

# The New Criterion *February 2004*

## More than natural grace

*Frederick Law Olmsted*  
*Walks and Talks of an*  
*American Farmer in England.*  
Library of American Landscape History,  
530 pages, \$24.95 (paper)

*reviewed by Francis Morrone*

In 2003, New York City celebrated the “sesquicentennial” of Central Park. I put that word in quotes because this was a dubious municipal anniversary. 1853 was the year in which the city council of New York authorized the purchase of 778 acres of land, bounded by Fifth and Eighth Avenues and Fifty-ninth and One-hundred-sixth Streets, for the creation of a great metropolitan park. (The city later augmented this with an additional sixty-five acres, extending the Park to One-hundred-tenth Street.) In fact, Calvert Vaux’s and Frederick Law Olmsted’s “Greensward” plan for the Park dates from 1858, which was also the year in which the plan began to be implemented. Therefore, 2008 will be the Park’s true sesquicentennial. No matter, I suppose. New York City was in the mood to celebrate something.

Amid the celebrations, we saw all manner of exhibitions, walking tours, articles, lectures, and books about the Park. Among the most fascinating of these is an absolutely gorgeous facsimile reprint, courtesy of the Library of American Landscape History in Amherst, Massachusetts, of Frederick Law Olmsted’s 1852 book *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. The reprint features a superb introduction and scholarly annotations by Charles C. McLaughlin, professor emeritus of history at American University and the founding editor of *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*. The publisher put great care into making the reprint affordable as well as attractive. It is hard to think that a \$24.95 paperback could be handsomer than this volume.

Most people refer to “Olmsted’s Central Park” and “Olmsted’s Prospect Park.” Among historians of American landscape architec-

ture, a war rages between those who believe Calvert Vaux has the true claim on these parks' authorship, and those who promote Olmsted. For many years, the Olmsted forces prevailed. Indeed, an Olmsted industry emerged—a National Historic Site (in Brookline, Massachusetts), long-term scholarly publication of the great man's miscellaneous papers, fat biographies, and such. None of this is other than it should be. After all, Olmsted ran the most successful landscape architecture practice in the world, and designed, or helped to design, parks all across the nation, parks without which the civic life of Americans is unimaginable. In addition, he spawned a landscape architecture dynasty: his son and stepson were also America's foremost landscape designers. For example, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (known as "Rick") laid out the magnificent suburban development of Forest Hills Gardens, in Queens, New York.

Yet, in recent years we have seen a bit of an Olmsted backlash among those who put forward the idea that Vaux should be credited as the principal designer of his joint ventures with Olmsted. In New York, the gardening writer and parks advocate M. M. Graff published *Central Park—Prospect Park: A New Perspective* in 1985. Ms. Graff's lively style and strong judgments make this a compulsively readable book, in which we learn that "Olmsted couldn't draw," "Olmsted was a dismal writer," and that he knew nothing about plants. Olmsted's titular precedence over Vaux in their partnership "was the first step in the public undervaluation of Vaux's role that broke his spirit and brought him at last to the water of Gravesend Bay"—a reference to Vaux's possible suicide. She quotes the great landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr.: "Mr. Olmsted was a leader of men, a man of magnetism and charm, a literary genius, but hardly the creative artist that Mr. Vaux was."

Just as emphatic as Graff is the architectural historian George B. Tatum, who claims that without Vaux, "Olmsted would be remembered—when he was remembered at all—as a journalist and author."

Lately, we see an anti-anti-Olmsted backlash. In 1999, Witold Rybczynski came out with *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century*, a decidedly pro-Olmsted book. And now, with the reprint of Olmsted's 1852 book, we have another pro-Olmsted salvo, as shown by Mr. McLaughlin's mentioning Calvert Vaux only once in the book's lengthy introduction and extensive annotations.

But why would Mr. McLaughlin mention Vaux any more than this? After all, *Walks and Talks* predates Olmsted's partnership with Vaux. Well, I see a couple of reasons for Vaux's entering into the story. First, we have the remarkable—the amazing—coincidence that while Olmsted and his friends ambled and rambled about the English countryside, Olmsted's hero, the Newburgh, New York-based landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing, visited London to find a sympathetic architect whom he might lure to America as an assistant. The young London architect whom Downing fetched was, of course, Calvert Bowyer Vaux. Second, Vaux became interested in Olmsted after reading *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*.

As well Vaux might. For, though the book is, to say the least, uneven, it nonetheless manifests a lively intelligence, a probing eye, and occasional glimmers of magnificence, as to make any, like Vaux, who got involved in America's nascent public-parks movement wish to have on his side the author of this book.

In the spring of 1850, Olmsted, twenty-eight years old, embarked, with his brother John and their friend Charles Loring Brace (later famous as a social reformer and founder of the Children's Aid Society), on a twenty-six-day crossing, from New York to Liverpool, aboard the 1500-ton packet ship Henry Clay. (In another remarkable coincidence, two years later the great Downing died in the wreck of a Hudson steamer also named the Henry Clay.) The young men's purpose was to hike across the countryside of southern England. They were not the

first, nor the last, to be awed by the glistening beauty of the verdant farms and vales of a land shaped by the hand of man in concert with nature into what, many years later, the architect Christopher Alexander called “one of humanity’s most beautiful artifacts, intricate and refined, historically deep, an aesthetic whole.”

