



Library podcast

Tony Horwitz discusses 'Spying on the South'

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[00:00:36] Good afternoon. I'm Alison Danyer. I am a librarian here at the Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the Central Library. And thank you all for joining us this afternoon. It's a pleasure to welcome Tony Horwitz to the library. Thanks first to the Elliott Bay Book Company for inviting us to host this event. You can find more author events and programming on our Web site at SPL.org. Now let me turn things over to Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce our program. Thank you Alison and.

[00:01:10] Thank you very much for being here. Thank you for coming on this. Let's turn to a lovely Saturday afternoon. We as many of you know are about to be delighted by the welcome return presence of Tony Horwitz who has been to Seattle. I believe with most of his books over the years always engaging in what he does here. And that's also certainly reflected in the books he's written. He has a background which includes we're talking about the state of newspapers but he was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist of certainly for the Wall Street Journal as well as for many years a writer for The New Yorker and then has been writing this extraordinary series of books. I think the first one he came to town with was *Confederates in the Attic* over 20 years ago. I do remember you coming for that. But although *Baghdad Without a Map* was in another book in that about that period books set in lands books set on sea. And the books on Central Land have had mentioning confederates in the attic this resonance with the book he's here for today. This book which is whose title is not something that we embalmers contrived. We're using the word spying about the way he's using it but is a book entitled *Spying on the South*. And it's a book that chronicles and sort retraces the journey undertaken by the young journalist Frederick Law Olmsted in 1854 at a time when the south of this country was making motions beginning to go through the the things that would lead it to attempt to leave this country and all that was going on.

[00:02:48] And he did so as a journalist for The New York Times. This book is rich in this sort of telling stories about Olmsted who most of us think of later for helping design Central Park and his firm which has let design parks and landscapes all over the country in the world and including Seattle. But but Olmsted had did all these other things as young younger men including this period of being a journalist for The New York Times and going around in the south. TONY Horwitz goes back to the south today and gives both this wonderful back and forth reading of what's gone gone on and going on and certainly we're what. What is going on in the south historically and now has great bearing on everything on things everywhere in the country. So Tony we'll read from and talk about this. He'll take questions and then he'll be at this table here to sign copies of his book when he's done. And just to say again it's good you're in for a treat if you haven't seen him before because he's he's good at this the writing and the reading. So with that we thank you. And and actually please join him giving a warm welcome back to wonderful writer Tony Horwitz.

[00:04:01] Oh I hope I can live up to that introduction now can I wander in. Can you hear me. Good. All right. I'm miced up. I like to move around and flail my arms. So first of all just great to be back in Seattle. My favorite book town and I'm not buttering you up. I really feel that way because of Elliott Bay and thank you to the library but also because somehow thoughtful readers always turn out and that's not always the case in other towns. I'm at the front end of book tour and my first sort of prepared talk about my book was last night and I was a little anxious about that and sat preparing it and I go to a bookstore in Berkeley where in rather Berkeley fashion the audience included several kind of drifters who you might say were experiencing a different reality. And as I start talking one of them calls out. Are you talking about Olmsted or the Amistad or Auschwitz.

[00:05:07] And I said I think Olmsted at which point he drifted back out.

[00:05:13] So I decided to toss that talk and start fresh today so you can tell me afterwards. I appreciate the feedback and I'm going to try and talk for no more than 20 minutes. I haven't really timed it but so that we'll have lots of time for questions so don't be shy when I'm done. But I will begin by anticipating a question because it's one that you often receive you know right off the bat as an author and that's how did you get the idea for this book. And with my past work I've generally had something earnest and high minded to say about my lifelong passion for this civil war a great discovery in the archives. This time I have to lower the tone because the idea for Spying on the South came from cleaning house. My wife Geraldine Brooks who so many may have read is a novelist and we live in kind of crooked old farmhouse from the 18th century in New England where everything sags and our overflowing books don't help. And this reached a breaking point a few years ago when Joni and I were fighting over shelf space in this old barn behind our house that we were fixing up to accommodate these books.

