



*Charles Eliot, c. 1895*

# Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect: A Life Revived

Carl Little

When Charles Eliot died of spinal meningitis in 1897 at the young age of 38, his father, Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard College, proceeded to sort through notes and letters, assembling an exhaustive account of his son's life and accomplishments. The book that resulted, *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect*, is one of the most unusual personal biographies ever published in the history of American letters.<sup>1</sup>

Originally printed in 1902 in an edition of 1,000 by Houghton Mifflin, this classic in the literature of landscape architecture was resurrected in 1999 by the American Society of Landscape Architects, the first volume in its Centennial Reprint Series commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the society. This tome offers a double treasure: the reprint in facsimile of the biography and the introduction to the new edition by Keith N. Morgan, professor of art history at Boston University.

In his essay, "Charles Eliot, The Man Behind the Monograph," Morgan notes the singular status that this "rare example of filial biography" holds in the history of American landscape architecture, namely, that it was the first of its kind. "In 1902 no precedent existed for a monograph on an American landscape architect," he writes. (x)\*

According to Morgan, the book is "hagiographic" by today's standards. "Eliot emerges as the perfect model for the young profession," he observes, "receiving credit for ideas and projects that were actually the work of many minds and hands." (xi) At the

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\*Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* (1999).

same time, the art historian acknowledges the significant contributions the pioneering American landscape architect made to the field. Eliot's legacy, in Morgan's view, is formidable. Not only did he expand "the parameters and concerns of the profession," he also, in the professor's estimation, "laid the foundations for the environmental movement and for the professions of city and regional planning." (xl) Morgan cites Ian McHarg (1920-2001), a leader in contemporary landscape architecture education, on Eliot's con-

tribution to modern day thinking in the field. In his autobiography, *A Quest for Life*, McHarg credited his forebear with the idea of ecological planning.<sup>2</sup>



*Mary Yale Pitkin Eliot  
with sons Samuel and Charles*

Eliot's mother, who died when he was ten, was an amateur artist and lover of nature who encouraged her son to study his surroundings. Maine further nurtured his appreciation of the landscape. Charles took his first trip down east in 1871 at the age of 12 when the family made a summer camping excursion to

Calf Island in Frenchman Bay. In a letter to his grandmother the boy included a detailed description and a map of the camp, an example, writes the admiring father, of his son's "characteristic precision." (8)

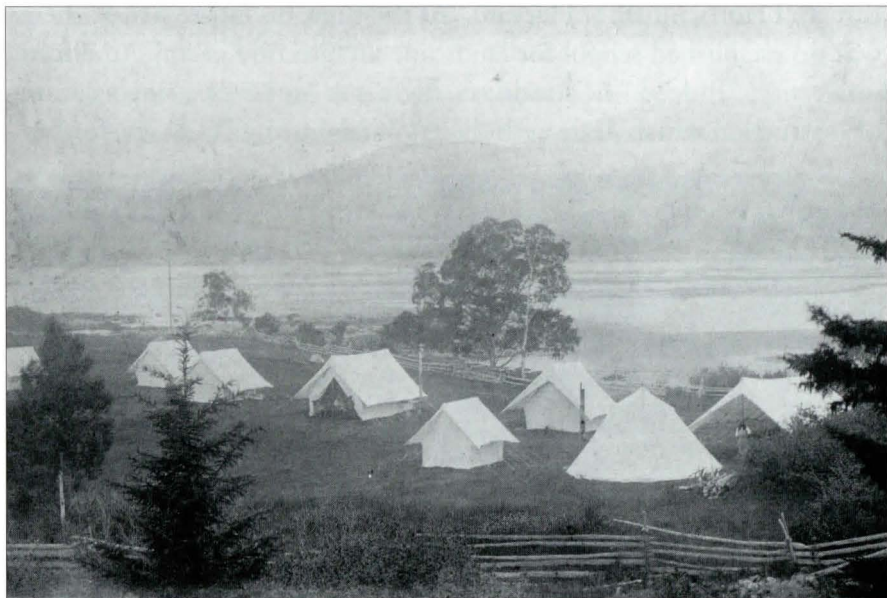
The Eliots continued to camp in the Mount Desert Island vicinity for many summers. The children, the father averred, "learnt by experience that in summer at least, health, comfort, and great enjoyment can be secured without elaborate apparatus or many costly possessions, and that the real necessities of healthy and happy existence in warm weather are few." (10)

