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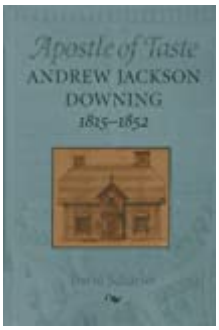

David Schuyler. *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-1852.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xii + 290 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5229-9.

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A Cottage Industry

The Hudson River Valley once inspired Andrew Jackson Downing to write about an America where every man might own a tasteful cottage and a little plot of land. Today, a single building at Springside, the former estate of Matthew Vassar in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and a handful of villas in the Newburgh, N.Y., area are all that remain of his built work. In this first comprehensive biography of Downing, David Schuyler, professor of history at Franklin and Marshall College, delves into Downing's extensive writings to explain why a charismatic landscape gardener who died at age thirty-six became nineteenth-century America's most famous and influential tastemaker.

Schuyler begins his close textual analysis with a biographical sketch that rambles between historical sources, the work of contemporary researchers and his own musings. We learn that Downing was born in Newburgh in 1815, became involved in the family nursery business by age sixteen and entered into a horticultural partnership with his brother during the 1830s. He began writing about the Hudson River Valley as a teenager, after a climb up Mount Beacon opened his eyes to the picturesque landscape of the Hudson Highlands. Downing would go on to write four books, several essays and scores of articles for horticultural journals, all intended to educate a popular audience in the art of architecture and landscape design.

Downing was eulogized immediately upon his premature death in 1852, first in stories of his heroic behavior during the steam boat accident that killed him, and later in essays and reprinted editions of his books. Modern historians have continued this tradition. Unlike many of his predecessors, Schuyler does not hesitate to show the extent to which Downing borrowed architectural ideas and aesthetic theory from foreign sources. In fact, he emphasizes the importance of creative "adaptation" to American conditions. Chapter two, "The Making of the Treatise," an analysis of Downing's first book, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841), demonstrates how Downing benefitted from the writings of Alexander Pope, Sir Uvedale Price, William Gilpin and a host of other foreign commentators on the picturesque. The English gardener Humphrey Repton is given credit both for his aesthetic theory and

for his presentation of landscape ideas to clients, while the Scottish-born tastemaker John Claudius Loudon is repeatedly cited as the source for many of Downing's ideas, not to mention their reference book format.

Although Schuyler lists extensive foreign influences on Downing's architectural and aesthetic philosophy, he seems less confident about the discussion of such topics in America. Alexander Jackson Davis, Downing's collaborator beginning in the late 1830s, emerges as a creative genius at least as successful as his friend, but Ithiel Town (1784-1844), the revivalist architect and Davis' former partner, is not even mentioned. Davis, Henry Austin, and countless architectural historians benfitted from the use of Town's famous office-library in New York and home-library in New Haven, which contained the largest collection of art and architectural books of its day with over 10,000 volumes. The extent that Downing's messages were popular ideas–his insistence on an American architecture based on the American climate and built with American materials–needs further development. Longfellow's only novel, *Kavanaugh* (1849), makes a dramatic plea for such a native art form, and Louisa Tuthill, author of the first history of architecture published in America, *History of Architecture from the Earliest Times* (1848) simplifies principles of architectural "fitness" and "expression" for the common reader, the same audience Downing chose to address. Such a widespread interest in these aesthetic topics only underscores the importance of Downing's message for the entire nation.

Perhaps because Downing's treatise and his later books on cottages and country houses have become well-known in architectural circles, Schuyler's analysis of his work on fruit trees is particularly engaging. It becomes clear that, while Downing's aesthetic principles can be condensed to a few simple ideas, he also imparted a considerable amount of practical information. What types of trees might grow in a certain kind of soil, for example, and the best type of plant for a certain shady corner are among the topics pursued in *The Fruit and Fruit Trees of America...*(1845). Downing stands above the others of his day, at least in terms of selling volumes on the arts of architecture and horticulture, because of his informative, practical manner. In true Yankee fashion, he brashly condenses the complicated discourses of his English and Scottish predecessors, transforming lofty prose into the language of ordinary readers. Downing offered the comforting presence of a fellow gardener who stood by your side as you built up the flower bed or tilled the carrots.

Although Downing and his contemporaries promoted the use of native building materials, they were not beyond painting wood to appear like marble. In fact, as Schuyler explains, Downing contradicted his philosophy in many instances, the least of all being his infatuation with English architecture. In 1850, Downing traveled to England with the intention of finding an English architect to join his firm. It is a testament to his personal charm that he did just that, traveling home with Calvert Vaux, who later explained "his style was so calculated to win confidence that without a fear I relinquished all and accompanied him." Practical reasons for Downing's choice of an English partner include the ease of publishing previously engraved English designs, the need to introduce such styles in America, and the fact that there were very few trained architects in the United States at that time. Schuyler analyzes the designs of "Downing & Vaux, Architects," with an eye both to their innovations, and their anglicisms, noting that Downing described how each plan might be "best adapted to American conditions."

The eighth chapter, "Metropolitan Landscape" is least successful, but only because Downing did not live long enough to finish his first urban park project, the plan for the mall in Washington, D.C. Schuyler does his best to imagine Downing's urban theory by examining Davis' work at Llewellyn Park in West Orange, New Jersey. He suggests that Downing's influence passed from Calvert Vaux to Frederick Law Olmsted in their Central Park collaboration.

Mid-way through *Apostle of Taste* I found myself consulting Downing's books for more details and seeking out his few remaining Hudson Valley buildings. Unfortunately, Schuyler's book was of less use for present-day excursions. Downing's extant Newburgh villas, the remodeled David Moore house and the brick shell that was once Dr. William Culbert's "Suburban House with a Curved Roof," were found not through Schuyler's book, but by consulting an article in a Newburgh newspaper. *Apostle of Taste* only briefly mentions the contemporary fate of these buildings, and the exact addresses are not given (I was not able to locate the "Symmetrical Country House of W. L. Findlay in Balmville, NY, nor to discover whether it still exists). The first building is a pile of rubble, the second a beautiful remodeled apartment complex; the neighborhood is street after street of historic buildings, a few renovated but hundreds boarded up and falling down. We need observant, articulate apostles of taste like Schuyler to confront the tragic state of our architectural legacy. Such contemporary commentary may be considered beyond the scope of biography, but, were

Downing alive today, he would undoubtedly lead the crusade.

Apostle of Taste is illustrated with black and white engravings and maps from Downing's books and other appropriate nineteenth-century sources. Contemporary photographs of the extant Downing properties would be a welcome addition. The single undated but fairly recent photograph of a Surgeon's Quarters in Fort Dalles, Oregon, based on a Downing design, only begins to illustrate the extent of his influence.

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