

*Fig. 12.1* Glen Torridon, Wester Ross — grazing country.

# THE LONG TREK: AGRICULTURAL CHANGE AND THE GREAT NORTHERN DROVE

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## INTRODUCTION

The Highlands were for long considered a wild and remote place, virtually inaccessible from the rest of Scotland. The (?)thirteenth-century Bodleian Map designated that area of the far north-west facing the outer isles with the words *hic habundant lupi*, wolves are plentiful hereabouts, whilst at much the same period the entire western coastal fringe of the Highlands north from the Clyde was described by Matthew Paris as 'A country marshy and impassable, fit for cattle and shepherds'. Inland was 'A mountainous and woody region, producing a people rude and pastoral, by reason of marshes and fens...'. In the fourteenth century, Fordoun continues: 'the upland districts and along the Highlands [were] full of pasturage grass for cattle and comely with verdure in the glens along the water courses', and flesh may be said to have been put on the bones towards the end of the sixteenth century by Bishop Leslie (in Hume Brown 1893. II. 132): 'in the mountanis of Aargyl and Rosse lykewise and sindrie utheris places ar fed ky, nocht tame, as in utheris partes, bot lyke wyld hartes, wandiring out of ordour and quhilkes, through a certane wyldnes of nature, flie the cumpanie on syght of men' — beasts of like temperament perhaps to those wild British bulls hunted and caught 1,000 years earlier by means of strong nets (Gildas, in Logan 1876. II, 36–37)!

More than three-fifths of Scotland consists of mountains, hills and moorland, the bulk of it in what we know as the Highlands and Islands. Through time, the climate has contributed a blanket of peat bog over much of the moorland, and marshland in many a wider river valley. And the mountain areas, especially in the north and west with their heavy rainfall, have never been anything other than regions of natural poverty — a poverty reinforced by warring and feuding, and by agricultural practices that may be described as basic, though not necessarily or invariably inappropriate to the geographical conditions.

Climatic improvement from time to time may have ameliorated the lot of the inhabitants, and undoubtedly a number of locations were better favoured — island machairs, parts of certain broad and fertile, sheltered straths, and the attractive coastal fringe of such areas as Easter Ross and south-east Sutherland. In general, however, vast areas of Scotland were, and are, relatively ill-suited to an arable economy and over much of the Highlands what little cultivation there was, was restricted to narrow glens and coastal pockets.

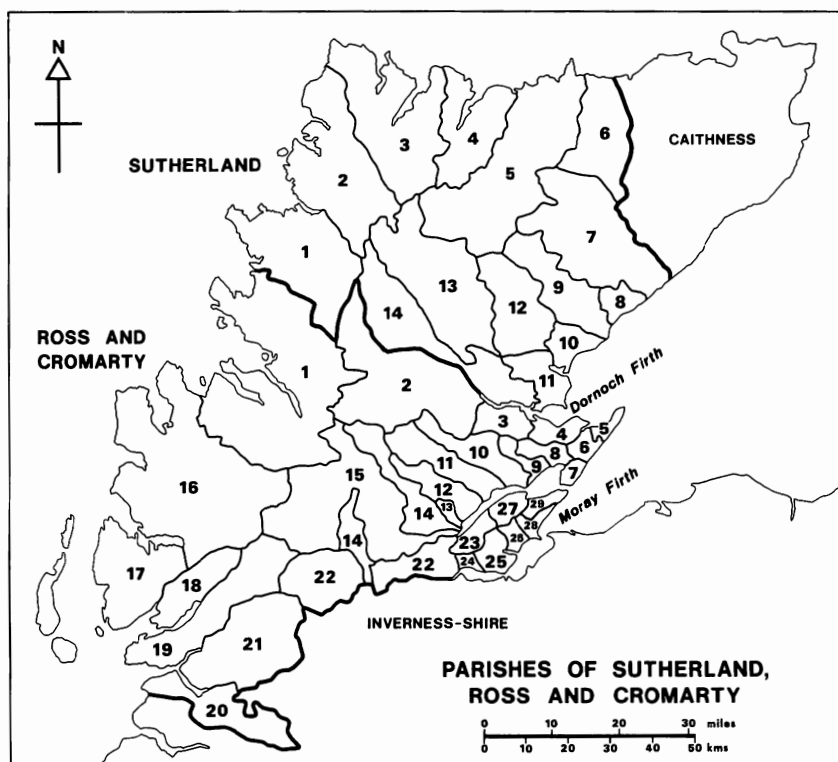


Fig. 12.2 Parishes of Sutherland, Ross and Cromarty.

#### SUTHERLAND

1. Assynt
2. Eddrachillis
3. Durness
4. Tongue
5. Farr
6. Reay (part of)
7. Kildonan
8. Loth
9. Clyne
10. Golspie
11. Dornoch
12. Rogart
13. Lairg
14. Creich

#### ROSS AND CROMARTY

1. Lochbroom
2. Kincardine
3. Edderton
4. Tain
5. Tarbat
6. Fearn
7. Nigg
8. Logie Easter
9. Kilmuir Easter
10. Rosskeen
11. Alness
12. Kiltearn
13. Dingwall
14. Fodderty
15. Contin
16. Gairloch
17. Applecross
18. Lochcarron
19. Lochalsh
20. Glenshiel
21. Kintail
22. Urray
23. Urquhart and Logie Wester
24. Killearnan
25. Kilmuir Wester (Knockbain)
26. Avoch
27. Kirkmichael (Resolis)
28. Rosemarkie
29. Cromarty



Like much of northern England, Ireland, Norway and the North Atlantic islands, therefore, survival depended upon a primarily pastoral economy. The grazing potential was enormous as later landowners and flock-masters well appreciated, though without controlled and responsible exploitation the land eventually became sour as well as denuded of trees and woodland. But in spite of the increasing pre-dominance of sheep-farming from the third quarter of the eighteenth century, it was cattle that had long provided a focus for the economy; and though sheep came to be driven in large numbers during the nineteenth century, both cattle and sheep continued to be moved 'on the hoof' to and from the less accessible parts of the north and north-west well into the present century.

This paper seeks to concentrate on droving in the north of Scotland and on the pivotal role of the eastern firthlands in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some indication of contemporary agricultural and pastoral practice will help provide a context.

### LIVESTOCK HUSBANDRY AND PATTERNS OF AGRICULTURE

Across Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland there was no single agricultural model. Very broadly speaking, by the late eighteenth century there appear to have been three somewhat overlapping patterns, geographically-based and reflecting differing environmental factors.

The 'western districts' [Fig. 12.1] consisted of mainly rough, wild and uncultivated mountains and moorland, and numerous woods (until they were burnt). They were very well suited for grazing, had numerous bays



*Fig. 12.3* Valley of the River Shin, south-east Sutherland — restricted but good arable, plentiful hill grazings and diversified resources.



*Fig. 12.4* Tarbat Ness, lighthouse and Ballone Castle — the fertile, eastern plain.

for fishing, and stretched from Kintail and Lochalsh, northwards by the parishes of Gairloch, Lochbroom, Assynt and Edderachillis as far round the northern coast as Strathnaver [Fig. 12.2]. The 'central districts', to include parts of Strathnaver, Kildonan and Clyne, and parishes such as Rogart, Lairg, Creich and Kincardine, contained extensive and attractive straths, often well-wooded and stretching inland amongst large tracts of high and inhospitable mountains [Fig. 12.3]. They too were well-suited to a pastoral economy whilst having the advantage of a wider, more plentiful range of natural resources, cornland, deer, game, salmon, timber, as well as greater accessibility to the higher-populated eastern districts. This 'eastern seaboard', by contrast, was low-lying, fertile and very much agricultural, taking in all or much of Contin and Dingwall parishes, the Black Isle, the north shore of the Cromarty Firth, the Tarbat peninsula [Fig. 12.4] and the coastal fringe of the Dornoch Firth, creeping northwards along the east coast of Sutherland. In terms of land-use it would also include the north-eastern parts of Caithness as well as the southern shores



of the Beaully and Moray Firths, though these are outwith the present study.

In short, most inhabitants of the western and central districts were necessarily pastoralists; whilst the inhabitants of the eastern seaboard, also heirs in considerable part to the Gaelic language and culture, were primarily farmers.

### The North-West Coasts and Hinterland

The life-style of the north and west was based on a dual system of winter-toun and summer shielings [Fig. 12.5], on the most careful exploitation of natural grazing. At its simplest, once the lower pastures had been grazed bare, stock were taken to the higher pastures and shielings to let the lower grazings recover for further use during the later part of the year. In practice it was rarely that simple, for a good herd had to make the best use of all his available fodder. He was particularly fortunate, for instance, if he had low-lying meadow land too wet to till; he would also have infield pasture very good for fattening cattle, but very little of it. He might well have tracts



*Fig. 12.5* Milking cattle outside the dyke, Uist (Cathcart Collection).

of good natural grass on the lower slopes of the hill not far distant from the township dyke; and he would have the mountain pastures, moors and commons generally sited between 250 m and 915 m (800 ft–3,000 ft). The herd had to know the potential of all his land: some pastures yielded only early grasses, little use for providing winter feed; on the other hand, most Highland pasture being high, it provided good grazing in summer but not early in the season, so there was little point in trying to use it too soon (Walker 1812. I. 311–18).

