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Abstract

In 1865 Frederick Law Olmsted read to the Yosemite Commissioners a report detailing his ideas about California's newly reserved natural space and his recommendations for its development as a "public park or pleasure ground." His text, "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees: A Preliminary Report," was lost for almost a century until his biographer Laura Wood Roper unearthed it, pieced it together, and published it. In spite of the lack of response it obtained at the time of it was written, Olmsted's text is now held up as a foundational document for both the National Parks system and environmentalism. This paper investigates how the stillborn proposal came to achieve canonical status in the late twentieth century and how legends concerning it have accrued. The report has become the road not taken; it allows people to imagine what the Yosemite National Park might have remained if it had not been subject to intense development. Taken up by contemporary environmentalists, Olmsted's text is made to authorize a myth of origins that is simpler and more inspiring than the tangled reality of events. This article analyses the report to show how the contradictions in Olmsted's vision for the park would not have permitted its preservation in the condition in which nineteenth century visitors found it.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environmentalism, Olmsted, Yosemite, National Parks, landscape.

Resumen

En 1865 Frederick Law Olmsted leyó a los comisionados de Yosemite un informe detallando sus ideas sobre el recientemente reservado espacio natural y sus recomendaciones para el desarrollo de éste como "un parque público o un suelo de recreo". Su texto "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees: A Preliminary Report" estuvo perdido casi un siglo hasta que su biógrafa Laura Wood Roper lo sacó a la luz, le dio sentido y lo publicó. A pesar de la falta de respuesta que obtuvo cuando fue escrito, el texto de Olmsted hoy se considera un texto fundacional para el sistema de Parques Nacionales así como para la ecología. Este ensayo explora cómo la propuesta sin éxito inicial llegó a formar parte del canon a finales del siglo veinte y cómo se han acumulado leyendas entorno a ésta. El informe se ha convertido en "el camino no elegido": permite imaginar cómo podría haber permanecido el Parque Nacional de Yosemite si no hubiera sido sujeto a un intenso desarrollo. Recuperado por ecologistas contemporáneos, el texto de Olmsted se hizo para autorizar un mito fundacional más sencillo y más inspirador que la enredada realidad de acontecimientos. Este artículo analiza el informe para mostrar cómo las contradicciones de la visión de Olmsted sobre el parque no habrían permitido su conservación en las condiciones en que los visitantes del siglo diecinueve lo encontraron.

Palabras clave: ecocrítica, ecología, Olmsted, Yosemite, Parques Nacionales, paisaje.

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In 1865, at a culminating moment in his short-lived tenure as one of the Commissioners appointed to manage the territory in Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove that had been newly granted to the State of California, Frederick Law Olmsted read a preliminary report to the Commissioners gathered at the site. He was probably chosen for this honor because of his success in designing New York's Central Park along with his less famous partner, Calvert Vaux. He also happened to be in California at the time, having been hired to manage the faltering Mariposa mining concerns of General Freemont. Olmsted's report was never submitted to the State of California or the Congress, and its author never set foot in Yosemite again. His ideas for managing the newly created "park or pleasure ground"[1]—the terms with which to designate it were still in flux—were never adopted. Realistically speaking, Olmsted's engagement with Yosemite was a failure and his report initially met the usual fate of failed grant proposals. It was abandoned in favor of other projects and filed away somewhere in his office. Curiously, though, it was to have a second life. After having been buried for many decades, an incomplete copy of the report was resurrected by Olmsted's son's secretary. Subsequently, biographer Laura Wood Roper found the missing ten pages that Olmsted had apparently extracted and included in an 1868 letter to the editor of the New York *Evening Post*. Thanks to the newly reconstituted text, Olmsted was to be reborn as an early environmentalist prophet. Despite the failure of his proposal and the very short duration of his engagement with the site, Olmsted's name now figures prominently in histories of Yosemite. The meager facts of his engagement have been elaborated to produce what can only be called an origin myth.

