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Hamish MacInnes, 1930–1920

Energetic, creative, adventurous, and highly unorthodox, Scotsman Hamish MacInnes was among the most influential British climbers of the 1960s and '70s, and he continued to be an important rescue leader and innovator for many years. Hamish started climbing as a teen-ager, and from the outset he had big ambitions. When he was 18 years old, he hitchhiked across war-torn Europe, intent on climbing the Matterhorn. Unable to afford hut fees, he made a solo ascent of the Hornli Ridge, up and down from Zermatt in a day. Hamish then spent 18 months in the Austrian Tirol on National Service, which gave him many opportunities to develop his technical skills in the Eastern Alps.

On his return to Scotland in 1950, Hamish fell in with members of the Creagh Dhu climbing club and started doing new routes in Glen Coe. In February 1953, he succeeded on three longstanding winter problems on Buachaille Etive Mor with 18-year-old Chris Bonington. One of them, Raven's Gully, was the most difficult winter route of the era in Scotland. Ice techniques at the time were rudimentary—MacInnes deployed his characteristic creativity and determination on the route, at times climbing wet rock in socks, wearing crampons on ice, and lassoing a chockstone for a pendulum.

A couple of months later in 1953, he visited Nepal with John Cunningham, intent on making the first ascent of Everest using food dumps left behind by the Swiss the year before. John Hunt's expedition famously got there first, so the Scottish pair made an attempt on Pumori. Beaten back by avalanches, they finally succeeded in making the first ascent of Pingero, a prominent subpeak of Taweche.

Hamish climbed in New Zealand over the next few seasons and did several new routes, including the very fine Bowie Ridge on Mt. Cook/Aoraki. Back in Scotland, he turned to one of the greatest prizes of all: the first winter ascent of Zero Gully on Ben Nevis. Competition was intense and MacInnes tried six times before he was successful in February 1957 with Tom Patey and Graeme Nicol. Another big prize was the first winter traverse of the Cuillin Ridge on Skye with Patey, Davie Crabb, and Brian Robertson. Their success, over three days in February 1965, was a testament to MacInnes' determination to drop everything and go for the route when conditions were just right.

By the mid-1960s, ice climbing was moving on from the step-cutting era. A big technological advance came in 1970 when Yvon Chouinard visited Scotland from the United States. Chouinard had been experimenting with a curved-pick tool that he showed to MacInnes in his workshop in Glen Coe. MacInnes, who had a strong engineering background (he built a car from scratch at the age of 17) had also been working on a new axe design, but with limited success. After talking to Chouinard, he increased the angle of his pick and came up with the Terrordactyl, the first of the dropped-pick tools. MacInnes soon showed their effectiveness by making the first winter ascent of Astronomy, a serious ice climb on Ben Nevis. Terrordactyls went into production later in 1971, and within a couple of seasons grades rocketed.

Hamish returned to Everest in 1975 as deputy leader of Chris Bonington's successful south-west face expedition. Working from an idea initiated by Don Whillans in Patagonia, he designed "MacInnes Box" tents. Rectangular in shape, they had adjustable front legs which allowed them to be pitched on any angle of slope. Typically, Hamish was the only person who knew how to erect them, but they were critical in allowing the team to move up and down the relentlessly steep southwest face.

Back in Scotland, Hamish founded the Glen Coe Mountain Rescue Team. As leader of the busiest search and rescue team in the country for 30 years, he saved countless lives. His engineering

proWess led to the invention of the MacInnes Stretcher, a lightweight, foldable design used by many rescue teams today. Hamish's technical safety expertise was greatly sought after by film-makers, and he was involved in many films, from the Eiger Sanction to Monty Python and the Holy Grail. He also was a prolific writer, with perhaps his best-known works being Call-out, describing his mountain rescue experiences, and an innovative series of Scottish climbing guidebooks.

Hamish died in his home in Glen Coe on November 22. He was 90 years old and had led an extraordinary life. The word "influential" is often used, but for Hamish, nothing could be more appropriate.

– Simon Richardson

Editor's Note: Simon Richardson wrote a longer tribute to MacInnes that was published at the UKClimbing website.

Images



Hamish MacInnes climbing in Scotland in 1972.

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