

EASTER ROSS: A RESIDUAL CROFTING AREA

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The traditional administrative division between Wester and Easter Ross* reflects the peculiar east-west extent, from the Outer Hebrides to the Moray Firth, of the County of Ross and Cromarty, and the consequent regional differences contained within it. In Ross-shire, however, the geographical contrasts between the west and east of the North-West Highlands of Scotland are heightened by the relatively extensive "outlier" of Old Red Sandstone sediments preserved in the down-faulted basin of the Moray Firth. The resulting upland-grit coastal lowlands and peninsulas form a distinct enclave whose relief, soils and associated agricultural and settlement patterns have much in common with those of "lowland" Scotland (Tivy 1963). Easter Ross is in but is not wholly of the Highlands. Its parishes either lie completely within the coastal lowlands, as in the Black Isle, or as on the mainland, run west to east from the main Highland watershed across both the highland and lowland areas of the county.

As a result Easter Ross is, in many respects, transitional in landscape and economy between "highland" and "lowland" Scotland. This transitional character is apparent, as has been suggested by Moisley (Moisley 1962:83-95), in the position it occupies between the main crofting and non-crofting economies of the Highlands. Ross-shire is one of the seven crofting counties of Scotland, and all the parishes of Easter Ross, with the exception of Rosemarkie and Cromarty (at the eastern tip of the Black Isle) acquired crofting status under the original Crofting Act of 1886. Agricultural units of less than 50 acres are characteristic of the eastern part of the county to-day and even on the relatively prosperous coastal lowlands account for a high percentage of the total number of holdings. And although, in

* For the purposes of this article, Easter Ross is used to cover the eastern part of the County of Ross and Cromarty and includes the administrative subdivisions of Easter Ross, Mid-Ross and the Black Isle.

fact, they occupy only about a third of the total acreage of improved farm land, they contribute a distinctive element to the present agricultural landscape not found in other parts of the non-crofting Highlands nor yet in otherwise comparable

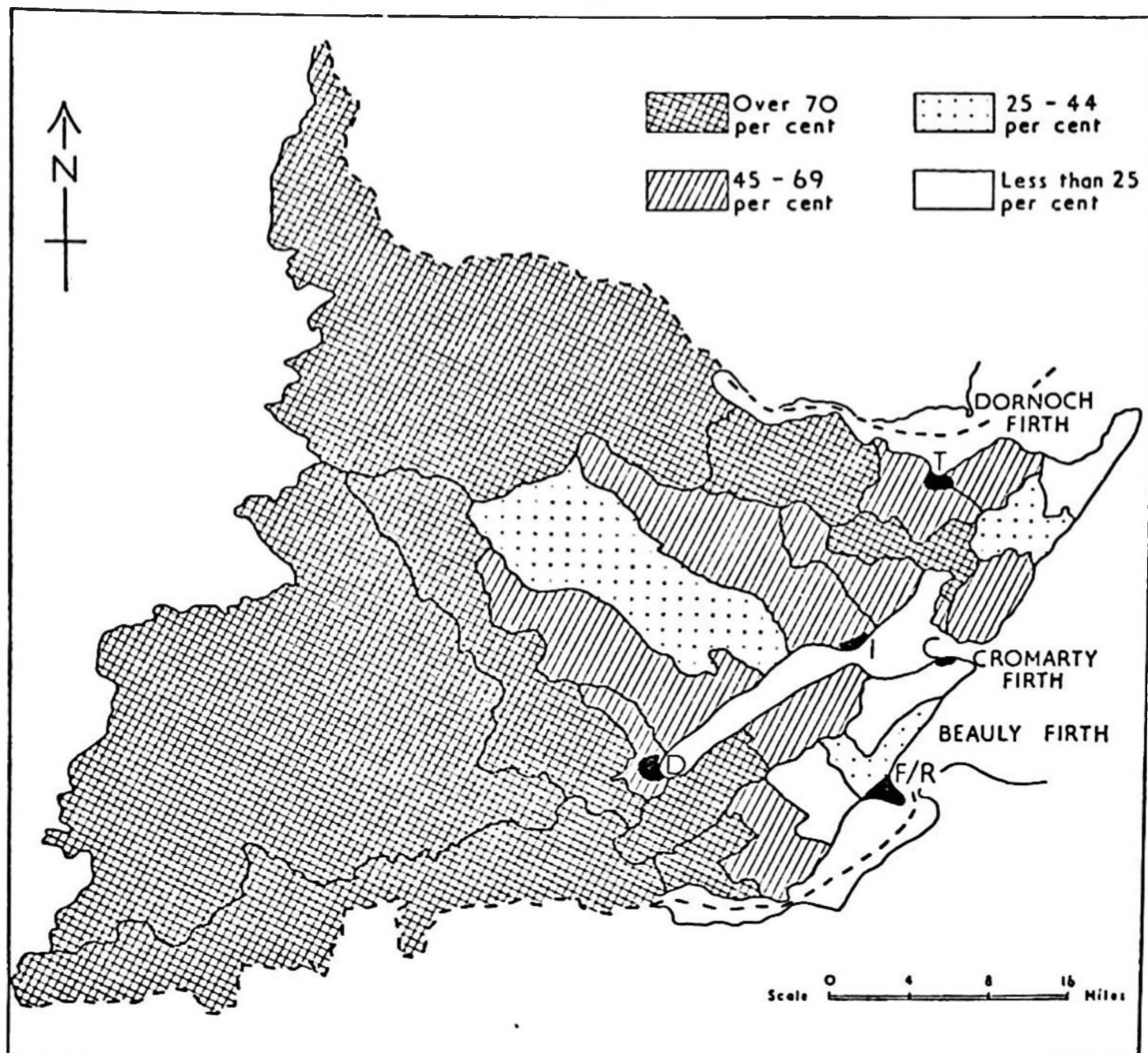


FIG. 1.—Easter Ross: percentage of all agricultural holdings whose acreage of crops and grass is less than 50 acres, 1960. Based on Statistics Supplied by the Department of Agriculture (Scotland). The parish is the basic unit.
T—Tain; I—Invergordon; D—Dingwall; C—Cromarty; F/R—Fortrose and Rosemarkie.

agricultural lowlands south of the Highland Boundary Fault. A great number, though not all, of these small holdings are *crofts* (Caird 1962:547) according to the legally accepted definition of the term (i.e. rented holdings situated within the seven crofting counties of Scotland of less than 50 acres in extent and/or less than £50 per annum rent, which carry security of hereditary tenure), and are registered as such with

the Crofters' Commission. There are, in addition, a considerable number of small holdings which have only recently lost their crofting status as a result of a change of tenure to owner-occupancy. These existing or erstwhile crofts of Easter Ross differ somewhat in origin, organisation and economy from the more numerous and characteristic crofting settlements of the North-West Highlands and Islands of Scotland. And many of these basic differences are related to the more favourable physical and economic conditions found within the Moray Firth lowlands.

The small holdings of Easter Ross contribute a distinctive element to the agricultural landscape by reason of their distribution. While approximately two-thirds of all holdings in 1960, in terms of improved land, were less than 50 acres in size, Fig. 1 reveals a proportion generally greater than this in the inland and less than this in the peninsular and coastal parishes. Such a distribution on the basis of parish statistics is, however, very misleading since a considerable area of the inland parishes lies in the Highlands proper and is largely unimproved land devoted to deer forest, sheep farm and forestry; here the total acreage of improved land is concentrated on the relatively restricted areas of flat land and good soil associated with alluvial terraces, or old lake beds, along the valley floors. The greatest percentage of all the small holdings is, in fact, contained within the "lowland" area of Easter Ross.

