

## Cover story

# 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

**I**N 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 like something out of a story book. But in a hut down a path in a forest in Fife – off-grid and, on an unseasonably cool day of heavy rain, uninvitingly off-road – you'll find Willy Slavin. Formerly of the parish of Barlinnie (plus a few more besides) he's now retired to this humble sylvan retreat to read, think, look out of the window and, today, welcome a guest eager to hear about his long and eventful life.

Slavin, who turns 80 in January, has been living in the hut since retiring from the priesthood in 2014. A sinecure of sorts, it's sited on land owned by Ninian Crichton Stuart, cousin to the current Marquess of Bute. A hundred or so metres away through the trees you can just make out the shape of a hut that Crichton Stuart himself owns. It's the closest thing Slavin has to a neighbour.

Slavin's hut is small and bare. There's a wood-burning stove in one corner, a single bed pushed against the wall and a deep shelf running in front of the only window functions as a desk. He cooks on a rudimentary one-ring camping stove and his food comes from a shop in the nearby village of Falkland. There's no electricity and no toilet, so he either uses the forest or what he refers to as "the facilities" in a nearby café.

The hut doesn't have an address either, at least not one the Royal Mail would recognise, so for all correspondence of a snail mail nature Slavin uses his sister's address in Glasgow. For the digital sort he has his iPad (OK, so he's not entirely off-grid).

"I love it," he says as I stand taking it in, from the rocking chair on the platform outside to the small pile of books on the desk, among

them *Is This All There Is?*, a reflection on death, resurrection and eternal life by the Catholic theologian Gerhard Lohfink. But what about the cold? The place is cool enough on a summer day like this so aren't the winters unbearable? "No, no," says Slavin, shaking his head. "Because of the stove. And we haven't had a bad winter in the last couple of years anyway."

Over the front door is a cross. Inside are more religious icons and a photograph of Slavin on the summit of the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye's Cuillin mountains. He started Munro-bagging aged 43 and the In Pinn, as it's known by enthusiasts, was the one that completed the set. He seems plenty pleased with himself in the picture, but there's something else there too – a sense of exuberance, zest and maybe a touch of mischief.

Those same qualities come over both in his person – during our two hours together he'll describe himself variously as "a non-conformist" and "a bit of a delinquent" – and in his writing. It's the second which has brought me here.

When Slavin retired and began to divest himself of his worldly goods, he destroyed his half-century's worth of diaries and papers but not before he had mined them for a memoir. 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 loves which takes a satirical sideswipe at the Catholic church and at bourgeois morality. Elsewhere there are mentions of and references to everyone from Socrates and TS Eliot to Bob Dylan and Frantz Fanon, the



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Picture: Gordon Terris

Martinique-born philosopher, anti-colonialist and 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 (lifted over the turnstiles at Ibrox, would you believe, to watch Rangers play) and his decision to train to be a priest despite not having "the faintest idea" of what it would entail. It tells of his years at the Scots College in Rome during the epoch-making Second Vatican Council, his later work in parishes around Glasgow and his training in psychology, and it details his life-changing decision to move to Bangladesh in the mid-1970s and the troubling, eye-opening decade he spent working in Barlinnie Prison after his return.

He falls in love (twice), eats tortoise with an Italian hermit (once), sees Sophia Loren drinking coffee in a Roman café, encounters Mother Teresa in far less salubrious circumstances, spends two years living in a Glasgow squat, flirts with liberation theology (a powerful Christian-Marxist mash-up driving political change in the world's poorest countries), and even heads up the Scottish Drugs Forum, an organisation offering guidance on drug issues. And throughout he wrestles with the priestly requirements that give his book its over-arching structure: poverty, obedience and celibacy.

That last one seems like a good place to start. "Making a case for celibacy is just as difficult as the case for obedience and poverty," he says when I mention the C-word. "I think the difference nowadays is that people

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