

Caledonia

Introduction

Wilsons of Bannockburn, the premier tartan weavers of the late 18th to mid-19th century were astute businessmen. Before the development of clan tartans after 1815, Wilsons wove well over 200 patterns, some of which they gave names to. Their early named patterns tended to be called after towns and regions, for example: Aberdeen, Fort William and Lochaber, or people, or events from history. Amongst the latter, they used the name Caledonia for a number of patterns at various points.

Caledonia was the old Latin name for Scotland used by the Roman Empire. The name is generally accepted to have derived from *Caledonii*, the name of an Iron Age tribal group living north of the Forth. By the early 18th century Caledonia was often used in literature as a romantic or poetic name for all of Scotland. It is easy to understand why Wilsons would have adopted such an emotive name during the early years of the Highland Revival.

Variations on a theme

In their 1819 Key Pattern Book (KPB) Wilsons included the Numbered Patterns that were at one time or another called Caledonia. They were: No.3 or Caledonia; No. 43, Kidd or Caledonia; and No.155 or Caledonia (Plate 1). For reasons that are unclear, Pattern No.43, Kidd or Caledonia was renamed as the tartan for the Davidsons of Inchmarlo, Aberdeenshire in a book called *The Baronage* Angus and Mearns, 1856.ⁱ

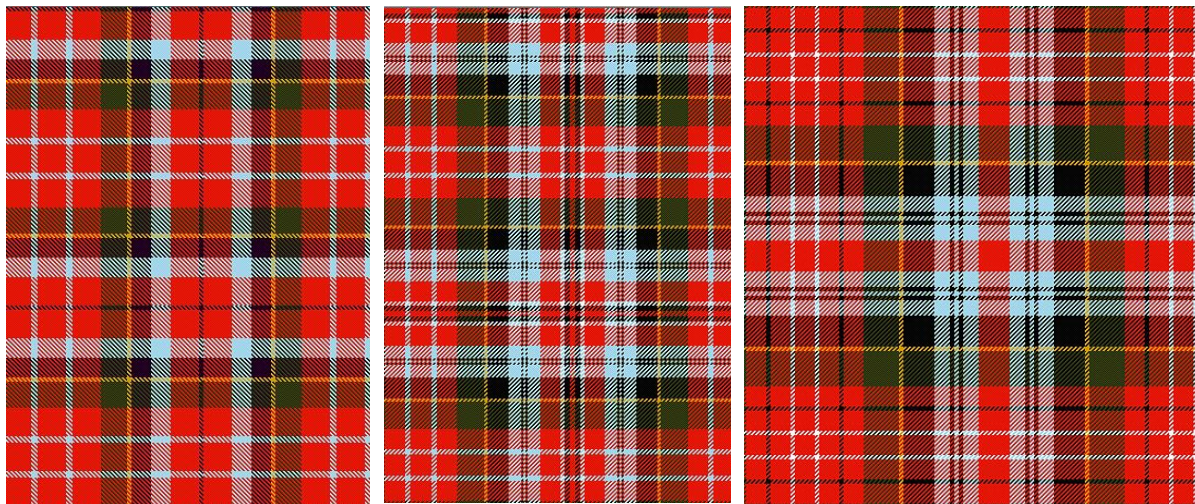


Plate 1. Wilsons' Patterns No.3 or Caledonia; No.43, Kidd or Caledonia; and No.155 or Caledonia

In addition to these three variations, the MacKintosh tartan was included in the 1819 KPB under the names *Caledonia* and *McKintosh* giving a further example of how popular names were recycled by them over the years.

Judging by the number of settings in the 1819 KPB (seven) and surviving examples, No.43, Kidd or Caledonia was the most popular of the three similar designs. The earliest known example is a magnificent Highland Revival suit dating to c.1790 (Plate 2). It is not known for whom it was made, nor under what name it was sold. In 1815 the Highland Society of London set about the job of preserving the "Tartans, Plaids, and Banners" of the clans, despite there never having been clan tartans per se. In April 1816 Cluny MacPherson, chief of the clan, wrote to the Society to say that "...I could only find one scrap of tartan in the country which I've sent to Bannockburn to have a plaid made and I'll send you a bit." What he submitted or

where he acquired it is not known but the following year, he submitted a specimen of No.43, Kidd or Caledonia as the MacPherson tartan, a name by which it has been most commonly known since (Plate 3).