Not only is the number of such holdings greater in the coastal lowlands but their distribution here is highly localised. Fig. 2 indicates those areas where there is a concentration marked enough to have produced distinctive field and settlement patterns. Outside these areas small holdings do occur but they are generally scattered at random among the larger farms. In practically all cases the main concentrations of small holdings occupy sites peripheral to moorland (or moorland now partially or wholly forested) and with which local names descriptive of existing or former physical conditions, such as "muir", "moss", "bog" or "heights", are still associated. Within the Moray Firth lowlands the variable lithology of the Old Red Sandstone Series (ranging from conglomerates and coarse sandstones to friable shales and marls), combined with considerable diversity of glacial drift, has resulted in a wide range of physical sites. The majority of the small holdings occupy areas of either relatively stonier soil, steeper slope, poorer drainage or greater altitude than the larger arable farms. Outside the "lowland"

area of Easter Ross, the greatest concentration of small holdings is in the northern parish of Kincardine along the straths of the rivers Oykell and Carron where, in contrast to the former area,

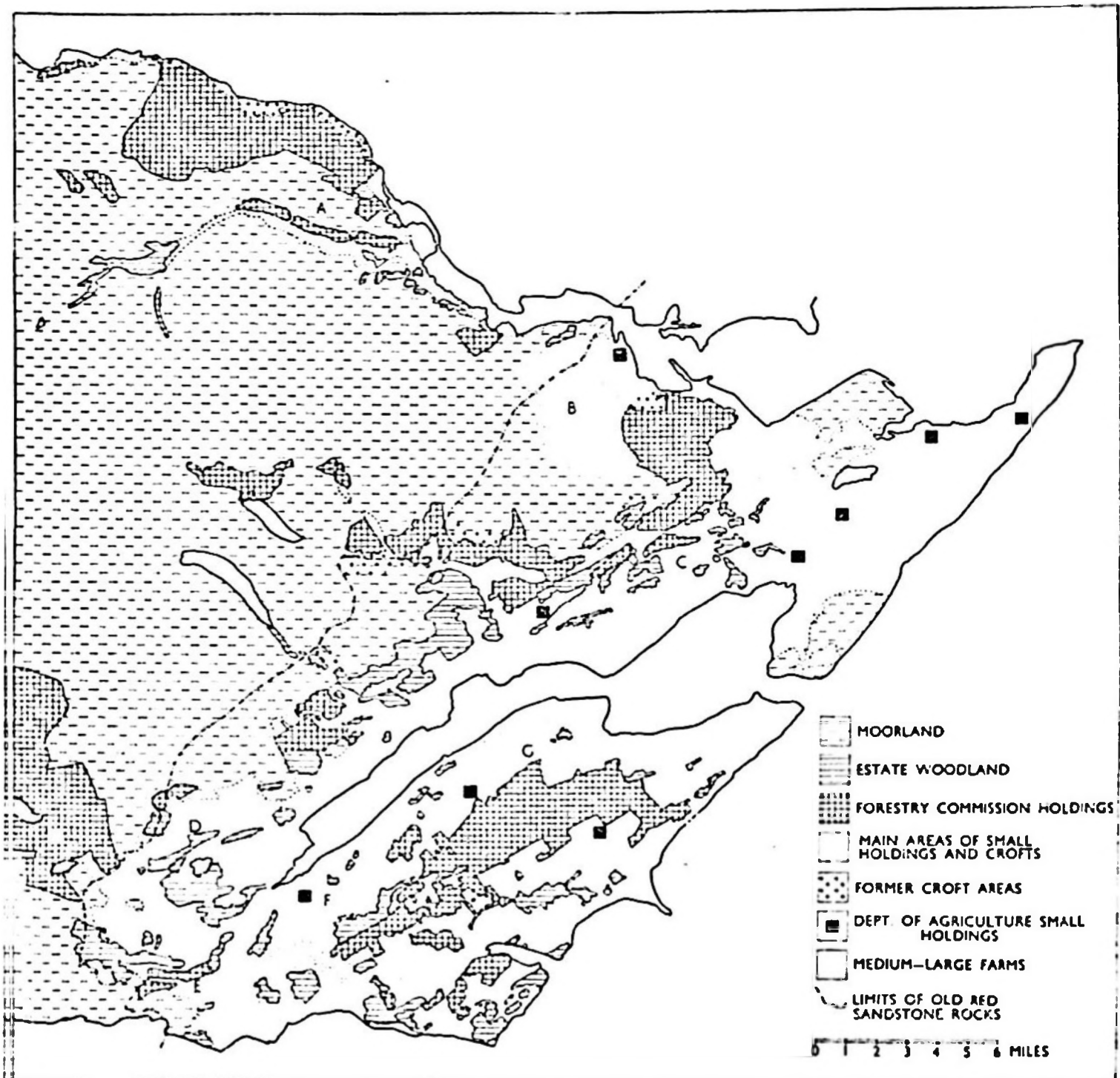


FIG. 2.—Easter Ross: certain elements of the agricultural landscape, showing areas where a small-holding field and settlement pattern is dominant. A—Strath Carron; B—Edderton-Struie area; C—Balnagowan area; D—Strathpeffer area; E—Muir of Ord area; F—Western Black Isle; G—Cullicudden area. Based on field work undertaken during summers 1962 and 1963.

they occupy the better sites provided by alluvial terraces and morainic material. But apart from these two valleys the other highland glens which drain into the Moray Firth are virtually empty, though traces of former settlement are not hard to find.

Within the areas A, B, C, D and F in Fig. 2 the majority of the small holdings satisfy the legal definition of a croft. For

many of these status dates from the end of the nineteenth century, while others designated as "land holders" in estate records automatically acquired crofting rights under the Small Landholder's Act of 1911. Of these at least 90 per cent are registered as crofts under the Crofter's Commission to-day. The fact that there are holdings in this category which are not registered crofts, although they enjoy full crofting rights, is usually the result of deliberate estate policy. In areas E and G the groups of small holdings differ only from the crofts in that they are now owner-occupied. When the estates on which they are situated were sold out, in the 1930s or later, the former crofters were given the opportunity to buy their holdings (their occupants still, however, consider and refer to themselves as crofters). This process continues and, together with amalgamation as tenants die intestate or renounce their rights, has resulted in a considerable and continuing decline in the number of legal crofter-holdings, particularly during the last 30-40 years.

In addition there exists a fairly numerous, though more dispersed group of small holdings which although "registered crofts" have little in common with the foregoing. These are the Department of Agriculture Small Holdings created by the subdivision of former large farms in the 1920s and 1930s. Their average size and rent is larger than that of the older crofts—and not infrequently exceed the usual croft limits—and reflects their situation on some of the richest agricultural land in Easter Ross. And for these reasons they will not be included in the following discussion.