[00:06:36] And it was at this point that she ordered me to ruthlessly cull the books I'd been toting around since my college days.

[00:06:46] You know textbooks but other things that I kept claiming I was couldn't part with because I was going to revisit them. And it was true they were still in boxes at this point threatening to collapse the beams in our book barn. So I rather glumly started going through them and throwing away four years of liberal arts education and then I'd come to this fat old volume I'd forgotten about called the Cotton Kingdom by Frederick Law Olmsted. And I opened it up and read a few pages and then I read a few more and then I went to my computer and ordered some biographies and histories from an independent bookstore. I'll point out until I'd fill an entire shelf. So there were a few reasons why I sort of fell so hard for Olmsted really had first contact. One is as Rick mentioned his books The Cotton Kingdom several others grew out of his unlikely early career as an undercover correspondent for The New York Times in the south. On the eve of the civil war before he goes on to the career that he's better known for today. And you know he's out there chasing stories committing journalism while in his personal letters a griping about his editors back in New York his blown out expense budget the bad food it all felt very familiar to me as a longtime journalist.

[00:08:24] I also identified with his adventurous and rather subversive spirit. He's constantly straying from his journalistic beat just going wherever his curiosity leads him. And he he later writes that the the best travel in this vein is to put yourself in the path of accident by which he means not physical accident. Though he has some as I do but accidental encounters and experiences that you couldn't anticipate and not knowing what to expect next. He also is much more drawn to everyday Southerners. Their lives and beliefs than he is to officials or so-called experts that journalists so often rely on. He writes that his very best sources were kind of regular folk with whom he could take a glass of toddy at the bar where the grog shop is. It was sometimes called in that day. This sort of freestyle ground level M.O. pretty much describes my own in my career as a foreign correspondent and roving scribe. In this country and it's one I reprised in this book which opens with a kind of bizarre bar scene in West Virginia and there are quite a few more of those before I drink my last beer. When I reached the end of Olmsted's path along the Rio Grande at Indian casino.

[00:10:00] So you know I was also drawn to his tough but fair approach to his subject. He's a hardheaded Connecticut Yankee. He calls himself an honest growler and he wants to see the South firsthand rather than through northern stereotypes and see if there is room for common ground and reasoned discourse as the nation is pulling apart in the eighteen fifties. This struck me as a kind of pressing barely relevant mission in our own day. So I thought OK I'm going to just set off on a parallel journey. One hundred and sixty years after Olmsted go to the places

he went to explore what he saw then and what I see now at another moment of national division. And I wanted to also travel in his very open minded open eyed freeform style. I had no itinerary really often no notion of where I'd even spend the next night. This isn't a style of travel I necessarily recommend to others unless you want to end up in some really dire flea pits or sleeping on the floor of a general store in rural Texas with the owner's dog as I did for some time or trapped in a monster truck at the world's largest mud fest in Louisiana. This is basically a shrunken demolition derby where people drive through these huge muddy craters in these huge vehicles they built themselves until the machinery and the moonshine gives out.

[00:11:44] But it was a great way to meet Americans I might otherwise not. And you know to meet them outside our social media silos in other precincts and sense what Olmsted called the drift of things in America Olmsted at this stage in his life is also adrift in both work and love. He's 30 years old. He's farming but he's restless and he has this tremendously romantic soul who's falling in love right and left but can't seem to find the right partner he's just been jilted by his fiance say it's a guy who really needed a dating app. And it's partly to escape the farm and his heartbreak that he goes south where he proceeds to write rather vividly and frankly particularly from Victorian times about his attraction to all the women he meets particularly the exotic beauties of New Orleans and San Antonio and at the same time he's honing his eye for another kind of landscape the natural world. And Rick talked about at the start. I was just want to make sure people kind of know who Olmsted became. He's generally recognized as America's greatest landscape architect a phrase that didn't even exist until he began doing it in the eighteen fifties. He was really a pioneer in this Central Park being his first and best known work but he went on to design parks all over the country and in Canada here in Seattle obviously.

