

The Myth of the Forgotten Tartans.

"It is generally regarded that 'clan tartans' date no earlier than the beginning of the 19th century, and are an example of an invented tradition." (Wikipedia)

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The history of tartan is complex and not entirely accessible. The subject of "clan tartans" is particularly disputatious. There are two extreme positions on the matter.

An outdated view is that from time immemorial those with Scottish surnames (members of Highland clans or Lowland families) wore specific tartan patterns which were exclusive to those surnames.

The present "received wisdom" is that the entire concept of clan tartans is bogus, having been invented in the nineteenth century by charlatans and unscrupulous merchants.

The truth is to be sought somewhere between these two positions.

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"By the time the Act was repealed in 1785... Tartan was almost a thing of the past... details of the old patterns were lost... and such fragments of old tartan cloth as remained were so worn and perished that they were of little value in adding to the little knowledge that remained of pre-1745 tartans." (Collins Gem Guide to Clans and Tartans).

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If Clan Tartans were not, in fact, invented until long after Culloden,

the only realistic suspects can be the big manufacturers, most notably William Wilson & Sons of Bannockburn. According to their records they were selling named Clan Tartans as early as 1793. By any reckoning thousands of Highland folk whose memories stretched back to the time before Proscription (the outlawing of tartan by the British government) must have still been alive then and able to distinguish between a genuine tradition and a merchant's "con". A seventy year old person in 1793 would have been 23 in the year of Culloden.

The argument that the concept of Clan Tartans was not invented until around the beginning of the nineteenth century depends upon an assumption that Highlanders alive at that time had no knowledge of whether such a tradition had or had not existed prior to the period of Proscription (1747-1782). In fact it has been estimated that almost one third of the generation which saw the introduction of Proscription were still alive when it was lifted.

It would, of course, be wrong to underestimate the effect of the ban. It was enacted by a ruthless government which intended it to be enforced and there are records of instances in which it was. Probably the weaving of tartan in many glens ceased or was greatly inhibited (at least during the early years of the legislation). It should be remembered, however, that the ban only applied in the Highland part of Scotland, it did not apply to women, and judging by the amount of portraits of the time in which the sitters wore tartan, it seems not to have deterred gentry. **(Gentlemen who could command three servants, women and boys, in addition to those serving in the army, were exempt from the ban).**

The Earl of Holderness, in 1752, noted reports that *"...universally the sheriffs, or their deputies, are very negligent of their duty in omitting to secure [imprison] persons wearing the Highland dress or carrying arms."*

There is, in fact, much evidence, not least from the Old Statistical Accounts, which were written by parish ministers, to indicate that the ban on tartan was far from entirely effective. James D.

Scarlett, widely considered to have been the best authority on such matters, ventured the following opinion – *“Except in the hands of a few Hanoverian officers, who saw in it an opportunity to persecute the Highlanders, the Dress Act does not seem to have been much enforced...”*

The point of this is: Tartan was obviously enormously significant to Highlanders or the Hanoverian government would have had no reason to ban it. Given this significance surely, in spite of the ban (or in a sense because of it), steps would have been taken to preserve the knowledge relating to tartan and the old traditional patterns. It is inconceivable that the Highland people, faced with this measure from a hated regime, would have tamely destroyed every stitch of old plaiding and applied themselves obediently to the business of forgetting their traditional setts. Proscription simply would not have brought about a period of racial amnesia during which all memory of tartan patterns stopped being handed down from father to son and from mother to daughter. The oft-repeated assertion that this was so is the real invention. It not only offends common sense, but is contradicted by a sound body of evidence.

We know from the ledger of William Wilson & Sons that prior to the repeal of Proscription their customers were (apart from military and colonial) largely on Scotland’s eastern coastlands. However, after repeal in 1782, they increased sales of tartan in the Highlands. This is to say that when they began to promote Clan Tartans they were selling them to Highlanders, many of whom were old enough to remember whether such a concept was authentic or a deception. We also know that Wilsons took trouble to seek out genuine traditional setts from the Highlands.