The typical crofts and other similar small holdings exhibit a wide range of size, from less than 5 to over 50 acres in some instances, not only from one area to another but within a given locality. Within the areas shown on Fig. 2 they occur either in irregular clusters or in regular "planned" blocks of anything from 3 to 5 up to 100 holdings, each of which has a distinctive name. These groups or blocks are usually referred to as "townships" though their grouping and naming is a result only of their association with a particular estate or adjacent large farm. A few of these so-called townships, as in areas A, B and D have, in addition, common grazings with clearly defined souming rights: these approximate more closely to the usually accepted concept of the crofting township as a social organisation. But in relation to the total extent of rough grazing in Easter Ross they occupy a very small area and in few cases do all those

crofters with shares on them make full use of their rights; in area B, for instance, many of the crofters were unaware of either the existence or exact location of the common grazings which are recorded in estate books. The traditional economic and social organisation which is still the basic characteristic of many of the Western crofts is lacking in Easter Ross. Here the nature, and location, of the townships are the result of the operation of different processes in their origin in a region somewhat more amenable than the Western Highlands and Islands to the agricultural improvements of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The evidence for the origin of small holdings in Easter Ross is fragmentary, and disjointed in time and place. On many estates past records are non-existent, such as exist are rarely complete, while maps showing the location and boundaries of present holdings are only occasionally available. In some areas of the Black Isle and on the "Heights" of Strathpeffer the small holdings were a direct result of the laird's policy of dividing and enclosing former joint-holdings into small units and leasing them to the tenants. A survey of the Cromartie estate, made in 1762 (Fig. 3) before enclosure, shows that on the south-facing side of the Peffer valley arable land had all but attained its present limits. During the period 1790-1810 the upper parts of the joint-farms of Auchterneed, Inchveany, Keppoch, Inchrory and Davochglier were sub-divided into numerous crofts while the lower parts were organised as large single farms (Fig. 4). Old rent rolls of this estate reveal that the crofts here were smaller and more numerous at the beginning of the nineteenth century than to-day; in the township of Auchterneed the average size, however, is still less than 10 acres.

As in much of the richer lowlands of Scotland, however, enclosure and the concomitant improvement of agricultural land resulted in the organisation of the former joint-farms into single large farms only, with the consequent displacement of many of the former tenants and the disappearance of the ferm-toun as a unit of settlement. Some of the tenants so displaced moved into nearby towns or into the newly-created estate villages, some emigrated outwith the area while others supplied the increased demand for agricultural labour. Various sources in Easter Ross indicate that a great number of "mealers" (or "mailers") or "cottagers", as they are referred to in contemporary accounts, settled or squatted voluntarily on the

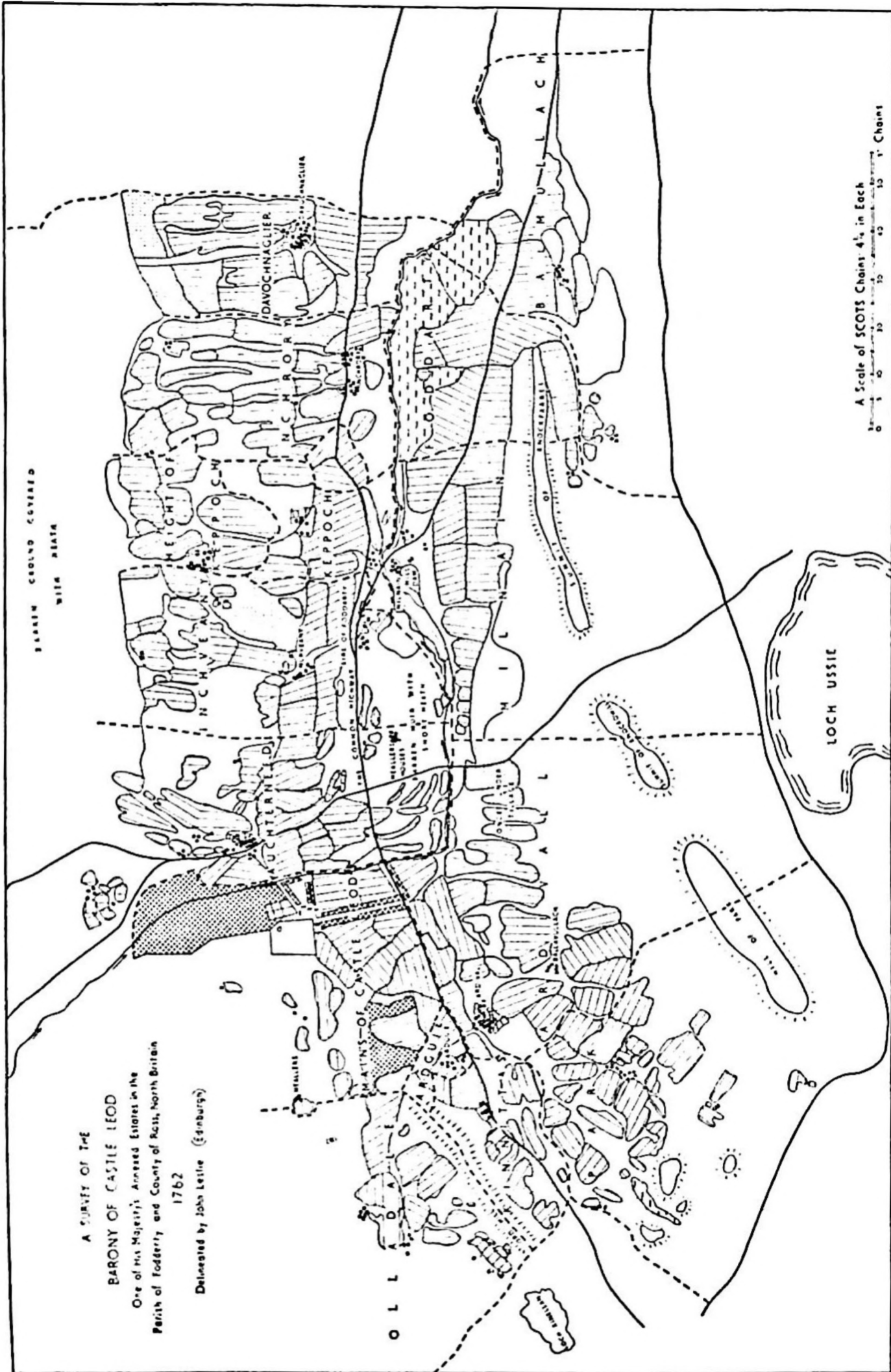


FIG. 3.—Survey of the Barony of Castle Leod, 1762. Arable land shaded; the only planted woodland is that cross-hatched area in the Mains of Castle Leod; remaining areas either moorland or scrubby woodland. Dashed lines indicate boundaries between joint-farms each with its small "ferm-toun" in which are the houses of the joint-tenants and "mealers" or "cottagers". Original of this map is in Castle Leod Strathpeffer; this slightly simplified copy has been reproduced by kind permission of the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Cromartie, M.C.



FIG. 4.—Strathpeffer crofting area (cf. Fig. 3). Heavy black lines are boundaries of land holdings; dashed lines indicate field boundaries. Note large farms situated on strath floor and lower valley-side slopes. Crofts are on the valley-side shoulders or benches at 400-600 ft. O.D.; those to the north were created during early period of enclosure 1790-1810; those of the townships of Gower and Loch Ussie were created from formerly unimproved moorland in 1850 to accommodate crofters displaced by the Strath Conon clearances. *Reproduced from Annual Report of the Scottish Field Studies Association, 1963.*

margins of the still unimproved and formerly common moorland, or were actually encouraged to do so by the individual proprietors. Among those who took the opportunity of so acquiring a piece of land were many crofters dispossessed by the early clearances in the West.

