

# Unnamed Plaid from Prince Edward Isle

## Introduction

Amongst a number of tartan artefacts belonging to family on Prince Edward Isles (PEI), Canada is what they call *an old family tartan*. From a photograph it was instantly recognisable as a handwoven narrow width plaid (Fig 1). The family descend from a number of MacDonald lines on PEI and it's unclear which branch owned the plaid before the 1960s when the current family inherited it. As they also own a piece of the original MacDonald of Glenaladale plaid it's quite possible that this narrow plaid is from the same branch.



Fig 1. Overview of the family plaid. Photo: Mary Gallant

## The Plaid

The plaid measures  $33\frac{1}{2}$ " x 118", woven with is hand spun singles yarn in both the warp and weft, and finished with a simple overhand knotted fringe at each end. Although there is some damage to the body and one selvedge, overall it is in remarkable condition. Three dyed colours; red, black and blue/green plus a natural unbleached white were used in the design. The red and black are well dyed but the blue, which is a duck egg shade, shows considerable variation in certain bands and between warp and weft suggesting that more than one dye lot was involved resulting in the difference.

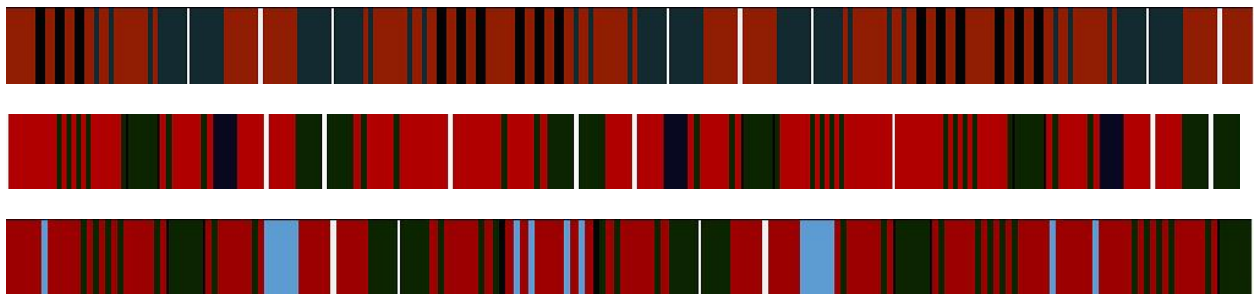
The plaid was woven as a standard balanced warp meaning that the sett repeats evenly from the centre out towards the selvedges. A black bar was added which begins a decorated selvedge pattern that runs for the last  $3\frac{1}{2}$ " on each side usings features from the main sett. A further variation of the selvedge pattern appears at each end of the plaid (Fig 2).



**Fig 2. Detail showing the selvedge and end variations of the pattern.** Photo: Mary Gallant

### The Sett

The sett has striking similarities with the setting of the MacDonald of Staffa tartan woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fig 3 is a comparison of the PEI plaid with a Wilsons' c1810 sample<sup>1</sup> and the count from their 1819 KPB<sup>2</sup>



**Fig 3. Comparison of the unnamed PEI sett and Wilsons' two counts for MacDonald of Staffa.** © The Author

Whether there is any connection between the PEI plaid and the Staffa settings or whether the similarities are just coincidence is impossible to tell. The family that own the PEI plaid descend from the Clanranald MacDonalds; the Staffa sept are a cadet branch of the clan, so there is an historical association that might account for the apparent similarity.

<sup>1</sup> Found in the Cockburn Collection where it's named *Macdonald of Staffa*.

<sup>2</sup> The tartan is named *Donald of Staffa's Sett* in Wilsons' 1819 Key Pattern Book.

## Dating the plaid

Having only had access to photographs of the original plaid makes dating it accurately extremely difficult. As it is hand woven, single width cloth, unusually wide and with a balanced sett it was probably woven in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century; a c1780-1840 timeframe is a reasonable working assumption. It's not possible to tell whether it was made in Scotland or locally on PEI, although the family assumed that it was made locally. Detailed technical and dye analysis might clarify this.

## Conclusion

As the piece is fringed at both ends and has a selvedge pattern on both sides, it was clearly intended to be used as a single width piece, either as a narrow plaid or for interior decoration, rather than to be joined. The selvedge pattern and variation at each end is unusual and reminiscent of the two plaids from Nova Scotia<sup>3</sup> and although not the work of a novice, this one would not have been as technically difficult to weave as those. There are no examples of this type of plaid surviving in Scotland and, like the Nova Scotia plaids, this may represent an old technique that was taken to the New World before dying out here.

The similarity of the sett to Wilsons' early C19th Staffa tartans raises the intriguing possibility that this PEI plaid represents either the original setting, or an early variation on the theme. We will probably never know.

Irrespective of its origins, this specimen is a fine example of a late 18th or early 19th century rural plaid employing traditional techniques long since dropped in modern cloth production. The pattern is not commercially available but could easily be re woven if there was interest.

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<sup>3</sup> See my article on those plaids [here](#).