The legends surrounding Olmsted's report

Although the Report went missing for almost a century, it is held up as a foundational text for environmentalism. In his 1965 book, *John Muir and the Sierra Club: The Battle for Yosemite*, Holway R. Jones claims that Olmsted's report "is important in understanding the motivations behind the idealism of the new conservation and in explaining the actions of Muir and the Sierra Club in opposing the Yosemite Commissioners" in the 1890's (30). In his recent biography of Olmsted Justin Martin declares: "With his August 1865 address, Olmsted played a key role in the conservation of America's wild spaces" (268). The official statement on the Library of Congress American Memory website proclaims: "Only in the twentieth century has his Preliminary Report come to be widely recognized as one of the most profound and original philosophical statements to emerge from the American conservation movement" ("Evolution" n.p.). Submitted to modern exegesis after being brought to light by Roper in 1952, Olmsted's report has revealed meanings that permit its interpretation as an early ecological scripture.

In addition, Olmsted's failed encounter with Yosemite has been worked into one of the foundational stories for America's National Parks. Roper advanced this surprising

[1] In a letter dated July 5 1865, addressed to his father Olmsted uses both terms: "I am preparing a scheme of management for Yosemite, which is by far the noblest public park, or pleasure ground in the world" (Olmsted, *Papers* 36).

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thesis in her introductory note when she published the report in *Landscape Architecture* in 1952. In italics, for added emphasis, she declares: "*With this single report, in short, Olmsted formulated a philosophic base for the creation of state and national parks*" (14). Subsequently, this claim has been strengthened by selective quotations from the report and by creative reconstructions of events. Ken Burns's 2009 documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea,* contributes to the Olmsted legend by selecting passages that seem to champion "the rights of posterity" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 24) by urging the "restriction" of anything that would "obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 21). The documentary omits the ensuing qualification that constructions undertaken in Yosemite should be, "within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 21). Nor is there any mention of the fact that the major part of the $37,000 appropriation that Olmsted's report asks for is reserved for the construction of a road leading "toward the district" and taking in all the "finer points of view" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 26-27). Instead of elaborating on the details of the report, the film moves on to identify a cast of ecological villains who serve as foils to the spurned Commissioner. An accusing voice explains how "once Olmsted returned to New York, a small group of Yosemite Commissioners secretly convened, decided his recommendations were too controversial to bring to the state legislature and quietly shelved his report" (*The National Parks* n.p.). Then Alfred Runte appears to explain how James Mason Hutchings, one of Yosemite's early champions, did all he could "to exploit the hell out it" after the Valley was set aside for public enjoyment (*The National Parks* n.p.). It is understandable that popular productions like the PBS series should favor broad outlines over the tangled complexity of events. Surprisingly, though, more scholarly works are sometimes even less rigorous with the facts.

Not content with taking the report as a starting point for the invention of the National Parks, some people have suggested that that Olmsted prompted the creation of the 1864 Bill, something that the man himself expressly denied. Textual records indicate only that Israel Raymond, the California based representative of the Central American Steamship Transit Company, suggested the idea in a letter sent to the California Senator John Conness (Huth n.p.). On March 28, 1864 Conness presented a bill asking that the federal government make a permanent grant of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the State of California "for public use, resort, and recreation" ("Legislation" n.p.). The Bill was rapidly passed and signed into law on June 30, 1864. In August of that year, Olmsted visited the Valley for the first time. In September, responding to Conness's suggestion, the California governor appointed Olmsted to the first Yosemite Commission. Although Olmsted clearly enters the picture fairly late, probably brought in because of his experience with Central Park and as well as his administrative expertise, Hans Huth claims that: "The men who were recommended as the first commissioners of the Yosemite grant were most likely those who helped prepare the act. …. Preliminary discussions must have taken place, probably with Olmsted and the other potential commissioners, before Raymond addressed the … Letter to Senator Conness" (n.p.). Jones repeats the same surmise in *John Muir and the Sierra Club: The Battle for Yosemite*. In the biography, *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Elizabeth Stevenson ventures: "It was probably [in early 1864] that he began to

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meet men in San Francisco to whom he could talk about a public reservation for the Big Trees of Mariposa and the Valley of the Yosemite. … He probably, among others, saw that a federal bill in the United States Congress would be the best method of preserving these areas" (259). The authors of *Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.: Founder of Landscape Architecture in America* go even further, declaring that in the months following Olmsted's arrival at the Mariposa Mining Estate in 1863, "… he helped prepare a national bill making the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Groves into state reservations" (Fabos et al. 43). Perhaps Olmsted receives this credit because he seems a more prestigious figure to uphold as Yosemite's founder than the vulgar commercial nonentity Israel Raymond.