To aid optimum exploitation, distinctions were made between the grazing of milking cows and of the yeld, barren or non-milking cattle,

young cattle, horses and other stock. In Assynt, for instance, in western Sutherland, the narrow glens and valleys and the small plains or local woodlands amongst the hills were kept for pasturing milk cows, goats and sheep in summer and harvest-time [Fig. 12.6], leaving the higher parts for the yeld cattle. At the same time, certain grazings within the area known as *Me-in-Assint*, the middle of Assynt — tracts of heath, moss, heathery hills, small rocks and freshwater lochans bordering on the outskirts of the coastal farms — were preserved during the three harvest months, and used as outwintering for cattle from the end of the harvest or early November until the beginning of February or thereabouts, when the animals would be taken in, housed and fed. Certain small islands within the same parish, like Oldany and Soay, were similarly exploited (Mackenzie 1794. 274–87); and the Summer Isles in Coigach.

At one time, the Highlanders' stock comprised as many goats and native sheep, small horses as well, as it did cattle [Fig. 12.7]. By the late eighteenth century however, 'Every farmer rears a few sheep and goats, but their number is very inconsiderable; and they are chiefly intended to reach at that pasture which, by its very steepness, is inaccessible to black-cattle' (Morrison 1792. 524). For cattle now formed the mainstay of the



Fig. 12.6 Grazing goats, Diabeg, Loch Torridon, 1972.



economy, and most were sold before winter — partly to pay the rent, partly because of the shortage of winter fodder, partly to buy in extra supplies of oats, barley and other human necessities. Traditionally it was the corn crop that failed, bere and sma' oats; but even in the best years of the later eighteenth century, Wester Ross was importing oatmeal from Ireland, the Clyde or Caithness (Sinclair 1795. 118–19).

As for the overwintered stock, they would frequently die in their thousands. Milk cows apart, there was no preferential treatment, so that in Sutherland: 'During Summer they procured a scanty sustenance with much toil and labour by roaming over the mountains; while in winter they died in numbers for the want of support; notwithstanding a practice which they universally adopted of killing every second calf on account of the want of winter keep.' (Loch 1820. 64–65). Loch continued by stating that in Kildonan parish alone in the spring of 1807, 200 cows, 500 head of cattle and more than 200 small horses died. As for those that did not die, the writer of an article on Perthshire Husbandry in 1808 commented:

I well remember to have seen the poor wives during the nipping cold winds in May, provincially called the *Cowquake*, tending their cows, reduced to a skeleton and covered with a blanket, while they picked up any spires of grass which had begun to rise in the kailyard or at the bottom of walls and banks. And to such extremities were they reduced at times that I have heard of their taking the half-rotten thatch from the roofs of their houses and giving it to the half-dead animal as the means of prolonging its miserable existence. (Anon. 1808. 436).



Fig. 12.7 Milking the goat indoors. Painting by William Simson, *Goatherd's Cottage*, 1832.





Fig. 12.8 At Duncansby, Caithness, 1969.

Those that survived the winter emerged from the byre dizzy with weakness. They were often so weak that they had to be carried outside; and then, when seeking shoots of new vegetation in bogs and marshes, they had to be dragged clear, too weak to extricate themselves. Far from disappearing last century, similar, if not so dire scenes survived in Wester Ross (Coigach) and Caithness (Duncansby), for example, into the 1960s and 1970s [Fig. 12.8].

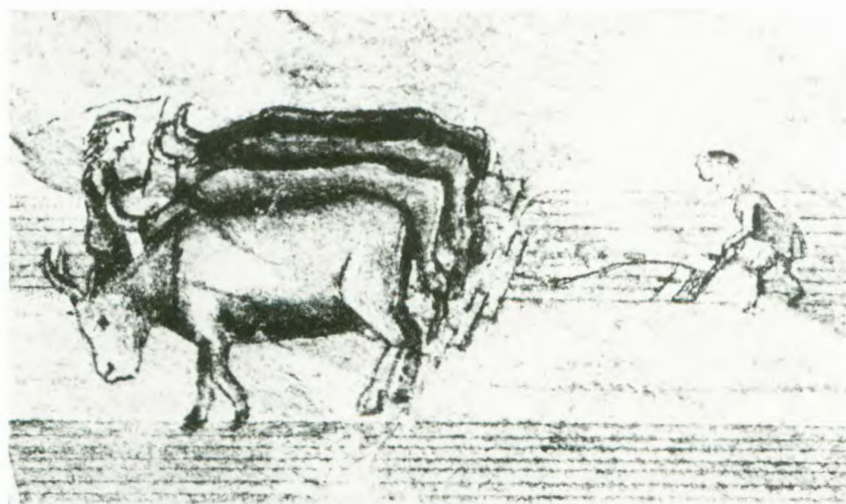
At the very least, these examples underline the need that there was for plentiful and well-managed hill-grazings: survival itself required a summer shieling system for milking stock, along with freer, less supervised, upland grazing for other stock. They also help explain the close association of special rites, instance Beltane fires and rowan sprigs, with the protection of animals. And it was no accident that the key dates in the seasonal calendar, Bealltuinn, Lùnasdal, Samhuinn, were closely associated with the movement of livestock (MacDonald 1978. 80). The men of the north and the west were almost totally dependent upon their stock.

### The Eastern Lowlands

Across on the eastern firthlands, the local farmers also kept considerable numbers of cattle, small horses and sheep. The proportions, however, were somewhat different. In the 1780s and 1790s, according to the *Statistical Accounts*, northern and western parishes might have four, eight, even fifteen times as many cattle as horses; east coast parishes just about twice the number:

	Dingwall 1790-91	Tarbat 1792	Lochalsh 1793	Edderachillis 1791-92	Tongue 1791
Black Cattle (inc. cows, calves)	600+	1176	3115	2573	2142
Horses	374	573	275	351	538
Sheep	?	2080	2475	2624	2846
Goats	?	?	1011	1307	714

This may be explained partly by the growing importance of cattle-breeding in the harsher non-agricultural areas, set against a drop in horse-breeding; partly by the fact that, a few milking cows apart, east coast stock were primarily working animals [Figs. 12.9; 12.10]. For whilst he did on occasion breed and rear a few of his own black cattle, the east-coaster was a farmer not a cattle-breeder; rather would he buy in as required most of his animals, cattle and horses, at the different local fairs held each October and November in Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland. After a few years' labouring, the animals were again sold, either to the drover or to the butcher, and often at a price higher than that first paid (Balfour 1792. 640). If they had survived, that is. For these animals still required feeding throughout most of the year and such was the system of pre-improvement agriculture that, as in less hospitable areas, this was far from assured. On a farm on the Shandwick estate round about 1800, there were 30-40 'shelties' (probably garrons) and 40 small oxen. The farmer had not one acre of fallow or turnips, and his straw stubble, never very long, was quite insufficient to keep the animals alive during seven months of the year



*Fig. 12.9* The Lighter version of the old Scots plough still pulled by four oxen yoked abreast. From W. Aberdeen's plan of Castlehill, Caithness, 1772.



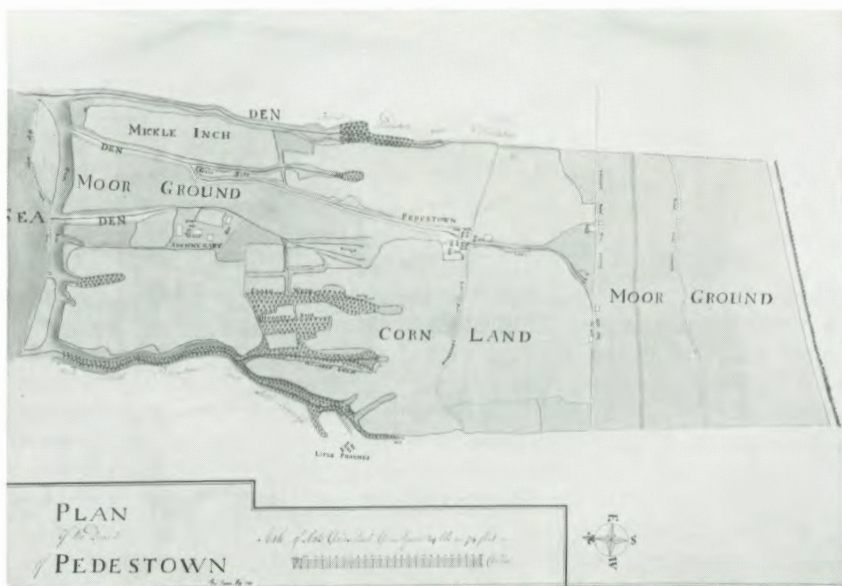


Fig. 12.10 The Davoch of Pedestown, south-west of Cromarty, Black Isle. Plan by James May, 1748 (Craigston Castle Drawings).

(Mackenzie 1810. 83, 97–99). Many perished each winter and spring through absolute want.

And on a farm with just ten horses and six head of cattle (besides young cattle) Mackenzie (1810. 82) further observed that one spring:

The land was remarkably full of weeds of all sorts. After the cattle had done ploughing, they were turned upon the field on which they had been working in order that they might feed upon the weeds which had been turned up. I never observed that they got any other sort of food during the day, except a small quantity of oats just before they went to work. At night the horses and cattle were turned to some patches of waste ground to pick up a miserable pittance of grass.

This was the farm where two farmers, jointly, were following what would by then appear to have been the decidedly uncommon practice of common ownership of the land:

Thirty acres were occupied by two men who had large families. They possessed the land, not in runrig, but in common. Both exerted themselves in cultivating the fields and they agreed respecting a particular but very irregular rotation of crops, and divided the produce equally between them.

During the summer months they sent their animals

to graze on some bare hills; the horses being brought down when the peats were ready for storing, and sent back as soon as the fuel was got home. When the corn was ready to be taken from the fields, the whole stock was brought home and allowed to range on the stubbles.

