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Todd Swain

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Scotland, the Climbing Way

Reconnections with hardy, brash, hilarious mountain friends

Todd Swain



NO ONE I HAD EVER MET ON NEW ENGLAND CRAGS IN THE LATE 1970S looked as pirate-like as Tom Patey climbing a sea stack in Scotland with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. No one seemed as intrepid as W. H. Murray, battling up winter first ascents on Ben Nevis in hobnailed boots. No one looked like brigands as much as Paul Ross and Alan Richard McHardy, completing an early British ascent of the Salathé Wall on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. The “Fox of Glencoe,” Hamish MacInnes, looked like a Hollywood version of a valiant mountaineer. (Hollywood indeed enlisted MacInnes many times—in front of and behind the camera.) The Scottish and British climbers I read about in books and magazines intrigued me because they seemed brash, inconceivably hardy, and powerful.

I went to Scotland several times looking for them. They were all of those things.

High School Library Dreams

I started rock climbing while attending Winnacunnet High School in Hampton, New Hampshire. The school library was stocked with a variety of classic climbing tomes, thanks to an English teacher who climbed. I devoured W. H. Murray’s *Mountaineering in Scotland* (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1947), Chris Bonington’s *Everest South West Face* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), Hamish MacInnes’s *Climb to the Lost World* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), and Tom Patey’s *One Man’s Mountains* (Victor Gollancz, 1971).

These lit my imagination and became the foundation of my now 40-plus-year climbing career. I also read about—and would later meet—Henry “Hot Henry” Barber, perhaps the best rock climber in the world in the early 1970s. Barber grew up in Massachusetts, made significant contributions to the United Kingdom climbing scene in the 1970s, and has lived in North Conway, New Hampshire, for decades.

From left, Todd Swain and his wife, Donette, with the legendary climbers Sir Chris Bonington, Peter Myers, and Paul Ross, in Keswick, England. COURTESY OF TODD SWAIN

Encounters with the Greats

On my early forays in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, I met Paul Ross. Ross was born in England and came to the United States in the 1960s to work for the Outward Bound school at Hurricane Island, in Maine. One of Ross's coworkers at Hurricane Island was Euell Gibbons (1911–1975), the wild-eating guru famous for pitching Grape-Nuts cereal on television. In the early 1970s, Ross and two partners started International Mountain Equipment (IME) in North Conway. Ross also founded the International Mountain Climbing School (IMCS). I taught rock and ice climbing for Ross in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Both IME and IMCS remain an integral part of the White Mountain climbing scene.

Ross introduced me to Alan Richard McHardy, another legendary British climber known for bold ascents in the 1960s and 1970s. During the winters of 1980–1981 and 1981–1982, I made pilgrimages to Scotland and worked as a climbing guide for McHardy. I took clients up icy routes in Glencoe; on



Todd (left) and Donette (right) Swain with the climber Hamish MacInnes, each holding a MacInnes invention: the terrordactyl ice climbing tool. COURTESY OF TODD SWAIN

Ben Nevis, the highest peak in Britain; and in the Cairngorm Mountains. I also had the opportunity to meet such Scottish climbing legends as Hamish MacInnes, Ian “Big Ian” Nicholson, and Cynthia and Ed Grindley.

MacInnes established some of the most famous climbs in Scotland. He also invented all sorts of climbing and mountain rescue equipment. He has authored more than two dozen books and worked on films such as *The Eiger Sanction*, starring Clint Eastwood; *The Mission*, featuring Robert DeNiro; and *Five Days One Summer*, starring Sean Connery. Nicholson was a hard-drinking, chain-smoking mountain machine. Look up “hardman” in the dictionary and you’ll find a picture of Nicholson. In the early 1970s, he famously soloed two of the most difficult ice climbs on Ben Nevis: Point Five Gully and Zero Gully. He climbed both routes in a morning and was back in the pub drinking by noon.

On one of my very best days—ever—I soloed a difficult winter route on Ben Nevis. This route, the Orion Face Direct, stands 1,200 feet tall (higher than Cannon Cliff in New Hampshire’s Franconia Notch), and it’s a grade 5 climb, the upper end of the difficulty scale. It was a bluebird day, and the climbing conditions were perfect. As I pulled my body over the top, there stood MacInnes and Nicholson, two of the very finest Scottish winter climbers of their day. It felt like hitting a home run in a Little League game only to be met at home plate by Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth.

