

SHELTERS 1



The Shelter by the Bay



ARTISTS ARE BEING INVITED TO MAKE HABITABLE SCULPTURE as an integral part of The Wilderness Sanctuary, an artists' retreat center in SW Ireland. Called the 'Shelter Project', this book marks the completion of its first phase.

The brief for these first two sculptures, or 'Shelters', was to use materials found on the site itself. The artists, Alfio Bonanno, Alan Counihan and Chris Drury chose to use stone, an obvious choice as here rock shows through the earth everywhere – planet bones. The challenge, however, was to leave something behind whose presence did not destroy the very nature of this stone wilderness.

The book does not document the process of making the shelters, nor is it a critical evaluation of the sculpture. Its intention is to 'place' Shelters within a wider vision – to describe how a longing for wilderness could answer to our inner solitude. It also puts the Shelters physically on the map so that they can be found.

Alfio Bonanno decided to work in collaboration, in itself a response to a sense of human insignificance in relation to the place. *"Our so-called vision is only a seed that must be allowed to grow and be changed by those who use the dwelling. There must be a letting go so that the stamp of the individual is eventually obliterated. The Shelter only begins to live when it is lived in."* (Chris Drury)

Describing his 'Shelter of the Bay', Alan Counihan writes *"It was blessed in the process and holds the joy of its making still"*. From a long way off you could hear the sound of stones being placed. As they fitted together they made a different, solid sound. Perhaps the oldest sound in the world.

Chris and Alfio were assisted by Gary Beshoff – "A man with great feeling for stone" (Alfio Bonanno). Alan's helpers included the writer John O'Leary, and Martin Sullivan whose strength and insight were invaluable. John O'Leary's experience finds voice in the words of this book – his poems dense and resonant as 'true' stones hitting home.

The Wilderness Sanctuary Artists Retreat Centre can be found on the Beara Peninsula in Co Cork, situated one and a half miles from Allihies on the Eyeries Road. It aims to provide small scale studio and accommodation facilities designed in such a way as to retain a sense of wilderness. When the studio and accommodations are completed, artists will be invited on the basis that their work will be enriched by solitude, or the wish to articulate a response to the spirit of the place, or they have been invited to work on a project with the local community. Meanwhile the next phase of the project is due to begin in 1999.

Rachel Parry Boydell

IRELAND WAS DIVIDED, according to myth into middle and edge. The middle was 'the treasure, the herds and the fortresses'; the edge' the cliffs and fjords, the salmon and the sea' – a division between what is subject to man and law and what is wild. With the land dissolving into light, westwards, brilliance, the shore is the limit of reality, beyond this is no language nor land in these bounds.

Wilderness is the boundary between this world and the otherworld, a place of change and exposure. Its derivation from the Welsh Gwyllt (Irish *geilt*), meaning shaman or madman, underlies its meaning as a place of visions – healing or terrifying, which reach beyond what we know.

Some say that it was from here in Allihies that the monks, who also sought a wilderness and built shelters in stone, first went to the Skellig (offshore islands). The legend as I heard it says that when he decided to sail there with his Brethren, the Abbot blessed a boulder and it became a boat. The deep scar scored in the slope of rock by the keel of this Stone-boat as the dragged it down to the sea can still be seen at Point na Drimnagh – The Promontory of the Keel, in clear sight of The Wilderness Sanctuary.

"Recently several of our Brethren have set sail, in hope of finding a sanctuary in the measureless ocean. . ."

wrote St. Adamnan in his Life of Columba.

It is fourteen centuries later and we can still feel the exhilaration and loneliness of that. Imagine only the thin skin of the curragh stretched drum-tight over theribs and keel, trembling with the breathing of the ocean, between your body and the infinite blue depth below.

The image is of the at-oneness and insignificance simultaneously that is the meaning of wilderness.



The Keel Stone, Point na Drimnagh



The Mountain Shelter

THE ENDLESS VIEW WESTWARDS, the ceaseless sea sounds, these shelters are a concentration of the wilderness. *“Hives for the honey of the invisible”* (Tim Robinson). As the stones relate to the mountain from which they were hewn, their form evolving from the accident of the rocks, so the clochain relate to the landscape. They are inside the world, a curved, carved space inside the mountain where one may dwell. They are shelters for the inner life. A sanctuary is a place made safe by magic in which we dream the world.

Stonework is a symbol of the striving to coerce or charm the world into meaning and form. The Carmina Gadelica quotes a spell with which a monster is compelled to chant a building into existence . . .

*Stone on top of stone,
Stone on top of two,
Set the stones thus,
And the wall will be up.*

*Stone on top of stone,
Grey stone by its side,
Courses upon course,
From the base to the top.*

Each course drawing inwards, enclosing space. As the innumerable shades of grey mount up in their courses, the whole structure sings with torsion and tension (intention) under the great weight of itself. Stand in a clochan with your eyes closed And you can feel the heft and weight of it Under your feet, like stepping on solid ground after a long time at sea.

It is not cement or mortar which holds the structure up, but gravity.

John O’Leary at work while corbelling ‘Shelter of the Bay’



EVERY STONE must fit perfectly if the building is to stand. This is the magic that makes the place safe. There is a morality in this work. If you put even one stone in the wall (or word in the poem) for the ease or look of it, that is not right or 'true', the whole edifice will fall of its own weight. In this sense every wall is a manifestation of the sacred, a heirophany. The purity of intention is the beauty of the building.

John O'Leary



Alan Counihan working on his Shelter of the Bay



Gary Beshoff, Alfio Bonanno and Chris Dryry at work on the mountain Shelter

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