[00:13:31] That was actually his sons who did the work on that but very much along the lines that Olmsted had established but also suburbs campuses is what I came to realize is that Olmsted really designed the urban or helped create the urban and suburban landscape that we still inhabit today just unbelievable number of ways in which he influenced. And one of the joys of researching this book is you know following him through the south is seeing this emerging aesthetic of this man who doesn't even yet know where he's headed in the eye. He brings to landscape and he has this almost laser vision for what he calls the genius of the place by watching which he means its intrinsic aspects the elements of a landscape that make it distinct and beautiful whether it's the Kentucky blue grass or the bayou of Louisiana where the plains of Texas or landscapes that would lead leave many of us kind of unmoved. And that's particularly true with me as a rather nature impaired writer. I gather Bill McKibben is coming soon. I'm not a Bill McKibben. I love nature as much as the next person but I struggle to identify and describe its elements. So I have some fun with myself in this book wandering around with plant guides trying to find these trees and shrubs that Olmsted has extolled that to me look kind of like any other you know leafy and green.

[00:15:18] I will say that Fred greatly improved me in this regard. I came back from my travels with all kinds of bold ideas about how to landscape by rather untamed farmstead in Massachusetts. I thought my best idea was to never mow it again because the great Frederick Law Olmsted hated lawnmowers as I do or being on them or pushing them and hated manicured lawns. You can imagine how well that went over. Another takeaway on Olmsted for me was the social vision that he develops in the course of his Southern travels that really propel him to Central Park and underlie his whole design philosophy. He sets off for the South as is sort of you know moderate open minded guy about what he'll find. But about midway through his travels he hits the wall. He has an experience that just kind of crystallizes what's been forming in his mind. He has an extended visit with a slave holding aristocrats in Tennessee a very area diet man and what appalls them appalls him is not just that they're entirely intransigent on slavery but that they have complete contempt for the common man and for democracy. They think that the masses are incapable of governing themselves or if any sort of uplift and that their feudal society with themselves at the top is really far superior to the north in every respect which they regard as vulgar and disordered.

[00:17:08] And this you know offends Olmsted's Yankee sensibilities on every level. But he kind of takes it to heart and it leads him in a new direction. He he realizes first. that these people are what he calls the dangerous class in America. Essentially he foresees the civil war that these leading men of the South as he calls them you know will fight before they give an inch. And so he he always has forward vision and he sees that. But he also concludes that the North should stop preaching to the south about its sins because they're not listening anyway and instead reform and fortify its own house to demonstrate the true promise and potential of a free and democratic society in contrast to the south and one part of this reform mission. He begins to map out our public spaces and urban parks which in that day didn't exist. where as he imagined it rich and poor Jew and Gentile native and immigrant will all come together and assimilate and be uplifted. So you know today we look at Central Park or others and we see these lovely green spaces that make our cities livable and that was also of course part of his program but there were also born of conflict one that ultimately led to the deaths of some seven hundred and fifty thousand Americans for Olmsted.

[00:18:48] You know his first Central Park was really war by other means of fought for the soul and survival of the American experiment. So as you can tell it. He's a rather lofty thinker but he also has a sense of humor and fun in his southern travels. And I certainly tried to emulate that in my own. On his trail and some of you I gather have seen my earlier books. I like to think that one can wed seriousness of purpose with levity of tone when appropriate in my view history or any nonfiction should never be homework. I want to entertain readers as I hope they're also being educated. So you know I have some some adventures in the spirit of Olmsted no end by just telling you a little bit about about a few of them. Whenever possible I went not only where

Olmsted went but by the same means that he did. He traveled by train riverboat Stagecoach coach and ultimately in the saddle across two thousand miles of Texas with two horses a mule and his tuberculosis brother who has come along in the hopes that you know the fresh air of Texas will improve his lungs. I couldn't replicate that but I did find a mulatto here who was willing to take me on an extended expedition through the Hill Country of Texas which was perhaps Olmsted's favorite landscape of any he encountered in his journey.