But there are other issues at stake too. If we accept Olmsted's report as a foundational National Parks document, Yosemite displaces Yellowstone as the birthplace of the first National Park. It accords the honor to California instead of Wyoming. Not surprisingly, several Sierra Club publications promote the thesis (Jones 8-9, 16). The Olmsted/Yosemite myth even accrues features of a widespread Yellowstone legend. In the anecdote that Richard West Sellars describes as "a revered part of national park folklore and tradition" (Sellars 8), members of the Washburn-Doane expedition gather around a campfire at Yellowstone and discuss the question of turning it into a public park (Sellars 8). Apparently unconcerned by the difficulty a forty three year old man might have reading by firelight, Lee Hall grafts the campfire onto the Yosemite scene where Olmsted presents his report: "At a campfire meeting in the late summer of August 1865, Olmsted read his report to fellow commissioners and a group of visiting dignitaries from the East …" (Hall 129). This borrowed detail coats Olmsted's administrative discourse with a patina of Western romance and wilderness authenticity. It gives Yosemite the same title to a "'virgin birth'—under a night sky in the pristine American West" that Sellars finds in the Yellowstone story (8). In the enhanced accounts of Olmsted's connection with Yosemite, the lines between history and myth blur. Or rather, we seem to be in the presence of something that becomes, in Mircea Eliade's words "a sacred story, and hence a 'true history' because it always deals with *realities*" (6).

What the report says

To see the report as one of the originary moments of important developments in American territorial policies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is to occult its complex adhesions to nineteenth century times and spaces. Selective borrowing from the text makes Olmsted into a visionary figure, but it reveals as much about retrospective patrimonial appropriation as it does about his project for Yosemite. Rather than a the starting point of a historical trajectory that would lead to the 1964 Wilderness Act and to the current ecological restoration projects in Yosemite and other National Parks, the report is part of a geo-historical network that connects nineteenth century California across time and space with Europe and the Eastern United States. Conceived during an interlude in the Indian Wars, it also inaugurates a late stage in the colonial conquest of the North American territory.

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Olmsted recognizes that in granting the land to the State of California "upon the express conditions that the premises are to be held for public use, resort, and recreation, and are to be inalienable for all time…" ("Legislation" n.p.), Congress departs "from the usual method of dealing with the public lands" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 24). Like numerous sites in the West, Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove were inhospitable for farming or homesteading and unpromising for mining. Nevertheless, through the efforts of the artists, photographers and writers who shaped the public taste, such sites were being converted into scenery for the nation's delectation. Olmsted goes to considerable lengths to justify the decision as a democratic one, perhaps, in part, because it contradicts the recently passed Homestead Act of 1862. In Europe, he points out, the rich cultivate their mental and physical health by spending "a certain period of every year on their parks and shooting grounds" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 12). Yosemite resembles these luxurious reserves, and were it not for the intervention of Congress, it could easily have become one: "it would have been practicable for one man to have bought the whole, to have appropriated it wholly to his individual pleasure or to have refused admittance to any who were unable to pay a certain price as admission fee, or as a charge for the entertainment which he would have had a monopoly of supplying. The result would have been a rich man's park" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 24). Thanks to the grant, Congress bestowed a scenic and sanitary treasure on the nation as a whole. Olmsted's sole objection is that the park remains inaccessible for the majority of the population: "for the present, so far as the great body of the people are concerned, it is, and as long as the present arrangements continue, it will remain, practically, the property only of the rich" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 24), hence the urgent necessity of creating a road through the land.

Like a number of texts produced during the 1860s, Olmsted's report incites Easterners to imagine the wonders of California, and it suggests the logistical and institutional means to allow them to enjoy it. In that sense, it not so different from the writings of the now-reviled James Mason Hutchings, whose October 1859 article on "The Great Yo-Semite Valley" lauds the wonders of the scenery and gives practical advice about making the arduous trip. Rather than advocating the preservation of a unique biotope, Olmsted's report urges that this exceptional scenic wonder—a kind of natural museum—become more widely accessible to the American public. Its value lies in the aesthetic qualities—it is compared to works of art—and its sanitary value—it is a refuge for people exhausted by urban industrial life (Kalfus 284-5). For Olmsted, Yosemite is the natural gem that does not need crafting like Central Park but only demands national safekeeping so that the public may benefit from it.

