ESSAY REVIEW

A Man in His Time


The publication of The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, appearing volume by volume across a number of years, in mid-course at the present time, is dedicated to the long and remarkable career of the creator of landscape architecture as a profession in America. The task is properly comprehensive and ambitious, for Olmsted had ideas which are larger than any label put upon him. His importance continues and grows today.

Until Olmsted was in his early forties, however, his friends and relatives considered him to be an engaging failure. His younger brother, John Hull Olmsted, wrote complacently, in May 1847, of the impulsive Fred, who was always trying something new, setting off to be a “scientific” farmer on the rocky shore of Sachem’s Head below Guilford, Connecticut. “He has fine capabilities naturally,” John Hull Olmsted opined, “but they want training now most shockingly. Still, Fred will make a good farmer—a good citizen and a good husband, one of these days.”

This had been the family tone earlier when a very young Fred tried clerking in an importer’s firm in New York City and did not like it—much to his merchant father’s disappointment. In another episode, his family had watched with tolerance when Olmsted went to sea as an apprentice merchant marine officer, sailed to China under a harsh master, came home determined to do something on land, and so set out to be a farmer, first on the Connecticut shore and then on Staten Island. He interrupted farming
to try publishing, and he escaped into travel—to England in 1850, and then into the great unknown of the South between 1852 and 1854. In 1858 Olmsted, along with his friend, Calvert Vaux, won a contest for a park design for the City of New York. Olmsted was put in charge of the project and successfully implemented the design. The Civil War intervened, and a fury of work as Secretary General of the U.S. Sanitary Commission might seem to have pointed the man toward philanthropic work. A fear of not making a living at this kind of career or at park work sent Olmsted to California in 1863 to manage the failing gold-mining estate of a group of New York speculators. Disillusioned with the Maniposa project, Olmsted returned to New York in 1865 and at last settled into his own kind of work and never let go.

The seemingly haphazard movements of his early life, the reaching out in various directions, prepared Olmsted for what was to come. He pursued his ideas, now centered on land design, the relationship of the city to the land, and the place of the wild in a civilized man’s life. More broadly, he considered how people in a democratic society might live well in either city or country.

In spite of his long career, Olmsted, after his death in 1903, was a forgotten hero. Lewis Mumford brought him again to scholarly attention in an essay, “The Renewal of the Landscape,” in The Brown Decades, published in 1931. A gradual acceleration of attention grew in the decades which followed, with the climax in 1967, when the Olmsted family dedicated the Olmsted Papers to the public, papers which had been held in a semi-sequestered state in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Since then, Olmsted’s plans have been edited and published, biographies written, and critical studies made of various aspects of his work. He seems at present the center of an industrious interest which shows no lagging. The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted insure a greater ease for future searches and shapings.

In the four volumes published to date, a meticulous and generous scholarship has made plain Olmsted’s development out of a particular family and regional heritage, through an eccentric schooling, travels, farming, publishing, the Civil War experience, and the triumph of the first park. One might note with some trepidation that in four volumes the editors have reached only the end of the Civil War, and that ahead of these valiant editors lies all Olmsted’s mature work from 1865 to 1895. The editors originally projected an eight-volume set, but they now plan twelve volumes, the last two to hold Olmsted’s “major documents on park design and city planning” and his “plans and views of landscape design.” Given the expansive efforts so far exhibited, one wonders if these planned volumes will
be sufficient to contain the ebullition of energy, thought, emotion, and creation of the remainder of Olmsted's career.

In the first four volumes the editors have devised an elaborate and comprehensive framework, initiated and guided by the editor-in-chief, Charles Capen McLaughlin, and joined by other members of an editorial board, each one bringing different strengths to the task, principally by Charles E. Beveridge, listed in the latest volume as series editor. McLaughlin's introduction to the life and work of Olmsted in Volume I contains the essence of the guiding editor's motivation—words just but without excess: "As farmer, author, administrator, and park planner, Olmsted fought selfish and short-sighted thinking with imaginative proposals to enhance the life of his own times and that of future generations." The organization of this first volume and the succeeding volumes is careful and rational. Each volume has a particular editor's introduction and other notes to the period covered. The Papers have a careful array of scholarly aids. Each volume contains, in addition to the letters and other Olmsted documents, a statement of editorial policy, a biographical directory, useful appendixes, bibliographies, footnotes, and an index. Each volume is enlivened by a gallery of pictures, photographs of the principal and lesser players in the Olmsted story, in addition to pertinent drawings, maps, etc.

