

# ***District Tartans and the evidence for a Regional Motif in old tartans from the Appin/Lorn area.***

Today so called *District Tartans* are increasingly popular. In fact, after personal tartans, what might be broadly called District tartans are the most common group of new designs. They are popular not only amongst those in Scotland with no family tartan but now widely across the world to denote Scottish connections. Before the recent resurgence of interest in District tartans there were two important milestones in establishing their authority in the minds of the public: firstly the writings of Martin Martin<sup>i</sup>, and then the early records of the famous weaving firm Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn<sup>1</sup>.

Martin wrote that *“Every Isle differs from each other in their fancy of making Plads as to the stripes in breadth and colours. The humour is as different through the mainland of the Highlands, in so far that they who have seen those places are able at first view of the man’s Plad, to guess the place of his residence”*. He was the factor<sup>2</sup> of an estate on Skye and so his word has been taken as authoritative by some historians arguing that this is proof of the early use of particular tartans in each area of the country, which of course it is not. What it suggests is that there were styles of design that could be associated with specific areas. It does not mean that only such and such a style or colours were used in a particular area, nor that they were exclusive to that area. Indeed, it would be ludicrous to assume that designs would not have crossed the boundaries of a particular glen or island.

By 1820 Wilsons’ records list nearly 300 tartans, the majority of those were merely numbered, some had town or district names and by then an increasing number, clan or family names. However, examination of their pre-1800 patterns shows that with the odd exception in the era before the development of clan tartans the vast majority of named tartans were either military or called after towns, district or regions. Wilsons realised that named patterns sold better and so used Scottish place names to promote their goods. So for example, writing of the Aberdeen tartan they said *‘This Pattern was made and named after the City of ABERDEEN about the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century’*. There is nothing in their records to suggest that they ever considered these tartans to be old patterns or to have an historical connection to the places that bore their name. In fact almost all of the tartans are connected with towns and areas in the Lowlands which confirms their fashion status rather than them being sold as having some pseudo-historical Jacobite/Highland connection.



Fig 1. Wilsons’ Athole tartan with purple.

Notwithstanding the evidence by Martin for regional styles and Wilsons’ predominately Lowland names for their commercial designs, Teall & Smith<sup>ii</sup> seem to have been seduced by David Stewart of Garth<sup>iii</sup> when he wrote that *“.....Thus a MacDonald, a Campbell, a MacKenzie, etc. Was known by his plaid; and in like manner the Athole (Fig 1), Glenorchy and other colours of different districts were easily distinguishable’*. The fact that clan tartans were a recent ‘invention’ at the time Garth was writing and evidence that he’d been swayed by the idea without any proof means that his comments about District tartans should at the very least have been treated by Teall & Smith with caution. Yet they seem to have overlooked this and used it as evidence to popularise the concept of ‘District’ tartans being specific

<sup>1</sup> References can be found in Wilsons’ 1819 Key Pattern Book and amongst their many surviving letters and specimens c1780-1840.

<sup>2</sup> Factor is the Scottish term for an Estate Manager.

rather than general tartans and in doing so promoted a myth which has now taken on the status of historical fact for many people.

It was not until D.C. Stewart's work<sup>iv</sup> that an attempt was made to group tartans with similar design features by clan/locality. He identified three broad types: the Black Watch, MacKintosh and MacDonal groups. Scarlett<sup>v</sup> identified the Campbell, MacKintosh and Ross groups. Unfortunately in each case the authors grouped together tartans that earlier researchers, particularly D.W. Stewart<sup>vi</sup>, claimed as old but which in reality cannot be dated earlier than c1800 and Wilsons' records. It is frequently impossible to identify one genuinely old i.e. pre-1750, extant specimen of such a group. Whilst there are a number of extant pre-Culloden era specimens hardly any fit readily into any of these four supposed archetypes. If the Stewart/Scarlett classifications lack evidence are there surviving specimens that do provide support for regional designs?

Recent research by the author identified three 18<sup>th</sup> century specimens from the Appin/Lorn area that share common structural features not seen in surviving contemporary examples from elsewhere in the country. A further specimen with the same setting is amongst the artefacts belonging to the Scottish Tartans Authority although there is no indication of where it came from.

The Glencoe Museum has a number of tartan relics including a small fragment some 8" x 9" on loan from the MacColl Society and which is claimed/labelled as being *from Flora MacDonald's wedding dress* (Fig 2). The weight of the cloth and presence of a herringbone selvedge contradicts the claim and confirms it to be a fragment of a c1730-50 plaid. It's not known how the piece came into the possession of the local MacColl family but not having their own tartan, the design was adopted by the Clan MacColl as their tartan in the 1930s.