In 1795 Sinclair notes that "several gentlemen have improved their large tracts of waste ground by placing mealers or cottagers in such situations as appeared most adapted for improvement" (Sinclair 1795). A little later Mackenzie makes a similar comment: "Improvement of waste land is a favourable object with every proprietor and the desire for having it accomplished cheaply has occasioned a considerable competition for crofters who have been removed from other places (those who have not the means of transporting themselves to America). Some crofters are established without any other condition being imposed on them, except that they shall improve a certain space annually. Others have an allowance of money for rendering a certain extent productive" (Mackenzie 1810). This process is also frequently referred to in both the *Old* and *New Statistical Accounts* of the parishes of Easter Ross. And in the Balnagowan Estate Book, 1962, such entries against existing small holdings as "settled and reclaimed by tenants removed from large farms in early 1840s to make present single farm of Balnagore" point to specific cases.

In a long and detailed account of the estates of Ross-shire in the late-nineteenth century, one James MacDonald summarises the results of this process by that time (MacDonald 1877:64-209). Most revealing is his account of the letting of the former "common lands" of Millbuie which occupied much of the central backbone of the Black Isle. In his earlier account Sinclair had remarked on the unsuccessful efforts in the past on the part of the proprietors of land adjacent to Millbuie to divide it among themselves. At the beginning of the nineteenth century an interim apportionment of the western end had begun but the final division among twelve estates was not completed until 1827. The better "improvable" land on these divisions of the former common was let to crofters in holdings varying from 10-30 acres on 19-year leases, together with encouragement, often financial, to bring them into cultivation; the remainder of the common was planted. The improvement of moorland was more widespread on the western margins of Millbuie while towards the east the Cromarty estate portion was planted up completely. The legacy of this process is visible

to-day in the cluster of "townships", each associated with a particular estate, at the western end of the Black Isle (Fig. 5). In the township of Balvaird for instance the rectangular arrangement of lots remains unchanged since they were first surveyed in 1823 (see Fig. 6). A similar plan for part of the Ferintosh estate shows a comparable arrangement (Fig. 7), but suggests that unenclosed "squatter land" was still being occupied at this time. In the latter example subsequent amalgamation has reduced the original number of croft holdings very considerably and the initial grid-iron pattern is less obvious. In both these examples, however, the distribution of houses and of the patches of improved land suggest that lotting and enclosure succeeded the actual settlement and improvement.

MacDonald also refers to the operation of a similar process in Mid and East Ross. In the coastal lowlands along the north shore of the Cromarty Firth the way in which the existing small holdings cluster around "The Wilderness" of Balnagowan Moss (Fig. 8)—an intractable area of ill-drained, coarse, fluvio-glacial material—is, in the light of the foregoing evidence, significant. Similarly, the crofts above Edderton (Fig. 9) occupy a high, badly drained bench (600-800 ft. O.D.) and here, small irregular patches of improved or formerly improved land must present a condition not dissimilar to that when the first squatters settled the area.

This particular process of improvement, which created the existing crofts of Easter Ross, was most active in the period 1790-1850. And the supply of displaced tenants was maintained by the clearance of much of the Highland area of Easter Ross for deer forest in the period 1840-50. Estate and Scottish Land Court records note, for instance, the creation of the crofts of Gower and Loch Ussie, in the Strathpeffer area (see Figs. 4 and 5), to accommodate tenants displaced from Strath Conon in 1850. This parallels a similar process described by Kay for parts of Aberdeenshire (Kay 1962:100-111). Here, as in Easter Ross, it was a process largely motivated by the lairds, for several reasons: to extend the amount of improved land: to increase the rent rolls; and not least, as MacDonald remarks, "to hold out inducements to careful ploughmen, labourers, etc., to take a small farm or croft and therefore to remain in the area" (MacDonald 1877), and thereby supply the vastly increased demand for agricultural labour.

Evidence would suggest that the squatting process which

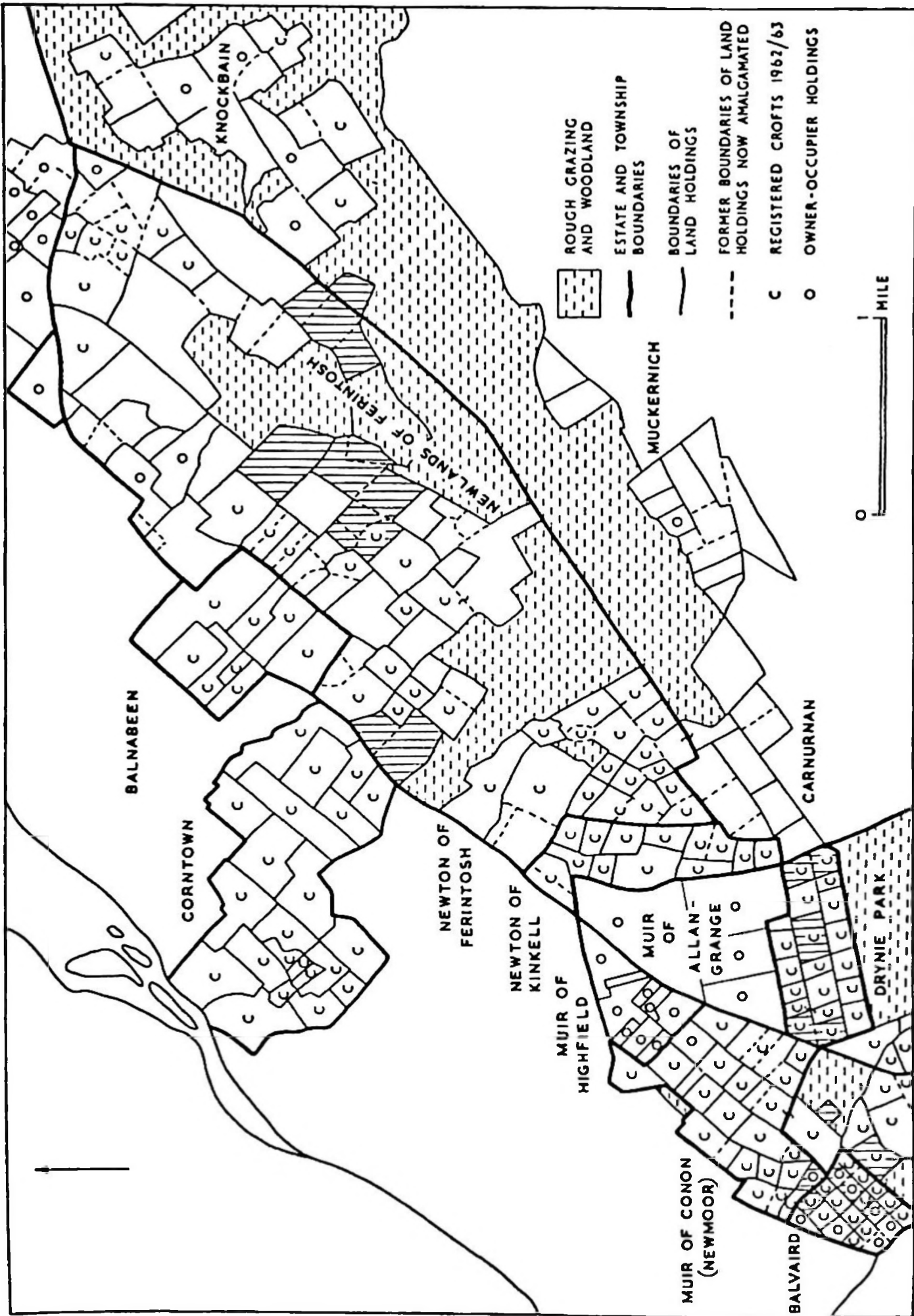


Fig. 5.—Western Black Isle crofting area. Here crofts are arranged in “township” blocks, each with a distinctive name. Corn town and Balnabeen are small holdings created by the Department of Agriculture in the 1930s; the remainder came into existence in the period 1810-50. In the townships of Balvaird (cf. Fig. 6). Drynie Park and Newlands of Ferintosh those holdings worked by one man in each township are cross-hatched.

created the majority of crofts in Easter Ross was one common to many parts of Scotland, and, in particular, to the north-east.

