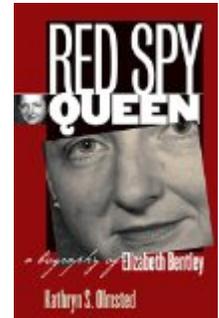


**Kathryn S. Olmsted.** *Red Spy Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth Bentley.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. x + 268 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2739-0.



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### Engendering Treachery

*Red Spy Queen* is a well-researched, coherent, and fast-paced biography of Elizabeth Bentley, an upper-middle-class New Englander who turned courier and spy-handler for the Soviet Union from the late 1930s to the end of World War II. Bentley's detailed, but ever more sensationalist confessions to the FBI, congressional committees, magazines, and newspapers, spanned from August of 1945 up through the 1950s, and "trigger[ed] an earthquake in American politics," manifested in the Alger Hiss case, Justice Department prosecutions of American Communist Party members, and the McCarthy hearings (p. ix). Earlier scholars and commentators largely ignored Bentley's role in the postwar anti-Communist loyalty probes, explains Olmsted, in part because of the difficulty of assessing the credibility of Bentley's uncorroborated and contradictory statements. As well, historians seemed to adopt contemporary perceptions of Bentley "as a pathetic or even laughable figure," and a naive idealist used by others with superior intellects and greater purpose (p. x). However, newly available archival material from the

former Soviet Union, including Bentley's own NKGB (predecessor to the KGB) autobiography, together with an array of declassified U.S. documents from the era, now make it possible to test Bentley's veracity in all the particulars, and thus to reassess her role in a critical moment of America's political and cultural history.[1] Olmsted brings to the task an extensive knowledge of espionage and official secrecy, demonstrated in her earlier work *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI*.

In what ways is gender a useful category of analysis for understanding the life of Elizabeth Bentley, historical incidents of espionage, and spy-hunting domestic loyalty campaigns? Gender comes into Olmsted's analysis through two distinct avenues: first, as a way to make sense of Bentley's own actions, life choices, and interactions with fellow travelers in her circle and with her Soviet handlers; second, as a lens through which to comprehend the array of contemporary public and private responses to Bentley's allegations. As to the first, Olmsted portrays Bentley as

"a bundle of contradictions. She was an alcoholic daughter of a temperance crusader; a fan, at different times, of Mussolini, Stalin, the pope, and J. Edgar Hoover; a shrewd woman who outsmarted the NKGB and the FBI but who chose boyfriends who abused her. She was, as one FBI agent who knew her says, 'a highly intelligent woman with a very unfortunate life.' Above all, she was an intensely lonely woman searching for love and acceptance" (p. xi). As to the second, Olmsted argues that "Bentley's 'spy queen' image makes her more, rather than less, historically interesting. There was something about her that touched the fears and fantasies of postwar Americans. Her media image revealed Americans' concerns about gender relations after the upheaval of the war. Her story became interwoven with the cultural, as well as the political, history of the Cold War at home" (p. x).

Chapter 1, "The Sad and Lonely Girl," covers Bentley's life from her 1907 birth in Connecticut, through her education at Vassar College on a scholarship, the premature deaths of her parents before 1925, her postgraduate work at Columbia University, her graduate fellowship at the University of Florence, and her initial flirtation with American communism. As Bentley had a tendency to mislead and exaggerate, her biographer had the added burden of tracking down even the most basic details. Her father was a dry-goods merchant, her mother a local schoolteacher, both "old-family Republicans and Episcopalians who enjoyed respect from their fellow small-town New Englanders" (p. 2). Bentley later claimed that she had been seduced into anti-Americanism and communism by her undergraduate teachers, but Olmsted shows the dubiousness of this claim, demonstrating that it was Bentley's several trips to Europe, particularly Italy, that brought her under the sway first of fascism, then anti-fascism. Bentley was unusually tall (over 5'9") and classmates recall her as lonely, plain-faced, and a social misfit. During her time in Italy, she shed her New England, Republican upbringing, reportedly

leading a promiscuous sex life, punctuated by heavy drinking bouts and a suicide attempt. It was in Italy, under the romantic mentorship of her faculty advisor, a leading anti-fascist, that Bentley "developed her lifelong taste for political extremism," and her lifelong compulsion for "breaking the rules and deceiving the authorities" (p. 7). Her habit of self-delusion and mendacity took root when she took credit for a master's thesis actually written by one of her advisor's other students.

