

The Lord of the Isles Tartans

Introduction

The Lord of the Isles¹ is a title that was associated with the MacDonalds for over 300 years from the mid-12th century. The title was forfeited to the Scottish Crown in 1493 after which time the eldest son of the Scottish monarch, and since the Union of the Crowns in 1603 the British monarch, held the titular title Lord of the Isles². This, along with the Duke of Rothesay, another of the non-peerage titles, was dropped in favour of the *Prince of Wales* from 1603 until c1850. Around this time, Queen Victoria mandated the use of the titles to refer to the eldest son and heir apparent when in Scotland. HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay is the present *Lord of the Isles*.

In the 19th century, five tartans associated with the MacDonalds included some reference to the Lord of the Isles in their name and three have been worn by the members of the Royal Family at various times. Of the five tartans: two can be dated to portraits from the third quarter of the 18th century; one from an early 19th century manufacturer of tartan cloth; another was the work of the infamous Sobieski Stuart Brothers; and the final one, designed for a Prince.

Notwithstanding the early date for some of these tartans, it was not until the early Victorian era that any of the designs became associated with the Royal Family. The earliest surviving specimens date to the early 19th century. Oldest of all is a specimen in the Cockburn Collection (1810-15) where it is labelled 'Lord Macdonald', to which someone added 'of Slate' at a later date Plate 1). Slate (more commonly written Sleaf) is a reference to the MacDonalds of Sleaf and is discussed in detail later. By c1830 the tartan from the same manufacturers³ was being offered by a number of bespoke tailors as 'MacDonald of the Isles' (Plate 2).

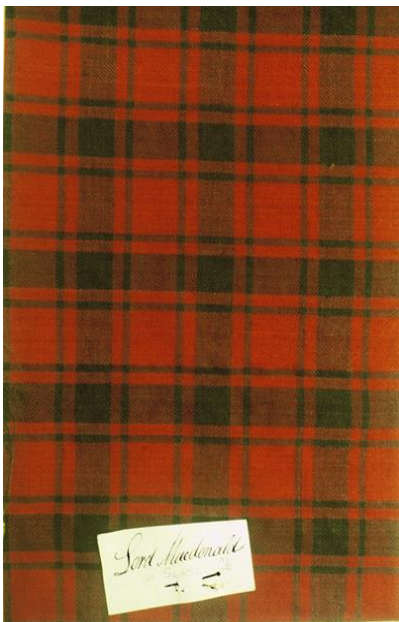


Plate 1. Wilsons' specimen labelled *Lord Macdonald*, Cockburn Collection 1810-15. © The Author.



Plate 2. Wilsons' specimen labelled *Macdonald of the Isles*, Romanes & Paterson sample book 1830-40. © The Author.

¹ Historically, the chief of the MacDonalds was referred to as *Ri Innse Gall* or *Rex Insularum* (Gaelic and Latin respectively for King of the Isles.)

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_the_Isles accessed 26 Jan 2020.

³ William Wilson & Son, Bannockburn.

Exactly when Wilsons' *Lord Macdonald* became *Macdonald of the Isles* is unclear but it was possibly a response to the inclusion by the Sobieski Stuart Bothers⁴ of a similarly named tartan in their *Cromarty Manuscript* (1829). The published version of this manuscript, the 1842 *Vestiarium Scoticum* has been widely dismissed as work of fiction, notably by Stewart and Thompson.ⁱ

The Sobieski *Lord of the Isles* tartan was unlike the earlier Wilsons' design. Notwithstanding the dubious claims about the origins of the *Vestiarium*, it was the first book to include pictures of tartans and was followed at the time by authors such as Smibertⁱⁱ (Plate 3). This pattern has become a popular MacDonal tartan and, as it was never worn by any holder of the title Lord of the Isles, it will not be considered further in this paper. Published the same year as Smibert's work, the Smith Brothersⁱⁱⁱ opted for the earlier Wilsons' sett but which they called *MacDonald of Slate* (Plate 4)⁵. From the middle of the 20th century this tartan was increasingly sold as *MacDonald of Sleat* whilst the original version (discussed later) became known by the older name, *MacDonald Lord of the Isles*.