The editors have organized the material by interspersing chronologically Olmsted's private letters and public writings. This arrangement loses something of immediacy. It compensates by presenting a spectacle of development, the private man in his questionings and discoveries, side by side with the more considered pronouncements of the public man.

Necessarily there are disadvantages to any large plan, and they are beginning to be evident as the volumes appear over the years. The Papers will be a disappointment to the good, general reader. The volumes are for study, not for the refreshment of the imagination. They are heavy to the hand and heavy to the mind, not at all what one might want to hold comfortably while sitting under a tree in one of Olmsted's parks.

Close students of Olmsted's life and work will find few surprises in the documents published in the four volumes. Others will discover a much more complex figure than popular accounts might suggest. The arrangement displays the growth of a mind. Various aspects of Olmsted's development might be cited. One example, as revealed in Volume II (Slavery and the South: 1852-1857), is the transformation of his opinion of southern society and its "peculiar institution," as a consequence of his journeys through the cotton kingdom. He had intended to write calmly and coolly about what he foresaw as the inefficiency of agriculture under the plantation slavery system. Although his picture of southern life was fairly observed and reported, he very slowly and inexorably changed in his inner being from an
objective observer to a passionately committed man. He could no longer tolerate slavery; he came to abhor it. The public letters to various newspapers (principally the newly established *New York Times*), and also his private letters, trace the degree of change.

A parallel but somewhat contradictory change of heart was occurring at the same time. He was gradually working out for himself what the proper role of a democratic citizen should be. His travels a few years earlier in England had sharpened his regard for American democracy. Now, in the South, confronted by a very different cultural climate from that of his familiar Connecticut, he struggled with his concession that the slaveholders possessed some good qualities. As a Yankee, he hated inefficiency and sloth, and he found plentiful examples of these hateful qualities everywhere about him in the southern slave society. Yet, at the same time, he had to admit that the good Yankee qualities of orderliness, efficiency, and sharpness did not answer all the exigencies, or even the hoped for betterment, of a possible good life for the nineteenth-century American man. He came to admire the southerner's ability simply to be. The admired ability to do was not enough. Out of the wicked South, Olmsted derived a more complete view of the proper citizen for his landscape of American life.

It is to be expected that future volumes will provide other good case studies of the importance of reading and analyzing documents in their specific developmental context. The *Papers* will stimulate other scholarship. For example, there should be a separate volume of Olmsted's personal letters. Olmsted corresponded with an interesting and varied group of relatives, friends, business acquaintances, and even enemies. Among them were Charles Loring Brace, founder of the Children's Aid Society; Fred Kingsbury, a private person in his law career, but a most candid friend and correspondent; Harry Codman and Charles Eliot, apprentices and later partners; George William Curtis, the colleague at *Putnam's* and a neglected man of letters of the time; George Templeton Strong, an ally during the Civil War, and a fascinating and private keeper of a remarkable diary of the New York life of his time; Andrew Haswell Green, commissioner of parks, a doughty colleague and enemy; Edwin Godkin with whom Olmsted helped found the *Nation*; Mariana Van Renssalaer, the art critic; Henry Hobson Richardson, the architect; and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the sculptor; not to mention Olmsted's wife, Mary Perkins Olmsted; his sons and partners, John and Frederick, Jr.; and his father and stepmother, John and Mary Ann; and many others. Their letters to Olmsted are preserved in the great Library of Congress collection and are interspersed with those that Frederick Olmsted wrote to them and to many others, so that the tattered, hand-written notes back and forth constitute the history not only of one man, but of a generation. Olmsted was in the center of this generation's
ambitions, struggles, achievements during a time when public attention was
directed to railroad builders, inventors, and manipulators of money. A joint
selection of the letters of Olmsted and his correspondents would constitute
a superb picture of a neglected group of doers and creators. The Papers
should also encourage new studies of landscape art, of the relationship
between the civil and the wild, of the governance of cities, of the layout
of human institutions such as homes, schools, hospitals, streets, parks—in
worlds not imagined by Olmsted himself.

Olmsted the man belongs to his own time, but his work and words
continue to have meaning today. His seminal ideas were of the kind that
are capable of development. Therefore, the appearance of Olmsted's Papers
is an important event in scholarly publishing. The editors are preserving a
life and a work instructive for the future as well as of the past.

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