Mount Desert Island provided tonic for Eliot throughout his short life. Finishing up at Harvard, he set out for Northeast Harbor "without waiting for Class Day or Commencement." (30) Part of his courtship of Mary Pitkin several years later consisted of a month-long stay on Mount Desert Island.<sup>3</sup>

Through yearly summer cruises aboard *The Sunshine*, a forty-three-and-a-half-foot sloop, the young man became intimately acquainted with the New England coast.<sup>4</sup> The log Eliot kept on these trips paints a picture that will be familiar to a sailor today. Here is a typical entry:

Aug. 3. Beat out the narrow E. entrance of "Burnt Coat" with very light air, past Long Island and by Long Ledge Buoy up Somes Sound. Shopping at Somesville. Beat down the Sound, and being caught by flood tide and calm anchored off Fernald's Point. Mounted Fernald's Hill [Flying Mt.] in evening. Superb view. (19)

While at Harvard, Eliot led a band of his classmates on summer expeditions to the region. Calling themselves the Champlain Society (after Samuel de Champlain, the French explorer), they made scientific explorations of the island, starting in 1880.<sup>5</sup> The first two years, the group's camp was pitched "in a beautiful position on the east side of Somes's Sound, a little to the north of the house of Mr. Asa Smallidge." Water came from a "clear and abundant brook" that descended Brown Mountain. (25)



*Champlain Society campsite on Somes Sound*

In September 1880, when his parents had returned from Europe, Eliot advised them on choosing a site for their home on the island. “If you want to build a house at Mt. Desert,” he wrote, “you had better examine the coast from our camp-ground on Some’s Sound to Seal Harbor. Somewhere on that line you will find a site that will suit you,—a site with beautiful views of sea and hills, good anchorage, fine rocks and beach, and no flats.” (27) His parents followed his advice, exploring this stretch of coastline “on which at the time not a single summer residence had been built.” (27) The house went up in the spring and summer of 1881. Charles later helped design the approach to the house, choosing the plantings.

It was during the Champlain Society’s 1882 “summer campaign” that Eliot chose his profession. He was not as involved with the group and had time to think, dividing his time between shore life and sailing *The Sunshine*. Using a process of elimination, he decided that “there was no form of ordinary business which had the least attraction for him.” (32) Knowing something about landscape architecture, the young man settled on his future course. Surely, his surroundings added inspiration to the choice of calling.

Eliot enrolled at the Bussey Institution, the Department of Agriculture and Horticulture at Harvard. At the time, his father writes, there was no established school for landscape architecture in any American university. “Indeed,” he continues, there was “not even a single course of instruction which dealt with the art of improving landscape for hu-



*Champlain Society, 1880*

man use and enjoyment, or with the practical methods of creating and improving gardens, countryseats, and public parks.” (33)

In the spring of 1883, Eliot entered the office of Frederick Law Olmsted as an apprentice. Through his work for the eminent landscape architect, plus his own extensive and intensive travels and studies, Eliot would develop into one of the most knowledgeable figures in the field.<sup>6</sup>

Morgan refers to Eliot as a “landscape *flâneur*, a constant but attentive wanderer, and a connoisseur of landscape forms.” (xxii) He took up this “sport” at age 16. “In company with two or three other boys,” recounts Eliot *père*, “Charles would take the steam-cars or horse-cars to some convenient point of departure within ready reach of Cambridge, and then walk from five to ten miles cross country to another point whence there was railroad communication to Boston or Cambridge.” (14)