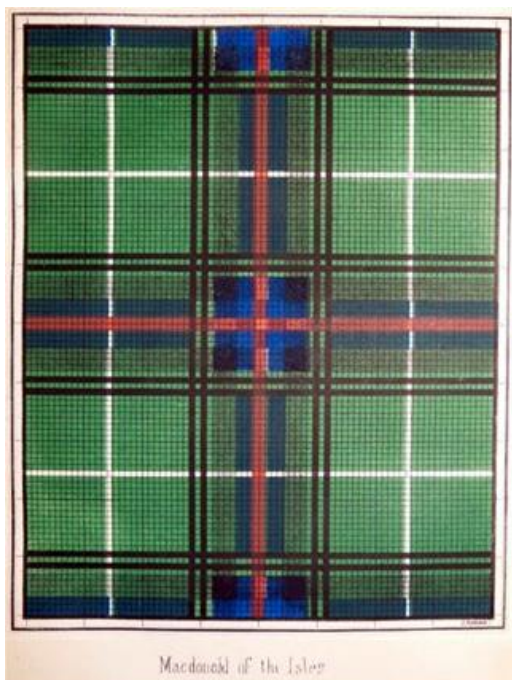


Plate 3. The *Vestiarium Macdonald of the Isles*, Smibert 1850



Plate 4. MacDonald of Slate, Smith Brothers 1850

Royal Adoption

A painting of 1849 depicts Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) wearing a kilt and plaid in what had presumably been chosen as the tartan for the Lord of the Isles title holder (Plate 5). The Prince of Wales continued to wear the Lord of the Isles tartan as a young man, as evidenced by a portrait (the earliest known photographic image of this tartan) taken at Abergeldie in 1863 (Plate 6). Edward's son, Prince Albert Victor, is also shown wearing the tartan in a photograph of 1870 (Plate 7) and a family portrait c1875 (Plate 8).

⁴The Sobieski-Stuart brothers were celebrities in Victorian Highland circles. John Carter Allen and Charles Manning Allen styled themselves *Hay Allan* for a time before adopting Sobieski-Stuart after claiming to be the illegitimate grandsons of Prince Charles Edward Stewart.

⁵ On p37 the Smiths say "Lord Macdonald of Slate and Lord of the Isles. — Lord Macdonald of Slate is the acknowledged chieftain of the MacDonalds of Slate, and as the representative of the last ' Lord of the Isles,' is called by way of pre-eminence in the Highlands."



Plate 5. Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, with Prince Alfred by Franz Xaver Winterhalter 1849.
Credit: The Royal Collection Trust



Plate 6. The Prince of Wales at Aberfeldie, 1863 wearing the Lord of the Isles tartan.
Credit: National Portrait Gallery



Plate 7. Prince Albert Victor of Wales, 1870
Credit: The Royal Collection Trust



Plate 8. The Prince and Princess of Wales with Prince Albert Victor and Princess Louise c.1875.
Credit: The Royal Collection Trust

The use also extended to the Prince of Wales's personal Ghillie at Balmoral. Kenneth Macleay's watercolour of Archibald Fraser MacDonald, Jäger to the Prince, shows him wearing kilt and plaid of the Lord of the Isles tartan (Plate 9).

In later life the Prince tended to prefer the Balmoral, Duke of Rothesay, and Hunting Stewart tartans; however, he wore the Lord of the Isles on one notable occasion. In July 1871 he appeared as Lord of the Isles at the Waverley Ball held in London (Plate 10). The majority of the costume still existed over a decade later when his cousin by marriage, Prince Wilhelm of Prussia, borrowed it to be photographed 'as a Scotsman' (Plate 10).

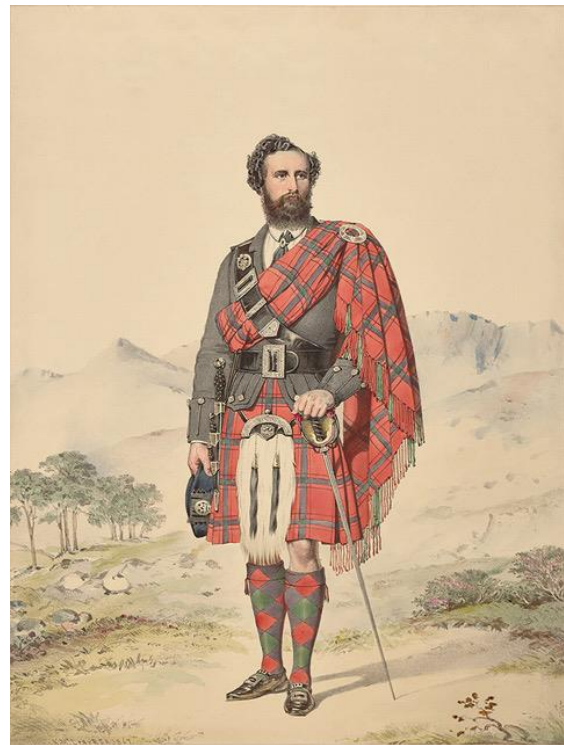


Plate 9. Archibald Fraser Macdonald, Jäger, by Kenneth Macleay 1867 wearing the Lord of the Isles tartan. Credit: The Scottish Tartans Authority



Plate 10. The Prince of Wales as Lord of the Isles 1871 and Prince Wilhelm of Prussia as a Scotsman, 1884

The Prince of Wales's son, Prince Albert Victor, died during an influenza pandemic in 1892. When Edward acceded to the throne as Edward VII, his second son, Prince George became Prince of Wales, Duke of Rothesay and Lord of the Isles. Despite Stewart's claim (discussed later), there is no evidence that Prince George ever wore the Lord of the Isles tartan in the nine years that he held the title. In 1910 he, in turn, ascended to the throne as George V and his son, Edward Albert, was created Prince of Wales, Duke of Rothesay and Lord of the Isles.

Whilst Prince, later King, George may not have worn the Lord of the Isles tartan during the period he held the title, he did dress his son in it. In 1903 Prince Edward Albert (later Edward VIII) was photographed wearing a unique 'Hunting version' of the Lord of the Isles tartan in which the colours were reversed (Plate 11).



Plate 11. Prince Edward Albert wearing the Lord of the Isles Hunting (Royal) tartan, 1903.

This reversal can be seen in this comparison of kilts worn in 1921 and 1931 respectively (Plate 12). In Black and White photos of the post-Victorian era, the red shows up as a brighter shade than green. The 'Hunting version' had not been known before the use by Edward and it must be assumed that it was designed at the request of his father in the same way he had the hunting version of the Duke of Rothesay tartan designed in the 1890s, a suit of which Edward had altered to fit himself⁶.

In 2010 a kilt in this tartan that had once belonged to Edward was sold at auction⁷. At some point, the kilt had been given to David Campbell, a valet who accompanied the Prince of Wales to the Bahamas in the 1930s. A similar kilt from the same era is held within the Royal Collection suggesting that at least two kilts were made in this tartan (Plate 13). This hunting version is not, at time of writing, recorded within the extensive database of The Scottish Tartans Authority and, therefore, does not appear within The Scottish Register of Tartans. For ease of comparison, a representation of the colour change and the black and white versions is at Plate 14.



Plate 12. Edward, Prince of Wales wearing different versions of the Lord of the Isles tartan at Braemar 1921 & Inverness 1931.

⁶ Further information can be found in this paper - https://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Duke_of_Rothesay_Tartans.pdf

⁷ <https://issuu.com/ten94design/docs/summer-2010/51> accessed 29 January 2020.



