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GUEST EDITOR: ROBIN KARSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LIBRARY OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE HISTORY

Charles C. McLaughlin and I first met at the 1994 Dumbarton Oaks Symposium on Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century. I was there to speak about the wild gardens of Warren H. Manning, and Professor McLaughlin, professor emeritus at American University and founding editor of The Olmsted Papers editorial project, came forward to introduce himself. He was fascinated by new information about this almost-forgotten associate of Olmsted's, and he was enthusiastic about our new publishing venture, Library of American Landscape History (LALH). He pitched an idea: a reprint of Olmsted's first book, heavily annotated and introduced with an essay that would make sense of Olmsted for a new generation of readers. I was immediately interested. Charlie had made the trip described in "Walks and Talks" several times, traveling at first on foot, and then, as his physical condition declined, in a wheelchair. He suggested illustrating the new introduction with photographs that would show what these landscapes looked like now.

In the new edition, Charlie's knowledge of Olmsted's England was to be presented in detailed notes, several to a page. When the sheer volume of these notes threatened to overwhelm the already substantial text — which we elected

to print as a single volume of 530 pages — negotiations became intense. But the wranglings always concluded congenially, and, as the years passed, conversation was filled with ideas for future projects, too. The various pieces of the book came together gracefully if rather gradually. We were fortunate to have Charlie's assistant, Tina Hummel, helping us as well as guidance from a wonderful team of editors and a very patient designer, Jonathan Lippincott, who understood the importance of replicating the look and feel of the original book. The new edition came out in November 2002 at a gala launch at the Metropolitan Club in Washington, DC. Charlie, who then became a trustee of LALH, was proud of his book — he usually kept a few in the basket of his "chariot" to sell at the conferences and lectures he continued to attend even as his health declined.

At the time of his death in September 2005, he had many more such events planned, and much still to say about topics that ranged from Olmsted to the Stanley Steamer, a subject of persistent interest. Thousands of new readers have discovered Olmsted's book as a result of Professor McLaughlin's insight, talent and efforts — and I, being one of them, remain extremely grateful to him for it.

Frederick Law Olmsted, "Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England." Introduction by Charles C. McLaughlin.

Amherst, Massachusetts: Library of American Landscape History, 2002.
Originally published New York:
G.P. Putnam, 1852

From the introduction by Charles C. McLaughlin.

England, the subject of this book, has long fascinated North Americans. The renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) first saw the mother country during a month-long walking tour of Southern England and Wales in the spring of 1850, taken when he was twenty-eight years old. The record of that trip, "Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England," is an engaging account of the young man's adventures. More significantly, 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 features of them to his commissions.

In effect, Olmsted remolded portions of the American landscape into idealized versions of Victorian England.

With its vast tracts of lands owned by the aristocracy, England also impressed upon Olmsted the critical importance of public ownership and free public access to such treasures of scenery for the health and recreation for all. He believed that access to natural scenery would give all citizens a chance to escape from the narrowing effects of selfish interests and enable them to gratify, exercise, and educate aesthetic faculties that were intimately associated with their moral perception and intuition. Having observed the slums of large cities such as Liverpool on the one hand and the openness and beauty of the countryside on the other, Olmsted was inspired to develop in the United States a new metropolitan form that preserved the best of both rural and urban life for everyone.

From Chapter 8: “The People’s Garden.”

Olmsted describes his impromptu visit to Birkenhead Park — a “People’s Garden” — whose lasting impressions sowed the seeds for Olmsted’s work on Central and Prospect Park.

Walking a short distance up an avenue, we passed through another light iron gate into a thick, luxuriant, and diversified garden. Five minutes of admiration, and a few more spent in 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. At a distance of a quarter of a mile from the gate, we came to an open field of clean, bright, green-sward, closely mown, on which a large tent was pitched, and a party of boys in one part, and a party of gentlemen in another, were playing cricket. Beyond this was a large meadow with rich groups of trees, under which a



Birkenhead Park

flock of sheep were reposing, and girls and women with children, were playing. While watching the cricketers, we were threatened with a shower, and hastened back to look for shelter, which we found in a pagoda, on an island approached by a Chinese bridge. It was soon filled, as were the other ornamental buildings, by a crowd of those who, like ourselves, had been overtaken in the grounds by the rain; and I was glad to observe that the privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes. There were some who were attended by servants, and sent at once for their carriages, but a large proportion were of the common ranks, and a few women with children, or suffering from ill health, were evidently the wives of very humble labourers. (pp. 91–92)

From Chapter 9: “First Walk in the Country.”

This passage, among Olmsted’s most breathless and evocative, describes his first encounter with the English countryside — “never to be forgotten.” The conductor’s call “BROMBRO!” should be translated “Bromborough,” the name of the rail stop.

A bit of broad pasture, with colts and cows turning tail to the squall; long hills in the back, with some trees and a steeple rising beyond them; —

Another few minutes of green bank; —

A jerk — a stop. A gruff shout, “BROMBRO!” A great fuss to get the window on the other side from us open; calling the conductor; having the door unlocked; squeezing through the ladies’ knees, and dragging our packs over their laps — all borne with a composure that shows them to be used to it, and that they take it as a necessary evil of railroad travelling.



Hereford countryside

The preparations for rain are just completed as we emerge upon a platform, and now down it comes in a torrent. We rush, with a quantity of floating muslin, white ankles, and thin shoes, under an arch...

