

MacDonnell of Keppoch - A tartan of the '45

Introduction

In Aug 2013 the Scottish auction house Lyon & Turnbull sold a framed Jacobite display titled 'The Fatal '45'. The display contained 'a fragment of tartan, silver button and a pen and ink of the tomb of the last Stuarts' (Fig 1). The plaque states that the case contains 'A silver button and a piece of the plaid, left at Moy Hall by Prince Charles Edward, during his wanderings after Culloden. The suit to which it belonged, was made from a tartan, spun for the last of the Stuarts by Mrs MacDonnell of Keppoch.'



Fig 1. Framed display containing a piece of tartan spun and woven by Mrs MacDonell of Keppoch.
Photo credit: Lyon & Turnbull

Also included in the frame is a hand-written note¹ detailing the tartan's provenance; 'The MacDonell (Keppoch) tartan spun by Mrs MacDonell of Keppoch at the time of the '45 of which a suit of clothes was given to Prince Charlie when he left his own, during his wanderings. The plaid of this suit he left at Moy Hall and it was long in the possession of the MacKintoshes tho I believe that the present family have not got it.'

Logically the plaque post-dates the note. There are inconsistencies between the narratives and both contain historical inaccuracies. The suit was said to have been made from yarn spun² by Mrs MacDonnell³ of Keppoch and that the plaid from the suit was left at Moy Hall

¹ The hand-writing style of the note suggests that it was written sometime after the '45. In all likelihood composed in the early-mid 1800s.

² References elsewhere to the Moy Hall Plaid say that Mrs MacDonnell also dyed the yarn but no indication if she or someone else wove it.

during the Prince's wanderings after Culloden; and finally, we are told that the suit was given to him when he left his own during his time on the run. This post-Culloden timeframe is at odds with the story of how the Lady Anne MacKintosh acquired the plaid.⁴ The Prince is known to have stayed at Moy Hall on 16 February 1746 (the occasion of the celebrated Rout of Moy) but there is no evidence that he tarried there following Culloden. Writing of the plaid, Drummond-Norieⁱ stated that the Prince stayed with Keppoch the night before visiting Moy (i.e. on 15 Feb) which is when Mrs MacDonnell presented him with the plaid⁵. This is contradicted by Blaikie who makes no mention of the Prince ever staying with Keppoch and has him staying with Grant of Dalrachny (Carrbridge)ⁱⁱ.

There is no suggestion in any account that the suit of clothes was left at Moy and neither descriptions accompanying the framed specimen explains where it was acquired. There are a number of stories concerning the Prince changing his clothes during his escape; his clothing was too identifiable and the replacement was to allow him to blend in with the local population⁶.

The Specimen

The framed fragment is 20 cms x 13 cms (widest point)⁷. It is uniformly woven from singles (non-plyed) yarn in both warp and weft at 54 epi⁸. There is a line of stitching visible running left to right approximately 2 cms from the top of the specimen as viewed (Fig 2). The stitching thread appears to be linen, the position suggests that it was a seam and the shape of the specimen that it may have been cut from a coat sleeve.



Fig 2. Specimen removed from the frame and rotated to the correct weaving alignment with the stitching visible along the top. Photo credit: The Battle of Falkirk Muir 1746 Visitor Centre⁹.

³ The name was historically Anglicised as *MacDonnell/MacDonell* (from the Gaelic spelling *MacDhomhnuill*) but nowadays is also spelt *MacDonald*. All three versions are used in this paper to reflect the quoted source.

⁴ The Moy Hall Plaid is discussed in this paper on the [Plaid given to Lady MacKintosh of Moy Hall by Prince Charles Edward](#)

⁵ Drummond-Norie's account only mentions the plaid, not of it being part of a suit of clothes.

⁶ This paper on the [MacDonald of Borrodale](#) tartan explores the best known example of a plainer tartan he was given.

⁷ The image was removed from the frame and rotated to align with how it would have been woven.

⁸ Ends per inch – the density of the woven cloth.

⁹ The specimen is currently in private hands but will be displayed at the future Visitor Centre.

The material is naturally dyed in four colours: red; green and two blues, dark and mid-blue. If tested it is likely that the analysis would reveal that dyes to have been those commonly use in 18th century specimens:

- Red – Cochineal + a tin or alum mordant.
- Green – Indigo + an indeterminate yellow source.
- Blues – Indigo

Of note, both the shades; the epi; and importantly the sett of the Moy Hall specimen, differ from that of the framed Keppoch piece. The Moy Hall red is brighter and nearer scarlet, the green darker, the pattern more complex and the cloth slightly denser (Fig 3). This last point may indicate that it was woven on a different loom and possibly by a different weaver.



