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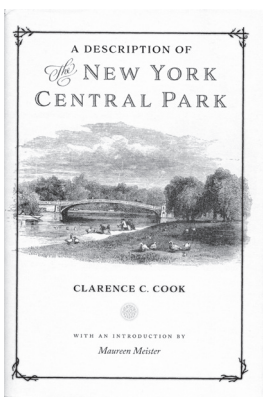
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Book Reviews



***A Description of the New York Central Park*, by Clarence C. Cook, originally published 1869, reprinted with an Introduction by Maureen Meister, (New York: Washington Mews Books/New York University Press, 2017) 238 pp.**

It is tempting to take New York City's Central Park for granted. These days, the park is beautiful, well-maintained, and safe, welcoming 40 million visitors a year. The Central Park Conservancy, a private non-profit entity established in 1980, raises and administers the park's nearly \$80-million annual budget.

It was not always thus. Perhaps the lowest point was in the 1970s. Conditions then were scabrously captured in Carl Reiner's black comedy *Where's Poppa* (1970), in which a dutiful son (Ron Liebman) gets mugged, or worse, every time he rushes across the park at night to keep his brother (George Segal) from murdering his obstreperous mother (Ruth Gordon). The film was admittedly exaggerated, tasteless, and politically incorrect, but in that era the park was unsafe, poorly maintained, and a sorry sight, the great lawns described as dustbowls.

In fact, the park has had several periods of prosperity and decline. Even its earliest days were rocked by political machinations, enormous challenges, and controversies great and small.

All this is brought to life by the snarky judgments, critical asides, and pointed approvals and disapprovals in the book-length essay on Central Park written by Clarence C. Cook. The modestly titled *Description of the New York Central Park* roams virtually through the entire park as it neared completion in 1869—already 10 years in the making—but with numerous diversions to discuss the aesthetic intentions of the park's designers and the various controversies about those goals and other parties' interests. Reproduced in the same trim size as the original, this facsimile edition also includes the hundred-odd evocative engravings of park scenes drawn by Albert Fitch Bellows, a conventional but spatially subtle illustrator of the period.

The reprinted text is preceded by an insightful Introduction by Maureen Meister, an architectural historian who has published widely on the Arts and Crafts movement and nineteenth-century architecture. Meister notes that this was not the first book published on Central Park, but it “continues to be both memorable and authoritative.”

Meister's introduction provides interesting biographical details on Bellows (he had an architectural background but studied painting in Antwerp) as well as other individuals involved in its publication, including the publisher, the printer, and especially its author, who was on his way to becoming one of the country's first professional art critics. Meister's introduction is especially helpful in placing the book's origins within the context of the struggles to get the park under way and to keep it on track in the era when New York City's government was under the corrupt sway of Tammany Hall.

As advertised, Cook's text is mostly descriptive, written in a vivid and lively style that makes for enjoyable insights as the author guides us on a virtual tour, starting in the park's southeast corner, wending across toward 72nd Street, then meandering to the upper park on the east side and finally back down around its west side, with numerous asides and observations along the way. As a critic, Cook can be sharp, but he is an unwavering advocate of the expressed ideals of Central Park's designers, especially the themes of focusing on nature and being open to all levels of society. These firm priorities fuel many of Cook's more tendentious descriptions.

Cook's text begins with a "glance" at the history of the park. In a sense, it all began in the Hudson Valley, with Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–52) of Newburgh. Cook writes that Downing "gave the first expression of the want, which everybody at that time felt, of a great public park" in an essay published in his journal *The Horticulturalist* in 1848. Rural cemeteries had established precedents—Mount Auburn near Boston started in 1831, followed by Laurel Hill in Philadelphia and Green-Wood in Brooklyn. But a non-funereal civic park, Downing argued, would "refine the national character." Downing traveled in 1850 to England, where he not only visited English picturesque parks but recruited the young architect Calvert Vaux to come to Newburgh and establish an architectural partnership. In early 1852, some months before his untimely death, Downing also hired none other than Clarence Cook! Thus, the author's advocacy for the ideals of elevating moral character through the experience of composed nature was rooted in direct contact with the charismatic Downing, whom Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted later honored as their mentor in the design of Newburgh's Downing Park, their final collaboration in 1897.

Cook recounts the missteps in Central Park's gestation. Once the principle of building a park reached wide agreement, the state Legislature established a Central Park Commission in 1851 to oversee its creation. After first considering another site along the East River, they settled on the current location (initially ending at 106th Street, later extended to 110th). Some landowners tried to change the southern boundary from 59th to 72nd Street, but the mayor vetoed that. An engineering firm prepared an initial design, which Cook calls a "matter-of-fact, tasteless affair" with no effort toward "beauty or picturesqueness." In 1857, a reconstituted commission sponsored a competition, which yielded thirty-three entries; the winner was the "Greensward" design of Olmsted and Vaux.

