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ESSAY REVIEW

PLANTS AND THE PRESIDENTS: A FOUNDING VISION FOR AMERICA

by

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Andrea Wulf, *The founding gardeners: how the revolutionary generation created an American Eden*. William Heinemann, London, 2011. Pp. 372, £20.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-0434019106.

It seems that individuals and indeed nations, including newly formed ones, may be better understood by considering their interests and pastimes. And if this is so, then their relationship with plants and no less with the landscape they inhabit provides particularly fertile ground to explore. That is a central contention, at least, of Andrea Wulf's latest book, *The founding gardeners*, which builds on her immensely successful *The brother gardeners* (Heinemann, 2008)¹ by examining the fascination that plants, plant exchange, gardens, agriculture more broadly, and the expansion westwards perhaps inevitably held for modern America's revolutionary founders. Through Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison, Wulf shows how successive presidents imposed their vision not only on their own properties (Mount Vernon, Peacefield, Monticello and Montpelier, respectively) but also on the wider natural landscape. At the same time Wulf links their endeavours back to the political sphere for which they are normally remembered, and reveals a surprising change in attitude by the time of the serious-minded Madison that even heralded an environmental concern for the natural world.

Not commonly located in tales of advancing frontiers and wildernesses tamed, Madison's thinking predates the usual start point for such debates in nineteenth-century American history (Thoreau, Marsh) and, Wulf argues, took its cue from Enlightenment science and economic rationality (Priestley, Ingenhousz, Davy and Malthus) rather than from romantic ideals of one kind or another. The founding gardeners approached their business, she explains, by experiment, by deploying natural history exchange networks and by fostering improvements in husbandry as well as by celebrating nature as an ornament in their beds and shrubberies. Drawing these and other threads together in a seminal lecture to the Albermarle Society in Charlottesville in 1818, Madison anticipated theories that place mankind in a complex natural system on which he depends, a system that must be conserved rather than just exploited. However, it is clear that beside their recreational and symbolic value, plants were for solidly practical use in the fledgling republic, and well these presidents knew it. Wulf shows how each president's estate was no mere

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playground, and how alongside the wonder and amusement of plants, presidential efforts were directed towards spreading seeds and good practice to bolster the infant United States. As Jefferson once observed, the ‘greatest service which can be rendered any country, is to add an useful plant to its culture’ (p. 94). So fervently did Jefferson believe this that on a trip to Italy in 1787 he risked imprisonment and even the death penalty to smuggle rice back for use in South Carolina (among other species he also coveted the olive tree).

It all begins, of course, with Washington confronted on battlefields by the British—and, we learn to our surprise, before a powerful enemy attack on New York devoting his time to writing long screeds to his estate manager about planting at Mount Vernon rather than concentrating on the usual military preparations. The great general’s mind was no doubt on escape from his arduous labours to the peaceful pleasures of his garden. Yet there, as elsewhere, the influence of the former imperial master is clear, for Washington adjusted his estate to reflect the British-led taste for a more natural appearance in planting schemes even as he insisted that his woodland be made up entirely of American species in symbolic defiance of his old adversary as well as to represent a living celebration of all things American. Similarly, he corresponded avidly with the British agricultural writer Arthur Young to obtain details of the latest advances in crop rotation, which improving landowners across the Atlantic were then pioneering. Now outside the imperial network (although trading links were soon re-established amid congressional controversy), the former colonies would have to feed themselves and trade as best they could. Thus the development of Mount Vernon both before and after his two-term presidency saw Washington not only fending off the many visitors to his property and enjoying his plants and books on botany, but also working in his own botanical and walled gardens on an altogether more international range of plants of potential use to his country. Less visible than his native species, these served the more practical but no less patriotic aim of helping with agriculture and horticulture, and included European orchard grass for hay, English walnuts and cherries, peach trees from Portugal, and other plants from as far afield as China and the Cape of Good Hope.

Jefferson and Adams, while on ambassadorial duty in Europe, likewise found much in the Old World that could readily be applied to the New World that they, like Washington, were busy shaping. Post-independence they toured classic English estates such as Stowe, collecting ideas as they went. The Whig icons in Cobham’s temple of British worthies at Stowe inspired Jefferson to begin his own collection with luminaries such as Bacon, Newton and Locke, to be followed by American heroes too. Woburn Farm (Surrey) and the Leasowes (near Birmingham) appealed rather more to the stout, rumbustious Adams for their rural simplicity, much in keeping with classical virtues espoused by Homer and Virgil. Here beauty was combined with utility on fashionable ornamental farms or what were called *fermes ornées*. For Adams, who could never afford a property on the scale of Jefferson’s or Washington’s, the combination was irresistible and was duly incorporated on his Peacefield farm estate. There he was surrounded by the spectacular American countryside and, like Washington and Jefferson, he added that other English favourite, a ha-ha to free the garden from the restriction of walls and fencing and open up views to the landscape beyond. Adams was much the closest of all four presidents to the farmers on whom each leader thought the future of America would depend. Thus we have one of the most striking and amusing images in a work

liberally scattered with them: that of the earthy Adams plunging his arm into a heap of manure in England to test its quality and triumphantly proclaiming its American equivalent to be superior. This, one imagines, was hardly an activity emulated by the tall, impeccably turned-out Jefferson. But both men noted the swathes of American trees and shrubs adorning England's parks. These had been supplied by the Philadelphian collector John Bartram, a hero of Wulf's previous book, and they demonstrate that England had drawn copious inspiration from North America well before Jefferson and Adams visited its shores.