Unfortunately the size of the pattern means that the sample's dimensions are insufficient to allow confirmation of the sett. One pivot, the triple green stripe, is obvious but the remainder beyond the broad green bar is unclear and so it would have remained but for a remarkable discovery.

There are a number of extent plaids and fragments of early tartan spread throughout the country and whilst many appear similar, they're often predominately red blue and green, they differ in their setting. It is therefore extraordinary to find another example, also in the Glencoe Museum, that has the same setting but woven in just red and green and in slightly



Fig 2. Fragment of C18th plaid (Glencoe Museum)

different proportions. Because they are part of the museum exhibit it was not possible to remove the plaid to examine it fully however, it comprises two lengths of off-set cloth 24" wide with a herringbone selvedge joined in the traditional manner to make a double width plaid. The origin of the plaid is unclear but the fact that this a local history museum, the similarity in the age of the cloth, yarn weight and weave, including herringbone selvedge, all suggest that the two specimens are probably from the same weaver and off the same loom.



Fig 3. The two Glencoe Museum pieces showing the similar setting.



This discovery is hugely significant as it is the only known example of two extant pieces of this age from the same area.

If survival of two specimens were not remarkable enough then the discovery of a whole, albeit cut into two, early 18<sup>th</sup> century plaid from the same region and which has the same basic structure is extraordinary (Fig 4). Details of the find are outlined in a [companion paper](#) that discusses the find at Dunollie House, Oban. The plaid, which had been used for the past 200 years by the chief of the MacDougalls for curtains, is probably the oldest surviving complete example of a 6 yard double fine plaid. Although somewhat faded the sett is clearly discernible and quite obviously what might be described as a decorated version of the setting in the Glencoe specimens. The term 'decorated' refers to the basic structure or setting (in this case that of the Glencoe pieces) being enhanced or lived up by the addition of finer lines of brighter colours. Such 'decoration' is typically found amongst many 18<sup>th</sup> century specimens.



Fig 4. The Dunollie Plaid in use as curtains.

changing the colour of some of the finer potentially huge. The discovery of the Dunollie plaid which dates to the early C18th is such an example. In it fine pink and white stripes are added which make the design much more showy and elegant. This use of fine highlight lines was common in 18<sup>th</sup> Century plaids and is often found in fragments of tartan traditionally connected to the westcoast mainland.

The portion of a plaid in possession of the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) again utilises the basic setting but in that case is brighted with pink and light blue stripes (Fig 5). The history of this piece is unknown but the majority of the STA specimens, including this one, have strong west coast associations<sup>3</sup> so it is entirely possible that this piece was also from the Appin/Lorn area.

In terms of structural development, although not necessarily age, the plaid at Glencoe is the simplest of the three designs in that the basic pattern that can be described as being rendered simply in red and green. In the smaller Glencoe specimen (now called MacColl) the design is developed by changing the broad stripe and accompanying guards of the green band to blue and brown respectively but without altering the sett. By retaining the basic pattern but stripes the number of permutations of the design is



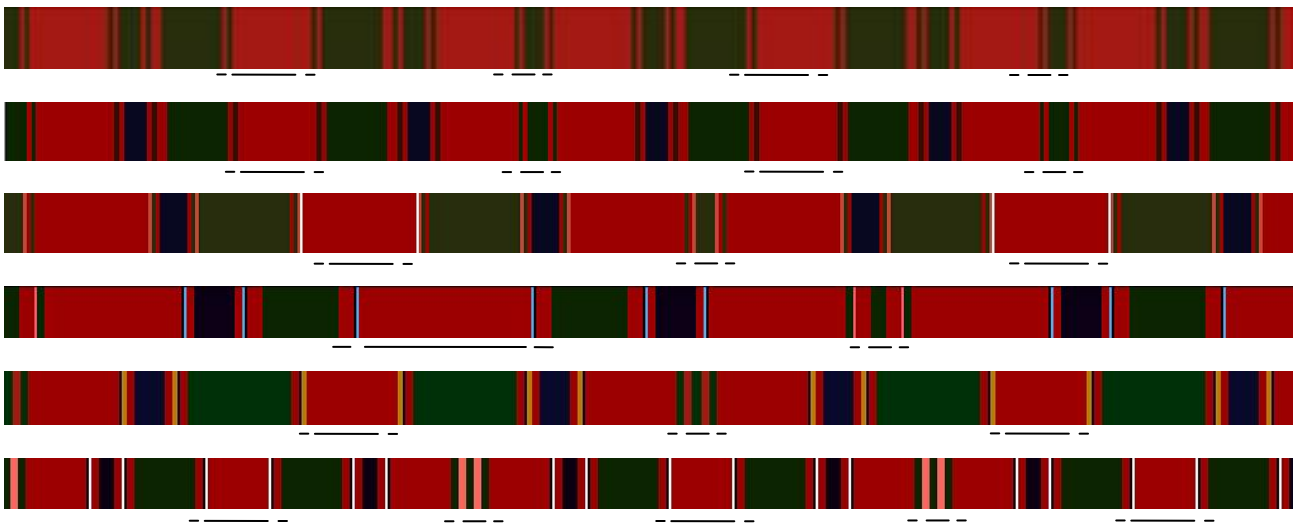
Fig 5. Portion of an unnamed C18th plaid in the STA Collection.