“Wilson’s’ were known to have toured the Highlands in the late C18th and early C19th looking for old patterns that they could use as a basis for their traditional tartans.”(Peter MacDonald, Head of Research, STA)

Even as late as 1822, the year of the visit of King George to

Edinburgh, there remained alive eye-witnesses to the '45 (Patrick Grant, who had fought alongside the Glengarry regiment at Culloden, was 108. The widow of James Steuart of Tulloch, who gave Prince Charles Edward a pair of brogues at Dunkeld, was 99). This was some 30 years after Wilsons had started to sell Clan Tartans in the Highlands. Sir Walter Scott played such a major part in the organising of the 1822 visit (and has, indeed, been thought of by some as the inventor of Clan Tartans) that it is worth considering his views on their provenance. He is often quoted as saying – *“I do not believe a word of the nonsense about every clan or name having a regular pattern which was undeviatingly adhered to.”* Less well known is his conviction that Clan Tartans were *“of considerable antiquity”* and that he believed that he could demonstrate that they had been worn *“a great many years before 1745.”* These comments indicate that Scott very sensibly saw that Clan Tartans *realistically defined* had their origins during the era prior to Culloden.

The present author's suggestion for a realistic definition is – *any pattern which has had a special association with a particular clan, probably because it has been woven and worn in a territory dominated by the clan in question, or any tartan known to have been worn in a uniform manner by a clan.*

What is being opposed here is the assertion that the very *concept* of Clan Tartans was invented some fifty or more years after Culloden. It is not the purpose of this article to maintain that *all* clans necessarily had *exclusive* setts pre-'45, but that there is convincing evidence that *some* clans had tartan patterns which were particularly associated with them, and that, therefore, *in effect* there were Clan Tartans in Highland society prior 1745.

Crucial to penetrating this mystery is the actual experience of the generations of Highlanders who lived throughout the eighteenth century. These were the people who knew, and who handed down, the truth. It is a fact of history that generally only the wealthy and influential leave records of their recollections and opinions for posterity, so relevant material is strictly limited. In fact the present writer has found not a single clear and specific statement from

any such person denying the existence of Clan Tartans prior to 1745. On the other hand, evidence by statement or by implication to the effect that Clan Tartans were a reality of the Jacobite era is not difficult to come by.

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Anne MacVicar was born on Lochaweside, Argyll, in 1755. This was during the period of the ineffective ban on tartan. She married and became Mrs. Grant of Laggan, Speyside. Anne was a poet. In 1795 she wrote *The Highlanders*. When this work was included in the collection *Poems on Various Subjects*, published in 1803, her notes to *The Highlander* included this statement – “... (*tartan*) was the manufacture of their women, and the distinction of their clans, each having had a sett (as they styled it) of tartan peculiarly their own.”

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General David Stewart of Garth was the co-organizer, with Sir Walter Scott, of the 1822 Royal Visit. Garth had served in the Black Watch regiment since 1787. He was the author of *Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland*. In his preface to that publication the General explains that he had been fortunate in having received much of the knowledge which he passes on from older men of the regiment. “*I had also the advantage of being acquainted with several highland gentlemen who had served as private soldiers in the regiment when first organized.*” (This was in 1739.) Garth then has this to say about Clan Tartans –

“In dyeing and arranging the various colours of their tartans, they displayed no small art and taste, preserving at the same time the distinctive patterns (or sets, as they were called) of the different clans, tribes, families, and districts. Thus a Macdonald, a Campbell, a Mackenzie. &c. was known by his plaid; and in like manner the Athole, Glen-orchy, and other colours of different districts were easily distinguishable.”

Garth adds an observation which, though only a statement of common sense, is worth repeating in the context of this article –

“It was easy to preserve and perpetuate any particular set, or pattern...”

Those who refuse to accept evidence of this quality must resort to effectively accusing Mrs. Grant and General Stewart of having been misled or being in some other way channels of disinformation. Is their testimony to be overruled in favour of a modern prejudice?