Fig 3. Comparison of the Keppoch and Moy Hall specimens showing the differences in colour, setting and quality. © The Author

The Sett

The setting is typical of mid-18th century red type tartans that bear what D. C. Stewartⁱⁱⁱ classified as the 'MacKintosh Motif': *The basic pattern consists of two broad stripes of green, flanked by narrower stripes of blue. The MACKINTOSH is just this, with the addition of a blue line at the centre. In the others it is usual for the expanse of the red ground to contain a few contrasting fine lines* (Setts, p25). The motif can be seen in the comparison of the MacKintosh tartan and the Keppoch tartan (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Comparison of the MacKintosh (top) and Keppoch setts. © The Author

Stewart's Setts gives a simplified version of the Keppoch which omits the fine light blue lines (Fig 5). Writing of the design he says: *The MacDonell of Keppoch, which is supported by considerable authority, so closely resembles the Clan MacKintosh as to lay the present attribution open to doubt. A composite MacDonell-MacKintosh tartan does not consist well with the long history of inter-clan strife.* He doesn't specify what the 'considerable authority' was and reflects the 'clan tartan theory' prevalent at the time.



Fig 5. The Keppoch sett given by Stewart (1950) omitting the fine blue lines. © The Author

Stewart's comment also assumes that the MacKintosh tartan is older. Elsewhere he says that the MacKintosh '*...is one of the few ancient tartans so well authenticated to admit of doubt or question*'. However, whilst the MacKintosh may well be an ancient tartan, a phrase not qualified, the oldest known specimen dates to c1800, well after the date of the Keppoch specimen discussed here. The so-called MacKintosh Motif is found in a number of mid-18th century specimens from the Central Highlands and may well reflect a style of pattern common to and widely use in the area. Perhaps the best example of this is a comparison with the plaid said to have been worn by Thomas Fraser of Struy at Culloden (Fig 6).

MacDonell of Keppoch



Fraser of Struy

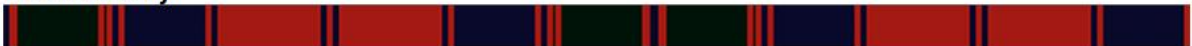


Fig 6. Comparison between the MacDonald of Keppoch and Fraser of Struy tartans. © The Author

A notable feature of the tartan is the triple-stripe centred on the red ground. Stewart (1950) called the triple-stripe feature the MacDonald motif on account of the number of old MacDonald and related tartans that employ it.

Placing the Keppoch fragment onto a larger image of the tartan reveals how the specimen relates to the overall design (Fig 7).



Fig 7. The Keppoch fragment positioned in the overall design. © The Author

Early References

Like many Jacobite era patterns the MacDonnell of Keppoch tartan was not included in any of the standard 19th century tartan publications. The first rendition of the design was in Macleay's *Highlanders of Scotland*, 1870^{iv} which includes Angus MacDonnell of Inch¹⁰ wearing the tartan (Fig 8). There is the possibility that the drawing dates to c1855¹¹ but without reference to the original it is impossible to know if it was the same as the 1870 published version or a more basic study. Whether 1855 or 1870, what is clear is that the tartan was in use at that date. How widespread this use was is unclear and it was not included in any book on tartans and Highland Dress until 1924^v.



Fig 8. Angus MacDonald of Inch wearing the Keppoch tartan. Macleay 1870

The tartan (Fig 9) was one of relatively few shown by MacKay¹². He says of it that '*We are indebted for the pattern of tartan to Miss Julia MacDonell of Keppoch. The pattern is very old, and was worn by a remote ancestor of Miss MacDonell's*'.

Unfortunately MacKay gives no further detail and it has proved impossible to identify Miss Julia MacDonell of Keppoch¹³. Nor is it clear if the pattern was copied from an actual specimen as might be supposed or was taken from Macleay's drawing. Both are notable for the omission of the fine light blue stripe between the red and dark blue which is apparent in the original specimen.

¹⁰ Macleay and MacDonald were second half-cousins and g. grandsons of Alexander, 16th of Keppoch killed at Culloden.

¹¹ This portrait, painted by Macleay before the sitter emigrated to Australia in 1855, was the prototype for the whole series.

¹² It's not clear why but all the tartans shown are associated with the MacDonalds.

¹³ Possibly MacKay's error for Jessie MacDonnell b.1840, third of six daughters born to Angus MacDonald, 20th of Keppoch?

Given the size of Macleay's drawing, the large sett and the fact that the hand-colouring was done by someone else, the omission is perhaps understandable, less so in MacKay's image. It is possible that he had access to a specimen that didn't have the fine blue stripe, or he may simply have missed the line which is only two threads in the original. The observant reader will notice that the dark fine stripes in MacKay's print appear black whereas they should be blue. This is a result of the printing process which was less discriminating at the time.



