

TIM RICHARDSON

THE GARDEN OVER THE POND

A GENIUS FOR PLACE: AMERICAN
LANDSCAPES OF THE COUNTRY PLACE ERA

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By Robin Karson

(University of Massachusetts Press 428pp £46.95)

'ENCOURAGE THE CREEPERS.' This was the American garden designer Charles Platt's advice on low-maintenance lawn care to his client William Gwinn Mather, president of the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, in 1933, at the height of the Depression, when even plutocrats felt the need to tighten their belts. Or adjust their braces, or whatever it is that plutocrats do. 'Encourage the creepers,' he wrote, 'especially the nearly evergreens, such as the Speedwells or Veronicas, Bugle, Creeping Dandelion, English Daisy ... all of which can be walked on comfortably ... Then keep a limited area near the terrace in perfect grass.' In the event the lawn at Mather's house – Gwinn, near Cleveland – was saved and his library sold. Evidently, denuded bookshelves were preferable to a dandelion-filled lawn.

One of the strengths of this vast tome by Robin Karson is the way she relates the making of gardens in America during the so-called 'country place era' of 1900 to 1939 to the financial status and business vicissitudes of the clients who paid for them. The state of the economy always had more impact on garden style in America than in Britain, where the traditions of inherited wealth and a generally more cheerful disposition towards the prospect of relative poverty helped garden owners take a longer view (except at key moments such as the Second World War and its aftermath). American garden-makers tended to have a much more dynamic and creative influence on the look of their estates, many of which were, after all, made from scratch in what was formerly wilderness. There was also a strong philanthropic drive evident in men like F A Seiberling, founder of the Goodyear tyre company in Akron, Ohio, who commissioned a Tudor revival country mansion and wild garden at Stan Hywet before turning to the well-being of his 7,000 employees, for whom he created the garden suburb of Goodyear Heights (much as Hershey did for his chocolate workers in Pennsylvania).

The book comprises a series of vividly detailed mini-biographies of designers and clients, followed by detailed studies of seven gardens, including Dumbarton Oaks in

Washington, Winterthur in Delaware and Val Verde in California. This infilling of background detail, before the reader gets to visit (on the page at least) the gardens themselves, is a rewarding approach, since one gains a strong sense of a designer's development.

The under-appreciated designer Warren Manning looms large in the first half of the book. An irascible character, whom fellow designer Fletcher Steele cuttingly appraised as having 'no understanding, and consequently no patience, with any point of view that does not coincide with his own', Manning nevertheless completed, the author says, some 1,200 residential designs. The chapter on Gwinn benefits from detailed research into the designer's copious surviving plans and planting lists, which reveal the incredible detail of the wild garden, where each glade, bridge, set of steps and path was given its own name and number, with all the wildflowers and other plants (three different types of leek in one place) carefully recorded. Manning could be diplomatic, too: when his client professed scepticism about the idea of a garden without bright flower colour, Manning told him that such designs were intended only 'for the comparatively few people who can fully appreciate the ... quiet tone of

green and inconspicuous flowers'. Such flower snobbery remains strong in this country today: witness the kagouled cadre of connoisseurial galanthophiles who start gathering in little groups at select garden addresses at this time of year.

In Robin Karson's appraisal, Manning was a key inheritor of the romantic, picturesque attitude of the star landscapist of the previous generation, F L Olmsted, designer of Central Park in New York. The book's general trajectory follows the development of American garden design away from this essentially English tradition (Olmsted's key inspiration had been Birkenhead Park, near Liverpool), towards a distinctively American, highly decorative version of the more formal Arts and Crafts garden of 'rooms', and finally on to the fearless geometries of Modernism. That this happened in a few

intense decades is evinced by the fact that Dan Kiley, who became a leading Modernist designer, began his career in the elderly Manning's office.

One odd aspect of this book is that it seems to get much better as it goes along; I daresay I will now be told that the last chapter was in fact written first, but that is the impression. There is far more analysis, as opposed to historical description, in later chapters. The introduction, which rehearses some unsophisticated ideas about American garden owners seeking a relief from urbanism in their country estates, or using them as a means of



Naumkeag: 'intimations of laughter'

GARDENS

'conspicuous consumption', is eclipsed by more nuanced aspects of the text later on. The real flavour of American garden-making in the early part of the century is captured, for example, in Samuel Parsons' 1915 comment about Italian gardens in America:

And yet you feel that the owner loves Italy; and remembers Italy, but yet loves America still more with its brave simplicity and its absolutely natural charm ... One may have an English or American or French home bearing evidence of the effects of a strong personality, and yet it may have a touch, by no means overpowering, of a more alien, and possibly more desirable style, whether it be Italian, or Japanese, or clearly semi-tropical in effect.

That was the tone that so many Americans were trying to create in their eclectically inspired gardens.

The book in fact really takes off halfway through, with a compelling walk-around the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, designed for Robert and Mildred Bliss, who were the sort of people who concocted pioneering collections of pre-Columbian and Byzantine art, and commissioned Stravinsky to write a new concerto for their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Karson debunks the received idea that this garden, like many others, becomes less formal farther from the house (a Reptonian cliché), pointing out

the use of large trees near the house and a complex path system far from it. But the high point of the book has to be the brilliant discussion of the work of Danish-born Jens Jensen, a pioneer of 'prairie gardening' and the ecological approach in the 1920s, whose work has obvious resonances today. The close description of Jensen's technique of making large flower meadows, and his use of water in the landscape – even the way he manipulated the sky, light and shadow – is highly original and will potentially be of use to today's landscape and garden designers (though hardly any of them read books on garden history, of course).

The conclusion of *A Genius for Place* is triumphantly evocative. Robin Karson has already written a whole book about her design hero Fletcher Steele, who created the exuberant proto-Modernist garden Naumkeag in the Berkshire Hills, and she captures its singular tone – beauty and fun in equal measure – in her final paragraphs: 'intimations of laughter, keen intelligence, and a love of the land'.

Steele commented in 1926 that 'the chief vice in gardens, as in women, is to be merely pretty'. The same might be said of large-format, highly illustrated garden books – but this one does not fall into that trap. Carol Betsch's finely composed black-and-white photographs complement, tonally, the historical images, and help make *A Genius for Place* rich in escapist charm as well as information.