

Found – the original Culloden Tartan Coat

The Culloden tartan is well known to many not only because of its vivid colouring but also because of the story surrounding its origin which associated it with the battle in 1746, thus makes it one of the oldest surviving designs that we have.

First shown in D.W. Stewart's *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans* (1893), the design has been widely reproduced since. In his forward Stewart claimed that..... *The method adopted in the present work has been to weave the tartan.....in its proper colours in fine silk.the weaving was executed.....in exact proportion to the original.* From this statement one might therefore assume that his silk plates were accurate copies of the specimens lent for the book. However, a chance discovery casts new light on the design and shows that what has been produced for years as an accurate reproduction is fundamentally incorrect.

I'd long suspected that the original jacket was not the same bright shades as those shown by Stewart and that the dark yellow and purple of Stewart's plate would more likely to have been green and blue respectively. Jamie Scarlett also raised this as a possibility¹ although he speculated that Stewart had copied a piece that had faded to the shades shown. The key to determining what the original shades were was to try and find the original jacket, for which I'd been searching for over 30 years. I was fortunate to have seen a copy of the coat (albeit in a different tartan) made by/for the famous artist Wm Skeoch Cumming c1900 and so when recently visiting the newly refurbished Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow I was immediately struck 'square and centre' by a tartan jacket on display that was instantly recognisable as the Culloden Coat. Interestingly, the artefact had been identified by the National Museum of Scotland as a fine example of an 18th Century tartan jacket some years ago but no-one had recognised the tartan.



Fig.2 Culloden Coat
(Photo courtesy of the Kelvingrove Museum)

Even though the colours and proportions of the original tartan (Fig.1) differ markedly from those Stewart depicted there is no doubt in my mind that it is the same jacket. It was heartening to see that the colours were in fact more like those that I had always suspected would have been used. Some of the dyes are very faded and on a cursory glance it is difficult to be certain what they were originally. Fortunately I was allowed to study the coat.

The tartan is shown below in comparison with Stewart's version where the colours and proportions can be seen more clearly. The original green is quite faded and very mossy, almost khaki and although possibly confusing, clearly nothing like the vivid shade that Stewart depicts, nor would it have been then.



Stewart's 1893 Copy



The 1746 Original

Stewart did not include threadcounts in his work and merely stated that the proportions were correct. However, following in his father's footsteps D. C. Stewart² gave a threadcount based on the silk sample in *Old & Rare*. Comparison with the original shows D. W's copy to be incorrect in colour and proportions. The difference can be seen in the count below where heliotrope is a light purple or lilac shade:

<u>R</u>	Az	Heliotrope	W	K	DY	K	<u>Y</u>	
10	4	28	4	26	26	4	6	- Stewart

<u>R</u>	LB	B	W	K	G	K	<u>Y</u>	
20	4	40	8	40	40	4	12	- Original (MacDonald)

When one compares the two counts a number of things are immediately apparent:

- The two main ground colours shown by Stewart are wrong. They are green and blue as opposed to yellow and purple.
- The pivot stripes are twice the size shown by Stewart and thus proportional more dominant compared with the ground colours.
- The ground colours (blue, black & green) are broader in the original so making the finer pale stripes appear less dominant.
- Finally, the white stripe that divides the black and blue is twice the size of the guard stripes to the pivots whereas the Stewarts shows them all to be four threads.

So what is known of the Coat's origins? The simple answer is - very little. From the structure of the material, dyes, style etc., it is possible to state that it is contemporary with the period of the '45. The quality and workmanship of the coat suggests that it belonged to someone of rank but that might have been anyone from a chief or prominent clansman to a wealthy Jacobite supporter or the like. At this stage it is not even possible to state with any accuracy that the cloth was dyed and/or woven in the Highlands or even Scotland.

It is possible to date ownership of the coat back to c1840-5- but it is highly unlikely that its possession during the previous 100 years will ever be reliably determined. At the time Stewart wrote his book (c1890) the artefact belonged to Gourlay Steell RSA (1804-91), who had loaned it for the book. It had previously belonged to a James Drummond RSA (1816-77) and before that to a W.B. Johnston RSA (1804-68). Before then it may well have belonged to the family of the individual that wore it at Culloden but there is no information on who he, and therefore the family, was so it is impossible to associate the coat with any particular clan, family or area.

The artist Skeoch Cumming copied the coat, albeit in a different tartan, and I believe may have been used it, or as the basis for one or more of the jackets, in his portrait *The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans, 1745* – see Fig 3.



Fig 3. *The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans, 1745* Wm. Skeoch Cumming

The original coat was donated to the Kelvingrove Museum & Art Gallery, Glasgow c1990 by a Dr Hendry from Glasgow but there is no indication from where he obtained it. Hopefully future research will tie up some of the loose ends. The coat may be viewed in the Museum's *Scottish Identity in Art* display.

© Peter MacDonald Jan 2008

¹ SCARLETT J.D. 1990 *TARTAN: The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn, London

² STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977