

Anne Hailes: The Road To Glenlough is a treasure trove of Donegal history

Anne Hailes in the Irish News

YOU'D be hard pressed to connect Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, the famous American artist Rockwell Kent, Bonny Prince Charlie, Fionnan O'Connor and a dog called Millie. Well, Christy Gillespie has managed to do just that with great aplomb.

It took over 15 years to bring them all together in his epic book, *The Road To Glenlough*, named for an area of outstanding beauty in the heart of the Gaeltacht between the parishes of Glencolmcille and Ardara.

This story of south-west Donegal unfolds over 600 pages and more than 900 photographs and illustrations – even the acknowledgements are a history lesson on this part of Ireland.

It might never have been born if Christy, a primary school principal in Termon, hadn't decided to visit his friend in Indianapolis: on the flight to the USA, he leafed through the in-flight magazine where he read the story of painter Rockwell Kent and his love for the valley of Glenlough.

This much sought-after artist had arrived on honeymoon in 1926 and it was there he painted some of his acclaimed Irish collection. In the article, Christy was staggered to see a photo Kent had taken of villagers at a night of partying shortly before he returned to America. And there, in the middle of the group, was Christy's grandmother – it was the same photo he had at home in Kilcar.

He was intrigued, and began years of researching both the artist and the area, photographing and, above all, talking, and this led him to a treasure chest of history.

Christy discovered that poet Dylan Thomas arrived over the hill from an Port one lovely July day in 1935. Christy devotes four chapters to the poet, from his difficult growing up in Swansea, through his childhood to his career on a local paper and on to the peace and quiet of Glenlough Valley, where he wrote away from temptation.

I'm sure Thomas, who died 70 years ago, would have been pleased to know that, in a hall in Dunfanaghy, a group of my friends had a summer theatre production: the year of *Under Milk Wood*, I played Captain Cat's dead lover, Rosie Probert, and so I became acquainted with the genius that is Dylan Thomas.

Dylan was certainly happy with what he was producing in the peace of his little cottage: "Words are coming nicely, and the rain can't get in through the roof. I have a blazing turf fire, and the only sound is the sea on the million stones."

That's Donegal in a nutshell.

In 1746, a prince, dressed as a woman, fled to safety in Ireland. In Glencolmcille, the locals believed him to be Prince Charles Edward Stuart who, after a failed invasion to restore the Stuart monarchy, sailed across the sea from Scotland.

He stayed in hiding for two months before being picked up by a French ship at a spot now known as Prince Charlie's Cove.

A detailed history of these men, their families, their highs and their lows are all recorded by Christy, and the stories are fascinating to read. But it's the fair days and the fishermen, the hard-working women tending family and farm that gives this book so much colour.

He involved many locals and visitors, especially from the north, in his quest for accuracy:

"Fionnan O'Connor is without parallel the most knowledgeable person in Ireland with regard to whiskey and poteen making and was very willing to share his vast store of information with me," Christy reveals.

"And rock climber Iain Millar climbed to lofty vantage points to capture unique images of sea stacks and promontories in the area."

The author's wife, Brona, and his four children, Bronwyn, twins Orla and Clare and his son, Daniel, who has taken it upon himself to deliver his Dad's tome to people like me – all had a part in the making of this book, which dominated Christy's days during his years of retirement. If he wasn't writing, he was talking his way round Donegal, or sitting thinking – and that's where Millie comes in.

"My faithful Jack Russell who's been loyally by my side day after day," he tells me.

"She always had the sense to know when it was time for me to leave the computer and go for a good long walk."

Two events prove the importance of this book. One family in the area told Christy how their mother, who was in the late stages of Alzheimer's, suddenly took an interest in the photographs when *The Road to Glenlough* appeared in the house. For two years, she hadn't spoken to her family, but suddenly, to their delight, she began chatting and pointing out people she'd known in her youth.

"On another occasion, I was told that, when the family had to leave their elderly father in the room for a while, they put the book on his knees to read and enjoy the pictures. As it weighs 3.4kg, he wasn't able to get up out of his seat - so they knew he'd be safe."

The colours of Rockwell Kent's paintings are beautiful, the stately royal pictures of Bonny Prince Charlie and his family are works of art: however, every illustration had to be paid for, and there were also research and reproduction costs. For instance, every single word of Dylan Thomas has to be paid for individually, but as far as Christy Gillespie is concerned, it is worth every penny.

I would agree. This is a book to be cherished, to be enjoyed either by dipping in and out or sitting down to devour, and most certainly it's a book to pass down through the generations. I'm sure Glencolmcille will welcome the idea of a museum for all Christy's research materials and photographs, and so continue building the memories.

