

Irish Times review by Paul Clements

DRAWN TO DONEGAL

The Road to Glenlough

By Christy Gillespie

The piece de resistance of Christy Gillespie's large-format book is the story of the American artist Rockwell Kent. He was one of three famous people who spent time in the isolated valley of Glenlough, in south-west Donegal.

Kent lived there for four months in 1926 after arriving with his wife, Frances, on an extended honeymoon. By that stage his name carried considerable prestige. He was already a consummate artist and writer known for drawings, books and maps and had painted in France, Greenland, Alaska and South America.

Kent craved grandeur and remoteness and Ireland held an allure. He wanted to live the life of locals, experience their world and paint it. The warmth of the people appealed to him, and he made friends in Glenlough with Dan Ward, a sheep farmer and weaver who eked out a living with his wife Rose. Kent renovated a thatched cow byre next to the cottage, turning it into a studio.

The valley was an expansive stage for the artist, who immersed himself in the drama of the landscape and coast, producing some of his best work.

He developed a first-hand knowledge of his neighbours capturing them on canvas. One of the book's 43 chapters deals with figurative studies that he sketched and transformed into watercolours.

After returning to the United States, Kent organised exhibitions of the Irish paintings, dividing his work into distinct categories. Many sprung from his time at Glenlough, including Dan Ward's *Stack*, *Irish Coast* and *The Sturrall* (all now in Russian museums).

Collectively his Donegal artworks amount to 100: 39 oils, 29 watercolours and 32 drawings and prints. Prices for them in the 1920s ranged from \$600 up to \$6500.

As a comparison, two years before the Great Depression, a basic car cost \$380. Just one of Kent's drawings, *Dan Ward's Haystack*, is in Ireland. It was bought by a syndicate and is at the Folk Village in Glencolmcille.

Gillespie's ambitious book took 15 years to research and write and weighs in at a hefty 3.4kg (7½ lb)

It is a lavish production, and the variety and quality of the evocative illustrations are prodigious running to nearly 700 pages.

The two other well-known names who feature in the book are Dylan Thomas and Bonnie Prince Charlie.

