

THE LANDSCAPE PRIESTHOOD

BY ELBERT PEETS

THERE is in this country a fairly numerous group of persons called landscape architects. They range from Tony Piccolo, a suburban artist of the spade with a front yard full of tagged retinosporas, through the service departments of the big nurseries, up to the true Olympians, the fifty Fellows of the American Society of Landscape Architects. There is, also, an order of lay sisters who serve tea on the lawn when their Kelway hybrids are in bloom, and applaud briskly at the end of an informal talk on the culture of Alpine bog plants. There is, again, a mixed group of publications, from the quarterly that does not utter the name of Repton, Olmsted or Eliot without a prayer of thanks to Allah, down to the police-dog-and-motor-boat type of garden magazine that publishes a calendar telling one when to rake the leaves off the tulip bed. Finally, there is a burgeoning system of instruction in landscape architecture, a Mother School adjacent to the Mecca of the art (and of the cod industry) with numerous offspring at the State universities. And yet, in spite of all this pomp and noise, I quite seriously believe that the sacred art of all these busybodies has made the visible face of this continent somewhat less beautiful than it would otherwise have been.

I say this without denying that landscape architects have formed many beautiful compositions and have saved from destruction many areas of fine natural growth. The Middlesex Fells are delight-

ful, indeed, and I envy the squirrels that play all day in the Ramble in Central Park. Charles Eliot was, to be sure, a highly useful citizen. None the less, the introduction of the English landscape style of gardening was a calamity of the first magnitude. One does not blame the mid-Nineteenth Century—it had to have its wallow in the pool of nature-sentiment. But why do landscape architects of today continue to resort to that pool and form nationwide organizations for its pious protection, when to the nose of every intelligent contemporary the place is obnoxious? American landscape architecture is now a huge joke. It has produced a few pleasant reproductions of Surrey landscape and a few charming Italian gardens. But as a vital, evolving art it is dead.

The story goes back to the inspiring era of George I, when one Kent leaped the fence and discovered that all nature was a garden. It was already known in his day that nature was either the principal proof of Divinity or God's favorite residence. The gardeners in the new natural style thus acquired a sacerdotal distinction which they have never wholly got rid of. The landscape garden was in the beginning (see "Paradise Lost") and ever shall be. Other arts reflect human vagaries, but this one has an unchanging norm. The Abbé Delille's rule was simple: "Worship the genius loci and consult God." Edward Young said that nature was Christian. That, like Christianity, it was surely most to God's taste in the home counties of

England, was not doubted. Such were the roots of the fanatic identification of gardening with nature, and of the fierce denial of the capacity or right of any but the initiated themselves to judge their work.

This confidence in the Heaven-willed eternal verity of informal gardening sat heavily on the revered Olmsted, the St. Peter G. Eddy of American landscape architecture. He loved to quote—the Psalmist's words were his divine authority—"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters," and doubtless there came to his mind an English meadow and mill pond. That many-sided strong mind of his deserves an exploring Gamaliel Bradford. Does it mean anything that he loved buggy-riding and hated cities? That he was an Anglophile, and that his "real prophet" was Ruskin? Olmsted saw himself as a pioneer in a cultural wilderness, but whatever tool he used, that wilderness supplied. He did not invade—he answered a Call.

New York wanted Central Park and wanted to be told that it was the best antidote to her slums. The gentlemen who profited by those slums were not surprised when they found the antidote well laced with bridle paths. New Yorkers wanted to be told, as Olmsted roundly told them, that "the average amount of disease and misery and vice and crime has been much greater in towns," and that the remedy was to make in Central Park "the greatest possible contrast with the streets and the shops and the rooms of the town." It was such a pleasant remedy! It was God's wish, or nature's, and if the Irish didn't walk three miles for the still water cure, or if it didn't cure them, well, it is not our fault that nature prefers carriage-owning Protestants of English ancestry.

There was the usual progression in Olmsted's faith, from the external to the internal. In England, five years before Central Park was planned, he saw the public garden at Birkenhead. "I cannot undertake," he exclaimed, "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 kept with the most consummate neatness." The young Yankee saw a neat job. Two decades of success fixed the creed of the winding path, and made defence of it superfluous, as witness this pronouncement of his: "Whether the contemplation of natural scenery is practically of much effect in counteracting and alleviating these evils [of urban crowding] . . . I do not propose to argue, . . . for if the object of parks is not thus suggested, I know of none which justifies their cost." And that was that. Twenty years more of honors and reading Ruskin made of him a mauve-decade Isaiah: "Nature is the shape and image of right reason—reason in its highest sense embodied and made visible in order, stability, in conformity to eternal law." And, one might add, also in conformity to the soul-need of Frederick Law Olmsted, a New England Puritan doubting the creed of his fathers, seeking in benevolence and the love of nature substitutes for the harsh religion that was their substitute for art.