Thus it becomes clear that, traditionally, the native firthlands farmers had access both to modest grazings close-by and to wider hill grazings some considerable distance away: 65–80 km (40–50 ml) distant for some Cromarty farms (Sinclair 1795. 10–11). From the parish of Urray both horses and black cattle were sent to the western hills from May until Michaelmas; from Nigg, and from Kirkmichael and Cullicudden in the Black Isle where over-stocking was equally common, the animals were dispatched in summer to the ‘cold Highland grazings’ (Downie 1791–92. 672; Arthur 1792. 537; Macadam 1793. 590).

### The Inland Uplands

Mountainous like the west coast hinterland, the central, inland districts of Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland also held considerable breeding stocks of black cattle and hill horses, some sheep and some goats. At the same time their more varied resources allowed Strathnaver, for instance, to buy corn from Caithness in the mid-seventeenth century, in exchange for timber; and ‘particularly tall firs’ from Strathcarron were exported near and far (Gordon ?1640, in MacFarlane. II, 447–48, 453–54).

But in addition, and to a much greater extent than the western districts, the central mountains played host to those summertime herds of lowland animals requiring pasture. Whilst the inland pastoralists often overstocked with their own animals, in relation to the number they could keep alive during the winter, nonetheless the hills were still apparently undergrazed — initially at least. To allow them to buy in essential foodstuffs and to retain more of their own ‘surplus’ stock during winter and spring, they were induced to lease out grazing. This practice led eventually to real overstocking, so that the low country cattle and horses never fully lost the generally poor-looking, stunted appearance engendered by overstocking in the low country (Mackenzie 1810. 133–35). Put a little differently, an upland tenant in Creich parish would overwinter as many of his own black cattle as feed would allow. But if circumstances were particularly straightened: ‘In that case, he takes cattle from others, who may have more than they can feed, at the rate of 2s., 6d., or 3s., through the winter and spring, as provender is plentiful or scarce.’ (Rainy 1791. 338). Such winter leasing suggests cash-crop grazing taken to an extreme; it reflects the pressures that were growing upon both native Highlander and firthland Lowlander.

Nevertheless, demand for these more distant grazings, leased from Highland occupiers, grew as more localised grazings were swallowed up in lowland improvements; at the same time their rent increased as the hills were turned over to beef cattle and sheep. From 1s. a head per season, creeping up eventually to 5s. and 6s per head, it was simply a matter of time before the native lowlander would be outpriced, or, indeed, excluded. So that of farmers in Nigg parish in 1793 it was said (Macadam 1793. 590): ‘it is supposed that they shall soon be obliged to adopt a different method; because great part of the Highlands, where their cattle were wont



to be grazed in the summer season, are now converted into sheep farms, the number of which is still increasing'.

### The New Farmers and Farming Practice

This old firthland farmer, however, was of a dying breed regardless. By the later eighteenth century, eastern seaboard farms were being amalgamated, re-divided, enclosed and re-let to improving farmers, many of them from the south, so that by the time of the *New Statistical Account* in the 1830s and 1840s, very little seems to have remained of the old system based on large numbers of labouring animals [Figs. 12.11; 12.12]. By 1837 in Contin parish for example (Downie 1837. 240–41): 'The few black cattle reared for sale are the remains of the old Highland breed, which seems to have degenerated in the same ratio in which the circumstances of the people declined.'

The Shandwick estate already referred to was taken over by a Mr Cockburn Ross from Row Chester in Berwickshire. He reckoned that four good horses (presumably Clydesdales) would do the work of 70–80 small horses and oxen; and always intent on reaping considerable profits through improved techniques and efficiency, it was generally felt that one substantial farmer could easily occupy and cultivate the 400 acres of lowland Easter Ross that represented the holdings of 20 native families. According to Mackenzie, such a farm would require seven pair of good horses each with a horseman whose family might average five persons — a total of 35 persons rather than 100 formerly supported by the same land; and in a very different, dependent, situation socially (Mackenzie 1810. 85).

Another such improver was MacLeod of Geanies, who had both lowland and upland estates. By the early 1780s he had introduced Norfolk husbandry and plantations in Easter Ross, and by 1784 was 'presently building a family seat' (Wight 1784. IV. i, 268–70) [Fig. 12.13]. About this same time he was also leasing Cromartie land in Lochbroom from the annexed estate commissioners (*ibid.*; Mackenzie 1810. 130):

At Coigach, on the west coast, Mr. MacLeod possessed a large farm, which maintains about 300 horned cattle and 60 horses during the summer months. They run out summer and winter, by which they are hardy and healthy. The horned cattle continue unmixed with any other kind. The management of them is good. Every winter the one half are brought down to Geanies, where they have plenty of food. Both parcels are thereby improved, plenty of pasture being left for the half that remain in the high lands.

Though his stock was clearly of a superior breed, MacLeod was not initiating anything totally new. Nearly 20 years earlier in 1766, a professional drover, Charles Gordon of Skelpick in lower Strathnaver, had taken a tack of remote mainly inland Rientraid in Assynt, a little to the north; and there are clear indications of a healthy commercial cattle trade in Coigach a full century earlier. References in the Cromartie papers refer to

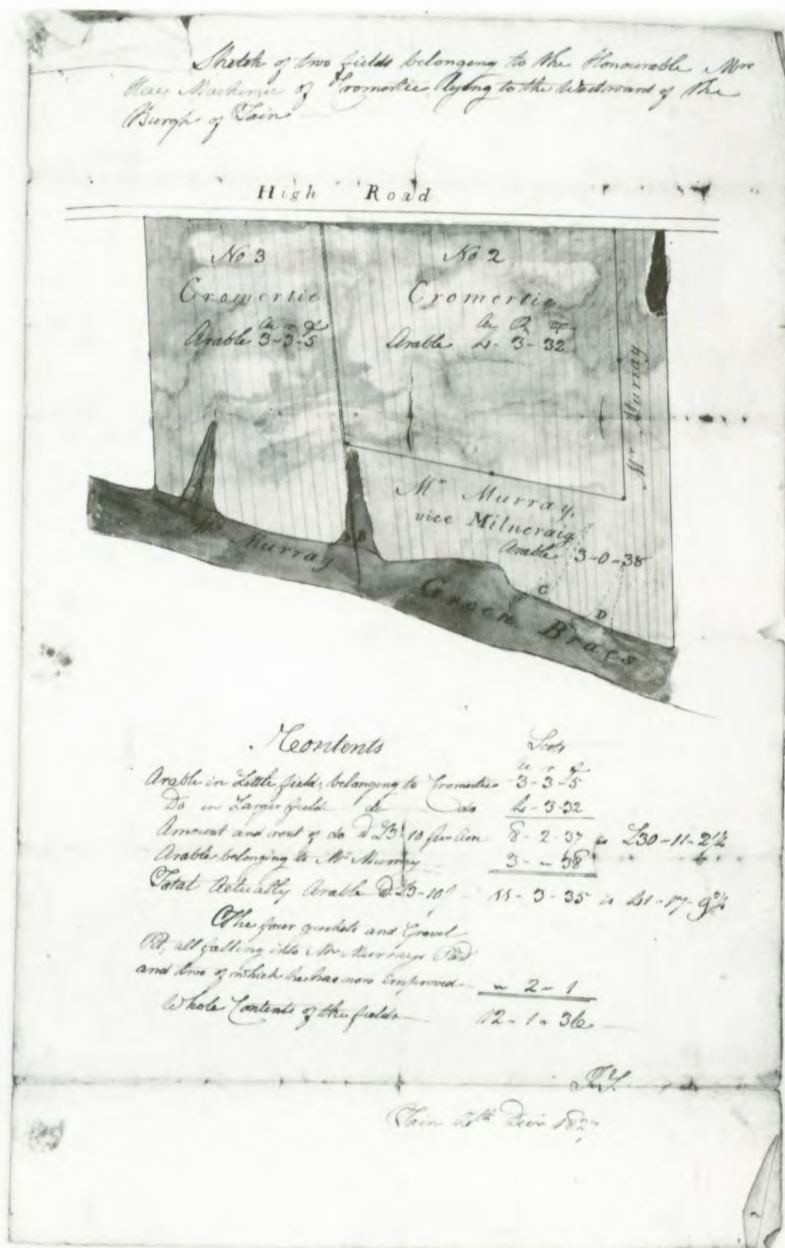


Fig. 12.11 Sketch of fields west of Tain belonging to the Honourable Mrs Hay Mackenzie of Cromartie. Plan by T. Shand, 1827.



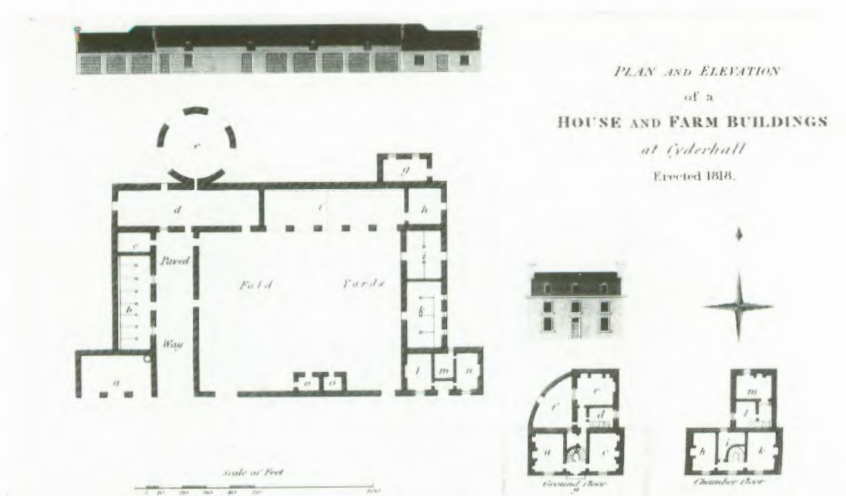


Fig. 12.12 The new farm and steading at Cyderhall, 1818. From James Loch, *An Account of the Improvements on the Estate of the Marquess of Stafford*, 1820.



