

*Fig. 11.1* Cromartysaire reflected the exact extent of the Regality of Cromartie in 1686. These were the territories acquired and held by George MacKenzie, 1st Earl of Cromartie and his sons. The major holdings were the Baronies of New Tarbat, Strathpeffer and Coigach. As well as being very remote, Coigach was Highland and essentially pastoral, compared to Lowland and agricultural Easter Ross.

# EARLY FISHERY AND FORESTRY DEVELOPMENTS ON THE CROMARTIE ESTATE OF COIGACH: 1660-1746

Monica Clough

In the summer of 1756 Captain Forbes of New, Factor to the Annexed Estates of Cromartie, went over to the west to take a Judicial Rental of the Barony of Coigach, lying all along the northern side of Loch Broom [Fig. 11.1]. Both Forbes and the surveyor, Peter May, who mapped the Barony found it difficult to convey how remote they found it. The people, many of whom had recently fought in the Rising of the '45, were uniformly hostile to the government officers, and also strangely hostile to one another. 'I must beg leave here to take notice', wrote Forbes, 'that the Barony of Coigach is possessed by Macleods and Mackenzies mixt and that there seems to be a kind of Clan Quarrel in which I am as little interested — further than doing my duty as Factor — as I am in the disputes in Corsica' (*SRO E 746. 74.4*). It was almost exactly 150 years since this particular clan quarrel should have been ended by the marriage of the Macleod of Lewes heiress to Sir Rorie Mackenzie of Tarbat [Fig. 11.2]. The Barony of Coigach was part of the estates of the Mackenzies of Tarbat and Cromartie from that marriage in 1606 until their sale four hundred and fifty years later, bar the thirty-five years of annexation by the Crown after the Rising. A fairly comprehensive picture of their management can be found in the surviving estate papers, and much of the evidence has been presented and analysed in *Cromartie: Highland Life, 1650-1914* (Richards & Clough 1989).<sup>1</sup>

It was a pastoral community, with a population of about 900 adults in the Barony; a good recruiting ground for soldiers, part of one of the largest parishes in Scotland. Up to the end of the 17th century the presbytery was on the watch for pagan practices, especially bull-sacrifices and oblations of milk poured out in the name of St. Mourie (see R. W. Munro, this volume). With the exception of the Minister, a schoolmaster and a few of the tacksmen, no English was spoken or written; and because there was no castle or mansion house, no member of the landowning family lived in Coigach during this period. Rents were collected often at two or three yearly intervals, by the chamberlain of the other estates in Easter Ross, who made the hazardous journey by Garve and Fannich (another extensive forest wilderness, owned by the estate in Mid Ross). The chamberlain was always accompanied by a few men, a clerk and nominally at any rate, a piper. There was a resident ground officer unable (up to the mid 18th century at least) to sign his name. This lacuna put power into the hands of the principal tacksmen, self-appointed as the landlord's spokesmen. There was no civil



*Fig. 11.2* Sir Rorie MacKenzie of Tarbat ca. 1579-1626, Tutor of Kintail, married the heiress to MacLeod of Lewis in 1606 and thereby gained Coigach.

law officer either, not even a baron-baillie-depute, though a visiting chamberlain sometimes held a court. From 1684 until 1891 the Barony was a part of the County and Sheriffdom of Cromartysire.

Goods and news of the outside world tended to come from Stornoway by sea, rather than across the pathless hills. Once a year parties of men drove their black cattle on the hoof to sell at Beaully cattle market; they were sometimes pursued back by the chamberlain, who collected the rents while the tenants had the cash in their hands. It is worth noting that though all the Cromartie properties in Easter Ross paid rent in kind, and had assessments made in bolls of barley until the 1790s, the most distant barony of Coigach paid only silver mail (i.e. cash) from at least 1660 onwards.

The cattle trade, the only generator of income, was obviously established long before 1660. There were no services, and only a few minor rents: wedders, driven on the hoof to Castle Leod; butter and cheese; and pairs of

white plaids, each twelve foot in length. These plaids were highly prized, only a pair was ever levied from each property, and they were probably of the fine quality of a modern Shetland shawl. Certainly George, the first earl [Fig. 11.3] was able to settle part of a large debt to a bookseller in London by trading in two years' rent of white plaids.

This paper, however, is not concerned with the cattle trade (see Baldwin 1986. 183-220), but with two efforts by the owners to develop the Barony of Coigach in other directions — fishing and forestry. Indeed, given the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the British Fisheries' station in Ullapool in 1788, it is only fair to devote some time to the serious attempts of the first earl of Cromartie, ninety years earlier, to establish a fishing station there.

