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Planting Seeds

Fletcher Steele, Landscape Architect: An Account of the Gardener's Life, 1885-1971

By Robin Karson

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Reviewed by Lynne Lavelle

In 1950, Mabel Choate wrote landscape architect Fletcher Steele about her garden at Naumkeag estate in Stockbridge, MA. "In my mind, Naumkeag is now a work of art. Thanks to you," she wrote. "I am more interested in it and excited about it all the time... for you know, I have always wanted to make it a complete whole, like a picture in its frame." Choate, daughter of the lawyer and diplomat Joseph Hodges Choate, allowed Steele almost complete creative freedom at the 49-acre estate between 1926 and 1958, as well as entry to the high society she kept. And the resulting gardens – Afternoon Garden, Blue Steps, Chinese Temple Garden, Moongate, Rose Garden and South Lawn – represent the pinnacle of his career.

Fletcher Steele is cited by many as the transitional figure between the old guard and the modern in landscape architecture. But in this, the revised addition of the 1989 account of Steele's life, landscape historian Robin Karson tells a broader story – that of the man and his clients, and the single-mindedness that fueled the design of almost 600 gardens over 55 years. This collection of letters, personal accounts, sketches and photographs portray Steele as a shrewd guest of the American aristocracy – one who enjoyed private quarters and martinis at his clients' homes, but would bill their guests later for seeking his advice.

Though Steele spent his career in the company of high society, he did not have such roots himself. John Fletcher Steele was born in Rochester, NY, to Mary, a musician, and John, a lawyer, who never approved of his son's career. The family was comfortable, but not well off, particularly by the area's prosperous standards. Fletcher, as he was always known, spent his early life tending the family's fruit trees, lawns, kitchen yard, horse yard and garden; he was lured not by a love of plants, but by a desire for organization. "From earliest time, I was never satisfied with the place people or nature put things or with their shapes and sizes," he recalled. "I suppose it was because I thought it was easier to change plants than buildings that I decided on landscape architecture because I was not rich and had to do something."

Following a brief period at Harvard University and an apprenticeship with the landscape architect Warren Manning, Steele set up his own practice in Boston, MA. By 1925, he had several large commissions under his belt and had completed several European and North African tours, as well as a stint with the Red Cross during World War I. These influences, and his

growing interest in modern art, forged a link between Beaux Arts and Modernism in his work over the following decade. Karson includes significant examples, such as the Great Terrace at Lisburne Grange, in Garrison, NY, and the use of white railing at the estate of Mary Schofield in Peterborough, NH – an idea Steele would revisit later at his most ambitious project, Naumkeag.

Karson's account of Naumkeag gives credence to her argument that Steele's most inventive work came after the death of his father in 1936, when he no longer had to face John's skepticism. The garden was designed in four phases, each more experimental than the last, and spurred by Steele's deepening friendship with Choate, who liked to experiment with form and color as much as he did. According to Karson, much of Steele's work at Naumkeag was inspired by his conversations with Choate about India and China, which she visited – at his urging – in 1935. The temple in the Chinese Garden (1937-1939) incorporated genuine artifacts, and was built to give context to the many marble figures and carvings Choate had collected, "without," Steele said, "guessing the shudders of her professional landscape advisor whose duty it was to make them feel at home on a New England hillside."

Naumkeag's considerable slope also played a large part in its design, inspiring both the reshaping of the South Lawn and the Blue Steps. Steele embarked on the steps in 1938, after Choate complained that she was "risking her neck" on her daily trips to the cutting garden. The result was far grander than she envisioned. "I told Mr. Steele he must make some steps that would be convenient and easy," she said. "Little did I realize what I was in for." Steele designed the Blue Steps with comfort in mind, believing that a lack of variety made a long flight of steps intolerable. He decided instead to build four graduated flights divided by platforms over arches containing dripping fountains and pools.

As with previous projects at Naumkeag, Steele and Choate's friendship drove much of the development of the Blue Steps. Choate is pictured experimenting with paint on the steps as Steele looks on, dipping a brush in the blue shade they would choose. It is candid moments like these that make Karson's book more than just an account of the gardens – it is also an insight into the upper classes at play. Their devotion to planting, weeding and landscaping, while the Great Depression and two World Wars lurked in the background, is not easily made sympathetic. But the photographs of these huge estates, along with the stories of the salons, birthday parties and exotic trips abroad evoke a world so removed from that of the masses that its insularity is forgivable.

Choate's death in 1958 brought Steele's most creative period, and closest friendship, to an end. Naumkeag was opened to the public a year later, at Choate's bequest, and by that time it had matured into something closer to a fantasy world than a garden. While he would never surpass it – commissions of that scale dwindled as large estates became more expensive and less desirable to run – it is an enduring testament to Choate's and Steele's imaginations, and to Steele's early declaration that "the chief vice in gardens is to be merely pretty." ■