The garden over the pond

A genius for place: American landscapes of the country place era

By Robin Karson

'(Encourage the Creepers.' This was the American garden designer Charles Platt's advice on low-maintenance lawncare 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 Veronica, 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, demurred bookshelves were preferable to a suitable walkway.

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' (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 Birkenhead, England, where the vicissitudes 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). The world war and its aftermath, and the financial gains of the 1920s, 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 tire company in Akron, Ohio, who commissioned a Tudor revival country mansion, and wild gardens 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 Henry 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 mingling of background detail, before the reader gets to walk on the page at least, is a rewarding approach, since one gains a strong sense of a designer's development.

The under-appreciated designer Warren Manning was also a famous star, and an early book among the many that character, whom fellow designer Fletcher Steele cuttigly 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 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, and Manning was the first to suggest that the concept of the garden as an extension of the public park should be developed.

In his approval of American gardens, 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. This is reasonable enough, but the whole 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 the 1940s and 1950s, is a story of gradual development over the 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 more of a grip on the English narrative than on the American; this 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 relates Manning's name and ideas to earlier American garden owners seeking a relief from urbanism in their country estates, or using them as a means of 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 the garden a picture of nature, with the use of native plants and the planning of the whole garden, even the way he manipulated the sky, light and shadow - it is highly original and will potentially be of use to today's landscape and garden designers (though hardly any of them real books on gardens until the 1970s) - illustrates that this great American garden designer. K. C. Kemper's appraisals, Manning. 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 the short but singular tone - beauty and fun in equal measure - in her final paragraphs: 'intimations of laughter, keen intelligence, and a love of the land'.

Steel came commended 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 Hetime's finely composed black-and-white photographs complement, totally, the historical images, and help make A Genius for Place rich in escape charms as well as information.