



Detour to Camusfearna
A journey fulfilled

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Detour to Camusfearna: a journey fulfilled

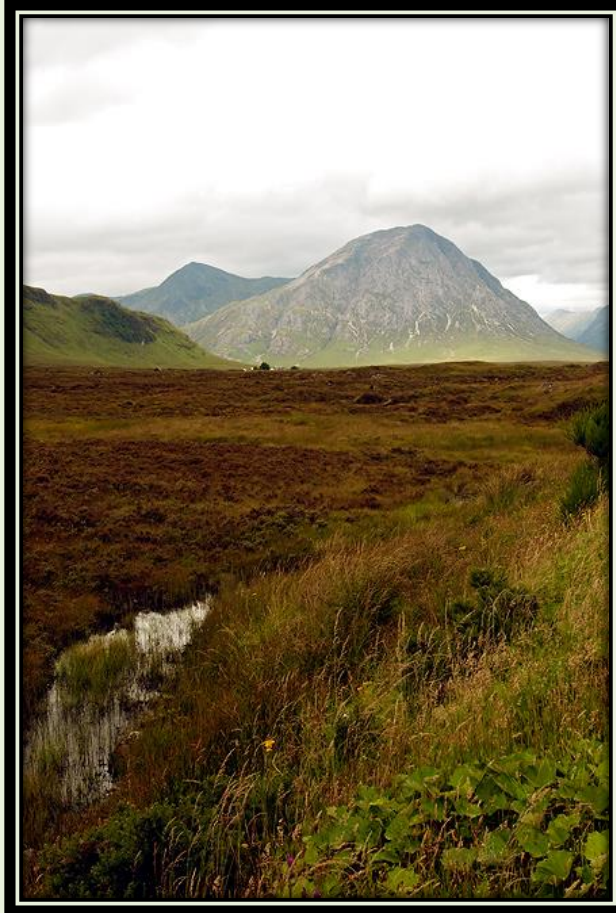
“Try Tuesday through Friday.” I was on the phone from Milan to our travel agent having just completed an exhausting business trip to Italy and France. I had allowed a few days at the scheduled end of the trip to respond to questions raised at our meeting in Alsace. But the presentations had gone well and the time was not needed. Now I was trying to get home to Colorado, but everything was booked solid. The only option was to trash the ticket I had and upgrade to Business Class at a \$3,200 price tag for a one way trip to Denver. I’m enough of a Scotsman to consider such an option ridiculous no matter who is paying the bill. “Well at least get me to London”, I said. “I’ll figure it out from there”.

In my impoverished youth when I was a student I wandered all over Europe sleeping in tents on empty lots, or under bushes in city parks, or on the upscale side, in vineyards on the Cote d’Azur where there also was a ready supply of fresh fruit. But those days were long gone and the thought of travelling in the 21st century without a reservation (or booking as they say in the UK) created previously unknown feelings of apprehension and anxiety.

When the flight arrived in Heathrow on Saturday morning I found a quiet spot in Terminal 5 near a WiFi signal and warmed up my laptop. My scheduled return was on Monday week so I had 8 empty days to fill. I had decided to go back to Scotland to a special place in the West Highlands that I had planned to visit for some time. The immediate question was fly, train or drive. A couple of mouse clicks convinced me that the cost of walk on flights to Glasgow or Inverness meant flying was out. The “go anywhere” British Rail ticket was a good alternative, but you had to buy it in the US. So I called up Budget, rented a right hand drive, manual transmission Volkswagen “Golf” and a GPS unit and ventured out onto the London motorway system. The spirit of adventure was not totally dead after all!

My destination was the Sound of Sleat that separates the Isle of Skye from the Scottish mainland. I wanted to see this place because of a man whom you already may know. His name was Gavin Maxwell and he became something of an icon in Scotland through his most famous book "Ring of Bright Water" that was made into a film by Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna of "Born Free" fame. But it was Gavin Maxwell himself that stirred my curiosity and the aura he created around the place he lived. It was temporary home in a rented lighthouse-keeper's cottage on Sandaig Bay about 4 miles south of Glenelg. He called the place *Camusfearna (the Bay of Alders)* and lived there with pet and wild otters. Gavin was born into an aristocratic family, a dying breed in the years after WWII. Membership in this exclusive class generally meant a job was unthinkable, money was degrading (at least in terms of everyday conversation) and services would be provided by the lower classes purely for the privilege of doing so. In Gavin's case, his heritage provided the support he needed to live much of his life in the heart of the Scottish Highlands in a place he described as "an idyll, something of a dream". In his lifetime, he was an adventurer, a portrait painter, an entrepreneur who was constantly in and out of money and eventually a writer. Above all, he was a recluse with a great love of animals and Nature. Because of my own love of the Scottish Highlands, albeit from the classes that are privileged to serve, I wanted to experience the place where he had lived that had so enthralled me in his book.