Indeed, Yosemite offers a ready-made park: "whose trees and plants … are closely allied to and are not readily distinguished from those most common in the landscapes of the Eastern States or the midland counties of England" and whose "stream is such a one as Shakespeare delighted in, and brings pleasing reminiscences to the traveller of the Avon or the Upper Thames" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 4). Like many nineteenth century visitors, Olmsted had little difficulty recognizing its aesthetic qualities. He did not realize something that we now understand about Yosemite. The Ahwahneechee had shaped the site Olmsted admired into both their garden and their hunting grounds. Unbeknownst to him, he was describing a park that had been created by centuries of effort on the part of

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its indigenous inhabitants (Olwig 395-7). The land that Senator Conness claimed was "for all public purposes worthless" was actually someone else's homeland ("Legislation" n.p.). In making a grant to the American public, the government was expropriating some of America's first people. As Rebecca Solnit points out with characteristic irony: "Yosemite always looks like a virgin bride in the artistic representations, not like somebody else's mother" (222). She adds: "The touchstone for wilderness turns out to be an artifact of generations of human care" (308).

Of course Olmsted's nineteenth century ideas about Indians prevented him from comprehending their stewardship of the land. He saw them as an intrusive presence that disturbed its natural perfection: "Indians and others have set fire to the forests and herbage and numbers of trees have been killed by these fires" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 22). He was unaware that the open meadows that reminded him of the English countryside were produced by the Indians' practice of selective burning (Biswell 48-55; Anderson 155-186; Figueiredo 29). The landscape that he so admired was the result of centuries of interaction between the land and its inhabitants. Olmsted attributes Yosemite's scenery exclusively to "the greatest glory of nature" (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 4); nevertheless, in his descriptions, he draws on the lexical fields of art appreciation. As Grusin suggestively remarks, Olmsted's report "reproduces nature as a public park in which individual human agency can be simultaneously produced and elided by means of the aesthetic agency of nature" (335). The report remaps and redefines the Ahwahneechee's Yosemite Valley. From a fertile garden that sustains a tribe, it becomes an art gallery framing picturesque scenes that offer themselves to visitors:

> It is not, however, in its grandeur or in its forest beauty that the attraction of this intermediate region consists, so much as in the more secluded charms of some of its glens formed by mountain torrents fed from the snow banks of the higher Sierras.
>
> These have worn deep and picturesque channels in the granite rocks, and in the moist shadows of their recesses grow tender plants of rare and peculiar loveliness. The broad parachute-like leaves of the peltate saxifrage, delicate ferns, soft mosses, and the most brilliant lichens abound, and in following up the ravines, cabinet pictures open at every turn, which, while composed of materials mainly new to the artist, constantly recall the most valued sketches of Calame in the Alps and Apennines. (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 8)

The "secluded charms" of the Valley have to be discovered in the gaze of the civilized traveller. The site becomes a litmus test that measures the viewer's level of sophistication. Stephen Germic sees it as reflecting American exceptionalism in Olmsted's eyes, "constituting an ideal identity while repressing the confusion, personal and social, of classes" (Germic 56). The rhetoric of democracy in the report is at war with the elitism of its aesthetics.

Olmsted was convinced that the Ahwahneechee, along with some of the rougher sorts of people he encountered in California, were incapable of appreciating the scenic beauty of Yosemite:

> The power of scenery to affect men is, in a large way, proportionate to the degree of their civilization and to the degree in which their taste has been cultivated. Among a thousand savages there will be a much smaller number who will show the least sign of being so affected than among a thousand persons taken from a civilized community. This is only one of the many channels in which a similar distinction between civilized and savage men is to be generally observed. (Olmsted 1993 14)

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Olmsted's report proposes a new measurement for determining one's level of sophistication: "It is an important fact that as civilization advances, the interest of men in natural scenes of sublimity and beauty increases" (Olmsted 1993 22). The adoption of this yardstick for measuring civilization explains the curious opening paragraph of Olmsted's report, which gives a long list of the nation's artistic achievements during the Civil War years (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 1-2). The list demonstrates the Euro-Americans' and especially the Easterners' title to Yosemite. They are refined enough to appreciate "the sublimity of the Yo Semite, and … the stateliness of the neighboring Sequoia grove," which they have seen framed in Bierstadt's paintings and Watkins's photographs (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 2).

