PREFACE

LANDS OF NORTH-WEST ROSS

The lands west of the north-south watershed are referred to popularly as 'Wester Ross'. These are the boggy, rocky, mountainous lands of the northern Highlands, where the potential for settlement is limited to more fertile pockets scattered either coastally or along the bottom of steep-sided straths and glens winding inland from fjord-like sea lochs. These heavily indented coastlines fringe the Northern Minch and mark the Atlantic edge of the great western parishes — from Glenshiel and Kintail in the south, through Lochalsh, Lochcarron and Applecross, to Gairloch and Lochbroom in the north.

These seven parishes contrast strongly with the twenty-two parishes of Easter Ross — essentially Lowland and agriculturally-favoured parishes, some with a Highland hinterland, which have long supported high densities of population attracted by the potential for security and prosperity. The western parishes could offer a richness of salmon, deer and native timber, and at one time played host to herds of wild cattle and horses as well as to wolves and bears. They would long have had substantial value, therefore, as a seasonal (and perhaps recreational) resource. They were, and remain however, a harsh and ungenerous environment for any kind of permanent settlement where access to arable land is both critical and strictly limited. They can support — out of their own resources and in any relative comfort — only a small permanent population.

Coigach and 'North Argyle'

As a term, 'Wester Ross' is insufficiently precise, for neither 'Wester Ross', nor indeed 'North-West Ross', suggests that a part of the area was once distinct from the western lands of Ross. Charters dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries refer to 'North Argyle' — the western coastlands from Kintail northwards to Gairloch and Lochbroom, held by the earls of Ross from 1220 though not as part of the earldom. This 'Argyle' has nothing to do with modern Argyll; rather, as Gaelic *Earra-Ghaidheal*, it suggests a one-time boundary of the Irish-speaking Scots. Just exactly where within the later parish of Lochbroom that boundary lay remains unclear; Coigach, however, looked north rather than south, and in the mid 17th century it was yet recalled as the former fifth part of Assynt (Old Norse *áss endi*, the end of the rocky ridge). Here then is likely evidence for a quite separate Celtic administrative unit stretching north from Loch Broom to Kylesku, not dissimilar perhaps to the 'five quarters' of (Easter) Ross, detailed in 1479 as the confiscated estates of John, last earl of Ross.

During the period of the Scottish monarchy, Coigach continued to be largely 'separate' from the lands to the south. It formed part of the mainland holdings of the MacLeods of Lewis who, in maybe the later 13th century, had supplanted the MacNicols or Nicolsons, owners from perhaps the 10th century. It was the MacLeods who split Coigach off in the 1460s to provide for the second son of the first MacLeod of Assynt; and after the MacKenzies acquired the MacLeod estates in the early years of the 17th century, it was Coigach alone that, by 1686, was consolidated by the first earl of Cromartie and his sons into the area subsequently known as Cromartyshire — a disjoined area that included the east coast Baronies of New Tarbat and Strathpeffer, as well as the west coast Barony of Coigach and the inland upland Fannichs. In 1891 Cromartyshire was assimilated into the County of Ross and Cromarty; in 1975 the County became Ross and Cromarty District. Thus has the orientation of Coigach come to be 'mislaid'!

PEOPLES OF NORTH-WEST ROSS

If these are the lands of North-West Ross, who are the peoples? In all truth they are indistinct and shadowy figures until post-medieval times — prehistoric tribes, Celtic tribes, Picts, 'Irish' Scots, Norse, 'Scottish' Scots, 'Anglo' Scots, English . . . . Over the millenia, the western seaboard has played host to successive waves of peoples who would appear in large part to have come, conquered and settled — and all-too-often left again for kinder pastures elsewhere in the wake of climatic, demographic, economic and/or social hardship and change.

Rarely, however, do conditions bring about a complete abandonment of an area by a people or a culture, for under most kinds of pressure only a proportion of a population would migrate — those who had the means perhaps, and those who were dispossessed. Periodically, and for varying reasons, certain groupings have undoubtedly preferred to stay; and others have had little option but to stay. There has always been considerable scope, therefore, for ethnic and cultural continuity, assimilation and evolution. Nevertheless, these factors alone do not necessarily imply enrichment.

Early Peoples

The modest spread of single standing stones represents one of the earliest traces of man's presence in the landscape — erected perhaps in the 3rd-2nd millenia BC, though we know not why. Equally unclear is the relationship after around 1000 BC and into AD between stone-built brochs and duns and the many small and scattered groups of undefended hut circles — except that these represent an organised society apparently based on local family or tribal groups of farmers who had increasing cause to protect themselves.