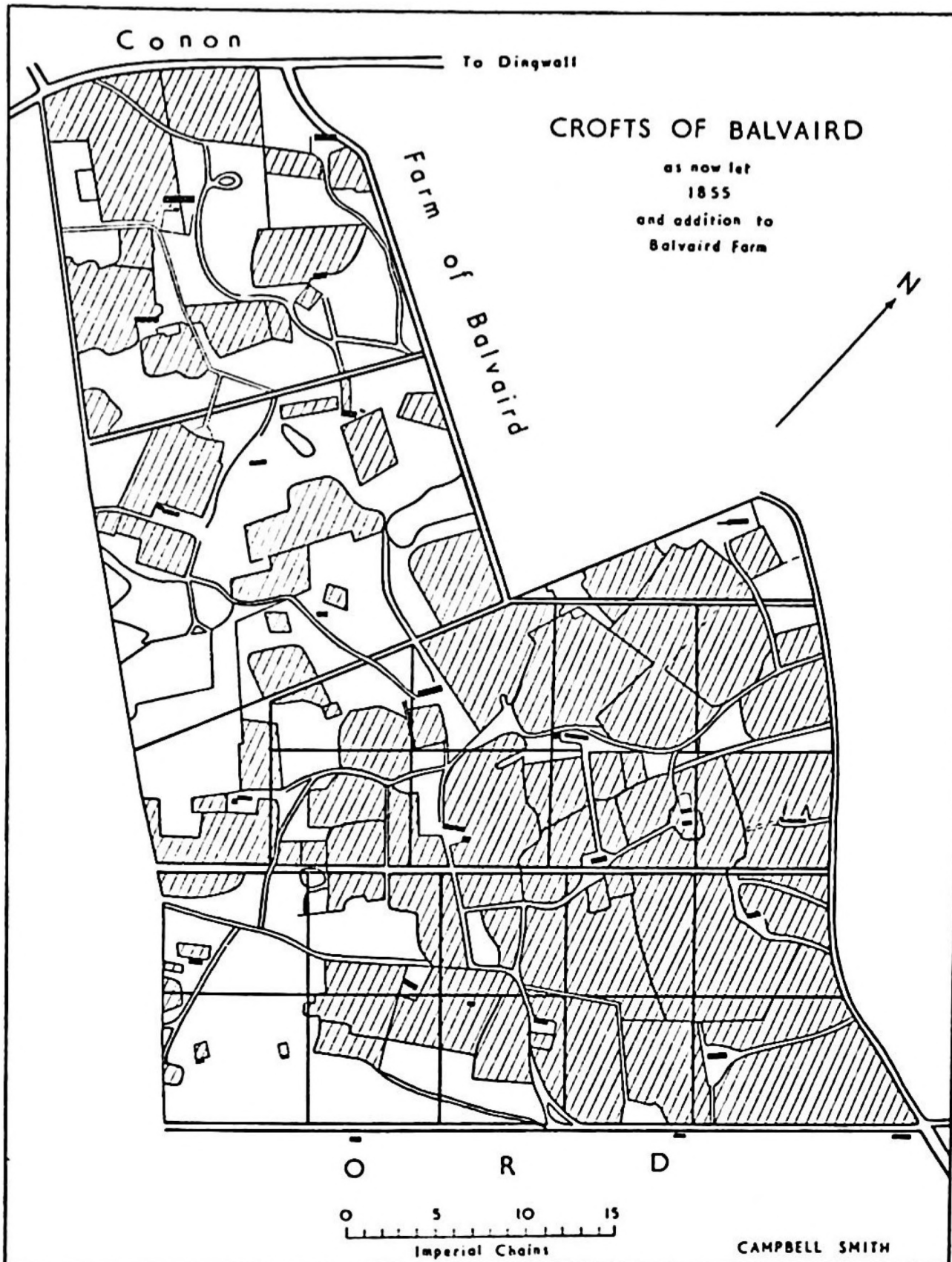


FIG. 6.—Crofts of Balvaird, 1855; this shows the rectangular enclosure, or lotting, of land settled and improved by “mealers”. Note that part of this improved land (shaded area) has been assigned to an adjacent farm. *Original MS. of this survey in Conon Estate Offices, Urray, Muir of Ord, Ross-shire.*

In many areas the crofts so created were but an ephemeral, intermediate stage in the improvement of formerly uncultivated land and its eventual absorption into large, compact, farm

