

A Cromar relic of Culloden

Introduction

In 2019 an 18th century plaid was donated to the National Museum of Scotland. The donor family's tradition is that it belonged to an ancestor named John Moir from Cromar in Aberdeenshire. He is said to have fought under his chief, James Moir of Stoneywood, with the Jacobite side at the Battle of Culloden. One writer speculated that John was wounded because *the tartan plaid which he wore in the action, and which still exists in wonderfully good state of preservation, shows quite unmistakably the mark of a bullet hole through its folds*¹. In November 2024 the author had an opportunity to examine the plaid and make an assessment of the material and the bullet claim (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The author examining John Moir's Plaid. Photo: EF Williams

¹ Letters to the Aberdeen Press and Journal - Thursday 09 November 1905
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000576/19051109/012/0003> accessed 29 October 2020

Construction

The piece is a typical example of 18th century joined plaiding. It is 94 inches (240 cms) long and made from two pieces of material 20-inch (50 cm) wide (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Overview of the Moir plaid showing the single-width cloth and the double-width join.

Photo: EF Williams

Woven at 46 epi², with singles³ in both warp and weft (Figure 3), the material is joined with a simple whip-stitch on one selvedge. The raw ends were turned and sewn-down, the method commonly used for 18th century plaids (Figure 4).

Running lengthways the pattern is unbalanced. At one end it is turned on the pivot on the red ground bordered by the green, whereas the other end is turned on the green before the red. This difference is due either to the plaid having been longer and subsequently cut down, or there being insufficient cloth when woven to allow it to be balanced. Given that the yarn used to sew down both ends is the same it is probable that this is the original size of the plaid.

² Epi – Ends/threads per inch.

³ Unplied yarns.

No dye analysis has been conducted on the specimen but, if it were to be, it would probably confirm the use of: cochineal (red); indigo (blue); indigo + a yellow, native or imported (green); and probably a tannin source such as oak or alder for the black. The brownish shade of the latter points to little, or more likely no, indigo top-dyeing which was often done to get a darker shade. Testing of the yellow element of the green would help confirm the date as the presence of an imported hardwood would indicate a later 18th century date.



Figure 3. Detail showing the warp and weft singles. Photo: EF Williams



Figure 2. Detail showing one of the turned ends. Photo: EF Williams

The Sett

The sett is essentially an alternating red ground pattern with one ground surrounded by blue, the other by green, separated by a black band. There is also a fine red stripe between the blue and black, a feature often seen in old specimens and a technique used to give a visual break between the two. There are 2.5 half setts across the warp which has the black stripe on the joining edge and a blue and extended red stripe selvedge mark on the non-joining edge (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Graphic showing the warp with the joining pivot on the right.

When two pieces of the warp are joined, the pattern repeats across the width of the cloth to give 4 half setts and a selvedge mark of each side which appears as three broad stripes. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Graphic show the effect of two pieces of material being joined and the triple-stripe selvedge.

The Bullet Claim

The 1905 newspaper article mentioned that the plaid '*shows quite unmistakably the mark of a bullet hole through its folds*'. What the author of the article failed to mention was that the bullet only went through the black squares in one section along one line in the warp, and that there is lesser damage in other black squares elsewhere in the plaid (Figure 7).



Figure 7. John Moir's Plaid showing the 'mark of a bullet hole'. Photo: National Museum of Scotland

Whilst the idea of a bullet damaging the plaid in the heat of battle is a good story, the reason for the holes is probably far more straightforward and a result of the dyeing process. Iron⁴ was commonly used as a mordant with a tannin dyestuff for black in 18th rurally produced tartan. But whilst it was readily available, iron can cause the yarn to become brittle which over time causes it to deteriorate. The damage is obvious in this section where the black in the weft has completely disintegrated (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Disintegration of the black yarn in a section of the weft. Photo@ EF Williams

⁴ Ferrous sulphate, also known as 'Copperas', which, despite its name, has nothing to do with copper, and 'green vitriol' has been used in dyeing for hundreds of years.

Having identified the reason for the damage being more prosaic than the romanticised bullet hole story, that does not preclude that the plaid having been worn during the '45. Assuming that it has not been cut down and that the current size is the original form then the length (2.4m) precludes it having been worn as a belted plaid. If worn, the size would have been more practical for a lady's mantelet⁵ of the type seen in a number of mid-18th century portraits of Jacobite women such as that worn by Jenny (Jean) Cameron of Dungallon (Figure 9). Equally, the plaid could have been a domestic piece; for example, a bed throw.



Figure 9. Jenny Cameron of Dungallon wearing a mantelet or pinned shawl c.1745-50

⁵ According to the 1773 Dictionary of the English Language, a mantelet is 'a small cloak worn by women.'

Conclusion

Tartans that can be associated with a particular family are scarce amongst old specimens. In this case there is a family association with the Moirs from the Cromar area of Aberdeenshire. Whether this piece belonged to John Moir will probably never be known for certain.

Assuming that the current size is that of the original and that it wasn't later re-purposed, then the plaid is too small to have been worn as feileadh mor or belted plaid. It is more likely to have been worn either with a feileadh beag or little kilt or worn with trews or breeches and used as a cloak/blanket. It could equally have been a woman's mantelet.

The construction of the cloth: yarn; dyes; width; offset pattern; joined nature; and turned ends are all consistent with 18th century rurally produced tartan. Based on these factors it is likely to date between c.1740-80.

Romantic stories are often attributed with such artefacts which are often associated with the '45, and in particular, the Battle of Culloden as is the case here. However, as discussed earlier, the damage that is supposed to have been caused by a bullet is demonstrably not the case. Instead, it is the result of yarn disintegration due to an iron mordant used for fixing and saddening the black dye. Whilst the plaid may have been worn at the battle, there is no proof of this and it may be simply a family myth. Dye analysis might provide a more accurate date, especially if imported hardwood dyes were used which would reflect a later date. Unless such analysis were conducted then the age and the stories associated with the plaid will remain open to question.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald December 2024