How successful they were we cannot tell; by the early centuries AD, however, the 'indigenous' population, whether descendants and/or incomers, appears to have been predominantly Celtic-speaking and with Celtic tribal names. These are Ptolomey's tribes, and from the 4th-9th centuries AD they had coalesced into a people nowadays referred to as Picts.

Whether or not the administrative division of land into 'fifths' and the measurement of farm land in 'davochs' indicate a Pictish presence or later influences, symbol stones in Easter Ross and as far north as Farr on the north coast of Sutherland undoubtedly betray a strong Pictish culture. Placenames too are significant. Names such as Oykell, Achilty and Achilti(buie) may well have emerged around this time. They appear to be of the same origin as Welsh *uchel*, high, and highlight Pictish settlement east-west on this narrowest of necks across mainland Scotland — from Loch Broom to the Kyle of Sutherland and the Dornoch Firth.

However, just as carved symbol stones are at their most common and elaborate on the fertile lowlands of Easter Ross, so also are a host of other names incorporating Pictish elements — whether e.g. *pit*, a place or farmstead (Pitkerrie); *-ais*, a dwelling (Alness); or stream names ending in *-n* or *-ie* (Carron, Conan, Rogie, Grudie, Polly, Runie). Of river names ending in *-ie*, for instance, nine out of twenty-four are found in Wester Ross, fifteen in Easter Ross. Fewer are found to the north, in Sutherland, where Norse influence was strong; and few, if any, are to be found in Dalriada to the south, where Irish Gaelic speakers — the Scots — were settling as early as the 2nd century AD and were well-consolidated by the early 6th century.

The boundaries of 'North Argyle' were likely established by the late 7th century (the monastery at Applecross was founded by the Irish priest, Maelrubha, in 673 AD), but it is a matter for conjecture whether the 'Scots' had effectively colonised the far north-west before the Scandinavians first raided in the 790s AD. Professor W. J. Watson reminds us that the Norse called the Minch *Skotland-fjördr*, the firth of the land of the Scots, and survivals of the name *Annat* indicate the presence of pre-Norse, Gaelic-speaking missionaries from the Irish Celtic church. That these names are to be found off Applecross, beside Loch Torridon, Loch Broom and Loch Laxford, in Skye, Harris, Lewis and on the Shiant Islands does not necessarily confirm that at this time significant numbers of Gaelic speakers were found north from 'North Argyle'. There may have been a mixed population, perhaps bilingual, of Picts and Scots, or maybe they were mainly Picts. Either way, with the coming of the Norsemen, some kind of bilingual or possibly trilingual society emerged along the north-west coast. The more developed Scots would have exercised a superiority over the Picts, but if numbers of Picts and Scots fled eastwards as the more powerful Scandinavians advanced inland from the coast, the latter might well have established their shore bases in a relatively empty land. Around Loch Broom, for example, supported by their longships and established on patches of better land appropriated alongside safe

anchorages at Ullapool, Tanera and perhaps Dornie and Reiff, even modest Scandinavian plantations would likely have been little threatened by small clusters of Celts grouped on what nowadays at least are the bleak and windswept slopes around and behind Achiltibuie, home to numerous hut circles and fragmentary field systems. (Bog fir shows that at one time some, at least, of these slopes were well-wooded).

This can only be conjecture. One way or another, the Norsemen and the Gaels, Scandinavians and Scots, assimilated the Picts into their stronger culture; and eventually, as formal ties with Norway weakened and broke, a mixed race of Scandinavians and Scots lost its bilingualism and was absorbed into an essentially Celtic and Scottish world. The formal break is marked by the Battle of Largs and the Treaty of Perth (1266); bilingualism may well have disappeared, however, by the 12th century. And once a language has gone, culture and traditions go too — only fragments surviving the transfer from one language to another.

17th-20th Centuries

By the late 16th century internecine fighting between competing factions within the Lewis MacLeods, descendants of such a mixed race, destroyed the clan and led to the MacKenzie takeover of MacLeod lands. The Mackenzies proved to be a large and extended clan, politically astute (other than for backing the 'wrong' side during the '45), and with a well-developed liking for good living. Whether as earls of Cromartie or as lesser families, they held lands throughout both Wester and Easter Ross and not infrequently fell upon hard times. They survived by speculating abroad, by cattle trading, by selling off such assets as the standing timber and, as fortunes ebbed and flowed, by settling each other's debts through wadsetting, intermarriage and other mechanisms.