This use of "natural scenes" as a touchstone for evaluating civilization inverts an earlier standard. In the first centuries of colonization the invaders celebrated their ability to transform wilderness into farmland (Nash 23-43). That was the proof of their civilization and the justification for dispossessing America's indigenous peoples. But in the West, those criteria did not always apply. The people Olmsted met in California during his work managing the mines of the Mariposa Estate were not farmers. Nor did he find most of them particularly civilized, if we credit his letters back East and his notes for a projected study of "The Pioneer Condition in American History." In describing the locals, he uses the term "savage" to apply to whites and Indians alike. The letters he sent back East deplored the behavior of the men he encountered in the West. For example, in an October 10, 1864, letter to "Harding" sent from Bear Valley, California, Olmsted writes: "It is *nowhere*; there is no society. Any appearance of social convenience that may be found is a mere temporizing expedient by which men cheat themselves to believe that they are not savages" (quoted in Kalfus 259-60). Nevertheless, in time, through contact with Yosemite's superb natural scenes, he hopes that Californians will improve.

The flaws in Olmsted's proposal

Although no one has produced any evidence as to why Olmsted's proposal was shelved, I would like to suggest that it failed to respect some of the cardinal rules of grant writing. For one thing, it errs in its manner of addressing its audience. It speaks to cultivated Easterners rather than to the Californians who were to evaluate it. Second, its demand for $37,000 of public money is apparently unrealistic. Subsequent funding requests by two of the commissioners maligned in the Ken Burns documentary were turned down (Jones 33). In 1868 J.D. Whitney's appeal for a modest $5000 was refused. In 1875, and again in 1877 Commissioner William Ashburner unsuccessfully requested $26,500 for trails and bridges. Apparently the legislature was unwilling to grant any money for this new and unprecedented manner of managing public land. The models already in place for developing government land grants—homesteading railroading and mining—relied on private investment. Finally, Olmsted's plan may have simply been unpractical. He claims in his report that his proposed road will obviate the necessity of exploiting the valley's natural resources:

> Besides the advantages which such a road would have in reducing the expense, time and fatigue of a visit to the tract to the whole public at once, it would also serve the important purpose of making it practicable to convey timber and other articles necessary for the

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> accommodation of visitors into the Yo Semite from without, and thus the necessity, or the temptation, to cut down its groves and to prepare its surface for tillage would he avoided. Until a road is made it must be very difficult to prevent this. (Olmsted, *Yosemite* 25)

In spite of Olmsted's claims, Yosemite's topographical layout, far from developed areas and difficult to access, presented logistical challenges that would not necessarily have been resolved simply by improving the road. Lodging the growing numbers of visitors and feeding them and their horses would have demanded more substantial investments than those Olmsted projected.

The twin values of democracy and nature evoked in the report may actually be incompatible. Nowadays, the millions of visitors who come to the Yosemite Valley each year expecting to find scenes similar to the paintings and photographs that Olmsted knew, or even to Ansel Adams's photographs, leave somewhat disappointed. Many of them yearn nostalgically for the Yosemite that Olmsted saw in 1865 and agree that the site would be perfect if it were not for the crowds of people and the roads, restaurants, campsites, and shops that accommodate them. Moreover, even without the complex infrastructure of what is one of America's favorite national parks, the landscape has altered over time. In banishing the Indians and banning their practice of controlled burning, both measures that Olmsted would have approved, the park managers have permitted the Valley floor to become covered with dense evergreen trees that obscure some of the views that nineteenth century visitors so admired.

Although the photographs and films of the park available for the admiration of the public continue to promulgate images resembling the views Olmsted would have enjoyed, visitors entering the park by its access roads have very different impressions. William Least Heat Moon's recent depiction of the Valley illustrates the dysphoric experience of those in search of the legendary Yosemite:

