



Fig. 7.1 George Mackenzie, Lord Tarbat and later first Earl of Cromartie. Painting attributed to M. Dahl, c.1708.

THE CROMARTIE ESTATE, 1660–1784: ASPECTS OF TRADE AND ORGANIZATION

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THE FORTUNES OF GEORGE MACKENZIE

We start with a summary of the career of George first earl of Cromartie (1631–1714), and single out the aspects of the grain trade and the building of the mansionhouse of New Tarbat.

George Mackenzie, Lord Tarbat and later first earl of Cromartie [Fig. 7.1] will be referred to throughout as ‘Tarbat’, for convenience. He was born in 1631, son of Sir John Mackenzie and grandson of the redoubtable Tutor of Kintail, Sir Rory, the man most feared in the north after the Devil. The Mackenzies, as Rosalind Mitchison has well said, were Imperialists; they were consistently loyal to the Crown, and fell at Flodden for it. This loyalty also brought gains, the trust of the Crown which gave them the reversion of the lands of the Earls of Ross, and later of the Bishops of Ross. Mackenzies fanned out from Kintail over a wide arc in the Black Isle and Easter Ross, and as the surviving Hearth Tax returns for Ross clearly show, were the leading landowners and tacksmen; only one of the name of Mackenzie has a single hearth in 1691.

George Mackenzie was next to the Chief, Seaforth, by virtue of joint descent from the eponymous Kenneth, and as the Seaforths of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were either Catholic or Minor, or both, a lot of the administration of the family, and the trust of the Crown, devolved on Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbat and his cousin, also Sir George Mackenzie, of Rosehaugh. Both were lawyers, and registered as Advocates after the Restoration of 1660. However, before that, Tarbat had been out with the Engagers at Worcester and with Glencairn in his Rising, much of which was based on Easter Ross. Tarbat was a man of great personal charm and ability, a man who needed a big stage, and in his long life he served five Stuart monarchs — of course he needed to be as agile as an eel to have done this. His political career need not detain us, only to note that Tarbat was for most of his career in Edinburgh or Whitehall, and not in Ross, except for a brief eclipse in his fortunes soon after the Restoration. From 1676 until 1709 he was almost continuously in office, as Lord Clerk Register and later as Secretary of State for Scotland under Queen Anne, and that came expensive. He retired to Ross in 1712 and died a few days after hearing of the accession of George I in England; he is buried under a crooked obelisk in the car park at Dingwall, opposite the Kirk with St Clement’s aisle.

The salient point to remember in Tarbat's career is that he championed the episcopalians and the interest, just beginning to be called Tory, which later became identified with the Jacobites. Ross was strongly episcopalian at this point. The Whig rivals to the Tory episcopalian Mackenzies were the Rosses of Balnagown and the Munros of Foulis, who were staunch presbyterians but very much dominated in this period by the episcopalian majority. Easter Ross suffered quite severely during the troubled years immediately after the ousting of James VII and the arrival of King William; as it was a known disaffected area, troops were quartered all over the cornlands, and exacted all they could from the inhabitants.

Sheriff Ross of Balnagown used his term of office to harass the Mackenzie interest, and Tarbat's papers are full of petitions from leading men of the name of Mackenzie complaining about the exactions of Balnagown. It was of course the time of Glencoe, where quartering troops had led to worse troubles. Tarbat had been in command of the pacification of the Highlands until the Argyll faction had him replaced, and he did what he could for his tenants and interest in Ross. He was, however, in a delicate position because he was afflicted with a tiresome son, the Master, who had been a tearaway Restoration buck in Edinburgh until an affray in a Leith inn had nearly had him up on a murder charge, and it took all his father's adroitness to get him off and rusticated to Tarbat House. Regrettably once there he took to drink and to open adherence to the Catholic church, and had come out with his cousin Lovat in support of King James. General Mackay had put both Lovat and the Master of Tarbat under arrest. The Master did not take much part in politics again, but he did get through a lot of his father's money, as did his brothers and sisters, and his direction of affairs in the north was erratic and unsatisfactory.

ORGANIZATION OF THE GRAIN TRADE

That is the background: now the grain trade. This was a long established one. A document of 1621 among the Cromartie papers is a bond between the baillies of Tain and an agent in Bergen for shipment of bere barley, and when he inherited the estates in 1654 Tarbat must have found a framework to extend. There are only a few odd documents in this connection until the late 1670s, thereafter there is a pretty complete run until 1707 or so, and evidence of a rapid decline in grain export after 1716, when the great Whig distillery of Ferintosh was extended and took in most of the surplus of the area.