Bentley's first exposure to American communists came in the mid-1930s, amid the Great Depression. Bentley's exaggerated and falsified stories of her anti-fascist activities in England gave her standing among New York political intellectuals, and she joined "the American League against War and Fascism, a Communist-front group designed to expand and unify Americans' opposition to fascism in Europe" (p. 9). When denied a loan to pursue a sociology degree from Columbia University, possibly because of faculty suspicions about her pilfered thesis, Bentley parlayed the incident into local celebrity, claiming that she was being punished for her anti-fascist stand. Olmsted shows persuasively that Bentley was driven not by ideas or even ideology, but rather by a longed-for sense of belonging; when first invited by a friend to join the CPUSA, she was reluctant, but yielded when other members responded to her recalcitrance with coldness and displeasure. As Olmsted explains, the CPUSA had not fully recovered from the red scare after World War I; by the mid-1930s, though, it was an above-ground, legal entity, urged by Moscow's Communist International (Comintern) to seek a popular front within America, uniting with liberals and leftists to oppose fascism in Europe. Well-bred, well-educated native Americans such as Bentley were particularly sought after. Although Bentley totally misunderstood and misconstrued efforts to recruit her by an underground American agent and a male Russian agent, she remained "too good a prospect for the Soviets to ignore. She had no foreign ac-

cent, no police record, and no family to hinder her in 'special' work" (p. 18). Bentley ultimately "activated herself" as an undercover agent; she obtained a position in the Italian Library of Information, Mussolini's propaganda bureau, then immediately hurried to CPUSA headquarters in New York City, where she hooked up with "Timmy," aka Jacob Raisin, aka Jacob Golos, a founding member of the CPUSA and its preeminent enforcer of Stalinist orthodoxy.

Chapter 2, "Vitaly Important Work," tracks Bentley's early work for the CPUSA, at a time when she did not yet appreciate that the research, spycraft, and role as a mail drop for other agents served not only "Timmy" and the CPUSA, but also the Soviet Union. In part, as Olmsted shows, this confusion stemmed from the fact that the CPUSA and Golos himself had a certain autonomy from Moscow that lasted until the Nazi-Soviet Pact, when Moscow tried to take direct and full control of its American network. However, the more significant reasons came from Bentley's own self-delusion, and "indifference to ideology" (p. 28). Olmsted suggests that Bentley operated as a needy woman who acted from personal, not political or ideological motives. Soon she "fairly glowed with satisfaction and self-importance. A few years earlier, she had been an unemployed, unattached, virtually friendless young woman. Now she had a powerful, caring lover who was training her to play a critical role in the coming worldwide revolution. Though she supported Communist ideals, hers was a case of personal, rather than ideological, devotion to the Cause" (p. 27). The contrast is to Alger Hiss's accuser, Whittaker Chambers, who was also "a lonely soul searching for something he could not find in his family, religion, or education," but whose turn against the Soviets was inspired by a sense of betrayal over the Nazi-Soviet Pact, on top of the murder of his friends and contacts by Stalinist types (p. 29). Chambers met with Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle in 1941, and named eighteen current and former government employees as spies or fellow travelers, in-

cluding Donald and Alger Hiss, then mid-level State Department officials. Without the corroboration that Bentley herself would supply in 1945, investigating Chambers's allegations remained a low priority for the FBI; still, the Justice Department did subpoena Golos, and used material found in his possession to go after CPUSA leader Earl Browder for passport fraud. This notoriety meant Golos could no longer use his business, World Tourists, for espionage, and needed not only a new front, but also a new assistant to operate as both courier and case officer.

