

# DISCOVERING the **FUTURE** in the **PAST**

By Linda Schmidt



**Icon of the institution:** This Eadweard Muybridge photo from the 1870s shows the original landscape surrounding Mills Hall.

The only constant is change, posits one old adage. This has certainly held true of Mills' Oakland campus, even from its earliest days. When Cyrus and Susan Mills moved their women's college here from its original location in Benicia in 1871, they were surrounded by a wide-open swath of pasture land transected by two small creeks. Over the following decades, they added a handful of buildings and planted well over 50,000 trees and shrubs to transform the parcel into a forested haven for the young women of the time.

Since then, a variety of dynamic characters, changes in architectural fashion, evolving educational needs, and the irresistible march of time have all shaped the physical form and function of the campus. All this history and more was unearthed over the past two years as the College undertook a project to assess its cultural landscape heritage—that is, the combination of geography, landscape, architecture, and human activities that have come to characterize the Mills campus since those earliest days.

The project, funded by the Getty Foundation, enlisted the knowledge of several Mills staff members, students, and consultants, including planner and landscape architect Robert Sabbatini

and Vonn Marie May, who has made a career of studying cultural landscapes. "The research and documentation compiled through this endeavor is an important historical document in its own right," says Renee Jadushlever, vice president of operations and a member of the project team. "The findings illustrate the College's historic and continuing commitment to our cultural, architectural, and landscape planning and decision making."

Louise Gilbert, director of development, foundations and corporations, who was instrumental in securing the Getty Foundation grant, agrees. "Each institution has its own personality, its own culture. This project gave us a way of appreciating the landscape



**Extreme makeover:** In 1910, Lisser Hall's south-facing façade was graced with classic Greek columns; in 1927, the building's new arched front porch opened to the north. Photo credits: 1910—Lothers & Young; 1927—Don Jones

in terms of its history, of who walked here, of who envisioned this place," she says. "The people came alive for me, each one of them."

The founders indeed had a very specific and sophisticated vision. Cyrus and Susan Mills had been missionaries in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Hawai'i, serving as educators in both far-flung locales. By the mid-1860s, they had returned to America and soon felt compelled to bring salvation and education into what New England Protestants regarded as the morally suspect lands of the new state of California. Cyrus seems to have been as enthusiastic about cultivating the campus grounds as he was about cultivating the minds of his young students. He used an intuitive sense to create a naturalistic planted setting, based on the ideals of English landscape design, with beautiful vistas and grand spaces befitting what was hoped to become known as "the Vassar of the Pacific Coast."

"There was Cyrus, very interested in exotic plant species and really making this an arboretum," says campus architect Karen Fiene. In addition to extensive plantings of eucalyptus trees, Cyrus also established productive orchards and fields to supply the campus.

"The Mills period wasn't a design imposed by a trained architect. Cyrus Mills put the campus together from a grounds perspective. He was making the campus self-sufficient, he was making it beautiful," says May. When Susan Mills took over as college president following Cyrus' untimely death, additional

buildings soon graced the campus—most notably, El Campanil and several others designed by Julia Morgan. Morgan was the first woman civil engineer to graduate from UC Berkeley and the first to be granted a Certificate of Arts from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris—a fitting match for the first western institution dedicated to advancing education for women.



After Susan Mills passed on in 1912, the Board of Trustees for the first time commissioned a master plan for the campus. President Aurelia Henry Reinhardt initiated a second master plan, this time by famed architect Bernard Maybeck, in 1916. Both of these plans remained largely unrealized, however, perhaps due to lack of funding or the radicalism of the overhaul each proposed. Both plans called for the removal of Mills Hall but, even at that relatively early date, the legacy of the founders was strong and the razing never took place.

As the century progressed and the campus population grew, however, sig-

nificant alterations were inevitable. Less than 10 years later, well-known Bay Area architect Walter Ratcliff Jr. submitted yet a third plan that brought a more ordered and classic design to the grounds. Ratcliff and Reinhardt formed a dynamic duo, and together they pushed the College into a new era: Ratcliff served as campus architect from 1923 until 1947, erecting more than a dozen buildings on campus, including the Art Gallery, Faculty Village, and the splendid Music Building. Part of Ratcliff's success in building on the campus must be attributed to his respect for the long and continuing history of the institution. In 1924, he described the challenges of working on an existing campus: "A scheme must be established that takes into account: first the present buildings and grounds, second the necessary development in the immediate future, and third the development in the distant future."