Fig 9. The MacDonnell of Keppoch tartan.
MacKay 1924

Whilst the connection of Miss Julia (Jessie?) MacDonell of Keppoch with the tartan is unclear, the link with Angus MacDonald of Inch is beyond doubt¹⁴. The fact that Angus is depicted wearing it raises the possibility that he or Macleay may have owned or had access to an original specimen, possibly the fragment discussed here. If Angus did own a piece it could well have belonged to his grandfather or great grandfather and have been worn at Culloden.

Confusion over the Keppoch and Moy Hall Fragments

Mention has already been made of the conflation of the Keppoch and Moy Hall fragments in the note accompanying the framed specimen discussed here. This is understandable, the story of the Prince's association led to the plaid being revered as a Jacobite relic and it was subsequently divided amongst Charles' supporters as a keepsake. The tradition of the Prince leaving the plaid at Moy before Culloden is cited by both McIan^{vi} and D. W. Stewart^{vii}.

The story of that piece is further confused by Stewart's reference¹⁵ to plaid having been given to the Prince by MacDonald of Keppoch. Interestingly, Stewart does not include the framed Keppoch tartan in his *Old & Rare* which is perhaps surprising. He had access to many of old specimens when he compiled his work and the omission of this sett suggests that it was in private hands and not known by the various tartan collectors of the day, unlike others he included.

Conclusion

The spinning, weaving and dyeing of the framed specimen is typical of mid-18th century rural tartan and is comparable with other relics of the period. The shape of the fragment and the remnants of stitching are consistent with it having been cut from a tailored garment, probably a coat, rather than from a plaid. That would fit with the tradition that it was from a suit of clothes.

¹⁴ Angus MacDonald was the grandson of Angus Ban MacDonell, illegitimate son of Alexander, 16th of Keppoch. Angus Ban fought alongside his father at Culloden and according to contemporary accounts carried the mortally wounded Alexander off the field. Angus Ban became de facto chief until resigning in favour of Alexander's legitimate son Ranald.

¹⁵ Stewart (1893) includes two versions of the Moy Hall plaid, one of which he attributes to the MacDonalds of Keppoch, plus a plaid said to have been found on the Culloden battlefield. All three are actually taken from fragments of the Moy Hall plaid.

Nineteenth century narratives conflate this fragment with the so-called Moy Hall plaid, confuse the itinerary of the Prince and associate both tartans with him. This is exemplified by the plaque on the case and the framed note which are at odds with each other and historically incorrect. It has been demonstrated that the Keppoch and Moy Hall tartans differ, as does their spinning and weaving quality which may point to a different source. There is no evidence to support the Prince having visited Keppoch's house either before or after Culloden. The Prince could easily have been given the plaid left at Moy by Keppoch or someone else before he visited Moy in February 1746. It seems less likely that a length of cloth sufficient for a suit, whatever that comprised, was spun and dyed by Mrs MacDonnell of Keppoch and somehow ended up with a tailor, probably in Edinburgh¹⁶ where it was made up for the Prince. In fact, the idea that she spun the yarn especially for him is fanciful given the time it would have taken. This was not something done quickly, it would have taken several weeks to spin and dye the yarn and then some further time to weave it. There is also a surviving coat that has a better claim to having been worn by Prince Charles Edward and exchanged in the days after Culloden.

It is regretted that the origins and subsequent ownership of this fragment are not recorded. Traditionally the pattern is associated with the MacDonalds of Keppoch. Macleay's drawing is proof that the tartan was worn in the mid-19th century by a descendent of Alexander, 16th of Keppoch which adds credence to the claimed association. Whether or not it was worn by the Prince, made by Mrs MacDonnell of Keppoch for her husband Alexander or for his natural son will probably never be known. Without doubt the MacDonald of Keppoch tartan can be dated with certainty to the mid-18th century and in all likelihood has strong connections with the events of the '45.

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ⁱ **DRUMMOND-NORIE W.** 1897 *Loyal Lochaber and its associations historical, genealogical, and traditionary*, Morrison Brothers, Glasgow

ⁱⁱ **BLAIKIE W. B.** 1898 *Itinerary of Prince Charles Edward Stuart from his landing in Scotland July 1746 (sic) to his departure in September 1746*, T. and A. Constable, Edinburgh

ⁱⁱⁱ **STEWART D.C.** 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shepheard Walwyn., London 1977

^{iv} **MACLEAY K.** 1870 *The Highlanders of Scotland.*, Mr Mitchell, Publisher to the Queen, London

^v **MACKAY J. G.** 1924 *The Romantic Story of Highland Garb and Tartan*, Aneas MacKay, Stirling

^{vi} **LOGAN J and MCIAN R.R.** 1845 *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands*. Ackermann & Co., London

^{vii} **STEWART D.W.** 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston, Edinburgh

¹⁶ The Prince stayed in Edinburgh for six weeks in 1745 following the Battle of Prestonpans and would have had the time to have clothes made whilst there.