What a pair the two American diplomats must have made, picking their way through Britain's country estates in the wake of the war: Jefferson tall, thin, impassive and elegantly attired; Adams short, heavy and plain in dress, with a sometimes explosive temper. Wulf plays well on the contrasts, sometimes paradoxes, that her subject throws up and uses them to make her tale both entertaining and instructive. Adams, for example, ruefully left Peacefield for the presidency when Washington retired from office. By contrast, Washington, ever the wily general, happily retreated to Mount Vernon. Jefferson is far less convincing than Adams when as president he adopts the unpretentious garb of the farmer in a largely unbuilt White House that he in fact wished to see scaled back. But his eventual departure, like that of Washington before, was joyfully back to the relative privacy of his estate (he rode overnight in a snowstorm to reach Monticello, passing his own estate manager in the wagons on the way: more than one incumbent since would no doubt sympathize with this desire to be free from the burdens of presidential office). Wulf is able to unfold her story in this way because she has so carefully researched the private papers of each president to discover what really interested them—obsessed might in some cases be a better word—and how they got along (and sometimes did not—Jefferson and Adams quarrelled seriously back in America, and only in retirement on their very different estates were they finally reconciled, unsurprisingly in correspondence about plants and gardens). She quotes freely and interestingly from their papers so that the voice of each man is heard among the plants she colourfully describes. Importantly, she shares their passion for plants and gardening, which is readily apparent in prose that is never dry but always lively and attractive. Wulf also seems to have mastered the geography and feel of each estate by spending time at them, and this too is conveyed in her descriptions.

But it is her concept that plants and the land mattered to the new republic that carries conviction. She rehearses the fierce Republican and Federalist dispute that split the founders over whether America would be an agrarian or a mercantile force: with hindsight, of course, they need not have worried since it became a giant in both spheres. She acknowledges that political institutions were lacking to develop and indeed protect the American landscape. There was no board of agriculture to compare with that in Britain (which in fact lacked influence with government). Botanic gardens were hard to establish (one did not appear in the capital until after Madison's retirement, despite the urgings of all four presidents), and the reality of national parks was still a distant dream, although the seeds of the latter concept were certainly being sown by the likes of Madison. Moreover, agricultural and philosophical societies were being created and agricultural improvement was being promoted, and Wulf persuasively makes the case that in different ways each president admired the natural world and readily perceived the economic usefulness of plants to the state. The shared interests of

these political leaders express a deeper concern with America and its future that is, in part, apparent in their occupations away from Washington DC but which is not actually separate from its affairs. Witness the squabbling over the city's physical location, its layout and even the size of the White House garden (Jefferson, like a good Republican, wanted small government, and as president shrank the garden from its original 60 to a modest 5 acres, a clear political gesture, like his unostentatious presidential dress code). The interrelation, symbolic and real, of such issues is clear and lies at the heart of the book.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the way in which the landscape, its plant life, and ultimately human culture, were being encompassed by the interests and vision of these presidents was the buying from European powers of vast tracts of land and the dispatch of missions into the West towards which most of their estates symbolically faced. The Louisiana Purchase from the French in 1803 was a Jeffersonian stroke hailed by contemporaries as the most important event since independence itself. The Lewis and Clark transcontinental mission that followed resembled in many respects the sort of discovery expeditions previously launched into the Pacific from Europe, and especially Britain, right down to the imperial aims that lay behind it. The exploration of the West deserves a place in Wulf's book because it combines Jefferson's Enlightenment interests in collecting—of plants, of animals and of information about the tribes encountered and the land to be crossed—with wider questions raised by expansion westward. The Louisiana Purchase opened up new territory to which colonists migrated as Virginia's soils were steadily exhausted by poor farming techniques (one of the spurs for Madison's speech of 1818), and the meticulous Jefferson instructed Lewis and Clark to see whether the nomadic peoples that they met might possibly settle and embrace the Republican ideal of a life farming. To do this, as Wulf points out, they would have to cede their lands as well as their way of life. Moreover, even as admiration of the vastness and sublimity of America's wilderness followed in the wake of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and with it a new way of imagining what it meant to be American and even patriotic about the country, so also more and more of the very forests that everyone increasingly cherished were felled to feed a growing nation (another concern for Madison). And if the 'founding gardeners' were really creating an 'empire of liberty', as Jefferson proclaimed, Wulf poses the question why much of the heavy landscaping and other work on the presidential estates was done by slaves. Even Madison's showcase attempt to ameliorate the lot of his slaves by providing a model slave village on his lawn, which Wulf likens to British landowners' attempts to assuage their tenants with model villages so as to maintain social order, is shown to be a mere gesture since most of his slaves lived in cabins elsewhere (p. 227). Evidently there are costs in creating a new nation, Edenic or not, and some of these can be severe indeed.

So politics, plants, gardening and the growth of America under the four first presidents are traced in this enjoyable and well-researched book, but it is the gardens and their owners that rightly feature most prominently. Wulf gives a view of these politicians and warriors that is not usually centre stage in discussions of their historic achievements. It is refreshing to see them in this new light, and timely, too, since the south lawn of the White House has recently sprouted beds of vegetables and fruits. That is a development of which, for all their foibles and outright faults, the first presidents would certainly have approved. The book includes colour illustrations (plants, people and the properties) and

other black-and-white images in a running text of 242 pages. Nearly 100 pages of notes and a bibliography reveal the weighty scholarship that lies behind what is a very readable work: Wulf wears her considerable knowledge lightly. The only slight quibble is that she might have written a further 100 pages. I would have read them quite happily. One only has to wonder where she will take us next in her exploration of history through its gardens and plant collectors.

NOTE

- 1 Andrea Wulf, *The brother gardeners: botany, Empire and the birth of an obsession* (William Heinemann, London, 2008). See N. Chambers, 'The world of collecting: an eighteenth-century obsession', *Notes Rec. R. Soc.* **62**, 397–399 (2008). (doi:10.1098/rsnr.2008.0025)