# Dingwall and the Ross & Cromarty Election of 1847

## *by Forbes Munro of Dingwall Museum*

*Figure 1 Gilray's 'Electioneering', 1806 © British Museum*

### Victory

On 10 Auguust 1847 the result of the parliamentary election for the Ross and Cromarty constituency was due to be declared in the county town of Dingwall. The *Inverness Courier* described the scene, as James Matheson, the victorious Liberal candidate, approached the burgh from the south:

> *"… the inhabitants determined to give that gentleman a cordial and hearty greeting. Flags waved from the windows in Dingwall, and a procession was arranged to accompany the popular candidate from Conon House to the hustings. Two beautiful arches were erected at Conon Bridge, and another at Maryburgh; and it was at this spot where the electors of the south and north side of the Conon met'.*

The two groups merged at Maryburgh and moved on with pipers and the Dingwall band in the lead.

> *"When the procession entered the High Street, the effect was imposing in the extreme. From every window a banner waved and the cheers of the congregated multitude were absolutely deafening. Mr Matheson having reached the hustings at the Cross of Dingwall, was received with prodigious cheering, which lasted for some time."*

Later, 150 electors entertained Matheson to dinner in the Caledonian Hotel in Dingwall.

Such scenes were not uncommon after elections in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this case, however, the winning candidate had been unopposed. The former Conservative MP for the constituency did not seek re-election. No campaigning or voting had taken place. The outcome had been known for some time. Consequently, the exuberance on Dingwall High Street seems unlikely to have been an outburst of pleasure and relief from party supporters following a hard-fought campaign. To understand the reaction to Matheson's win, we must dig deeper into the events leading up to the election.

### The Contestants

Thomas Mackenzie of Applecross, a Wester Ross landowner and a Conservative, was the sitting MP. By the summer of 1845 rumours began to circulate that the Liberals were seeking a candidate to oppose him and that Mackenzie was already considering whether to stand for re-election (something he denied at the time). Thomas Mackenzie, often just referred to as 'Applecross', may be described as a traditional Highland landowner. The man selected to be his opponent was of a quite different stripe.

James Matheson, the son of an army officer from Sutherland, made his fortune in trade between India and China. He was a founding partner in Jardine Matheson & Co of Canton (and later, Hong Kong). In 1838, following an earlier short visit back to Britain he bough,t through a London agent, the Achany estate near Lairg, which had belonged to the Gladstone family. Attached to the purchase was the smaller Blackwells estate in Dingwall, which had come to the Gladstones through marriage. Although taking its name from farmland at the west of the town, the greater part of the property consisted of flat, open land between the east end of the High Street and the Cromarty Firth. It included Park House, on the east side of Hill Street, which had belonged to Provost Robertson.


*Figure 2 Applecross House © Applecross Heritage Centre*

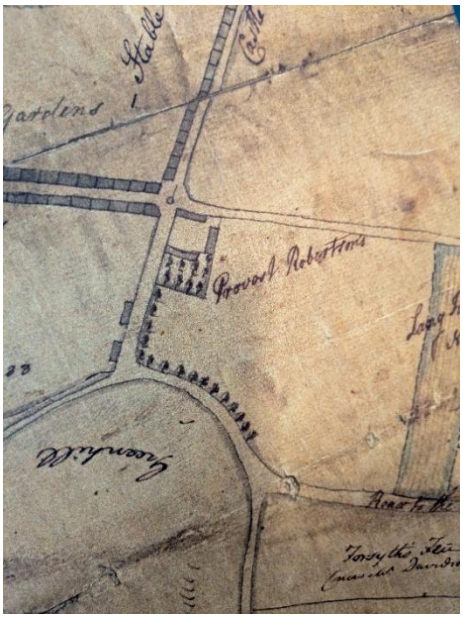

*Figure 4: Park House*
*© Dingwall Museum*

*Figure 3*
*Park House, Dingwall*
*© Forbes Munro*

In 1842 Matheson returned permanently from Canton – to use his Dingwall residence from time to time, to become a member of the burgh council, to purchase Lewis from Stewart-Mackenzie of Brahan and, in 1843, to take over from his recently-deceased partner, William Jardine, the parliamentary seat of Ashburton in Devon. In 1846 he chose instead to stand for election in Ross & Cromarty.

## The Political Calculus

Under any circumstances, Matheson would have been a strong opponent for Mackenzie – a wealthy man able to make generous philanthropic gestures, a former newspaper owner (founder of the only English-language newspaper in Canton) who was aware of the value of press publicity, and above all, the proprietor of Lewis.