Plate 2. Highland Revival Suit c.1790
Photo: National Museum of Scotland

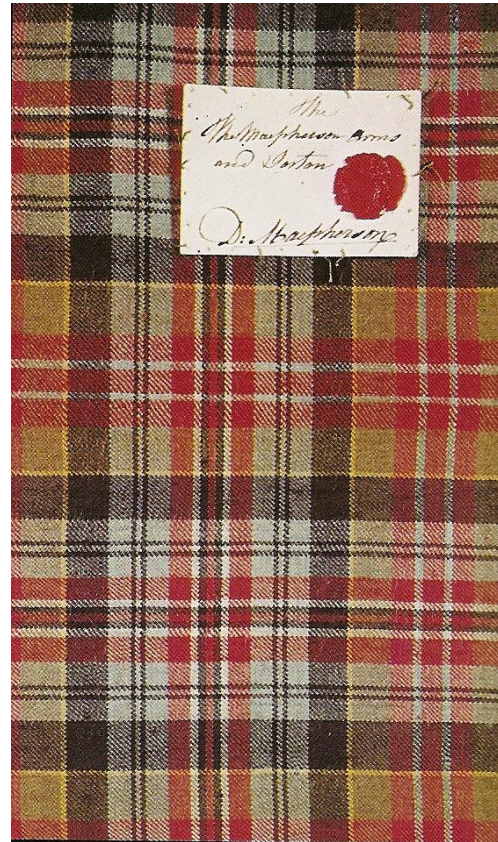


Plate 3. MacPherson tartan 1817
Photo: Highland Society of London

Why Kidd?

Wilsons named some of their early tartans famous individuals (Rob Roy, Wellington etc), after individuals for whom they designed them (Bruce of Kinnaird), and sometimes after customers (A New Pattern for T. Logan). Their Kidd reference may have been an example of the latter.

According to the records of the Scottish Tartan Society¹ the name is said to have been that of a Scot called Kidd who purchased this tartan for clothing workers on his plantation in the West Indies.² However, this attribution may be the result of partial information or conflation of references. Whilst there were several individuals named Kyd/Kidd that had connections to Barbados and Jamacia (Plate 4), there is no definitive record of any of them purchasing cloth from Wilsons or elsewhere. A Wilsons' letter³ shows that they supplied cloth to Jamacia for slave wear in late 1790s but it was for Linsay⁴, not tartan which was a much more expensive material. However, Kidd was a common name in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and without corroborating evidence such as Wilsons' correspondence, it is impossible to know who might have been the source of the name. Given Wilsons' propensity for naming tartans after popular romanticised historical figures, another possibility is that the name is a reference to Captain Kidd (c.1645-1701) the Scottish privateer later denounced as a pirate by parliament.

¹ Now represented by its successor organisation The Scottish Tartans Authority.

² The West Indies are now known as the Caribbean, an archipelago comprising over 50 islands.

³ Letter from Mason & Thomson to Wilsons dated 22 Dec 1797 ref Linsay for Negro wear.

⁴ Linsay = linsey-woolsey, a coarse, durable textile traditionally woven with a linen warp and a woollen weft. It was hard wearing and cheap. An order to Wilsons in 1797 asked that it be shilling or less per yard.

