words, if used inappropriately, may totally change the meaning of a sentence.