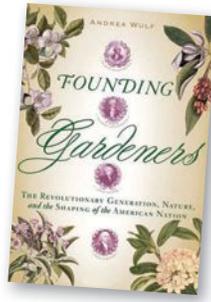


[Guest Lecturer]

The secret life of Jemmy

Author touts James Madison as forgotten founder of American environmentalism BY CHRIS EDWARDS

Move over Thoreau and Muir! In *Founding Gardeners*, British design historian and New York Times best-selling author Andrea Wulf identifies James Madison as “the forgotten father of American environmentalism.” In November, Wulf lectured about “The Revolutionary Generation, Nature and the Shaping of the American Nation.” She came to campus as part of JMU’s environmental stewardship emphasis. The diverse turnout of scientists, professors, gardeners, students and activists reflected that of the lecture sponsors, which included the JMU Department of Integrated Science and Technology, the JMU Institute for Stewardship of the Natural World and the Augusta Garden Club. Madison contributor Chris Edwards interviewed Wulf to ask more about the fourth president’s connection to American environmentalism.



Wulf: He often gets portrayed as a kind of studious but dull personality, compared to the more colorful heroes of the American Revolution. Not much private correspondence — say between James and Dolley Madison — exist that would show his personality in depth. But Dolley, for example, told a friend that they were running races on the back portico! Madison has been portrayed as a very cerebral man, but he had a pair of gardening trousers that had been patched at the knees. He seems to be a more physical person than we might guess. I see him more as a farmer who’s often out in his garden, not just standing on his portico looking at his land.

Madison: You’ve written books about horticulture, so what attracted you to Revolutionary politics?

Wulf: It happened sort of by accident, while I was researching my last book, *The Brother Gardeners*. It’s a story about the British obsession with gardens but one of the protagonists is John Bartram of Philadelphia, who transformed the English garden with American trees and shrubs — and who was a good friend of Benjamin Franklin. He was amazing.

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Andrea Wulf says James Madison might have been a more physical person that we would guess.

Madison: You wrote that for his 1818 Address to the Agricultural Society of Albarque, Madison gathered many innovative ideas — ranging from crop rotation to overpopulation — into “one concerted plea.” What difference could such a speech make?

Andrea Wulf: It confirmed him as an incredibly innovative farmer who was approaching agriculture and forestry in new ways. He said man has to return to nature what man took from nature. When you read it, it’s so contemporary.

It’s so topical. It’s what we’re dealing with now. The speech was widely read at the time, both in the United States and England. It was very radical. You don’t have new legislation following this, but it kind of set a new tone. Over the next decades more and more agricultural and horticultural societies were established, such as the New York Horticultural Society. Its members were asked to ensure “the preservation and culture of plants indigenous to our soil.”

Madison: What surprises did you find in Madison?

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He sent seeds to England, hundreds of boxes. I found an invoice to George Washington, who had ordered plants from Bartram. Madison, Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson all knew and visited Bartram's garden — so the Founding Fathers and Constitutional Convention came up again and again.

Madison: You devote a chapter to the hot day in July, 1787, when that motley group, including Madison, slipped away from the stalemated negotiations to stroll the Bartram grounds with John's son, William. Two days later, three among them (though not including Madison) switched votes. The ayes had it. Were those events connected?

Wulf: Among that politically incongruous group, more than half the delegates were farmers, many were interested in plants — what they saw on that day were trees and shrubs from all 13 colonies, their branches intertwined in horticultural union — so maybe it inspired them to come to a compromise to be a truly

United States. But of course it can only be speculation that a three-hour walk on a cool summer morning among the United States of America's most glorious trees and shrubs influenced these men.

Madison: What did you find at Montpelier?

Wulf: I talked a lot with the archaeologists there — in particular about the archaeological dig of Montpelier's slave village. Madison had relocated it to his garden area and built slave huts that were very unlike the usual flimsy cabins built elsewhere. They had raised wooden floors, glazed windows and brick chimneys. I went back, with that information, to the British Library, and studied the contemporary books with patterns for "model villages" constructed by British landowners for their tenants and found very similar designs. Since Madison owned these books, he probably used those to create his "village." By placing it in the middle of his garden, he presented himself as a slave owner who cared for his slaves (but of course still had



British design historian Andrea Wulf has also written *Chasing Venus*, a book about 18th-century transits of Venus. In this book Wulf characterizes the study of those phenomena as the first global scientific endeavor. Her book will be released in May 2012.

other more basic cabins in the fields).

Madison: How would Madison feel about today's environmental issues?

Wulf: I would like to think he would be very concerned about the environmental issues of this day. It would seem a natural proposition.

The founders believed in small-scale farming, but I find it very problematic to interpret today's problems through their eyes. ¶

★ Learn more about JMU's Institute for Stewardship of the Natural World at www.jmu.edu/stewardship and about Andrea Wulf at www.andreawulf.com.

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