For fifty years Olmsted preached and practiced, and his faith has now spread to every corner of the country. His disciples have almost as tight control over American gardening as the Klan once had over Indiana politics. Large estates, though they have their formal gardens, are mainly in the landscape style. Every suburban lot breaks out in scalloped borders and specimen plants as naturally as a Plymouth Rock hen lays a brown egg. No park board would dream of employing a designer who questioned the validity of the landscape postulate. Cemeteries, as everybody knows, are always landscaped, and so are all the Floral Heights. It is truly pitiful to see normally straight-edge minded engineers trying to equal the trick streets and yawpy intersections of the initiates. Even when

landscape architects do not get the job, the landscape idea usually does, though it be a Scotch gardener that incorporates the tradition. It is not only in Mr. Babbitt's Zenith that landscaped lawns are standard equipment. The Colleoni statue in Newark is landscaped, the Lincoln Memorial is landscaped (a classic Greek setting based on data from the paintings of Puvis de Chavannes), the Toledo art museum is landscaped, the Los Angeles Automobile Club is landscaped—nothing, indeed, has escaped the blight.

II

Chance has given the priests of the inner temple a firm hold on the training of the novices. In the 70's Olmsted moved from New York to Brookline. He built up a large practice, and dozens of men got their training in his office. One of these was Charles Eliot, son of the president of Harvard. When, about 1900, after Charles Eliot's death, Harvard began instruction in landscape architecture, it was natural that the new department should become practically a branch of the Olmsted office. F. L. Olmsted, Jr., was made an instructor and, later, Charles Eliot professor. At present the three principal teachers are old Olmsted men. The school is both orthodox and eclectic. Two of the instructors are Italian-garden fans, and the student work is touched with reminiscences of Lante and Gamberaia—but only at one side of the house. There is a chaser of wild garden close at hand, and the Principal View is valed and shrubbed and clumped in the established camouflage mode. A professor and the school librarian have published a bulky text-book on more than one page of which the Eighteenth Century returns to life, as for instance: "A landscape of rocky upland country about a mountain tarn might be mysterious in a day of low-drifting clouds, stern or desolate in a storm, and perhaps on a bright breezy Spring morning even gay." They say also that a composition of two trees is difficult to

manage. The instructor in planting design is a botanist who has ventured to write a book on "Man's Spiritual Contact with Nature." One of the illustrations in it has this legend: "'And God reveals himself in many ways.' Here are two—a tree and a church." He also quotes this remark by Ruskin: "What a thought that was when God thought of a tree!" It is minds freighted with such lovely but sterile ideas who are training the men who will make America's contribution to an art practiced by Raphael, Le Nôtre and Wren! And as long as they are at Harvard they must continue to teach this sort of stuff—they cannot deny the Logos incarnated in Olmsted and Charles Eliot. The late President Eliot's bequest to the school is only the most recent of many chains that tie them to the traditional faith.

Very few of the students there are drawn from Harvard College. Most of them are graduates of State universities where undergraduate instruction in horticulture and ornamental gardening is given. Of these many go back to their old schools, or to others, as instructors, on the recommendation of the Harvard faculty. This interchange of personnel produces a strong spiritual connection between the Olmsted-Harvard tradition and hundreds of men and women who go from the State universities with a smattering of garden design, enough to get them jobs as draftsmen, or with a general impression to guide them in forming the settings of their own homes or as members of city-beautiful committees.

Plant breeders, to induce variations, force their seedlings into rampant growth. Exactly that is what the moribund garden art most needs. Students of garden design, instead of being held down by traditional tastes and conceptions of practicality, ought to be encouraged to commit every sort of imaginative indiscretion. One of the programmes should begin thus: "The Italians of America wish to build an enormous garden in honor of Michelangelo (or Mussolini) which shall do the utmost

possible violence to the teachings of Humphry Repton." The impression that fancy will flourish when you simply refrain from laying obvious bricks on it is an illusion. A child of six twists his tongue and draws unheard of dragons, but candidates for degrees play safe. The chairman of the Harvard School of Landscape Architecture points with pride to the maturity of his pupils. The average of their ages is twenty-eight. That is a catastrophe. The brain of such a student is a terminal moraine pushed into his skull by the academic and professional glaciers that have moved over it. Only pedagogical dynamite, not abstention from repression, can open up those minds and start them reworking the treasures of accumulated æsthetic form.

