

## The use of a selvedge mark on early military tartan

The use of a selvedge mark is a common feature found on specimens of 18<sup>th</sup> century tartan; it is also seen in a number of portraits of the period and it seems likely that it was a typical element of cloth intended for joining. Highland regiments had their basis in the culture of the Highlands. It would have been logical that the weaving techniques associated with civilian tartan and Highland Dress would have been incorporated into the cloth for military uniforms.

### Selvedge Marks

The word selvedge is a corruption of "self-edge", a term that has been in use since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Literally, it is a self-edge and refers to the woven-in edges of a piece of cloth that prevents the fabric from unravelling. A selvedge can be described as a form of over-locking and is a result of the weaving process where the weft (cross-ways) threads pass around the edge of the warp (length-ways) threads so binding them in. When the finished cloth is turned through ninety degrees the selvedges are the top and bottom edges.

Selvedge marks were a form of decoration where, in tartan, the pattern was off-set and the mark appeared only on one side<sup>1</sup>. In an off-set warp the pattern (sett) was repeated, starting from the middle of a pivot on one selvedge<sup>2</sup>, it ran towards the second selvedge where a broad band of colour was added. This band ran along the edge of the cloth and was usually a colour used in the sett. In civilian cloth the mark was usually blue, made up of several bands of herringboning and often finished with a narrow stripe, of 8-10 red threads (Plate 1). In blue, black and green type military tartans this band was usually black and formed by extending the normal black bar on one side of the green ground to roughly double the usual width. It seems likely that in the mid-late 18<sup>th</sup> century the military selvedge mark was also herringboned, at least in some instances.



**Plate. 1** A typical example of an 18<sup>th</sup> century selvedge mark on civilian tartan. © The Author

<sup>1</sup> The method of off-set patterns for plaids is described in this paper - [http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined\\_Plaids.pdf](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined_Plaids.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> This was normally the selvedge on the side that the shuttle was introduced from and on which the threads for short colour changes were floated (carried over rather than cut and woven in).

## Four time periods

From a military Highland Dress perspective, the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be broadly divided into four:

- The Jacobite Risings 1700-55.
- The Seven Years' War<sup>3</sup> 1756-63.
- The American War of Independence 1775-83.
- The French Revolution War 1792-1802<sup>4</sup>.

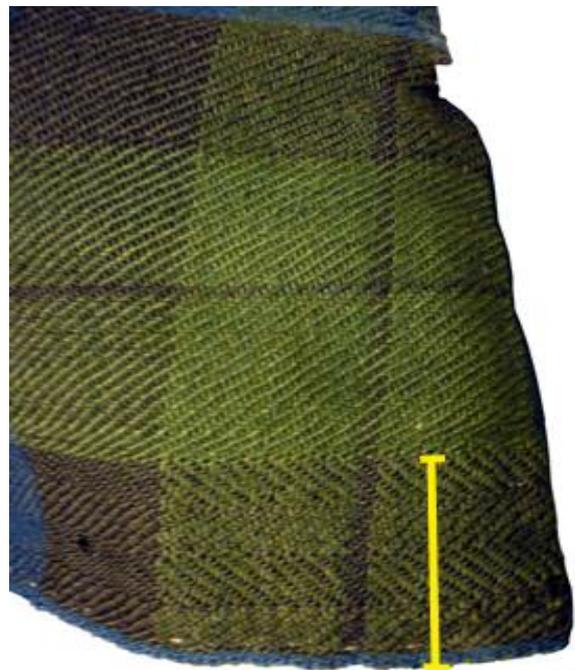
There was no regular army Highland Regiment until the formation of the 43<sup>rd</sup>, later 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of Foot<sup>5</sup> in 1739 but there were a number of Highland Independent Companies (HIC) in existence from 1725. The dress of the HIC has been the subject of considerable discussion and disagreement over the years. According to Scarlett<sup>i</sup>, it was not until about 1733 that the companies had uniform plaids. It was his opinion that the exact pattern of the Black Watch tartan was not actually standardised until after the '45 Rising. Apart from offering no evidence for his views, neither he nor Wade (see below) gave any indication of what the early pattern looked like or how it was laid out.

## Early References

With the exception of one specimen, a piece submitted to Lord Loudoun<sup>6</sup> in 1746, there is no known surviving example of military tartan before the 1790s. This is perhaps surprising given that a rough calculation suggests that over 30 miles of Government tartan<sup>7</sup> was woven before 1750. There are, however, a number of portraits and written material that allows an insight into the settings used at various points during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

General Wade is said to have instructed the company commanders to "...provide a Plaid, Cloathing and Bonnets in the Highland Dress for the Non-Commission Officers and Soldiers belonging to their Companies, the Plaid of each Company to be as near as they can to the same Sort and Colour."<sup>ii</sup> Tartan at that date would have been woven single-width and joined to make a plaid; it is logical to presume that the pattern was off-set to allow it to repeat correctly when the cloth was joined. It is also likely that the pattern would have included a selvedge mark like the majority of surviving civilian specimens.

