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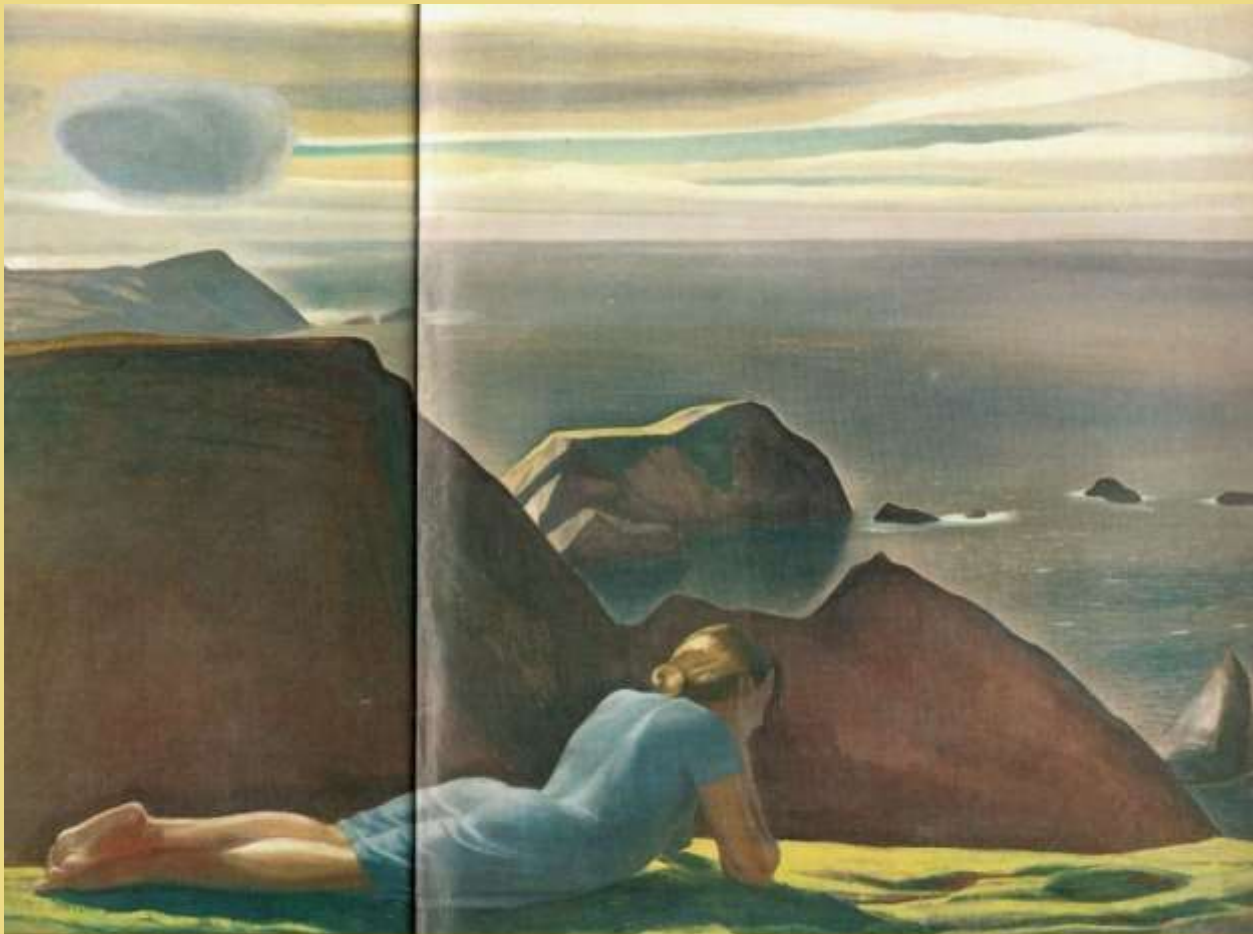
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THE IRISH LEGACY OF ROCKWELL KENT

An American artist spent a memorable summer in Ireland, in 1926.
ANTHONY GLAVIN Investigates.



