

## BOOKS

# A 'talent most rare'

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED DREAMED OF A BETTER, GREENER WORLD, FREE FOR ALL TO ENJOY.

BY MARJORIE KEHE

**I**t was Frederick Law Olmsted's biggest break. But when the job was first offered to him it looked a lot more like a last resort.

In 1857, at the age of 35, Olmsted – who had already failed twice as a “scientific farmer” and then went on to lose thousands of dollars as a publisher – was offered a salary of \$1,500 to clear stones and drain swamps in the middle of New York City. At the moment, Olmsted's shoes were in tatters and he had no money for rent. “What else can I do for a living?” he moaned as he accepted the title of superintendent of a brand-new work in progress: New York's Central Park.

Olmsted was “a late bloomer nonpareil,” writes Justin Martin in his thorough, admiring biography **Genius of Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted**. Martin does an excellent job of tracing the development of this multit talented genius and – by the book's end – makes a powerful case for Olmsted as a reformer who not only created some of the world's most beautiful parkland but also helped to shape our lives and public spaces as we know them today.

As a dreamy young man who loved to read, beautify farmland, and travel – and whose father could afford to send him to visit Europe's most wonderful gardens – Olmsted had turned himself into a landscape architect without knowing what he was doing. (The field did not exist at the time.) But suddenly, in Central Park, he was in exactly the right place at the right time. Paired with the talented and like-minded architect Calvert Vaux, Olmsted submitted a plan for the development of Central Park that, by

comparison, left the ideas of his closest rival looking “commonplace and tasteless.”

The ideal of Olmsted's life was that green spaces should nourish the city dweller's innate hunger for natural beauty. Where his contemporaries cherished no higher vision for Central Park than a tedious set of statues and parade grounds, he dreamed of glorious vistas that would “supply the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork.”

Olmsted's success in creating a showcase of natural beauty in Central Park was so overwhelming that suddenly his talents were wanted all over America. Among many other achievements, Olmsted went on to design more than 30 major parks in US cities. He worked on the US Capitol grounds and several prestigious US college campuses, including Stanford University. He was also an early environmentalist who was instrumental in advocating for the preservation of sites of great natural beauty like Yosemite and Niagara Falls.

His son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., continued his father's work on into the next century, helping to establish US national parks, shape the future growth of numerous US cities, and create the profession of landscape architecture. “From 1857 onward, there isn't a single US landscape architect that doesn't owe a debt to Olmsted,” writes Martin.

And it's not just public parks that bear his mark. A man of great and restless intellectual energy, Olmsted also worked as a journalist, traveling the pre-Civil War US South and cataloging the abuses of slavery so effec-



tively that Malcolm X would one day cite Olmsted's writing as key to his development. During the Civil War Olmsted headed up a medical rescue unit that helped to lay the groundwork for the Red Cross. Later in life he also managed a California gold mine.

Along with Olmsted's many gifts came numerous quirks and contradictions. He suffered from anxiety and depression and, for a time, even hysterical blindness. An early acci-

dent left him lame and for the rest of his life he walked with a cane.

But Olmsted dreamed of making the world a better place for the average man and little came between him and his goal. He was "the most remarkable specimen of human nature with whom I have ever been brought into close relations," wrote a colleague who worked with him during the Civil War. "Talent and energy most rare.... He works like a dog all day and sits up nearly all night, doesn't go home to his family for five days together, works with steady, feverish intensity until four in the morning, sleeps on a sofa in his clothes, and breakfasts on strong coffee and pickles!!!"

Olmsted died at the age of 81 – ironically, in a Massachusetts asylum of his own design – nursing a great fear that he had left no legacy behind him.

Too bad Olmsted can't take a stroll through today's Central Park, suggests Martin. The sight of a huge, diverse populace flooding the park, each enjoying the beautiful space in his or her own way – exactly as can be seen in contemporary Central Park every single day – would represent the fulfillment of his dreams.

"I think Olmsted would be proud," Martin concludes.

■ Marjorie Kehe is the Monitor's books editor.

**Genius of Place**

By Justin Martin

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