[00:20:31] So so perfect on paper except by a guide turned out to be a kind of cowboy Captain Ahab who was determined to torment and humiliate me in every way possible. Short of you know tying me to a cactus and leaving me in the noonday sun and his rather mysterious loathing of me was exceeded only by that of the mule he chose for me to ride who was determined to get me off his back. From the first minute of my guide said something interesting on my first day as I'm learning how to ride a mule and he says you know mules are actually very smart and they read you like a book before you've read their first page and this was certainly true of my mounts. He read me. Yeah. Not so much as a book I thought more like a comic strip. Charlie Brown this hapless fellow you know who can get this mule to do what I want it to do and I'll just say that we ended up literally butting heads. And you can guess who got the short end of that given that this mule was eight pounds. I also had to improvise on river travel which I said does a lot of it was relatively easy for me on the Mississippi where he rides the steamboat because there are still these or now replica 19th century steam boats that travel the exact path he did stopping at the same ports.

[00:22:10] I could really duplicate that part of his journey except I was on this tourist boat where you're floating past these former huge cruel slave plantations while being entertained by Elvis impersonators. It's a rather weird scene. I had fun within the book. It was more difficult on the Ohio River that he also rides by steamboat from Wheeling and what was then Virginia and now West Virginia down to Kentucky or Cincinnati and then into Kentucky steamboats no longer go there. But he also wrote about all the barges filled with coal coming down the river from Pittsburgh and they were still there. So I thought What the heck. I can't get on a steam boat maybe I can hitch a ride on a coal barge and I can go and just with a little reading about what ensued. When I go to a coal loading dock near Wheeling to see if this is possible and forgive me I'm not going to attempt to West Virginia accent and trigger warning there's some off color language in this and it's just gonna be short and then we can get to.

[00:23:25] Get to the good part.

[00:23:28] You want to what. Ask the security guard at the entrance. Talk to someone about riding a barge. I repeated. He picked up a phone and called the site supervisor. Wayne guy here at the gate wants to talk to you about. I'll let him explain. I found Wayne in a shed by a

labyrinth of Chutes and conveyor belts. He said that coal arrived here from an inland mine to be loaded and transported to power plants along the Ohio. Then he walked me to the desk of a colleague who handled these shipments. The man was on the phone on a hold. So I asked him straight out how might I hitch a ride on a river barge. helps if you're coal. He replied. Barges carried coal and other bulk cargo. It was only the boat's lashed to the barges that carried people whoops. how far you want to go he asked Olmsted rode a steamboat from Wheeling to the largest port on the Ohio. So I told him Cincinnati you realize you could probably walk there quicker. I didn't but nodded and stood there until he scribbled down a name ID number. Try this guy in river ops wouldn't get your hopes up. Greg Walden worked in river operations for one of the nation's largest utilities. Fortunately he was open to having a writer document the unsung business of coal transport. I can put you on a boat this week. Just not sure exactly when or where he said the crew would provide everything except footwear. You'll need some serious steel toed boots. I found them at a century old shoe hospital in Wheeling where the salesman lugged out a pair of his heaviest duty industrial grade boots drop a big chunk of coal on these you won't feel a thing he said.

[00:25:08] The boots weighed almost 10 pounds sheathing my toes and steel and my shins and leather thick as Rhino hide the high stiff uppers forced my normally hunched posture upright huge vibrant soles added another three inches to my height. I walked out of the store feeling like Paul Bunyan. Two blocks later I felt crippled as if my feet were encased in concrete. Greg Washburn called again. I got a boat leaving out a brilliant in an hour he said. You can hop on there. hopping anywhere it seemed impossible at the moment but I limped to my car and followed the Ohio bank to the misnamed brilliant a tiny town clouded by fumes from a massive power station with thousand foot high smokestacks. The plant was my hop on location. Washburn had told me I'd be boarding a boat called the Roger Keeney during a crew change. He had learned the captain but not the eight crewmen who arrived at the plant gate in a crowded van and appeared less than thrilled when I announced I was joining them. No one said a word as we drove to a dock and boarded a small vessel waiting to be shuttled out to the Keeney. After some tentative probing I learned that the men had risen before dawn to meet the van at a pickup point four hours south.

