

# Unnamed C18th Plaid dated 1785

## Introduction

In early 2016 the author had an opportunity to examine a portion of an initialled and dated 18<sup>th</sup> century joined plaid (Fig 1). The piece belonged to a family from Highland Perthshire and is a portion of a larger plaid. It is the writer's contention that, notwithstanding the date, the plaid is a remnant of an older piece and is likely to date to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig 1. Joined plaid – overview. © The Author

## Construction

The cloth is of a good quality with hand-spun singles yarn, naturally dyed and hand-woven with the offset pattern containing two half setts across the warp. The pattern continues into the third sett to finish with a traditional blue herringbone selvedge and final red stripe, a technique often found in 18<sup>th</sup> century plaids<sup>1</sup>. In example considered here there are 3 bars of 14 blue threads and 1 bar of 2 blue and 10 red threads. The piece comprises two single width lengths of cloth 19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches wide that are joined at the non-herringbone selvedge by a whip stitch (Fig. 2). The whole piece is approximately 39<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches wide and 88<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches long.

Both ends are raw (cut) and have been secured by stitching to prevent the weft (long-ways) threads unravelling (Fig 3).



Fig 2. Detail of the whip stitch join. © The Author

<sup>1</sup> See the articles on [Traditional Selvedge Patterns](#) and [Joined Plaids – Settings and Construction](#).



**Fig 3. One of the cut ends secured by linen thread.** © The Author

Even without having the opportunity to test the yarn it is probable that the dyes were those typically used in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, plus indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green.

### **Date and Initials**

To judge from surviving examples, the custom of embroidering initials and/or a date on plaids was not standard practice, nor does it seem practical or necessary to do so on an outdoor garment. Surviving examples with initials only are more commonly seen. Examples are found on full coloured plaids but are more frequently encountered on white based plaids, some of which may have been used as an arisaid. With the exception of one white ground type plaid, initialled and dated CY 1726, the practice appears to have been more common during the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This may reflect the different use or re-use of plaids by then, or the fact that the fewer older ones survive, or a combination of both.

In this case the date and initials (JS 1785) were embroidered with the same beige yarn used to secure the cut ends; the reversal of the 'S' was presumably deliberate. This is not the same yarn that was used to join the two halves. This fact, combined with the position of the date and initials along the selvedge, is indicative that it was embroidered at a later date than the two pieces of material were joined and thus, when the cloth was woven. The initials and date are framed by some loosely stitched paler yarn that may be contemporary but could equally be later (Fig 4). The initials JS probably refer to the owner of the plaid in 1785 but who would not necessarily have been the original owner. Generally such initials were feminine and the pieces were done to mark a special occasion. These were often dowry pieces done by a women for their marriage and was something special that they brought to the new home. The date could also represent another important even such as the birth of a child. The plaid belongs to a family who descend from the last of the MacDuffs from Strathbraan, Perthshire but the identity of JS is unknown. A Stewart married into the family in the 1840s but that would not account for the date on the plaid unless it was an inherited piece that the bride brought with her, not an unreasonable proposition and this might indicate an older Stewart connection for the plaid rather than being of MacDuff origins.





Fig 4. 1785 date and initials JS framed by loose stitching. © The Author

## The Sett

The structure of this tartan is similar to a number of surviving 18<sup>th</sup> century specimens from the Appin/Lorn area but that does not necessarily mean that this specimen was original from there. The red, blue and green setting of this plaid shares the basic pattern discussed in the Regional Motif paper<sup>2</sup>; one pivot having a triple stripe centred on a large red square, the other pivot being a plain red square bordered by narrow stripes then a broad green band. In the second pivot the border stripes and band gives a reversed triple stripe formed by the underlying red ground colour. The triple stripe motif is shown under the colour strip (Fig 5).



Fig 5. Sett showing the triple stripe motif. © The Author

Since c1950 the tartan discussed has been known as MacColl although it is subtly different from the original MacColl setting authenticated by the MacColl Society in 1934<sup>3</sup>. The earlier, MacColl Society, setting conforms to the Glencoe specimen discussed in the Appin/Lorn paper and differs from this sett in having fine brown stripes bordering the blue band in place of the blue ones in this initialled and dated specimen.

## Conclusion

It is clear that this beautifully spun, dyed and woven specimen dates to at least last 1785, however it is typical of specimens found throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The specimen is a portion of a larger piece and shows evidence of later stabilisation (securing the raw ends)

<sup>2</sup> [Evidence for a Regional Motif in old Tartans from the Appin](#)

<sup>3</sup> Specimen in Volume II of the Highland Society of London's Tartan collection.

which is likely to have been done at the time it was initialled and dated. Chemical and/or yarn analysis might help date the piece more accurately but structurally and technically it is consistent with other mid-18<sup>th</sup> century plaids; so the original cloth may well be closer to c1740-60.

The tartan is the oldest known specimen of what is now known as MacColl. However, the setting can be traced back to a number of early to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century specimens found throughout the country, particularly in Appin and Lorn. It may therefore represent a style of pattern that was once widely found throughout the Highlands.

Although now owned by a family of Highland Perthshire extraction, little is known about the origins of the piece and the initials indicate that it may have been acquired through marriage to a Stewart. Further family research might help identify who 'JS' was and where they came from. Given the relatively local nature of many marriages of the time, the unknown Stewart may also have been from the Strathbraan (Glenquaich/Amulree/Dunkeld) area meaning that this could well be a truly Perthshire piece.

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