

The Crubin Plaid

Introduction

Amongst the specimens in the West Highland Museum (WHM), Fort William is a piece of tartan said to have been dyed and woven by the Misses MacPherson of Crubin in 1730. The piece is usually folded so that only a small section is visible (Fig 1) and the accompanying information states that it was obtained from a Mrs Bullen from Onich near Fort William in 1957. The specimen was on loan to the United Services Museum (USM¹) between 1933-57.



Fig 1. The Crubin Plaid (in case). Photo: Courtesy of the West Highland Museum.

In 2019 the specimen was photographed out of the case which allowed for a more detailed examination. It measures approximately 26.5 inches wide, selvedge to the selvedge, and 55 inches long (Fig 2), with one rough end and one turned end (Fig 3). The cloth was woven at 68 epi² and contains four half sets of the pattern.



Fig 2. The Crubin Plaid. Photo: Courtesy of the West Highland Museum.

¹ Now The National War Museum, Edinburgh Castle, part of the National Museums Scotland.

² Ends per inch (the traditional measurement of density of the material).

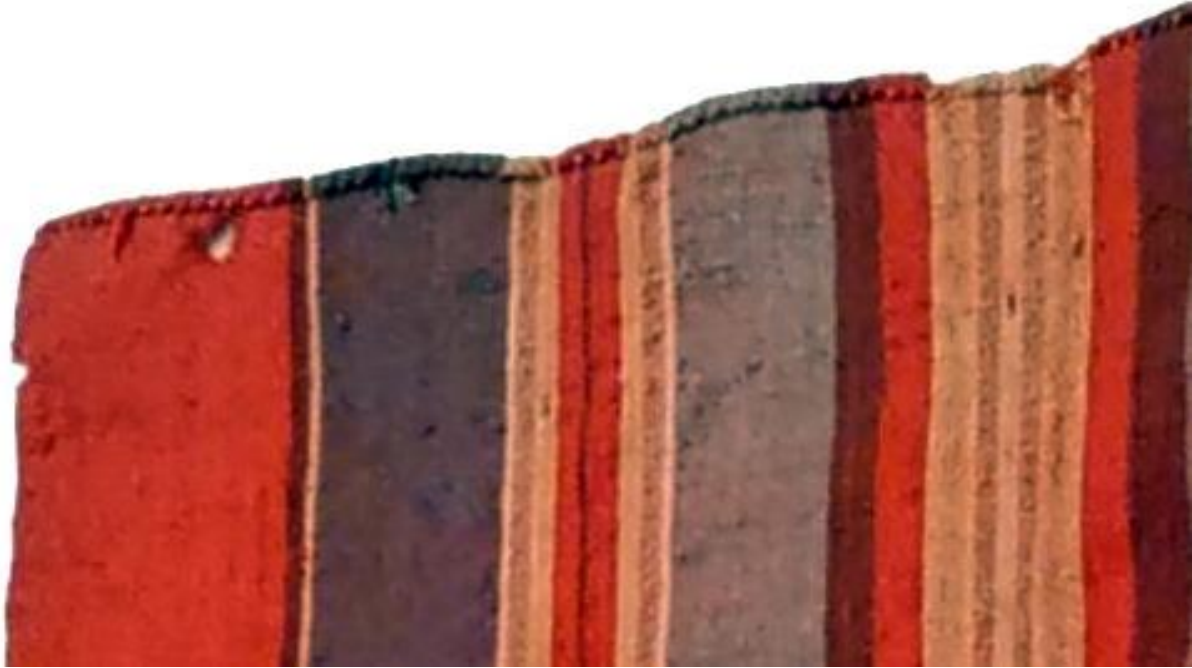


Fig 3. Turned end of the Crubin Plaid. Photo: Courtesy of the West Highland Museum.

The turned end was the traditional method of finishing the rough warp ends of a piece of cloth to prevent it from fraying. However, the rough end and size of the specimen is indicative of it once having been longer but subsequently damaged or altered.