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The Highland Society of London was founded in 1778. Simon Fraser of Lovat was its first president. He had led his clan regiment on the field of Culloden. In 1815 the Society began its collection of “certified tartans”. Clan chiefs were invited to submit sealed samples of their authentic Clan Tartans. Regarding this exercise Jamie Scarlett ventured the following opinion – *“The people who contributed to the Highland Society collection at the beginning do not seem to have had much trouble rustling up a genuine tartan; it seems to have been 1822 and later when difficulties arose...”*

Sir John Murray MacGregor was born in 1745. His father, Evan MacGregor, was a Jacobite major, aide de camp to Prince Charles Edward in the '45. Sir John's uncle, Robert MacGregor of Glencarnaig, commanded the MacGregor regiment at Prestonpans. Sir John himself registered the MacGregor tartan with the Highland Society of London.

Those who insist that Clan Tartans were not “invented” until Sir John was almost fifty years old may wonder how a man with his personal experience, family history and access to tradition could be deceived by (or be a party to) a cynical commercial ploy which would bring him neither profit nor honour.

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Patrick MacDougall of MacDougall was born in 1742. He became the 24th Chief of his clan. Walter Scott said of him that he had been “in six battles and thirty times under fire”. This Chief registered the MacDougall tartan with the Highland Society of London. Notes in the records of William Wilson & Sons, dated 1831, refer to the MacDougall tartan as being then “*more than a century old and perfectly genuine*”. (In fact recent [2010] examination of an old sample of MacDougall tartan led Peter MacDonald, Head of Research, Scottish Tartans Authority, to conclude that the sett dated to pre circa 1750.) From the above we can see the implied progression from authentic clan era MacDougall sett, to the MacDougall clan tartan marketed by Wilsons in the early 19th century, to the same tartan known to this day as “MacDougall”. Additionally, however, the same researcher’s more recent work on the Appin/Lorn tartans (based on actual surviving pieces) places Wilson’s “Locheil” and the “McColl” clan tartan into much the same category. He dates them to the “clan era” and sources them from the districts occupied by the said clans. The present writer would be inclined to add “Stewart of Appin” to the above.

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At the risk of labouring the point, when William Wilson & Sons started to sell Clan Tartans to Scottish Highlanders there could have been absolutely no mystery as to whether this was an authentic tradition or a commercial novelty. If a person was too young to remember 1745 and what had gone before, he or she had only to ask a father, mother, uncle, aunt, or an elderly neighbour or friend. It seems unlikely that proud Highlanders would buy into something they knew to be a “racket”. As for the disappearance of all the old setts, no matter how often this has been copied from book to book, it was always too preposterous to

require serious attention. There was no great cultural cleavage which separated Highlanders of the 1790s from those of the 1740s. No great blackout. It had to be invented to make the story of the Clan Tartan “swindle” stand up. Of course big manufacturers made the most of Clan Tartans, exploited them, if that term is preferred, but they did not dream the idea up out of thin air and gleefully bamboozle a generation of Highland Rip Van Winkles.

With regard to provenance, each Clan Tartan has to be considered individually. Some have been passed down from Jacobite times, some are military in origin, some were designed or adopted in the early nineteenth century, and yet others are even more recent. There need not be any sense of the “romantic and gullible” versus the “wise and realistic”. In truth, where the history of tartan is concerned, very few are wise. It is surely ironic that such a vibrantly colourful subject is comprised so frustratingly of grey areas. Anyone championing any point of view (including this one) has difficult questions to answer.

Allan Breck Stewart, of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, was surely a romantic character. Yet he was a real man and Stevenson's novel was based very much on real events. These events took place during the period of Proscription. Regarding the sett which we know as “Stewart of Appin” James D. Scarlett had this to say –

“Without being foolishly definite, I would say that it would be probable that Allan Breck wore the Appin Stewart sett and would certainly regard it as authentic.”

Willie Scobie