## FISHING

Tarbat (he had not yet become the first earl of Cromartie) had a long pre-occupation with the possibilities of commercial fishing and he made two determined attempts to set up a fishery at Ullapool. Both failed, as the same problems which beset later developers were even more severe in Tarbat's day. These may be summarised as the difficulties of distance and transport — the lack of mainland roads, the lack then of government aid and of an assured market, the undependable vagaries of the herring shoals and (Tarbat's perennial problem) his lack of capital and support. In late Stuart times the Dutch continued to outfish the native Scots round all our coasts.

Tarbat's initial idea came in the form of a printed *Short Proposal for The Africa Company and Fishing*, undated but probably about 1697 and endorsed in his own hand 'Anent Fysery' (SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 218, 219). His proposal was that the funds raised for the Africa Company should first be invested in equipping a single seagoing Buss, to fish off Scotland on the model of the Dutch fishers' 'mother ship', processing its own catches and those of local small boats [Figs. 11.4, 11.5]. He estimated it would cost £500 Sterling to build and equip. One Buss would, he considered, land 30 lasts (360 barrels) and would make two loadings in a season. By simple and regrettably over-confident arithmetic he calculated that after four years the Company would have £72,000 sterling to re-invest, as well as much incidental profit to merchants and coopers. It would give 'supply to the poore and indigent', adding as a clincher 'and the whole stock to be pulled out of the sea'. The same proposal goes on to make the excellent point that the Africa Company (of which his brother was secretary) should first concentrate on investing up to £10,000 yearly in advancing current trade within Scotland — 'the Company would apply the greatest part of their Stock and Labour on Fishery and African trade [slaving] until they be sufficiently stocked for planting and sustaining a colony on probable and solid grounds'. In a scribbled draft for a speech in parliament at the same time he wrote with enthusiasm of the fisheries' potential — 'for mines of gold and silver in the earth do not renew their treasure verie slowly (if at all) whereas the





Fig. 11.3 George Mackenzie of Tarbat, 1st Earl of Cromartie, 1632-1714.

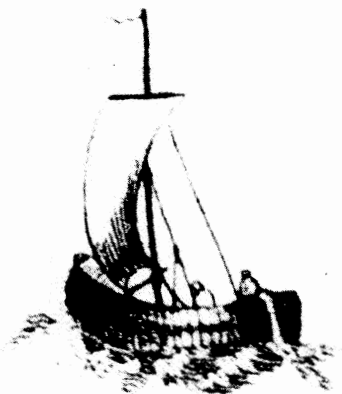
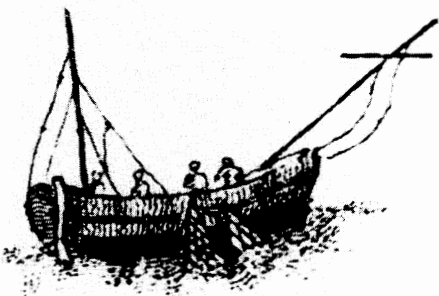
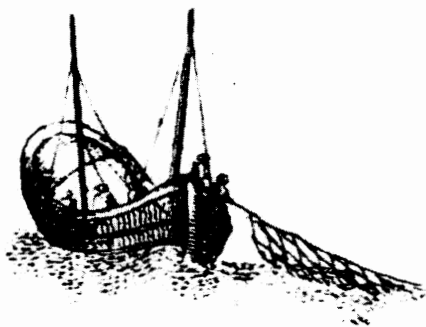
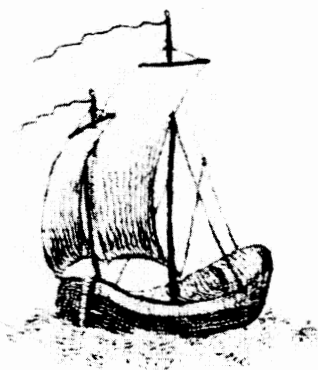




Fig. 11.4 A somewhat fanciful representation of hauling fish on shore, with fishing and trading boats offshore. From John Ainslie's *Map of Scotland*, 1789.

mines of the fish of the sea are yearly renewed'. There is also a draft Bill *Overtures for the Advantages of Fishing* dated 4th August 1698 and signed, modestly, Tarbat, J. P. requesting a bounty scheme to subsidise herring fishing (SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 211). Tarbat was out of office at this point, and it is tempting to think that it may have been enthusiasms of this sort which caused his contemporaries to dismiss his schemes as 'maggoty'. At any rate nothing but the full and disastrous attempt to establish a colony in Darien in Central America had any appeal to his fellow investors in the Africa Company.

