

BOOKS AND AUTHORS



GRACE LOUDON MCADAM

Colman Park on Seattle's Lake Washington Boulevard, part of the design for Seattle's park system created by Olmsted Brothers. That firm, headed by Frederick Law Olmsted's son and stepson, used their father's design principles to spread his influence all over the country.

The restless genius behind America's city-park system

Justin Martin's lively biography creates a rich portrait of complex, multitalented Frederick Law Olmsted

'Genius of Place: The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted — Abolitionist, Conservationist, and Designer of Central Park'

by Justin Martin
Da Capo Press, 460 pp., \$30
REVIEWED BY MARY ANN GWINN
Seattle Times book editor

Frederick Law Olmsted's vision of open spaces defines the American urban landscape. Olmsted, a man without any formal training in landscape architecture (there was none) designed Central Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, the U.S. Capitol grounds and the Boston public parks system.

Though he died in 1903, Olmsted's reach includes Seattle — the same year he died, Olmsted's firm, run by his son and stepson and guided by their father's design principles, came to Seattle to design its park system. Like Boston's system, Seattle's "emerald necklace" of parks and boulevards — from Green Lake to Seward Park — forever shaped our city.

The man who invented landscape architecture was many things before he settled on his final path at age 45 — a sailor, farmer, journalist and abolitionist. As author Justin Martin tells it in his lively new biography, "Genius of Place," Olmsted's youth was a series of tryouts, underwritten by his wealthy, indulgent father.

He lost his mother at age 3, received an indifferent boarding-school education and skipped college: "He was a person of such obvious intelligence, yet he was

entirely adrift ... it was as if he was following his own calendar, and he behaved as though he had all the time in the world," wrote a puzzled friend.

Olmsted worked as a clerk, then as a sailor on a merchant ship. He farmed (his father helped buy the land). In an age "that valued derring-do over narrow specialization," Martin writes, it was easy for Olmsted to jump from one identity to the next — he got his first journalism assignment after a five-minute interview with the New York Daily Times (now The New York Times).

Olmsted, who had written a meandering book about his walking tour of England, got the assignment to travel the length and breadth of the antebellum American South. Olmsted produced 48 "letters" on the South. The book version of his reports, "The Cotton Kingdom," is still in print; reading it in prison, Malcolm X pronounced the book an "unvarnished look at the institution of slavery," Martin writes.

In 1857, Olmsted, in debt to his father and hurting for money, heard through friends about a big job: Central Park's first superintendent. He got the post, then he and architect Calvert Vaux's plan for the park won the Central Park design competition.

To shape the park, Olmsted hired 1,000 men, who planted many thousands of trees (the park had been virtually denuded by firewood hunters). He drained swamps and executed massive demolition projects, using gunpow-

der on the park's abandoned structures and its massive rock outcroppings. He stuck to his vision of the park as a place for all of New York City's people, "the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous," Olmsted wrote.

In the middle of the project, Olmsted's beloved brother John died of tuberculosis. Olmsted married John's widow, became father to his three young children, and kept on working.

Olmsted, whose pattern was to achieve something amazing and then walk away from it, next became director of the United States Sanitary Commission (forerunner of the American Red Cross). For the first three years of the Civil War he arranged medical care and evacuation for the wounded, coordinated thousands of volunteers and tangled with the military over its abysmal care of its soldiers.

Then he walked away again — in 1863, again pressed for funds, he took a job as superintendent of a gold mine in California. Olmsted's family would become some of the first white visitors to Yosemite, and Olmsted took up the cause for its conservation.

Olmsted eventually came home, importuned by Vaux to return and help him design Brooklyn's Prospect Park. He then designed the park around Niagara Falls, the park systems of Boston and Buffalo, the U.S. Capitol grounds and his two swan songs, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair grounds and the grounds around George Vanderbilt's gargantuan

North Carolina Biltmore estate.

In his decline he turned his firm over to his two surviving sons, stepson John Charles and Frederick Jr. They carried his legacy into the 20th century, designing Seattle's parks, the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, the Spokane park system and the grounds of the Washington state Capitol.

Olmsted's life story is fabulous biographical material, and Martin largely makes the most of it. In a brisk, unvarnished style, he artfully balances Olmsted's achievements with his personal limitations.

For all his accomplishments, Olmsted was a driven, restless soul. He suffered from depression and insomnia, and was unforgivably harsh with his stepson John Charles, who carried on his father's work, only to be told in a letter from Olmsted: "You are not a genius in art, a man of less artistic impulse I never knew."

Olmsted knew how to draw *genius loci*, the genius of the place, out of the most unforgiving rock and rubble-strewn landscape. Visit any Olmsted-inspired park — Central Park, Prospect Park, Seattle's Volunteer Park, the chain of parks along Lake Washington Boulevard — and feel it: the sweep of the landscape, the sublimity of the view, the touch of nature in the city. We have one man's genius, drive and obstinate nature to thank for these enduring pieces of heaven: Frederick Law Olmsted.

Mary Ann Gwinn: 206-464-2357 or mgwinn@seattletimes.com.