Plate 13. A kilt in the Lord of the Isles, Hunting (Royal) tartan worn by Prince Edward c1920-30. Photo: The Royal Collection Trust.

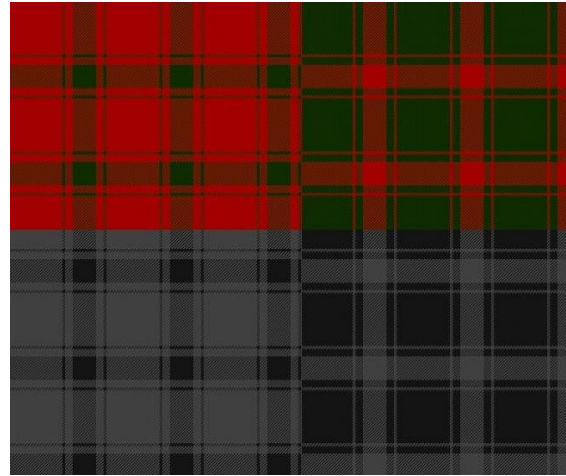


Plate 14. Comparison of the Lord of the Isles tartans (Red and Hunting) showing their black and white versions. © The Author.

In 1893 D. W. Stewart's seminal work *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*^{iv} was published. It included a number of tartans associated with the MacDonalDs, including *The Lord of the Isles* of which he wrote (my emphasis):

"The authority for the accompanying example is a portrait of Sir Alexander (afterwards first Lord) Macdonald of the Isles, in the collection of Lord Macdonald of the Isles, at Armadale Castle in Skye. The tartan is represented only in the coat of the youth holding the golf-club, the trows being in red and white check; and **a close inspection reveals an important addition to what has long been accepted as the "Lord of the Isles pattern—to wit, that of the black lines intersecting the red squares.** The omission of these black lines from the modern sett is obviously accidental, for the tartan as now worn is based on the authority of the picture, which was believed to have been accurately copied. The origin of the error cannot be ascertained; but, probably, a mistake in the reproduction of the design when tartans became the wear after the repeal of the proprietary statute has remained undetected till now. On the canvas, at least, the intersections are clearly depicted ; and, moreover, the tartan thus conforms to the rule of breaking large squares generally observed in old clan patterns. **It may be added that the tartan, which is that usually worn by H.R. H. the Prince of Wales, who bears the title of the Lord of the Isles, has never hitherto been faithfully delineated in any previous work nor properly reproduced in any textile fabric of modern manufacture.**"

Stewart was the first to identify the black stripe centred on the red square in the painting of the MacDonald Boys (Plate 15) and include it in his work (Plate 16). The painting is now in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) and as Stewart states, the black line is clear. Stewart's observation that the omission of the line in woven specimens before his book was accidental is probably the most likely explanation, however, it could have been deliberate. What is known is that the simpler setting, that without the black line, had been woven for nearly a hundred years by the time of Stewart's book and named *Lord of the Isles* for at least the previous sixty years. The Prince of Wales at the time *Old & Rare* was published was Prince George (later George V) whom despite Stewart's claim, is not known to have worn the Lord of the Isles tartan. It is worth noting that Stewart's allusion to the Repeal having allowed tartan to be worn again demonstrated his lack of understanding of the Act, which did not ban the wearing of tartan. Similarly, his suggestion that there were old clan patterns was erroneous.



