



Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

29th edition, 2018
The Céide Fields, Ireland

Motivation of the Carlo Scarpa Prize

The Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche has unanimously decided to dedicate the 29th edition of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens to the *Céide Fields* near the village of Ballycastle, on the north County Mayo coast in the west of Ireland, a site containing the tangible remains of an extensive Neolithic rural landscape that holds the key to our understanding of the origins of land cultivation and its environmental implications over the millennia.

Situated in the bleak countryside on the north-west coast of Ireland overlooking the Atlantic ocean, the Céide Fields complex was first discovered in the 1930s. Excavations carried out in this landscape with its rich archaeological heritage have revealed a vast network of drystone walls built over five thousand years ago to enclose pastures and cultivations and forming a hidden geometry that was concealed and conserved by a combination of factors including climate change, deforestation and the disappearance of the fields under a thick layer of peat. The formation of the blanket bog over thousands of years, the simple, everyday routine of turf-cutting – that age-old activity producing fuel and shaping the landscape – the wisdom of a schoolmaster who recognised the history of his land in the heaps of stone revealed when the turf was removed – these three factors gave rise to an archaeological campaign that has been carried out in surprising harmony with the site: with the local sheep farming, the life in the farmhouses scattered across this rugged countryside, the relationships between the locals living in this far-flung corner of Ireland, at close quarters with an environment unique to their history, which is the history of Ireland.

The complex, which takes its name from the Gaelic *Céide* meaning “flat-topped hill”, is situated in the area bounded by Killala bay to the east and Broad Haven to the west where excavations have revealed a concealed field system consisting of parallel walls running up two sides of the hill and following the contours of the Behy valley to Belderrig in the west, and to Glenultra to the east, as far as Rathlackan. The 15-hectare visitor site, which is part of a much wider area of which 1,000 hectares have been mapped so far, features an informative visitor’s route and an award-winning interpretive centre now celebrating its 25th anniversary that help visitors understand the historical value of the place and the extent of the field system much of which is still concealed beneath a 3-4 metres layer of peat.

This is a rain-sodden hilly landscape mostly covered in a soft layer of blanket bog that overlooks the Atlantic ocean from the dizzying drop of 120-metre high cliffs composed of layers of sandstone, limestone and shale formed around 350 million years ago, descending to the tiny inlet of Belderrig harbour to the west and dipping before rising to the lofty promontory of Downpatrick Head and its impressive sea-stack Dún Briste (from the Gaelic “broken fort”), to the east.

The physical and historical links between the *Céide Fields* complex and Belderrig, the neighbouring village lying 7 kilometres further west, add to the value of this site, which is so important for archaeology and which is inextricably connected to the human and social aspects distinguishing it and to the role that stockbreeding and education play in the care of this landscape and its capacity to look to the future. The investigations carried out here, in Belderrig, discovered and then brought to light the traces of plough furrows, evoking memories of ancient barley and wheat crops that connect central Asia to northern Europe, recreating an episode in the evolution of agriculture in the millennia of human history.

Sheep farming, pastures and life in scattered farmsteads, the thick blanket bog covering the land, cut away in sections by the locals for blocks of turf; here in this complex environment a



local schoolmaster found a concealed landscape buried beneath layers of peat accumulated over millennia. In 1934, the Belderrig schoolmaster, *Patrick Caulfield*, was the first person to recognise the scientific value of the heaps of stones discovered in the bog and to realise that they belonged to a single system, thus giving rise to the *Céide Fields* archaeological project. This legacy of curiosity and knowledge that began with this village schoolmaster continued through the work of his son *Seamas Caulfield* who became a teacher and archaeologist in turn, and through the generations following them. Most of all though it is expressed in the collective efforts of those who have participated in the excavations and who continue to further and disseminate our knowledge of the Fields, people like *Gretta Byrne* who is responsible for their current and future management on behalf of the Irish Office of Public Works (in Gaelic language *Oifig na nOibreacha Poiblí*).

“When he stripped off blanket bog/The soft-piled centuries/Fell open like a glib” wrote the Irish poet Seamus Heaney in 1974, at the end of a visit to Belderrig and to the archaeologist-schoolmaster Patrick Caulfield. Thanks to these discoveries we too can experience a millennial landscape composed of ancient stones, people who dig and explain the presence of the finds discovered, fields flourishing beneath the turf and animals grazing under the gaze of their herders, all contributing to the beauty and identity of this environment in a constant state of transformation.

Céide Fields is a significant chapter in an Irish story in which archaeology not only signifies a desire for knowledge but is also an expression of a sense of belonging to place and proximity to a local history revealed in the landscape. The work of archaeologists overlaps with that of stock-breeders and farmers who are brought together by the shared wish to care for and conserve places while focusing on the core aims common to all landscape projects: education as a mission inextricably linked to local context; the relationship between agriculture, stock-breeding and the responsible use of natural resources; the understanding of the value of biodiversity as well as hospitality and coexistence with the opportunities and needs of tourism development.

The *Céide Fields* bring us face to face with the teachings transmitted by landscapes over the centuries that the Carlo Scarpa Prize helps us to study and disseminate: the awareness of the origins of cultivated landscapes and the value of the biodiversity revealed by the forests of the wild apples in the *Tien Shan*, in Kazakhstan (2016). The capacity to create a new landscape in bleak, wild conditions similar to these Irish landscapes – as in the garden of *Skrúður*, near *Núpur* overlooking the oceans of the north, in Iceland (2013), and sharing the same human vocation to educate and ability to wait patiently. Co-existence with wildlife as in the *Bosco di Sant’Antonio*, *Pescocostanzo* (2012), an Italian nature reserve where humans have created a pact underpinning the value of a mountain landscape. But also an awareness of history as a journey through infinite stratifications, appearing in the *Céide Fields* as a gradual accumulation of layers of decaying vegetable matter that is gently pierced by the probe of an Irish archaeologist, and elsewhere as a cross-section through history, as in the *Cave di Cusa*, *Sicily* (1999), an ancient limestone quarry in the heart of the Mediterranean shaping the landscape through a story made of stones. In revealing its landscapes, the *Céide Fields*, like these places, remind us of the need to interpret our history as the outcome of the migrations of populations, mingling of cultures and temporary settlements.

Motivated by reasons connected to the universal value of a place, to its deep underlying links with a sometimes painful history, and to the merits of those who were able to recognise its significance, taking responsibility for its present management and asking questions about its future perspectives, the Scientific Committee of the *Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche* has decided to award *Carlo Scarpa seal* to the archaeologist *Gretta Byrne*, who is in charge of the *Céide Fields* archaeological complex. This Prize, which is in her hands today, is intended to express our closeness and support for all those people working in this place to safeguard and diffuse awareness of the importance of a shared heritage rich in meaning and teaching.