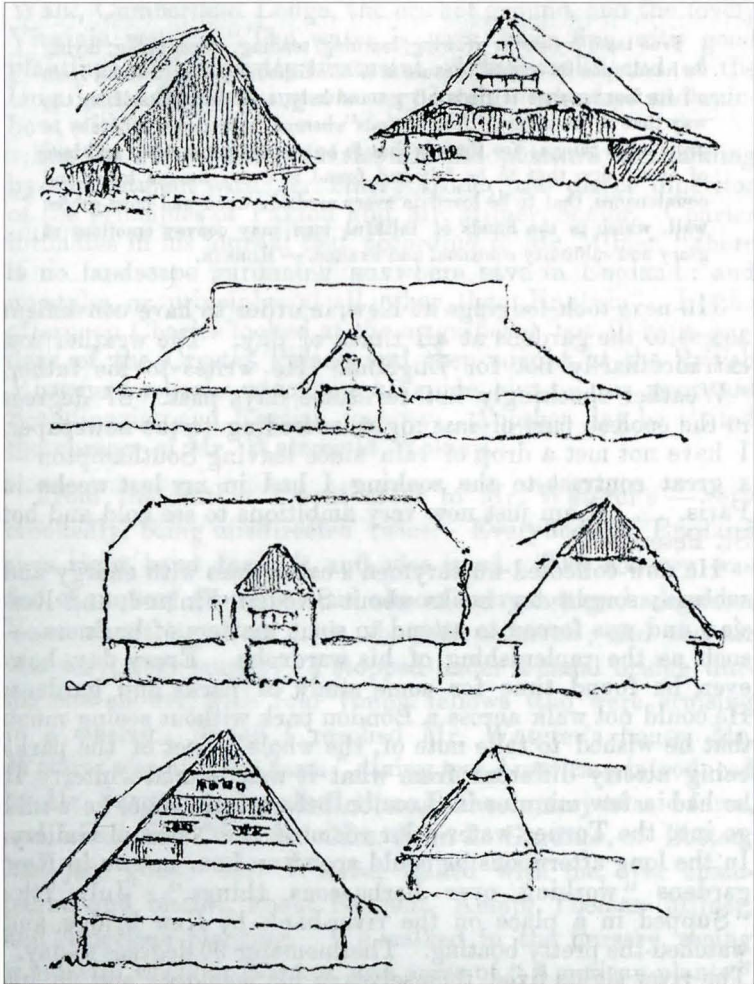
Eliot writes movingly of his son’s development into manhood, of his progress and doubts. “His head was full of memories and dreams,” he says of Charles in August 1881, “of fearful hopes, dreads, and pains; the beauty and the wonder of God’s earthly paradise burst upon him like a holy vision, and the depths of hell on earth opened at his feet.” (27) He often advised his son to take care of himself. “If you feel the blues coming upon you,” he suggested in a letter to Charles in April 1886, “get a book and a glass of wine, or go to bed and rest yourself.” (92)

Great swaths of the biography consist of lengthy citations from the son’s letters and notebooks describing in detail the countrysides through which he walked and rode during his travels abroad in 1885-1886. These travelogues can become rather tedious, just as John Singer Sargent’s many watercolors of his travels can sometimes seem repetitive. Yet each in his own way brought character to his recordings.

During a stop in Exeter, England, Eliot adds a touch of humor to an account of his lodging situation. “The evening was hot, and the hotel dreary—hardly anybody in it,” he wrote in his journal. “Usually there is somebody conversing with the bar-maid. Nobody else to talk to in the whole great house; and I am not yet educated up to bar-maids.” (136) His reflections on his own personality are revealing: “I wish I were mentally and emotionally duller than I am!” he exclaims; “There must be a great peace in unawakedness.” (118)

Eliot was frank in his appraisals of the Old World. About Westminster Abbey in London he remarks, "Beautiful interior greatly marred by hideous modern monuments." (52) Glasgow he finds to be "unprofitable and ugly" (162), while he parenthetically refers to the King's Palace in Stockholm as "stupid Renaissance." (173) Even natural features earn his disdain: While visiting Prussia, Eliot declares the Vistula and Oder "stupid and slow rivers." (187)

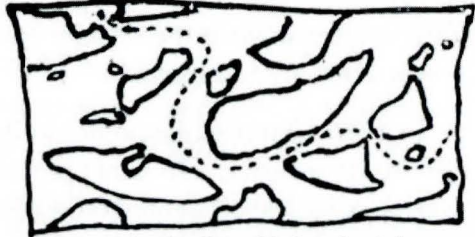
At the same time Eliot was highly appreciative of the beauty he discovered in his travels. Visiting Venice, he is bedazzled by the Piazza: "The low sun was shining full on the front of St. Mark's, and in at the