Camusfearna lies on the western edge of what some have called Britain's last wilderness. It is in the district of Ross-Shire bounded by three main roads that run through Glen Shiel to the north, the Road to the Isles through Glenfinnan to the South and the Great Glen to the east. The Sound of Sleat forms the western boundary and across that waterway is the south eastern peninsula of the Isle of Skye.



Buchaille Etive Mor

The way north from Glasgow skirts the western bank of Loch Lomond, climbs through Crianlarich and Tyndrum and winds upward across the bleak and windswept Rannoch Moor. The Buchaille Etive Mor (the Great Shepherd) soars from the moor at the head of the Pass of Glencoe. This was my playground as a youth; a storied country, both in fact and fiction. The scenery is awesome, but the roads are jammed with tourist traffic every July and August. There is a bridge now across Loch Leven at Ballachulish where the ferry used to run. The same ferry now operates at the Kylerhea narrows at Glenelg.

The road to Kyle of Lochalsh leaves the Great Glen at Invergarry and climbs over the pass into Glen Shiel. It's a short drive except for the urge to stop for another photograph. At Shiel Bridge I turned left onto the one track road with passing places that was to take me to the Sound of Sleat. Slipping into second gear I started the climb up Ratagan pass.



The traffic had vanished. I stopped for a moment at a parking spot and drank in the view of the Five Sisters of Kintail that I had climbed so many years ago. At the top of the pass I stopped again and looked down at the view spread before me. The empty, single track road curved down along the mountainside from the hilltop to the sea. A pencil of smoke came from the croft chimney in the glen below where the farmer was stacking his hay in the evening sunshine. I rolled down the car window and felt the air soft, warm on my face. Slipping into first gear, I pulled back onto the road and began the long descent into the village.

Stepping carefully around a tabby cat that was peacefully asleep curled up against the doorway of the Glenelg Inn, I found Sheila who checked me in and showed me to a spacious room overlooking the bay. Gleneg village and the Inn were central in Gavin's stories. That evening, after a delightful dinner by a wood fire, I wandered out to the cobble beach. The silence was complete except for the flurry of wings

as a flight of Greylag geese splashed down in the Sound sending ripples over the still water towards the shore. Tabby had followed me down to the beach and was rubbing her neck against my legs. It was as though I had stepped through a time warp and found the Scotland I left 40 years ago. It was as though I had stepped into Brigadoon.

Early next morning I drove the four miles down the one track road to Tormor at Upper Sandaig to be greeted by a sign with large red letters saying “Footpath to Sandaig Bay Closed”. The rock and moorland of the Eilanreach estate had been replaced by a tightly packed forest of lodge pole pine and logging was underway. I was crushed, but not deterred. If I came back very early next morning, say around 5 am, I could be in and out before operations began. In the meantime, I drove down to the road’s end at Corran on Loch Hourn. Osama bin Laden was there, I was told at the Glenelg Inn. He turned out to be a



tame red deer stag that that terrorized the tourists at the tea room! Across the water is the vast and rugged Knoydart Peninsula that has 6 miles of one track road and a permanent population of about 70. I stopped at the top of the road at a picnic table on the way back to Glenelg and sat down to look out over the Sound. The scenery and the silence were overwhelming and my inner peace was complete. The world had indeed stopped and I had gotten off, for the time being at least.

Gavin Maxwell’s “temporary” home in Sandaig

Bay lasted for twenty years. The story of his life there and the people who shared it is written in the Ring of Bright Water trilogy which includes the sequels “The Rocks Remain” and “Raven Seek Thy

Brother". Unlike the film, the books are not idyllic, but lay bare the frustration, despair and tragedy as well as the wonder of life at Camusfearna. Over the years, Gavin brought civilization by the way of electricity, telephone and a drivable road to a place he never owned. On a horrendous night in January, 1968 the cottage burned to ashes taking with it his favorite otter Edal. In the intervening years Gavin had bought lighthouse cottages on Isle Ornsay and Eilean Ban that had been converted to tourist cottages by his friend Richard Frere. It was to Eilean Ban, the island between the mainland and the Isle of Skye that he now moved with his remaining otter Teko with grand plans to set up an eider duck colony and a wildlife park there.

