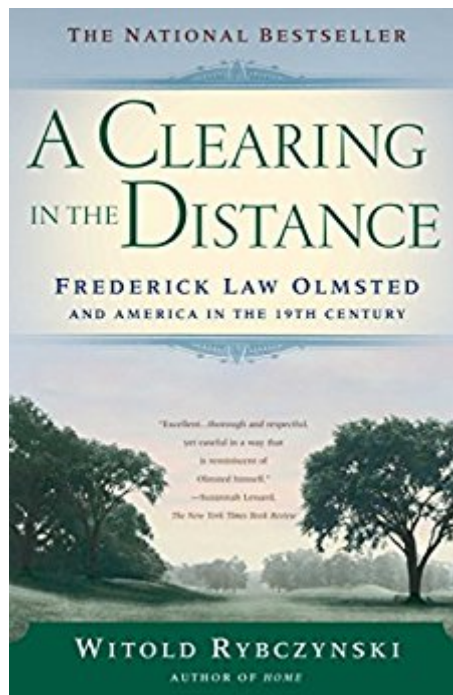




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# **A Clearing In The Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted And America In The 19th Century**



## Synopsis

In a brilliant collaboration between writer and subject, Witold Rybczynski, the bestselling author of *Home and City Life*, illuminates Frederick Law Olmsted's role as a major cultural figure at the epicenter of nineteenth-century American history. We know Olmsted through the physical legacy of his stunning landscapes -- among them, New York's Central Park, California's Stanford University campus, and Boston's Back Bay Fens. But Olmsted's contemporaries knew a man of even more extraordinarily diverse talents. Born in 1822, he traveled to China on a merchant ship at the age of twenty-one. He cofounded *The Nation* magazine and was an early voice against slavery. He managed California's largest gold mine and, during the Civil War, served as the executive secretary to the United States Sanitary Commission, the precursor of the Red Cross. Rybczynski's passion for his subject and his understanding of Olmsted's immense complexity and accomplishments make his book a triumphant work. In *A Clearing in the Distance*, the story of a great nineteenth-century American becomes an intellectual adventure.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an extraordinary book! I highly recommend it to readers as it tells of the life of a famous landscape architect. I had thought that Olmstead was the gentleman who designed Central Park in New York City. Yes he did but I never knew of the many other things he did, including the grounds around the U.S. Capitol and many other parks around the country. He never even went to college, but he clearly was an erudite man who was able to both design parks and organize his business structure. I highly recommend this book to those who are interested in U.S. history and also the development of many of our parks.

Great story of the man who fought for landscape Add to dictionary and disability inclusion

This is a brilliant account of an American legend. His career was a remarkable adventure: surveyor, sailor, farmer, merchant, social commentator, author, abolitionist, planner, construction manager, wartime administrator, mining executive, and (finally) consummate landscape architect. The author skillfully conveys these transitions in an lively narrative that ably portrays 19C America as well. Olmstead's creativity was served by a pragmatic versatility capable of working wonders. Anticipating dense urbanism and frontier encroachment, he pioneered municipal parks and wilderness preserves that today remain invaluable oasis's. Though largely self-taught (like Washington and Lincoln), he collaborated as an equal with the luminous figures of his day (most formally trained: Vaux, Richardson, McKim, Mead, White, Post, Burnham, Root, Hunt, Saint-Gaudens). He was interested in new technology (electric boats and lighting, drainage, transportation) and took a leading edge to incorporate it in his work. Ultimately, his legacy is not only one of exceptional work (enjoyed by many cities, including Hartford -his birthplace), but the invention of a skilled professional discipline that continues to enrich human life today. This work (illustrated and annotated) was a delight. Highly recommended. I wish it was available when I attempted to make my way through Laura Wood Roper's torturous 'FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmstead' in 1973 (it sits on my shelf yet half unread). Also recommended: Cynthia Zaitzevsky's 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System' (1982) a great record of Olmstead's Boston park development (with plans and photographs).

This book strikes a lovely balance between describing Olmsted's life and personal history and his creations, parks that span the United States. You may be surprised to learn, as I was, the vast number of projects he undertook. How Central Park was really his first significant project. How he

had to fight political and economic battles to keep it from being ruined. How he was able to truly "get it right" with Brooklyn's Prospect Park. Through the fascinating descriptions of the landscapes, the author also provides great insight into Olmsted's life. What struck me the most was how Olmsted, as with many of his contemporaries (U.S. Grant, Mark Twain) worried for most of his life about his finances and his career. This is a first rate work, told in a clear and compelling fashion.

To me, a biography is successful if the author conveys both the subject's accomplishments and the influences that helped to shape these deeds. Rybczynski easily meets these standards in this entertaining, instructive study. Rybczynski spends a lot of time discussing the significance of Olmsted's major projects, like Prospect Park and Mount Royal. The innovations that Olmsted brought to the field of landscape architecture in these projects are clearly laid out for the reader. However, these discussions were not the main point that I took from the book. Instead, I was enthralled with the discussions of the various jobs and travels that Olmsted undertook throughout his life, particularly in his formative years. Rybczynski does an excellent job of showing that these diverse experiences not only satiated Olmsted's curiosity, but also were essential to the development of Olmsted's views on landscape architecture. It is refreshing to find an example of the belief that a variety of experiences are necessary to bring out new talents, enhance existing skills, and create a well-rounded individual. I highly recommend *A Clearing In The Distance* for many reasons. These reasons include a concise writing style and a multi-faceted subject. But, above all, the book brings attention to an individual deserving of such study. It is this quality that makes *A Clearing In The Distance* a "must-read" for not only admirers of Olmsted's works, but for anyone who is interested in the creative development of an innovator in their field.

This well-written, well-researched and vivid biography of the great Frederick Law Olmsted demonstrates that his gifts to future generations (us!) go far beyond Central Park. His multiple gifts and tenacity overcame personal and political struggles. He was also an active abolitionist and travel writer

Wonderful book. Well researched, delightfully written. Inspired me to read Olmsted's 600 page book on his journey through the south before the Civil War. Great bibliography. I shall probably go on to read everything Rybczynski has written.

Fascinating history of a man who was involved in many things! He was not only a landscape

architect. He spent time in the civil war running hospital ships for the Union and he was instrumental in the Yosemite preservation . A man of the century.

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