*English barns, sketch by Charles Eliot*

open doors. I went in, and out again; and in, and out. What a wonder of earth is this!" (13) In London he marvels at Turner's paintings on display at the Royal Academy. "All the landscape painting I have ever seen is as nothing in comparison with these," he writes. (61)

Morgan observes that Eliot used his extensive knowledge of the New England landscape as a touchstone throughout his life and wanderings. Indeed, in the course of his travel reports from abroad, one finds numerous references to Maine,



*Sea Islands off Stockholm, sketch by  
Charles Eliot*

to the point where it would seem the young man was homesick. In the south of France, for example, he notices "slopes of stone chips (like those on Pierce's Head, Mt. Desert)" (78); "a low rock with a tall tower (like Boone Island, Maine)" (81); and "a sparsely inhabited shore, reminding one a little of that between Seal Harbor and Great Head." (83)

In Sweden, Eliot discovers a near mirror image of his homeland. "Put me anywhere out of sight of the houses and fences, and I should say I was in Maine," he notes. (173) On an excursion around Stockholm he observes, "the shores are more wooded, and resemble, say, Bartlett Island Narrows [Mt. Desert]." (175) Houses built on "steep rocky sides" bring to mind "Harbor Hill at Northeast Harbor, or on Mr. Curtis's shore." (176) Other spots recall Eggemoggin Reach, Rockland and Carver's Harbor.

Contemporary land-use policy makers will recognize some familiar issues in Eliot's reports from Europe. While speaking with a member of the Lakeland Defence Association in the famous Lake District in England, he learns of an issue that arises in today's Maine.

He told me that the closing of ancient foot-ways was the chief trouble at present. It was done right and left by new proprietors newly rich, and was hard to prevent, because the burden of proof lay strangely enough with the public; was also a disagreeable sort of quarrel, because it seemed, in some measure, personal. (161)



The language of Eliot's writings from his European sojourn has a wonderful old-fashioned quality to it. Where, today, do we find such words as "beverdured" or "excursionist"? It is amazing to consider that his 74-day tour of Europe cost him \$5.63 per day, including his purchases. (200) The greatest danger experienced in his travels occurred at the very end, when the steamer *Pavonia* sank in Boston Harbor as he was returning to America.<sup>7</sup>

In 1886 Eliot rented an office in Boston and established himself as a landscape architect. His father provides a detailed description of how Charles established his fees and other elements of his business. He charged \$50 for a day visit, with Bar Harbor one of the listed locales that fell within the range of this fee. The first decoration in his office was a large coast survey chart of eastern Massachusetts and the coast of Maine. As his father explains, "That old love warmed the new purpose." (206)

Although he enjoyed his independence as a landscape architect, Eliot returned to F. L. Olmsted & Co. in 1893 after the sudden death of the firm's junior partner, Harry Codman. Working for the re-named Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, Charles would be challenged by larger projects and would sacrifice time with his family, which grew to include four daughters, but his stature grew and he became an authority on landscape design.

Were he alive today, Eliot would surely join the anti-sprawl forces. He vehemently opposed "commercial intrusion" into scenic landscapes. He disliked artificiality in landscape design, the "manicure school" of horticulture. He also opposed billboards, called "hoardings" in his day. "It is obvious that the conditions are favorable for a rapid increase of the advertising plague throughout the country," he commented in 1895. (542)

Eliot's vision of preservation had a direct impact on his father, who would be one of the founders of what we now know as Acadia National Park. Immersing himself in his son's writings no doubt made him something of a disciple and led him to embrace the concept of "reservations," the term landscape architects at the time employed for parks. Eliot senior once wrote his son, "If it were not for Mt. Desert, I should hardly have more time for reflection and real living than an operative in a cotton mill"—a revealing commentary on his own busy life and that of the worker class. (92)<sup>8</sup>

*Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* is illustrated with family portraits, photographs, travel sketches and other related material. (Do not pass over the epigraphs that begin each chapter, many of them citations from the literature of landscape architecture.) Also included is a removable copy of the 1893 “Map of the Metropolitan District of Boston Massachusetts showing the existing public reservations and such new open spaces as are proposed by Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect.” In his own time, Eliot had the occasion to witness a project as ambitious as today’s Big Dig: the development of the Back Bay Fens.