Plate 15. The MacDonald Boys c1750. Attributed to William Mosman. Picture Credit: NGS



Plate 16. The Lord of the Isles tartan from Old & Rare

Mention has already been made of the 'Slate' suffix i.e. the non-black line version, being called *MacDonald of Slate* by the Smith Brothers. This tartan was adopted by the MacDonalds of Sleat at some point after 1850, is generally known by that today. However, to add to the confusion, the current chief of Sleat wears the black line version as Macdonald of Sleat (see Plate 23). The black line version is usually referred to as the *Lord of the Isles* tartan and classified as a Macdonald pattern on the authority of the c1750 portrait. Whilst the Prince of Wales continued to wear the Sleat (non-black line) version into the early 1930s, there is no evidence of him ever adopting the corrected version of the Lord of the Isles. He appears to have stopped wearing both the Sleat and colour reversal (Hunting?) version in the early 1930s. Instead, he adopted another tartan included in Stewart's book; the *Lord of the Isles, Hunting*. This is a completely different pattern to the colour reversal of the Sleat setting. Writing of the hunting tartan in his book Stewart says:

"Like the preceding example, the present is based on a painting in ' Armadale Castle—a life-size representation of the first Lord Macdonald of the Isles, dating from about 1765..... Through the kindness of Lord and Lady Macdonald of the Isles the Editor had last year an excellent opportunity of obtaining reproductions of the tartans delineated in their family portraits. The painting in this case was photographed to a large scale, and afterwards coloured from the original by an experienced artist. From these the silks were woven, carefully compared with the paintings, and so absolute accuracy of reproduction secured. Traditionally known as the Lord of the Isles hunting tartan, the pattern here given appears in the coat, vest, and kilt of the figure portrayed. During the greater part of the present century the design was not rendered in textile fabric, but recently Lord Macdonald of the Isles had it woven for his use."

The portrait of Sir Alexander Macdonald (Plate 17) is now also in the collection of the NGS. Stewart's silk plate (Plate 18) appears to be a reasonably good representation of the tartan in the portrait which has a number of features that are interest to costume historians. Notwithstanding Stewart's claim about the accuracy of the colour matching, there has long been discussion about the darker colour and whether it should be dark green or blue. Shortly before he became Edward VIII, the Prince of Wales had an evening kilt ensemble made in this tartan in which two shades of green were used (Plate 19).



Plate 17. Sir Alexander Macdonald⁸, 9th Baronet of Sleat and 1st Baron Macdonald of Slate by Sir George Chalmers c1772. Picture Credit: NGS



Plate 18. The Lord of the Isles Hunting tartan from Old & Rare. Said by D. W. Stewart to be an accurate match to the sett and colours in the portrait.



Plate 19. The Prince of Wales' green silk corduroy doublet, kilt and plaid c1930. Source: Pinterest.



Plate 20. Evening Suit made for the Duke of Windsor c1950. Source: Pinterest

⁸ Sir Alexander Macdonald of Sleat was the younger of the Macdonald Boys in the earlier painting and so was the source for both of the earliest Lord of the Isles tartans.

King Edward VIII renounced his titles on abdicating in 1936 and was subsequently created the Duke of Windsor. In that guise he continued to favour the Lord of the Isles Hunting tartan and had an evening suit made in 1950/51 (Plate 20)⁹ When Her Majesty The Queen ascended to the throne in 1952, her heir apparent, HRH The Prince Charles, was granted titles including; Duke of Rothesay and Lord of the Isles. In recognition of the latter title His Royal Highness has long worn the Lord of the Isles, Hunting tartan (Plates 21 and 22).



Plate 21. Prince Charles at Balmoral Castle in 1997. Photo: The Australian



Plate 22. The Duke of Rothesay at the centenary of the Iolaire disaster in 2019. Photo: @The Royal Family

By virtue of his position as the High Chief of Clan Donald the current chief wears the Lord of the Isles, Hunting tartan, as did his father (Plate 23).



Plate 23. The MacDonald Chiefs - The Chief of Glengarry (*MacDonald of Glengarry*), The Chief of Sleat (*Lord of the Isles tartan*), Lord Macdonald of Macdonald (*Lord of the Isles, Hunting*), The Captain & Chief of Clanranald (*Clanranald, Red*) and The Earl of Antrim (*MacDonald of the Isles, VS 1842*). Photo: Anthony MacMillan.