Whilst not the standard 42<sup>nd</sup> sett, the plaid reused for the back of a Strathspey Volunteer's waistcoat offers an insight into what the early Government tartan selvedge mark might have looked like (Plate 2). The black herringbone mark with the final blue threads follows exactly the form of selvedge marks used in civilian tartan during much of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Dating this



**Plate. 2** Selvedge mark (yellow stripe) on a piece of reused mid-18<sup>th</sup> century plaid. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland

<sup>3</sup> Known as the *French-Indian War* in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> The French Revolution essentially rolled over into the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and the whole period 1792-1815 can be regarded as a continuum.

<sup>5</sup> Latterly known as The Royal Highland Regiment, the Black Watch.

<sup>6</sup> Colonel of the 64<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (Loudoun's Highlanders).

<sup>7</sup> Aka the 42<sup>nd</sup> or Black Watch tartan. It was worn by the majority of Highland Regiments raised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

piece is difficult, it is likely to be from the second half 18<sup>th</sup> century but the lack of dye analysis or other supporting evidence means it is impossible to refine the date. What can be dated with certainty is the specimen of material for Sergeants' Plaids sent to Lord Loudoun in 1746 (Plate 3). The specimen is interesting because whilst it does not include a selvedge mark per se, the pattern repeats normally to the edge of the cloth but with a chevron, as opposed to herringbone weave. A letter from the same agent the following year indicates that he'd supplied tartan to Loudoun's, presumably this pattern, but gives no detail. From other correspondence we know that tartan for one company's plaids were woven in Crieff<sup>8</sup> but not where the other material was woven. There is therefore the possibility that this example was a particular weaver's version or error for a standard herringboned selvedge mark. Loudoun's 64<sup>th</sup> was a short-lived regiment, 1745-48. The tartan was not used again until the end of the century when it was adopted by the Inverness-shire (Baillie) Fencibles 1794-1802 by which time the setting included a standard military black selvedge mark<sup>iii</sup>.



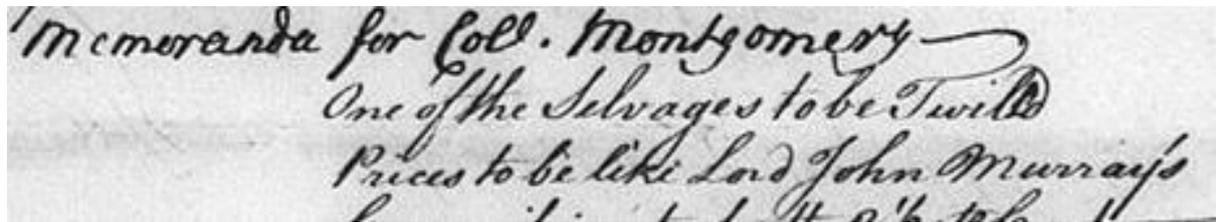
**Plate 3** Sample of cloth for Sergeants' Plaids sent to Lord Loudoun in Aug 1746.  
Photo: Huntington Library, California

Written references to plaids before c1770 are few, details of the weaving technical details even less so. One interesting exception is a letter sent to the 77<sup>th</sup> Regiment (Montgomerie's Highlanders) in c1757 detailing the Regulation of Cloathing for a Highland Regt of Foot which

---

<sup>8</sup> Loudoun was admonished for choosing the Crieff weavers because the plaids could have fallen into the hands of the Rebels.

includes instruction about the selvages. The letter includes memoranda for the regimental colonel including, that *One of the Selvages to be Twilled* and that the *Prices to be like Lord John Murray's* (Plate 4).



**Plate. 4** Extract of the Regulation of Cloathing for a Highland Regt of Foot referring to selvages.

From the description that *one selvedge to be twilled* (twill weave) it may be assumed that the other differed in some way. Twill is the standard weaving structure for tartan so it's not clear why it would be mentioned unless to differentiate it for practical reasons. In off-set plaids with a herringbone selvedge the other selvedge, the one that was joined, was always plain (twill) weave and its structure would not normally need to be mentioned. Herringbone threading is also known as 'broken twill weave' and it seems much more likely that the instruction was to include a herringbone selvedge mark. The portrait of Capt John Campbell of Melfort from around the end of the Seven Years War shows the setting arrangement that was in use around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup> including what appears to be a black selvedge mark (Plate 5).