For the casual reader, the 40-chapter, 770-page *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* is a book to be broached in sallies, much like the walks recounted within. The professional landscape architect will also enjoy these rambles, and will find further enlightenment in Eliot’s detailed plans for townships and parks found in the latter half of the book. A companion reader’s guide is extremely helpful.

At some point, it might be useful to extract Eliot’s writings about landscape architecture to comprise a separate volume. His writings for *Garden and Forest*, for example, remain relevant. One of his first essays for this publication described the ugliness of the suburbs in March. An address he gave to the Advance Club of Providence, “The Need for Parks,” correlates good health with opportunities to be outside.<sup>9</sup> Another article decries a practice still popular in our state:

On the rocky coast of Maine each summer sees  
money worse than wasted in endeavoring to make



*President Charles W. Eliot,  
Harvard University, 1875*

Newport lawns on ground which naturally bears countless lichen-covered rocks, dwarf Pines and Spruces, and thickets of Sweet Fern, Bayberry, and wild Rose. The owners of this particular type of country spend thousands in destroying its natural beauty, with the intention of attaining to a foreign beauty.... (215-216)

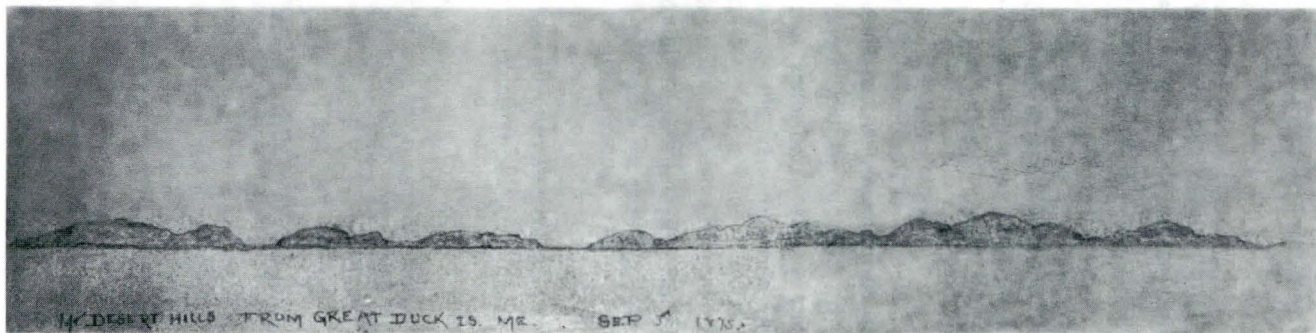
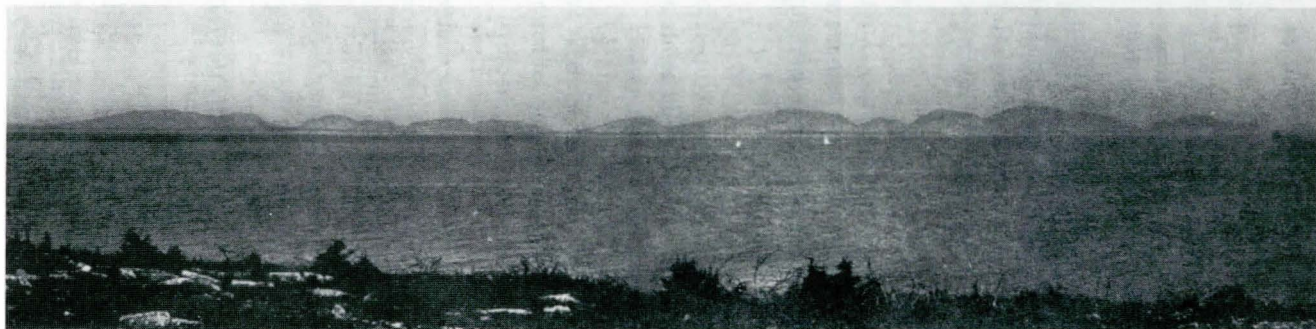
Finally, Mainers and Mount Desert Islanders will enjoy the place of prominence the pioneering architect gave to his adopted state. His essay "The Coast of Maine" is as lovely a tribute to this special stretch of geography as has ever been written. "The mere map of it is most attractive," Eliot states. (309) He also refers to issues that nettle us to this day: "The finest parts of the coast are already controlled by land companies and speculators, while the natives' minds are inflamed by the high prices which the once worthless shore lands are now supposed to command." (313)