Not merely by the deadfall of professional education does the landscape tribe trap its victims. Its hardy braves hunt far afield. In Massachusetts the assistant extension professor of landscape gardening lectures to you, shows you lantern slides, and makes plans for planting the school grounds. In Iowa a landscape extension specialist shows you a demonstration farmstead. In Georgia he is a field agent in landscape gardening. The Federal Department of Agriculture has its county agents on your trail, and sends you a bulletin on beautifying the farm, art at its government best. Agricultural institutes, normal schools, farm papers, and county fairs do their bit. Garden magazines furnish plans and planting lists. The lists may vary, but the same plan goes to Maine and Texas. Nursery service departments, run by young fellows who have studied at the State college under Harvard graduates, gladly make plans for planting their shrubs in the corners of your lawn. Garden clubs invite lecturers to tell you how to do foundation plantings of mixed evergreens.

A few years ago an issue of the official organ of the American Society of Landscape Architects was devoted to extension work along landscape lines, as one says. There were reports from all the fields. The Department of Agriculture man sent a

photograph of a previously gaunt farm home beautified with a curved walk and flocculent shrubbery. A Southern horticulturist told of his booklet, entitled "Beautifying the Rural Home," and of his Summer teaching at a college in Tennessee. The editor concluded the symposium, pointing out matters that might better be left to private practitioners. Now, several of these symposing professors are friends of mine, and I regret to report that some of them are fitted to teach no art higher than pitching horse-shoes. Yet the editor—a man of sense off duty—cast not one suspicious glance at the *quality* of all this busying. In the true gospel, it seems, there is no varying quality. A shrub planted is a soul saved.

III

The American Society of Landscape Architects, unlike the corresponding architectural organization, has enlisted almost all the practitioners in its field. Membership is essential to respectable professional standing—and helps get jobs. Admission to the lower ranks of the society is easy. Given the necessary diploma or a certificate of service in an approved office, all one needs is a slight competence in drafting and facility with the established clichés. Since junior members are taken directly from the colleges, proved power of design would be an absurd requirement. Fellowship and high office follow upon professional success and conformity to ethical standards.

Every royal academy has its chorus of ancients. In the A. S. L. A. it is the Boston crowd. Olmsted men are preponderant in the society, if not numerically in the majority. The present head of the Harvard school is quite actively a past president. The official organ is edited by a Harvard professor, a member of the Olmsted firm. The Western members occasionally rebel against the Eastern control of the offices and committees, but they do so very cautiously. There is apparently no protest

against the academy's fundamentally conservative attitude toward design. Naturally, the leaders in the A. S. L. A. do not openly influence the members to use one style of design rather than another. They have little need to. The society has never heard of Kirschville, Pa., and Kirschville has never heard of the society. But when the directors of the Angels' Rest Cemetery ask young Mr. Strauchenpflanzler to draw an extension plan they know it will be formed in pleasing pretzel-curves. Anything else would offend their intelligences. Anything else would, of course, be stiff, formal, unnatural, inappropriate, un-democratic, un-American, irreverent. As long as these sturdy words walk the ramparts the burgher landscape architect may sleep serene. His stock in trade is safe.

And yet not quite. A prowling foreign fancy, the vogue of formal gardens, lately waylaid some of the best customers. Faced with this condition, the profession showed subtle tact. It made the thief a salesman. It became eclectic: it designs formally or informally as is most functional, a phrase safely construed as meaning according to the wishes of the client's wife. Will the guild adapt itself to the trend of taste and slough off naturalism entirely? Alas, it cannot! The somewhat delicate reason had best be expressed from within. Hubbard and Kimball of Harvard, in their book on landscape design, define the profession's catchment area thus:

In producing the formal setting of a palace, the landscape architect's equipment may indeed differ from that of the architect only in his knowledge of plants and what effects can be secured with them; in reproducing or intelligently preserving a natural woodland, however, the landscape architect must have a knowledge of nature's processes, a familiarity with nature's materials, a sensitiveness to the natural beauty of rock and wood and water, which does not form the professional equipment of any other artist.

No extraordinary knowledge of cerebral ecology is needed to suggest that under this foliage of logical distinction will be found the fungi of economic interest. If all land-arrangement were formal the

landscape architects would soon sink to the level of horticultural assistants to the architects. Not until the osteopath, seduced by pills, gives up his vertebral lesions, will the landscape architect forswear his undulating shrubbery.