Another Specimen

In 2018 the author examined an unreferenced specimen in the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) of what appeared to be MacKintosh 'Old Method' tartan, one of the early designs by the firm William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. That specimen also has one rough and one turned end, and includes the initials 'IMP', or 'HMP', in one corner; assumed to be for I (or H) MacPherson, (Fig 4). It was donated in 1947 by a woman from County Wicklow and is described in the NMS record as: *"Mentioned in Mclan's 'Highlanders at Home', p. 118, and 'Costume of the Clans' but may be only half of the original piece. (Remainder in Edinburgh Castle Museum). Presented by the great-grand-daughter of the Mrs. Mackintosh (nee Macpherson of Crubin) therein referred to, Miss Dorothea I. Harrison [...]."*

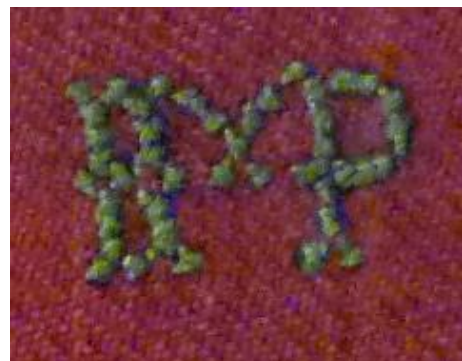


Fig 4. Embroidered initials IMP or HMP. Photo: Courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland.

The museum therefore had both pieces for some ten years and it is clear that they thought them to be the two halves of the same plaid. Due to reorganisational changes at the NMS this detail only surfaced again as part of the research for this paper. This information, together with the fact that both lengths are the same width and setting, plus have one rough and one finished end, supports them being the two ends of the same length. That would mean that the plaid would originally have been roughly 26.5 x 128 inches (67 x 325 cms) when made. Whilst it has not yet been possible to compare the two pieces in situ, and allowing for differences in angle and lighting, a photographic montage shows the similarity of the sett (Fig 5).



Fig 5. A comparison of the two specimens. Photo: © The Author.

Examination of both pieces reveals damage to certain colour stripes and the use of two shades of yellow. The former is probably due to the caustic effect of the iron mordant on the black, and the use of lead to brighten the white, both of which cause yarn to deteriorate over time. The two shades of yellow are an interesting feature that results from the use of parallel bands of silk and wool in those stripes (Fig 6).



Fig 6. Detail of the NMS specimen showing the damaged threads and two shades of yellow. Photo: Courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland.

The use of silk stripes in an otherwise wool tartan is unknown in surviving specimens of rurally woven 18th century tartan but it is a feature employed by Wilsons of Bannockburn from the late 1700s. This pattern is identical to Wilsons’ MacKintosh tartan and in particular, what is thought to be their ‘old Method’ for that pattern. As has already been mentioned, there were MacKintoshes in the family that owned the so-called Crubin Plaid which might explain why they would have had a piece of what appears to be Wilsons’ tartan.

The Family Tradition

There are discrepancies in the records of the family oral tradition surrounding this plaid that reinforce the author’s long-held doubts about its alleged age and origins.

Writing the narrative to accompany Mclan’s drawing of the MacPherson characterⁱ, James Logan said *“In the hose a sett is shown, interesting as having been painted from a plaid woven about two hundred years ago,..... and is one of the earliest specimens of hard tartan. The material was spun by one of the ladies of the house of Crubin,..... and is now in the possession of Mrs Mackintosh of Stephen’s Green, Dublin, to whom she was great great grandmother. It is not considered the common clan tartan, but it has been called the full-dress pattern of the chief.”* This is the broadly same information given in the subsequent publication by Logan/Mclanⁱⁱ and associated with the NMS donation.

If the hose in Mclan's painting are supposed to represent the tartan of the Crubin Plaid, it is a very poor representation, woefully inaccurate and cannot be relied upon beyond showing a red based design (Fig 7).



Fig 7. Hose said to represent the Crubin Plaid from Mclan's MacPherson character.

