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A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century by Witold Rybczynski

The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography by Stephen J. Holmes

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Much of Simpson's book follows the course of westward expansion, but he adds a special focus that describes the radical alteration of the landscape that transformed the unsettled Midwest and West into an agrarian landscape and then into a suburban one. Although utilitarian themes dominate the history of America's landscape, Simpson carefully assesses the impact of such writers as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, whose "view[s] from within" endowed Americans with a more appreciative and respectful attitude toward their country's landscape (p. 164). Indeed, it was the gradual softening of traditional antipathies toward nature that led to the idea of the romantic suburban landscape—peaceful, pastoral places where people and nature might coexist harmoniously.

Simpson's well-written volume is an excellent analysis of the laws, ideas, and policies that have shaped our understanding of landscape in the United States. He concludes that we still place little value on the land beyond its utilitarian and economic worth. "Few of us draw delight and inspiration from it," he laments, and "[f]ew study its legacy and meaning" (p. 345). He acknowledges in closing that the political and economic implications of resource use and population growth, as well as our growing perception of ecological problems, might move Americans toward adopting a "new stewardship ethic and a new relationship with the land"—a prediction that seems problematic (p. 346).

Visions of Paradise reflects Simpson's thoughtful analysis of a wide variety of sources; the book is a unique blend of history, landscape, and insightful observation that will please students of the West, environmental history, and suburbia.

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A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century. By Witold Rybczynski. (New York: Scribner, 1999. 480 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$28.00.)

The Young John Muir: An Environmental Biography. By Stephen J. Holmes. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. xv + 309 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00, cloth; \$22.95, paper.)

Frederick Law Olmsted and John Muir are the two late-nineteenth-century men most associated with the parks movement in America, Olmsted for city parks and Muir for national parks. Their association to Yosemite was only indirect. Olmsted helped design Yosemite National Park in 1865 then moved back east, while Muir lived there for a time, fought to protect the park, and wrote eloquently about it in numerous books and articles. Despite Yosemite, Olmsted is more often linked to urban parks; perhaps his greatest accomplishment was his first job, Central Park in New York City, begun in 1858. He went on to become America's foremost landscape architect and spent most of his adult life in the New York City-Boston area. Muir was the nation's foremost prophet of wilderness and lived most of his life near the Bay Area. The two men never met.

These two biographies take different approaches. Rybczynski chronicles Olmsted's life from cradle to grave, giving ample attention to the historic context in which Olmsted lived and worked as well as to the nature of his innovative city park designs. Having visited many of Olmsted's parks, Rybczynski peppers his narrative with personal comments on his impressions of the architect's work. Based on his extensive research, he also imagines some scenes in Olmsted's life, creating narratives of what might have happened. These dramatize significant events in the self-trained landscape architect's life. Holmes, on the other

hand, limits his focus to Muir's early years, up to the age of 35, four years after he arrived in California. Moreover, Holmes is writing a psycho-biography, interpreting the way people and events influenced Muir's psychological development as a writer and thinker about nature. Although Rybczynski's biography is more satisfying to read, Holmes's work may have more influence on Muir studies.

Olmsted was born into comfortable upper-middle-class circumstances in 1822 in Hartford, Connecticut. His father supported his wanderings and erratic self-education, which included newspaper work, world travel, travel writing, and scientific farming. Olmsted's experiences and connections served him well on the pivotal day in 1857 when he happened to run into Charles Elliot, a prominent businessman. From Elliot he learned about the new park being planned for New York City. With Elliot's, and other important men's backing, Olmsted won the job and eventually took over the planning and then administration of Central Park, one of the most significant parks in the world.

Later, in 1865, however, Olmsted's reassociation with Calvert Vaux, his partner in the Central Park design and a professionally trained architect, established him as a landscape planner, mostly of urban parks. The list of parks, campuses, and other public outdoor spaces that Olmsted and his firm was associated with was so extensive that one asks: was there a significant public space planned between 1858 and even beyond his death in 1903 that he was not involved in? Rybczynski clearly demonstrates that Olmsted was one of the most important figures in American life between the Civil War and World War I. He appropriately quotes Lewis Mumford, who wrote in 1931 of Olmsted, "[he] almost single-handed laid the foundations for a better order in city building" (p. 418).

Like Olmsted, Muir was a long time in finding his "life's work." Stephen J. Holmes's biography covers that formative period, using

an approach he calls "object relations." This theory says that the longing for relations with other people forms the core of human psychic life. Holmes's biography, thus, "stresses the inner dimension, . . . the psychological and spiritual dynamics of self-construction" (p. 10). Using this method, he meticulously combs through the sources on Muir's early life, and the evidence tells him that Muir's great insights were tied to individuals (Holmes especially emphasizes this), places, and natural beings. He also asserts that those special insights into Muir's sense of "home" in nature were particular to the young Scotsman's time and place and developed gradually. Muir, Holmes claims, did not have "eureka!" experiences in nature. Although Holmes may be correct in his ideas about how Muir's psyche developed, sometimes his narrative balls up. He focuses so much on interpreting the complexity of a specific piece of evidence, one sometimes loses sight of the main theme he is trying to weave. Nevertheless, this is a worthy and thought-provoking book.

Still, these two books have faults that reflect on the publishers and not the authors. Scribner's should have included more photographs of Olmsted, his associates, and his parks; and the University of Wisconsin's price for the cloth edition of the Muir book is high.

Scholars of parks especially will want to read these two biographies. Those seeking to understand Olmsted's contribution to urban landscape planning will particularly benefit from Rybczynski's book. It is highly readable. Those desiring insight into the psychological development of one of the great thinkers of the environmental movement will want to plow through Holmes's book on Muir. I recommend both.

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