Chapter 3, "Clever Girl," shows Bentley heading the new Soviet front company, U.S. Service and Shipping Corporation, and reconstructs Bentley's initial contact with individuals later targeted in her depositions and congressional testimony. ("Clever Girl" was a loose translation of Bentley's Soviet code name of *umnitsa*.) One particularly compelling example was Abe Brothman, a New York engineer engaged in industrial espionage, whose mention by Bentley to her FBI debriefers ultimately led that agency to focus on Julius Rosenberg. In 1941, Bentley was briefly under FBI surveillance because of her relationship with Jacob Golos. At the same time, she began a friendship with Mary Price, secretary to the well-known journalist Walter Lippmann; the two women combed his files for gossip on Anglo-American relations, and mention of future war plans. Bentley also hooked up with Bob Miller, who got a job with Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. It was Germany's attack on its ally Russia in June 1941 that prompted Moscow to seek more direct control over the CPUSA and field agents in North America. Only at this point did Bentley fully apprehend that she was a "spy for Golos, the Communist Party, and the Soviets, all at the same time" (p. 43). By August of 1941, Bentley was supervising what came to be known as the "Silvermaster group," led by Nathan Gregory Silvermaster, a native Ukrainian and lifelong Bolshevik activist who was employed in the Resettlement Administration of the Agriculture Department. Other

members included two advisors to Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, and two Pentagon contacts with access to military secrets.

Olmsted is evenhanded and careful in her discussion of Bentley's later accusations against especially prominent individuals, including Lauchlin Currie, one of FDR's economic affairs advisors; Harry Dexter White, primary architect of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; and Maurice Halperin, a former University of Oklahoma political science professor who joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) as a Latin America specialist. Currie ultimately admitted telling the Soviets about American efforts to break Soviet codes (the Venona project); Harry Dexter White's biographer Bruce Craig concedes that White did pass along information and possibly sensitive documents, believing that he was not only helping his good friend Silvermaster, but also that he was contributing to Soviet-American cooperation. Maurice Halperin apparently handed over classified documents. OSS chief William Donovan's personal assistant, Duncan Lee, passed along verbal information about OSS spy hunting campaigns, alerting the Soviets about suspicions raised against Halperin. William Remington, employed in the War Production Board, transmitted data on U.S. aircraft testing and production. Bentley passed along to Soviet agents tidbits from this group including secret estimates of Germany's military strength, information about America's Lend-Lease program, and gossip from the White House and Cabinet meetings. While helpful, this information was not what the Soviets really sought. What they really wanted was information on the opening of a second front and details about America's internal anti-espionage efforts.

Olmsted argues persuasively that "these intelligent, privileged men and women" passed along secrets for diverse, though generally naive and idealistic motives. Some, like Duncan and Remington, were "hardworking, well-meaning native sons" who believed that the U.S. government

should be more open to its wartime ally, and who saw themselves as contributing to world peace (p. 53). Others, such as Silvermaster and Halperin, were true believers working for a Soviet America. The Great Depression, growing economic disparities, and deep-rooted racism convinced these individuals that "their judgment was better than that of their employers and their government. They believed that their superior intellect or empathy gave them the right to decide when to share top-secret information" (p. 55). Bentley herself "was much less of an idealist than her sources. She had only the vaguest grasp of Communist doctrine, which of course made it all the easier for her to abandon it later. For her, spying offered the chance to take risks and break the rules, all while earning a good income. Most important, her supervisor loved her and kept her bed warm at night" (p. 54).

Chapter 4, "A Serious and Dangerous Burden," focuses on Bentley's resistance to Soviet efforts to take direct control over their American networks, particularly after the death of Jacob Golos in November of 1943. Ignoring Moscow's orders, Bentley expanded her network, connecting with the "Perlo group," comprised of individuals in various parts of the U.S. government, including Capitol Hill and the War Production Board. CPUSA head Earl Browder eventually turned over the Silvermaster group to the Soviets in June 1944. Renewed heavy drinking intensified Bentley's anger and resentment at Moscow's effort to order her around: "The NKGB's power play infuriated a woman who did not like other people to tell her what to do--and who did not seem to fully understand her own relative weakness. She resolved to find a way to get even" (p. 69). Although her trip to the FBI was still a year away, Bentley "began a clever, manipulative, passive-aggressive campaign to hurt the people who had hurt her" (p. 69). While pretending compliance, she did what she could to derail Soviet efforts. "As the end of World War II and its grand alliance approached, one of the top Soviet agents in the United States was an

unstable, alienated, mendacious American who drank too much and was doing all she could to sabotage her own agent network" (p. 72). Amid this self-destructive and vindictive campaign, Bentley connected with Anatoly Gorsky (Gromov), chief of NKGB operations in the United States, first secretary at the Soviet embassy, and erstwhile controller of the Cambridge Five in London. Through a mix of bribery and threats, Gromov successfully severed Bentley's ties to her network, pushed her out of her well-paying position at U.S. Service and Shipping Corporation, and encouraged her plans for a vacation at Old Lyme, Connecticut, where she began to map out her revenge. When Bentley recontacted Anatoly Gorsky, she made drunken threats to go to the U.S. government with her knowledge. When hearing of this, however, Moscow urged Gorsky to go easy on Bentley, assuming that she needed a shoulder to cry on