Fig. 12.13 Geanies House, parish of Tarbat, from the south, by C. C. Petley.

rents in silver rather than in kind from Coigach in the mid-seventeenth century (Monica Clough: *pers. comm.*) — silver almost inevitably realized from the sale of cattle; whilst around the same time Gordon of Straloch says more generally of Wester Ross ‘...every year many herds of oxen raised here are driven far and wide for sale’ (in MacFarlane 1907. II. 445).

Whilst this trend towards the large-scale commercial hill-grazing of cattle, which had long gone on alongside smaller-scale shieling practice, was to continue into the nineteenth century, further change had already begun. Around 1790, for instance, the same MacLeod of Geanies was looking to replace his Coigach/Lochbroom cattle with sheep. But yet again he was not the first.

Sheep-farming reputedly began in the highland areas of Ross-shire with Sir John Lockhart Ross of Balnagown. A Mr Geddes of Tummel Bridge in Perthshire, to whom farms were let on the Sutherland–Ross-shire border in 1781 or 1782, was maybe the first sheep-farmer (certainly amongst the first) to settle in the north; soon after, Ross's forest of Freewater and the highland parts of Munro of Culcairn's Ross-shire estate were let to a Mr Cameron of Fort William. It was all wedder sheep at this time, for fear that a breeding stock would not survive the climate (Mackenzie 1810. 126–30), but even so, 'For every pound of beef, that a Highlander can send to market, a shepherd can at least bring three pounds of mutton' (Sinclair 1795. 110).

It would be erroneous to assume that cattle now all but disappeared from lowland or highland landscapes. Numbers declined in favour of sheep, but they were still considerable (Henderson 1812. 189):

	Assynt		Creich		Golspie	
	1790–98	1808	1790–98	1808	1790–98	1808
Black Cattle	3840	2000	1300	906	1100	1100
Horses	384	90	1531	965	350	260
Sheep	3840	8000	4000	13000	1000	1000
Goats	1024	60	?	20	?	100

Actual ownership of the cattle, however, had largely passed into the hands of the new farmers and estate owners.

On the one hand, the lowland improvers looked to cattle as a cash crop. MacLeod of Geanies, for instance, had seen the wisdom of bringing half his stock across from mountainous Coigach to Tarbat each winter, where his improved system of arable husbandry provided plenty of winter feed. And increasingly what became known as a *flying stock* appeared. The new improving farmers of Easter Ross, being so far from the markets, found breeding itself uneconomic. Instead, along such seaboard parishes as Tarbat, Nigg and Killearnan farmers like George Mackenzie of Muckle Tarrel bought young Highland stock from the hill country, maybe three and four year old stots, fed them on surplus straw and turnips during the winter and spring, and sold them off to drovers at good prices in the summer (Henderson 1812. 116; Rose 1836. 33; Campbell 1840. 465; Kennedy 187. 69). In this they were echoing, albeit rather differently, the annual buying and selling of their 'unimproved' predecessors and paving the way for their twentieth-century descendants. It made sound, economic sense.



At the same time the new sheep farmers also retained a strong interest in cattle, for in this early period of sheep farming considerable numbers of black cattle were kept on those parts of the new upland farms that were not, or thought not to be, well-adapted for sheep. Today we would consider a mix to be ecologically sound; in the early nineteenth century when the demand for Highland cattle (like corn) for export to England remained particularly high, fuelled by the French Wars of 1792–1815, the retention of cattle certainly proved profitable, even if the ‘Highland bones to be covered with Scottish and English beef’ (MacCulloch 1824. III, 103) were no longer the primary focus of the northern economy. They might be sold by the flock-masters either direct to the drovers or indirectly as flying stock, through the lowland improvers.

It is of little surprise, then, that under such pressures, the newly-dispossessed native farmers of the eastern seaboard, the ‘lower classes’ as Mackenzie terms them, should have made common cause with the dispossessed Highlanders turned off their traditional grazings and out of their long-established townships to make way for sheep. In the 1780s, hostilities had followed Geddes’s newly-introduced flocks — ‘numbers were shot and droves were collected, surrounded and forced into lakes and drowned’. And in the summer of 1792 ‘at the unfortunate time when the spirit of revolution and revolt was fast gaining ground over the whole kingdom’, open insurrection broke out in Ross-shire. All the sheep that had been brought to the various farms were gathered and upward of 10,000 driven down from the high ground to be taken to Inverness and there left to stray or to be driven further south by those living in Inverness-shire (Mackenzie 1810. 129–32).

In general terms and sentiment, the words of John Robertson, writing in the *Glasgow National* in 1844 on the evictions of the Rosses from the Glens of Strathcarron [Fig. 12.14], applied as aptly to their coastal cousins:

For a century, their privileges have been lessening; they dare not now hunt the deer, or shoot the grouse or the blackcock; they have no longer the range of the hills for their cattle and their sheep; they must not catch a salmon in the stream; in earth, air and water, the rights of the laird are greater, and the rights of the people are smaller than they were in the days of their forefathers. (in Mackenzie 1883. 140).

In spite of what might and should be seen therefore as revolutionary evictions in the north, in favour of improved agricultural estates along the firthland lowlands and massive sheep farms amongst the hills and glens of Ross and Sutherland, change in the actual use of highland grazings by livestock and in the movement of stock was essentially evolutionary. It had begun well in advance of these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clearances and was due in no small part to the demand for cattle for the droving trade — a demand evident as early as the fourteenth century, maybe the thirteenth century, and which grew during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to peak in the first half of the nineteenth century. The



*Fig. 12.14* In the church and burying ground at Croik, Strathcarron, the inhabitants of Glencalvie sought refuge after their eviction in 1845. Their names are scratched on small, diamond-shaped window panes in the church.

rest of this chapter focuses directly on droving in the north, and particularly on the droving of cattle. For when sheep, power symbol of the new 'Highlander', came to be driven to the southern markets, they simply followed in the tracks of the old Highlander's principal symbol of personal wealth and status.

## STOCK FOR DROVING

Perhaps the greatest trading asset of livestock in remote and inaccessible parts of the country was their ability to walk and even swim to market! They did not need to be transported except from more distant islands. This was as true over long distances as it was locally, and in the northern counties there had been a not insignificant local trade — a trade that embraced horses, as well as cattle and later sheep.

### Native Garrons

Throughout the seventeenth century, as earlier, horses were bred widely across the rough and mountainous north-west Highlands. Gordon of Straloch, for instance (?1640, in MacFarlane 1906–08. II. 444–56) refers to 'herds of deer, cattle, and horses' in Assynt and Eddrachillis, to 'herds of cattle and many droves of horses' in Strathcarron, to 'countless numbers of cattle, horses, goats and other tame animals' in Strathnaver where 'The

violence and numbers of most rapacious wolves ... prowling about wooded and pathless tracts, cause great loss of beasts and sometimes of men'. These horses, black, brown and grey garrons standing some 118–127 cm (44–50 in) high, were well-suited to the pastures and climate. They were grazed on the high hills in summer and autumn, on the 'benty grass of the mountains' well away from the milking cows (Morrison 1792, 524); and nearer to the township during winter and spring. 'There being little need for them in the country' (Sinclair 1795. pt III. 149), the small but hardy animals were generally bred for sale.

Some were sold at the Dornoch market, for instance, to the natives of the parish of Loth for the pack transport of seaware, manure and peats (McCulloch 1791–92. 464); others were bought locally at £3–£4 each by the tenant farmers and cottagers of Urray and elsewhere for ploughing and other labouring (Downie 1791–92. 671–72). For the pre-improvement agriculture of the firthlands required large numbers of labouring stock, cattle and horses.

But there was an equally strong and long-established trade with Orkney whose native horses, though larger, were reckoned less hardy than those from the northern mainland counties (Sinclair 1795. pt v. 225). Some of the sales came from the east coast of Ross where, around 1795, animals bought in their first year from the west were kept at little or no expense and sold to Orkney at a year old for £3 to £5, an increase of some 15s. to 20s. a head from c.1790. And if kept until three or four years old, they fetched from twelve to fifteen guineas 'for the saddle etc' (Falconer 1791–92. 383; Downie 1791–92. 672; Sinclair 1795. pt II. 96). Henderson, writing of the mid and western districts of Sutherland in 1807 (1812. 107) provides a little more detail:

the farmers used to keep numbers of brood mares ... and in general their colts were sold when they were about 14 months old, to horse-dealers, who drove them to the Orkney isles and sold them to advantage, generally by bartering them for five and six year olds of the same species, which they brought to the Caithness markets in August and September, and had their profit return ... These horses were never shod; they travelled over the flinty rocks without any inconvenience.

The end of an era, however, was close. Commercial cattle had long been increasing in numbers on the hills in proportion to breeding horses and colts, and in addition 'the Cheviot sheep now occupy the former habitation of the hardy Highlander and his horses' (*ibid.*). In 1805, 'Irish horse-jockies' simply contributed to the clearance, whilst helping the Highlander pay off three years of rent arrears. They bought all the old garrons they could find, at a tolerably good price, 'with all the refuse of that species of animals, and in short, every sort they could procure ...' (Sage, in Henderson 1812. app III. 175–76).

