

Plaid found at Culloden – a Re-appraisal

The so-called *Plaid found at Culloden* was first recorded by D.W. Stewart in his 1893 workⁱ where, referencing it to the Culloden Coat, he said of it

‘.....but the fabric contains evidence of earlier manufacture than the date of Culloden. Indeed, with the exception of two plaids at Dunimarle, certified as having been at Sherriffmuir in 1715, the writer knows of no example so large in size, and possessing so much internal evidence of great age. It may, with every probability, be assigned to the first years of the last century, if not considerably earlier. Nor is this incompatible with its appearance at Culloden,....’ *‘The plaid....., shows a shows an intricate and unusual sett; and the single check (repeat), as here displayed, represents half of the plaid,.....’* When shown in exhibitions it has been catalogued “Highland Plaid, found on the field of Culloden the day after the battle.

Quite how Stewart was able to claim an early C18th, or possibly much earlier, date is unclear. His description of the sett as *intricate and unusual* might be taken to suggest that plaid was off set, perhaps with a selvedge mark/pattern but as he defines his remark one can only speculate based on other surviving pieces. He was loaned the plaid by Mr Gourlay Steell R.S.A.¹, but does not say if it was complete or merely a portion of the original. Given that the colours are completely different to those in the 1821 copy, see below, it is probable that Steell's was the original setting and it's likely to have been a portion, or perhaps one half, of the plaid at Moyhall² that tradition relates was given to the MacKintosh by Prince Charles Edward. The sett is the same but Stewart's proportions are wrong and the colours defective: he gave yellow for green in the original. He made the same error with the Coat from Culloden which I have shown in a related article to be wrong so there is strong circumstantial evidence to suppose that his plaid and the Moyhall specimen are one and the same.



Plaid found at Culloden (Stewart)



Plaid from Moyhall (MacDonald)

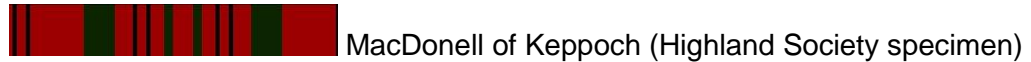
Having dealt with Stewart's error I shall not consider it further. The setting for the Moyhall plaid is my own and will be discussed later.

Regrettably, like some other pieces associated with the Prince, the original Moyhall plaid was divided up as souvenirs among his supporters. A number of these survive, either in museums or private hands but many of these pieces are tiny thus making determination of the original sett tricky. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the original piece was clearly woven off-set meaning that the pattern did not balance across the loom from the centre. The material also had a selvedge mark.

¹ Gourlay Steell also loaned the Culloden Coat for Stewart's book so it's possible that like the Coat, the plaid had previously belonged to James Drummond and before him, W. B. Johnston, both R.S.A.

² The plaid was copied in 1821 although it's likely that it was incomplete then. I've seen a full width piece of the copy and it just doesn't make sense at the joining selvedge which suggests to me that that portion was a *best guess* at the time.

A small section of the cloth will inevitably lead those unfamiliar with traditional plaid weaving techniques to misinterpret the original sett. For example, tartans associated with both the MacDonells of Keppoch and Robertsons are said to have been taken from portions of plaids associated with the Prince. Here are their strips showing the amount of the warp that survives and then the 'assumed' original tartan.



MacDonell of Keppoch (Highland Society specimen)



Robertson (Clan Donnachie specimen)



The resulting tartans assumed by later writers are logical but in my opinion wrong and the result of trying to extrapolate the sett from such a small fragment in isolation. Had other similar pieces been consulted then the broader pattern would have been obvious. If these same fragments are positioned relative to their place in the Moyhall plaid then it is quite apparent that they are sections from that material, either the original or part of the 1821 copy, rather than being similar tartans but with much the same story concerning their origins.



MacDonell of Keppoch - HSL



Robertson

The slight differences between the three are the result of variations in historical data and how they have been recorded in later databases. They do not necessarily reflect the actual threadcounts accurately. For example, I examined the Robertson piece a number of years ago and found that the count matches the 1821 copy rather than the original at Moyhall.

Having shown that the MacDonell of Keppoch and Robertson setts are in fact pieces of the Moyhall plaid/1821 copy I shall now return to the question of the original setting.

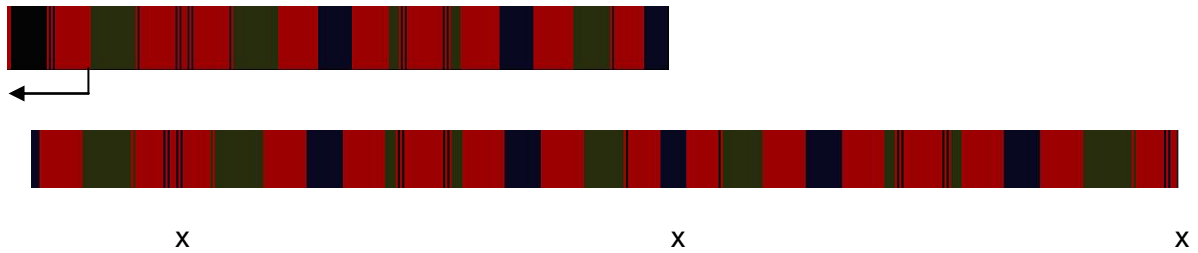
Jamie Scarlett had access to both the Moyhall fragment and the 1821 copy at Blair from which he drew conclusions³ about the original sett that I find problematic. The original Moyhall specimen stops short of the second selvedge but we know, because of the selvedge mark on the other side, that it is the one that would normally be joined. Based on the 1821 copy Scarlett's



³ SCARLETT J.S. 1990 *TARTAN The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn., London

interpretation of the second selvedge, and therefore possible pivot, is logical but structurally very unbalanced. The difficulty of getting the colours right, especially the thinner strips, is evident from the 1821 copy where the blue and green are both dark and readily confused with black.