I rose early next morning and set off again for Tormor. The footpath to the Bay is a little over a mile long and drops quickly downhill along the burn. At one time it would have been easy to follow, but now it was strewn with dead trees and logging debris that made the going very hard. About a quarter of the way down the path disappeared entirely forcing a crossing of the slippery rocks in the burn. There was a broad path through the forest on the other side, but it appeared to lead in the wrong direction. By this time I was tired and my feet were soaked in the brown tannic water of the peat bogs. I began to wonder if there were mysterious forces keeping from reaching the Bay and decided to turn back the way I had come. The sign was right. The footpath was closed. At least a dry pair of socks and breakfast would be waiting at the Glenelg inn.

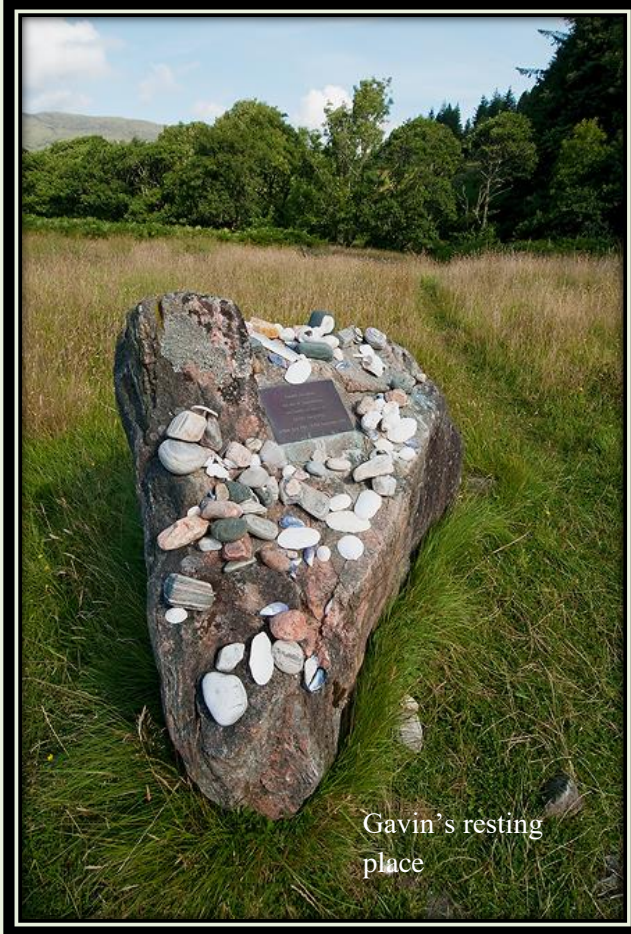
Eilean Ban and Gavin's cottage there is open is open for public tours, so after I was dried out and fed I took the old Ballachulish car ferry to Skye and drove over the moorland to Kyleakin. Kyle of Lochalsh and Kyleakin are now joined by a bridge with two sections that run from Eilean Ban. (Gavin would have been mortified that his island paradise had been so violated). The tour originates from the Bright Water museum at the Kyleaken pier. Richard Frere had removed the dividing wall between the cottages creating a long room that Gavin furnished and decorated with hand-picked antique furniture and the few items salvaged from the Camusfearna fire. The only access to the island was by boat across the

swift currents that sweep through the narrows. His withdrawal from humanity was now complete; the remaining connections being his radio phone, telescope and boat. He lived on Eilean Ban for another eighteen months until he died of cancer. The wildlife park was never completed, Teko died, Camusfearna was bulldozed to the ground and buried in the dunes and the story was at its end. Or was it?

I had one morning left to fulfill my pilgrimage. At the Inn I was told about another forest road that led down to Sandaig Bay. Rain had been forecast, but when I set off the sun shone and the air was calm. Perhaps I was destined to go there after all. At the foot of the path the forest gave way to a broad sunlit bay encircled by the burn, the ring of bright water. The power and telephone lines were still there ending where the cottage once stood. Raef Payne's cottage where Gavin and his helper Andrew Scot retreated after the fire was still there, although the years of neglect had taken their toll. I walked along the sandy beach to the edge of the sea. Mine were the only footprints. It was, as Gavin had said, idyllic.