<sup>3</sup> The STA inherited this specimen from the Scottish Tartans Society. It purchased the piece from the historian John Telfer Dunbar whom in turn acquired much of his material from the Carmichael Collection which was principally amassed from west coast families.

If one assumes that the two specimens in the Glencoe Museum<sup>4</sup> were produced fairly locally, and bearing in mind that Dunollie near Oban is only 55 miles by road (even closer using the old Highland passes) and that both areas are in the old historic Lorn/Appin area then it is not unreasonable to speculate that three, possibly four if one includes the STA specimen, C18th plaids represent a structural style that was common there. Whilst this is not conclusive there is strong supporting evidence amongst the records for the famous weaving form Wm. Wilson & Son based in Bannockburn near Stirling.

Wilson's were known to have toured the Highlands in the late C18th and early C19th looking for old patterns that they could use as a basis for their *traditional* tartans. Their 1819 Key Pattern Book lists *Locheil* which is another brightened version of the basic sett under consideration, in this case with yellow and pink lines. It's not known if they named the design after the area, a common practice of theirs at the end of the C18th, or after an individual, probably the 'Gentle Locheil' a famous Jacobite, but their choice of a design known to have historic roots in the area is intriguing at the very least. Wilson's also used the design in at least two other tartans, their; *Old Bruce* and *King George IV*. By the 1831 their Locheil was being called *Munro* and their King George IV, *Dalziel*.<sup>vii</sup>

Below is a series of colour strips that shows the development of the design from the two Glencoe specimens to the Dunollie and STA plaids and then finally Wilson's *Locheil* and *King George IV* tartans. Whilst the proportions differ they all share similar motifs (shown under the colour strips) with one pivot having a triple stripe of a broad guarded by narrower ones centred on a large red square and the other being a plain red square bordered by matched narrow strips then broad bands which actually gives a reverse of negative triple stripe formed by the underlying ground colour. The pivotal triple stripe is particularly interesting as it is a feature of a number of old tartans associated with the MacDonalDs and may in fact represent a West Highland style<sup>5</sup>.



Whilst claims of the broader use of 'District' tartans cannot be conclusively established these clan era designs clearly share a common structure and regional association that provides compelling evidence that at least in the Appin/Lorn area some designs were woven to a common theme. From the few surviving examples it is impossible to know if this was used elsewhere but the choice of the setting by Wilson's as the basis for their *Locheil* offers powerful support for its historic use across Appin and Lorn. Much work still needs to be done on the historical use of motifs, particularly the triple-stripe which was widely used on the west coast.

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<sup>4</sup> The Museum comprises a collection of local history artefacts.

<sup>5</sup> At the Battle of Killcrankie in 1689 MacDonald of Glengarry's men were noted for their plaids of a *triple stripe*.

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- i **MARTIN M.** 1703 *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland.*
- ii **TEALL OF TEALLACH G.D. and SMITH P.D.**, 1992 *District Tartans*, Shepheard-Walwyn Ltd, London.
- iii **STEWART OF GARTH D.**, 1822 *The Sketches of the Highlanders of Scotland*, Constable & Co, Edinburgh.
- iv **STEWART D.C.** 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Revised Edition Shepheard-Walwyn., London 1977.
- v **SCARLETT J.D.** 1990 *TARTAN: The Highland Textile*. Shepheard-Walwyn, London.
- vi **STEWART D.W.** 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh.
- vii **LOGAN J.** 1831 *The Scottish Gael*. Smith, Eldar & Co. London.