So, here is how Tarbat organized his trade. In the winter months the tenants *raused* the grain — a nice word which I have not identified but which I take to mean either to winnow or to dry in a kiln, probably the latter. The Chamberlains of the three baronies of Easter Aird, Tarbat and Strathpeffer took in the rents at Candlemas (2 February), and soon thereafter they sent a note of quantities and quality to Edinburgh where Tarbat was living. One Chamberlain was affronted to be asked to send a sample and wrote 'Our grain is well enough known and as good as any in

Lothian'. Now we would obviously expect details of the quantities involved, but there is a problem. The rental in 1703, a well documented crop, was 934 bolls of bere barley, but we do not know how much grain actually went to the great Boll of Tarbat which was the local measure. This was a copper vessel, evidently of some antiquity, kept in the old kirk of Tarbat until this year of 1703 when it was sent on a grain ship to Edinburgh for repairs, and did not return for some years. However, another measure was kept at Meddat of Milton where the Chamberlain lived, and was of the same capacity. The standard Linlithgow Boll was equivalent to 308 imperial pounds weight of barley. A Moray Boll is vaguely referred to as 'bigger'. I suspect this Tarbat Boll, I suspect it deeply, because in the great famine of 1783 the benevolent government diverted a ship full of supplies which was to have gone to America (only the war had ended there), to Dingwall for the use of the inhabitants of the Annexed Estate of Cromartie — pease, potatoes and oats, sold at give-away prices to the distressed tenants. The tenants, however, created an outcry, not at the price but at the measure, when asked to buy it by the peck. 'The people in this neighbourhood would take no other measure but their own ordinary Peck, which upon trial weighed 42 lbs. or 672 lbs. per boll', wrote the troubled Factor to the Annexed Estate. Six hundred and seventy-two pounds against a standard of just over 300 . . . ? Tarbat would seem to have done very well out of his grain rents! The commissioners sent up a standard set of weights and measures from Edinburgh on the next ship. At what point the switch took place (or even *if* it took place) is not clear; did 800 bolls of Tarbat measure leave Portmahomack and arrive as 1600 bolls of Leith measure? Because there were several shipments each year, often to different buyers, and because they took at least a year to pay in a good season, it is never possible to present a complete balance sheet. So it is just a query in the margin, but an intriguing one.

In March, on receipt of the news of intake, Tarbat negotiated a bond with a buyer, one of the great Edinburgh brewers such as Cleghorne, who undertook to take a stated amount at a stated price, with failure clauses and interest charged for non-payment. It was a long business-like document, binding on the few occasions when it was taken to the courts, and a pretty standard wording in all the surviving examples. Usually, though not always, Tarbat was responsible for the shipment, and this involved signing a Charter Party with a skipper of a reliable vessel based in Leith, Alloa or Anstruther. Some of the same Masters turn up year after year. They undertake to present themselves in a named boat off the collecting points on the estates (Dingwall, Nigg Bay, Cromarty or Portmahomack), and to take on board a specified amount of grain in ten weather-work days. Insurance was arranged, and a small amount of Captain's perquisites were specified, such as 'the boll of oatmeal and ane barril of aile as *Caplegan*'.

Naturally the arrival of a ship on contract for only ten weather-work days entailed a great deal of shore organization on the part of the estate chamberlains. They had to have the grain bagged, and they had to have boatmen to transfer the bags from the Giral to the barque lying out in the

roads, so that I cannot help feeling that when the Chamberlain could add 'To Drink money for the completion of the lading', he must have been thankful. The bags came from Dundee (where else would you get bags in Scotland); they were called *sarks* and cost a penny a dozen.

No sums in the scanty accounts we have for this period ever seem to relate to a credit to the estates for the value of the crops, roughly between 800 and 1,000 bolls sold annually at prices between £4 and £8 Scots per boll. It is only too likely that all was spent in Edinburgh where the expenses of Lord Tarbat were always in excess of his income, and where he was building a mansion house at Royston. This of course represented a capital drain from the area.

BUILDINGS FOR THE GRAIN TRADE

I have mentioned the Giral House, the grain store, which is a feature of the Moray Firth (see Beaton and Stell, in this volume). Tarbat was prepared to make heavy capital investment in the grain trade, and the most complete set of accounts deals with the building of the giral and pier of Portmahomack, on old foundations, in the 1690s. The builder was Alexander Stronach of the neighbouring tack of the Milldam of Tarbat. His giral is still there, and his stonework was used for the foundations of the present pier, as can be seen from Rennie's map and designs in Register House, c.1821. Another giral was built at the port of Cromarty, but neither New Tarbat nor Strathpeffer had one; at the former the Barony Court building was used, at Strath the ground floor of Castle Leod. I should have said that one of the services exacted from the tenants was the 'leading of the bere', conveying it to and from those points to the ports of embarkation. Nowhere in the papers can I see any hint of how this was done: pack ponies, sleds, or the backs of the womenfolk? — only guesses.

