

Portion of an 18th Century Plaid

Introduction

Amongst the old fragments owned by the Scottish Tartans Authority is a piece of loosely woven naturally dyed tartan that is classic of early-mid 18th century plaids (Fig 1). The sample is amongst a number that once belong to the historian John Telfer Dunbar, most, if not all of which, he seems to have acquired from the artist William Skeoch Cumming¹. Cumming in turn acquired it from Alexander Carmichael the renowned Scottish folk-lore collector who collected most of his specimens from the western Highlands and Islands. Nothing else is known about the origins of this particular piece.



Fig 1. Original fragment. © The Author

The fragment is approximately 10 x 12" taken from the middle of the original piece. Having no finished edge, one can only speculate as to the width and type of selvedge it would have had. As mentioned, the cloth is of quite a loose weave compared to many other pieces of the period. It was woven with hand spun 'singles' (non-plyed yarn) at about 30 epi which suggests more of a homespun type material rather than finer cloth made from a plyed yarn associated with a higher-ranking individual. However, the use of a deep red extensive, probably obtained from imported cochineal, would seem to imply otherwise. The other dyes used are likely to have been indigo for the blue, again an imported dyestuff, and a blue (indigo) and yellow (probably a native plant dye) combined for the green. There is no evidence of fading in the sample so this portion of the original appears not to have had a great deal of outdoor exposure before being damaged or cut up leaving just this small sample. The construction and shades of the piece are wholly consistent with it having been rurally woven sometime between c1730-60.

The Sett

The sett, which is aligned per the warp, is not immediately apparent. The centre red square enclosed by narrow green and blue lines on the broader red ground looks to be one pivot but it's not until one looks closely at the left-hand edge of the cloth that two fine green threads can be seen outside the fine blue stripe. This incomplete green stripe therefore mirrors the one immediately adjoining the next blue stripe and thus, one can determine that the second pivot is the narrower red in the bottom left of the image. There is therefore *just* enough of the fragment to allow a full reconstruction of the sett (Fig 2); the original specimen has been inserted. Although the pattern doesn't match any existing tartan the sett has similarities with a number of existing designs; for example, Robertson, in which the ground areas that feature the pivots are surrounded by alternating blue and green bars. It also shares this basic structure with a number of 18th century plaids as can be seen in (Fig 3). As there are no details of where this piece was collected, it is simply classified as an Unnamed C18th tartan that was possible part of a plaid.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Skeoch_Cumming accessed 31 January 2018.



Fig 2. Reconstruction of the sett with the original specimen aligned to it. © The Author

In the colour stripes below the similarity between this tartan and a number of other 18th century specimens is obvious. All can be described as having alternating red grounds with decorated pivots that are surrounded by blue and green bars respectively.