'Annie McGinley' Courtesy of the Rockwell Kent Legacies

If not exactly an artist without honour in his country, Rockwell Kent (1882—1971) is today better remembered in parts of Greenland and Ireland — and better represented in the major museums of the USSR — than he is in much of his own America. Equally ironic, if not a bit puzzling, is the fact that by all accounts Kent was a man larger than life: accomplished painter,

renowned book illustrator, prolific author, hardy adventurer, and a social reformer who was no stranger to controversy.

The reasons for this partial eclipse from the public eye, dating from the last decades of his life, are various. His left-wing politics, which landed him in hot water as early as 1915 in Newfoundland, and again on Monhegan Island off the

Maine coast in the 1940s, brought him before the McCarthy hearings in 1950, and no doubt contributed to the cancellation of a major retrospective show a few years later. His prowess as a book illustrator for such classics as *Moby Dick*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron* and *Candide* also likely obscured his reputation as a major painter, while his steadfast loyalty to

representational — as opposed to abstract — art left him increasingly stranded by the changing tides of artistic taste.

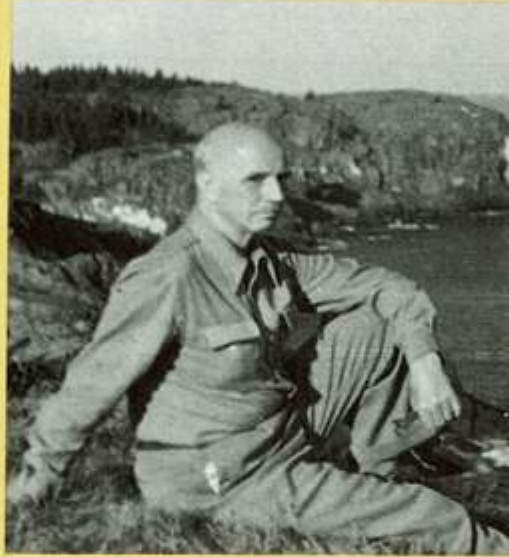
A major retrospective of Kent's paintings mounted by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, which toured America from coast to coast last year, suggests that the rehabilitation of this artist may at last be on hand. Included

among the nearly ninety canvases in that show were five of his Irish oil paintings, executed during an idyllic four months that Kent spent in the Donegal village of Glencolmille in 1926. What's more, the fond memories of that long-ago summer held by his former Donegal neighbours offer, even now, sixty years on, a telling chapter in the life of this remarkable artist.

Among those who vividly remember Kent is Annie McGinley, 82, the subject of one of Kent's most celebrated paintings. It was to her childhood home in the tiny fishing townland of Port that Kent, together with his second wife, Frances, first arrived in 1926. "When he first came, he thought he would get a place in Port," recalls Annie, a widow who now lives in the thriving fishing town of Killybegs. "But there was a big crowd of us in it, and we hadn't the room". Undeterred, the American couple continued north to the isolated townland of Glenlough, situated at the farthest reaches of the sprawling parish of Glencolmcille.

The lonely splendour of Glenlough, reached only by an arduous, mile-long, mountain trail, and inhabited only by Dan and Rose Ward, suited Kent down to the ground. A skilled carpenter, he immediately undertook to transform a thatched cowshed into a one-room dwelling-cum-studio for himself and his bride of only two months. What might have seemed like primitive digs to the average American was no bother to Kent, who had already built cabins for himself in Alaska and Newfoundland, and who would do the same in Greenland five years later. Today villagers still remark on his handiwork, praising the wooden floor he fashioned

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from timber salvaged from the Glenlough shore, or the ingenious window shutters that unfolded into a table. As Kent wrote in one of several autobiographical volumes, "Before the summer was over, people from miles away came to call on us 'just to see,' as they told us, 'the pretty little house'".

Comfortably ensconced, Kent at once began to paint, sketch, and photograph his neighbours saving the hay, setting lobster pots, and even making poteen. "He did paintings galore when he was here", recalls Annie McGinley, whose father allowed the artist to store his completed canvases in their cottage in Port. "Down in our house there used to be twenty or thirty pictures at a time, some of them as big as the gable, piled up behind a chest".