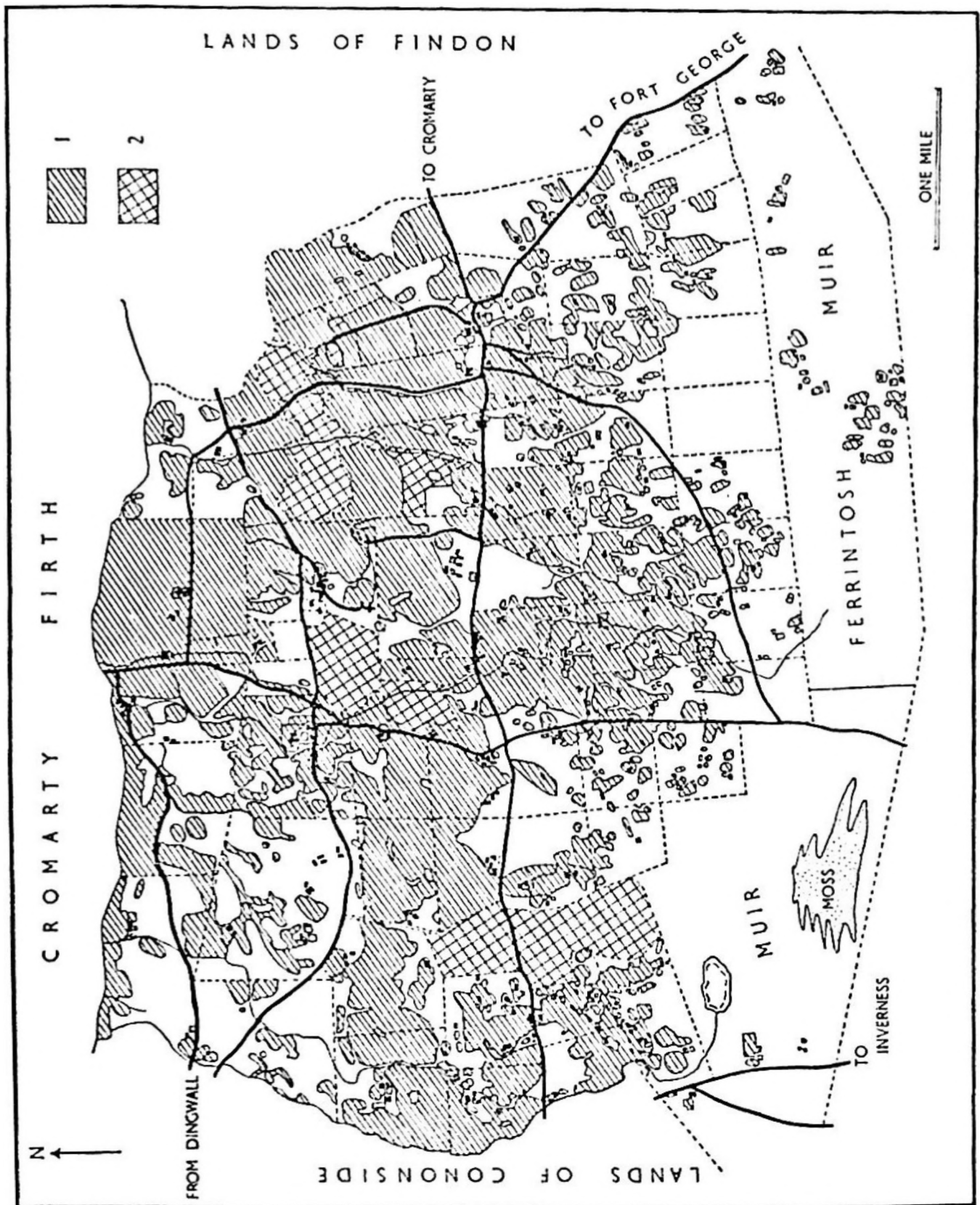


FIG. 7.—Estate of Ferrintosh, Black Isle, Ross-shire, as surveyed by Wm. Crawford, Jun., Land Surveyor, Edinburgh, 1810. *This simplified and generalised version of the original map is reproduced by kind permission of Ferrintosh Estate Office, Inverness* 1. arable land; 2. woodland; solid black lines—roads; dashed lines—farm and croft boundaries. Note south of the Cromarty road the rectangular lotting and enclosure of the moorland edge, already at this date settled and partially improved by “mealers”.

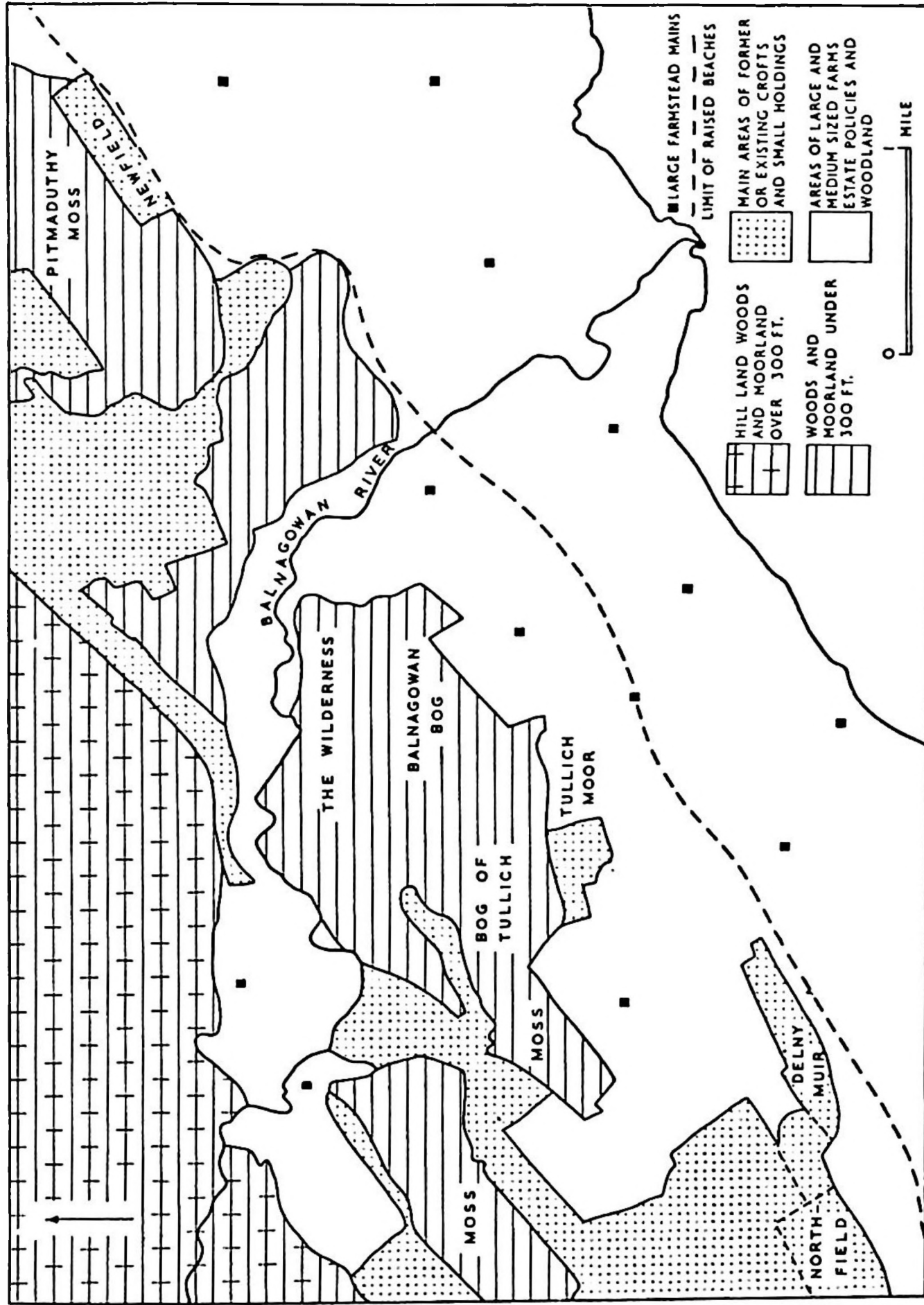


Fig. 8.—Balnagowan area (straddling parishes of Kilmuir Easter and Logie Easter mainly) showing the characteristic location of former or existing small holdings in relation to other landscape features.

units. In Aberdeenshire, Kay notes the relatively early amalgamation of former croft lands or their addition to pre-existing farms. In other areas—and such is the case in Easter