Landscape architects, too, had a strong influence in this period. Howard Gilkey, who worked closely with Ratcliff on most projects completed in the 1920s, wrote eloquently of the importance of the campus grounds to the College's educational mission in the October 1926 issue of the *Mills Quarterly*:

By and large, the distinction between environment and education is vague. Certainly, one of the distinctive things that Mills offers its students is the beauty of its environment, afforded and exemplified happily in the charm of its varied gardens. I feel that the destiny of the institution is involved in creating at Mills landscape gardening of the highest type possible.



***Celebrating the Cultural Landscape Heritage of Mills College***, a 159-page book packed with historical photographs, documents the history of the built and planted landscape of the Mills College campus and proposes possible future development in two major areas. Also included are summaries of four educational lecture programs presented as part of the landscape heritage project.

The Northern California Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects selected the Mills landscape heritage project and book as the winner in the "Analysis, Research, Planning, and Communications" category, citing the College's excellent understanding and support of its landscape.

*Celebrating the Cultural Landscape Heritage of Mills College* is available from the Center for the Book, [www.mills.edu/academics/library/ctr\\_book](http://www.mills.edu/academics/library/ctr_book), or contact Janice Braun, [jbraun@mills.edu](mailto:jbraun@mills.edu) or 510.430.2047.

Gilkey was joined by Howard McMinn, a botanist and scholar with a strong interest in California native flora (a popular species of manzanita is named for him). Clearly, in retaining these two accomplished plantsmen, campus leaders recognized the importance of the landscape started years earlier by Cyrus Mills and the value of maintaining a park-like atmosphere. McMinn, chair of the botany department, worked and taught on campus for nearly four decades, but his greatest lasting influence can be seen in his extensive plantings of some 275 native species—a horticultural philosophy that has only grown stronger in the intervening years.



Alumnae from nearly any decade might be surprised to see how the physical campus continues to evolve and serve students in broader and different ways. The causes of change are many and varied. Lake Aliso, once inspiration and home of time-honored student rites, has fallen victim to the natural process of sedimentation; today, only a mudflat remains where soothing waters once rippled. Lisser Hall, originally facing south and designed in a Greek Revival style, was refurbished in 1927 in keeping with a new campus policy to adopt a Spanish colonial architectural style. Other structures have changed their purpose over time: After the College acquired the Ming Quong Home for Chinese Orphans in the



**Outstanding in his field:** Howard McMinn planted experimental gardens across from the Music Building and used the campus environment as a teaching tool for his botany students.

mid-1930s, the building was renamed Alderwood Hall and served as the Mills Graduate House until the 1950s; today, it is the Julia Morgan School for Girls.

“You can be sitting on a goldmine and not realize it,” says Fiene. “By weaving together the bits of history we were able to see what was happening in the world when Cyrus and Susan Mills founded the College, what was happening with women’s education, what was happening with landscapes and the environment. Tracing those events helped us see that we’re part of a continuum. When you uncover that knowledge it gives you a guide to the future.”

For as much as this project was about discovering the past, it also provides direction for the changes that are yet to come. “The plan serves as a potential roadmap for future planning and decision making, allowing for creativity in design with a keen appreciation for the intent of the architectural and landscape giants who planned the Mills campus,” says Jadushlever. Some of these changes are already underway. The Music Building, for example, is in the midst of a multi-million dollar renovation that will preserve architectural details while introducing such changes as enhanced acoustics, improved accessibility, and expanded classroom space.

Recognizing the accomplishments and desires of past campus planners does not freeze future development or dictate any particular style, however. One primary outcome of the study is to build an awareness of the campus’ character so

that classic structures can be preserved and future plans can complement the best of what already exists. “You don’t disparage iconic architecture—the Campanil, Mills Hall, and so on,” says May, “but you need to peel off culturally irrelevant stuff, then add new facilities that are aesthetically and historically compatible.”

The project team focused on the future of two major campus locations: the Oval and the area surrounding the intersection of Richards and Kapiolani roads. The design of the building now under construction at that intersection (see page 14) was informed by the results of the Getty research.



**Tarnished treasures:** The Carnegie fountain in its glory days. Future plans may include restoration of previously existing features, such as this ibis-adorned fountain or the carriage drive from Wetmore Gate to the Oval.

