

Tartan from Isabella Fraser's Wedding Dress 1785

Introduction

Amongst the displays at the Inverness Museum & Art Gallery is a fine example of a tartan wedding dress from the latter half of the 18th century. The dress was worn at, and probably made for, the wedding of Isabella MacTavish to Malcolm Fraser, both from Stratherrick¹, in January 1785 meaning that it was probably made at some point the previous year.

When this paper was originally written, it was the author's contention that the dress had been made from an older plaid that had been reused, possibly as a result of the ban on the use of male Highland Dress under the Act of Proscription of 1746². However, dye analysis carried out in 2018 proves that the cloth cannot be older than 1775, a fact that raises a number of questions about the continued tradition of tartan weaving the Highlands during the Proscription.

The tartan has similarities to a number of old pieces collected in Strathspey and Badenoch which raises the intriguing possibility of a preferred regional style or theme. This paper examines the tartan and dress in relation to these other specimens.

The Dress

The style and construction of the dress (Plate 1) have been discussed elsewhere and is the subject of ongoing research¹. It is not my area of expertise and I shall not comment further beyond noting that the tartan was not well matched in the construction, and that the dress has the appearance of being home-made rather than made by a professional seamstress.

The accompanying plaid is made from a length of the same tartan and has one turned end, the other is an unwoven warp section finished with a simple overhand knot (Plate 2). The outfit was made from a length of plaiding³ and the cloth itself must pre-date the dress but by how much will probably never be known. The dyes, and thus a possible date for the cloth, are discussed later.



Plate 1. Isabella MacTavish's Wedding Dress c1784
Photo ©Inverness Museum and Art Gallery

¹ Stratherrick is a broad valley approximately three quarters of the way up, and on the eastern side of, Loch Ness.

² The Act of Proscription (19 Geo. 2, c. 39) 01 August 1746.

³ Plaiding is a term that refers to material, often of a large pattern, woven off-set and frequently with a selvedge pattern or selvedge mark, the latter often herringboned, and intended for joining to make double width cloth rather than used for tailored clothing.



Plate 2. Plaid showing knotted and turned ends. Photo © The Author

The Cloth

The material is hand-woven from hand spun singles (unplied) yarn, is 25.5-26 inches wide along the length of the plaid section and shows little evidence of errors or inconsistencies. It was woven with a 6 Dent reed, 8 ends per split and has 48 epi, an average density for this type of rural cloth. This 'single-width' is typical of surviving specimens of 18th century rurally woven (non-industrial) tartan. There are two setts across the width of the cloth that run from end to end to the single green stripe, each sett would be approximately 13 inches (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Loom width of the cloth with one sett highlighted. © The Author

To make the skirt part of the dress sections of the single-width cloth were joined with an edge-to-edge seam (Plate 3).

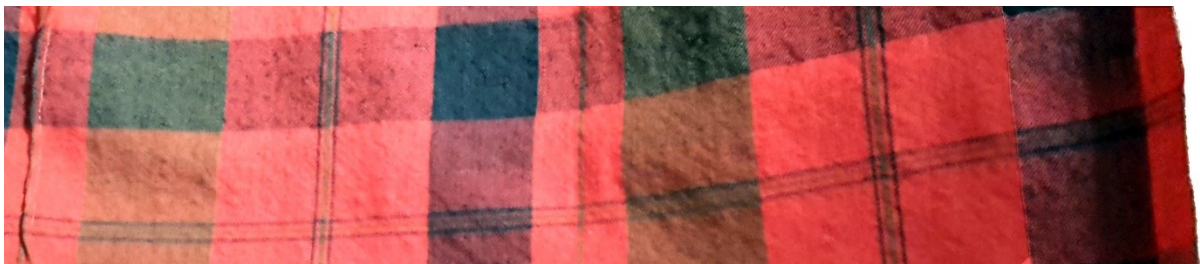


Plate 3. Single width of the cloth with seam (left). Photo © The Author

Although this is an asymmetric sett, the layout of the pattern with the central green stripe also being on both pivots means that technically, the cloth could have halved length-ways and joined on either selvedge to make a traditional joined plaid without interrupting the pattern (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Layout of the pattern if joined to make double-width cloth. © The Author

The Dyes

The yarn is evenly and expertly dyed, using Cochineal and Indigo/Woad⁴ for the red and blue respectively, and a combination of Indigo/Woad, Fustic⁵ and Quercitron⁶ (the latter two are yellow dyes) for the green. It is the use of Quercitron that gives an earliest possible date of 1775 for the cloth as it was that year that Edward Bancroft introduced the dye into Britain⁷. The cloth must therefore have been made some time between 1775 and 1784.