Chapter 5, "Get Rid of Her," tracks Bentley's early, rather tentative, contacts with the FBI field office in Connecticut. Bentley did not reveal anything about her own activities, reporting only her fears that she was being followed by an FBI agent, who turned out to be a crank. Nothing much came of her initial visit, although FBI interest in her story was sparked by revelations around the same time by a Soviet embassy employee in Canada who handed over documents about Moscow's espionage network in North America. An old contact of Bentley's, Louis Budenz, went public after experiencing a Catholic conversion, and this intensified Bentley's fears that she would be found out. Even when the FBI invited her to visit their New York City office, her information was vague and without corroboration. What ultimately drove her to begin naming names and supplying verifiable details to the FBI was her fear that both the Soviets and the FBI were after her, a suspicion confirmed by Earl Browder, who had been pushed out of the CPUSA leadership for "right wing deviationism." The Soviets had subsequently withdrawn support for the U.S. Service and Ship-

ping, pushing Bentley out of a lucrative job. So, on her third meeting with the FBI, and in successive conversations in the month following, she supplied full and accurate information; her facts tied in with other things that the FBI had heard from various sources. As one FBI agent later remembered: "We had files here, there and everywhere ... and she kind of sewed it all together" (p. 100). At this early stage, according to Olmsted, Bentley told the unvarnished truth, distinguishing between what she knew from her own activities and what she surmised indirectly. The FBI turned her in, hoping to implicate others. However, because J. Edgar Hoover told the British station chief in the United States about Bentley's revelations, the information reached Kim Philby, who passed it along to the Soviets, who in turn warned its agents in the United States and initiated a campaign to discredit or silence Bentley.

Chapter 6, "The Blond Spy Queen," covers official and public reaction to Bentley's revelations. This is especially rich territory for an exploration of gender as a useful category of analysis. Olmsted shows the partisan and institutional rivalries between a Republican-dominated Congress and the Truman White House, and between the FBI and Attorney General Tom Clark. Although Truman had preemptively established loyalty boards to screen federal employees, Hoover believed the White House and the Attorney General were not serious in their efforts, and that Clark would seek indictments based on information he knew to be insufficient and uncorroborated in an effort to embarrass the FBI. Thus, Hoover passed along Bentley's revelations to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). At the same time, Bentley began to make demands on the FBI for money and vacations; as leaks about her identity began to appear in newspapers, she turned again to heavy drinking to relieve her fears about Soviet assassination efforts against her. In April of 1948, she contacted a reporter from the *New York World-Telegram* in "one of the most fateful choices of her life. She had decided to spy; she had de-

cided to defect; and now she decided to tell the world about it. None of these decisions worked out well for her, but in many ways the last one was the most disastrous" (p. 123). A few months later, she made headlines, when reporter Nelson Frank announced: "Red Ring Bared by Blond Queen." For reasons of his own--hoping to satisfy bosses, who in turn wanted to see increased sales and give the Democrats a drubbing--Frank transformed the plain-faced, dark-haired Bentley into a "beautiful young blonde," who had helped steal top-secret plans of the B-29 bomber. This was the first step in the exaggeration process that turned Bentley's information from incomplete, uncorroborated, and sketchy to wild, sensationalist, red-baiting allegations with consequences for national politics. Bentley's true identity remained secret, until revealed by Frank when other newspapers began publishing official leaks.