Tarbat managed to convince at least one of his Edinburgh cronies, Sir William Binning of Bavelaw, of the profit to be made from private fishing. After some correspondence, upon terms now unknown, Binning and Tarbat agreed to set up a fishing station at Ullapool in 1698. The only evidence of **its brief existence** is a letter dated 9th November 1698 from H. Kynneir, servitor to Sir William Binning, writing from Ullapool (SRO GD 305. 153

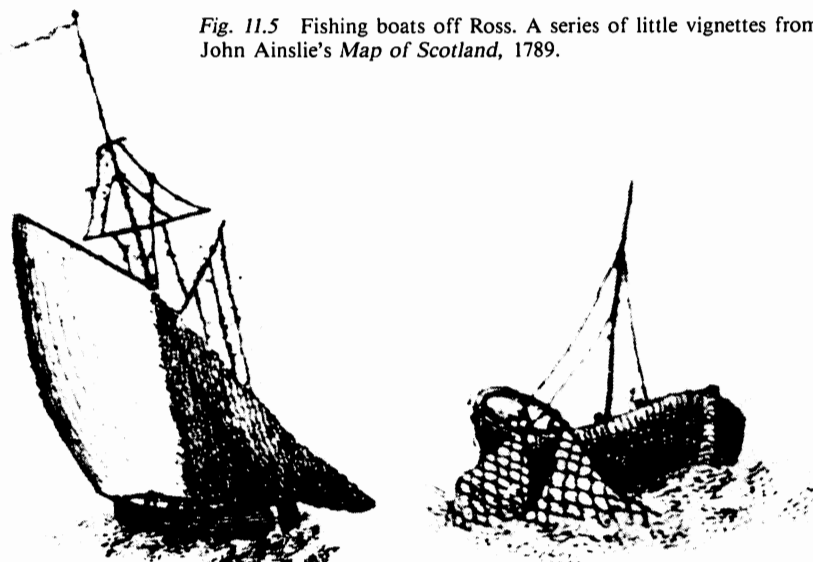


(VII) 32). He enclosed two receipts for goods despatched by the two partners and left in Stornoway by John Manners — Master of the *Jennett of Leith* and known as a reliable skipper in the Cromarty grain trade (see Clough 1986. 88-97). The goods took three weeks to reach Ullapool from the Lewes, and are detailed twice by the careful Lowlander, Harvie Kynneir. The cargo included all necessities for the setting up of a fishing station. Besides food, drink and tobacco, it included full coopering stores and tools, 24 fish-gutting knives, four rousing tubs, pickling pans, ladles and shovels, a measuring bar and a pair of scales, a ladder, a small quantity of Great Salt (14 bolls at £10.10 Scots per boll) and much more of small salt (72 bolls at £2 each). There was also one barrow, quite possibly the first wheel to appear on the roadless shores of Loch Broom, where there was not then a meal mill either. Nothing more is heard of this fishing station. An obvious weak point in the inventory of stores was the small proportion of good salt to the inferior sort. Binning, however, does not figure in later lists of Tarbat's creditors.

In 1712 Tarbat, now an earl and aged 80, was again out of office, this



Fig. 11.5 Fishing boats off Ross. A series of little vignettes from John Ainslie's *Map of Scotland*, 1789.



time for ever, and came north to his estates where he could perhaps dream of exerting more personal supervision over further fishery schemes. Even longer and more detailed *Proposals made by the Earl of Cromartie on the Fishing* are dated February/March 1712 (SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 216). The first page is missing, but it reads like a more business-like version of previous proposals, almost as a company prospectus. He implied that two Buss-type large vessels are already fishing on station, though this may be wishful and misleading. He claims that salt and casks must not only be provided for them but also for the 'country people engaged in coast fishing' — who were already fishing the Great Line of 800 to 1,000 hooks ('each which line should be very strong') and the Small Line of 300-500 hooks, together with hand-lines of several sizes for the 'great scaled fish' (cod and ling). A quantity of hemp-thread should be supplied for the making of nets and lines, especially for nets 'there being a great many nett-makers near these coasts'. Turning to the shore base he goes into great detail for the buildings. For example, a smoke house for smoking herring should be made of stone and built high 'since the same fire will smoak several stages'. And



roofing of canvas or thatch must be provided over the external drying-poles for cod and ling, for 'there is not one thing I fear more than the rain in time of drying cod and grey fish'. Evidently the intention was to employ all the methods subsequently adopted by the British Fisheries Society from 1788 on through the next hundred years — fishing by drift-net and by lines, to produce the standard three categories of fish; salt herrings in barrel, smoked herrings or haddock, and air-dried cod and ling. He ends on a characteristically optimistic note that 'Loch Kannorth' (Loch Kanaird) was 'swimming with herrings'.