But this was not sufficient. Speculative ventures were prone to failure, and growing tastes for expensive south-country life-styles (fine country houses, elegant town houses, 'policy' plantings, servants, life as a Member of Parliament, military responsibilities) all required substantial funding. Increasingly, major and minor landowners sought to extract considerably greater revenue from their estates — whether directly from their tenants in the form of increased rents or by reviewing the uses to which they could put their lands. When leases fell vacant, higher rents could be obtained first from graziers, later from wealthy industrialists — provided that the existing tenantry were relocated and restricted to allow for undisturbed access by sheep, cattle and deer; by shepherds, stalkers and sportsmen. Some sought to diversify into fisheries and kelp, but this was of relatively minor significance. The kelp industry was never as developed as in the islands, and commercial fisheries came into their own only with the establishment of the British Fisheries Society settlement at Ullapool in 1788. In any event, this initiative also proved to be short-lived, the herring becoming remarkably elusive by the 1820s.

The Impact of Development

It is the story of these past 300 or so years that features so strongly in *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross*. Early chapters provide an environmental context for settlement and a focus first on the fortifications of early Celtic Scotland, notably brochs, and then on key Norse place-naming elements for farms and for critical geographical features. Analysis ranges widely across the northern and western mainland and islands, revealing a complexity in successive phases of settlement and technology, linguistic and architectural evolution, that will repay continuing study.

The majority of chapters, however, deal with the late medieval and modern periods. They focus on such themes as medieval ecclesiastical sculpture, post-Reformation parish life and structure, and the rise and fall of both the MacLeods and the MacKenzies. Substantial sections examine many and varied aspects of everyday life and work — both the mechanics and economics of land ownership, fisheries, forestry and crofting, as well as their associated buildings and architecture. Churches, country houses, farm houses, crofthouses and such 'industrial' buildings as salmon stations and fishery storehouses all feature in some detail, and an entire chapter is devoted to the planned 'new town' of Ullapool, which celebrated its bi-centenary in 1988. Other contributors explore the evolution of settlement, notably within the context of agricultural improvement, estate management and the Clearances. They examine poverty, famine and the relief of destitution; and they focus on present-day social and cultural change — seeking to determine concepts of identity both for 'locals' and for 'incomers'.

The larger part of the book, therefore, concentrates on land use, life-style, settlement and culture during that lengthy period of instability triggered by the break-up of the clan system and heightened by the social, economic and political aspirations of a new breed of landed proprietor and principal tenant, whether Scottish or English.

The Nature of Change: People and Environment

Change is the all-important factor, the common underlying theme — change and continuity, change and destruction, change and inter-dependence whether between peoples and cultures or between peoples, cultures and their environment. Underlying the concept of ever-present change, however, is the unhappy indication that all-too-often change was engineered by the few, for the few, and at the expense of the many — a view reinforced by not infrequent references in Estate papers to the harassment of timber extractors and commercial sheep farmers by the local tenantry.

Undoubtedly there was, and still is, a need for change. The questions, now as ever, relate rather to the nature of that change: who makes the decisions, on what grounds, how change is carried out and for whose

benefit, both short-term and long-term? Change from a pre-industrial peasant economy (still surviving in modified form in the north-west Highlands well into the 19th century, and arguably through until the final demise of traditional crofting in the late 20th century) was perhaps inevitable. But a change to what? And for whom?

Over a period of 200-300 years, 'economic rationalisation' by land-owners and principal tenants faced with a perceived need to generate greater wealth and more substantial cash-flow, all-too-often proved an excuse for the exercise of philosophies somewhat removed from wider concepts of social justice and community well-being. There were honourable exceptions, of course, and the efforts of certain individual and influential families in north-west Ross, particularly the older-established families, ran counter to the prevailing culture. Some were genuinely interested in agricultural and domestic improvement across all levels of society. And on occasion at least, in times of famine, some most certainly contributed to the relief of their starving and impoverished tenants and lost income as a result. They maintained rents at 'uneconomic' levels; they postponed payment of rents; they inaugurated what we would nowadays term 'targeted welfare schemes', building roads in return for meal. But rarely, if ever, do they seem to have stopped to consider whether such hardships and the structural collapse of long-established communities correlated directly with their own underlying activities and aspirations. And the times did not encourage consultation and shared decision-making on the kind of change and development that would have best served the whole community.