But of all the capital investments on the grain account, the most impressive was undoubtedly the long campaign to acquire the best port in the area, the burgh and lands of Cromarty. This had long been the property of the Urquharts, and the burgh was a fifteenth century royal creation. Tarbat went into partnership soon after the Restoration with his cousin Mackenzie of Rosehaugh and with Brodie of Asleck, across the Firth, to capture the properties. The Urquhart fortunes were in decline, and the burgh was 'much decayit' and in arrears over its dues to the Royal Convention. The intricate steps by which these three property-developers enveloped two successive Urquhart lairds in a web of obligations and bonds, and finally foreclosed, are too long to detail here. It took nearly twenty years. The partnership was an uneasy one as Brodie was a stern presbyterian and his diary is full of biblical quotation, especially when he considers the peril to his soul of doing business with Tarbat and Rosehaugh. However, he was inclined to write 'After I sought direction of God, I yielded to treat . . .', and it was a successful partnership. By 1683 Tarbat was confirmed as owner of most of the Urquhart estates; Rosehaugh had died and his heirs had got Navity, a fine farm, and when his widow began

to make more demands she was briskly married to a brother of Tarbat's whose own wife, providentially, had just died. Brodie sold out his interest in the Burgh, and Tarbat was confirmed by the Crown as owner of the lands and port. For years thereafter the Royal Burghs unavailingly tried to get the back dues from Tarbat.

Tarbat was a trusted servant of James VII. In 1685 he was made a Viscount in the accession honours and got all his land holdings elevated into a Sheriffdom, subsuming the old Shire of Cromarty. The shire as a political entity, though not all as a family holding, lasted until 1894 — Ross and Cromarty. Naturally this meant that the royal ports of Dingwall and Tain were outclassed by the shire ports of Portmahomack and Cromarty, and few dues came their way. They too became 'much decayit'. Not only did the Cromarty deal bring in a fine port and good corn lands, but also the fishing of Conan, a great profit maker. On Queen Anne's accession Tarbat was made an earl and took title from Cromarty, his great strategic acquisition.

Now to the building expenses: we have none for Cromarty port, though the ruins of Tarbat's Giral remain beside the harbour, merely stumps of stones. But there are many details for Portmahomack and for the building of the mansion house at New Tarbat, the predecessor of the one so sadly derelict at the present time. For Portmahomack the fullest account is a *Brief Survey of the workmanship of the pier of Castlehaven* in the Cromartie Papers, summarizing the building and charges for it for the benefit of Tarbat who was in Edinburgh. The work had been contracted to Alexander Stronach, of the Milldam Quarter of Tarbat, a local mason of some distinction who had started work in 1690, finished in 1698, and was awaiting full payment in 1700 when this survey was made. Tarbat had extended his requirements and been dilatory, according to Stronach, in payment. The cash charges had been fully met, £700 Scots by the first contract and several smaller sums, but not the grain payments due. Tarbat proposed that his chamberlain, Merchant of Wilkhaven, should take up the overdue grain rents of the previous year to pay himself and Stronach for their work. This was far from satisfactory, as in a sense Tarbat was gambling on futures in a commodity market: if the grain harvest was good his tenants could pay back rents, if it was too good the prices would fall unduly, if it was another bad year the reckoning could be put forward to another year . . . Stronach had built the pier 'by the first contract of 3 score yairds length and 3 ells brod and four ells high'; by the second contract he extended it with a sheltering wall six feet higher than the pier and its full length, and made shoulder-works at the shoreward end. It is probable that these included the building of the Giral house, the use of which is referred to in subsequent letters from the chamberlains of the estate.