The Tartan

Given that this outfit is one of very few pre-1800 examples to survive, and the only major piece of female tartan clothing, it seems odd that no-one has looked at the tartan in detail. All references simply refer to the dress being of 'a red tartan'ⁱⁱⁱ. Apart from being 'red', the

striking feature is the large sett size and that the pattern is asymmetric or non-reversing. Isabella MacTavish was from Ruthven in the parish of Dores, Stratherrick; this tartan is remarkably similar to a number of mid-18th century plaids from the Rothiemurchus/Kingussie area in adjacent Badenoch. The colour stripes below show the structural similarities.



Isabella Fraser's Wedding Dress



Plaid from Rothiemurchus



Plaid from Nethybridge



Plaid, Am Fasgadh, Kingussie

The first two setts are asymmetric, the latter two symmetrical. Each might be described as a 'red' tartan. Technically, they can be described as having alternating red grounds enclosed by alternating large green and blue bars separated by a red stripe/bar, the red grounds having green and/or blue stripes centred on them. The overall impression of the asymmetric setts follow this description but with a single bar of blue and green surrounding each red ground rather than alternating two blue and two green bars. The survival of a plaid belonging to [MacDonald of Glenaladale](#) demonstrates that this type of setting was not unique to the Badenoch area but the similarity of these designs lends support to the idea that this type of setting may have been popular in the area, or perhaps to a particular weaver or weavers.

Judging from the surviving 18th century specimens, asymmetric tartans were far less common than standard repeating setts. This is unsurprising, non-repeating patterns are much more difficult to match effectively when the cloth is joined. Unless the warp is a

⁴ Both Woad (native) and Indigo (imported) contain the chemical *indigotin* which is responsible for the blue colour. Chemical analysis alone cannot determine the individual source plant.

⁵ Old fustic, or yellowwood, is derived from dyer's mulberry, a tropical American tree (*Chlorophora tinctoria*, or *Maclura tinctoria*)

⁶ American Black oak, *Quercus velutina*, native to the Eastern and Midwestern part of the United States.

⁷ Edward Bancroft discovered quercitron in 1771 and received a British patent controlling the distribution of the dye in 1775.

balanced one, which is unusual in an asymmetric sett, the joining two pieces of cloth results in the twill, the diagonal structure of the weave, running in opposite directions in each half of the plaid as this example in an old Glenorchy specimen shows (Plate 4). As there are a number of surviving examples of joined plaids made from asymmetric tartans our modern preference for balanced patterns was apparently less important 250 years ago and cloth of bright or expensive colours a more significant factor in choice. The use of a large amount of red marks these out as expensive pieces that would have been the reserve of the relatively better off.



Plate 4. Join in an asymmetric plaid showing reversed twill. © The Author

Conclusion

The use of a large amount of red means that this would have been an expensive and prize piece of cloth at any point in the 18th century. Assuming that the dress was made for Isabella's wedding then it was made shortly after the end of Proscription⁸ and the cloth sometime between 1775 and 1784. Bancroft is known to have promoted his new dye energetically and it was quickly taken up across the length and breadth of Great Britain. It is therefore likely that it was available to Highland dyers within a year or two of the 1775 Patent. It would be interesting to investigate the dyes used in the similar plaids from the area to see if any of those also include the use of the dyestuff Quercitron. The associated cost and access to the specimens means that this may be difficult to achieve.

We will probably never know exactly when, where or by whom it was woven but whenever that was, the size of the sett indicates that the cloth was not woven especially for this dress or similar clothing. It is the author's opinion that it is much more likely that the cloth was

⁸ The Act of Proscription banned the wearing of Highland Dress but not tartan per se.

already owned by the family and chosen for Isabella's wedding dress because it was available and/or she liked it.

Whilst the tartan of the dress has always been classified as a Fraser one it seems more logical that it should be considered a MacTavish one and as such is much older than the tartan now worn by the clan.

This is the only surviving example of what must have been a common practice of incorporating tartan as part of women's clothing in the latter half of the 18th and early 19th centuries. As such, the historical importance of this dress has generally been overlooked in favour of male costume and it is worthy of further study.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald June 2014 (Revised October 2018)

ⁱ **Watson, J.** 2018 *Isabella McTavish Fraser's wedding dress - A study into an 18th century wedding dress*. Accessed 08 October 2018. <https://isbellamctavishfraser.wordpress.com/> (accessed October 16, 2010).

ⁱⁱ **Office of the Northwest Territory Alliance Patternmaster** 1997 *Highland Wedding Dress #541*. Northwest Territory Alliance <http://www.nwta.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/541highd.pdf> (accessed October 16, 2010).