In a few minutes they go off in carriages, and room is left us in the little waiting-room to strap on our knapsacks. The rain slackens — ceases, and we mount, by stone steps up a bank of roses and closely-shaven turf, to the top of the bridge over the cutting.

There we were right in the midst of it! The country — and such a country! — green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous! We stood dumb-stricken by its loveliness, as, from the bleak April and bare boughs we had left at 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 farm-houses, 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. (pp. 98–99)

From Chapter 11: “The Break of Day.”

Olmsted wonders at his own great swell of emotion confronting a scene that was both completely new to him and as familiar “as my native valley.”

It was very early this morning when I became gradually aware of the twittering of house-sparrows, and was soon after brought to more distinct consciousness of time and place by the long clear note of some other stranger bird. I stepped from bed and knelt at a little, low, latticed window, curtained without by a woodbine. Parting the foliage with my hands, I looked out upon a cluster of low-thatched cottages, half overgrown with ivy; a blooming hawthorn hedge, enclosing a field of heavy grass and clover glistening with dew; a few haystacks; another field beyond, spotted with sheep; a group of trees; and then some low hills, over which the dawn was kindling, with a faint blush, the quiet, smoky clouds in a grey sky. It may seem an uninteresting landscape, but I gazed upon it with great emotion, so great that I wondered at it. Such a scene I had never looked upon before, and yet it was in all its parts as familiar to me as my native valley. Land of our poets! Home of our fathers! Dear old mother England! It would be strange if I were not affected at meeting thee at last face to face. (p. 111)

From Chapter 16: “Visit to Eaton Hall.”

Olmsted’s earliest reflections on the art of landscape architecture are as familiar as any passage of this book. McLaughlin notes that, at the time of Olmsted’s visit to Eaton Hall (the 1,193-acre estate near Chester), “the architect William Burn (1789–1870) was supervising changes which took him from 1845 to 1854 to complete. At the same time, the parks and gardens with which ‘Capability’ Brown’s alterations overlaid the original axial plan in the eighteenth century were altered under the supervision of William Andrews Nesfield (1793–1881).”

In the afternoon we walked to Eaton park.

Probably there is no object of art that Americans of cultivated taste generally more long to see in Europe, than an English park. What artist, so noble, has often been my thought, as he, who with far-reaching conception of beauty

and designing power, sketches the outline, writes the colours, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions. (p. 145)

At length the wood fell back, and the road was lined for some way with a double row of fine elms. Still no deer. A little further, and we came to a cottage most beautifully draped with ivy; passed through another gate. Ah! here is the real park at last.

A gracefully, irregular, gently undulating surface of close cropped pasture land, reaching way off illimitably; dark green in colour; very old, but not very large trees scattered singly and in groups — so far apart as to throw long unbroken shadows across broad openings of light, and leave the view in several directions unobstructed for a long distance. Herds of fallow-deer, fawns, cattle, sheep, and lambs quietly feeding near us, and moving slowly in masses at a distance; a warm atmosphere, descending sun, and sublime shadows from fleecy clouds transiently darkening in succession, sunny surface, cool woodside, flocks and herds, and foliage. (p. 147)

Chapter 19 (Volume II): “The Deceit of Descriptions of Scenery.”

There is always a strong temptation upon the traveller to endeavour to so describe fine scenery, and the feeling which it has occasioned him, that they may be reproduced to the imagination of his friends. Judging from my own experience, this purpose always fails. I have never yet seen any thing celebrated in scenery, of which I had previously obtained a correct conception. Certain striking, prominent points, that the power of language has been most directed to the painting of, almost invariably disappoint, and seem little and commonplace, after the exaggerated forms which have been brought before the mind’s eye. Beauty, grandeur, impressiveness in any way, from scenery, is not often to be found in a few prominent, distinguishable features, but in the manner and the unobserved materials with which these are connected and combined. Clouds, lights, states of the atmosphere, and circumstances that we cannot always detect, affect all landscapes, and especially landscapes in which the vicinity of a body of water is an element, much more than we are often aware. (p. 406)



Isle of Wight

The deep sentiments of Nature that we sometimes seem to have been made the confidant of, when among the mountains, or on the moors or the ocean, — even those of man wrought out in architecture and sculpture and painting, or of man working in unison with Nature, as sometimes in the English parks, on the Rhine, and here on the Isle of Wight, — such revealings are beyond words; they never could be transcribed into note-books and diaries, and so descriptions of them become caricatures, and when we see them, we at first say we are disappointed that we find not the monsters we were told of.

Dame Nature is a gentlewoman. No guide’s fee will obtain you her favour, no abrupt demand; hardly will she bear questioning, or direct, curious gazing at her beauty; least of all, will she reveal it truly to the hurried glance of the passing traveller, while he waits for his dinner, or fresh horses, or fuel and water; always we must quietly and unimpatiently wait upon it. Gradually and silently the charm comes over us; the beauty has entered our souls; we know not exactly when or how, but going away we remember it with a tender, subdued, filial-like joy.

Does this seem nonsense to you? Very likely, for I am talking of what I don’t understand. Nature treats me so strangely; it’s past my speaking sensibly of, and yet, as a part of my travelling experience, I would speak of it. (p. 407)

All photographs are by Charles C. McLaughlin and are from his edition of “Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England.”