[00:26:22] They were about to begin a 21 day shift on a very cramped boat without alcohol or other diversion and now the last minute addition of a stranger and spanking new boots asking questions such as how many barges does each tugboat handle. This is a tug we're in now. The man beside me muttered Keeney a tow. tugs referred to small boats that worked at harbors tow boats were much bigger and more powerful and despite their name pushed rather than towed barges down the river I changed tack asking what there was to do at ports. We'd stopped out in West Virginia and Kentucky. Huntington s'got titty clubs. My neighbor replied If you're into fat naked ladies with C-section scars. That's your town.

[00:27:06] I zippered it until the tug motored us out to a blunt nosed vessel with three decks Chuck shoved forward to form a wall like bough 500 gross tons of diesel powered muscle diesel powered muscle purpose built to push the offensive lineman of the river world. As soon as I boarded someone shoved an orange flotation vest in my chest and told me to follow a buck a lanky crewman with a shaved head bushy beard and a T-shirt stating Southern bred venison fed Buck was responsible for my fire and safety briefing emphasis on breathe.

[00:27:42] He strode rapidly around the boat opening hatches to chambers filled with mechanical horrors. You pretty much want to stay the fuck out of this one he said at the tiller room.

[00:27:51] It's hydraulic powered shafts able to crush a man in pinch points along the walls. Then he ran through a checklist of alarms. The man overboard alarm alarm sounds like a school bell he said. And if I heard a long continuous ring something serious is going down and you head for the galley.

[00:28:09] Worst was a stuttering alarm. That basically means we're going to shove her into the river bank bailout and let the fire department deal with it. The Keeney had a lifeboat but Buck said there wasn't much space aboard so if something really goes bad I'd swim for it. He hooked an electronic device to my safety vest. Sets off a signal so someone can fish you out hopefully. breathing complete. But candidly the boat's roster listing listing the crewmen aboard beside their job titles. There was a blank spot at the bottom next to spare filling in my name. I felt like one of the red jersey Expendables in Star Trek who are invariably vaporized in the first scene. The next form was comforting either I the underside Voyager began assume all risk of accident or injury to myself or loss of life due to the condition of the boat or docks or negligence of the crew or mishaps during ingress and egress to wharves or other property. I Voyager signed. I think I'll stop there and open it up to all of you so please no questions comments abuse on.

[00:29:24] Any aspect of this or writing in general. Fire away and it's.

[00:29:31] The question is how long was my journey from start to finish of so Olmsted first of all took actually two journeys for the New York Times and I'm following his second one which was about 14 months from Maryland all the way down to the to the Rio Grande. My own was it took about two years with some trips home.

[00:29:52] I do have family and so it was not one continuous journey but it was basically a 2015 and 2016 ending at the Rio Grande. Just a couple days before the presidential election something I talk about in the book.

[00:30:12] Yeah. The question was whether this was a commission trips and the New York Times at this point is only a year old and had started with the mission. I don't know about here but back east. You know we used to call it the Gray Lady because it was a sort of sober newspaper. Just the facts ma'am kind of newspaper and that was actually how it was at the start. Newspapers of that day were very partisan and kind of overheated sort of tabloids. And so the New York Times was begun with this notion that it would be the temperate and balanced in fact based paper. And so the editor was looking for someone like that or who he could send south and Olmsted himself was this.

[00:31:00] At that point you know fit the bill.

[00:31:07] Questions about his educational background and you know how he comes to do these very complex engineering projects. You know in addition to the other aspects of parks and that was part of what I became fascinated with the making of this peculiar genius Frederick Law Olmsted because he's he's largely self out educated he's from a privileged background. His father is a successful merchant in Hartford. His brother goes to Yale. But Fred is this sort of bohemian character who essentially leaves school as a teenager. He sails off to China. He tries all these different things he's and his family is you know they're writing letters to each other saying you know they get that Fred has some kind of genius there. But yeah they'll say you know if only he could get it together you know he might make something of himself. But you know but really it's not till his 30s that he does. So he's unusual in that way. This is an era before really professional specialization. So he didn't really get. You know some training had a farm that he kind of landscaped he knew about farming and drainage and all of that. He's he worked briefly with a topographical engineer so he has some training but really. And he writes later that a lot of it was his Southern Journey his experience of the landscape and learning the contours and all that that that informed much of his design.