CROMARTIE CASTLES AND MANSIONS

When Tarbat inherited from his father, in 1654, their main residence in Easter Ross was the castle of Ballone, on the Tarbat estate [Fig. 8.10]. But

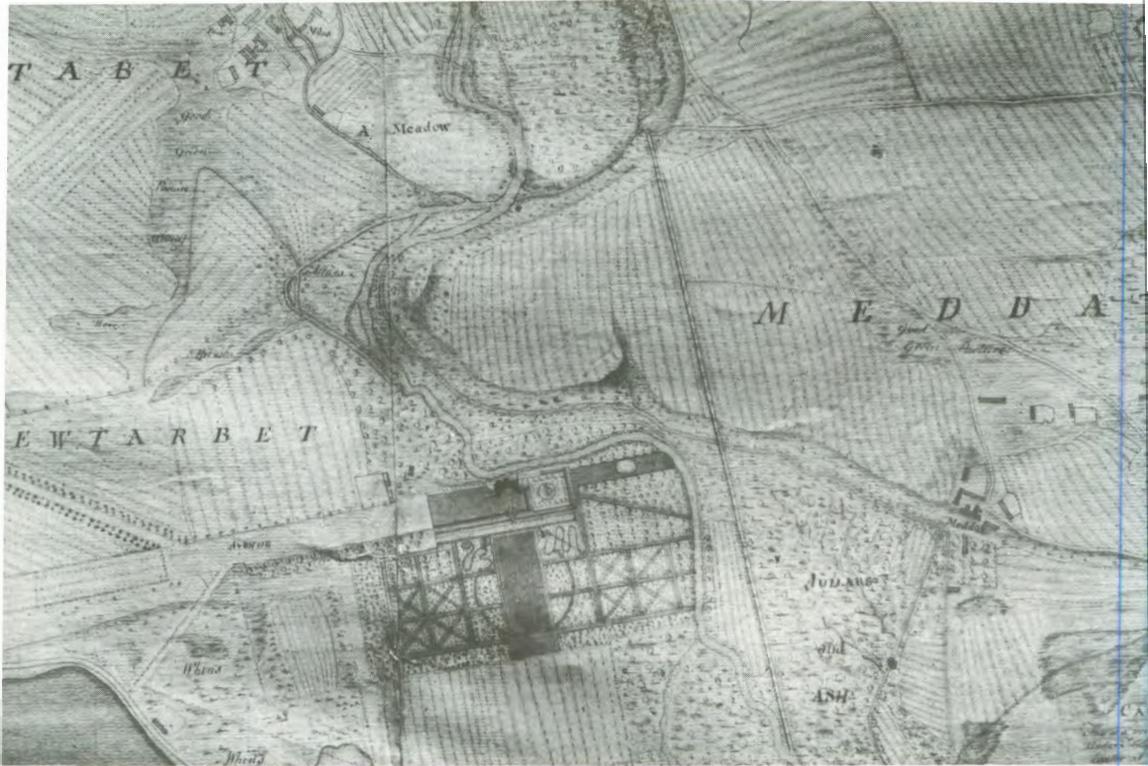


Fig. 7.2 The mansion house and policies of New Tarbat facing Nigg Bay, showing arable, woodland, pasture, rough land with whins, and water mills (top left). From a plan for the Commissioners for the Annexed Estates, 1754.

Fig. 7.3 Royston House, Edinburgh, also known as Caroline Park House.



the centre of gravity of the estate had moved to Milton, facing the Cromarty Firth, where there was a decayed castle which had belonged to Sir Robert Monroe, and which he renamed New Tarbat. Tarbat's rebuilding began about 1666, and the house was a very fine one. All that remains is a sketch in the papers from which a Victorian lithograph has been made, together with the admirable ground plan and plan of the policies made for the Commissioners for the Annexed Estates in 1754 [Figs. 8.11; 7.2].

Tarbat was connected through the marriage of a daughter with Sir William Bruce, and he had also lived in an apartment of Holyrood House while Lord Register, shortly after Bruce had completed his rebuilding there. It is clear that New Tarbat was in the Bruce manner, with four drum-towers at the corners, a marble hall and an oval staircase, and a 'piano nobile' on the first floor. Three generations of Stronachs built there. The grounds were laid out in the formal style of the late seventeenth century, the old raised beachline was built into a handsome terrace with sweeping steps and statuary and a fountain ordered in London. Royston House, the earl's other house just outside Edinburgh [Fig. 7.3], was at the same time rebuilt equally grandly; it was part of Tarbat's lifelong emulation of his political opponent, Lauderdale, that he wanted an Edinburgh house as modern as Ham House, and a country seat that also emulated Lauderdale's. The similarity between Royston and Ham can still be seen. The same plasterer, George Dangerfield, worked for all of these houses including Holyrood and New Tarbat in 1678; and Dick, the master mason, was recommended as having 'worked for the Earls of Errol and Marishal and at Panmuir'.