A letter from the Estate Chamberlain, Norman Macleod, dated 15th August of the same year, 1712, confirms that the smoking-house had been built, but economically. Macleod had had experience of the old earl's schemes; he was cautious, 'whatever was done in either Lochs Broom or Gairloch was but an essay and therefore to lay out much expence was unfit'. The very bad news he gave was that no large ships had called to pick up the catch, or even to net it; and as an aside he remarks that the herrings are so plentiful that they are being used as manure by the country people.

The earl had apparently employed The Zetland Company of London as agents to supply the two boats, and to market the catch. The earl must have written urgently to his son-in-law, Major John Sinclair in London, who replied on 12th September, a bare month after the earl had heard the disturbing news of the non-arrival of the hired ships. Sinclair wrote a short letter, reporting that he had made 'with the utmost diligence inquiry about the Zetland Company but the more I inquire the worse I like them, they sham, they ly, they break appointments, they are "not at home" when thy ar, they will not shew their books to satisfy on how your money was applied for the Company's services, in short I am afraid they divided it amongst themselves'. Sinclair prudently enclosed a lawyer's endorsement of this verdict: Mr Hamilton wrote 'I am afraid it is a trick designed upon you from the beginning' and advised the only possible course would be to file a Bill of Chancery, 'a pretty tedious business' (*SRO GD 305* Correspondence: Major Sinclair to the Earl of Cromartie, 12 Sept. 1712). In 1721 there was a Bill of Roup of Fishing Stores lying at Cromarty and Coigach, set up for £292 1s. 3d. Sterling, last indication of the large scale of investment planned (*SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 255*). The total annual rent of the Barony of Coigach was about £50.60 Sterling at this date.

This appears to have been the end of Tarbat's second attempt to establish a fishery in Loch Broom. Forty-three years later, in 1755, the Factor for the Annexed Estates of Cromartie wrote hopefully of the great benefit the north side of Loch Broom derived from the herring fishing, and gave a well-argued case for a fisher town to be built at Ullapool 'as well situate for a village as perhaps any place on the western coast'. The Commissioners ignored this advice for another thirty years.

However, an international (and subsidised) market for salt herring had by then been established in Great Britain with growing demands from ships' victuallers, and from the plantations in the West Indies. Loch Broom and Gairloch were increasingly visited by freelance fishers. The estate benefit-



*Fig. 11.6 Herring gutters, Ullapool. Early 20th century.*

ted a little, by selling licences for the distilling of whisky; it was able also to increase several rentals, and to create new ones for Isle Martin and Tanera Mor, on the grounds of fishing profits. In 1756 the local Minister wrote to the Commissioners complaining of the behaviour of the fishers and the lack of any law-enforcement officer — behaviour which had encouraged back-sliding of his parishioners and at least one unfortunate girl to become a prostitute. By 1775 John Woodhouse of Liverpool had leased Isle Martin from the Commissioners and had claimed to have spent over £3,000 in the very first year in buildings, vessels sent, and casks. He already had his established market. In 1787 Directors of the newly formed British Fisheries Society visited the Western Highlands and, inspired by the success of Isle Martin and Isle Tanera in Loch Broom, decided upon a station at Ullapool. The purchase of land at Ullapool and Isle Ristol from the Cromatie heir Lord John Macleod, newly returned to his estates, was completed in September 1788, and the Society's investments and arrangements were more successful than the forgotten former attempts of the landlord (see Dunlop 1978; also J. Munro, this volume) [Fig. 11.6].