The last competition for the Rome prize in landscape architecture illustrated this regimentation of ideas in the profession very well. The programme—unlike many other competitive programmes that have required dominantly informal layouts—fixed no style of design. The small memorial park was to be built on an irregular terrain with a hill in its midst, which the builders of the Parthenon would have lusted to shape into a great rectangular terrace overlooking the town. Yet all the competing designs were in the informal park style. One of them was full of walks in commas and ovals, French curves as dashing as any in the Parc Monceau. In the winning plan the principal entrance drive split a rectangular intersection of the boundary streets, and just within the park impinged against the point of a triangular island of lawn. On the hill was a timid touch of informal formality, quite impotent to master the design—a passage that could be called formal, if that is what you want, but not formal enough to suggest that an architect did it.

These men may honestly not like that sort of thing. But as students and as competitors they were browbeaten by the landscape atmosphere. They were intimidated by the topography, they had no convictions capable of standing up against what happened to exist, they all knew that the landscape creed holds trees and ground forms sacred. These restraints were just as effective as if the programme had explicitly said, "No masculine rendering of the hill-overlook idea, such as you may shortly be going to the Pincian Hill study, is permitted." The Pincian Hill and Hadrian's villa may save one of these men. The others will go back to their proposed contours in full line, existing contours in dotted line, and the annual banquet of the

A. S. L. A. This society's fundamental purpose, apparently, is to keep its art separate and distinct from the contiguous arts. It is an anti-social purpose. The arts were better off when the chance of genius might make of one man architect, goldsmith and engineer. Specializing is in part responsible for the conspicuous inconsistencies of phase among our arts. He is a lucky architect who on successive days works on a factory, steel bridge, lunch room, church, skyscraper and country villa. He is more likely to make architecture the true fruit of our culture and genuinely enjoyable to us than a specialist is.

When it comes to making a beautiful country, no professional art can take the place of mellowed folk art. Italy was not made beautiful by artists so much as by peasants and laborers. The garden architects of the Renaissance did not create things wholly new: they built more dramatic versions of the old court-yards, gardens and grape arbors. A peasant thought the master's garden fine, but he did not think it strange. Artists and peasants could work together to make the country beautiful, because they used the same form-language. There is a tiny plaza at the edge of Orvieto, a few feet of parapet wall, a bench, four trees. But the art of the place, it will be noted, is exactly the art of the Villa d'Este.

The landscape style does not speak the folk language and cannot be harmonized with folk art. There is a brief essay by Olmsted in which he contrasts a white picket fence with a picturesque stone wall of varied texture, planted with rock plants and sketchy vines. The wall might be pretty, but Olmsted's choice shows that he was blind to the beauties and the limitations of folk art. Go to New Bedford: the town is full of charming garden motives, bits of box parterre, granite gate-posts, buckthorn hedges looking over stone walls, low terraces and steps, and balanced lilacs at the gates. Out at Padanarum there are great cedar hedges and green piers

twelve feet high and eight feet through that would be famous in garden lore if they were at Hampton Court. Now go to the Stetson estate, nearby, planned by Charles Eliot. In whole effect and in every detail it is as much unlike the fine garden tradition of New Bedford as it could possibly be made. The entrance drive would not be more exotic to the local culture if it were planted with palms. The same sort of thing can be seen in any part of the country. In California the early settlers from the East applied their old ways to the new materials, and made the beginnings of a charming indigenous art of the land. The stunning clipped Monterey cypresses in the Odd Fellows' cemetery at Salinas, the occasional old velvet-soft cypress hedges, the lofty green arches over front gates, the eucalyptus lanes, the houses set in orchards—in the face of all this enormous wealth of suggestion landscape architecture has produced what? The Angeleno's pride, the atrocious East Lake Park!

The landscape style is irremediably toxic to the good taste of the countryman. It is nature-imitative, informal, anti-geometric, opposed to the display of craftsmanship, which no genuine folk art can be. Especially in building and the surroundings of the home, folk art has always formed simple symmetrical arrangements. Only such rudimentary principles of design as straightness, uniformity, economy and equal balance can be understood by the simple minds who do the great mass of building and gardening. The illiterate Italian peasant or the art-fearing New England farmer, left alone, will make for his house a charming setting of stone walls, terraces, walks, hedges, arbors and rows of trees, handled with pleasant characteristic touches in each locality. But give him new materials and new ideas, and he contrives a display of inane ugliness. Ornamental landscape gardening, standardized and nationally advertised, is wiping out whatever there is of the beautiful folk types of garden art.