“The Business School’s forward-looking new architecture references the intent of past landscape planning and further develops this proposed central core,” says Jadushlever. As in all areas of the campus, development here must address the balance of pedestrian and automobile access, educational and programmatic needs, and the wise use of both financial and natural resources.

“You can take important cues from the past, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be contemporary or you can’t move into the next century,” says Fiene. “Like the roots of a tree, the legacy of those who have come before us provides strength; building on that integrity gives our endeavors a renewed sense of place.”



**Gone but not forgotten:** Julia Morgan designed the gymnasium above, along with Alumnae Hall and Hellman Pool, to form a U-shaped complex on the edge of Toyon Meadow. Only Alumnae Hall, now known as the Student Union, still stands.

## Illuminating Iranian history

### The Windsor Shahnama of 1648

B. W. Robinson and Eleanor Sims '64

Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008



Eleanor Sims '64 treated more than 250 Mills alumnae and friends to an exclusive preview of her new book, *The Windsor Shahnama of 1648*, at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco on February 14, 2008. The standing-room-only audience viewed slides of a selection of the Windsor Shahnama's 148 dramatic paintings, richly illuminated in several shades of gold, while Sims explained the manuscript's artistic and cultural context and recounted some of the tales of heroic courage, love, and betrayal depicted in the paintings.

The Shahnama ("Book of Kings") may be better known to many American readers for its role in the bestselling novel *The Kite Runner*, in which two main characters revel in the saga's stories of valiant heroes, battles and revenge, and tragic fates. Written by the poet Firdawsi at the turn of the 11th century, the Shahnama chronicles the history of Iran from its mythical earliest days to the Muslim conquest. In the eight centuries after the epic's composition, thousands of copies were made—often illuminated and illustrated manuscripts, sometimes at the order of Iranian rulers. The Windsor Shahnama was commissioned by Qarajaghay Khan, a 17th-century governor of Mashhad, the principal pilgrimage city in Iran. The volume was presented to Queen Victoria in 1839 by the Afghan prince Kamran Shah as a gesture of thanks to the British government for its support during the siege of the city of Herat. The 1,512-page manuscript forms part of the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle and is one of the largest of all surviving illustrated manuscripts of this text. Sims' book explores the creation, history, and significance of this manuscript and its paintings; the published volume includes more than 50 full-color reproductions.

Based in London since the early 1980s, Sims is co-editor of the journal *Islamic Art*. Her previous publications include *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (Yale University Press, 2002). A Bent Twig seven times over, Sims graduated from Mills with a degree in English and a love of art history ignited in classes with Professor Alfred Neumeyer. She completed her PhD in Islamic art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She has worked in the Islamic Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, taught at the University of Minnesota and the University of Pennsylvania, and participated for several years in Italian-sponsored campaigns studying historical monuments in Iran before the Iranian revolution of 1979. The *Quarterly* inter-

viewed Sims after her February lecture to learn more about what drew her to the Windsor manuscript.

"The Windsor Shahnama is a very lavish and elaborate manuscript of the mid-17th century, a period whose manuscripts have not been well studied," Sims says. "And there is an interesting accumulation of royal details about where it was made and how it got to Queen Victoria."

Sims' work on *The Windsor Shahnama of 1648* began a decade ago, with a meeting at Windsor with Oliver Everett, then the royal librarian. Everett sought to encourage publication of the Royal Collection's most important Oriental manuscripts following an exhibition and an accompanying catalogue of the *Padshahnama*, a royal Indian manuscript recounting aspects of the life of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. Sims suggested the Windsor Shahnama, and soon she and the late B. W. Robinson, the first scholar to write about this Shahnama, were at work on the project.

Sims was especially interested in questions of manuscript making in this period, the people involved, and how the resulting volume reflects its cultural and historical context. She observes, "The question of who painted the Windsor Shahnama is extremely complicated because there are only two signatures in the whole manuscript." Her research points to the probability of a school of painting in 17th-century Mashhad more active than had heretofore been considered.

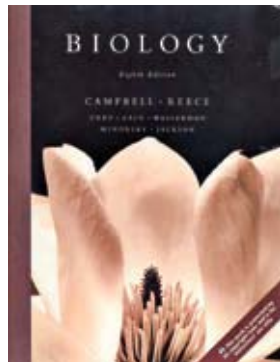
"Today, some people will look through this book just to read these wonderful stories of heroes and their families," says Sims. "In the 17th century, the Shahnama was not only how Iranians learned about the past, but also the way young princes learned of their obligations as rulers. If you read your Shahnama, you would learn how to distinguish right from wrong; how to treat family and friends, allies and enemies; and how best and most wisely to govern your country. You might even—eventually—learn that killing for revenge would get you nowhere."

