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William J. Watson

Excerpt

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## 1. County and Shire. Origin of Ross and Cromarty.

Under the old Celtic system, which lasted on into the twelfth century, Scotland north of the Forth and east of the watershed was divided into provinces governed by nobles of the ancient ruling race, who, though they were nominally under the King of Scotland, were in practice petty kings in their own right. These large provinces were sub-divided into districts under chiefs who were responsible to the ruler of the province. A provincial ruler was styled *Mormaer* ; the chief of a district was styled *Tòiseach*. This arrangement represented the old tribal organisation.

In the twelfth century great changes and re-arrangements were made. *Mormaers* became earls (in Latin *comes*) ; the *Toiseach* became a thane. The change in style denoted a change in status, for now earl and thane were made to hold title and land from the king, and they were understood to represent the king's authority. In addition to these nobles, other officials were appointed, called *vice-comites*, "deputes of the Earl," in English *sheriffs*. These in theory, though not always in practice, were the servants and agents of the king, whose duty it was to attend to the king's interests, and to see that the king's justice was done, either by themselves or in their presence. The sphere of the sheriff's jurisdiction did not necessarily coincide with that of the earl, for, as one historian puts it, "the realm of the earl or thane was

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[More information](#)

## 2

## ROSS AND CROMARTY

bounded by his own feudal rights of property ; the region of the sheriff had a fixed arbitrary limit, the boundaries of the shire or county.”

The word “county” comes through Norman French from the Latin *comitatus*, the territory of a *comes*, “count” or earl. Some of the Scottish counties bear the title of an old earldom, for instance Caithness, Ross, Sutherland, Moray, and are therefore properly entitled to be called “Counties.” Most of them, however, take their names from the seat of the sheriff, such as Inverness, Nairn, Banff, and are therefore strictly speaking sheriffdoms (*vice-comitatus*). The term *shire* itself is Anglo-Saxon *scir*, *scire*, a charge, a care. It has been borrowed into Gaelic as *sgìre*, a parish, the district allotted to the care of one man for religious purposes.

In 1263 the Earl of Buchan was sheriff of Dingwall. In 1292 William, Earl of Ross, got his lands of “Skey, Lodoux (Lewis), and North Argyll” erected into the sheriffdom of Skye. North Argyll included the west coast of Ross-shire. Later the sheriffdom of Inverness included Ross, Caithness, and Sutherland, as well as Inverness-shire, but in 1503 an Act of Parliament was passed which made Ross a separate sheriffdom, with the sheriff’s seat at Dingwall. In 1661 the bounds of Ross were fixed practically as they are now, and Lewis was definitely included in the sheriffdom. In the time of the Earls of Ross, the earl was usually sheriff of Inverness.

The sheriffdom of Cromarty appears to have been instituted in connection with the royal castle there. The first sheriff on record is William de Monte Alto, “vice-comes de Crumbaughtyn” in 1264. The bounds of the

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## 4

## ROSS AND CROMARTY

sheriffdom were small, for they did not much exceed those of the present parish of Cromarty. The first Earl of Cromarty, Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbat, who was made earl in 1703, obtained the privilege of having his various estates, large and small, throughout Ross erected into a new county of Cromarty, consisting of fourteen detached pieces. This inconvenient arrangement was ended in 1891 by the Boundary Commissioners.

By a similar arrangement made in 1476, the Thane of Cawdor had all his lands in Moray, Nairn, and Ross made into one thanage of Cawdor, in consequence of which the parish of Urquhart, in which most of the thane's Ross-shire lands lay, was reckoned part of Nairnshire till 1891. Hence it is that Urquhart is also called *Ferin-tosh*, "thane's land," or in Gaelic "*an Tòis-igheachd*," the thanedom.

Ross means "promontory," with reference originally to the large promontory between the Cromarty and Dornoch Firths, the upland part of which is called *Ard-rois*, "Height of Ross." Cromarty is in Gaelic *Cromba'* (open *a*), a difficult name to explain, but certainly containing *crom*, bent<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. General Characteristics.

The character and scenery of the mainland part of the county are exceedingly diversified. Its long double frontage, to the Atlantic and to the North Sea, gives it two climates, on the west moist and mild, on the east bracing and dry, and in the uplands cold. The west coast, much and

<sup>1</sup> See *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty*.

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Loch Coulin with Ben Eighe in background

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## 6

## ROSS AND CROMARTY

deeply indented by sea-lochs and close to the mountains, offers a striking contrast to the fertile plains and sunny slopes and valleys of the east. Only about seven per cent. of the whole surface is arable. The mountainous interior rises to peaks of nearly 4000 feet, with endless variety of glens, lakes and streams in between. The upland pastures at one time fed great herds of the shaggy wide-horned Highland cattle. Towards the end of the eighteenth century these began to be displaced by sheep, which in their turn have made way for preserves of deer and grouse. Easter Ross, the Black Isle, and the lower parts of Mid Ross are notable farming districts. Smaller farms and crofts are most numerous in the higher parts and on the west coast. In certain places land once tilled has been annexed to deer-forests. On the other hand, during last century much land was reclaimed and improved, especially by Sir Alexander Matheson in Ardrross. Many districts are still remote from railways; Ullapool, for example, is thirty-two miles from the nearest station; and it is rather remarkable that there is still no railway between Dingwall and Cromarty. The deficiency of communication on the west coast is only partly relieved by a rather unsatisfactory steamer service.