IV

The landscapers need not all hang. Many of the younger men see the tangle of myth and vested interest that binds the profession, and are slowly cutting their way toward the light. They are looking for inspiration, not merely in the national styles of gardening, in Kip's views and Falda's "Fontane," but in every sort of space and ground arrangement, in Renaissance plazas and Mayan temple groups. They are groping toward new forms in land design, with as yet nothing agreed upon except that there are æsthetic motives and mechanical means in our huge gridiron cities, in our love for height and size, in the Wilson dam and the Yale Bowl, in concrete mixers and steam shovels, and in booster energy and national highways. They see that gasoline has changed the design and location of parks. Observing the Sunday crowds lying two deep on Revere Beach, they doubt that only hilly lawns and trees in groups of three or five can rest the city soul. They see that the current American is not a gardener, that he does not care for plants as plants, though he loves grass, trees, sunlight and panoramic views as much as ever. I know of one young landscape architect, in charge of a nursery, who is simplifying his plant lists so that a person of ordinary intelligence can look at his catalogue without getting dizzy.

It is true that Americans, even such as

care for art in one way or another, are barely interested in garden and park design. That is because we do not know what we are missing. As an instance: there are few things that have more of both charm and dignity or make a stronger appeal to human form-feeling than a fine avenue of trees—not mere street trees, but straight walls of foliage with a broad carpet of grass or gravel between them, like the avenues in St. Cloud. American landscape architects have been busy three-quarters of a century, but where in any of their public parks is there a really fine avenue? We have suffered so long from the incredibly narrow taste of our park designers that our imaginations have no measure with which to assess our loss. That loss is virtually a whole art, an art that Apollo seems somehow to have inspired with breadth and dignity and also with the fancy and friendliness that make it a joy to every kind of mind.

But ideas do change—in time. New work will be done, new words will become the nuclei of new values, and appropriate disguises will be found whereby the new ways can penetrate even into the heads of the professors. The benevolent analyst whose name is hereto superscribed will then be tendered honorary membership in a reformed A. S. L. A. And at last the Anglo-natural style of garden will be laid away in the God's acre of Eighteenth Century metaphors.

OLD WHITEY

BY NELS ANDERSON

AT FIRST Old Whitey did not take kindly to her confinement. She rebelled against the narrow, grimy pen. She threw herself against the plank fence, growling her protest. She tried to dig under it. Then she tried to climb over, but it was too high, so she contented herself with standing on her hind legs, her front feet and snout hanging over the top. From this position she could see all the centers of interest on the Krone farm: the house, the stable and the granary where she used to pull ears of corn through the cracks. She could see the people come and go. And she could see the swill-barrel.

Whenever anyone came in sight she would cry out, complaining. No one heeded her except Billy, and he only appeared at meal times. As he went through the ceremony of dripping the swill and mixing into it the usual quart of boiled wheat, Old Whitey looked on eagerly, emitting little grunts of anticipation. She was becoming more interested in the carryings-on at the swill-barrel than in anything else.

As she thus gave more attention to eating and less to escape Old Whitey's protests subsided to occasional plaintive little squeals. She began to ignore all sounds outside the pen save when she heard Billy approach. Then she would clamber to her standing position, groaning like a starveling. But all the time she was gaining in weight, and so it became increasingly difficult for her to lift herself. Finally, she ceased to try, and then, by degrees, she lost all interest in the outside universe. In her indifference she would lumber through the mire from the muddy corner where she slept to the equally muddy corner where

she ate, only to return to sleep some more.

The face of Billy, appearing each meal time with his bucket, was finally the only link that connected her with her former existence. She would listen for him and try to gobble all the contents of his bucket in a few great gulps, before he emptied it into the trough. But gradually she lost even her fervor for food. At times she was so groggy when he came that she made no attempt to rise from her squalid bed. After that she ate with the perfunctory apathy of a prisoner who accepts languidly whatever is shoved into his cell. Sometimes she would leave the trough after a few swallows, and later return mechanically to eat more. She would take little half-swallows, halting between mouthfuls as though she were eating in her sleep.

When Whitey, after her career of raising pink little pigs, was committed to the fattening-pen she was large but not without some graceful lines in her well-muscled body. She was rangy and alert and made a show of dignity. But little by little confinement and over-eating robbed her of all this, and at the same time the grimy pen blotted out the clean whiteness of her bristles. Her figure took on a blanket of puffy fat. Her old maternal defiance yielded to a pliant, lazy moping about the pen. She became so enormous that her legs bowed under the burden of her body. Her cheeks puffed out like toy balloons, and her eyes receded and narrowed until they were only a pair of hairy slits in her head.

Pa Krone noted this transformation with keen satisfaction. As he watched Old Whitey mince her food he would wag his head knowingly and smile. "Mama," he