While Blackwells in Dingwall might afford him local political ‘legitimacy’, possession of Lewis gave him political ‘clout’. About 15 per cent of the electorate of the Ross & Cromarty constituency resided in Lewis and tended to vote in accordance with the wishes of its landowner. Thomas Mackenzie was aware of this – and would claim in July 1847 that it was the principal reason influencing his decision to withdraw from the race. Nevertheless, Mackenzie’s growing unpopularity across the constituency – and Matheson’s countervailing popularity – offers a more likely explanation of the eventual outcome.

Matheson announced his candidacy in July 1846 and highlighted his two principal policy positions – support for the Free Church of Scotland, and for Free Trade as a guiding economic principle. In so doing he laid down markers separating him from Mackenzie and drew for backing on strong currents of sentiment which roiled Ross and Cromarty between 1842 and 1847.

*Figure 5: James Matheson, 1844 © Art UK*

**The Disruption**

In 1843 simmering disputes within the Church of Scotland, centred on the powers and responsibilities of Heritors [proprietors], turned into open revolt.

Across Scotland, ministers and congregations withdrew to set up their own places of worship- a process which in the Highlands tended to have a strong, underlying anti-landowner currency. In Dingwall parish the minister, Rev Hector Bethune, and about a third of the congregation remained in place while the majority left to construct a new church on Castle Street and to recruit John Kennedy of Killearnan to be their first minister. Elsewhere in the county the proportions leaving the parish churches were even higher than in Dingwall, and tensions between those staying and those departing were even more acute.

This was certainly the case in both Rosskeen parish (which included Alness and Invergordon) and Resolis parish on the Black Isle - where riots broke out in October 1843 when attempts were made to introduce Church of Scotland ministers to pulpits vacated by men departing for the Free Church. A number of the protestors were imprisoned in Dingwall's new county jail.


*Figure 6: Leaving The Manse © public domain*

Several landowners – Thomas Mackenzie among them - refused to make sites available for the construction of new churches and manses. Mackenzie would claim that in keeping his Applecross estates closed to seceders '*my sole desire was to support, and, if possible, strengthen the Established Church of Scotland***.**' [*Inverness Courier*, 10 September 1845] Although he later relented a little, and permitted a foundation stone to be laid in Lochcarron, the electoral damage had been done. In the meantime, James Matheson let it be known through the press that his factors in Sutherland and

Lewis had been instructed to assist new congregations in obtaining sites for churches. In Dingwall, he donated land for the construction of a manse and school for the Free Church.

## Poor Relief and The Winter Famine

The disturbance in religious matters shattered the welfare system traditionally operated by the parish churches. Parliament reacted by passing the Poor Law (Scotland) Act of 1845, which established commissioners at a county level to oversee parochial boards at the parish level. However, this system was still new and untried when Dingwall - along with the rest of Ross and Cromarty and the Highlands, more generally - experienced a serious subsistence crisis.

In 1846 the potato blight which previously hit Ireland and the more southerly parts of Scotland arrived in the Northern Highlands. Potatoes which should have been harvested in the autumn rotted in the fields and gardens. This took place at a time of relatively high food prices because of a run of poor grain harvests across northern Europe. In 1845 the UK parliament, faced with famine in Ireland and unrest in industrial cities, finally abolished the notorious Corn Laws which protected farmers' incomes and landlords' rents. Thomas Mackenzie, as M.P. for Ross, voted against the repeal; James Matheson, as M.P. for Davenport, voted for it – reflecting their respective positions on trade as well as related issues of poverty and social order.

