The green American dream

US landscaped gardens in the early 20th century were characterful and cutting-edge, says Robin Lane Fox

The English country house dream has lost none of its magic. It is even stronger after a decade of City of London bonuses. The aim is still to buy a house, usually on the axis from the Chiltern Hills (north-west of London) to the Quantocks in Somerset, make a lovely garden and sell one's inner soul or partner that all the office hours have been worthwhile. The same dream began to surface in the recent boom in Ireland and it has even found takers in parts of France. I do not think it has ever really been rooted in Italy. The last Italian whom I told that I lived in a country house replied that the country was only for animals. In Russia, the countryside is still in a wretched state and few of the new oligarchs want to go near it. They would rather live in Mayfair, London.

As so often, Americans have invented a label for the country dream. They have an age that they call the Country Place Era. Its main energy ran from about 1880 to 1930, although it is certainly not yet dead. I have been reading about it with fascination in a fine new book, A Country Place by Robin Karson. Her work of many years. It vastly enlarges our sense of landscape gardening's history and the origins of what now seem like new fashions. As so often, the new actually has the shock of a forgotten past.

I do not think that the American "country places" of this era have a very good foreign image. Outsiders picture them in literary terms, from Henry James to The Great Gatsby with a Great Depression waiting to round them off. They belong in the lifespan of Edith Wharton, who abandoned such places to live in France. Country places could be comically ugly pastiches of older countries' styles. They are imagined as too full of cowpats and long, roughly mown vistas. At a guess, I would have said that their dominant style of gardening was always English. The great Frederick Olmsted, landscape gardener of Central Park, was swept away by his walking tour in England's countryside, which shaped his ideal landscape in much of his later career. In the American gardens, by his walking tour in England's countryside, which shaped his ideal landscape in much of his later career. In the American gardens, he was busy trying a book called What England Can Teach Us About Gardening by William Miller.

Magically, the typical English country gardens inspired landscapers in the US of Rob Karson's book.

Coffin and Fletcher Steele are landscapers of real originality and interest. By 1900 landscape gardening was being taught at important universities, including Harvard. By contrast, the contribution of the UK universities of Oxford and Cambridge to the subject has remained largely unconsidered.

American designers were not obsessed with England only. They also looked to France, historic Italy so simple to their own prairies. Vigorous style wars were fought around the patios. Were mental stresses too, and some delicious points of etiquette. Karson recalls how one lady purchaser of a country place promptly put it back on the market when she found that she could not ride her horse into the hall. Another couple decorated theirs using maps of London as wallpaper.

I very much like the enliven of gardeners who gathered at Cornish in New Hampshire and profited from what Karson calls "crass fertilisation". At dinner parties one of them would say grace with the words "let us pray". Best of all is the marriage of an elderly country place owner to a much younger bride who has married before. A country neighbour sent a funeral wreath as a tribute, thinking that the service was in memory of the bride's former husband.

So much was going on: Italian style from Italian villa was being championed by Charles Platt. The great Beatrix Farrand was aiming to "keep step with the great stride of nature". We can catch some of the results in the black and white photographs which accompany Karson's text, from which two figures recall me by surprise.

Karson is an encyclopaedia of the English landscape world, who rose to become the landscaper of the private country place of Henry Ford. From his English countryside brought a taste for the flowers of wild nature. Seeing the amiable natural flora of the American prairies led him to apply a "prairie style". In 1907 the architect Frank Lloyd Wright had published designs of his new "prairie house". In 1908 Wright published his first book, Landscape Art: An Inspiration From The Western Plains. It is amusing to reflect how "new wave planting" has been pushed recently by architects as if it is a modern breakthrough.

The owners, you might be thinking, simply had too much money. If so, follow the career of the remarkable Henry du Pont. His family fortune was based partly on gunpowder and their massive legacy to gardening is alive and well at Longwood and Winterthur on the east coast of the US. But I had no idea of the personal skill that Harry brought to his life's work. As a child he would be sent to bed without supper if he failed to remember botanical names. Harry already had his first plant at boarding school. He studied horticulture at Harvart and worked on plant nurseries. One of his first acts at Winterthur was to run a trial of 42 types of Dahlia, noting each one's performance in a book. His family gardens became the supreme country place. Watch out, though you might be that move to a country place might engulf you too and give in to the entirely different meaning to the words "bogus luck".