> In the middle of Yosemite Village in the deep valley of California's upper Merced River is a soft-drink machine, and on its front is a large posterized photo of a golfer about to tee up, golf cart at the ready. Large words proclaim: DISCOVER YOUR YOSEMITE. I had just come from talking with Ranger Scott Gediman, who told me, "National Parks aren't for entertainment." Yet within the Yosemite boundaries are the golf course, a refrigerated ice-skating rink, five ski lifts, snowboard runs, a kennel, a sports bar with a big-screen TV, and an annual costumed pageant reenacting an English Christmas dinner. As I tried to make note of the pop machine, I was jostled by a passing multitude bestrung with gear: cell phones, MP3 players, and pagers. I dodged baby strollers hung with diaper bags, cars with video cameras poked out the windows, and a tandem bicycle pulling a trailer hauling two barking dogs the size of large rodents. The crowd was shod more in flip-flops than hiking shoes, halter tops outnumbered field shirts, and the people licked ice-cream cones and munched tacos. Was I at a mall or in a valley world renowned for its natural wonders and its 800 miles of trails? Within an ace of the drink box were two hotels, a large store, a jail, a post office, an ATM, parking spaces for 2,000 cars, and more than 200 miles of asphalt pavement. The Yosemite I wanted to discover had to be somewhere else, both in time and place. (Heat Moon 98)

Heat Moon's lists of the artifacts of contemporary life illustrate how thoroughly the Yosemite experience undoes the binary division between nature and culture, wilderness and civilization. Moreover, his inventory of the installations catering to tourists clearly gives the lie to the park ranger's idea of what a National Park is. The ranger's idea that the parks are not for entertainment seems in contradiction with the original legislation

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that set apart the site "for public use, resort, and recreation" ("Legislation" n.p.). Clearly though, contemporary ideas of "use, resort and recreation" have changed. What has remained constant is the struggle to define the nation's mission to manage the Yosemite Valley.

What Yosemite might become in the future is still the subject of intense debate. The most recent struggle centered on the Merced River, placed since 1987 under the provisions of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The river's new status required that the National Parks Service present a comprehensive management plan to reduce tourist impact on the river. After years of debate opposing economic and environmental interest groups, the National Parks Service finally released the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. Calls for limitations on automobile access and camping facilities have been dismissed as economically unfeasible.[2] In fact, campground and hotel space will increase under the new plan, while certain leisure facilities such as the skating rink, will be moved further away from the river (Department of the Interior 5-6). The dilemma facing park managers remains as unresolved today as it did in Olmsted's time: "How to admit all the visitors who wish to come without destroying the very thing they value?" (Spirn 94). The recent debate shows how imperatives of making the National Parks accessible and profitable take precedence over environmental considerations. These policies have shaped the park as it is today. Had Olmsted been given the responsibility for implementing his plans, it is questionable whether the site would have developed in a substantially different manner.

Against considerable odds, Olmsted's preliminary report on Yosemite and the Mariposa Big Trees has assumed an important place in the history of the National Parks and in the advocacy of environmental conservation. Since the report was ignored and then lost, it could not have done much to influence the parks' development.[3] Moreover, Olmsted is certainly no Thoreau or Muir; he has no particular reverence for wildness. In fact on arriving in California he wrote to his wife, "I hate the wilderness and wild, tempestuous, gambling men such as I shall have to master …" (Olmsted quoted in Stevenson 244). Indeed, he values civilization, and he expects people to become more civilized in contact with Yosemite thanks the education in taste provided by its beautiful scenes. His first goal was to provide access to those scenes by constructing a road. How, then, can we explain the latter-day importance of the report?

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[2] See William R. Lowry's discussion of the traffic problem in Yosemite in *Repairing Paradise: The Restoration of Nature in America's National Parks,* 63-106.

[3] Germic argues that while Olmsted perceived his experience managing the Mariposa mines as another of his failures, his brief tenure as Chair of the Yosemite Commission "offered him some redemption for his time and efforts in California" (53). While this may be true, I am skeptical about Germic's claim that Olmsted "played a major role in the creation of two of the most celebrated public spaces in the United States—New York's Central Park and Yosemite National Park" (13). His engagement with Central Park is indisputable, but there is little evidence that his involvement with Yosemite went beyond the drafting of this aborted report.

