

Christy arrives after his 15-year trek on 'The Road to Glenlough'

By Connie Duffy for the Donegal Democrat

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It might have been a long time coming - 15 years in fact - but as everyone will discover it's well worth the wait.

Christy Gillespie's much-anticipated new book, *The Road to Glenlough* will be launched this Friday night, July 7 at 7pm in the Folk Village, Glencolmcille, and again the following night, Saturday, July 8 in the Áislann, Kilcar beginning at 8pm.

It tells the history of the remote and monumental valley of Glenlough in south-west Donegal. It's in the heart of a Gaeltacht area and forms the border between the parishes of Glencolmcille and Ardara. Where this valley meets the Atlantic has been described as "Ireland's finest coastal walk" in the book *Mountain and Coastal Hillways, A Walking Guide*.

Indeed for such a remote out-of-the-way area, it has attracted a number of very noteworthy visitors including American artist Rockwell Kent (above), Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and if detailed and recorded local tradition is to be believed, where Prince Charles Edward Stuart hid out following his failed rebellion in Britain.

The book numbers nearly 700 pages and is beautifully designed incorporating 900 high-quality images. These include all of Kent's Irish artworks where he recorded a way of life now very much in the past. His depictions of poteen making, fishing for lobster, the building of Dan Ward's Stack and his iconic tribute painting Annie McGinley are now considered to be among his very best.

Christy grew up in Kilcar, enjoyed an illustrious playing career with the local GAA club and became a national school teacher, following in the footsteps of his late parents, Mary and Dan.

He taught at the Boys School in Letterkenny before he was appointed principal of Termon NS in 1993. During his time there inspired and encouraged pupils to explore all facets of the world of learning.

He has always had a huge interest in the cult of St Colmcille and the lore attached to him. Indeed he published a book on the saint in 1997 to coincide with the 1400th anniversary of his death. He also published a book on the story of the evictions at Glenveagh.

Inspiration comes in many forms and the idea for his book began during a flight to Indianapolis in the USA in 1987.

“I was reading the Aer Lingus Inflight magazine Cara and discovered an article by Anthony Glavin called The Irish Legacy of Rockwell Kent and the time he spent in south-west Donegal in 1926. I was fascinated and delighted as it was probably the last thing I expected to read in the magazine. It contained a number of paintings and photographs. One of them showed a crowd standing outside a typical Donegal thatched cottage and I thought: ‘We've got that photograph at home’!”

On his return home, Christy asked his late mother who explained it was taken at a big night for an American artist before he returned home.

“She added my grandmother Bridget Byrne and two of her sisters were also in it as was Andy McGinley, one of the two fiddlers that supplied the music that night.”

That conversation lit the fuse and the more Christy explored Rockwell Kent’s story and connections the more determined he became to discover and tell the Glenlough story.

“I just knew there was a really good story to be told and the more research I did the more I discovered the valley’s associations with the likes of Bonnie Prince Charlie and Dylan Thomas. Things started to snowball so I thought the best thing to do was to treat the valley as a very impressive stage with these luminaries coming on and off so I tell their stories before they come, how they interacted while they were there and what was to become of them afterward.”

Christy also felt the locals had a story well worth telling as well as living through the harsh times.

“Kent’s writings, photographs and paintings recreated a life that’s long gone now capturing a time when the country was taking its first tottering steps in autonomy. These are done in such a detailed and beautiful way that it has almost conferred immortality on them. There’s nothing comparable to it in this country and in particular his coloured photos from 1926.”

There is actually no road into Glenlough, it being a hard two-hour walk from the nearest road, but when you reach the bay there it is well worth the effort, as it is on a much grander scale than the nearby and much more accessible Sliabh Liag which is now a world heritage site. At its head is a glacial lake surrounded by an amphitheatre of high ground while down at the bay there are a number of sea stacks standing guard including the Tormore, the largest off the coast of Ireland.

Christy's book also reminds us that the Glenlough area was for centuries the heartland for poteen making in Donegal because it was so remote and he firmly believes Kent’s photographs of poteen makers at work are the only genuine images of such an operation. There will be more book launches to follow around the county and also in Dublin, but if you would like to preorder a copy then you can contact Christy at glenloughvalley@gmail.com. The book will also be in selected bookshops and other venues in the county from next week onwards.