How ironic, therefore, that we find so 'pleasing' such surviving landscape features as well-proportioned country houses, fine steadings, well-planted policy woodlands, neat and regular field systems on the (few) substantial farms. And how wretched are the abandoned, rush-infested rigs scratched across the sodden and treeless moorland, the broken-down hill-dykes, the crumbling ruins of tiny crofthouses clustered or in line a little above the shore and frequently beyond all reasonable limits of cultivation.

Nor was poverty felt only by the smaller tenants and cottars; it is echoed in the land. 'Wilderness' the northern and western Highlands may be; but 'natural' this wilderness is not. Hills, moorlands and infields have been largely exhausted; natural forests and native woodlands have all but disappeared through clear-felling, burning, wasting and indiscriminate grazing by sheep and deer. The 'wilderness', both natural and human, is essentially man-made. It is a classic example of short-term profit maximisation by the politically and economically more powerful, and over-use of much-restricted and peripheral lands by a marginalised, impoverished and periodically starving peasantry. The media remind us of environmentally — and culturally — destructive practices by loggers and ranchers in South America, and the over-intensive use of scarce natural resources amongst the increasingly pressurised hill tribes of Nepal; they remind us of the problems that accompany excessive and unsustainable

development in these and other localities world-wide. Such have been the practices for two or three centuries in the Scottish Highlands, and the results are plain to see.

Future Directions?

By contrast, traditional and non-intensive Highland economies, based primarily on pastoralism and supported by modest farming, fishing and woodland management, are often recognised nowadays as environmentally as well as culturally sympathetic — role models perhaps for a new era of lower-key, sustainable lifestyles. The old economies and practices had evolved over centuries, through the distillation of generations of observation, experience and knowledge, in such a way that communities understood what was environmentally and socially responsible and what, conversely, would lead to the terminal decline of much-needed resources and to the fragmentation of their society. That so much of this accumulated wisdom has been lost can hardly be laid at the door of today's crofter or fisherman. Rather is it a 'by-product' of the cultural, not simply environmental impoverishment that resulted from continuing exposure to an ascendant culture largely indifferent to non-material and locally-significant values and aspirations.

Such a loss heightens the need to extend environmental, economic and cultural awareness amongst all who live and work both in the Highlands and beyond. 'Education' is insufficient, however, if it does not speedily generate new attitudes, new policies, new ways of looking at distinctive regional cultures, land ownership and land use, new ways of involving communities in determining locally-relevant and sustainable initiatives.

Happily attitudes are changing, and initiatives and investment — albeit often modest — have begun. The emergence of Sabhal Mór Ostaig and Acair; Community Co-operatives; telecottaging and Integrated Rural Development Studies; the Scottish Crofters' Union and Rural Forum; Highlands and Islands Forum; the Assynt Crofters Trust and the Letterewe Accord — these are all pointers to the future. So also are positive contributions from the Local Authorities, Government Departments and Agencies, Conservation Bodies and the European Union. Initiatives such as Integrated/Agricultural Development Projects and Crofter Forestry grants, schemes for Environmentally Sensitive and for Less Favoured Areas, road- and harbour-building projects, green tourism and Gaelic-medium education are all to be welcomed — provided that they genuinely strengthen the long-term interests of local communities and cultures, and encourage stability and reinvestment locally. Although some sectors may still find it difficult to relinquish a 'top down' approach and to agree the significant decentralisation of planning and decision-making powers to knowledgeable locally-elected groups, there is a certain reassurance to be found in the 'grass roots', 'bottom-up' philosophy of much that is emerging.

It is, however, a fragile system — a series of fragile, tentative networks which require careful nurturing. For in the far north-west, it is frequently still a matter of potential rather than of identifiable achievement. And herein lies the paradox. The very nature of environmental and cultural education and of integrated and sustainable development is long-term and low-key; results will not be immediate (though judicious fencing and stock reductions, for instance, can soon be seen to trigger woodland and associated regeneration). In other words, substantial, short-term returns on investment are as unlikely as they are unreasonable — particularly when the true costs of past and future environmental and cultural impact are assessed, accepted and taken properly into account.

Many factors inevitably inter-relate in any consideration of a 'way ahead' for the north-west Highlands. Without continuing commitment to socially, culturally and environmentally sympathetic policies (and regardless of the superficially benign image of retirement homes, tourist facilities, klondykers and palm trees) the future for north-west Ross will be bleak — bleak for its natural landscapes and bleak for its people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

and reassuring to recognise that higher and more civilised values survive.

