

The Prince's Own - An Error In Translation?

The MacRae/Prince's Own tartan is one of a group of similar designs that includes: Ross, Huntley, Lumsden, Rae and Kinnoull. A number of writers have claimed that the Prince's Own is the original version. Quite how long it's been associated with the MacRaes is uncertain but irrespective of its origins it now appears that the design currently used is incorrect and that the Lumsden version has a stronger claim to be the correct setting. I shall explore the setting in detail later but it's perhaps useful to give a brief history of the design.

Much of the confusion surrounding this design can be traced to D.W. Stewart's 1893 publication *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans* in which he wrote of the design that '*Various circumstances tend to enhance the interest of this design, which is especially associated by Jacobite enthusiasts with the memory of Prince Charles Edward, and which was named during the campaign of 1745-46 from his personal use of it. Authenticated by specimens of contemporary and immediately subsequent dates-invariably bearing the legend of royal adoption-the pattern may be ranked amongst the earliest clan patterns extant in fabric. It is undoubtedly an old pattern of the MacRaes; and it was certainly worn by the Prince in their territory. But whether it was previously used by members of the clan, of whether it was adopted by them as a compliment to the wearer, cannot be determined.*

The trouble with so much of Stewart's work is that he did not offer any evidence to support his claims of a particular pattern's antiquity and so in this case one may ask: What circumstances, where is the evidence to confirm the sett was used by Prince Charles Edward and/or named during the '45 campaign and where are/were these supposedly contemporary specimens? Stewart then apparently contradicts himself saying that *It is undoubtedly an old pattern of the MacRaes* and then *But whether it was previously used by members of the clan,.....cannot be determined.* Either it was an old MacRae sett or it wasn't. Interestingly, the official MacRae Clan Society website makes no historical claims to the Prince's Own version which is surprising if there were surviving specimens from the '45 as Stewart claimed.

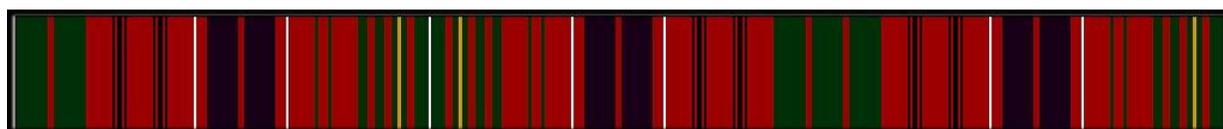
The fact is that the oldest known specimens of the Princes Own are those in the Cockburn Collection of 1810 (Pic 1) and the Highland Society of London's (HSL) Collection (Pic 2) of c1816 in both of which it is called MacRae. The apparent colour (shade) differences are due mainly to the lighting conditions under which the pictures were taken. These two examples are the same sett. There is a second, contemporary specimen in the HSL named MacKay but that appears to be an error in mis-locating the original labels with the samples when the collection was re-mounted at a later date. The commonly worn MacRae tartan is a simplified version of this Cockburn/HSL sett with the section containing the yellow stripe omitted.



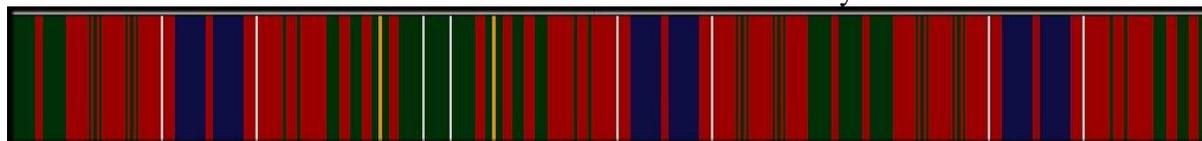
The story is confusion further by the ‘claimed’ history of the oldest Lumsden tartan which is taken from a waistcoat (Pic 3) that belonged to Andrew Lumsden, Prince Charles Edward’s Private Secretary during the ’45. Authorities have there assumed that the waistcoat is contemporary whereas it’s a Regency style garment of material that was almost certainly woven by Messrs Wilsons of Bannockburn. Andrew Lumsden died in 1801 so the waistcoat is more likely to date to c1790-1800.

When the Prince’s Own (top) and Lumsden (bottom) settings are compared below the similarity is immediately obvious. The pivots are marked X and Y. The discrepancy is at the former where the Prince's Own has a white pivot centred on the green and the Lumsden has two white stripes placed apart on the green which in effect introduces another bar of green which then becomes the pivot. The second pivot is marked as Y and y (upper and lower setts) to allow for the proportional differences in the graphics caused by the error at X.

W/2 G12 R6 G6 Y2 G6 R6 G8 R6 G10 R18 G4 R8 G4 R18 W2 R8 B22 R4 B22
R8 W2 R18 K2 R2 K4 R2 K2 R18 K2 R2 K4 R2 K2 R18 G20 R4 G/10



X Y
X y



G/10 W4 G20 R8 G6 Y4 G6 R8 G10 R8 G10 R22 G4 R10 G4 R22 W2 R10 B26 R6
B26 R10 W2 R22 G2 R2 G4 R2 G2 R20 G2 R2 G4 R2 G2 R22 G20 R4 G/10

If one assumes for a moment that these are in fact the same tartan and that one is an error for the other that begs the questions which is correct and how did the error occur? Examination of the Lumsden waistcoat confirms the full setting with the double white stripe. In order to understand how the Prince's Own error occurred one needs to understand how cloth, particularly a large sett such as this, was set to the loom by Wilsons of Bannockburn and earlier weavers. Such setts were used for plaiding which was traditionally woven at half the finished width and two pieces were then joined - see the article of the plaids from Antigonish, Nova Scotia for a detailed example. The pattern was set up on the loom with the side to be joined finishing half way through one pivot - X in this case and the pattern carried across to finish either on the second pivot if it fitted, or in a selvedge pattern or selvedge mark. If the sample were to be cut in half and joined the result would be a double white stripe on the green as in the Lumsden version.



4. HSL sample showing the offset central green pivot.

As there are no earlier written records of the Prince's Own/MacRae than Stewart's, and the fact that both the Lumsden Waistcoat and the HSL specimens exist, I am drawn to the conclusion that the error was Stewart's in assuming that the white strip was the pivot rather than the green which it is and that the Lumsden setting is the correct historical one for the design irrespective of what it was originally called. Given the fact that the Cockburn, HSL and Lumsden waistcoat are all Wilsons cloth it is quite possible that they came across an old piece associated with the Charles Edward Stewart and were selling it as such which might explain why Andrew Lumsden would have wanted something in it to reflect his earlier association with the Prince's cause.