

It Occurs to Me: The Road To Glenlough

By Frank Galligan

In his weekly column, Frank Galligan looks forward to the publication of Christy Gillespie's book 'The Road to Glenlough,' which is being launched in both Glencolmcille and Kilcar this weekend.

Last October, I looked forward to the publication of Christy Gillespie's book 'The Road to Glenlough'.

The first book launches take place in Glencolmcille in the Folk Village at 7pm on Friday night and in the Aislann in Kilcar the following night, Saturday, at 8pm.

As I said before, it is a remarkable work of scholarship, and now that I've read it, I'm more convinced than ever that it will garner critical acclaim at home and abroad.

Christy has been Jesuitical in his research and fact-gathering and still manages to make it a fascinatingly enjoyable read, rather than an academic tome to be consigned to the dusty shells of university libraries. It is so readable for an academic treatise and notwithstanding the fact that Bonnie Prince Charlie, Rockwell Kent and Dylan Thomas are the three central characters, it is Glenlough that commands the centre ground and the narrative.

As it says on the blurb, "There is no road to Glenlough. Not even a well-worn path. The valley, in the south-west highlands of Donegal, is as remote and monumental as it is enchantingly beautiful. It is a place that has attracted a number of notable visitors. These include American artist and illustrator Rockwell Kent, Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and, if strong local tradition is to be believed, where Price Charles Edward Stuart hid out after his failed uprising in Britain, as he waited for a failed ship to bring him back to the safety of mainland Europe."

In the course of his research, Christy discovered that the Annie McGinley featured in the famous painting of the same name was a cousin of our granny's clan. There's also a lovely photo of our mutual grandad, Francie Byrne, at the construction of one of the Folk Village cottages. Although I was brought up in Carrigart in the main, Christy's book has re-convicted me of my 'motherland'...'In Through', and at my age it's a wonderful settling down and confirmation of the roots that matter.

I reminded readers some years ago, that for Christy Gillespie and myself, a journey to the 'Tabhairne agus Siopa' in the Folk Village is always an emotional one, filled as it is with paraphernalia from Patrick McGinley's shop and pub in Meenanearry. Patrick was our maternal grandmother's father, and the items include the christening robe used by the family for generations.

One of Christy's photographs shows a gathering in Glen Lough in 1926, the night before Kent departed for good, with our grandmother Bridget, grand-uncle, fiddler Andy McGinley, and other family members. Twenty years ago, on a trip to St Petersburg with the Pushkin Trust, I walked entranced around the amazing Hermitage Museum, to be confronted by another of Kent's most famous paintings, 'Dan Ward's Stack'. It was an incredible moment...I was transported from the home of Pushkin, the father of Russian literature, 'in through' to the place which inspired Kent to write: "I've travelled north and southeast and west in search of mountain peaks but never until now have I found peaks whose summits reached so near to God as do you men of Donegal."

As Christy reminds us, on that final Big Night before Rockwell Kent departed, our mutual granduncle, Andy McGinley's "...bow is blurred, a clear indication that he was actually playing as Kent took the picture, a musical moment frozen in time. Kent was to take an active part in the entertainment that night, dancing the "break-down" with Annie. But as the night wore on, Denis McGinley's supply of high-quality poteen began to diminish. And so Kent made efforts to purchase some fresh stocks from a neighbouring distiller, but it proved to be not of the same high standard:

“The fiddle played, the couples danced, the older people sat and talked and smoked and drank poteen ... it was such a warm-hearted and affectionately convivial evening as is never to be forgotten - and most certainly not an evening one should let be marred for lack of enough poteen. ‘If you can get a bottle from your neighbour, Denis I’ll pay for it,’ I said. But when the poteen came and was handed to me to pour out, what a disturbing mess of alien stuff was in it! That would never do. ‘Go get me a bit of muslin or something to strain it with Annie,’ I bade the girl who was helping me. Annie at last returned. ‘I could find nothing but this handkerchief,’ she explained and showed it to me. ‘See? It’s only been used a little bit!’ ‘Annie,’ I said, ‘it will only make the poteen sweeter; give it to me.’”

Christy has done County Donegal and Glen a huge and inestimable service with this brilliant publication.