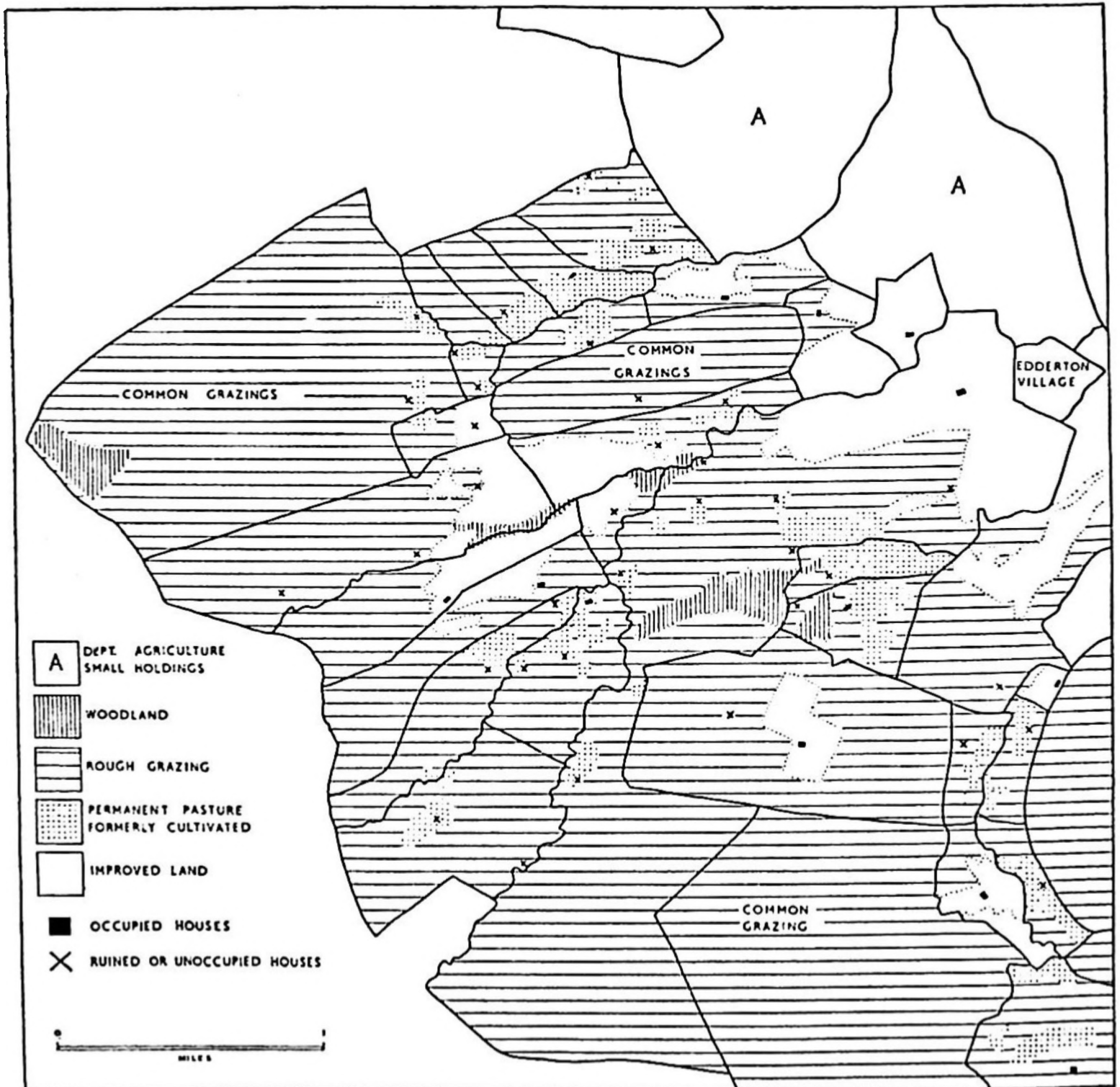


FIG. 9.—Edderton-Struie area; *black lines* are farm and croft boundaries.

Ross—the crofts or their imprint on the landscape have persisted up to the present. Since their initiation, however, this particular crofting settlement and its associated economy has experienced and is still undergoing considerable modification consequent upon increasing mechanisation and commercialisation of agriculture, and rural depopulation. In Easter Ross the

degree and rate of modification varies greatly from one part of the area to another. In some, certain factors have tended to accelerate the eventual disappearance of the crofts, in others, to delay this process or even perpetuate the system.

Within the Highland periphery of Easter Ross, and particularly in the coastal parishes which lie north of the Cromarty Firth, the disappearance and continuing decline of former crofting settlements is most marked (Fig. 2). Once improved land has reverted to heather moorland and has been incorporated into the rough grazings of the adjacent large sheep or stock-rearing farms. Some of the former crofting settlements in these areas have been acquired by the Forestry Commission, renounced croft land has been or will be planted, and only a few isolated holdings still persist within these forested areas. In other places the formerly improved croft-land has been amalgamated with and is now worked by the larger farms to which they lay adjacent. And in areas A, B and C in Fig. 2 the crofts and small holdings which still remain are in a relatively rapid state of decline.

The disappearance and decline of the crofting settlements is then most marked in areas of poorest physical site and/or greatest inaccessibility. The remaining holdings are small, the majority less than 20 acres, while in Strath Oyckell, Strath Carron (Fig. 10) and the coastal fringe of the parish of Kincardine along the Dornoch Firth the mean size is less than 10 acres. The number of holdings on which former arable land is either poorly worked, not worked at all or merely used for grazing is high; the rate of renouncement of holdings is rapid and the proportion of old people and amount of absenteeism of tenants is much greater than on small holdings elsewhere in lowland Ross-shire. Sub-letting and amalgamation has reduced the number of working units very considerably and numerous unused or empty houses testify to this process and to a marked decline in population. In such areas the amount of arable land is small and the emphasis on sheep rearing is greater than on the other crofting areas in Easter Ross.

In the Edderton area, for example (Fig. 9) crofts, as such, have all but disappeared although the settlement and field pattern still persists. This is an old-established crofting settlement which dates from the end of the eighteenth century and the existing holdings are but a depleted remnant of a formerly more densely settled area. In 1958 twenty-three holdings were registered as crofts: field work in 1963 revealed that

