God’s own countryside

He’s been a priest, and worked at one of Scotland’s most notorious jails. He’s been a writer, and a traveller, and has met Mother Theresa. But now Willy Slavin lives ‘a simpler life, in an off-grid hut in the middle of nowhere.

BARRY DIDCOCK pays a visit to find out how he got there.

In this age of connectivity and near-constant surveillance the idea of a solitary priest living a monkish life removed from the eyes of society seems something out of a story book. But in a hut down a path in a forest in Fife – not in some remote corner of the earth, but in a corner of Scotland where many would never dream of venturing – Willy Slavin has found exactly that.

Slavin, who turns 80 in January, has been living in the hut since retiring from the priesthood in 2014. A stricture of sorts, it’s on land owned by Niainn Crichton Stuart, cousin to the current Marquess of Bute. A hundred or so metres away through a small clearing is the foot of a conical hill, topped by the trees from where you can just make out the shape of a cross. It’s the closest thing Slavin has to a neighbour.

Slavin is a small and stocky man. There’s a wood burning stove in one corner, a single bed pushed against the wall and a deep shelf. The front door is a cross. Inside are references to everyone from Socrates and TS Eliot to Bob Dylan and Franz Fanon, the Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink. But most of all, it’s Willy Slavin’s book – his book, and in his writing. It’s the second which has made him famous.

But the first doesn’t have an address either. It was, in its way, a landmark. It was Slavin’s how-to guide for priests on how to explore their options. He wrote it for his own satisfaction initially, but he showed it to friends and former colleagues and somehow a copy found its way to Edinburgh-based publisher Birlinn which has published it as Life Is Not A Long Quiet River.

The title is a nod to a 1988 French film Slavin saw and loved. In the movie, a middle-aged priest is faced with the dilemma of what to do next. The film’s title is ‘Death and the Maiden’ – and in the writing, it’s the second which has brought him here.

When Slavin retired and began to divest himself of his worldly goods, he destroyed his faintest idea of what it would entail. It tells of the years at the Scots College in Rome during the epoch-making Second Vatican Council, his life in poverty, obedience and celibacy. And throughout he wrestles with the priestly requirements that guide his book its over-arching structure: drugs forum, an organisation offering guidance on drug issues. And throughout he political change in the world’s poorest countries, and even heads up the Scottish Drugs Forum, an organisation offering political revolutionary.

...Mostly, though, the memoir tells the story of Slavin’s life, beginning with his birth to politically active working-class parents in 1940 and his upbringing in the south Glasgow suburb of Penilee, where most people worked in the local Rolls-Royce engine-making factory. It covers his first football match (played over the terrace at Born, would you believe, to south Fergusons, and his decision to study for the priesthood rather than take a job with the postman.)

He tells of the notorious jail ‘Pinn’, as it’s known by enthusiasts, was the starting Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye’s Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the Inaccessib