

Found – the original Culloden Tartan Coat

Introduction

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*¹, 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 leant 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.

Revised setting

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 possibility² 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.



Even though the colours and proportions of the original tartan (Fig.1) differ markedly from those Stewart depicted and 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 gold shade that Stewart depicts, nor would it have been then.

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

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. Stewart³ gave a threadcount based on the silk sample in Old & Rare. Comparison of the original and D. W's copy shows his to be incorrect in both colour and proportions (Fig 3).



Fig 3. Comparison of Stewart's count against the original.

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.

The Coat's origins

Stewart said of it that it is was 'a Riding or Military coat in the possession of Mr Gourlay Steell and that it had last been shown publically at the Naval & Military Exhibition, Edinburgh in 1889¹ where it was described as a *Highland Tartan Coat worn by one of Prince Charles Edward's attendants at Culloden*'.

From the structure of the material, dyes used, style etc., it is possible to state that the coat is contemporary with the period of the '45. The quality and workmanship of the piece suggests that it belonged to someone of rank; that might have been anyone from a chief or prominent clansman to a wealthy Jacobite supporter or the like.

It is possible to date ownership of the coat back to c1840-50 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 James Drummond RSA (1816-77) and before that to W.B. Johnston RSA (1804-68). Before then it is likely to have been in private hands and may well have belonged to the family of the individual that wore it at Culloden but unfortunately there is no record of who he or they were.

The claim that the coat was worn at Culloden lies in the description at the 1889 Exhibition. Gourlay Steell must have lent the piece and was presumably the source of the identification too. Whilst we cannot be certain it is possible and perhaps probable that the story of its origin was handed down through the previous two RSA owners and that they in turn had it from the family or whomever gave it to W.B. Johnston. If it were simply associated with Culloden then one might consider the claim with a degree of scepticism; there are numerous old fragments claimed to have been worn there, however in this case the statement that it was *worn by one of Prince Charles Edward's attendants at Culloden* seems quite specific

¹ The core of the 1899 Exhibition was broken down into sections: Fine Art, Arms and Armour, Colours, Uniforms and accoutrements, Medals, Orders and Decorations, and Naval and **Military relics**.

and strengthens my supposition that prior to Johnston obtaining it that the coat had belonged to a descendent of the original owner.

A rediscovered treasure

The ownership of the coat after Gourlay Steell are a mystery. We know that Skeoch Cumming had a copy of 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* (Fig 4).



Fig 4. *The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans, 1745* Wm. Skeoch Cumming.

The original coat effectively disappeared for almost a 100 years following the publication of Stewart's work. Given that he had a copy made, Skeoch Cumming may also have owned it for a while as may one or more of a small number of tartan collectors, principal of which was John Telfer Dunbar, best known for his seminal work *The History of Highland Dress*⁴. It was not until c1990 that the coat resurfaced when it was donated to the Kelvingrove Museum & Art Gallery, Glasgow by a Dr Hendry from Glasgow. The coat may be viewed in the Museum's *Scottish Identity in Art* display. To date attempts to discover when and where Dr Hendry obtained the coat have been unsuccessful. Hopefully future research will tie up some of the loose ends. If you are interested in material matched to the original please [contact me](#).

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¹ STEWART D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston, Edinburgh

² SCARLETT J.D. 1990 *TARTAN: The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn, London

³ STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977

⁴ DUNBAR J. T. 1962 *The History of Highland Dress*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh