

The Cockburn Collection

Introduction

The Cockburn Collection is an assemblage of 56 tartans collated by Lieutenant-General Sir William Cockburn in the early 19th century. The specimens are 25 inches wide, a full web (width of cloth), which are individually mounted and bound in large book format. Most, if not all, of the specimens were woven by William Wilson & Son, Bannockburn.

In 1925 the collection was given to Lt. Col. William Lamont, Ardrishaig, Argyllshire for safe keeping by Sir William's great-grandson, Robert Cockburn. It was displayed at the Banff Highland Gathering in 1931, and in 1952 Lamont sold it to the Mitchell Library, Glasgow where it is currently housed.

Dating the collection

In his letter to Lt. Col Lamont, Robert Cockburn said that the collection was formed between 1810-20 and, on this basis, it has long been held to be the earliest known collection of tartans. However, the initial date is not supported by any evidence and is questionable. The Highland Society of London (HSL) conceived of the idea of 'clan tartans' in late 1815 based on an idea by the Secretary¹ to preserve the banners and badges (including the tartans) of the clans. As a result, the HSL formed their own collection between 1816-22. Whilst Wilsons had identified a few tartans by surname before 1815, these were generally named after prominent individuals rather than as patterns for the whole clan. General Cockburn was a member of the Highland Society of London and it seems probable that he decided to form his own collection following the idea established by the Society. Approximately 50% of Cockburn's tartans are in the HSL.

The Tartans

Of the 56 specimens included in the collection, two; Grant of Monymusk and MacQuarrie (Plates 1 and 2), are unique and do not appear in any other of the known early 19th century collections of tartans, of which there are seven, including that of the Highland Society of London.



Plate 1. No.41 Grant of Monymusk. Photo: Glasgow life Museums

¹ There were two Secretaries, a Gaelic speaking and an English speaking one. It was the latter, the Miniaturist Andrew Robertson who proposed the idea.



Plate 2. No.33 MacQuarrie. Photo: Glasgow life Museums

Low-res images of the tartans are available online.² Several of the tartans bear names that differ from those use today, for example; MacLaine of Lochbuie is labelled as Sinclair. There are two specimens of Royal Stewart, one of which is labelled MacDonald of Clanranald; two specimens of Wilsons' MacKintosh tartan labelled as 'McIntosh' and 'MacPherson', Nos 54 and 55 respectively. And, there are four pieces of the Government tartan (commonly called the Black Watch) labelled Nos 1-4 as: Sutherland; Campbell of Argyll; Munro; and Grant of Grant (Plate 3).



Plate 3. Nos.01-04 Sutherland; Campbell of Argyll; Munro; and Grant of Grant. Photo: Glasgow life Museums

² <https://libcat.csglasgow.org/web/arena/cockburn-image-gallery> Accessed 10 February 2023.

Cockburn presumably obtained some, possibly all, of his specimens from Wilsons though whether this was directly or through an agent is not known. The samples date from the period when the concept of clan tartans was in its infancy; a time when patterns were being designed, shared and reused. It is not clear whether the labels were attached to the samples when Cockburn acquired them, or whether they were his 'best guess'. In some cases, the names, or pattern, differ from those sealed by the chief of the name in the HSL's collection between 1816-22. A good example of this is the MacPherson tartan. The chief sealed another Wilsons' tartan, *Pattern No.43, Kidd or Caledonia* as that of the clan whereas the Cockburn specimen matches what Wilsons were selling as MacKintosh at the time and which was sealed by MacKintosh of MacKintosh as his clan tartan in the HSL's collection (Plate 4).



Plate 4. MacPherson (HSL); MacPherson (Cockburn); MacKintosh (HSL).
 Photos: The Author (1 & 3); and Glasgow life Museums

Conclusion

The Cockburn Collection offers a unique opportunity to examine an early collection of tartans that was compiled at a time when the concept of 'clan tartans' was in its infancy. It is the earliest known example of a collection compiled by an individual and it seems probable that Cockburn's interest was stimulated by his involvement with the Highland Society of London. It was they that established the concept of clan tartans in late 1815 and whose own collection spanned the period 1816-22. Of Cockburn's 56 tartans, 27 are in the HSL's collection with similar names, the majority of the remainder were tartans designed by Wilsons sometime between 1800-20.

Most, possibly all, of the specimens were woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn, the premier tartan manufacturer of the time. The majority of the names are those that appear in Wilsons' internal 1819 Key Pattern Book but some show the fluidity of naming in the early 19th century. The use/attribution of the Government tartan to four different clans is a prime example and reflects the discussion in the correspondence in the records of the HSL. Shortly after the chiefs were written to asking them to submit a piece of 'their true clan tartan'. No less than six submitted a piece of the Government tartan. No doubt this was because they, or their father, had served in a regiment that wore it.³ Several chiefs were asked to resubmit a different tartan in order to be seen to be different and thus support the idea of historical clan tartans.

³ In the 18th century the Government tartan was worn by the majority of Highland Regiments including the: 42nd (Black Watch); 77th (Montgomerie's); 78th (Fraser's); and 87th (Keith's).

Notwithstanding the date attributed by Robert Cockburn to the formation of the collection (1810-20), it is the opinion of the author that the collection is later and broadly aligns with that of the HSL. Based on the tartans included and their naming, it is probable that the Cockburn Collection dates to 1816-25.

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