

The Use of Colour in Tartan

When travelling around Highland Games or talking to people who are unfamiliar with the colour variations available for a given pattern it is not unusual to be told by someone that; '.....our clan has three tartans, the ancient one, the modern one and a very nice muted one.....'. There is often misunderstanding about the terminology used by tartan manufacturers. The terms apply to generalised ranges of shades which are used to produce variations of the same tartan. The fact that the same pattern can look completely different when produced in these different colour ranges can result in the impression that these are in fact different tartans.

The first thing that requires clarification is that the term used to describe the overall shades of a particular piece of material does not refer to the design in any way and has no bearing on the antiquity of a pattern. The suggestion has been made that terms referring to the colours should come after the name and those which refer to the antiquity or use of the pattern e.g.; old, hunting etc, should come before the name. For example, Old MacLachlan - modern, and MacLachlan - old, the former being the Old MacLachlan tartan in modern colours and the latter being the later/contemporary MacLachlan tartan in old colours. These examples shows how easily two different patterns might be understood to be the same tartan when in fact they are not, and how the same tartan can be construed as two different tartans when presented in different colour shades. The idea a uniform nomenclature is logical but unfortunately it has not been widely adopted and is unlikely to be so because of the manufacturers' individual practices. It's also self-evident that unless applied universally such a proposal would only add to the confusion.

It is important to understand that the colours used today are ALL produced using chemical dyes and that the natural dyes used until c.1856 could produce every colour and shade from light to dark depending on the type, quantity and quality of the dyestuff used and the desired effect – Fig 1.



Fig 1. Examples of the colours available from natural dyes.

By the last quarter of the 18th century the famous weaving firm William Wilson & Sons of Bannockburn were working with large quantities of natural dyes to produce standard colours. They continued to develop these until the increasing availability of chemical dyes made natural ones uneconomic. The skill with which Wilsons produced their colours from natural dyes can still be

appreciated by examining some of their many surviving specimens and studying their dye recipes. More information is available in their [1819 Key Pattern Book](#).

After the mid-19th century chemical dyes offered a cheap, quicker and easier way of obtaining standard colours albeit often to the detriment of the original patterns where the design subtleties often became obscured. Below are listed the major colour groupings and the various contemporary names applied to them throughout the Trade.

OLD, ANCIENT or VEGETABLE COLOURS

These are the mid-light shades which are supposed to represent the colours obtained in the past from natural dyes, their use dates from towards the end of the first half of this century. Whether they were a result of a movement against the dark shades of modern colours or designed by the Trade to increase their range and thereby commercial success is unclear. There is a story to the effect that shortly after the war someone was seen wearing a kilt at one of the highland games where the original modern colours of the cloth had faded by use and exposure to the elements into what we would now call old colours. The author has demonstrated this process by placing a piece of cloth in modern colours under glass in direct sunlight with half the sample covered. Over a period of about 18 months the section in the light faded out towards the ancient range.

In general however, old/ancient colours do not reflect the shades obtained from the natural dyes which were used in old tartans. They are far too insipid in comparison and have a uniform paleness unrepresentative of the old highland specimens. The term old/ancient colours have no bearing on the age of the particular pattern which they describe and it is therefore possible to have a recent tartan woven in old colours and called ancient. A good example is the Ancient Atlantic tartan which was designed in the 1970's.

MODERN or ORDINARY COLOURS

The early aniline or chemical dyes were a by-product of the coal and chemical industries, the first of which, Perkin's Purple, was produced in 1856. This was quickly followed by the other commonly used chemical colours. Although cheap and easy to use these dyes did not have the subtlety and versatility of those they replaced and as a result the shades that they produced were very strong and dark. It was by using these shades that the Black Watch tartan as worn by the military today became so dark as to be almost black. Once the use of natural dyes ceased these aniline colours continued to be used as the common shades until the invention of 'Old Colours'. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence still specifies the exact shades of the colours to be used in military tartans and thereby maintains the myth of their dark origins in the face of extant specimens of the early 19th century which are woven in the middle range Wilsons' shades.