Return to Scotland

In spring 2018, my wife, Donette, and I visited Scotland for six weeks. I hadn’t been back since the 1980s, and Donette had never visited. The first week we climbed sea stacks and sea cliffs with Henry Barber, by then age 65. He entertained us with stories from his trips around the United Kingdom and his exploits in other parts of the world.

After Barber returned home to New Hampshire, Donette and I enjoyed wonderful visits with MacInnes (then 88), McHardy (77), Nicholson (69), Cynthia Grindley (68), and Davy Gardner (68). All except MacInnes are still climbing. Donette and I climbed new routes on the basalt sea cliffs of the Isle of Skye with Grindley and went to a sport-climbing crag north of Inverness with McHardy. We also drove south to Keswick in the Lake District to see Ross (81) and Sir Chris Bonington (84).



Henry Barber approaching the Am Buachaille sea stack. TODD SWAIN

I mention their ages because all of these women and men have not lost the gleams in their eyes, their wit, or their passion. They still look for opportunities to “take the piss” out of one another. Their stories left us rolling on the floor. Gardner told us about the time he and a mate left their gear in a talus cave while climbing Buachaille Etive Mòr in the Highlands. The breeze stopped soon after they returned to the cave. The midges—the tiny biting

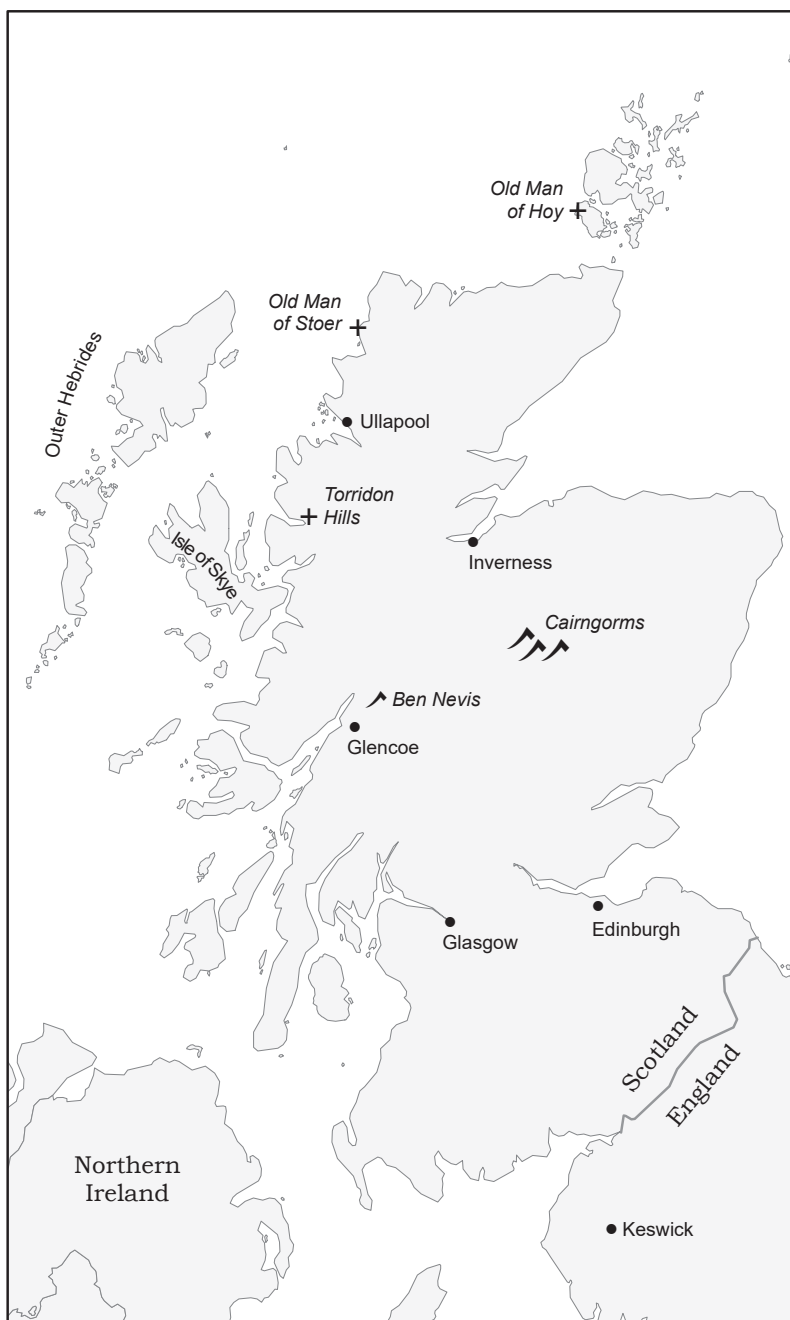
flies similar to no-see-ums in northern New England—began to swarm so thickly the climbers could barely breathe. The group tunneled deeper into the boulders. The midges followed. Gardner in his thick Glaswegian accent told how they hitchhiked out of there to escape the midges. McHardy listened to this and announced that you could do away with prisons and simply employ the midges as punishment. A person strapped to a chair and left outside for 12 hours during the height of midge season would soon repent!