### **Black Cattle**

Alongside the trade in live horses, there had also been a local butcher trade in cattle and sheep. In the mid-seventeenth century, for instance, in



Strathnaver and Caithness as well as in Orkney and Shetland, barrelled salted beef was being sold to sailors, fishermen and other voyagers; and sometimes it was sent down to Leith (Gordon ?1640, in MacFarlane 1906-08. II. 445; Brand 1701). To the coastal parishes of Easter Ross too, in the late eighteenth century, butchers came from such centres of population and commerce as Inverness and Dingwall, buying first off the native farmers and later from the improving farmers who replaced them (Balfour 1792. 640). George MacKenzie, an improver in Muckle Tarrel, did not sell every year to the butcher, but when he did the cattle were kept tied up indoors, well-bedded and given straw to eat at midday and all night. By contrast, beasts for droving were left loose in sheds, better to travel (MacKenzie 1810. 116).

No particular attention was paid to rearing of cattle expressly for the butcher trade, and in general it was the oxen and old cows, nearing the end of their days, that were fattened up to satisfy the troops of Fort George and the shipping out of Inverness and Cromarty. The best animals seem to have gone to the drovers, so that on occasion the butchers were obliged to go considerably further afield for their supplies. And they certainly travelled as far as Edderachillis in western Sutherland in search of wedder mutton, said to be much liked by seamen (MacKenzie 1810. 216; Rose 1790-91. 372; Falconer 1791-92. 388).

Most livestock, therefore, was sold to the drovers, and so important had the trade become, that cattle were bred specially for this market [Fig. 12.15]. Those with the best reputation were the *kyloes*, originally swimming across the narrows or kyles from Skye en route for the southern



Fig. 12.15 West Highland Cattle from Aros, Mull and Caolis, 1840. From D. Low *Breeds of Domesticated Animals in the British Isles*.

trysts. Good stock was also reported from Kintail and Coigach (Sinclair 1795. pt II. 118–19), whilst Argyll stock was bred from the best of Kintail, Glenshiel and Skye (MacKenzie 1810. 247–48). From Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland and Caithness, on the other hand, came the *norlands*. Here, according to Sir John Sinclair (1814. III. 29), cattle-breeders had been neither very skilled nor successful before the 1790s:

The stocks of these counties and parts adjacent were known in the markets of the low country, by their bad shapes and diminutive size. Their heads were coarse, backs high and narrow, ribs flat, bones large, and their legs long and feeble for the weight of the chest, and they were considered very slow feeders.

In 1795, Sinclair (1795. pt II. 95) had advocated the crossing of true Highland bulls, particularly from Skye, with carefully chosen, small and handsome, well-haired, hardy cattle bred ‘in the country’. And he reported that their offspring, lean and weighing no more than 113 kg (250 lb), fetched more from the English dealers than would a 180 kg (400 lb) cross from an improved English bull. Such were the hardships endured on the hoof that these animals lasted best; they were also much the best and quickest improvers, and by experience were found to return the most profit to the grazier.

The drover, it was said, required three good qualities in a beast — ‘a choice pile, weight and short legs’ (Morrison 1792. 524); and it came to be that ‘The taste of the Highlands is formed by that of the drovers who carry cattle to the south’ (MacKenzie 1870. 217).

## DROVING

### Itinerant Dealers

It was said of Christopher MacRae of Inverinate in Kintail (MacPhail 1914. 219):

if he was as frugal in keeping as he was industrious in acquiring, he had proven a very rich man in his own country, for he was the first man there who drove cows to the south country mercates and to that end bought cows yearly from MacKenzie’s, MacDonald’s and MacLeod’s estates.

As the trade developed, therefore, dealers and drovers [Figs. 12.16; 12.17] may, on occasion, have been men from nearby parishes, or perhaps east coast men moving around the western districts; occasionally they could be local tacksmen or landowners; more generally they seem to have come from southern Scotland, often from Perthshire, Stirling, Dumbarton or Ayrshire; some came from as far away as Yorkshire (MacRae (1791–92) 1981. 408; MacKenzie 1810. 254; Henderson 1811, in 1812. 150; MacCulloch 1824. III. 103; McRae 1836. 209).

By all accounts, before the nineteenth century they preferred to scour the country acquiring stock directly from farmers and graziers, and gradually moving east and south across the northern counties towards the lowlands



Figs. 12.16; 12.17 Cattle droving. Pen and brown ink drawings by James Howe, 1830s.





of Easter Ross. This proved to be an unsatisfactory system from the seller's point-of-view, however, since he received payment only after the dealer returned from the great southern trysts. And that payment could be less than agreed. There were cases of default in parishes such as Clyne in the early 1790s (Ross 1793. 323); and further instances were recorded in the 1810s, 15–20 years later:

... [Sutherland] farmers are under necessity of selling their cattle to adventurers, who take them on credit, and if they succeed in disposing of them in the southern markets to advantage, they return and pay the people: if otherwise, they demand so much per head, as discount, which is generally given. (Henderson 1812. (Suth.) 127–28)

On one occasion the creditors had to agree to a discount of 20s. per head, nearly 50% of an original price probably no more than 45s. (ibid.). Certainly some of the dealers were 'deluded adventurers' who themselves were ruined, but the principal sufferers were the country people who depended on the produce of their herds and flocks to pay their rents and support their families.

### The Growth of Cattle Fairs

To Sir John Sinclair, the practice of driving the northern cattle as far as Crieff and Falkirk, 'nay into England, even as far as London or farther' was absurd, leastways without prepayment or some intermediate market which would allow of a system of guaranteed credit notes paid on time and without discounting (Sinclair 1795. 74–75). This led him to advocate a system, 'universally admitted', which would remedy the situation:

by fixing upon a central station to comprehend the cattle of the whole North Highlands. Or if a sufficient collection could be formed, that there should be two such stations at proper distances of time and place, within reasonable reach of our own homes; where the English and South Country dealers would as certainly attend as they do now at Crieff [*sic*] and Falkirk were they but assured of a sufficient choice and assortment of cattle.

The dealers' only alternative at that time, 'our limited trifling trysts', were those occasional local markets and fairs mentioned by other late-eighteenth century writers, to which the inhabitants of Assynt and Edderachillis, for instance, repaired to sell their cattle and any surplus produce, and to buy food and other necessities (MacKenzie 1794. 319; Falconer 1791–92. 387). For however regular the markets may have been in Kintail and Glenshiel (MacRae 1791–92. 408; MacKenzie 1810. 254; McRae 1836. 209), further north they were less so and thinly-scattered.

In Caithness there were minor trysts at Georgemas and in the strath of Dunbeath; in Sutherland at Clashmore, Monibuie and Dornoch; in Easter Ross at Kincardine (Ardgay?) and at Kildary (Haldane 1952. 106). St Barr's Fair in Dornoch, however, was reported to be 'the only regular



Fig. 12.18 The Clach Eiteag, quartz stone, that marked the local Kincardine fairs. Now at Ardgay, 1983.

[cattle tryst] held within the county' (Henderson 1812. 115); whilst Kincardine's *Feille Edeichan*, market of the quartz stone [Fig. 12.18], although it offered a 'fine shew of Highland cows, fattened on the best heath' and said to be most flavoursome and tasty in their beef, could not possibly supply the increasing demands of the South Country drovers. The market was only once a year, moreover, held in the last week of November as at Dornoch, or in the first of December — far too late for the southern trysts (Gallie 1790. 517; Allan 1840. 432).

Certainly there had been plans much earlier, enshrined in an Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1686, to allow David Ross of Balnagown to raise 'the village of Ardgay to a barony to be called *Bonarness*, with burgesses, a tollbooth, baillies, courts of justice, a market cross, a weekly market and two annual fairs'. But this had never materialized (Allan 1840. 432 footnote). Nor by 1840, in the adjacent parish of Edderton to the east, was there yet a fair or market of any kind, '... and there is only one small inn, or rather alehouse, which is situated on the Struy road from Bonar Bridge to Sittenham' (Gordon 1840. 459). This alehouse, nonetheless, a forerunner presumably of the Aultnamain Inn, reflects the existence of a key drove route.