The ring of bright water



There's a great stone where Gavin Maxwell worked at his desk by the window overlooking the sea. His ashes are buried underneath it. Visitors place shells and rocks from the beach on the stone, as I did. Oddly enough, they don't seem to blow off in the wind and there's always room for more. A few yards away under a shady tree there is a cairn to Edal, Gavin's pet otter that was killed in the fire. The inscription reads:

Edal, The Otter of Ring of Bright Water

1958 – 1968

Whatever joy she gave to you give back to Nature

It was then that I realized that Camusfearna was

not just a place, but a way of life where living with and caring for Nature is the very core of our being.

Perhaps this was Gavin's greatest success; that people should still come here to this place to pay homage almost half a century after his death.

Early next morning I packed my gear into the car and said goodbye to my new friends at the Glenelg Inn.

I have been around the world five times and have never felt so much at home than I have there. Two days later I dutifully showed up at the ticket counter in Heathrow Terminal 1 for my scheduled flight to Denver carrying a load of cameras and a renewed love of my homeland in my heart. I noticed that the attendant had stamped my ticket envelope for an upgrade and the fast lane through security. It was the perfect ending to a journey fulfilled.

More Information

The Camusfearna story is told in:

Gavin Maxwell, "Ring of Bright Water", Longmans, Green and Harlow Ltd., 1960, SBN 582-10648-6

Gavin Maxwell, "Ring of Bright Water Trilogy", Abridged Version, Viking 2000, ISBN 0-670-88992-X

Douglas Botting, "The Saga of Ring of Bright Water", Neil Wilson Publishing, 2000, ISBN 1-897784-85-6

Richard Frere, "Maxwell's Ghost", Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1976, ISBN 0-575-02044-X

A restored version of the film is available on DVD.

Contact Information for the Glenelg Inn:

The Glenelg Inn

Glenelg

Kyle of Lochalsh

Ross-Shire

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Tel. (from US), 01-1 44 1599 522273

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If you can't get in, try B&B's in the area at:

<http://www.bedandbreakfasts.co.uk/propertysearch.asp?location=Glenelg+Inn+at+Glenelg>

If you're caught out as I was and need travel accommodation at short notice, try:

www.laterooms.com

Hotel subscribers heavily discount available rooms for travelers.