When put together, the modern shades of blue, black and green give an overall dark appearance and tend to obscure the actual pattern. Ironically, some of these shades, especially the reds and blues, are quite good matches to the shades obtained from natural dyes and frequently used in 18th century rural tartans. There is at least one example in which the blue, green and black are all dark and which by contemporary parlance would be classified as modern colours. However, the use of such uniform dark colours does seem to have been the exception rather than the rule during that period.

MUTED COLOURS

These are of fairly recent origin, early 1970's, and fall somewhere between the old and modern colour ranges, and are the best commercial match to the overall shades of natural dyes prior to 1855. Once again the problem with these shades is that they are of a uniform hue and therefore inconsistent with the old practice of counter balancing shades.

REPRODUCTION & WEATHERED COLOURS

Although slightly different to each other, these two ranges are used by different weavers for roughly the same colours. The term 'Reproduction' is restricted to those patterns produced by D.C. Dalgleish Ltd, Selkirk, who were the originators of this range. The story surrounding the origin of these colours is very romantic but quite false. The story has it that a piece of tartan was dug up in the 1950s at the Culloden battlefield and after 200 years buried in the peat, the colours had become very drab, hence the term 'weathered' by some manufacturers. Unfortunately the firm who gave us Reproduction colours has declined to answer questions concerning the shade's origins and it is perhaps significant that there appears to be no record of the 'original specimen'. Given the historical importance of such an artifact it is not unreasonable to expect it to have been examined, the claims verified by an independent observer and the specimen preserved. I'm therefore of the opinion that the story is an invention designed to sell more cloth.

The main difference with the Reproduction shades is that the usual blues become slate blue, black a less intense charcoal black, red a deeper shade and green a sort of khaki. In the Weathered range the blue become grey and green becomes brown.

NATURAL DYES

Until the latter part of the 18th century there was a great deal of variation in the shades produced from natural dyes. This was due to the individual production constraints and techniques available in the rural highlands, for example, the size of dye vessels and the availability of raw dye materials.

As a result of the failure of the '45 Jacobite Rising Highland Dress, and by implication tartan, was proscribed for a period of 35 years '....in that part of North Briton called Scotland' (Act for the More Effective Disarming of the Highlands, 1746) i.e. the Highlands. This led to the skills needed to spin, dye and weave tartan disappearing completely from much of the Highlands within fifty years. That the traditional skills were not completely lost is evidenced by the survival of a number of plaids dated during the mid-1770's and the fact that tartan production, initially for the huge number of Highland Regiments, moved to the Lowlands and in particular the firm of Wm Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. Wilsons. They scoured the Highlands for old patterns and by 1780 were working with stock patterns and colours based on historic examples.

When using natural dyes, either industrially or rurally, it was the common practice to counterbalance the colours against each other. The main colours used in a majority of extant 18th century pieces were a combination of some or all of the following; black, blue, red and green – Fig 2. Reds at that time ranged from pink to scarlet and any shade of red was highly prized due to the cost of the dyestuff. When a darker red was used as a ground colour pink was sometimes used as a guard colour to highlight stripes or to separate major ground colours in the same way as white, yellow and pale blue. The two colours that seem to have varied least were green and blue, the former usually being an olive shade whilst blue was often very dark navy. Wilsons continued to use their colours in much the same way as the earlier rural dyers with mid greens juxtaposed by darker reds and blues.



Fig 2. An 18th century plaid in natural dyes.



Fig 3. Wilsons' plaids c1828-40 in natural dyes.

The decline in the use of natural dyes began with the introduction of the first aniline dye, Perkin's Purple, in 1856 and within a few years chemical dyes had completely replaced traditional natural dyes which in turn led to the proliferation of colour ranges seen today.

(C) Peter MacDonald 2001 (Updated 2010)