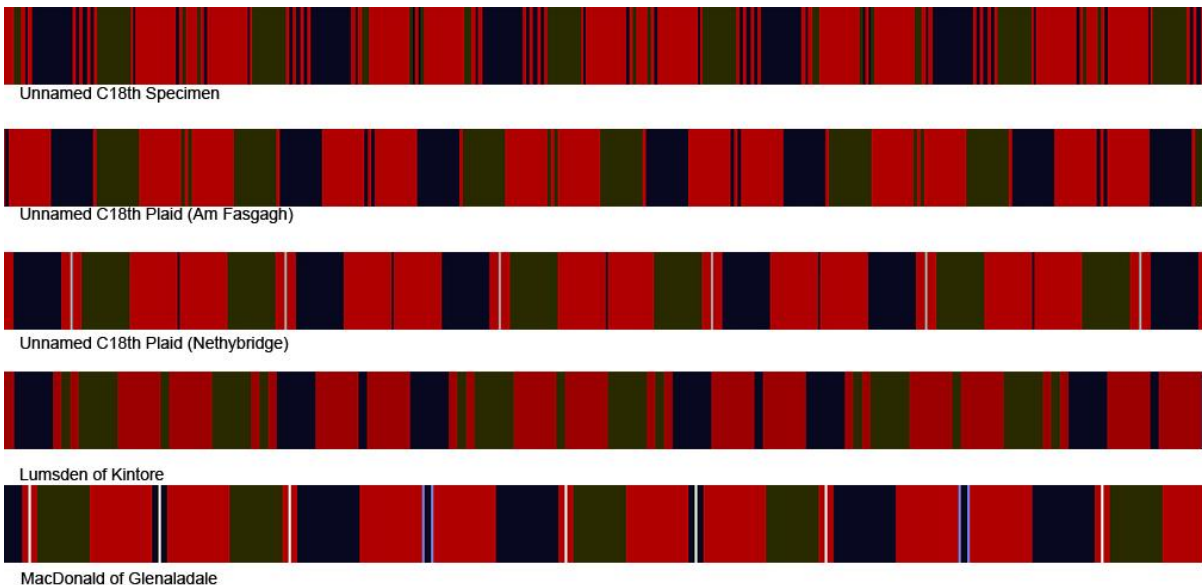


Fig 3. Comparison of the Unnamed tartan (top) with other mid-18th century designs. © The Author

Use of the original material

With only such a small piece of the original material surviving it's impossible to know what size the original material was, nor how it was used. It may have been used as a belted plaid, for some type of domestic used as bed hangings or some other use. The fact that the

fragment is not faded argues against it having been part of an everyday plaid unless not much used for some reason. Beyond that it is impossible to tell whether the cloth was single width or joined piece and whether it had a plain, herringbone, or even a decorated selvedge.

Clearly the specimen pre-dates clan tartans and there is nothing in the structure of the cloth or the sett that gives any clue as to where it was made. As Carmichael collected the majority of his specimens from the west coast and islands it's reasonable to conjecture that this piece was similarly collected there although it is entirely possible that it came from some other part of the Highlands.

Considering the pattern, sett size and quality of the material it's likely that the material would have been intended for use as a joined plaid, probably with a blue herringbone selvedge. The amount and quality of red indicates an expensive piece of cloth so it's likely that it was produced for a special event and/or a reasonably wealthy individual.

An Early 19th Century Reconstruction

In 2018 the auctioneers Lyon & Turnbull sold *An Early Twentieth Century Kilt, Jacket and Trews of matching tartan and of typical form, the jacket with gilt bullion edging and with velvet cuffs*². The outfit³ had belonged to Skeoch Cumming and was used as the model for dress a number of the characters in his tapestry *The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans*. Cumming must have had access to the original specimen in order to have it copied. The identity of the weaver is unknown and the kilt is much faded but the accuracy of the reconstruction of this large sett is apparent when compared with the original (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Comparison of the kilt sett made for Wm. Skeoch Cumming and the original material. © The Author

Conclusion

The majoring of surviving 18th century tartan specimens are fragments of once larger pieces and fragments such as the one discussed here present difficulties in their interpretation when there is no finished edge. A certain amount of speculation is therefore necessary in

² [Lyon and Turnbull - An Early Twentieth Century Kilt, Jacket and Trews](#). Accessed on 31 Jan 2018.

³ The ensemble came from the collection of the late Peter Nicholson, a leading light in Scottish castle and tower house restoration, and was on loan to the Scottish Tartan Society during the 1980s.

considering the original size and use. As mentioned earlier, the spinning, dyeing and weaving techniques used in the production of this piece are consistent with a mid-18th century date and it is not unreasonable to ascribe a c1730-70 time period to it. This piece is very likely to have been collected by Alexander Carmichael, but whether him or not, it is regrettable that there are no details to identify where and from whom it was acquired.

This is one of a number of Unnamed 18th century tartans that are generally unknown today. Dating to the time before the development of clan tartans, it would have been a logical type of authentic type of pattern for Cumming to have commission as part of the material for his Jacobite themed works.

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