The label accompanying the piece in the WHM states that it is a *"PORTION of a PLAID c1730. Spun and dyed by the MISSES MacPHERSON of CRUBIN, in Badenoch,.... Deposited by E.D. Bullen, a descendent of the MacPhersons of Crubin in 1938."*³

And a note from the time the piece was in the USM states that *"The McPherson plaid was in 1886 in the possession of Mrs Wm. McIntosh, it came to her mother in whose hands it had been placed by the former's grandmother for safe keeping. The plaid is at least 200 years old, having been made by the ladies of Crubin, at which time four were made, only one existing, the others having been destroyed. George IV when Prince Regent, wanted, together with Prince Alexander of Russia, to have this plaid made for themselves, and a request was made to Mrs. MacPherson for the loan of the ancient fabric (1806) which was chosen from amongst the plaids of the other Clans as being most pleasing."*

Another note from the same source says, *"Scarf of the full dress Macpherson tartan, 250 years old. The wool for this scarf was spun and dyed by ladies of the Clan. It was preserved during the proscription when most other tartans were destroyed, it being considered a felony to wear them."*⁴

From these various narratives a number of common themes emerge:

- The date of c1730 is predicated on the piece being 200 years old when loaned to the United Services Museum in the 1930s. This timeframe was first mentioned by Logan writing in 1845 which would therefore date the plaid to the mid-17th century.

³ Exhibition label accompanying the WHM specimen. Viewed in 2019.

⁴ Notes made by Professor George Nuttall of Cambridge in 1886 transcribed c.1956 by W.A. Thorburn, Assistant Curator, United Services Museum, Edinburgh (now part of the National Museum of Scotland).

- The plaid is traditionally associated with the MacPhersons of Crubin and is described as having been spun and dyed, or made by, the ladies of Crubin/the clan.
- That the plaid, had belonged to a Mrs MacKintosh, nee MacPherson (of Crubin), at some point in the 19th century. This Mrs MacKintosh was the great, great grandmother of the donor. It stretches credibility to believe that both pieces had belonged a different Mrs MacKintosh, both of whom had been MacPhersons of Crubin and it should be assumed that they were one and the same.

If the plaid was in the possession of Mrs Wm. McIntosh in 1886⁵ and had belonged to her grandmother it is not unreasonable to assume that it was at least 60-80 years older, dating it to c1800-20. However, Prince George did not become Prince Regent until 1811 and Prince Alexander of Russia was not born until 1818, so the claim that they desired to have the plaid copied in 1806 cannot be accurate. That date was also a decade before the first attempts to codify clan tartans. There is no evidence of the Prince Regent/George IV ever wearing this tartan and it seems likely that the story was conflated at some later date with the tartan extravaganza that accompanied the King's visit to Scotland in 1822 when he is known to have worn the Royal Stewart tartan.

The mention of this being one of four plaids is, like other elements of the story, unsubstantiated and impossible to verify. However, it may point to a misunderstanding by the family over what 'was made by' actually meant. It is conceivable that there were four plaids made from a length of cloth that was purchased elsewhere and simply finished (made) at home by turning the edges. This looks to be a classic example of family tradition that became confused over time and took on elements of myth.

Wilson's MacKintosh Tartan

In their 1819 Key Pattern Book (KPB) Wilsons included two patterns named MacKintosh, one is that commonly associated with the clan, the other is the tartan discussed in this paper. The KPB includes three settings for this tartan; for the 600 Reed and 24 Reed, the second* and third** counts are annotated 'New Sett'. In the counts for the 'New Sett' the yellow threads are annotated as *wool*, whereas in the first of the counts the yellow stripes are made of roughly equal bands of wool and silk threads. These yarns take the dye differently with the silk yellow looking duller, it is also thicker than the worsted wool. Although not annotated, it is reasonable to conclude that the two yellow version was Wilsons' original or 'Old Method' for this tartan.

Counts from the 1819 KPB plus that of the so-called Crubin Plaid.

MACKINTOSH TARTAN for the 600 reed, 6 half Setts, and for the 24 reed, 6 half setts, 25 inches wide;

S	K	W	G	W	Ys	Yw	S	K	S	Yw	Ys	W	N	K	S	Yw	Ys	W	
90	6	4	40	4	4	6	10	4	10	6	4	4	40	14	14	16	4	4	
94	6	4	42	6	-	6	10	4	10	6	-	6	42	14	14	16	-	4*	
74	4	4	34	4	-	6	8	4	8	6	-	4	34	10	10	14	-	4**	
74	8	4	78	6	8	8	12	4	12	8	8	6	78	24	20	24	6	12	- Crubin Plaid (4 half setts)

*600 Reed (New Method)

**24 reed (New Method)

In the top count the 'w' and 's' indicate worsted and silk threads respectively.