While in Keswick with Ross, we walked the downtown streets. Ross pointed out the building where, in the mid-1960s, he ran a café/nightclub called the Lamplighter and professionally sang folk songs. We then went to another location, stopping in front of a two-story stone building. Ross explained that in the early 1960s, his parents ran a boardinghouse here. Ross pointed to an upstairs window and told us that he and the British climbing legend Don Whillans used to play rock and roll records and practice dance moves in that room. As the music got louder and the beer bottles emptied, their dance routines became wilder. They would swing, slide, and hurl each other around the room, practicing for Saturday nights to come. Once they hit the actual dance floor, Ross said the lasses were so unnerved by their acrobatic antics that none would dance with them.

Aging, Scottish Climber Style

In May 2019, Donette and I returned to Scotland. We climbed some classic Patey and Bonington rock routes. We once more shared a rope with Grindley in the Torridon Hills. We also had very entertaining visits with Nicholson and McHardy, who regaled us with more tales.

Here's one of the stories: After entering his home in Glencoe, Nicholson grabbed his iPad and proudly showed us a picture of a very nice backpacking tent erected in his front yard. Donette and I were a bit perplexed until Nicholson revealed that he had recently retrieved the tent from a dumpster behind a very classy local hotel. The hotel was so fancy, he said, that the parking lot and dumpster were the only places on the property where he felt comfortable. Nicholson speculated that some rich guest had thrown out the almost-new tent because a tent pole had broken. He subsequently repaired the broken pole and sold the tent from his front yard for £120! This scavenging thing was apparently as addictive as it was lucrative.



These are the landmarks Donette and Todd Swain visited or reminisced over while visiting Todd's haunts and climbing mentors. LARRY GARLAND/AMC

Now on a roll, Nicholson told us about another trash bin he had encountered. The bin had a lid with a small slot to insert trash. He peered into the slot and saw what looked to be another tent. Using a stick he found nearby, he was able to fish the fabric close enough to the slot opening that he could grab it with his fingers. He pulled and pulled, slowly revealing another nearly new tent. He pulled it out the way a magician might pull a string of tied kerchiefs from a sleeve. But the tent eventually got stuck in the slot. Nicholson fiddled for quite a while, trying to get the last bit of the tent out through the slot, before he realized the trash bin lid wasn't locked.

As Nicholson continued scrolling through his photos, he stopped at an oldie with a much younger him and a baby-faced George Reid, a friend of ours based in the Cairngorm Mountains who has spent much of his guiding career as an outdoor pursuits instructor for the British Armed Forces. The picture captured Reid's first multipitch climb. In true Scottish hardman fashion, Nicholson had sent Reid up the pointy end of a poorly protected route on the storied Etive Slabs, on Beinn Trilleachan in Glencoe. In another photo taken on the top, Nicholson wears his first chalk bag, wherein, rather than chalk, the bag holds a wee bottle of single malt.

At the end of our trip, we saw an early screening of the 2019 Magic B Films documentary *Final Ascent: The Legend of Hamish MacInnes*. The film chronicles MacInnes's struggle to regain his memory after a stint in a hospital not long before. I traded emails with MacInnes after seeing the film. He was pleased with the film's positive reception and wrote that he "was working 24-7 on the autobiography." At 89 years young, the Fox of Glencoe is still hard at work.

TODD SWAIN has been on a lot of climbing trips this year with his wife, Donette. When they are home, they split their time between Joshua Tree and Bishop, California. Todd has worked as a climbing guide, ranger, and special agent for the National Park Service.