Why the Olmsted/Yosemite myth arose

First of all, Olmsted's importance may have something to do with his son's success in carrying on the father's work in public landscape design. More solidly implanted in the American West, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. made a significant contribution to the shaping of the National Parks in the first half of the twentieth century (Diamant n.p.). Olmsted Jr.'s suggestions were incorporated into National Park Service Organic Act of 1916. His ideas for the aims of the institution turn his the elder Olmsted's vision in a more environmentally responsible direction: *"To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations"* (quoted in Diamant n.p.; italics in original). His work for the protection of California's redwoods led to one of the groves in California's Redwood National Park being named for him. His commitment to conservation earned him the U.S. Department of the Interior Conservation Award in 1956. Finally Olmsted Jr. continued the work that his father was unable to do in Yosemite. He served on the National Park Service Board of Advisors for the park and when the Tioga Road was completed in 1961 (Trexler 24), a scenic turnout was named "Olmsted Point" in honor of both father and son. The plaque commemorating the two men bears a photograph of the son, but it credits the father with the authorship of "a report recommending policy for the care and protection of Yosemite's scenery and wildlife." Contributing to the Olmsted-Yosemite legend, the plaque adds that the report "is considered a classic national park treatise."

The rejection of Olmsted's "Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report" meant that its author could not be associated with Yosemite's anarchic development in the years following the 1864 legislation. Given the rampant commercialization of the park in the ensuing century, Olmsted's ideas have come to seem comparatively more ecologically sound. Since the architect of Central Park was never given a chance to manage the very different problems of Yosemite, he would never be responsible for the errors committed. On the contrary, he can be held up as the more desirable alternative, the road not taken. "How different the development of Yosemite might have been had his report received the serious consideration of the State Legislature for whom it was intended and if he himself had remained at his Commission post!" exclaims Jones in his Sierra Club publication (30).

Imagining Olmsted as a proto-environmentalist gives continuity and legitimacy to a movement that began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century with the Hetch Hetchy controversy and that remains under threat in the twenty-first century. Olmsted's report responds to the pressing need to find respectable ancestors for conservationism. It is especially important for the future of the park itself, since it is governed by national legislation, and American law relies on interpreting precedents and intentions. For Yosemite, the text becomes part of the Book of Genesis, offering a myth of origins that supplements stories like Bunnell's account of the site's discovery, now somewhat tarnished by its link with the Indian Wars. Instead of being associated with that campaign of extermination and dispossession, Olmsted's report can be read part of a generous democratic impulse to conserve the land for future generations. Its modest

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suggestions about refraining from damaging the scenery can serve as ammunition in campaigns to inflect the development of Yosemite in a less commercial, more ecologically respectful direction. As Kalfus observes, in general, when Olmsted is mentioned in debates concerning the parks associated with him, "he becomes the rallying point of those who would defend what they perceive to have been Olmsted's intent against the encroachments of political and commercial interests" (36).

Naming Olmsted as the unheard prophet of Yosemite and of the conservation movement and venerating his brief text as a founding scripture is a way of bringing simplicity and clarity to the tangled reality of events. He can be placed alongside John Muir in the gallery of great men that are singled out as the moving forces in environmental history. However, as our insight into the ways in which the many actors—human and more-than-human—combine to shape the land develop, that history will be constantly subject to revision.

Years after his resignation from the Yosemite Commission, Olmsted was asked to express his opinion on the campaign to protect it from exploitation. Initially he refused, saying only that he "would like to have a talk with Mr. Johnson and with Mr. Muir on the subject" (Stevenson 392). Then, in an 1890 pamphlet entitled "Government Preservation of Natural Scenery," he reiterated his concerns with protecting "scenery from fires, trespassers and abuse" and with providing "the necessary conditions for making the enjoyment of natural scenery available" (quoted in Stevenson 392). As we see from this later pamphlet, Olmsted, like most men of his age, admired Yosemite for its scenic beauty. His plans for development would have focused on making the site more accessible with the aim of thereby refining public taste and manners. Embracing a democratic model that broke with more elitist European forms of land management, he hoped to make available the uplifting effects of Yosemite's natural beauty to the widest possible audience. As Spirn rightly points out, Olmsted's management strategy for Yosemite was "frankly anthropocentric" (92).

If Olmsted is now honored as one of the fathers of environmental conservation, it is largely because his report was ignored. The failure of his proposal and its subsequent burial and resurrection makes possible its subsequent success as a founding document for contemporary environmentalists. Olmsted is blessedly innocent of the many errors in management that have turned the sumptuous homeland of the Ahwahneechee into one of the National Parks system's most heavily exploited tourism sites. If the outsider's perspective guiding Olmsted's "Preliminary Report" was unwelcome to Californians in 1864, that same eccentricity later permitted it to have an extended, though perhaps illegitimate, life in modern debates about the nation's territorial policies.

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