

EDITOR'S PREFACE

'Firthlands' embraces those eastern lowlands clustered around the Dornoch, Cromarty, Beaully and Inner Moray Firths. *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* focuses more particularly on the gentle and fertile country around the Dornoch and Cromarty Firths — from Golspie and Loch Fleet in the north, to Bonar Bridge, Tain and the Easter Ross peninsula, across to Cromarty and the Black Isle, and up-firth to Dingwall and Muir of Ord.

Of the twelve contrasting chapters, one provides a broad geological background to the area and highlights landscape features as they have evolved through time — the Great Glen and Helmsdale Faults, glacially-deepened and drowned river valleys, raised beaches, wave-formed shingle barriers. And it is the underlying geology that gave rise to the shape of early habitational and communications networks, to the Brora coal-mines and to the spa waters of Strathpeffer, to stone and sand and gravel and peat for extraction, to the nature and balance of agricultural practice, to the oil and gas fields off the coast.

Such economic activity is most apparent for relatively recent times, so that six chapters concentrate on the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries. Some explore trade and family links across to Moray and the Baltic, as well as with other parts of Scotland and beyond; others concentrate on changes in settlement patterns, agriculture and stock-rearing, both in the firthlands and their highland hinterland; yet others are more concerned with a particularly rich architectural heritage. In each case, there is a weave between Highlander and Lowlander, spiced with the ever-increasing exposure of the north to southern influences and pressures. For the firthlands have long faced in multiple directions. Historically the Black Isle, for instance, and in particular its eastern edge, has been lowland and non-Gaelic in character; whilst the extended Easter Ross peninsula, in spite of a gentrified veneer of lowland ways, remained largely Gaelic in culture, reinforced by continuing immigration from the west. 'Lowland Highlanders', its inhabitants have been termed; 'Gaelickers' in Cromarty parlance, who saw their neighbours south of the Firth as 'no more than Lowland Bodies'. The most evident turn-about, however, is Inverness — a fully east coast and lowland burgh transformed through massive and sustained immigration into the undisputed capital of the Highlands.

The firthlands, then, are hardly 'highland' either geographically or, to some considerable degree, historically or culturally. But whilst so many influences would seem to have come from the south, this was not invariably so. Pictish sculptured stones and place-names are earlier instances of links across the Moray Firth certainly, but Norse place-names and traditions identify the area most distinctly as a 'southern outlier of Scandinavian Scotland'. Thus five chapters, in part or in whole, are concerned with the Norse and with their more identifiable influences on political and administrative structures, on ecclesiastical organization, on land-holding and place-naming.

From the ninth to the twelfth centuries, these low-lying peninsulas and waterways of the firthlands accommodated an intermingling of Picts and Norsemen increasingly infiltrated by Gaelic speakers from the west. They appear to have provided a zone of contact unique in Scotland, both culturally and politically; for although the traditional southern boundary of the Norse world came to be identified with the Dornoch Firth and *Ekkialsbakki*, Scandinavians settled successfully over the Easter Ross peninsula, along the northern edge at least of the Black Isle, and into Strath Conan beyond Dingwall — their place of legal assembly. Given the fertility of the firthlands, this need cause little surprise; strategically also, it was most attractive.

Yet if the Great Glen were of major importance for Norse communications with the southern Hebrides and beyond, there were equally good, more northerly routes direct to the west from Easter Ross. Perhaps the Conan River once provided a second, more shadowy frontier, following westwards by Strath Bran and giving access to evident Scandinavian interests around Gairloch, Loch Maree, Torridon and Loch Carron, with Raasay, Rona and Skye just beyond. It also gave direct access by Strath Garve to Loch Broom, that fjord-like sea loch opening westwards across the Minch to Lewis and Harris, and linked closely to the Kyle of Sutherland by Glen Achall and Strath Kanaird, Strath Oykeell and Strath Carron. Place-name evidence suggests a marked Scandinavian presence along both the Oykeell and the Carron (as rather more modestly along the Conan); such a presence is also evident beside Loch Broom, with its fine natural harbours and rare north-west mainland Norse settlement site (Ullapool). Other 'land use' names reinforce the impact of the Scandinavians here (Ristol, Calascaig, Langwell), together with a fairly plentiful scatter of topographical elements (Lael, Reiff, Kanaird, Raa, Oiscaig, Sionascaig). And then there are the enigmatic Summer Isles in outer Loch Broom — of which Tanera, harbour island, is but one.

Here, on the north shore of the loch, the lands of Coigach for long lay apart from those to the south; they went with Assynt and the northern Hebrides rather than with geographical 'North Argyll' or the Lay Abbacy of Applecross, which embraced only the southern part of Lochbroom parish. Whilst there is no apparent evidence to suggest a cognate of Norwegian *Sunnmøre* as an origin for the name nowadays applied to the archipelago, nor is there any to deny the possible survival of a Norse geographical name or a Norse regional or territorial name subsequently attached to islands marking the southern limit. By contrast, the usual explanation — *na h-Eileanan Samhraidh* — runs counter to their traditional use for out-wintering stock at least as much for summer grazing. In an area where winter grazing was scarce, why emphasize so strongly their summer role? Is the Gaelic, therefore, a rationalization of what had become a meaningless earlier name? Did Loch Broom have a political and territorial significance for the Norse that we have not yet fully appreciated? What might its relationship have been with that east coast territorial marker, *Ekkialsbakki*?

What such links, actual and speculative, help confirm is that the eastern firthlands, distinctive and lowland though they are in many respects, cannot be divorced from the true Highlands. The two areas are interdependent. So it was that, in the east, Scandinavian settlers had their main farms and settlements in the fertile lowlands (Skibo, Torrobol, Arboll, Cadboll), exploiting shielings and other resources inland and upland (Linside, Bossett, Rossal, Soyal, Langwell, Alladale, Diebidale, Amat, Rusdale). So also, presumably, did the Picts before them; so also the indigenous farmers of later times; so also, to a degree, their east-coast improver successors who out-summered beef herds both inland and in the west. And by contrast, just as some improvers brought stocks back from the west for the winter, west-coast crofters have also sent their sheep to winter-grazing in Easter Ross.

Circumstances had changed, however. As economic revolution overtook the north from the eighteenth century, part of that wider Industrial Revolution affecting the whole of Britain, the land itself and its diverse resources came to be seen less as an 'item of assumed common inheritance', rather as an 'economic asset in terms of monetary rent'. Responsible and balanced exploitation of natural resources linked to local control was lost; wealth generated amongst the inhospitable hills and moorlands was all-too-often diverted to good living and investment elsewhere. Ironically this wealth helped create that fine architectural heritage that we value today — in Edinburgh and London, as well as in Easter Ross and East Sutherland; but the manner of much of its generation led to impoverishment of the land through over-grazing and over-burning, and impoverishment of the indigenous human resource through clearances and changes in the social order.

However wild today's highland 'wilderness', these moors and mountains are in so many respects as degraded and desolate as derelict industrial wasteland. Whether massed sheep, deer or conifers, such an approach to land-use was ever ecologically unsound; and it is rather to less intensive, diversified yet integrated and locally controlled patterns of land-use, blending the experience of tradition with the benefits of technology, that many are now looking to reverse the trends of two hundred and more years — to reverse the outward flow of resources, human or otherwise, and to improve the quality of life and environment in the north.

A far cry perhaps from the general tenor of this collection of essays? But may not *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* have more than an historical fascination and value? A balanced appreciation of past patterns of life and experience can contribute to a clearer evaluation of change and to socially and environmentally progressive policies for post-industrial man.

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