[00:32:39] And he also had the help of Calvert Vaux who I think is an unfairly not forgotten but little known figure who's his CO designer at Central Park who is an experienced landscape gardener again the term landscape architect didn't yet exist.

[00:32:57] So you know he has some help in that regard. But he really kind of figures it out on his own as he goes along.

[00:33:04] It's remarkable.

[00:33:07] Ok. Yeah. The question is you know what I came away with about the great divide and I chose not to talk about it. Today it's a Saturday sometimes we can all use a break from politics. I'm a news junkie and you know but it's certainly a large element of the book and of Olmsted's story. You know it's hard to generalize. I think we have to be careful in talking about the South as if it's some sort of monolith. I mean we're talking over 100 million people depending how you draw the lines and you know we talking about the black South or the white south and the immigrants south of the urban rural which is perhaps the most significant divide.

[00:33:47] So you know I came away at times quite despairing as Olmsted was that the impasse has simply become so great that we cannot bridge it with civil discourse and reasoned dialogue. And there are indeed scary parallels to the eighteen fifties in our extreme polarization in the kind of overheated rhetoric and invective that sort of drowned out you know more reasoned discussion and debate in the way we have come to demonize people we don't agree with and also in the paralysis of a divided government that seems incapable of dealing with our largest problems and that was certainly the case in the 1950s and a general kind of loss of faith in our institutions. So there are a lot of quite frightening parallels. I don't think we're headed towards violent breakup as America was then. I certainly hope not. And on a more positive vein you know what struck me everywhere I went I think our media of which I have long been apart and particularly our social media and our political discourse amplify and exaggerate our differences. You know wandering around just meeting people in person you're reminded that Americans one have a lot in common but also have a basic decency and openness. And you know I spent an awful lot of time sitting talking about our differences in a civil manner.

[00:35:28] People buying me beers inviting me to their homes their churches their workplaces. I can count on one hand the number of times I really felt sort of personal animus as a liberal Jewish Yankee rolling in with a reporter's notebook. You know the media is not very popular either. And you know whether that moves the ball forward. I don't know. I'm not kidding myself that I changed anyone's mind or and they didn't change or change mine on issues that we tended to disagree with. But I do think it lowers the temperature a bit and makes it harder for us to demonize each other. And it's certainly preferable to just as I wrote recently The piece you know shout at each other through bullhorns from our respective bunkers which only deepens the divide and the attachment to those who seek to divide us. So I think we can all try a lot harder as Americans to do that you don't have to go to the deep rural South to do that. I don't know Washington state but I'm guessing if you drove an hour or two east of here you

would you know find a very different world. And I think simply engaging on that level is or is a really valuable exercise.

[00:36:51] I don't know if that answers your question.

[00:36:54] Hi Jack please. So if somebody in my apartment.

[00:37:05] Yes well we all know is as book lovers that no matter how often you attempt to cull your books they seem to reproduce in greater numbers. And as writers we're fortunate enough that we get sent a lot of books to be reviewed edited blurb so they're constantly piling up. So it hasn't ended the place hasn't collapsed. But you know we have books stacked up on the floor against the wall and you know tripping over them in the dark and yet we still have too many books. But you know it's an ongoing struggle. I guess I would say. Very good questions about what were his influences and did he go to Europe. And yeah he he kind of came of age as transcendental wisdom is happening. So he's very much influenced by Thoreau and Amish and both this quite novel idea that nature should be something wild you know nature is something that we shouldn't simply exploit for economic gain. And you know that we should set it aside and said later rights that access to those wild spaces is an inalienable right of Americans. And he's involved among other things out here on the coast or not quite Yosemite. He one of his many detours he ends up in California in the eighteen sixties and gets involved in the first study of Yosemite. And this is really 50 years before you know anyone's talked about national parks and almost no one's no Anglos have been or very few to Yosemite. And he sees instantly that this is a global treasure and rights that it should be set aside for the free use of all the people forever. So in a way I would say is a little ahead of Muir.