No doubt Kent initially seemed an odd sort, dressed in baggy plus-fours, or hiking home from a distant shop with a fifty-pound flour sack on his back, secured "Indian-style" by a strap around his head. "When at first we used to see Kent standing there painting on the *brúgh* of a bank, we didn't think he was right in the head!" laughs former neighbour Francey Gillespie, whose father sold Kent lobsters caught off Glenlough. The villagers quickly took the painter to their hearts, however. "We used to knit him socks and long-



'The Sturral'

Courtesy of the Rockwell Kent Legacies

stockings of homespun which he took to America", recalls Annie McGinley, while a story told by her brother-in-law Andy Maguire suggests just how much the locals warmed to Kent. "He did a drawing of a run of poteen at a still house up the mountain", explains Maguire. "There were four or five men in the drawing, who were a wee bit nervous that Kent might show it to the guards!"

The work he executed in Glenlough, coming just before his years in Greenland where he is considered to have reached his peak as a painter, is arguably as good as the best of his oeuvre. Paintings such as "Annie McGinley", "Shipwreck, Coast of Ireland" and "Dan Ward's Stack", variously demonstrate the superb draughtsmanship, resonant colours, and a concern with light typical of his finest work.

Not surprisingly, Kent's ardent socialism was simply not an issue in Donegal in 1926. "They used to say up the mountain that he was a Communist staying down with us", explains Annie McGinley's sister Mary, "but he was a very nice man. Plain, very plain".

While the leftist sympathies of such American writers as Steinbeck and Dos Passos eventually weakened in later life,

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Kent's impassioned politics never wavered. Unable to interest an American museum in providing a permanent home for his work — a response which likely had more to do with politics than aesthetics — Kent eventually gave a quarter of his private collection to the USSR, including some of his finest Irish paintings. Awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967, he created no small controversy by promptly donating \$10,000 of that stipend to the North Vietnamese.

Brief as his sojourn was, Donegal obviously etched itself into Kent's heart. Over the years he continued to correspond with the McGinleys and others, sending over a large colour reproduction of "Annie McGinley" as well as original watercolours as Christmas cards. Upon learning in 1950 that Dan Ward planned to sell Glenlough, Kent and his third wife, Sally, decided to buy the isolated farm, intending to live and paint there a few months each year.

The artist's application for a passport, however, was rejected by the US State Department, who cited as a reason a recent trip to the Soviet Union — despite the fact that Kent had travelled there as part of a prestigious international delegation to plead for



'Irish Coast'

Courtesy of the Rockwell Kent Legacies

nuclear disarmament. Kent promptly sued the State Department, losing twice in the lower courts before the US Supreme Court in 1958 finally found in his favour in a landmark decision.

Although Dan Ward had long since sold Glenlough, the Kents immediately set sail for Ireland. Putting up at the hotel in Glencolmcille, they collected the Wards who accompanied them on the long trek out to see what Kent described as "our dear valley". Later, they drove out to visit Annie McGinley, "with whom", as Kent wrote, "I had danced many a jig". "Do you know me?" Kent asked. "You look like a man I once knew", allowed Annie, and with that the artist and his one-time model shook hands.

"The son came once after and visited me", explains Annie, "and told me his father was dead. But my daughter had already written me from America that Rockwell Kent was buried".

Sporting an asbestos roof, Annie McGinley's homestead in Port now serves as a holiday home for summer visitors. Dan Ward's cottage in Glenlough is "closed" as they say in

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Annie McGinley on Kent's return visit, 1958

Donegal, its thatch falling in and the once-tidy meadows gone to rushes. "Dan Ward's Stack" hangs in a Leningrad museum, where the romantic realism of Kent's art is highly regarded, and where his reputation as a major 20th-century landscape painter is greater than in his own America.

In Donegal, however, the legacy of memory lingers on. A former neighbour fondly recalls a discarded tube of Kent's blue oil paint which worked wonders for marking sheep. Another insists on his story of the ewe Kent bought off Dan Ward, "and painted every colour of the rainbow". Certainly, there is no escaping the affection for the artist that lies at the heart of these recollections. "He had a fine, baldy head, Rockwell Kent", smiles James Cunningham, who grew up not far from Glenlough. "I seen him walking into Hugh O'Donnell's shop in a downpour. Hugh asks him, 'Do you not wear something on your head when it's raining?' 'Oh, no', says Kent. 'I like to walk bareheaded in the rain. It makes my hair grow like the green, green grass!'"



'Shipwreck, Coast of Ireland'

Courtesy of the Rockwell Kent Legacies