Bentley appeared before the HUAC under subpoena. Although Congress had recessed for summer break, Truman unintentionally played into Republican hands by calling Congress into a special session to tackle inflation, and HUAC seized the moment to attack the White House as soft on national security and fully infiltrated by Communist agents. Presenting herself as a naive idealist "propagandized by subversive teachers and seduced by an older ideologue," Bentley's testimony before HUAC marked the second stage of exaggeration and mendacity (p. 133). Eager to please her questioners, Bentley "agreed with most of what the committee members had to say. She obligingly concurred that American Communists were plotting to overthrow the U.S. government, that there was 'very little' difference between fascism and communism, that Russian farmers were 'slaves,' and that American Communists were 'suckers'" (p. 131). Particularly sensational was her allegation that the Soviets had been told ahead of time about plans for D-Day. Events accelerated when Whittaker Chambers came out of the cold and corroborated key points of Bentley's story. Olmsted makes clear that Bentley was not be-

ing manipulated by the FBI or any other outside force; indeed, the FBI grew increasingly wary of its unpredictable, unstable charge. Apart from Bentley's actions and self-representation, the "spin" about her as a "red spy queen" emerged from the "cultural anxiety about changes in women's roles in the 1940s" (p. 134). There was, Olmsted ably demonstrates, a "war between the stereotypes--'Red Spy Queen' versus 'Comrade Woman'--[which] exposed the fears of the men who relied on them" (p. 135). Drawing on the work of Elaine Tyler May, Susan Douglas, and Susan Hartmann, Olmsted recalls gender dynamics in the early Cold War era and explains how the coverage of Bentley drew from stock characters in film noir, early anti-Communist films, and detective fiction (p. 136).

Chapter 7, "False Witness," shows Bentley out on the hustings telling her tale, in part as a response to efforts by those she identified to discredit her as a neurotic or puppet of hidden forces, and in part because of her conversion to Catholicism by Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen. Bentley's new anti-communist, Catholic friends found teaching jobs for her, but her continued legal troubles, public notoriety, and private excesses combined to leave her unemployed and ever more unstable. Her accusations picked up impetus in 1949, when U.S. Army code breakers decrypting NKGB dispatches to Moscow (under the auspices of the Venona project) verified the leak of top-secret Manhattan Project details by British scientist Klaus Fuchs. In a chain reaction, Fuchs identified his American contact, and this brought investigators to recall Bentley's mention of Abe Brothman, who in turn identified Harry Gold, who named Los Alamos employee David Greenglass; the latter named Julius Rosenberg. Bentley played a starring role in the Rosenbergs' trial, and "supplied the missing link connecting the Communist Party with the Soviet Union" (p. 165). Being "unemployed, depressed, and broke," she hooked up with the Catholic foreman of the new grand jury investigating several of her charges, and he

helped Bentley get a book contract. Her *Out of Bondage*, serialized by *McCall's*, demonstrates, writes Olmsted, that Bentley responded to her critics and detractors "quite sensibly, with a defense that was carefully crafted to absolve her from responsibility while enhancing her respectability. She decided to portray herself as a sort of Communist June Cleaver" (p. 166). Bentley "had formidable survival skills, and one of those skills was her ability to lie. She lied to others and to herself" (p. 168). Telling readers that "I Joined the Red Underground with the Man I Loved," Bentley "constructed a new image of herself: neither Mata Hari nor vengeful schoolmarm but rather a conventional housewife who had meekly obeyed her 'husband' [Golos]" (p. 166). Olmsted explains that Bentley's "distorted portrayal of her life was one more example of her practicality and her resilience. She was shrewd enough to change her life story in a way that suited the times and her own needs" (p. 167). Olmsted makes a convincing case that Bentley's book was ghost written by two men close to Bentley, the Catholic jury foreman mentioned earlier, and Thomas Sloane, an editor for Devin-Adair. This collaboration added a further layer of gendered cultural stereotypes: "Two men, in short, helped plan, write, and edit a book by a woman aimed at female readers. Their assumptions about gender roles, combined with Elizabeth's strained attempt to portray herself as a victim, created that phony smell noted by so many reviewers" (p. 169).