Likewise, it gives the Society much pleasure to acknowledge the support — both financial and in kind — of a great many organisations and individuals. We could never over-value such local support as that of Ullapool's 'Ceilidh Place' or the Gairloch Museum, or the continuing backing of such national bodies as the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, the National Museums of Scotland, Historic Scotland, the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish Record Office and Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies. Moreover, we would want to acknowledge the quite splendid support of Ross and Cromarty District Council, Highland Regional Council, Ross and Cromarty Enterprise and the private sector — notably Letterewe Estate, the Royal Bank of Scotland plc and R. J. McLeod (Contractors) Ltd. Such a blend of public and private support augurs well perhaps for future initiatives in north-west Ross.

We hope that readers will find *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross* stimulating and enjoyable. There is a pressing need to record and unravel more of the patterns of culture and settlement in this little-known and superficially-understood part of the Norse, Celtic and latterly Anglo-Scottish worlds — particularly at this time of exceedingly rapid and critical change in population, language, culture, employment and aspirations.

We very much hope that the book will point the way. We hope that it will trigger further research, that it will encourage a stronger sense of community and identity locally, and that it will provide visitors, new residents and in-coming landowners and businesses alike with an attractive and authoritative background to the area's erstwhile cultural and environmental richness and diversity. Above all, we hope it can contribute to the 'new philosophy' so sorely needed to help conserve and reconstruct richness and diversity once more — both in north-west Ross and more generally across the north.
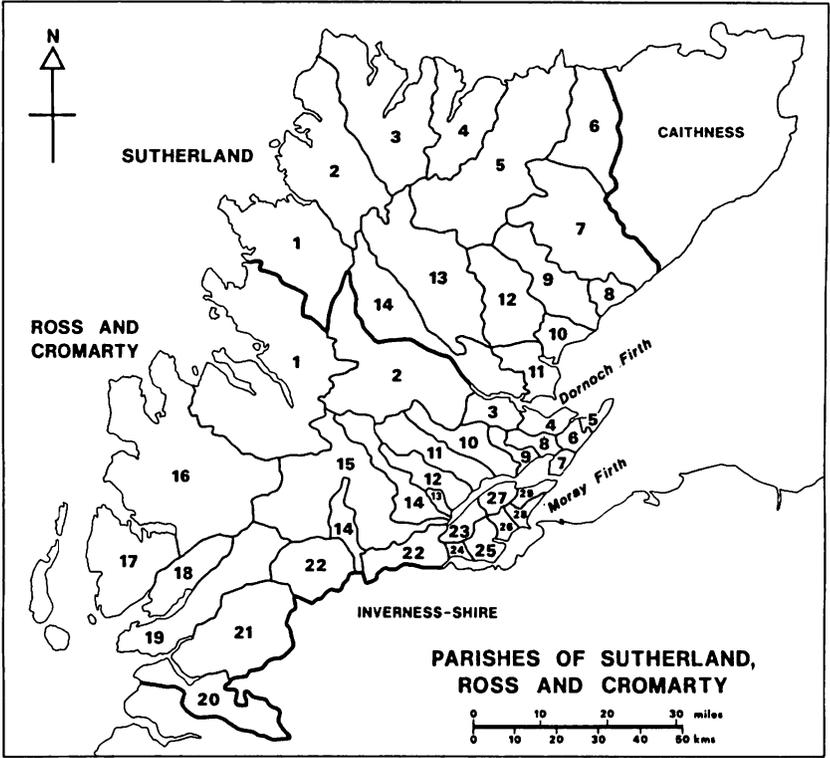
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Fig. 1.1 Parishes of Sutherland, Ross & Cromarty.

SUTHERLAND	ROSS AND CROMARTY	
1. Assynt	1. Lochbroom	16. Gairloch
2. Eddrachillis	2. Kincardine	17. Applecross
3. Durness	3. Edderton	18. Lochcarron
4. Tongue	4. Tain	19. Lochalsh
5. Farr	5. Tarbat	20. Glenshiel
6. Reay (part of)	6. Fearn	21. Kintail
7. Kildonan	7. Nigg	22. Urray
8. Loth	8. Logie Easter	23. Urquhart and Logie Wester ˙
9. Clyne	9. Kilmuir Easter	24. Killearnan
10. Golspie	10. Rosskeen	25. Kilmuir Wester (Knockbain)
11. Dornoch	11. Alness	26. Avoch
12. Rogart	12. Kiltearn	27. Kirkmichael (Resolis)
13. Lairg	13. Dingwall	28. Rosemarkie
14. Creich	14. Fodderty	29. Cromarty
	15. Contin	