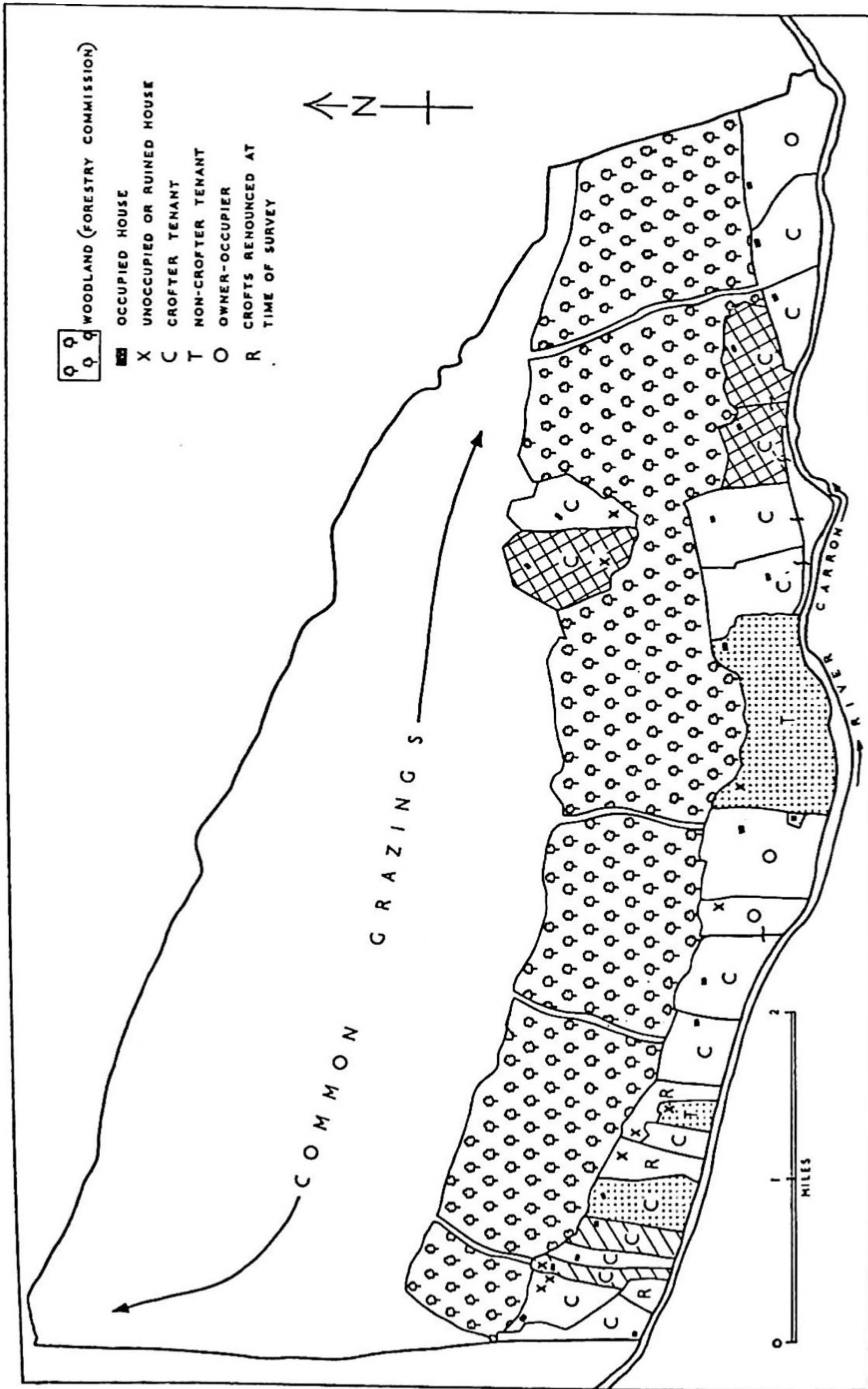


FIG. 10.—Crofts of Strath Carron. These occupy a narrow strip of alluvial terrace; sousing on common grazing on basis of given number of sheep per croft: mean acreage of crofts 8 acres; of 25 holdings existing in 1962, 3 had been sold and 2 renounced in that year and there were 17 working units. Those holdings worked by the same person are given a distinctive shading.

amalgamation and subletting had resulted in a reduction to fifteen working-units. Eight holdings are now worked by one progressive crofter; on eight others, however, the former arable land had not been cultivated for at least thirty years and is rapidly reverting to rough grazing; common grazing rights have lapsed. The result is the gradual, though not yet completed, emergence of a few medium-sized holdings composed partly of improved arable and partly of rough grazings. A little further south, in the Balnagowan area (Fig. 9) (straddling the parishes of Kilmuir Easter and Logie Easter mainly) there has also been a decline in former crofting settlements. Here there is a considerable intermixture of farmland with woods and rough grazings, and of large and small holdings. The latter comprise registered and unregistered crofts and a fair proportion of owner-occupied holdings. Most of the holdings to the south-west of the Balnagowan River have been quite recently renounced and amalgamated with adjacent large farms—though the old crofting house and field pattern still persists. To the north-east of the river there remain a fairly large number of crofts and owner-occupied small holdings. These are smaller than average, with a mean size of 8 acres. Of the twenty-eight crofts, ten were not worked either because the tenant was an absentee or was too old, and another six are used only for grazing.

South of the Cromarty Firth, and more particularly in the Strathpeffer area and the Black Isle, the groups of small holdings have persisted and retained their identity and vitality to a greater degree than elsewhere in Easter Ross. Within all the townships here (with the exception of those in the Ferintosh estate) the size of the original crofter holdings was small, usually less than 20 acres and in many cases (e.g. Auchterneed-Strathpeffer; Balvaird and Drynie Park-Black Isle) less than 10 acres. Sub-letting and amalgamation have progressively increased the size and number of the holdings worked by any one tenant. This is a process which is proceeding rapidly and which, given an impetus by recent Crofting Acts, can operate more easily and effectively than under the traditional and less flexible crofting structure of the Western Highlands and Islands.

In all the townships in this southern part of Easter Ross there are usually only half as many working units as there are individually leased holdings. There is, however, a marked tendency for one or two progressive tenants in each area to

have acquired or sub-leased a large number of, sometimes widely scattered, holdings. In Ferintosh, for instance, where eighty-eight separate holdings are recorded in the estate books, there are only forty-one working units; eight tenants rent or sub-lease three *or more* holdings, while one man has ten with a total of 250 acres. While as many as half the holdings in any one township may be worked by two or three tenants a high proportion of small, single holdings of less than 20 acres still remain. The majority of these, as are the large working-units, are well and fully worked and are situated on wholly improved or improvable land. The proportion of arable to grass is higher than in those holdings in the northern part of Easter Ross and along its highland margins and their stock rearing economy is not dissimilar to that of the adjacent larger farms; they differ from these in the smaller proportion and lesser diversity of arable crops, in the smaller scale of their operations and in a somewhat greater emphasis on sheep than cattle rearing. Some of the smallest and least accessible are used for grazing only or have, in a few cases, been so neglected as to have reverted to gorse scrub; but these are relatively few in number and are usually occupied by old retired people.

Also, in comparison to the small holdings north of the Cromarty Firth, those on the Black Isle and in the Strathpeffer area reveal a healthier age structure, with fewer retired folk and a higher percentage of those of working age (see Table I). Few however of the single holdings of less than 20 acres are full-time crofts, and the tenant as well as members of his family supplement their income by other forms of employment in the surrounding area. Modern hydro-electric and forestry developments in the adjacent "highland" part of Easter Ross combined with ease of access to Inverness and more particularly to a number of small but growing service centres—such as Dingwall, Muir of Ord, Cononbridge and Beauly—in the immediate vicinity, provide opportunities for supplementary occupation. These opportunities have undoubtedly tended to retard rural depopulation and to perpetuate the existence of holdings which would otherwise be too small to be really economic or to provide a reasonable income. In addition the change of tenure from crofter-tenant to owner-occupier, which continues as more and more of these areas are sold out by the respective estates, will also help to ensure the existence of the small holdings longer than might have been expected.

The crofts of Easter Ross are then modified remnants of a

settlement pattern which evolved during and as a result of the agricultural improvements of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. They represent an intermediate, and in other regions ephemeral, stage in the improvement of formerly uncultivated land and its eventual organisation in large, single farm units, which has persisted longer in north-eastern Scotland than elsewhere in the lowlands. However, abandonment together with amalgamation and consolidation of these formerly very small holdings has, particularly since 1920, been proceed-

TABLE I

Township	Area	No. of crofts	No. of working units	No. of full-time crofts	Age structure of Inhabitants		
					A	B	C
Gower . . .	Strathpeffer	12	7	1	7	13	9
Loch Ussie . . .	Strathpeffer	16	9	4	1	8	5
Inchvannie . . .	Strathpeffer	11	7	?		?	
Heights of Fodderty	Strathpeffer	9	6	1	11	13	3
Auchterneed and Bottacks	Strathpeffer	21	15	4	9	22	4
Drynie Park . . .	Black Isle	21	11	3	10	26	3
Balvaird . . .	Black Isle	20	13	0	12	32	2
Muir of Conon . . .	Black Isle	26	19	?	11	41	6

Full-time crofts are taken as those on which the *tenant* does not supplement his income by work off the croft: A = number of children at school; B = number of working age; C = number of pensioners.

ing at varying rates and must eventually result in their disappearance. Factors such as the trend towards increased owner-occupancy and the opportunities which allow of part-time crofting can, in the long run, only be temporary checks in the ultimate elimination of an uneconomic and not very efficient method of using good land. But while crofting may in time disappear as a type of farming in Easter Ross, relics of its former existence will contribute, in distinctive field and settlement patterns, a characteristic element to the agricultural landscape for some time to come.

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