Chapter 8, "Somewhat Hysterical," and the epilogue, take Bentley through the 1950s to her death from alcohol-related causes in 1963, at age 55. Living in Connecticut, Bentley experienced a painful decade of financial straits, heavy drinking, and disastrous romantic liaisons. She alternately threatened and begged the FBI for funds, coming close to blackmailing the organization in exchange for her continued availability as a witness for Senate investigations of the State Department China hands, including Owen Lattimore. Bentley said what was expected of her: "that Soviet agents

still infected the inner councils of the U.S. government, despite the failure of the FBI to find any" (p. 177). Olmsted shows how the FBI ended up in an untenable position: needing Bentley to supply ever more details and confirm older allegations, they had to respond to her financial demands and coddle her; though recognizing how unstable and mendacious Bentley was becoming, they could not repudiate her without discrediting the agency and re-opening closed cases. Bentley's Catholic patrons arranged for a teaching post at the College of the Sacred Heart in Louisiana, and then other similar schools when trouble found her yet again. Bentley's relative seclusion in academe ended when Senator Joe McCarthy mobilized the Government Operations Committee to ferret out remaining communists in the U.S. government and called upon Bentley to testify. Olmsted notes that this testimony included "the most preposterous lies of her career," confirming details of the scandal of the day, that Harry Dexter White had supplied printing plates to Moscow for counterfeiting occupancy currency in postwar Germany.

Bentley's lies "stemmed from her decision to earn a living as a professional ex-spy," spurred on in large part by her knowledge that male ex-spies, such as Whittaker Chambers, were prospering while she had to beg handouts from the FBI (p. 187). Much of the public doubt about her statements came from a former boyfriend, to whom she privately admitted that she had, on occasion, lied. She or her ghostwriters contributed stories of the pulp fiction variety as to how Bentley had been "cast in the Communist mold, blinded by its dogma, enslaved by its discipline" (p. 188). Her sensational and controversial "revelations" brought Bentley to television, forcing a wary Hoover to stand by her as a witness, through congressional hearings and libel trials initiated against her by those she had accused. Her government friends were able to call off the IRS, which was looking for back taxes on her book royalties. According to Olmsted, "In the relationship between Elizabeth and the FBI, it was always hard

to determine who was using whom" (p. 201). Ultimately, Bentley pulled away from the FBI, a move agents attributed to the onset of menopause. Though she was called upon on occasion during the late 1950s, things quieted down and she continued to drink, bringing on the "virus" of which she so often complained. Her death in late 1963 brought obituaries that understated her role in events, depicted her as a "frumpy New Englander," and snidely suggested that she was neurotic and intellectually shallow (p. 203).

Readers will find Olmsted's feminist summing up of Bentley as "a strong woman who defied limits, laws, and traditions" thought provoking, but also somewhat "incongruous" with the weight of evidence presented, to quote a *New York Times* reviewer.[2] No doubt, biographers of undisputed heroines--such as civil rights leaders and suffragists--have an easier task than does Olmsted in this respect. Bentley was "the Linda Tripp of her time" according to a former boyfriend, an apt characterization that conveys the challenges and perils for biographers of either woman.[3] While treason against the United States is no bar to posthumous accolades, aiding and abetting a political witch hunt for personal aggrandizement, petty vengeance, and cheap celebrity give even historians pause. Olmsted seems to settle on Bentley as a "nonconformist" with strong "survival skills," who "smoked when the university forbade it; she drank when her father crusaded against drink. She ran a shipping company at a time when women had few opportunities in business. She enjoyed sex and had lots of it, even when her family and neighbors were scandalized by her behavior. She deceived and manipulated the NKGB, the most brutal and murderous secret police agency in the world, and lived to tell the tale. She had also outwitted the FBI" (p. 204).

#### Notes

[1]. Bentley's NKGB autobiography is still in closed KGB archives in Moscow, so Olmsted relied on Alexander Vassiliev's notes on the document.

Olmsted, p. 206, n. 6. Olmsted's other noteworthy primary sources come from the Eisenhower Library, Women and Leadership Archives, now declassified FBI and National Security records, U.S. Attorney records, and archives in Florence and Rome.

[2]. Dorothy Gallagher, "The Witness," *New York Times Book Review*, November 3, 2002, p. 18.

[3]. Olmsted, quoted in Jeff Howitt, "Secret Agent Woman," =<[http://www-date-line.ucdavis.edu/102502/dl\\_olmsted.html](http://www-date-line.ucdavis.edu/102502/dl_olmsted.html)>, (visited 22 March 2003).

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