Kidd / Kyd / Kydd Scotland-West Indies evidence network, c.1750-1850

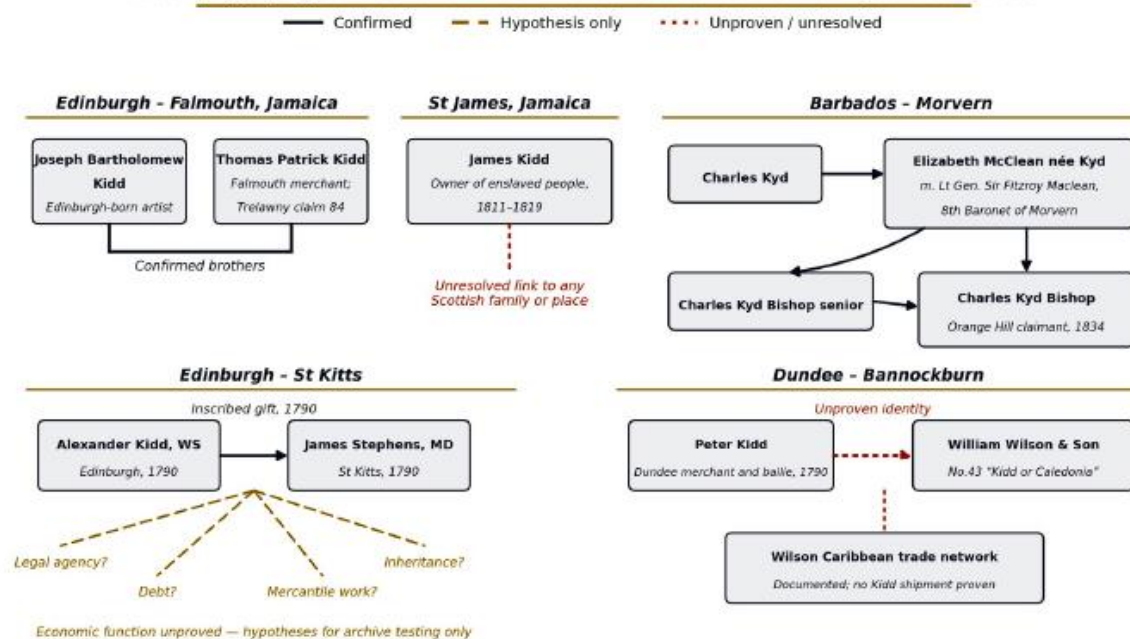


Plate 4. Notable Kidd/Kyd connections with West Indies c.1750-1850 Source: House of Kidd Worldwide

Wilson's specimens from collections made in the decade following MacPherson's adoption of the tartan saw them dropping the name *No.43, Kidd or Caledonia* in favour of *MacPherson* (Plate 5) and retaining the name *Caledonia* for their Pattern No.155 (Plate 6).



Plate 5. Wilsons' specimen of MacPherson, 1833. Photo: The Author



Plate 6. Wilsons' specimen of No.155 or Caledonia c.1830-40 Photo: The Author

Conclusion

Wilsons of Bannockburn named several of their early numbered patterns after places or people. It is therefore no surprise that they chose Caledonia to reflect its popularity in literature as a romantic or poetic name for all of Scotland. So popular was it that they used it for at least four tartans, three of which were variations on a theme: No.3 or Caledonia, NO.43, Kidd or Caledonia, later renamed MacPherson, and No.155 or Caledonia. The numbering may be indicative of the chronological development/naming of these designs (Plate 7).

When and why Wilsons named No.43 as Kidd is unknown. It has been suggested that it was because they were selling quantities of the tartan to a man named Kidd in the West Indies but no evidence to support this has been found. Given Wilsons' propensity for naming tartans after popular romanticised historical figures, it is possible that the name is a reference to Captain Kidd (c.1645-1701) the Scottish privateer later denounced as a pirate by parliament. He was popularised in articles and books at the beginning of the C19th. At about the same time Wilsons were producing the Rob Roy and Robin Hood tartans, plus other named after characters in Sir Walter Scott's novels.

What appears certain is that shortly after Cluny MacPherson adopted the No.43 version for his clan in 1817, Wilsons began to call it MacPherson and pattern No.155 was either developed and/or Caledonia added to its name. They appear to have dropped the name Kidd from their range by 1825-1830 and that tartan, No.43, was sold almost exclusively as MacPherson until the late C20th when some mills started offering it again under the name Kidd. More recently, there has been an effort by the House of Kidd Worldwide to revive the older setting of the tartan in shades approximating Wilsons' natural dye colours as the Caledonia/Kidd 1790 sett after the suit shown in Plate 2.



Plate 7. A cloak in Wilsons' No.43, Kidd or Caledonia (MacPherson) tartan c.1820 Photo: The Author

© Peter Elsea MacDonald, September 2026

ⁱ **PETER. MACGREGOR, D.** *The Baronage of Angus and Mearns*. Oliver & Boyd. Edinburgh 1856