

ARNOLDIA REVIEWS

Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted. Elizabeth Stevenson. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 484 pages, illustrated. \$17.95.

In the past ten years, there has been a steady revival of interest in Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of the Arnold Arboretum and the country's first professional landscape architect.

To name only a few of the most prominent titles, recent books include: Julius Gy. Fabos, Gordon T. Milde and V. Michael Weinmayr, *Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., Founder of Landscape Architecture in America*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1968 (primarily a pictorial survey); Albert Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition*, Braziller, 1972; Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973; and, most recently, the first volume of a long-awaited series: Charles Capen McLaughlin and Charles E. Beveridge, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I, The Formative Years, 1822-1852*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

A reader may well ask where to begin. Prof. Fein's book is probably the best overview of Olmsted's life and work, but like others in the Braziller series on Planning and Cities, its text is brief. On the other hand, Roper's book is a monumental achievement, the result of thirty years' research, but its length and level of detail may discourage a reader new to the subject.

Elizabeth Stevenson, the author of several other biographies, including the Bancroft Award-winning *Henry Adams*, has written a book that is both scholarly and "popular" in the best sense of the word. Her main interest is in the man rather than his works. Most of Olmsted's design projects, including the Boston park system, are treated rather impressionistically. Similarly, the involved social and historical background of Olmsted's life is drawn in broad strokes. But Olmsted the man emerges as a complicated, courageous and sympathetic human being.

As is well known, Olmsted did not begin his landscape career until 1858, when he was thirty-six and, with Calvert Vaux, won the competition for Central Park. He had been a frail and dreamy boy with a sketchy education. As a young man, he first went to sea and then was subsidized by a patient father in a series of farming ventures. By the time he became involved in Central Park, however, he had written four books (one on England and three on the antebellum South) and had a modest national reputation.

Later in life Olmsted asked himself "how such a loitering, self-indulgent, dilettante sort of man as I was . . . could, at middle age, have turned into such a hard worker and *doer* as I . . . have been ever since?"

The answer becomes apparent in Stevenson's first chapters. All the experiences of Olmsted's early life — boyhood wanderings through the Connecticut woods, perusals of Price on *The Picturesque* and Gilpin on *Forest Scenery* in the Hartford Public Library, informal study of civil engineering in Andover, Massachusetts and sporadic attendance at Yale, as well as his far from brilliant career as a scientific farmer — were synthesized in his later profession.

Perhaps better than any Olmsted scholar thus far, Stevenson understands the two sides of Olmsted's nature. Later in the letter quoted above, Olmsted said: "I have been selling being for doing." Stevenson responds: "He thought that he had warped the dreamer away from his dreams in order to work in the world. Yet . . . the dreamer and the doer had

worked together to make certain formed spaces open to the sky in which other persons might find freedom to be."

Olmsted's mature years were filled with this kind of "doing." Central Park completely absorbed him for four years, yet, at the start of the Civil War, he interrupted his landscape work to direct the United States Sanitary Commission (the predecessor of the American Red Cross). From 1863-5, he ran the Mariposa Mining Estates in California. He then returned to New York and collaborative work with Vaux on Central and Prospect parks. Throughout an increasingly busy career in landscape architecture, he wrote a stream of articles and professional reports and maintained a prolific correspondence. He also pioneered the nation's first conservation efforts at Yosemite and Niagara Falls.

Stevenson is most successful in her treatment of Olmsted's early life and of his last years. (The first third or so of *Park Maker* could well be read in conjunction with Volume I of the *Olmsted Papers*.) She gives particular attention to the projects in which Olmsted had the heaviest emotional investment: Central Park, his first born; and Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina, one of his final achievements.

Biltmore was a project almost without parallel in the history of landscape architecture. In 1888, George W. Vanderbilt asked Olmsted for advice on treating the grounds of his new winter estate. For the main dwelling, the fashionable architect Richard Morris Hunt was designing an only slightly reduced version of the chateau of Blois. Vanderbilt steadily (and somewhat stealthily) acquired large parcels of land until his estate totalled 120,000 acres. His original aim had been to establish a park, but Olmsted persuaded him that the best use of the land was as a scientifically planned forest and arboretum. The first aim was magnificently achieved, although the arboretum project floundered and finally failed. Olmsted's involvement with Biltmore lasted until the end of his working life. Expertly managed by Gifford Pinchot and later by Carl Alwin Schenck, Biltmore Forest eventually became a national preserve.

Throughout his life, Olmsted struggled to have his landscape principles understood and his work recognized, not as a handicraft, but as a "liberal profession." Acclaim came to him toward the end. In one day, he received honorary degrees from both Harvard and Yale. Characteristically, he accepted the awards, not for his own sake, but because they dignified his profession.

One of Olmsted's chief concerns at Biltmore had been to arrange the plantings so that there would be a clear view of a distant mountain peak. Aptly enough, the name of the mountain was "Pisgah," after the ridge from which Moses viewed the Promised Land.

CYNTHIA ZAITZEVSKY

Compost Gardening. W. E. Shewell-Cooper. New York: Hafner Press. 119 pages. \$8.95.

This volume describes the methods and obvious success of organic gardening and its principles as applied in England. The author is indeed a missionary for the method and the book is enjoyable reading. Varieties and materials described, however, are not usually available in eastern North America. Illustrated in black and white and in soft-tone color.

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1978. "Arnoldia Reviews." *Arnoldia* 38(6), 238–239.

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