Olmsted had led a varied, indeed a desultory, life until this trip. The product of a cultivated Hartford, Connecticut family, he, a student of modest attainments, failed to precede his younger brother to Yale. Instead, Fred (as he was called) became a merchant seaman, and went to China. His father then bought Fred a farm on Staten Island where he might indulge his deepening interest in “scientific farming.” His interest in the English countryside had much to do with his desire to make his farm both efficient and beautiful. Thus far, Olmsted’s was an unprepossessing career, and one could scarcely have foreseen his later renown.

Upon returning from England, his Staten Island neighbor, a publisher named George Putnam, encouraged Olmsted to shape his travel journals into a book. Putnam issued *Walks and Talks* in two volumes in 1852. The book earned generally respectful notices, but otherwise did not set the world ablaze. Still, it propelled Olmsted’s career well in the direction of his future glory. In Mr. McLaughlin’s words,

it is a record of how England permeated every aspect of Olmsted’s worldview a few years before he translated it into his career as scientific farmer, author and publisher, brilliant administrator, and, finally, landscape architect of twenty major parks and park systems in cities from New York to California. In these designs, Olmsted kept in mind the landscapes, both natural and manmade, that he had seen during his 1850 tour, and very consciously adapted the best, most felicitous features of them to his commissions. In effect, Olmsted remolded portions of the American landscape into idealized versions of the beautiful countryside of Victorian England.

On the strength of this book, the *New-York Daily Times* commissioned Olmsted to travel in the slave states and write down his impressions. Olmsted’s *Times* dispatches in 1853–1854 formed three books published between 1854 and 1860, then issued together as *The Cotton Kingdom* in 1861. His other major journalistic foray came in 1855–1857 when, again with his indulgent father’s assistance, Olmsted became a part-owner and managing editor of the prestigious *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*.

Olmsted and his companions toured Liverpool, then the world’s busiest seaport, before setting off for the countryside. Liverpool shared with America, and most other cities of the time, the filth, the noise, the stench, the overcrowding, and the soul-deadening routine that caused sensitive observers, like Olmsted, to dread the industrial metropolis of the nineteenth century. Yet Olmsted saw something else in Liverpool. The recently opened Birkenhead Park fired his imagination. Situated across the Mersey from Liverpool, Birkenhead was the first publicly funded park in England. Designed by Joseph Paxton (the brilliant designer later famous for his Crystal Palace), it opened in 1847. Today, Britain’s official literature on Birkenhead hails it as a major influence on New York’s Central Park—as indeed it was. Olmsted wrote:

Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People’s Garden. Indeed, gardening had here reached a perfection that I had never before dreamed of. I cannot undertake to describe the effect of so much taste and skill as had evidently been employed; I will only tell you, that we passed by winding paths, over acres and acres, with a constant varying surface, where on all sides were growing every variety of shrubs and flowers, with more than natural grace, all set in borders of greenest, closest turf, and all kept with most consummate neatness.

I like that “more than natural grace,” for the hallmark of Central Park and Prospect Park, as of Paxton’s Birkenhead, is the artful manner in which the Park provides a panoply of naturalistic effects in a way nature herself, unmediated by man, could ever do.

The pro-Olmstedians adduce from passages like this the notion that Olmsted entered into his partnership with Vaux with already clearly defined ideas of how Central Park should look. But as Ms. Graff writes, “The question of the precise role of each man is the subject of endless partisan argument, no less heated for being essentially unsolvable.” Indeed, Vaux himself, independently of Olmsted, also thrilled to Paxton’s park designs—especially the Halifax Park in West Yorkshire. Vaux worked for Downing when the latter’s magazine, *The Horticulturist*, printed Olmsted’s essay, later to be incorporated in *Walks and Talks*, on Birkenhead. That may have been Vaux’s first real sense of Olmsted, upon whom Vaux called in 1858 as he prepared his design for Central Park.

Though the anti-Olmstedian Ms. Graff says Olmsted was a bad writer, even she admits that “In justice, it should be noted that Olmsted’s early books and some of his personal letters, especially when animated by strong feeling, contain lively descriptions and felicitous phrases.” I think this gets it about right. *Walks and Talks* is a hard book to read from cover to cover. Olmsted lacks a sense of proportion, and his writing falls prey to that Victorian affliction I call the jumpy comma, making it hard for the modern reader to get in sync with the rhythm of Olmsted’s sentences. At times, though, the writing evokes the majesty of the period’s best writer, John Ruskin. For on occasion we reach such a passage as this:

There we were right in the midst of it! The country—and such a country!—green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous! We stood dumbstricken by its loveliness, as, from the bleak April and bare boughs we had left home, broke upon us that English May—sunny,

leafy, blooming May—in an English lane; with hedges, English hedges, hawthorn hedges, all in blossom; homely old farmhouses, quaint stables, and haystacks; the old church spire over the distant trees; the mild sun beaming through the watery atmosphere, and all so quiet—the only sounds the hum of bees and the crisp grass-tearing of a silken-skinned, real (unimported) Hereford cow over the hedge. No longer excited by daring to think we should see it, as we discussed the scheme round the old home-fire; no longer cheering ourselves with it in the stupid, tedious ship; no more forgetful of it in the bewilderment of the busy town—but there we were, right in the midst of it; long time silent, and then speaking softly, as if it were enchantment indeed, we gazed upon it and breathed it—never to be forgotten.

One paragraph, so beautiful, itself so green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous, as to make the reader spend his savings to go right over.

Pro-Olmsted or anti-Olmsted, how wonderful it is to have this new edition of *Walks and Talks*.