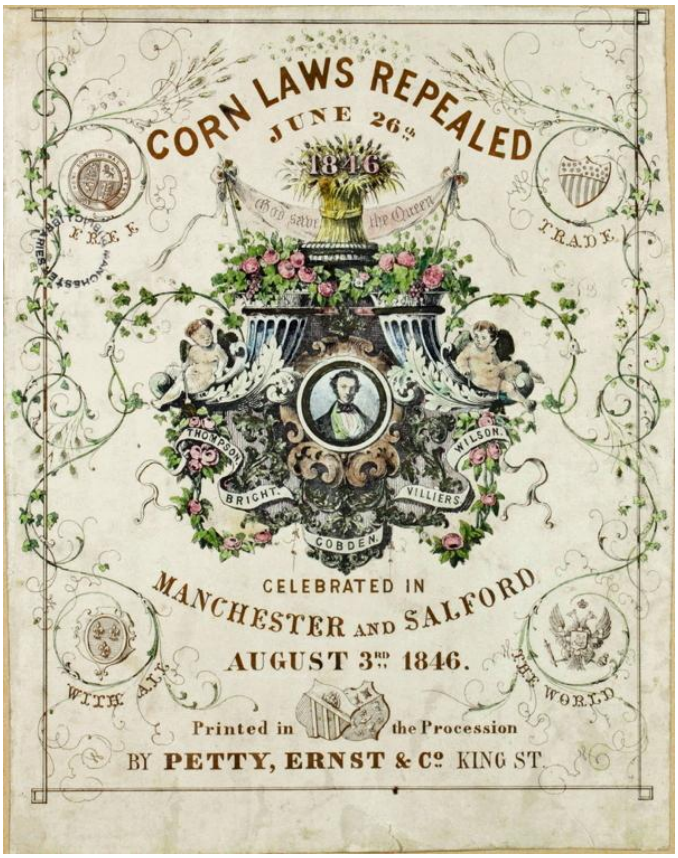


*Figure 6: Celebratory Poster, 1846 © Manchester City Archives*

However, repeal of the Corn Laws by itself could offer little immediate respite for the people of Ross-shire during the hard winter of 1846-47 because, even with a free market in cereals, there was still a shortage of grain supplies across Europe. The poorer inhabitants of Ross and Cromarty found themselves in a double squeeze affecting both availability and prices of foodstuffs. Real incomes fell and levels of poverty rose dramatically.

Conditions were most acute among the crofting communities of Wester Ross and Lewis, which were heavily dependent on the potato crop, but 'destitution' was also prevalent in the towns and villages of the eastern half of the county, where most of its wage-earners lived. Observers suggested that the working people of Dingwall were badly hit – at least by comparison with their counterparts in Tain or Cromarty. The town was already giving shelter to families cleared from the long glens and straths of the Conon River basin, with consequent pressures on wages and housing.

A powerful additional twist came from the fact that agriculture at the western end of the Cromarty Firth - in the parishes for which Dingwall served as the market town - had more of a 'mixed-farming' character than those in grain-growing Easter Ross. Potatoes were grown as a commercial crop alongside, or instead of, oats and barley. The blight therefore sharply reduced the incomes of farmers and larger crofters – and with it their demand for the goods and services which Dingwall supplied.

*"In Dingwall", the* Inverness Courier *reported at the height of late December snowstorms, "a considerable amount of destitution prevails among the lower classes – those especially who depend upon good weather for any work they can obtain. For want of firing, in one or two instances, families are subsisting on raw vegetables."*

It is not clear how much assistance the poor and needy received during the harsh winter of 1846-7. The new parochial boards aroused dissatisfaction because their rules prohibited help for those in employment. In December 1846 leading figures associated with the County Council began an attempt to intervene in local food markets. The idea was to take advantage of the abolition of the Corn Laws by purchasing grain – more especially 'Indian corn' (maize) from North

America. This would be stocked at depots at various locations – including Dingwall, Evanton, Avoch and Muir of Ord – where it would be sold on at cost price.

Such action might counter profiteering by farmers and grain merchants and serve to stabilize food prices. James Matheson was a major proponent and financial backer of this scheme. It got underway in Easter Ross but had barely begun in the parishes around Dingwall and in the Black Isle when, in February 1847, it was scuppered by a coalition of conservative landowners led by Duncan Davidson of Tulloch and Mackenzie of Applecross. These landowners argued that the County Council lacked the authority to raise a levy for famine relief – and that anyway the needs of the poor and hungry should be met by individual landowners taking responsibility for the tenants on their estates. Make-work projects - possibly using funds recently voted by Parliament for investment in drainage schemes – were mentioned as a potential method.

*Figure 7: Davidson of Tulloch (in later life) – a supporter of Mackenzie of Applecross © Am Baillie*

The burgh of Dingwall created its own committee for famine relief in December 1846. When it began operations, it confirmed that the local parochial board was indeed failing to meet the needs of the poor – some of whom were reduced to eating raw turnips to survive. With the aid of subscriptions – John Matheson and the Free Church to the fore – the committee established a soup kitchen in what had been the burgh jail. At the same time, the burgesses - alarmed by a fire at the West End in which arson was suspected - were worried that the famine might have unwelcome consequences. They established Dingwall's first police force, offering immediate night-time patrolling and a promise of future day-time patrols.

