

Cromarty Courthouse Crumbs of Justice 5

The Thieves

Date

1779

Background

In 1779 the Laird of Cromarty was, for once, a man who cared about the welfare and employment of its inhabitants. George Ross has torn down the old semi-derelict Urquhart castle and built a fine modern country house above the town. He has also erected several 'manufactories' including a brewery, a nailworks and a ropeworks. These provided employment both for people from Cromarty and for people from further afield, often Gaelic speakers. This could be a great source of tension in the town (see The Mercat Cross script).

George Ross is the senior Justice whom you can see at the centre of the three in the Courtroom tableau but in this case, he did not sit as a Justice. The three Justices were led instead by Sir John Gordon of Invergordon, another wealthy landowner.

The name of **flax** in Latin is *Linum usitatissimum*, which roughly translates as *incredibly useful fibre*. Most Roman clothing was made of **linen**, the cloth made from flax. Flax is still occasionally grown as a crop on the Black Isle today, creating fields of vivid blue. The stems of the flax plant are exceptionally strong and defy hand picking, they have to be cut with a sharp blade. These stems, when soaked in water, create wads of pale **tow** fibre, used for rope and wadding for upholstery. The fibres can also become pliable enough to be spun and woven into a fine and valuable cloth.

Cromarty's main use of flax is likely to have been as spun tow yarn which was then starched to strengthen and stiffen it and mix it with hemp, to be woven into strong rope for use onboard the many boats and ships using Cromarty harbour.

In this activity, four of the people involved in the alleged theft of flax from George Ross' ropeworks make individual statements about their involvement.

Pupils will listen to each and decide on the relative guilt of each individual and choose an appropriate punishment for each of them before George Ross's actual sentencing is revealed.

Vocabulary

begging	asking for money or food at the roadside
besom	here, a bad woman (literally a broom made of twigs)
bobbin	round wooden peg on to which yarn or thread is wound before being woven
hank	a coiled bundle (here of yarn)
hemp	another strong plant-based fibre used for rope
manufactories	the origin of the modern word factory – a place where things were made by hand
pliable	bendy
prostitution	here, being paid to sleep with men in order to survive
starch	a stiffening agent, often made from wheat or rice
thrawn	obstinate, pig-headed, stubborn
upholstery	furniture stuffing (today foam, in the past horsehair or tow)
wad, wadding	here, tufts of pale-coloured raw flax fibre before weaving, often used for rope or to stuff furniture
yarn	here, spun flax

Characters

John Mackenzie, a starcher

Anne Hossack Mackenzie, his wife, a part-time bobbin-winder

Grissel Husband Manson her friend, a stabler's wife

Hugh Manson, Grissel's husband

More people were involved in the original trial, but we have simplified it to four. All these statements are fictionalised, loosely based on what is known of the trial.

John Mackenzie's statement

Forgive me Mister Ross, for my English is not that good. I am still more used to speaking the Gaelic.

Well, Sir, what am I to say? This woman, Annie Hossack, from Cromarty, Sir. She was friendly to me since the day I arrived and knew no-one. She had a few words of the Gaelic and used them well. Not all the Cromarty folk were so kind. I thought she liked me. I was that pleased when she said we could wed.

One day when we were drinking Annie said, what a pity it was that all the yarn she wound on to the bobbins should be used as rope when it could be sold for so much more. She said it could be woven into fine linen for dresses. And why should we not sell a dress like that. She said a friend of hers knew someone who would weave it.

I said no at first, but on she went and on. Then she just began to take it, more and more each week, and I, like a fool, said nothing.

I know have married a bad woman. I am sorry, Sir.

Annie Hossack's statement

Weel Sir, thon Gaelicker, John Mackenzie, from the moment he arrived in Cromarty, he wouldn't leave me alone! Always snuffing around Annie Urquhart and masel', telling us we had fine, blue eyes and voices like larks. So I married him, in case she did. More fool me, for he is a terrible man with a drink in him. One night we were taking a wee whisky punch in the alehouse. He said then, what a shame it was that all the money from the ropeworks should trickle into the pockets of some Englishman – forgive me Mister Ross, I know you were born in Easter Ross before you went to London for work, but that is how this Gaelicker brute described you.