## TIMBER

The attempt to develop an income from Coigach by selling the timber was the work of the second earl [Fig. 11.7]. His father died in 1714, an old man; John had had to wait a long time for his inheritance, and had spent the years in reckless living. By 1707 he was so much in debt that his father had drawn





*Fig. 11.7* John MacKenzie, 2nd Earl of Cromartie, ca. 1665-1732.

up a complicated Will, leaving the properties in tailzie on his grandson, and a life-interest only of the rents of the barony of Tarbat to his unreliable son John. John was expressly charged not to sell any of the principle of the estates, and the entire rental of Coigach was to go to the maintenance and education of his two eldest sons. It was about £50 Sterling per annum, and we have traced only one year when it actually went to the maintenance of the little boys, George and Roderick at school in Inverness. George, Master of Tarbat, had two other tutors as well as his father. Unfortunately, his uncles Lord Royston and Lord Elibank were both rather distant and casual

about their obligations, whilst the second earl was unable to acknowledge that the estates he had waited so long to inherit were not his.

Earl John gives the clear impression of not caring for any inconvenient legal obligation. Almost as soon as he became earl his creditors began to put pressure on him, and by 1720 they foreclosed and were in the process of sequestering the rents of his remaining land at Tarbat. This should not have affected Coigach, legally the property of his son George, a minor. One outcome of his straits, however, was the second earl's quite illegal attempt to sell the standing timber of Coigach. The timber was presumably natural Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) growing up the south-facing slopes of Loch Broom, planted these days by the Forestry Commission; also what is now the bare 'forest' of Rhidorroch [Fig. 11.8].

There are indications that, originally, timber was cherished as an asset to the estate. A tack set in 1676, of the Oxgate of Ridorach and half-oxgate of Delvraid, has a special obligation written in — to 'look carefully to the woods of Ridorach' (SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 287). There is no standing timber now, though from evidence which we shall see, the average height of the boles was over 30 to 40 ft (9-12m). However, the old first earl had taken up as another 'maggoty scheme', the utilisation of the native timber of Scotland. There exists a draft, undated, of a speech to the Scots Parliament in support of a Petition to Queen Anne, begging that she would grant the same encouragement and premium for mastage and ship-planks from Scottish sources as was paid for the wood of colonial America — '... there are woods in our wildernesses . . .' (SRO GD 305. 158 (XII) 104). This seems to have led to an Admiralty Commission of Inspection which got lost in the woods of Strathspey, and never got to the real Highlands; it also may have given John the second earl the notion that that the woods of Coigach were a saleable asset, even though they did not belong to him. For in a contract dated 1719, the second earl assigned 'The Fir Woods of Coigach' to one John Innes, who died soon after, leaving his interest to William Innes, W.S., who was given the tack of Ullapool (SRO GD 305. 163 (XVI) 322). The second earl was already in debt to the Innes family.

Two long letters from William Innes give a good idea of the problems of extraction. The first is a quibble about the ownership of fallen timber — did such as had fallen between the signing of the contract and the start of operations belong to the Earl or Innes? The ground in question was 'the woods of Achall'. The second is longer, and Innes almost visibly tries to keep his temper with a difficult landowner. It is dated, from Ullapool, 1st June 1724 (SRO GD 305. Correspondence: J. Innes to John Earl of Cromartie). Firstly Innes answers objections clearly made by the earl, that an unidentified neighbour, 'the general', is getting far better prices for timber than Innes is giving. Innes replies, pointing out that the complaint would have been justified 'had your woods been kept as well and looked after as narrowly as theirs had been, but they have not, for they have been made havock of at pleasure, not only by all your own people in this country but also by the neighbourhood without much control'.

Innes goes on to complain that he made the bargain for 5,000 trees,





standing, fit to be manufactured into merchantable deals, 'and now since I came up here I have travelled the woods again and . . . after counting the trees we could not reckon on 3,000 trees to be yet standing'. Returning then to the grievance that the neighbour had cut much more profitable timber [Figs. 11.9-11.11], Innes explains that only:

those trees which may be brought down whole in their full length and bigness to the sea, by which such as are fitt for masts or yards to ships have a praemium or bounteth of 20/- sterling payed by Government . . . But none in your lordship's woods, tho' they were more fit for Masts . . . can be brought down whole by reason of the Linn that is in the water through which they must pass, and therefore they must be cutt into Luggs of 12 or 14 foot lengths at most and even those of that length cannot be brought down without great pains and trouble, so that I am obliged to manufacture into Deals all the trees that are fit . . . whereas those of the Gentles' Wood are sent to the markets whole and get a far better pryce than the deals doe, besides the praemium . . . the General obliges his tenants to work, paying what he states himself . . . so that the expense of every tree is but 10½ pennies [Scots], but the price sought from he here is a merk the tree . . .