Below is a strip representing the total width of the Moyhall warp with the selvedge mark indicated by the arrow and then below that Scarlett's assumed full sett, less the selvedge, with the pivots marked and showing how it would repeat once joined.

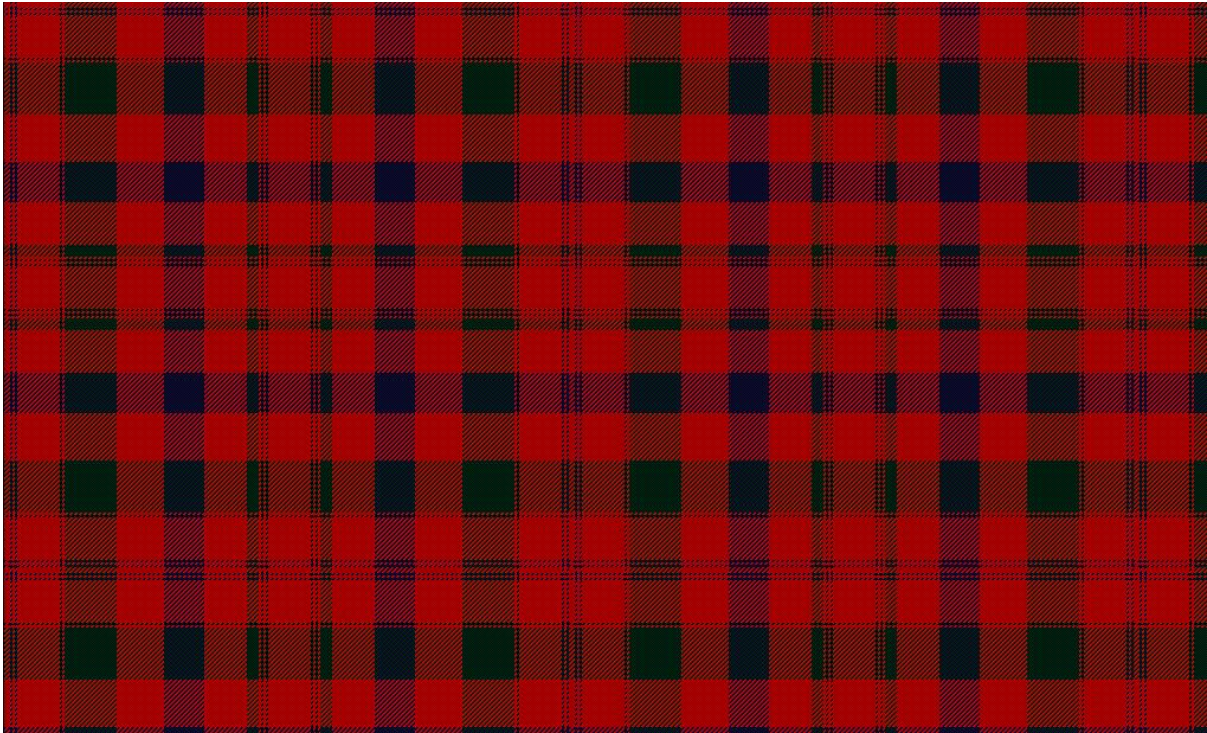


Whilst this is a logical extrapolation the resulting tartan is ungainly and results in a busy sett that's not well balanced or particularly visually pleasing.



Culloden Plaid reconstruction (Scarlett)

If we assume for a moment that the broad second (blue) pivot identified by Scarlett is in fact not so then a simplified setting is immediately apparent with the pivots on the red between the alternating bands of narrow lines.



Culloden Plaid reconstruction (MacDonald)

So what are we to make of the contradictions and inconsistencies in the interpretations of the design? There are a number of possible explanations:

1. The Scarlet interpretation is correct and the original sett did finish on the broad blue as the second pivot and thus the resulting joined plaid was a large, busy design with only a half repeat plus selvedge mark across the warp. Whilst this is possible there is no other known example of only a half setting across a warp and it seems unlikely that that was the case in the original.
2. The second pivot was wrong in the original i.e. the warp was incorrectly set up. This may seem an unlikely scenario but it would not be unique; for example, the original MacDonald of Glenaladale plaid did not have a pivot join, nor did an early Murray of Tullibardine plaid – see my articles on them
3. The original was not intended to be joined. Whilst this is possible, given the selvedge mark which was only ever a feature of joined plaid at this period it's unlikely.

There are numerous small pieces of the original plaid surviving but none that I've examined includes the joining selvedge which is frustrating. Unless or until such a piece comes to light the correct setting of this tartan will always remain in doubt but what seems perfectly clear is that both the so called Old Robertson and MacDonald of Keppoch are the result of errors in interpreting small portions of the Moyhall plaid and were not distinct tartans as claimed by Stewart and later writers.

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