Mackenzie said as how it would be better if some of the money went into our pockets. He said he had a plan, but that we would need a weaver who could hold his tongue. I foolishly told him a friend had told me of just the man, Davie Grant over at Newton. I enjoy my work at your manufactory, Sir. I did not mean to take any of the yarn, just wind it on to the bobbins. It was all Mackenzie. I have been led astray by my thieving, cruel husband, Sir. Please, please be merciful!

Hugh Manson's statement

Sir, my wife Grissel has ever been a thravn besom. Her friend Annie Hossack has led her into this. I work hard for you, Sir, and am out of the house from dawn until dusk. I knew nothing of this matter until your man turned up and hammered at our door three days since to arrest us for thieving! When he searched, he found the sacks of bobbin yarn concealed under the bed, and then found more over at Davie Newton's already half-

woven. All the work of this thieving Gaelicker Mackenzie and his wife, if you ask me! I am content with my job at your stables, Sir, and I would not have done this foolish thing.

Grissel Husband Manson's statement

Ach, Mister Ross, I don't know what the others have said to you, but you have to know this is not my fault. Annie Hossack asked me one day if I knew a weaver who could weave linen. She told me that she and Mackenzie planned to buy a little yarn out of their wages to weave into a fine dress to wear to the kirk on a Sunday, and that Mackenzie would drop it off at our house every week. If I could find the weaver, there might be enough to make me a wee shift too. I was that pleased! I told her I knew a good weaver, Davie Grant, and how much he would charge.

I didn't know that the yarn was stolen, Mister Ross. You have to believe me!

Activity

Ask four good readers to read aloud each statement and ask the class to take notes on what each of the defendants says they did, what they say the others did, and whether they think each of these defendants is innocent or guilty. Encourage debate and ask them to think of a good follow-up question to ask each defendant which would further explore their guilt or innocence.

This is likely to end up with a decision that all are guilty to some degree, perhaps less so Hugh Manson and his wife Grissel.

In the eyes of the law at the time, a wife was viewed as her husband's responsibility, so Hugh's plea of ignorance was unlikely to make any difference.

George Ross was furious about this crime, which he must have felt as yet another betrayal of his generosity (c.f. The Mercat Cross). It was recommended that all should be 'punished in an exemplary manner... in order to deter others from like Practices in time coming.' He did not want a repeat of the incident, so the punishment was to be harsh.

It was banishment for seven years.

Today banishment may not seem a terrible punishment – we now move house and work regularly. In the 18th century most people lived out their lives in one place. To be forced to move was to be sent away from all support in the form of friends and family and it was a punishment dreaded by all. Imagine - no home, no family, no income, no friends.

The men offered to enlist as soldiers with the 'Sutherland Regiment of Fencible Men' for the space of seven years instead – at least they would then be fed and housed and were rid of their troublesome wives. This offer was accepted.

The women did not have this option. They were ‘carried to the Mercat Cross’ outside the courthouse and there had a label reading ‘thief’ and a hank of stolen yarn hung around their necks. Then they were drummed through the streets of Cromarty - probably with the whole town sneering and jeering and spitting at them. They were then given eight days to get out of town – for seven years. This meant they could not return to the Cromarty/Resolis area in that time. If they were fortunate, a relative elsewhere might have taken them in or they might get a job as a maidservant somewhere. If not, begging and prostitution might have been the only way to survive.

Discuss the justice and fairness of this outcome with the class, looking at the differences in punishment between the men and the women. If you have looked at other Crumbs of Justice activities, compare and contrast.

Extension activity

- Flax seed is readily available and can be grown in pots to allow pupils to test its amazing strength. They can then cut, steep and then plait it to make mini ropes.
- Write an account of the crime from the viewpoint of George Ross himself (useful to look at the Mercat Cross and Broken Fiddle scripts too).