⁵ According to Mrs Bullen, the information about her forebear, Mrs Wm. MacKintosh, is said to have been transcribed by Professor George Nuttall in 1886 provides evidence of further confusion. He was an American who did not move to the England until 1899. The statement that Mrs McIntosh's mother was Mrs J Freeman Nuttall appears to be a red herring, the Professor was George Henry **Falkiner** Nuttall (not Freeman). He married Paula, daughter of Kammerherr von Oertzen- Kittendorf of Mecklenburg in Germany in 1895.

Other Names and Variations

Although some tartans had clan names before 1815⁶, they were not clan tartans per se but often named after popular historical or contemporary characters and places⁷. A sample of the 'Old Method' was included in the Cockburn Collection⁸ (1810-15) where it is named McPherson. The following year a specimen of the 'New Method' was sealed by the MacKintosh Chief as his tartan for the Highland Society of London's collection. Both these clans have at some time led the confederation of smaller clans called Clan Chattan which might explain both clans being associated with this pattern and the interchangeable naming in the early 19th century. In 1850 the Smith Brothersⁱⁱⁱ included the tartan under the name Chief MacIntosh. Today it is normally sold as Clan Chattan.

By c1830 Wilsons were selling a variation of the design with a white line centred on the red square which they called *Macpherson, Dress*. For some reason the Smiths called this version *MacPherson Clan* (Fig 8) despite there having been a well-established clan pattern by then. And when Sarah Davidson married Colonel Ewen Macpherson of Cluny in 1832 this fabulous silk dress in the *MacPherson, Dress* tartan formed part of her trousseau (Fig 9).



Fig 8. The Smiths' plates for their *Chief MacIntosh* and *MacPherson Clan*, together with a specimen (centre) of Wilsons' *Macpherson, Dress*. Photos: ©The Author.

Judging by specimens in three surviving sample books c1830-40, this was a popular fashion tartan at the time and obviously had a wider appeal than just to those named MacPherson. Whether because of some family connection, or simply because it was a popular tartan amongst chiefs in the north-east Highlands, Archibald Farquharson of Finzean⁹ chose the *MacPherson, Dress* setting for a Highland suit c1822-30 (Fig 10).

⁶ The Highland Society of London compiled their collection between 1816-22 and was the first attempt to codify 'Clan Tartans'.

⁷ For example; Prince Charles Edward, Rob Roy, Wellington, Aberdeen, Crieff and Glasgow.

⁸ The oldest known collection of named tartans.

⁹ Archibald Farquharson of Finzean (1793–1841) was MP for Cullen in Aberdeenshire.



Fig 9. Silk dress, Macpherson tartan 1832.
Photo: National Museum of Scotland.



Fig 10. Kilt and jacket c1822-30.
Photo: Aberdeenshire Council Museums Service.

The Sett

A comparison of the setting of the Crubin Plaid with Wilsons' MacKintosh (Old and New Methods) reveals them to be essentially the same pattern. With a white line added the pattern becomes their MacPherson (Fig 11 stripes 1-5). Whilst the MacFarlanes are not connected to Clan Chattan or from the same area, Wilsons' clearly used their MacKintosh as the basis for their MacFarlane tartan too (colour stripe 6). And the practice continues, the more recent MacGill tartan (stripe 7) is a simplified variation of the original Wilsons' pattern.