Rather was it in Sutherland, where there had been particularly strong complaints about earlier malpractices, that a series of new fairs was established in 1811 specifically for the sale of black cattle [Fig. 12.19]. They were sited on the main droving routes and timed to link with the

# NEW FAIRS FOR BLACK CATTLE, EASTERN SUTHERLAND, 1811

A. Location	Dates	
DUILLISH (Kildonan, on the cattle road south from Caithness and Strathnaver)	14 August	12 September
↓		
PITENTRAIL (Rogart, Strathfleet, on the line of the same cattle road south, and near the junction with cattle roads from the west and north-west)	16 August	16 September
↓		
<i>connecting with the great markets at:</i>		
↓		
KYLE (of Sutherland)	19, 20, 21 August	18 September
↓		
<i>and connecting with the great trysts at:</i>		
↓		
FALKIRK	2nd Tuesday in September	2nd Tuesday in October
B. Location	Dates	
KNOCK-GLASS (parish of Clyne on the cattle road from Caithness)	9 October	
↓		
PITENTRAIL (Rogart, Strathfleet)	11 October	
↓		
<i>connecting with the great tryst at:</i>		
↓		
BEAULY	18 October	

Fig. 12.19 Details of new cattle fairs as listed in J. Henderson, *Additional Report of the More Recent Improvements in the County of Sutherland, 1811* (in Henderson 1812. 149–50).



principal trysts in the south. Their establishment was very much in line with Sir John Sinclair's proposals some sixteen years previously:

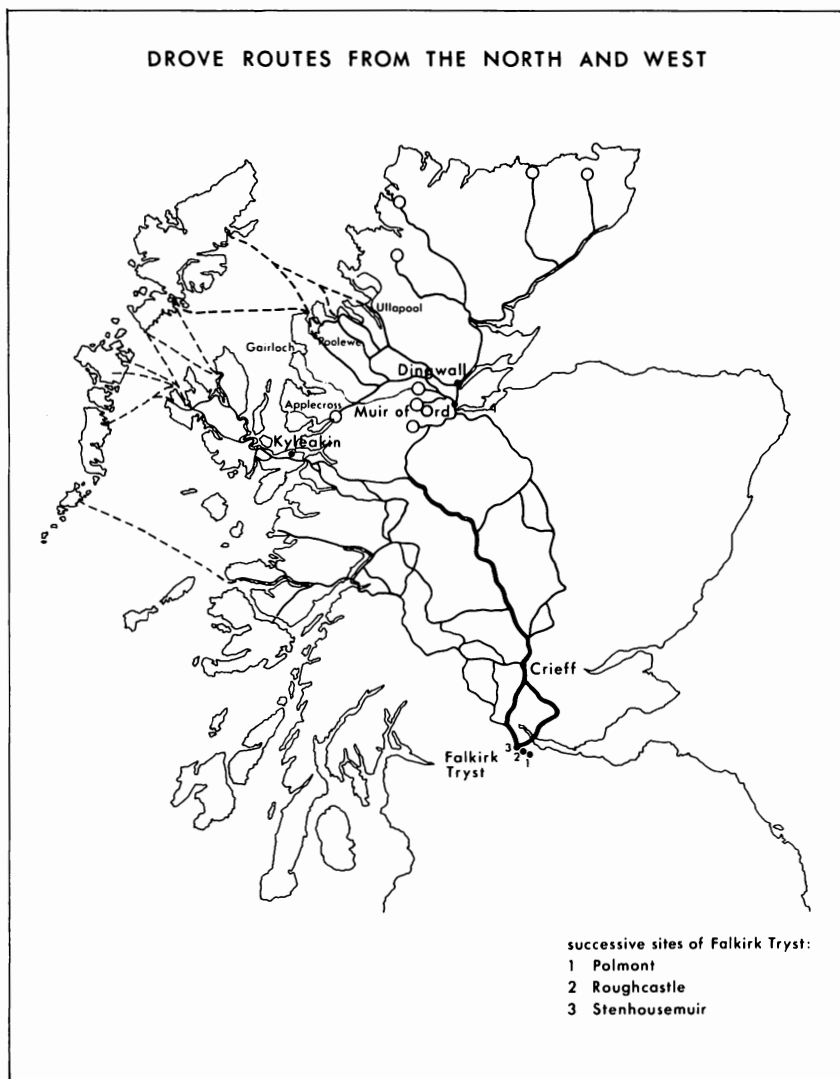
Drovers from the south of Scotland may expect to find great numbers of Highland cattle at these newly established fairs or trysts, which will suit their views for the southern markets, and will prove of advantage to the Sutherland and Caithness farmers or cattle dealers, in getting fair prices, and ready money, for their cattle. (Henderson 1811, in 1812. 150).

### **Drove Routes in the North**

The cattle from Caithness were brought down the east coast by Helmsdale and Brora where they met with stock from the glens of eastern Sutherland; also with stock from Strath Halladale and Strath Naver and from other hilly areas in the far north-west. They continued down to the Dornoch Firth. In general, however, the cattle from the north-west, from the Reay country in particular, were brought south-east by Loch Shin and Lairg to the Kyle of Sutherland where, crossing the narrows, they met with the east coast droves and also with droves from Assynt and Edderachillis brought down the Oyckell [Fig. 12.20]. They went up over Struie (a drove stance is still marked on the map and visible on the ground beside the A836 south of Strathrory: NH 653752) or by routes further west to Strath Rusdale, before dropping down towards the Cromarty Firth, to Dingwall and the south.

South of Assynt on the west coast, and into Coigach, there was equally a degree of choice. Droves from Coigach could travel east by Loch Achall across to Kincardine; more usually, they would join the principal routes from Wester Ross by which mainland beasts (and beasts from Lewis and Harris landed at Ullapool, Gruinard or Aultbea) went east to Garve, Dingwall and Muir of Ord. Hebridean stock landed at Poolewe on the other hand travelled the north shore of Loch Maree, joining with the Lochcarron droves at Achnasheen before merging with the more northerly Wester Ross droves at Garve.

Many of these through-routes are of considerable antiquity, though documentary references are scanty. Defoe tells of droves from Caithness destined for East Anglia and Sussex in 1726, whilst in 1703 the Sutherland Estates were certainly exporting on the hoof (Defoe 1724 (1762 ed.). iv. 253; Sutherland Estate Papers, Bundle 19. nos. 619–44): 'Your Lordship will be pleased to order one of your drovers to give me [Charles Ross, in Edinburgh] two fatt cows to be my winter beef.' More specifically, litigation reaffirmed long-standing routes by the north shore of Loch Maree to Kinlochewe and beyond; also up the Gruinard River, past Loch-na-Shellag and on to either the Ullapool–Dingwall or Achnasheen–Garve tracks. Additionally, Roy's map confirms mid-eighteenth century routes from Loch Broom to Dingwall via Strathgarve, whilst some twenty or so years later Pennant remarked on the Craven-in-Yorkshire drovers coming up to Loch Broom. The same route by Strath Garve was the only practical one (Pennant 1772. i. 364: see also Haldane 1952. 103–09).



*Fig. 12.20 Drove routes from the north and west. After Haldane, *Drove Roads of Scotland*, 1952.*

In so many cases the exact routes can no longer be determined. They were carried in the head and died with the last of the drovers. A sympathetic understanding of the shape of the land might suggest the reconstruction of routes; otherwise we are left with a few sparse records and with the lingering memories of those west coast crofters who were still taking sheep and a few cattle eastwards in the early decades of the present century.

In the 1940s, for instance, Haldane (1952. 108) noted not only that Lewis cattle had been landed at Ullapool within living memory, but that cattle from the Ullapool area were driven at times to Ardgay rather than to Dingwall. They took a route through Glen Achall and into the head of Glen Einig. Then, rather than continuing down into Strath Oyckell, the track branched at Craggan over to Strath Cuileannach and down Strath Carron. This route seems to have been used regularly when taking beasts to the late autumn sale at Ardgay, and was used also perhaps by the tinkers who formerly bought horses at the Ardgay markets and sold them around the Coigach countryside (D. Fraser 1972).

Coigach informants are able equally to document the stances and routes used locally until the late 1920s and early 1930s. From Culnacraig, south-east of the main crofting settlements around Achiltibuie, there were three possible routes: an upper route following a shelf under the main ridge of Ben More Coigach, a middle route, and also a low and precipitous sea route, very dangerous for livestock. By the 1920s, however, these routes had fallen out of favour. Rather did the crofter first take his animals across the moor to Badagyle returning home for the night, then ford the Osaig river the following morning and continue by the rough, untarred road to Drumrunie and Morefield, just outside Ullapool. Here, on a site belonging to the Cromartie Estates, a man was paid so much per 100 to look after the animals. There were further paid stances at Loch Droma and the Aultguish Inn, whence the way to Garve lay over the Corriemoillie Forest. They arrived at Garve 'in the darkling', where they left the animals inside a fence, without paying; thence to the Achilty Hotel (paid stance) and on to Dingwall. An alternative route from Aultguish lay through the Bealach Mór between Ben Wyvis and Little Wyvis, to Auchterneed and Dingwall (D. Fraser 1972).

All the drove roads from the far north and north-west, therefore, converged on Easter Ross, where they joined to form a mighty flood:

We believe the great Northern Drove Road begins somewhere about the Kyle of Sutherland (at which place a number of important cattle markets are held throughout the year) and runs nearly parallel with one of the Parliamentary roads for a considerable distance, through the lands of Ardrross, by Fowlis, and Dingwall to the Muir of Ord (another great market) — then branching away through the mountains towards Fort Augustus and from thence southwards — avoiding the public lines of road throughout the whole distance till it touches occasionally on the turnpike roads in Perthshire. There are other branch drove-roads leading from various parts of the country into this line, but this is unquestionably the principal one as proceeding direct from two of the greatest market stances in the North of Scotland. (*Inverness Courier* 26 September 1827).



Just as centuries before, because of its central, accessible position, Dingwall was selected as the *Thing-vellir* or assembly field of the Norse-speaking settlers whose legacy of place-names is so strong in much of Easter Ross and east Sutherland, so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that narrow neck of low-lying land linking the heads of the Cromarty and Beaully Firths formed a natural assembly point for the droves from the north and west. The Kyle of Sutherland, at the head of the Dornoch Firth, was only the lesser because its hinterland was that much smaller; its key markets were also established in 1811, at the same time as those near Beaully, the *Feill-na-manachainn*. The site of the Beaully trysts was later moved about a mile further north, more accurately justifying the name 'Muir of Ord', though termed in Gaelic *Blair dubh*.