[00:39:01] This is the eighteen sixties but he's part of yes that conservation thinking which is a whole nother kind of aspect of his career that I think is a little under recognized. Also Niagara Falls. He plays a big role in that. So and he sees. Did I mention that you know as a colleague that calls him long headed which means that he's always looking far into the future to what Olmsted calls distant effects whether it's a landscape or American society at all. As a whole and he has this astonishing line when he's writing about you suddenly he says this is 1864. in a century a million people will visit this place a year. He was off by eleven years. It was eighty nine years when we reached a million visitors there. So he had this sort of astonishing foresight and you know I don't know about all of you but in our tweet driven news cycles I feel we're shrunken headed by comparison that you know that kind of vision is to me his most extraordinary aspect of his of his mind.

[00:40:12] Yeah. I'm sorry. Yeah. Please.

[00:40:15] I really enjoy reading your book. Thank you. All do you know. My question is how do you. Where we face facts and get you to choose. I'm sorry. How do you when we fight like facts and get to the truth of stories. Can you talk a little bit about your research methodology.

[00:40:32] You know I was trained as a journalist and now I write mostly on historical topics. So yeah getting it. The truth is my kind of my mission and I recognized all the obstacles to that. And you know particularly with the past you know there's some things you can never know for sure. On the historical front I spent a lot of time in the archives Olmsted's very copious papers and thousands of personal letters diaries etc. are at the Library of Congress in Washington. There are other archives. So for the historical and biographical part of it I would say I did fairly traditional historical research. And then when I'm on the road I gather information as I always did as a as a journalist and what I will say is another thing that you know is it was very discouraging to me is this you know loss of a sense of common truth or fact and.

[00:41:40] You know it's easy to blame the right for this with conspiracy theories particularly in Texas. I came across all kinds of you know insane conspiracy theories one of which I'd go out and blow up and I come back to the people who've told me this and they still don't believe it. You know just impervious to what to me seemed like plain fact. They were claiming there were these Muslim compounds all over Texas including in this county you know armed jihadis. And I said look you know I used to be a Middle East correspondent. I speak some Arabic. Let me go check it out and come back and report you guys. This was kind of a breakfast club at a diner and in a very conservative part Texas and you know I go find the sheriff for this. Anyway long story short it's a Pakistani doctor who has a second home in this county. And this is somehow become a Muslim compound to the point of protest. People have been demanding that the county do something about this and this poor sheriff whose name was Woody a real good old boy and he said you know it's driving me nuts. You know I just everybody is saying what do you got to do something about you know this Muslim combat. So I go back and I say guys I talked to Woody and they said Yeah we all know Woody great guy I went to school with them and I said Well here's what he told me is this is no there there. I said oh well what do you have to say that they're probably paying him to say that on and on and you know this whole problem. And I would say the left contributes. Certainly I see it having a son who's just finished college just this is those that the truth is conditional it's individual.

[00:43:25] It's all your truth and my truth depending on our perspective or ethnicity or gender and of course there's a lot of validity to that.

[00:43:35] But I think this breakdown of there being a truth or facts we can agree if you can't agree on the facts how can you even then proceed to any kind of discussion about your differences.

[00:43:49] So I kind of got off your question but it's a bugbear mine. Yeah.

[00:43:56] Very good question. I think you worry about a lot. The question is as she's originally from Texas of this this sort of tradition of being exotic sized by people coming from elsewhere. And you know there's a long tradition about not just Texas the South in general and Olmsted zero and before. And one could argue still this tradition of people from outside not just the north Europeans going on what I would call Southern safaris you know to this sultry exotic place where we're going to find all these strange creatures. Yes. And also in the case the South and preach to them about you know. you know how to get their act together. And I certainly wanted to avoid that. Yes. One cannot accept that you know escape the colorful characters and scenes of Texas and the south. So you know but somebody should do that almost as a satire. Go north and maybe they have. I haven't read it and do this kind of reverse thing. And she they talk funny up here and they eat these lobsters and emptied in New England. And you know it's filled with all these cranky Yankees who won't make eye contact and acknowledge each other in the way that we do in the south.