Concern that social disorder might arise from hunger and poverty were not unfounded. During February 1847 popular riots to prevent exporting of grain by sea, which first broke out in Aberdeen, spread westwards along the Banff and Moray coasts to arrive on the Cromarty Firth. Over the weekend of 27-28 February, rioting born from a mix of desperation and imitation took place in Dingwall, at Foulis Point and in Alness before military force brought it to an end. [For an account of the 'meal mob' in Dingwall, see here]

## The Political Consequences

Only a few months separated the events of February 1847 from the dissolution of Parliament. Although the weather improved, the potato blight did not disappear and memories of the winter famine, with its dissension and disorder, remained strong. In July 1847 Thomas Mackenzie held a meeting of his Conservative supporters in Invergordon and announced that, having canvassed the electors, he would not stand in the forthcoming election. He claimed that Matheson's political hold over Lewis was too strong an obstacle to be overcome. But Mackenzie had almost certainly also discovered that his opposition to the emergence of the Free Church and to the initiatives towards publicly funded famine relief had cost him political support. A letter from an anonymous 'gentleman in the county' was published in the *Inverness Courier* on 20 July 1847. It acknowledged the impact of these factors and tried to defend Mackenzie's actions. However, the author claimed that the principal cause of the loss was Sir Robert Peel's 'betrayal' in splitting the Conservatives over the repeal of the Corn Laws – a reminder to the electors, if one were needed, that the return of a reunified Conservative government could yet lead to a re-imposition of agricultural protection.

With Mackenzie out of the way, Matheson swept to victory, setting off the scenes described earlier of joy at the Dingwall hustings. Such was his standing in the town that four years later he was elected as its Provost – a largely honorary gesture in view of his other activities. He held the position until 1854 and remained as MP for Ross & Cromarty until 1868, all the while cultivating a reputation as a generous and benign proprietor of Lewis. For much of this time he also served as chairman of the P&O steamship company – which carried the mails and well-paying passengers from Britain to India and on to China.

## China – The Missing Element

A striking feature of the electioneering of 1845-7 is the absence of questions about the nature of Matheson's connections to China.

*Figure 8: European 'Factories' at Canton, 1810 © National Maritime Museum*

Odd references surfaced in public – in speculation over whether Matheson's candidacy might mean opportunities for young men to join his firm in China, or in an attempt by the editor of a Conservative newspaper to poke fun by likening his candidacy to a gaudy, overly-decorated rickshaw. But there was nothing in the way of informed comment about Matheson's former business operations in China, about the source of the wealth which allowed him to act as a generous benefactor for 'progressive' causes, or indeed about his family's continuing connections with morally dubious activities in the Far East.

By the 1830s, James Matheson's trading house had become the largest importer of opium from India to China – where 'the drug' was linked to significant levels of addiction. Importation having been prohibited by the Emperor of China, Jardine Matheson & Co collaborated with smugglers, transferring cargoes of opium to local vessels out on the Pearl River rather than in and through the officially-sanctioned trade centre at Canton. Such illegal activity complicated the Chinese Empire's system of 'managed trade' with foreigners, and relations became particularly acute during the later 1830s, when attempts were made to renegotiate British trade connections with the Empire. Both James Matheson and his partner, William Jardine, lobbied hard for the British government to use its power and influence to 'open-up' China to 'free trade'. Misunderstandings on both sides resulted in the First Opium War of 1839-42, when British forces were victorious. China was obliged to reduce its restrictions on international trade, including the importation of opium, and to cede the island of Hong Kong as a base for future British commercial operations. The war over, James Matheson retired from the firm, leaving its management to his nephews.

One of the fiercest critics of the decision to go to war with China in 1839 was the young M.P., William Ewart Gladstone who denounced it in the House of Commons as: *"A war more unjust in its origin, or calculated in its progress to cover the country with a permanent disgrace, I do not know and I've not read of....[our] flag is become a pirate flag to protect an infamous traffic."* [Hanes and Sanello, *The Opium Wars,* p.88]

He was criticising - albeit indirectly - a man now in possession of his grandfather's house and lands in Dingwall. However, even Gladstone's family links to the town appear to have been inadequate to convey knowledge of Matheson's past from London to the Northern Highlands of the 1840s.

Was it the case that, for the electors of Ross and Cromarty in 1847 and the burgesses of Dingwall in 1851, China was too remote and its affairs too unknown to tarnish the reputation of the man in whom they wished to place their trust? Or was it more the case that whatever they knew was set aside in the face of the immediate and pressing problems of a difficult and tumultuous decade? We shall probably never know.

**Sources and Further Reading:**


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