On the east side, the way by land between north and south has always of necessity been round the heads of the firths of Beaully and Cromarty, while in addition Dingwall commands the route between east and west. The Beaully river formed a natural boundary which marks the southern limit of Norse influence. It is not surprising, therefore, to find important ancient and mediaeval strongholds in this region. The pre-historic forts on the Ord of

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## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

7

Kessock and on Knockfarrel were the forerunners of the feudal strengths of Redcastle and Dingwall. Similarly the entrance to the Cromarty Firth was guarded by the castle of Cromarty and the earlier Dunskaith on the Nigg side. The experience of the late war has again shown on a larger scale the vital importance of Cromarty and its firth. On the west, the castles of Strome and of Ellandonan were of first-rate importance as commanding the narrow seas and the passes to the east.

**3. Size, Shape and Boundaries.**

The total area of the county, including islands, is 3260 sq. miles, of which 103 are water. The greatest length, from north to south, is about 67 miles and the greatest breadth is about 75 miles. The shape of the mainland part has been compared to a fan, of which the part between the Moray Firth and the Dornoch Firth forms the handle, while the seven or eight promontories on the west, divided by sea-lochs, represent the ribs extended. On the north, the boundary between Ross and Sutherland is formed chiefly by the river Oykel and its estuary, the Kyle of Sutherland. Beyond the source of the Oykel, the boundary runs in an irregular curve north-westward by Loch Veyatie, Loch Fionn and the river Kirkaig, meeting the sea at Inverkirkaig. On the north-east there is the Dornoch Firth, and on the east the North Sea. The south-east side from Tarbat Ness is bounded by the Moray Firth to Chanonry Point, thence by the Inverness Firth to Kessock Ferry, and thence by the Beaulie Firth to Tarradale. Thereafter the march



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between Ross and Inverness-shire runs irregularly west by south to the head of Loch Monar. Then it goes south-west to A' Bheinn Fhada (Ben Attow), where it wheels eastwards to include Glenshiel, and so westwards along the watershed between Glenshiel and Glenelg till it reaches the sea near the north end of Kyle Rhea. The whole of the west side faces the Minch till the march of Sutherland is reached at Inverkirkaig.

Lewis, with the Atlantic on the west and the North Minch on the east, contains 683 sq. miles. Its greatest length is about 43 miles, and its greatest breadth 28 miles. It is separated from Harris, the southern part of the island, belonging to Inverness-shire, by Loch Resort on the west and Loch Seaforth on the east, and the isthmus,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  miles broad, between their heads. Lew's is shaped like a kite, with the Butt as apex. On the west side it is deeply indented by Loch Roag.

#### 4. Surface and General Features.

The plain of Easter Ross slopes northwards towards a low smooth ridge of hills running from Tain towards Ardross, and forming as it were the backbone of the promontory which gives its name to the county. The Black Isle, which is really a peninsula, rises on both sides to the ridge known as Ard Mheadhonach (mid-height), the highest point of which is 838 feet. Its western end gives a magnificent view of the really Highland part of the county, from Wyvis (3429) in the foreground to Sgùrr na Lapaich (3773) on the left. Wyvis itself is seen rather as a massive range than a single mountain, domi-



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Excerpt

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## SURFACE AND GENERAL FEATURES 9

nating the landscape and sheltering by its bulk the low ground to the east. Its most notable neighbours are Carn Chuinneag (2749) with its shapely double peak; Sgùrr Mór in Fannich (3637), the highest point north of Inverness, from which on a very clear day one can see most of Scotland north of the Grampians; and Sgùrr a' Mhuilinn (2845) at the head of Strathconon. Along the watershed from south to north are Sgùrr nan Conbhairean (3634), A' Bheinn Fhada (3383), Màm Sabhal (3862) with its neighbour Carn Éite (3877), Maoil Lunndaigh (3294), Mórúsg (3026), Fionnbheinn (3060), and Beinn Dearg (3547). West of the watershed there are the stately "Five Sisters" at the head of Loch Duich, namely, Sgùrr na Mormhoich (2870), Sgùrr nan Saighead (2750), Sgùrr Udhra (3505), Sgùrr nan Carnach, and Sgùrr nan Cisteachan Dubha (3370). Maoil Cheanndearg (3060) and Sgùrr Ruadh (3141) in Lochcarron are of the ruddy Torridonian rock, while their neighbours Na Cinn Liath or Grayheads (3034) are quartzite on top. Liathach (3358), Spidein a' Choire Léith (3456), Beinn Eighe (3217) and Ruadh Stac (3309) are all near the head of Loch Torridon. The finest hill in Applecross is A' Bheinn Bhàn (2936). Sleaghach (Slioch) near the head of Loch Maree is a great truncated cone (3217), deeply fluted with water-worn gullies. Mullach Coire mhic Fhearchair (3250), Sgùrr Bàn (3194), Badhaisbheinn (2869) and Beinn Ailginn (3232) are in Gairloch. An Teallach (3483), at the head of Little Loch Broom, is a wild serrated range resembling the Coolins of Skye. In Coigach are A' Bheinn Mhór (2438), Cuthail Bheag (2523) and Cuthail Mhór (2786); the two latter are fine shapely rounded hills.

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