In the description proper, Cook guides us with vivid accounts of every section of the park, relating each area, pond, walk, or bridge to the goals of the Olmsted-Vaux design. Cook rightly praises what most succeeding commentators view as the design's most significant feature—the effective separation and minimal intersection of the park's various modes of transport: carriage roads, bridle paths, pedestrian walkways, and the transverse roads that cut across it.

The first ten years of the park's construction included several controversies and setbacks, including the departures and later reinstatement of both Vaux and Olmsted. One hot issue arose from a pair of grand ceremonial gates designed and proposed by Richard Morris Hunt—the first American architect trained at the *École des Beaux Arts*, who would later have a hugely successful career (several houses in Newport, the Biltmore estate in Asheville, the base of the Statue of Liberty, and the 1890s facade of the Metropolitan Museum that obscures the one by Vaux). The park's designers opposed Hunt's gates as being excessive, intimidating, and somehow undemocratic. Cook called them “the barren spawn of French imperialism,” and he urged the commission to “avoid everything savoring of ostentation, affectation or mere vulgar display of ornaments.”

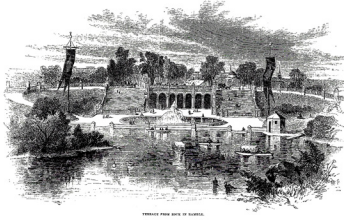
Cook objected that Hunt's gates depended “for any effect or beauty ... upon statuary,” without which they had “nothing to recommend them to an educated taste, and very little to catch even the popular eye.” The author frequently invokes his own superior taste, even while praising the park's commitment to serve people of all classes.

“The whole subject of sculpture in the park is beset with difficulties,” writes Cook. It seems that worthy citizens of foreign governments were constantly offering pieces of statuary, but “thus far there has not been a single piece ... that is at all desirable to have there.” Dismissing certain sculptures as “very unsatisfactory,” Cook suggests that there should be as little as possible of “the artificial” to detract from the park's “natural style of gardening.”

The emphasis on nature is a theme the author emphasizes repeatedly, echoing the sentiments of Vaux and Olmsted. But Cook acknowledges the irony that the “natural” effects of the park were an almost entirely artificial construction, involving tons of rock dynamited and removed, millions of trees planted, and tons of dirt shipped in from New Jersey.

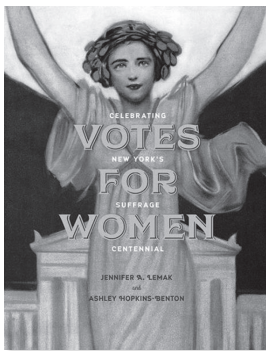
Clarence Cook makes for lively company as he guides the reader from the Sheep's Meadow through the Mall to the Ramble and on to the park's more primitive northern reaches. Along the way, he praises the work not only of Olmsted and Vaux but also other contributors, including assistant architect Jacob Wrey Mould, the entire Central Park Commission, and even Andrew H. Green, who drove Vaux crazy with micromanagement while Olmsted was serving in Washington during the Civil War. (They all seem to have

worked things out after the two designers were reinstated; Green went on to serve the city in numerous ways, including the unification of the five boroughs.)



The original publication of Cook's *Description* took a few years to complete. One advantage of this circumstance is that most of the drawings by Bellows and their engravings were already complete, allowing Cook to refer to individual images in the text. In one case, the author was able to praise Vaux's design for the Belvedere in the northern park even though it had not yet been built—the engraving was based on the architect's drawings. Even today, the illustrations enhance the experience of Cook's virtual tour, although some features have changed. Reading the *Description* "cannot fail" (as Cook would say) to give the reader a renewed appreciation for the park and a resolution to revisit it as soon as possible.

Jim Hoekema, Newburgh Historical Society



***Votes for Women: Celebrating New York's Suffrage Centennial*, edited by Jennifer Lemak and Ashley Hopkins-Benton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017) 272 pp.**

As New York goes, so goes the nation. In 2019 and 2020, prominent U.S. cultural institutions—including the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.—and countless historical societies, state commissions, and local projects will mark the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. "Votes for Women," the New York State Museum's recent exhibition honoring the successful 1917 campaign for state suffrage, was very much a harbinger of exhibitions to come, and its companion volume, released by SUNY Press in late 2017, represented the first major suffrage centennial exhibition to be documented in print.

Not simply a catalog of exhibited objects, but perhaps strongest as a visual record of women's activism, *Votes for Women: Celebrating New York's Suffrage Centennial* provides an introduction to more than 200 years of women's history in one elegantly-produced oversize paperback. Jennifer Lemak and Ashley Hopkins-Benton, New York State Museum curators, serve as the volume's authors and editors, and should be given much credit for not only bringing the State Museum's women's history collections to light, but also for