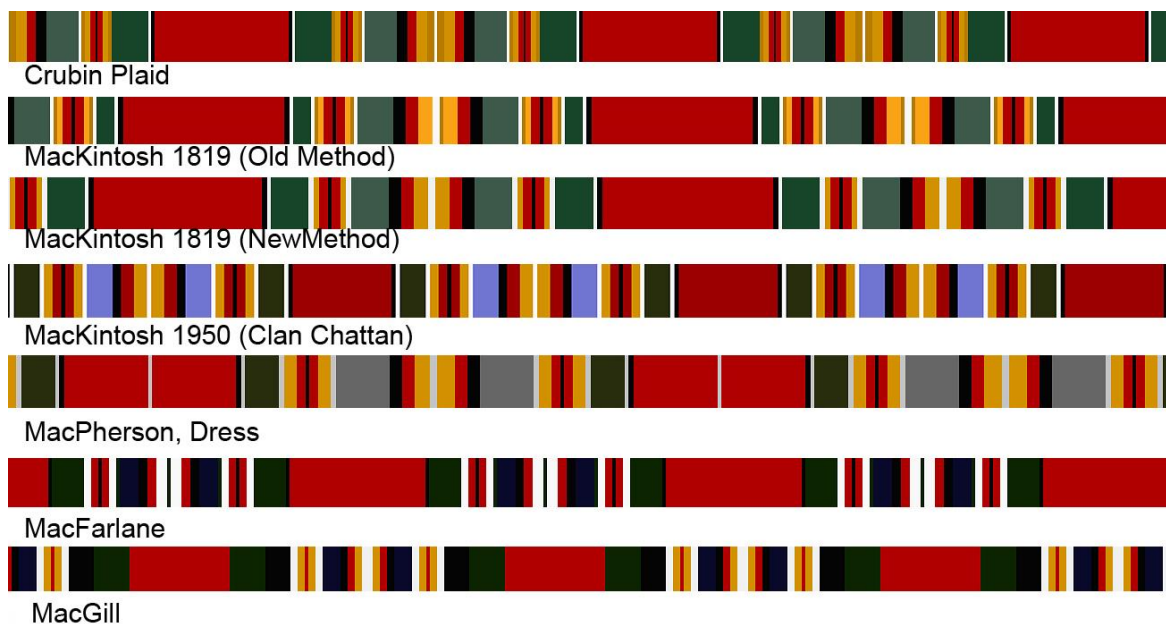


Fig 11. Colour stripe comparison of the Crubin Plaid with various Wilsons' and later tartans. ©The Author.

Apart from the obvious variations in proportions and the white line in the MacPherson, the principal difference between these setts is the colour/shade of the blue squares. Wilsons' 1819 Key Pattern Book specified the colour as Grey which is what is used in the Crubin Plaid and all the specimens before 1850. Relatively few of their designs included grey. Logan's scale (1831^{IV}) for MacPherson describe the colour as Azure i.e. Light Blue but it is unclear whether he had a specimen with that shade, which was widely used by Wilsons, or whether he mistakenly thought the grey was within the dyeing variation of their Light Blue. Seen in isolation and under certain light conditions, the Grey can look Light Blue.

Conclusion

The claimed antiquity of the so-called Crubin Plaid and the similar length in the NMS is at odds with what is known about rurally produced tartan in the 18th century, especially with the partial use of silk. Both specimens conform to specification for the Wilsons' *MacKintosh (Old Method)* tartan and both appear to be part of the same original length/plaid. Based on Wilsons' records and surviving specimens, this plaid probably dates to c1790-1820. The initials are presumed to refer to an I or H MacPherson and are likely to have been those of the original owner, as opposed to the weaver. Logan's mid-17th century date for the plaid can be dismissed as completely unrealistic, as can Mclan's rendition of the sett in the hose of his MacPherson character. Wilsons of Bannockburn are said to have toured the Highlands looking for old patterns to reproduce. It is of course possible that there was an old family plaid that was copied by Wilsons and later referred to by Logan but the specimen in the WHM/NMS is not it.

The fact that the Wilsons' specimen in the Cockburn Collection is labelled *MacPherson* at the same time that their records list it as *MacKintosh* is an example of the fluidity of tartan names during the early 19th century. It is noteworthy that the MacKintosh sealed this pattern as his own for the Highland Society of London in 1816, and that the MacPherson chief chose a completely different pattern at the same time (Fig 12). By 1830 the version with the white line was well established and all the surviving specimens of it are named MacPherson or MacPherson, Dress. From then onwards, that version seems to have been the one associated with the MacPhersons and the undifferentiated (no white line) version with the MacKintoshes. Both patterns fell out of favour in the late 1800s only for the original version to be revived in the mid-20th century as Clan Chattan and as such, a tartan suitable for the MacKintoshes, MacPhersons and the smaller clans of the federation.



Fig 12. The Highland Society of London collection's MacKintosh and MacPherson tartans sealed by the respective chief. Photo credit: National Museum of Scotland.

Acknowledgement:

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i **MCIAN R.R. and Logan J.** 1845 *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands*, Ackermann and Co., London

ii **MCIAN R.R. and Logan J.** 1848 *The Highlanders at Home*, Ackermann and Co., London

iii **SMITH W. & SMITH A.** 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith, Mauchline

iv **LOGAN J.** 1831 *The Scottish Gael*. Smith, Elder & Co., London