



Remembering Tony Horwitz

(1958–2019)

IN THE 1850s, before he co-designed New York's Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted was an undercover correspondent in the antebellum South for the *New York Daily Times*. In *Spying on the South: An Odyssey Across the American Divide* (reviewed below), his final book before he passed away at age 60, Tony Horwitz followed in Olmsted's footsteps as the landscape architect sought to capture the pulse of the South—and Horwitz the pulse of modern America.

In a return to one of his favorite subjects, the Civil War, *Spying on the South* is a larger-than-life, on-the-road book, one that dusts off history while exploring America's present-day divide and its variegated cultural fabric. The *New York Daily Times*, Horwitz told PBS about his book, had “wanted quite a sober analysis of the South's economy and society. But Olmsted is this very intrepid and adventurous fellow who is constantly wandering away from his beat into whatever he was curious about.” And so Horwitz—similarly intrepid and adventurous, curious and intellectually honest—followed.

“Horwitz was a collector of the world's great characters, and he used his journalism to tell their stories, and ours,” wrote the *New York Times*. Through narratives that mixed past and present, the personal and the historical, Horwitz walked, sailed, flew, and rode via hoofed animal through the travails of our collective—and not-so-collective—heritage.

“I think part of what I wanted to do is restore a little bit of the unpredictability to history,” Horwitz told NPR in 2008, after the publication of *A Voyage Long and Strange: Rediscovering the New World* (★★★★ July/Aug 2008), a peripatetic, humorous romp that explodes the myths of the

founding and the settling of the New World. Horwitz alternates his own experiences on the road—from the “Disneyfication” of St. Augustine, Florida, America's oldest European settlement, to a bizarre museum in the Dominican Republic dedicated to Christopher Columbus, and many points between—while considering the connection between myth and history.

Horwitz approached history and modern culture in a similarly immersive way in his greatest book, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (1998), a first-person account of living at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He discovered, after awakening to a reenactment of Confederate gunfire, that the Civil War remains surprisingly alive and well. Mock battles, KKK rallies, racial separatism, and present-day attitudes reveal the legacy of hatred and divisiveness in America. “It's wryly funny but sneakily profound: Horwitz packs the book with the goofy practices of die-hard historical reenactors,” wrote *Slate*, “... but *Confederates* is essentially a book-length argument for the continuing importance of history in everyday life.”

Starting out a journalist, Horwitz covered conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans for the *Wall Street Journal*. He won the Pulitzer in 1995 for a series on income inequality and low-wage jobs. He was also a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. His first book, *One for the Road: An Outback Adventure* (1987), recounts the thousands of miles he traversed throughout the Australian Outback after moving to the continent with his wife, the writer Geraldine Brooks. *Baghdad Without a Map and Other Misadventures in Arabia* (1991) followed. In *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before* (★★★★ July/Aug 2002), Horwitz shrewdly asks whether Captain Cook was a savior who carried Western civilization to the far corners of the earth, a tyrant who devastated native cultures, or a bit of both. And his concern that John Brown's infamous attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, had become little more than “a speed bump for students racing ahead to Fort Sumter and the Gettysburg Address” inspired *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2012).

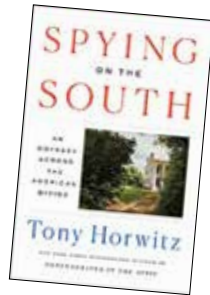
And in his final book, the enduring legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras live on.



Spying on the South

An Odyssey Across the American Divide

By Tony Horwitz



THE TOPIC: Frederick Law Olmsted is best remembered as a visionary landscape architect, credited with the co-design of Manhattan's Central Park. But prior, the unfocused, Connecticut-born farmer, writing as "Yeoman" for the *New York Daily Times* (now the *New York Times*), reported on the antebellum American South in two excursions between 1852 and 1854. His dispatches (and later, three books) captured slavery's great racial and political rift, his embrace of the abolitionist movement, and the character of the South. In 2015 and 2016—with the American presidential election looming—Horwitz, wondering how America has changed since then, traveled by train, car, mule, coal tow, and steamboat in Olmsted's meandering footsteps. He discovered casual racism, toxic industries, and evangelical Christianity; West Virginia towns devastated by the opioid epidemic; and more. Throughout, his humor and curiosity capture a region still under the long shadow of history but one also that also reflects the "diversity and capaciousness of America."

Penguin. 496 pages. \$30. ISBN: 9781101980286

NPR



"What [Horwitz] hears at almost every restaurant, bar, plantation house tour, and town hall meeting is an earful about big government, gun rights and the fallacy of climate change, as well as disgust with 'handout Democrats.' ... *Spying on the South* is every bit as enlightening and alive with detail, absurdity and colorful characters as *Confederates in the Attic* was." MAUREEN CORRIGAN

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Horwitz, too, met individuals of all classes and persuasions. ... While once-pristine areas Olmsted traveled are now awash in urban sprawl, Horwitz found some disparities between red and blue state cultures strikingly similar to the fault lines of 160 years ago, when Southern pride faced off against Northern elitism." RICH KIENZLE

Publishers Weekly



"Horwitz delights in the absurd and easily interlaces history with his many adventures—among them cruises on a coal tow and a steamboat, mudding in Louisiana, a re-enactment at the Alamo—where he encounters generous hospitality, warm intelligence, and, occasionally, bald bigotry. ... Throughout, Horwitz brings humor, curiosity, and care to capturing the voices of the larger-than-life characters he encounters."

Wall Street Journal



"Gradually a picture emerges of a region still wrestling with the aftereffects of slavery, the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction. ... As in his previous works, his generosity of spirit enables him to strike up conversations with a broad cross section of Americans living and working below the Mason-Dixon Line." RANDALL FULLER

New York Times



"One wishes for more depth and more breadth; the views of a few community or business leaders would have added perspective, and Louisiana and Texas constitute over half the book but he has hardly a word about the oil and gas industry (an industry he knows well since one of his books was about the Keystone pipeline). ... [P]erhaps Horwitz's book can help us find common ground today." JOHN M. BARRY

Kirkus



"Horwitz seldom reaches deep; his book is casually observed and travelogue-ish ... more Paul Theroux than de Tocqueville. Still, one can't help but notice that the things that occupied Olmsted's attention haven't changed much in the years since the earlier traveler toured a region that sometimes defies description."

Minneapolis Star Tribune



"*Spying on the South* was written before a change in the political weather last year, so it seems outdated. ... His blend of Olmsted's 1854 views and his modern experiences produce a readable travelogue without a strong political bent." BOB HOOVER

Newsday



"Olmsted's position as a well-situated Northerner occasionally blinkered his vision, and to some degree Horwitz follows suit. ... For the truth of today's South, go and see for yourself." MARY

ANN GWINN

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Combining geography, history, and travelogue, Horwitz wanders through Dixie and finds, as Olmsted did more than 150 years earlier, racial and political divides—but also a land far different, one marked by economic transitions, dying industries, and unique subcultures, including southern Louisiana's Cajuns. He also reveals Olmsted's legacy: the Southern slaveholders Olmsted met had viewed the North as just as socially stratified as the South, and in response, he had designed democratic, public spaces. Some of Horwitz's most interesting sections are the odd asides; unfortunately, he offers less analysis here than do classics such as W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* and Arlie Russell Hochschild's more recent *Strangers in Their Own Land*. *Newsday*, too, felt that Horwitz overlooked key aspects of the South, such as its urban renaissances. But with wit, imagination, and empathy, Horwitz, by "retracing Olmsted's adventures amid today's upheaval ... compellingly reveals how much—and how little—has changed" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*). ■