**Plate. 5** Capt John Campbell of Melfort c1763  
Unknown Artist. Private Collection

<sup>9</sup> 42<sup>nd</sup> Tartan. To make the full width put on 3 half Setts and so much of the 4th until all the green in it is put on after which conclude with the black selvedge mark. From Wilsons' 1819 Key Pattern Book, discussed later in this paper.

Allan Ramsay's portrait c1763 of Lt Col William Gordon in the uniform of the Sutherland Fencible Regiment 1759-63 offers a clear example of the arrangement of the Government with a selvedge mark (Plate 6).



**Plate. 6** Selvedge detail from Lt Col William Gordon by Allan Ramsay c1763.

Shortly after the end of the war<sup>10</sup>, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds (Plate 7). Murray was painted during Proscription and whilst not ostensibly wearing military uniform<sup>11</sup>, his plaid is of the Government tartan which, so far as is known, was solely a military pattern at that date. Like that of Lt Col William Gordon, Murray's plaid includes a selvedge mark (Plate 8). Both portraits appear to show the inclusion of a final stripe of blue stripe like that in the plaid reused for the Strathspey Volunteers Waistcoat – see Plate 2.



**Plate. 7** Selvedge detail from John Murray, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Dunmore by Joshua Reynolds 1765. Source: NGS

<sup>10</sup> The National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) date the portrait to 1765 but inscription, thought to be a later addition, reference to Murray being Governor of Virginia in 1770. Actually, he was Governor of New York in 1770 and Virginia the following year.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/8802/john-murray-4th-earl-dunmore> - accessed 10 April 2020. In their narrative the NGS incorrectly described Murray as 'wearing the Highland Dress of the 3rd Regiment of Foot Guards'. The 3<sup>rd</sup> of Foot, now the Scots Guards, were not a Highland Regiment. This is more likely to be a reference to Murray's clan heritage; the coat is in the Murray of Tullibardine tartan.

The final portrait from the Seven Years War that is of relevance is *The Pinch of Snuff*, Delacour's marvellous homage to Malcolm Macpherson of Phoness (Plate 8). There is good reason to believe that whilst not immediately obvious, the tartan depicted is the Government sett. However, the portrait shows a unique selvedge arrangement that includes a fine stripe with lighter (white) guard lines (Plate 9). This has similarities to the type of decoration found in a selvedge pattern rather than a simple selvedge mark and is perhaps an example of an individual weaver's variation. It should be borne in mind that until the end of the Seven Years War, the weaving of plaiding (the off-set material for making plaids) appears to have been done on a piecemeal basis. The regiments or their agent appear to have gone to weavers where they could get the best price or who could meet the demand, particularly the timeframe. As a result, it is to be expected that the quality, setting and colours will have varied, even between companies of the same regiment.



**Plate. 8** Pinch of Snuff c1760 by William Delacour, Private Collection



**Plate. 9** Detail of the Government sett showing the decorated selvedge mark. © The Author

By the time of the American War of Independence (AWI) the industrial revolution was beginning to introduce elements of mass production to tartan manufacture. One firm, William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn, established themselves as the principal supplier of tartan to the military and were probably the supplier of almost all military tartan in last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period Wilsons developed standardised patterns and colours which they codified in their early Pattern Book and Dye Recipes. These, together with numerous letters and other correspondence survive providing scholars with an invaluable resource.

Mention has already been made of Wilsons' setting for 42<sup>nd</sup> plaids from their 1819 Key Pattern Book (KPB)<sup>12</sup>. It included details of a number of settings from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century including plaid settings for the 42<sup>nd</sup>, 78<sup>th</sup>, 79<sup>th</sup>, 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> regiments. In every case the plaid settings included a selvedge mark whereas the Fine Plaid and Kilt settings for each did not. By the time of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the wearing of the Belted Paid had been superseded by the separate garments, the Kilt and the Half Plaid<sup>13</sup>. The 1819 plaid counts were therefore anachronistic by then and probably a hang-over for their late 18<sup>th</sup> century records. With the exception of the 79<sup>th</sup> counts<sup>14</sup>, all the others finished with a black selvedge mark following a full green square (Plate 10).

The Wilsons' setting is reflected in the portrait of Hugh Montgomerie, 12th Earl of Eglinton, 1780. The picture<sup>15</sup> is retrospective, it depicts him as Colonel of the 77<sup>th</sup> Regt c1760 during the French-Indian War<sup>16</sup>; it was painted two decades later and the dress, particularly the tartan, would have been taken from what was current issue at that time. Although the top of the kilted section of the plaid is obscured, the tartan conforms to the 1819 KPB setting with three half setts finished with a black selvedge mark (Plate 11).