⁹ <https://www.ericmusgrave.co.uk/index.php/archive/blog/the-duke-of-windsors-tartan-evening-suit/>

The shades of the various outfits in Plates 17-21 depart, some more than others, from those said by Stewart to have been matched to the portrait. There are no known old tartans that employ two shades of green together and no other main colour, whereas there are many that have green and blue. The alternative rendering of this tartan in those colours has a better balance and is visually more pleasing in the author's opinion. An example made with the traditional dyestuffs Woad and Weld shows the difficulty in interpreting whether the darker colour is green or as here, blue (Plate 24).



Plate 24. Lord of the Isles, Hunting with blue and green in natural dyes. © The Author

The Settings

For the purposes of this paper, the Vestiarium pattern (colour stripe 1 in Plate 25), which has no historical basis beyond the Sobieski Stuarts' vivid imagination can be discounted in relation to the others. All the remaining patterns share what D. C. Stewart^v called "*the MacDonald Motif*", that is; a broad bar flanked by a narrower one. This motif or theme, whilst not found in all tartans associated with the MacDonalds, nor solely in MacDonald patterns, does feature in the majority of the 18th century tartans associated with the clan. This may represent a feature or style of patterns from the western highlands and islands¹⁰. It is most obvious in the original Lord of the Isles tartan, the later (Sleat version) and its related hunting or inverse colouration – Plate 24, colour stripes 2-5.

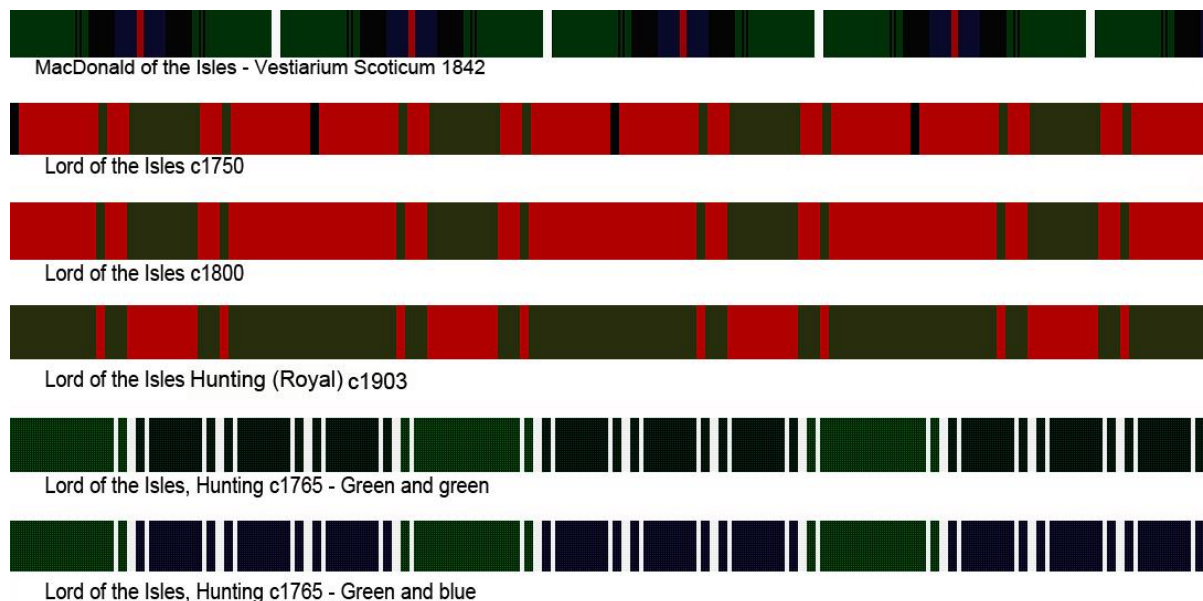


Plate 25. Colours stripes of the various tartans that have been called 'of the Isles'. © The Author

Conclusion

There are five tartans that have at some time included the term 'of the Isles' in their name, four of these as 'Lord of the Isles'. One of them was a private tartan and the name *Lord of the Isles, Hunting* is assumed from the owner holding the title 'Lord of the Isles' and having worn the red (Sleat) version as well. With the exception of the c1920 colour reversal/Hunting pattern, all the designs discussed in this paper have a primary connection with the MacDonalds. Three also have been/are worn by the Heir to the Throne who holds the titular title Lord of the Isles, including the current holder, HRH The Prince Charles who wears the c1765 Hunting sett.