Southwards from Muir of Ord there were two major alternative routes [Fig. 12.20]. Although after 1817 Inverness became the great centre for sheep and wool in the north of Scotland, the cattle route via Inverness and Aviemore seems never to have been as attractive to drovers as that through Strathglass, by Guisachan and over to Glen Moriston, then to Fort Augustus and over the Corrieyairack Pass to Dalwhinnie where all the northern routes merged once again to travel through Drumochter and thence to the great trysts at Crieff or, shortly after 1750, at Falkirk (Haldane 1952. 112–14).

## Roads, Ferries and Bridges

If the firthlands became a natural focus for the northern droves, they were equally so for the 'Parliamentary roads' referred to in the *Inverness Courier* (ibid.).

This was a time, around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when improved communications became increasingly crucial to the new commercial development and economic success of the Highlands. Around 1790, for instance, the British Fisheries Society, on the recommendation of John Knox, undertook to make a road from Contin to Ullapool, where it had recently founded a new fishing station. The road was built between 1792 and 1797 by Kenneth MacKenzie of Torridon at a cost of £4,582, rather than for the original £8,000 which the Government had considered excessive. But so poor was its quality that within twelve years it was abandoned (MacRae 1792–93. 558; Ross 1835. 88–89; Haldane 1962. 12–13). It had, however, provided work for the poor and needy, and pointed the way both for future projects and future employment opportunities for some of those who had been dispossessed.

In 1803 a Commission for Highland Roads and Bridges was established; in 1814 it took over the improvement and maintenance of nearly 500 km (308 ml) of old military road; by 1828 it had constructed some 1,435 km (829 ml) of new road across the Highlands and created a major network north and west of Inverness — roads to Strathglass, Loch Carron, Tongue, Wick and Thurso, as well as that through Easter Ross to Tain and Bonar, and one through the Black Isle to Fortrose. It was all a long way

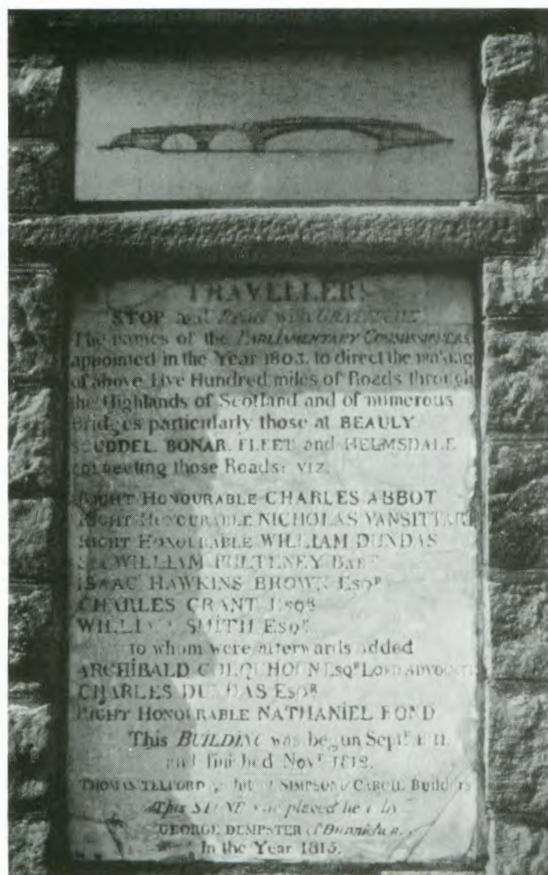


Fig. 12.21  
Commemorating the  
work of the  
Parliamentary  
Commissioners, builders  
of new roads and bridges  
in the Highlands in the  
first decades of the  
nineteenth century. At  
Bonar Bridge, 1983.

removed from Thomas Telford's report of 1803: 'Previous to the year 1742, the roads were merely the tracks of Black Cattle and Horses, intersected by numerous rapid streams, which being frequently swoln [*sic*] into torrents by heavy rains, rendered them dangerous or impassable.' (in Haldane 1962. 118).

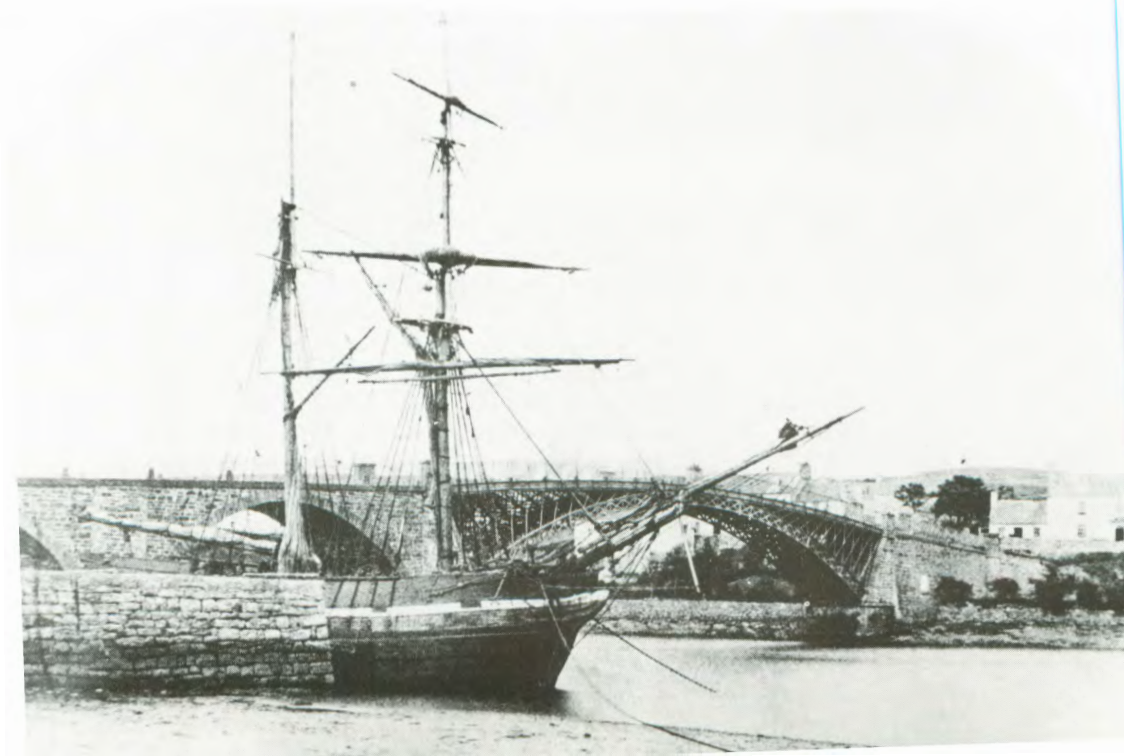
It was the bridges, however, that were of even greater benefit to the drovers. For whilst the new trysts at Beauly, Muir of Ord and the Kyle of Sutherland were each a natural focus in the movement of stock west to east and north to south, their very locations underlined one of the main obstacles to droving — as to other developments in the north. The Kyle of Sutherland, that magnificent narrow stretch of tidal water fed by the rivers Shin, Cassley, Oykel and Carron had to be crossed; so did the major rivers Conan and Beauly.

In 1801, the solid and handsome five-arch Canon Bridge was built; in 1812, following the overturning of the infamous Meikle Ferry in 1809



*Fig. 12.22* The iron Telford bridge at Bonar had a 150 ft (45.7 m) main span. William Daniell aquatint, 1821.

*Fig. 12.23* 'Old' Bonar Bridge, destroyed by floods 1892.



when over 100 travellers drowned, Telford's Bonar Bridge was completed [Figs. 12.21–12.23], 'a spider's web in the air ... the finest thing that ever was made by God or man' (Southey (1819) 1929. 128–29; Holloway & Errington 1978. 102–03, 116). The iron bridge with its span of nearly 46 m (150 ft) was built by the Shropshire bridge-builders, Simpson and Cargil, and so successful was it in withstanding a frozen battering-ram of logs flooded down from the river Carron in the winter of 1813–14, that a similar bridge was commissioned for the Spey at Craigellachie. By 1813 the stone-built Lovat Bridge over the Beauly river was also complete, though during construction it too had been threatened periodically by timber floated downstream from Chisholm lands (*ibid.* 129; Allan 1840. 422; MacKenzie & MacDonald 1840. 378).

The last great stretch of water to be crossed was Loch Fleet, a problem solved in 1818 not by a bridge but rather by running a road over a 915 m (1,080 yd) long earthen mound or dam near the junction of the River Fleet and the upper end of the wide, shallow sea loch. Uni-directional flood-gates let fresh water pass outwards as the tide fell, but kept back salt water as the tide rose (Haldane 1962. 131), so that over 160 ha (400 acres) were reclaimed from the sea, part of which remains a wetland habitat to the present day.

It had taken nearly thirty years for initial suggestions and requests for the various crossings to be translated into reality. For it was back in 1791 (Rainy 1791. 341) that a bridge at government expense had been mooted for the Kyle at Culrain, presumably at or near the site of the later, present railway viaduct:

Such a bridge would be particularly convenient for drovers; all the cattle driven to the south from Sutherland, Caithness, and Lord Reay's country, except the parish of Assint, having hitherto been obliged to cross the Kyle by swimming; which, when the weather is bad, and the Kyle much swelled by rains, hurts the cattle greatly, especially when the night following proves cold. Sometimes they refuse to swim, in which case they must be ferried over by the coble.

For good measure, the people claimed to foretell whether they would have a good market or not by the readiness of the cattle to swim (*ibid.*)!