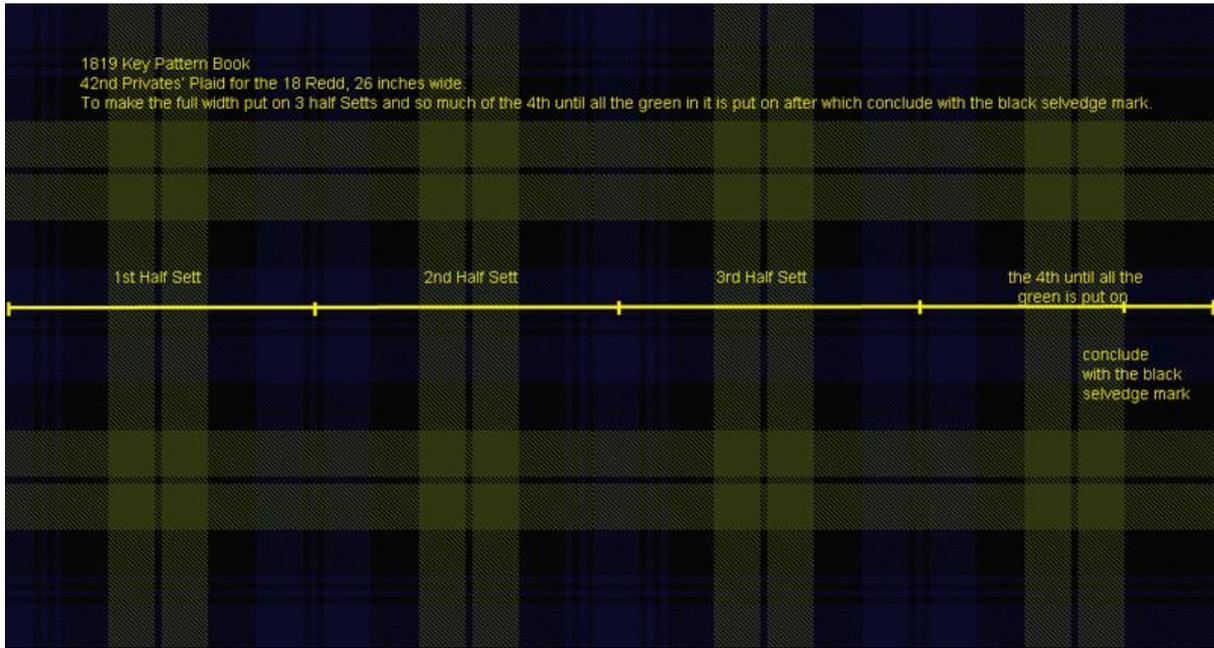
<sup>12</sup> The 1819 KPB was an in-house instruction manual rather than a published book. Research suggests that it was a consolidation of Wilsons' Pattern Books No 1 and 2, the former containing setting from the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> A Half Plaid was a piece of material loosely gathered on one of the long edges which was bound with tape. This tape extended either side to form ties for securing around the waist allowing the material to be arranged like the upper section of a belted plaid.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike the other regiments, the 79<sup>th</sup>s did not wear the Government tartan or a variation of it.

<sup>15</sup> This is one of two versions produced by Copley, the other, thought to be the original, is in the Los Angeles Museum of Art. This one is an improved version in which the detail is much clearer.

<sup>16</sup> The so-called French and Indian War (1754–1763) overlapped with the Seven Years War and is regarded by some as the North American element of the conflict. The colonies of British America fought those of New France, each side supported by the military of the parent country and by their Native American (called Indian at the time) allies.



**Plate. 10** Wilsons' setting & selvedge detail for the 42<sup>nd</sup> tartan from their 819 Key Pattern Book. © The Author



**Plate. 11** Setting & selvedge detail from Hugh Montgomerie, 12th Earl of Eglinton by John Singleton Copley 1780  
Original Photo: National Galleries Scotland

Up until the AWI the majority<sup>17</sup> of Highland regiments wore the belted-plaid in the Government tartan. There is evidence of regiments reusing their old plaid for kilts but it is not until c1780 that we see evidence of this. The portrait of an unnamed Officer of 73<sup>rd</sup> (MacLeod's Highlanders ) Regiment depicts him wearing a kilt with an obvious black selvedge mark in what is now known as MacKenzie tartan<sup>18</sup> (Plate 12). Whether the kilt, which appears to have sown-in pleats, was made from reused a plaid or from new cloth cannot be determined but the material appears to follow the later plaid setting detailed by Wilsons in their 18191 KPB.