[00:45:19] Actually you know I use a good good book idea I'll recommend it to some of my Southern writer friend but it is something I you know I did the last thing I want to do is perpetuate stereotypes or or take cheap shots. And I think it's you know less so in Texas but certainly I think there are many white southerners who have a chip on both shoulders about the way they're perceived by the rest of the nation. And that when they go elsewhere and open their mouths that southern accent is almost viewed as the opposite of an English accent it connotes lack of culture and education. And you know I don't think they're entirely wrong. It may be a degree of paranoia but whatever that phrase is just because you're paranoid doesn't mean it's not true. And I think again for those of us who aren't from the south we can be more aware of that. And certainly Hollywood could be.

[00:46:17] Yeah.

[00:46:20] Yeah and I perhaps didn't make that clear in the talk. The question is about whether he kind of carried with him in the south this you know.

[00:46:28] Mission that he ultimately has to have around green spaces. It's really during this trip that he's already got elements of it. But I would say this trip crystallizes it for him. He's kind of discovering himself as he's discovering the southern half of the country.

[00:46:46] And you know he just he's developing that eye for landscape and that social philosophy that I talked about. So there's certainly elements of that in him before he goes south.

[00:46:57] But I think it's there that he really develops it. He's still writing his stuff about the South when he gets offered a job at Central Park that leads the rest. So really one leads directly to the other if that makes sense. And in his later writing he often references his southern travels. This gave me an appreciation of lush plantings or you know he's drawing on what he saw in the south.

[00:47:25] Yeah. Okay. One specific example I don't know how many if you've been to Central Park there's a part called the ramble that I would say it was his favorite part.

[00:47:36] Very lush plantings and also Alabama cedar. There are a number of swamp Magnolia. He actually did some plantings from the south. Also the water features in his parks are kind of a lagoon like that. He I think he was particularly struck by the bayou and the kind of swamp penis in the water so there are other examples but he clearly carried much of that into his park designs.

[00:48:05] Yeah.

[00:48:07] In truth no idea. Usually as a writer you have a kind of nine month lag time you finish the book and for reasons that writers never understand they say that we need nine months to get this in the bookstore which used to annoy me this time for various reasons I didn't have that it was much more compressed so I really only finished the final editing maps all the the footnotes and all that a couple months ago and I haven't really had the brain space yet.

[00:48:41] And you know book ideas as with this one in my experience they always come when you're not looking for him. It's not like all right I'm going to sit down and think about what's my next book. I mean I've never really tried to do that but it's certainly never worked. It's always something just. You see out of the corner of your eye or your you're writing about something else journalistically and you think wow that's an interesting subject over there. So

really I don't have an answer to that. I'll just add those since you're interested in the civil warrior and I just another on an optimistic note because I certainly had my eye out as I was traveling this time for some of the themes that I addressed in Confederates since not my main focus here. But obviously the whole monument debate and everything else that's been going on is that you know we see on the news Charlottesville and other things that can make you feel you know white supremacy or neo confederate white supremacy is really on the march and it's certainly there at the fringes and not just Southern a lot of these folks are from the north.

[00:49:47] But I think there is a deeper tide in the south that is going strongly the other way. And I was very struck by the change in that regard in the 20 years since I wrote Confederates. Younger people are just simply not as invested in in this Confederate heritage and its symbols as their parents and grandparents who were marinated in it. And the region itself is much more diverse demographically. So you just have less people who have any real tie to this history. And there's also a much frank acknowledgement of slavery. If you go to plantations now as I do in this book not at all of them some of them you still get the hoop skirt Southern fried Gone with the Wind. Let's talk about the furnishings and garden and not even mention those shadowy people who did all the work. Now often you know slave cabins or are front and center. So I think there's been a really healthy change in that regard. Anyway I've run over. Thank you so much. And all of the other.

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