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Book Review - The Showy Town of Savannah: The Story of the Architect William Jay

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Off the SHELF

The Showy Town of Savannah: The Story of Architect William Jay by John D. Duncan and Sandra L. Underwood (Mercer University Press, 2019: ISBN 9780881466898, \$27.41)

John Duncan and Sandra Underwood have written a complete biography of the obscure architect William Jay. In the early 1800s, Jay arrived in Savannah from England and designed several public buildings and houses in Savannah and Charleston. After four and a half years in the United States, he returned to England and then worked as a civil servant in Mauritius, where he fell ill and died. He was mostly forgotten and even considered a myth by some in the early 20th century. Only three of the houses he designed in Savannah still exist, while his other buildings were radically altered or destroyed by fire. Yet those who knew of his designs praised his talents and ingenuity. In this book, the authors unravel some of the mysteries about Jay's work and life, including why he went to Savannah and left after a few years.

There are previous works about William Jay and his buildings, mostly in books about Savannah architecture. One book about Jay, *William Jay: Itinerant English Architect 1792–1837*, was published in 1983 by Georgia State University art history professor Hanna Lerski. Its title gives the impression of a wandering and lost person. Duncan and Underwood make their case that Jay's travels had more purpose.

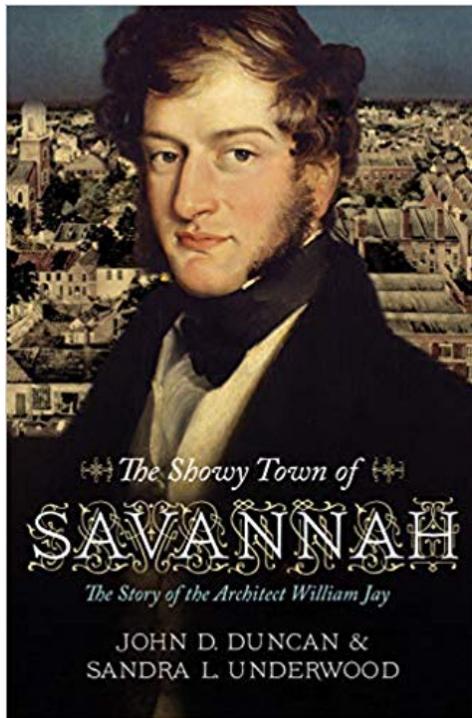
William Jay was the son of a famous preacher in England. He grew up in Bath, was educated in architecture in London, and lived in Savannah, Charleston, Cheltenham (a new spa destination in England at the time), and finally the island of Mauritius. Duncan and Underwood divide the book into several parts according to these places and cover the history of the homes and buildings he designed (as well as some others

that Jay may have built). The authors describe the difficulty of securing commissions for projects during a time when it was more common to hire a builder rather than a trained architect. Newspaper articles and letters show how Jay exaggerated, or frankly lied, regarding past projects to promote his services.

The term "showy" in the title was used by a 19th century travel author to describe Savannah and is connected with the Regency, Greek Revival style of architecture Jay celebrated. The authors point out that early American architecture history focused on the Northeast while

ignoring the South. This book helps rectify this omission by describing the impact and significance of Jay's buildings in Savannah and Charleston. Jay's story provides insight into the challenges of being a young architect during this time period and how debt affected both architects and their clients.

There are several tangents in this biography, such as a whole chapter devoted to the issue of slavery and backstory details of figures connected to Jay. They raise some interesting



issues related to American southern history and buildings but can be distracting to the narrative. At several points, the story skips ahead in time and then retraces how Jay arrived at a location or how his buildings were constructed, which can cause confusion in following Jay's life.

What is missing in this biography is a sense of what William Jay, the person, was like. The authors acknowledge this near the end of the book. Of course, they can only work from the sources available, and they do their best to give hints of Jay's personality. Based on his work and newspaper articles, he does come across as ambitious and a promoter of art and architecture. It is only toward the end of his life that more personal details are revealed through his wife's writings about the death of their son

and through the archives of Mauritius, which include a conflict with another civil servant. Duncan and Underwood's book provides the best chronicle available of this talented architect who could easily have disappeared from history.

Highly recommended for collections on architecture and Savannah history. The parts about restoring or modifying his buildings may appeal to public historians and preservationists. The book includes a bibliography, an index, and images of Jay, some figures in his life, his buildings, and other buildings of the time.

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