The best idea of the work involved in New Tarbat comes from a single set of Factor's accounts for the year 1686, the only complete set to survive. From this we can see that building was in full swing: Transport of '760 pieces of square stone, and the masons for hewing 300 of the number', plus the 'transport of 1600 loads of wall stones from the quarry of Apidauld, and a further 660 loads of wall stones from Cromarty' indicate its scope. The work was in the hands of James Dick, who in that year was paid £95 Scots and 4 bolls meal. Other named workmen were George Mackenzie, Carpenter, who was tenant of the estate, the foreman M'Cluskie who 'worked the horses that led the stones', and Donald Miller, wright, who repaired the cart-wheels and also was paid for 'the rigging of Kilmuir Kirk' of which Tarbat was principal heritor. George Mackenzie the carpenter was also paid for two 'voyages' in connection with the deal needed, some of which were brought to Tain from Sweden. Sash windows were ordered; painters, a glazier and a slater were also paid. From other evidence in these accounts it is not only clear that wheeled carts were in use, but there is a tantalizing suggestion that these carts ran on a wagon-way of wooden rails from the quarry down a gradual slope to the mansionhouse two miles away. It is impossible to prove this.

The third mansionhouse of the Cromartie family was Castle Leod in the Barony of Strathpeffer [Figs. 8.8; 8.9]. The only one to survive in family hands today, it was improved about 1606 by Sir Rory Mackenzie from an

original Z-plan fortalice, and Lady Tarbat supervised further improvements in 1692, complaining of the slowness of Highland labour and the difficulty of obtaining lime, as John (the heir) needed so much at Tarbat.

In 1712 Tarbat, the old earl, in his eightieth year, retired from Edinburgh and two years later died. His son, the second earl, had already contributed to family financial difficulties so much that he was only left a life interest in Tarbat, and all the property was left direct to his minor son who later became the third earl. George, the third earl, thus inherited many problems from his feckless father but married, very happily, a neighbouring heiress, Isabella Gordon of Invergordon, by whom he had a large family.

It is possible to follow the fate of both Tarbat House and Castle Leod from the thorough inventories taken from time to time. Inventories of the contents of Royston House, however, survive only from the first earl's day, proving it to have been furnished with Chinese lacquer cabinets, sets of walnut chairs covered in green spanish leather, a number of writing cabinets of walnut wood and several great beds with bedhangings and 'tour-de-loos' or ostrich-feathered corners. On his return to Tarbat most of this furniture came with him, and was recorded in two ship's manifests as well as in subsequent inventories. Even his great coach with horse-furnishing for six horses was sent north to roadless Ross, where much of his gear was not even unpacked by the time the inventory of 1717 was taken. It looks as if the Countess of the day was not a fastidious housewife; apart from the boxes of the first earl's unopened possessions she had 'Ane vat of foul honey for the bees in winter' kept in her linen cupboard. The third Countess, Isabella Gordon, was of sterner stuff, and she and her husband restored and repainted both houses, and charming they sound. But the third earl was a Jacobite and took up arms for Prince Charles Edward; so the final 'Inventar' is taken for the Government about six weeks after Culloden, and the series ends in the Roup of the contents of both houses (E 746/74/28.1). Most of the furniture, some of it recognizably the lacquer of walnut of Queen Anne's day, was bought by neighbours and returned after a generation, when the third earl's son got back the estates but not the title in 1784. In the long time of the Annexation the house of Tarbat was neglected and decayed, though Castle Leod stood firm as a billet for soldiers garrisoning the passes to the west.

The Factor, Capt. Forbes of New, tried to let Tarbat and to keep it in repair, but he was starved of funds and had no takers. According to Thomas Pennant's account (1772. I. 167), the tenantry gave him a lot of trouble too:

I beg leave also to acquaint the Hon. Board that some wicked fellowes have cutt off a part of the Lead of one of the statues at New Tarbat in the night time and have disfigured one of them very much. It is a statue of Cain and Abel which stood before the entry of the House and it is a pity that such insolence should pass unpunished . . . some time ago there was an Arm cutt from another of the Statues.

Forbes also sold a quantity of mature timber planted by the first earl, some of it so exotic that the carpenter from Cromarty could make no guess as to its price. But, perhaps the only reference to Dangerfield's Restoration baroque plasterwork is that in Pennant's description of:

the ruins of New Tarbat once the magnificent seat of an unhappy nobleman who plunged into a most ungrateful rebellion destructive to himself and family. The tenants, who seem to inhabit it *gratis* are forced to shelter themselves from the weather in the very lowest appartments while swallows make their nests in the bold stucco of some of the upper.

When Lord John McLeod inherited in 1784 he gave orders to pull the old house down, and to rebuild according to the plans of James McLeran. It is this fine building, the only Grade A listed building in Ross, which now lies derelict again.

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