There continues to be confusion over some of the designs, this is principally because of the same name being used for different patterns over the years and the fact that the name of some has changed. In summary and in chronological order they are:

1750 – The *Lord of the Isles* tartan which is sometimes referred to as MacDonald, Lord of the Isles or MacDonald of Sleat. The chief of the Sleat branch wears this version.

1765 – The *Lord of the Isles, Hunting*. Interpretations of the darker colour vary and it is woven with either two greens or, green and blue. In the two greens version it was worn by Edward,

¹⁰ See https://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Evidence_for_a_Regional_Motif_in_old_Tartans_from_Appin_&_Lorn.pdf

Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII and subsequently Duke of Windsor) and is worn by the current chief and HRH The Prince Charles.

What, if anything, the older two patterns were called in the 18th century is unknown but it is unlikely that either had any particular name until D. W. Stewart's 1893 publication. It could be argued that both were misnomers as he identified them with an individual who was not the Lord of the Isles at the time as the title was held by the Heir to the Throne. The older of the portraits also dates to a time before Alexander MacDonald was created Baron MacDonald of the Isles. Although he referenced the individual, Stewart could have been clearer and added MacDonald into the name of the tartan; however, he lived at a time of greater social deference and this may have influenced his thinking given the royal use of the 1800 pattern.

1800 – Estimated date for Wilsons of Bannockburn's *Lord Macdonald* pattern, it appeared in a collection of 1810-15; by c1830-40 was being sold as *Macdonald of the Isles* and in 1850 was identified as *MacDonald of Slate* in a publication that year. This is the version worn by several Princes of Wales (titular Lord of the Isles) between approximately 1849-1935. This tartan is now generally woven commercially as *MacDonald of Sleat* although not worn by the chief as such, see comments on the 1750 sett.

1842 – The Sobieski Stuarts' *MacDonald of the Isles* tartan was published in their *Vestiarium Scoticum*, 1842 and has proved popular ever since. The design has characteristics of the Black Watch tartan which was probably the inspired for a number of their designs. This sett has never been referred to as *Lord of the Isles* and unlike the Wilsons' pattern of the same name, never been worn by a member of the Royal Family.

1903 – The approximate date that Edward Albert, the future Prince of Wales started wearing the inverse colour version of the *Lord of the Isles*, now commonly called *MacDonald of Sleat*. It is unclear what the tartan was called at the time but based on the convention for the *Duke of Rothesay* tartan, it was probably known as the *Lord of the Isles Hunting* albeit a kilt within the Royal Collection is simply labelled (in hand writing on the internal lining) 'Lord of the Isles'. It is hoped that further research into the Royal Archives might reveal some reference to this pattern. In order to avoid confusion with the older *Lord of the Isles Hunting* tartan (1765), and noting the sole use by the previous Prince of Wales, it would make sense to add the suffix (Royal) to the 1903-1920 version i.e. *Lord of the Isles Hunting (Royal)*. It would be wonderful to see this tartan rewoven and in use again.

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ⁱ STEWART D.C. and THOMPSON J.C. 1980 *Scotland's Forged Tartans*. Paul Harris Publishing, Edinburgh

ⁱⁱ SMIBERT T. 1850 *The Clans of the Highlands of Scotland*. James Hogg, London

ⁱⁱⁱ SMITH W. & SMITH A. 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith, Mauchline

^{iv} STEWART D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston, Edinburgh

^v STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn, London 1977