

Reconstruction of the MacDonald of Borrodale Tartan

There are a number of tartan fragments that date to the period of the '45 and the ending of the clan system. All too often little or nothing is known about these precious pieces of fabric beyond the fact that they belonged to some collector or were found in a bog, castle, shop, jumble sale etc. Some of these pieces are large enough to allow their whole design to be confirmed, others can only be guessed at. It is rare indeed that one has more than one sample from the same web and even rarer that there is a good historical audit trail. The MacDonald of Borrodale tartan is possibly unique in having both elements that combine to allow an accurate reconstruction of a tartan intimately associated with Charles Edward Stuart's escape following the collapse of '45 Rising. Three pieces of the original plaid are known to exist: for simplicity these will be called Stoneyhurst (SH); West Highland Museum (WHM); and National Museum of Scotland (NMS).

In 1984 whilst working at the Scottish Tartans Society I was contacted by an 'Old Boy' concerning a fragment of tartan in the possession of Stoneyhurst College in Lancashire. The specimen was apparently old and said to have been part of a kilt worn Prince Charles Edward Stuart (PCE) during the period of the 1745 Jacobite Rising. Stoneyhurst is a Jesuit School that owns a number of artefacts associated with the '45 having acquired them via Henry Benedict, Cardinal, Duke of York, PCE's brother and successor. The Stoneyhurst Old Boy, Tom Massey-Lynch, confirmed the link to PCE during painstaking research. Island Glass (Eilean Glas) is better known as Scalpay, a small island situated off the east coast of Harris. Shortly after the defeat at Culloden PCE stayed with the MacDonalds of Borrodale, a Clanranald cadet family. On taking his leave from the family PCE was given (by Catriona MacGregor, Borrodale's wife) 'a suit of new Highland clothes the better to disguise him and make him pass for one of the country'¹. PCE was taken via Benebecula to Scalpay where his party arrived soaked after several hours in an open boat during a Force 7 gale. The party stayed with a Robert Campbell, tenant of Scalpay with whom PCE left/exchanged his plaid.

During 1984 I had an opportunity to examine the specimen, albeit that it was mounted on a piece of card and framed under glass and hung in a south facing window and therefore in direct sunlight. In the frame is a hand-written note saying:-

“This piece of cloth is part of a kilt left by Prince Charlie in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30 April 1746. Robert Hemsley, Tarber(?) House got it from a descendent of the Campbells and sent it to Walter Armstrong of Tarff house, Kirkcousan who gave it to J S Maitland, 19 April 1887.

In landing on the Island, Prince Charlie got wet – his kilt was not dry in the morning when he wished to start, so he left his own behind and took one of the Campbell's kilts.

The story was told to me by W Armstrong of Kirkcousan, Glasgow April 1887. J S Maitland H M Inspector of Factories.”

¹ Taylor H & A. 1938 *1745 and After*. London.

Maitland wrote the story down over 140 years after the date Prince Charles Edward is supposed to have worn the material and there was therefore plenty of time for a story of romantic attachment to have grown up around it. One cannot say for certain whether or not the sample was actually used by the Prince. There are numerous bearing similar stories and some of these certainly could not have been worn by him at the time and place stated. It is said by various authorities that the Prince never wore the 'kilt' as such during his time in Scotland, preferring trews and plaid. That does not necessarily invalidate this particular story, it is generally accepted that he did use several plaids, and the belted-plaid is sometimes referred to as the 'great-kilt'. Thus, in some instances the words 'kilt' and 'plaid' may be taken as synonymous.

Examination of the SH specimen revealed that the sample was consistent with a pre-c1800 date and more likely 1700-50. The tartan was very dark, so much so that it was difficult easily to distinguish between the blue and black. The sample was also too small to be completely certain that the full repeat of the threadcount was possible, however, based on the information I produced a tentative reconstruction – shown in Fig 1.



Fig 1. Reconstruction of the Stonyhurst specimen.

The following year during a visit to the West Highland Museum in Fort William I was stuck by the similarity of a small specimen on public display to which was attached a similar inscription as that of the Stonyhurst relic. What was immediately apparent from the FW sample was that the light overstripes in that sample were yellow not white. Dye analysis of the SH specimen later confirmed that the white was in fact a faded yellow. Further examination of both fragments by the writer under better lighting revealed the presence of three ground colours: black; blue; and green rather than the two originally identified. Confirmation of these and the original use yellow rather than white allowed a revised reconstruction of the tartan.



Fig 2. Revised reconstruction to show the original setting.

This reconstruction was subsequently confirmed as correct when a third, very small, fragment purchased by the NMS was examined and proved to confirm the portion of the pattern that had previously merely been projected based on the most logical structure. The three fragments are shown relative to each other in Fig 3.

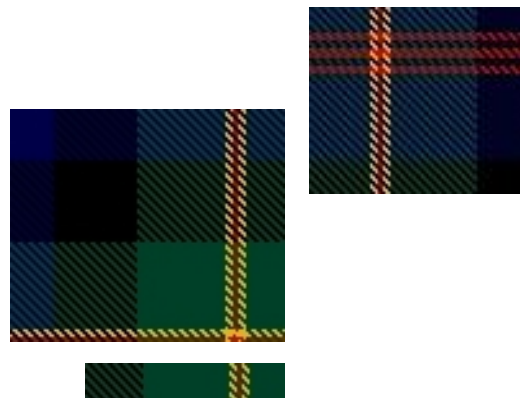


Fig 3. Graphic to show the 3 original pieces:

In conclusion, while one cannot really comment authoritatively on whether the Prince actually wore this piece of tartan, it is certainly possible. The sample is of a structure and colour consistent with its claimed antiquity and is similar to several other West Highland specimens of known 18th century origin. How much of the pattern is shown within the sample is impossible to say, the red square could be a pivot but the sample is too small to be sure. The size of the sett and use of such a wide band of white leads the writer to suspect that the material was originally intended as a plaid or belted plaid as opposed to a 'little-kilt'. In plaids that were fairly plain (dark) it was not uncommon to 'decorate' the borders with a more striking arrangement of colours and/or weave, i.e. herringbone. There is no indication in the threading of a selvedge but the white and red stripes could have been near the edges of a full garment.