Photo Gallery



The Glenelg Inn



The Glenelg Inn Dining Room



Glenelg Bay



Loch Hourn and the Knoydart Peninsula



The Kylerhea Ferry



The Sound of Sleat from Eilean Ban



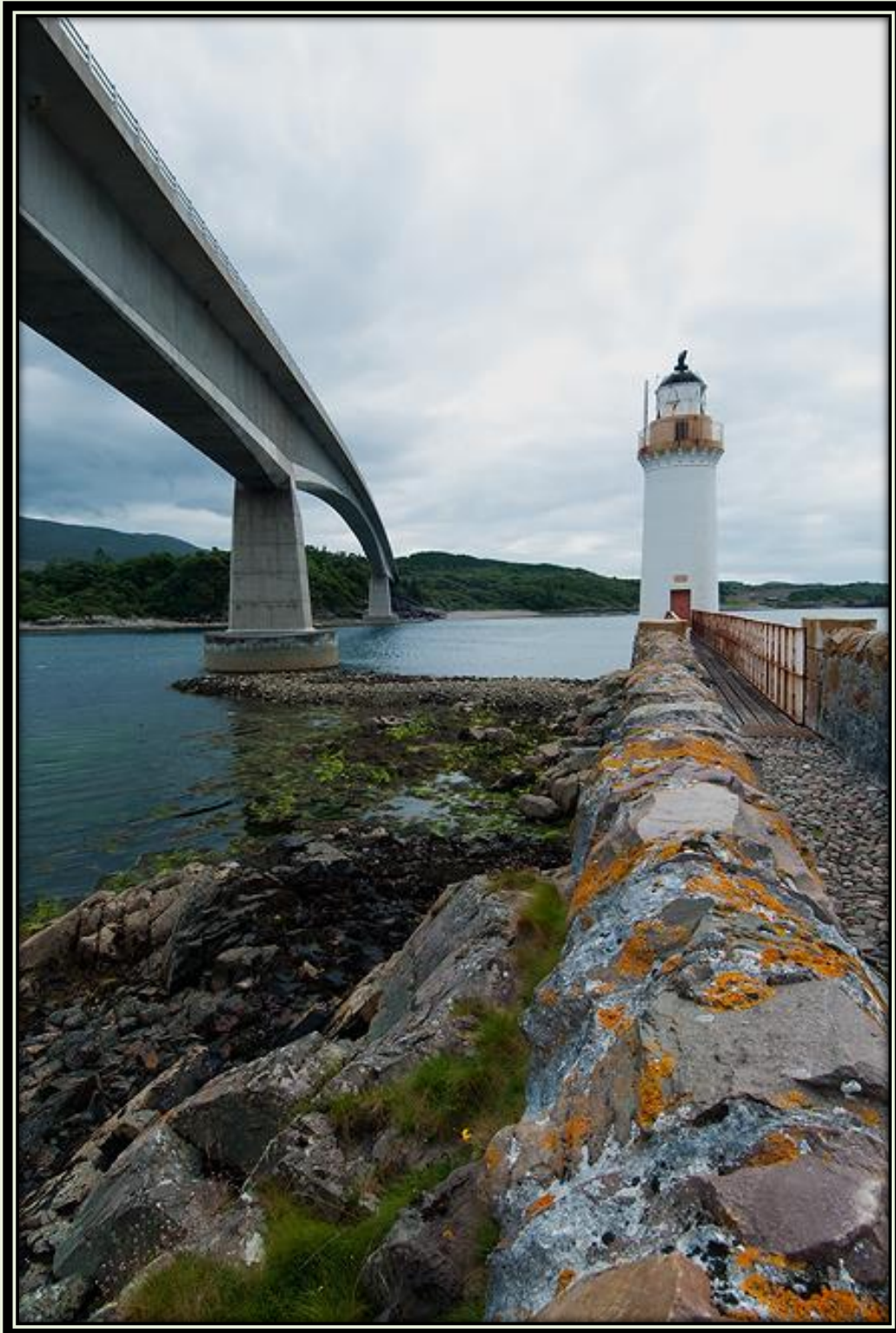
Eilean Ban Lighthouse



The Long Room at Eilean Ban

**Gavin's Portrait by
Raef Payne**





Eilean Ban Lighthouse and the Skye Road Bridge



The Beach at Sandaig Bay



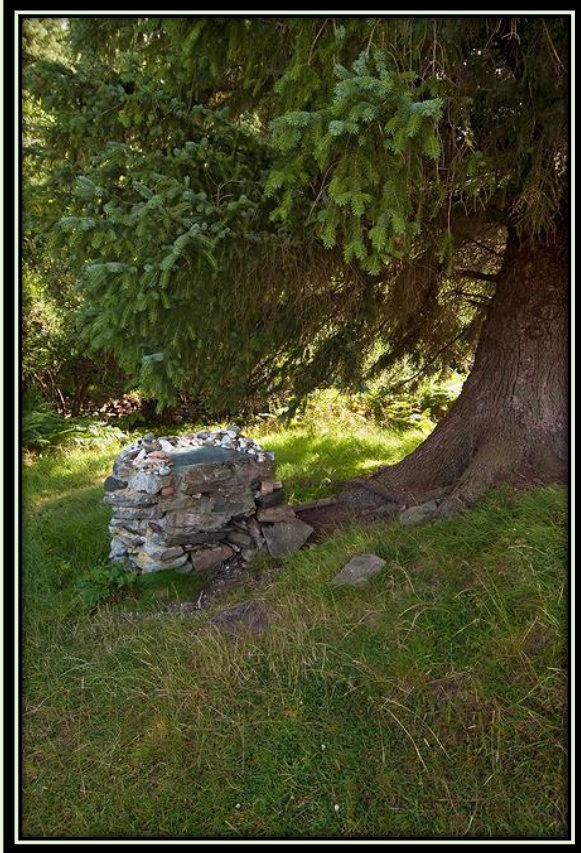
Sandaig Bay in Bloom



Camusfearna



Gavin's Memorial



Edal's Cairn

**Whatever joy she gave to you
give back to Nature**