"The Shahnama has been called the title deed of the Iranian nation's nobility, the repository of its history and its values. It is crucially important to understanding Iran today."



## Biology, 8th edition

*Neil Campbell, Jane Reece, Lisa Urry, Michael Cain, Steven Wasserman, Peter Minorsky, and Robert Jackson Benjamin Cummings, 2008*  
[www.aw-bc.com](http://www.aw-bc.com)



Lisa Urry, professor of biology and head of the Biology Department at Mills, contributes chapters on metabolism, cells, genetics, molecular biology, and the evolution of the genome as co-author of this revision of the world's most popular and successful introductory college biology textbook. The seventh edition has been adopted by more than 450 colleges, including Mills. It is estimated that 65 percent of all doctors and biological scientists in the United States under the age of 40 began their study with Campbell/Reece *Biology*.

## Recovering “Yiddishland”: Threshold Moments in American Literature

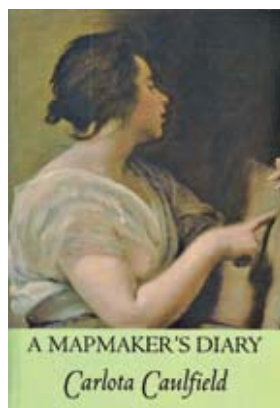
*Merle L. Bachman, MFA '93*  
Syracuse University Press, 2007  
[www.SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu](http://www.SyracuseUniversityPress.syr.edu) or 1-800-365-8929

In exploring the works of Yiddish immigrant writers from the 1890s through the 1930s, primarily in New York City, Merle Bachman challenges the commonly held belief that Jewish immigrants uniformly embraced assimilation in their adopted country. Bachman, an assistant professor of English at Spalding University, complements her personal engagement with Yiddish writing with academic literary analysis to uncover ambivalence about Americanization and resistance to the loss of Yiddish language and culture.

## A Mapmaker's Diary

*Carlota Caulfield*  
White Pine Press, 2008  
[www.whitepine.org](http://www.whitepine.org)

Mills Professor of Spanish and Spanish American Studies Carlota Caulfield presents her 10th book of poetry, a bilingual collection translated by Mary G. Berg in collaboration with the author. Caulfield, a native of Cuba, has received numerous international writing awards, including the first Spanish American International Poetry Dulce Maria Loynaz prize in 2002.



## Intersection: Sidewalks and Public Space

*Marci Nelligan, MFA '99, and Nicole Mauro, MFA '99, eds.*  
ChainLinks, 2008  
[www.chainarts.org](http://www.chainarts.org) or [spdbooks.org](http://spdbooks.org)

The sidewalk is much more than slabs of concrete that you pass over briefly on the way to the movie theater or grocery store. The essays in this book examine the sidewalk as a location for social commentary and debate, a space for performance and protest, and a center of community. This is the first in new book series, a spinoff of the journal *Chain*, that seeks to organize disparate works around a formal theme to shift perspectives and spark thought on topics of contemporary life.

## The Straits

*Kristin Palm, MFA '04*  
Palm Press, 2008  
[www.PalmPress.org](http://www.PalmPress.org) or [www.spdbooks.org](http://www.spdbooks.org)

This bittersweet volume weaves evocative poetry with unusual source materials to create a deeply textured history of the city of Detroit. Palm lived in the Motor City for many years, and here reflects on the city's evolution, from 18th-century French and Native American battles through the rise and fall of modern industry. Though geared toward Detroit, the book encompasses issues common to many great cities: the grandeur of a town's glory days, the promise and potential of urban life, and the disappointment and ruin embodied in a blighted metropolis.

## Riding to Washington

*Gwenyth Swain, MA '86,*  
*illustrated by David Geister*  
Sleeping Bear Press, 2007  
[www.SleepingBearPress.com](http://www.SleepingBearPress.com)  
or 1-800-877-4253

This illustrated children's book tells the story of Janie, a young girl who rides a bus with her father from Indianapolis to Washington, DC, to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak. Along the way, she encounters a variety of people and realizes how differences can lead to injustice—and how individual choices can lead to greater change. An accompanying teacher's guide is also available.