There follows intricate calculations of the cost of transporting a tree 'of the bigness to afford 3 luggs' to the mill, calculations which we fear were of no interest to the second earl. 'Every deal stands us a halfpenny to that mill, and a considerable expense more for carrying down the deals from the milns to the shoars'; the further expense that Innes had had 'to build the sawmills and provide all the materials necessary, the paying of £6 Sterling yearly to a Forrester for keeping the woods (which your lordship ought to pay) and many other expenses . . . If you had any thought before, that you were overreached in the bargain, you will be now convinced of the contrary'. Innes ends by complaining of the harrassment he has had from the tenantry of Coigach, egged on, he fears, by Lord Cromartie's 'doers'. He demands that 'Your doers may undeceive the people and make them know that giving me any disturbance or discouragement in the work here is *not* agreeable to your lordship'. He will pay a reasonable rate for reasonable work, and 'thus the tenants will be able to pay their rents and perhaps make some profits to themselves'.

It is not clear how soon the teenage owner of the woods of Coigach found out that his father had sold them, but fortified by excellent legal advice he went into action in 1724, obtaining a judgement against his father who 'Most wrongeously and unjustly . . . has cutt a great deal and is going on to the destruction of the whole'. He also complained that the value put upon the woods was far too low — 'I might further represent that the woods were sold at an undervalue for £600 Sterling, when they were worth a vast deal more'. Young Tarbat becomes a little shrill at this point — 'This is a great loss to me to be deprived of such considerable woods by a sale at a very low price made by one who had no right to sell them . . .' The judge-





*Fig 11.9* Felling timber with axes between Muirkirk and Sorn, Ayrshire. 1940.

*Fig. 11.10* Taking out the felled timber, Glen Orchy. Alasdair Alpin MacGregor Collection.







*Fig. 11.11* The long inland straths were well-suited to timber production. East over the watershed, at Contin, the upper part of the mill was built almost entirely of wood. Erskine Beveridge 1886.

ment was against the earl, who was required to repay to his son £400 Sterling. Meanwhile there was the contracting firm of Innes, two thirds through their extraction job, having had the heavy expenditure of putting up a saw mill. Eventually the aggrieved son settled with Innes to complete the job.

So, as part of his marriage and coming of age settlements in 1724, George Master of Tarbat assigned a new Tack to William Innes, in place of the one signed between Earl John and Innes on 2nd October 1719. Under the old tack Innes was to pay £600 in three instalments of which only the last remained unpaid: this was now to go to George. George, Master of Tarbat sells and disposes 'all and hail the remaining timber in the barronie of Coigach upward of 6" [15cm] diameter . . . particularly the fir woods in Achachall and Caulternath' . . . giving Innes authority:

to cut down use and dispose of all and every of the said firr woods and to transport the same by land or water to the sawmilns already erected by him on



the water of Ullabull for manufacturing the said woods into dealls, and from thence to the shoar or harbour of Ullabull to be put on board such shippes or vessells as shall be employed by . . . William Innes . . . with full liberty to plane and flank the dealls so to be manufactured, and the loggs, joysts, sparroof or nails [stored] near the mills or shore until they are sold or carried off.

It seems Innes was into the prefabricated roofing business, not attempting the manufacture of ships' timbers. By the time of the Judicial Rental of 1755 the sawmills are mentioned as lying derelict, at Ullapool. Not only had Innes logged-out his contracted ground, but in the aftermath of the 1745 Rising a naval party was landed near Isle Martin and deliberately set the same woods on fire, part of the scorched-earth policy ordered against the homelands of the 'rebels'. The old MacLeod 'long house' of Langwell was also burnt, with the loss of all the old MacLeod of Lewis Charters (verbal comm: the late Earl of Cromartie).

The fishing and the forestry exploits in Coigach in the late 17th and early 18th centuries form a forerunner to the account of the 'formidable economic odds' in the chapter by Professor Eric Richards (this volume) in which he speaks of the increasing poverty and insecurity of the common people and the problems of capital investment in Coigach.

### *Note*

<sup>1</sup>In Richards, E. & Clough, M. *Cromartie: Highland Life, 1650-1914*. (1989. 455, 459 and elsewhere), the present volume is referred to by its earlier, working title, 'Ullapool and Wester Ross'.

### *Acknowledgement*

Permission to reproduce illustrations has been kindly granted by: the late Earl of Cromartie [Figs. 11.2, 11.3, 11.7]; Scottish Ethnological Archive, National Museums of Scotland [Figs. 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 11.8, 11.9, 11.10]; Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland [Fig. 11.11].

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