At the end of this essay, Eliot makes a suggestion that will warm the hearts of today's land trust and conservancy leaders. "If the State of Maine should by suitable legislation encourage the formation of associations for the purpose of preserving chosen parts of her coast scenery," he suggests, "she would not only do herself honor, but would secure for the future an important element in her material prosperity."

The last chapter of *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* consists of Eliot's moving account of his son's last days. Here, the author/father pinpoints the special intelligence his son possessed. "His memory was not remarkable for languages or history," Eliot states, "but for places, scenes, and roads, for ledges, harbor approaches, and landings, for spots where *Rhodora*, *Linnaea*, or *Clethra* grows, or for a grove of thrifty Pines or a mass of hardy *Magnolias*, his mental memoranda were indelible." (745) How Eliot responded to his surroundings remains relevant more than a century later.



Carl Little is the author of a number of artbooks, including *The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent* (University of California Press) and *The Art of*



Western.

Beech.

Robinson  
and Dog.

Brown.

Sargent.

Pemitie. Green.

Newport.

The upper profile is a photograph taken from Little Duck Island; the lower is a pencil sketch made by Charles at sixteen from Great Duck Island, looking over and omitting Little Duck. The sketch looks more like the original than the photograph does.

*Mount Desert Island, sketched by Charles Eliot*

*Monhegan Island* (Down East Books). He wrote the foreword to a reprint of Rachel Field's *God's Pocket* (Northeast Harbor Library). He is director of communications and marketing at the Maine Community Foundation. Little and his family moved to Somesville in 1988.

## ENDNOTES

This article revises and expands upon an article that originally appeared in the *Bar Harbor Times*, October 5, 2000.

<sup>1</sup> The full title of the book is *Charles Eliot: Landscape Architect[,] a lover of nature and of his kind who trained himself for a new profession[,] practised it happily and through it wrought much good.*

<sup>2</sup> McHarg repeated this claim in his acceptance speech upon receiving an honorary Master of Philosophy degree in Human Ecology from College of the Atlantic in 1998.

<sup>3</sup> "It was a delight to Charles to show Mary the scenes at Mt. Desert that he most loved, and to take her driving and sailing through and about the beautiful island." (238)

<sup>4</sup> "The Sunshine cruised in successive summers along the shores of New England from Sag Harbor and Fisher's Island on the west to Eastport on the east, going up the principal rivers, and visiting all the bays and harbors, and many of the outlying islands like Shelter Island, Block Island, Nantucket, the Isles of Shoals, Monhegan, and Grand Manan." (11)

<sup>5</sup> Author and newspaper reporter Nan Lincoln, a descendant of Charles Eliot's brother, Samuel Atkins Eliot, has "placed the Champlain Society logs and the logs from the Sunshine and related photographs on deposit at Mount Desert Island Historical Society." (xlv)

<sup>6</sup> Eliot accompanied Olmsted to Cushing's Island in Portland Harbor to review plans to develop part of the island—one of the few times the young landscape architect had the occasion to visit Maine under professional auspices. (36)

<sup>7</sup> "All his precious books and photographs remained at the bottom of the Bay for three days; but by careful treatment after their recovery they were saved in fair condition." (203)

<sup>8</sup> Professor Morgan notes that Eliot *films* had a social conscience. His plans for Revere Beach and the banks of the Charles River, for example, were both guided by a desire to create recreational sites that were open to working people.

<sup>9</sup> “Any city physician will tell you that air-poisoning kills a hundred human beings where food-poisoning kills one; yet you pay for food inspection, and do little or nothing to provide your crowded quarters with fresh air.” (339)