<sup>17</sup> The sole exception appears to have been the 64th Regt, Loudoun's Highlanders.

<sup>18</sup> It is likely that Wilsons of Bannockburn designed this tartan, a variation of the Government sett, for the 73<sup>rd</sup>. The regiment was raised by Lord MacLeod, a courtesy title borne by the eldest son of the Earl of Cromarty, chief of Clan MacKenzie. It was subsequently used by the 78<sup>th</sup> (Ross-shire) Regt raised by Francis MacKenzie, later Earl of Seaforth.



**Plate. 12** An Unnamed Officer of the Light Company 73rd (MacLeod's Highlanders) c1780. Private Collection

A late and unique surviving example of a Wilsons' plaid setting can be seen in the 78<sup>th</sup> (Ross-shire) Regt kilt.<sup>19</sup> It is made from a length of single-width off-set material in which the white stripes are woven in silk<sup>20</sup>. This width and the use of silk yarn<sup>21</sup> means that the material is likely to date to c1800-20 but the inclusion of a broad black herringbone selvedge mark was

<sup>19</sup> In the collection of the West Highland Museum, Fort William.

<sup>20</sup> The threadcount in Wilsons' 1819 KPB includes a note that '*The white of the Officers is always silk*'.

<sup>21</sup> The damage to the white threads is typical of white silk thread and due to the use of lead in the whitening process which makes the yarn brittle.

anachronistic by then and exceptional amongst surviving specimens and gives an insight to the 18<sup>th</sup> century practice (Plate 13).



**Plate. 13** Detail of Wilsons' 78th officers' plaid setting including a herringbone selvedge mark. © The Author

## Conclusion

The inclusion of a selvedge mark was a traditional feature of 18<sup>th</sup> century rurally produced civilian tartan. Given that the early military tartan was also produced in the Highlands it is reasonable to assume that this feature was incorporated into tartan for the army too and that there was probably some variation in the pattern<sup>22</sup>. Surviving written records provide little by way of supporting evidence beyond the letter to Lord Loudoun in 1746 and a mention in the account for Montgomerie's regiment c1757. Whilst there is no contemporary evidence of the tartan for the HICs or early years of the Black Watch (42<sup>nd</sup>), from the middle of the century we start to see portraits of individuals from that and other regiments painted wearing plaids, and later kilts, in which the tartan looks to be painted with a selvedge mark. From the AWI era the setting and arrangement appear to follow the layout of that given by Wilsons' later 1819 KPB.

Only two examples of military tartan with a selvedge mark are known to survive; one is the specimen sent to Lord Loudoun in 1746, the other is the later 78<sup>th</sup> kilt. In both cases the selvedge is herringboned/chevroned. What seems remarkable is the lack of a single surviving piece of pre-1790 Government tartan. Based on the clothing issue for Loudoun's regiment<sup>23</sup>, the two battalions of the 42<sup>nd</sup> and one battalion each of the 77<sup>th</sup> and 78<sup>th</sup> Regts, all raised before 1760, would have needed an initial issue of some 48,000 yds, slightly over 34 miles of tartan! Add to this figure to clothe other regiments, such as the 87<sup>th</sup> and the various Fencible Regiments raised at the time, then the figure is closer to 40 miles of Government tartan. This is staggering amount and far more than any other single tartan before the advent of mass production. It seems remarkable therefore that not one fragment appears to have survived.

---

<sup>22</sup> General Wade's direction was that the HIC plaids were *to be of the same type and sort*. Sir William Grant of Ballindalloch's factor listed 65 weavers involved in weaving the plaids for the Strathspey HIC between 1725-39. It is not unreasonable to assume that there would have been some variation in their output.

<sup>23</sup> 12 yards of (single width) tartan for a plaid equates for some 12,000 yards per regiment.

This is the Holy Grail of tartan research and it is hoped that a piece will eventually be discovered that will be able to add substance to the speculation that surrounds the early history of this, the original military tartan.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald April 2020

- 
- <sup>i</sup> **Scarlett, J.D.** 2003 *The origins and development of military tartans: a re-appraisal*. Partizan Press, Leigh-on-Sea  
<sup>ii</sup> **MacWilliam, H.D.** 1932 *The Black Watch Tartan*, Northern Chronicle Office, Inverness,  
<sup>iii</sup> **Eslea MacDonald, P.A.** 2012 *The 1819 Key Pattern Book – One Hundred Original Tartans*, Private Publication