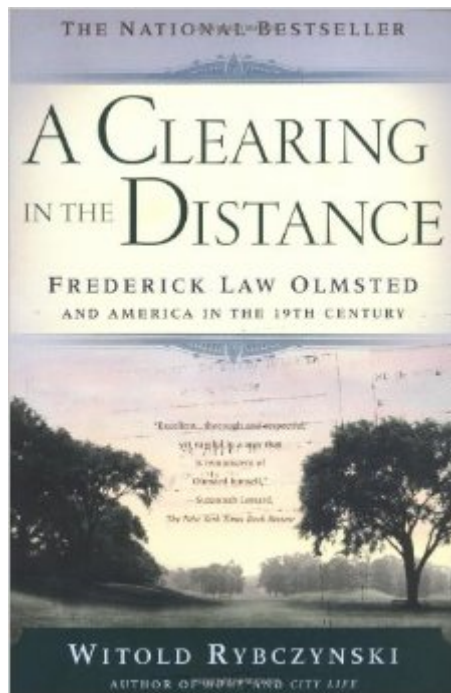


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A Clearing In The Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted And America In The 19th Century



Synopsis

In a brilliant collaboration between writer and subject, Witold Rybczynski, the bestselling author of *Now I Sit Me Down*, 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

If I told you that I've just read an excellent biographical memoir about an American original where the author is a looming presence and sections of the book, which masquerade as primary resource material, are actually fabricated by the biographer, you would probably assume that I'd broken down and bought the Edmund Morris book, *Dutch*. In fact, Witold Rybczynski's biography of the great American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), includes imagined thoughts

and dialogue that the author himself crafted. As he told Brian Lamb on Booknotes, he doesn't much like docudramas but found the technique could be valuable. Indeed, the author is a character in the book, sharing his opinions and walking through Olmsted's parks, sharing his observations. I mention this, not because it takes away from the book, but because they are fairly typical techniques.

Actually, the biographer is a presence in virtually every biography, starting with the choice of whom to write about, but then continuing with the editorial judgments about how to play incidents and what to put in and leave out. If authors like Morris and Rybczynski are more open about it than most, more power to them. Meanwhile, Rybczynski's subject here, in addition to designing and building Central Park, Prospect Park, etc., was also a sailor, farmer, journalist, founder of *The Nation*, author of several still pertinent books on the functioning of slavery in the South, and remained throughout his life an honest and honorable public servant. The author tells his story well and offers one important theme of Olmsted's work that retains its relevance. Olmsted, whom we perceive as a naturalist and environmentalist, believed that wilderness, open spaces and nature itself should serve humans.

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