Perhaps the best-known example of cattle swimming a kyle is that from Skye to the mainland [Fig. 12.24]. At the lowest ebb at Kyle Rhea (where the flood tide runs at over 11 km or 7 ml an hour), a 1 m (3 ft) length of rope with a noose at one end was put under the jaw of each cow in front, to a total of six or eight beasts, and a man standing in the stem of the four-oared boat held the rope of the foremost cow (Robertson 1808. xxxviii–xxxix). An earlier account of the same crossing, in 1787, described how:

one is tied by the horn to a boat; a second is tied to the first; and a third to the second; and so on, to eight, ten or twelve ... [By contrast] ... When horses are to be taken over, they are pushed off the rock into the water. A small boat with five men attends, four of them holding halters of a pair on each side of the boat. (Knox 1787. 111–12).



The scene on a kindly day may well have resembled that from Port Askaig, from where cattle were transported from Islay to Jura, on their journey to the mainland (MacCulloch 1824. III. 103):

The shore was covered with cattle; and while some were collected in groups under the trees and rocks, crowding to avoid the hot rays of a July evening, others were wading in the sea to shun the flies, some embarking, and another set swimming onshore from the ferry-boats; while the noise of the drovers and the boatmen, and all the hustle and vociferation which whiskey did not tend to diminish, were re-echoed from hill to hill, contrasting strangely with the silence and solitude of the surrounding mountains. The disembarkation formed a most extraordinary spectacle.

The Kyle of Sutherland, however, at or above Bonar, was more like a river, albeit tidal. In his *Letters from the North of Scotland* (1754. II. 133–34), Burt tells of an incident where such a river was in spate and where the only boat was to carry the drovers:

The Cows were about fifty in Number, and took to the Water like Spaniels; and when they were in, their Drivers made a hideous Cry to urge them forwards . . . to keep the Foremost of them from turning about; for, in that Case, the rest would do the like, and then they would be in Danger, especially the weakest of them, to be driven away and drowned by the Torrent.

Major rivers such as the Conon and the Beauly must have presented many such problems; smaller rivers in spate, too shallow to swim and too rapid to ford, would have been even more formidable, requiring on occasion considerable detours and delays.

If crossing rivers and the sea was time-consuming, so also was the process of walking the land. The main period of droving began in May, though stock was assembled from March or April until November. This allowed beasts to gain strength after a winter of near-starvation (in earlier times at least), as well as seeing past the worst of the weather; but if the animals were to reach the south of Scotland in good condition they could only move at a gentle pace [Fig. 12.25]. Although Coigach informants tell of 24 km (15 ml) a day for cattle (as compared to 16–19 km or 10–12 ml for sheep), this would hold good only over fairly short distances. For the two and three weeks it would take to move the droves to the southern trysts, four weeks from Caithness and northern Sutherland, a daily journey of 16–19 km (10–12 ml) was enough, particularly when the droves increased in size, numbering thousands of animals and stretching for miles along what for the most part were ill-defined tracks across and through the hills.

Increasingly well-made and metalled roads were a problem in later years, liable to injure the cattle's feet and to wear down their hooves. To counter such problems, Telford had insisted on the generous use of gravel in the north (Haldane 1962. 218) [Fig. 12.26], but shoeing became increasingly usual for those parts of journeys which had to follow the new roads. Trinafour, on the main drove route from Drumochter to Crieff was once such a shoeing stopover; Tyndrum south of Rannoch another. But



Fig. 12.24 Ferrying cattle at Kyleakin, Skye. Old postcard.

for the northern droves, shoeing took place around Muir of Ord and Dingwall. Perhaps seventy a day could be shod, perhaps on the outer edge only — but it must have been difficult work with half-wild cattle, fresh from Highland grazings and unused to handling (Haldane 1952. 34–35). Such, however, was the effect of metalled roads on unshod cattle bought at the sales in Dingwall and driven back to Coigach in the earlier part of this century, that they could travel only 6–8 km (4–5 ml) a day, and even then their hooves were badly worn down. Consequently they were left on a hill above Drumrunie for a week before the final stages to Achiltibuie. This let their hooves heal; it also allowed them to graze land they would not otherwise exploit.

### The End of the Road

The flow and ebb of droving as a way-of-life must always be seen in the wider context of social and economic change. In the century between the Union of the Crowns and that of the Parliaments, 1603–1707, cattle had become Scotland's chief export, replacing fish, wool, hides and skins so that 'The country was little else than a mere grazing field for England' (Walker 1812. 1. 307–08). Cattle remained the principal export until the mid-eighteenth century, then fell to fifth or sixth by 1810–12. Yet in spite of the rapidly-growing sheep trade, actual numbers of black cattle sold continued to rise, encouraged by improved agriculture, communications and marketing, by growing urban appetites, and by the French Wars of 1792–1815. In 1723, therefore, Crieff had disposed of 25,000–30,000 head yearly; by the turn of the century some 50,000–60,000 were sold annually at the Falkirk Trysts (which had replaced those at Crieff); by 1827 annual sales are said to have numbered close on 150,000 cattle, together with rapidly increasing numbers of sheep (*Stirling Journal* Sept. & Oct. 1827).





*Fig. 12.25* The beginning of a drove, Skye. Old postcard.

*Fig. 12.26* Highland cattle in (?)Argyll. Old postcard.



But in the decades after 1860, and into the new century, though the trade in livestock continued to thrive, the means whereby they reached the markets entered a new phase. Railways spread their tentacles to Oban, Mallaig and Kyle, Wick and Thurso; steamships opened up the west coast; new marts run by auctioneers appeared at the new rail- and steamer-heads; cattle floats followed tortuous new roads into remote communities. And all the while, the increasing enclosure of wastes and commons made the overnight grazing of herds and flocks by drovers the more difficult, and physically fragmented the old routes, barring progress through the country.

As these obstacles to droving multiplied, a further factor contributed to its decline — the continuing disintegration of the old Highland economy which held cattle husbandry so highly. So today, it is in the knowledge and skills of the occasional ghillie, stalker and poacher, heirs to the cattle-raider, drover and herd, that lie the lineal but fragmentary echoes of a cultural and economic heritage that stretches back through Norse-spiked Celtic Scotland and Ireland to those pre-agricultural, pastoral societies of prehistoric Europe.

## POSTSCRIPT

A Kincardineshire drover, Andrew Law, finally 'retired' in 1968. He never drove cattle, only sheep, but recalls a time in 1915 when he took a 'sma drove' of 540 sheep from Lairg to Perth. The route was termed 'the lang park'; he had two dogs; it took 28 days, 6.00 a.m. to 7.30 p.m.; he earned what he considered was good money, half in advance and half on delivery.

But we took a lot o ... bye roads ... auld roads ... auld drove roads ye ken  
... lot of auld drove roads we kent ...

... they fed on the road ... the front yins started eatin, an aye ... they had a  
good feed ... an then they landed at the tail ... well then they started walkin  
for'ard agin an we used tae continual circle roond ...

... ye were never harsh, ye ken ... ye juist let them stroll awa ... ye's juist  
like a drunk man ... the road was broader than it was lang, an ye strolled  
back an for'ard, back for'ard ... set up an fill'd yer pipe an carried on  
beside ...

... ye juist come near a corner o a hoos an ye juist walk up beside the sheep  
an ask the wifie if the teapot was aye het ...

... sometime ye caa'd an it was gettin pretty dark ... an if you've seen a nice  
gress field at the side o the road ... a bitty awa fae the ferm ... you juist caa's  
em doon there ... an that's you an the dugs lay doon at the back o the  
dyke ...

... cattle drovers' dugs was nae use on the sheep ... they were rauch ... they  
hed tae be ... some o yon cattle stuck a horn underneath a dug ... when he  
com up ... heaved him up in the air ... they hed to be tough, the cattle  
drovers' dugs, I'm tellin ye ...



... they didnae stand lang the cattle drovers ... an awfi speed cattle beside sheep, ye know ... ye hae an awfi job wi sheep tae get them ten mile oot doon the road in a day, ye ken ... generally only about seven, eicht mile a day, ye's ken ... knockin alang, nae bad ...

... the real, auld, auld drovers they used tae cairry a poke o meal an their cup, an their spoon ... then juist when they were hungry they juist put some meal in their cup, ye ken, a wooden cup ... an juist gaed tae the burn an put on water an ... what ye could call stir ... an that was a that they ate all the way doon ... maybe come doon fae Caithness richt doon tae Falkirk ... tae the trysts at Falkirk ... there was nae marts then ... they were all open sales ...

## Acknowledgement

Much of the oral tradition relating to droving and livestock husbandry in Coigach was collected in the early 1970s from Mr D. Fraser (Achnahaird), Mr J. A. Campbell and the late Mr D. MacLeod (Culnacraig). My sincere thanks to them for their invaluable assistance. Material from Mr A. Law (Arbuthnot, Kincardineshire) was recorded by the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now part of the Royal Museum of Scotland) in the late 1970s, and is housed in the archives of the Country Life Section. I am grateful for access to these recordings.

Illustrations are reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Figs. 12.4, 12.9, 12.11, 12.12, 12.13, 12.14, 12.20), the Scottish Ethnological Archive in the Royal Museum of Scotland (Figs. 12.5, 12.6, 12.7, 12.8, 12.10, 12.15, 12.20, 12.23, 12.24, 12.25, 12.26), the National Gallery of Scotland (Figs. 12.16, 12.17, 12.22) and the Scottish Tourist Board (Figs. 12.1, 12.2). Mrs Jane Davidson of the Place-Name Survey in the School of Scottish Studies very kindly typed the manuscript; Figure 12.2, as well as the introductory map of the Firthlands, was drawn by Douglas Lawson.

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