

# Tartan of the 78<sup>th</sup> Reg<sup>t</sup> of Foot (Fraser's Highlanders)

## INTRODUCTION

The 78<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Highland Battalion was raised in 1757<sup>1</sup> by Simon Fraser, former Master of Lovat, in response to the Government's need to raise men to fight the French in North America in what became known as the *Seven Years War* or in North America, the *French and Indian War*.

For over a century scholars, re-enactors and other interested parties have debated and disagreed over what tartan the regiment wore; some favour the Government (42<sup>nd</sup> or Black Watch) tartan: others a red tartan, generally supposed to be the Red Fraser, a variation of the Government sett with red in place of black. The aim of this paper is to examine the evidence and suggest the most likely answer to this long running debate.

Given the quantity of tartan required to outfit a regiment<sup>2</sup> it is perhaps surprising that only one fragment of pre-1770 military cloth survives<sup>3</sup> which is remarkable considering the staggering amount that must have been produced<sup>4</sup>. One would have thought that at least the odd fragment would have been preserved by the family of a Highlander that returned to Scotland or settled in America but apparently not! So, as with the Black Watch, we are left to speculate on what the Frasers wore but at least one can do this by examining what little evidence there is and so arrive at a logical deduction.

## EARLY REFERENCES



Plate 1. Pinch of Snuff c1760 by Delacour.

Whilst almost no early military tartan survives we are fortunate to have a number of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century portraits depicting Highland soldiers that offer an insight; not least of which is Delacour's *Pinch of Snuff* c1760 (Plate 1) which shows Malcolm Macpherson of Phoness who, at the age of 67 joined the 78<sup>th</sup> as a Gentleman Volunteer. Macpherson distinguished himself at the Battle of Quebec in 1759 and the following year was presented to King George II. The portrait has darkened with age but when the tone is adjusted the original colours show the detail more clearly. The majority of the uniform appears to be accurate for a junior officer's Highland uniform of the period however the depiction of the tartan is problematic and appears to be more generic rather than a detailed portrayal.

<sup>1</sup> Originally raised as the 2nd Highland Battalion of Foot, the 63rd Regiment, but renumbered the 78th Foot in April 1758.

<sup>2</sup> 12,000 yards of tartan - assuming a regiment of 1000 men each issued 12 yds single width cloth per the 64<sup>th</sup> Regt's clothing account.

<sup>3</sup> A fragment of cloth sent to the 64<sup>th</sup> Regt (Loudoun's Highlanders) in 1747.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the calculation above, two battalions of the 42<sup>nd</sup> and one battalion each of the 64<sup>th</sup>, 77<sup>th</sup> and 78<sup>th</sup> Regts which were all raised before 1760, would have needed an initial issue of some 48,000 yds, slightly over 34 miles of tartan!

Closer examination reveals a complex design in what appears to be a predominately brown tartan with darker, possibly black, overstripes and the suggestion of green, especially in the plaid folds below the coat on the left as viewed. There also appears to be a distinct selvedge pattern comprising a dark band and fine dark stripe with pale guards (Plate 2). Selvedge patterns, which don't form part of the overall sett, were a common feature of 18<sup>th</sup> century plaids.



**Plate 2. Detail of the tartan.**

Compared with the coat the lack of any obvious red in the tartan lends support to the idea that the original 78<sup>th</sup> wore a duller sett comprising some or all of the following: blue, green, black and brown. The setting will be discussed in detail later.

### **A RED TARTAN**

The idea that the 78<sup>th</sup> wore a red tartan is predicated on the portrait of the Death of General Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759 (Plate 3).

A Fraser's Highlander, assumed to be Col Simon Fraser (far left), is amongst the group of onlookers and is depicted wearing a red military coat which has the correct colour facings for the 78<sup>th</sup> Regt and a belted plaid of a predominately red



**Plate 3. The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West 1770.**

and green tartan<sup>5</sup>. Although painted in fine detail West's portrait must be treated with some caution as a reference. It was painted in 1770, some 11 yrs after the battle and includes historical inaccuracies, not least Simon Fraser's presence; he was recovering from earlier wounds and not actually on the field that day. Most of the other individuals depicted were



similarly not present at Wolfe's death. West's portrait contains excellent detail of the various uniforms and assuming that the artist took equal care with the tartan as he did with the coat then Simon Fraser is shown wearing a large red and green sett with finer pale stripes and half tones of the intersecting colours represented as tan or yellow (Plate 4). Unfortunately there is too little shown to allow for identification or an accurate reconstruction of the sett. The 78<sup>th</sup> had been disbanded for some seven years by the time of West's portrait so we are left to guess whether he somehow got hold of one of the original plaids or if he had access to some other plaid that he used as the source. It is unclear who if anyone actually modelled as Simon Fraser for the portrait. However, if there was a sitter then perhaps he brought his own plaid?<sup>6</sup>

**Plate 4. Tartan detail from West's portrait 1770.**

Another recently discovered portrait from the conflict shows a Highlander, thought to be Capt. Charles Macdonell of the 78<sup>th</sup>, at the Battle of Flagstaff Hill in 1762. He is depicted wearing a reddish-brown mottled plaid (Plate 5) but the tartan is very impressionistic as indeed is General Amherst's uniform and both outfits are clearly only meant to add colour and theme to the dramatic events that are central to the portrait. The stylised check is typical of some contemporary artists' attempts to depict the complexity of tartan without understanding the textile and may well have been based on the Highlander shown in the 1742 Clothing Book or similar watercolours of the period. It is mentioned for completeness but is of no historical value in determining the actual tartan worn by the 78<sup>th</sup>.



**Plate 5. Amherst in Canada by Robert Edge Pine c1770-80  
Image courtesy of Fort Ligonier, USA**

West's red tartan does not appear to be the same as the Red Fraser sett now wore by the 78<sup>th</sup> Re-enactment Regt (Plate 6) which is said to have been based on an old piece (hereafter referred to as the *Struy* piece) that belonged to a woman from Fort Augustus who was a descendent of the Frasers of Struy.

<sup>5</sup> West includes another Highlander, partially obscured amongst the party hauling a cannon seen in the background. The tartan of the kilt has an indistinct green sett that appears to be symbolic rather than an accurate representation.

<sup>6</sup> It has been suggested (Earl Chapman – see acknowledgements) that as *Fraser paid for the privilege of having his image depicted in the painting he may have wanted West to show him in his own personal plaid*. We will probably never know.

Writing in 1973 to Col Harper, founder of the Regiment, the military historian Capt. William MacKay said of the fragment that *"The old Fraser lady who gave me the piece of tartan nearly 50 years ago [i.e. c.1923] said that it had been worn by her ancestor, a Fraser of Struy at Culloden, but I would not be surprised if it had been worn at Quebec"* (my emphasis). The identity of the Struy descendent is uncertain but Harper goes on to say that *"...Thomas Fraser of Struy was gazetted a captain in the old 78th Fraser Highlanders on 16 January 1757, but did not proceed with the Regiment on active service. It is very possible that this old plaid had originally belonged to Thomas, in which case, it is the only piece of original 78th Regiment plaid that has come to light."*<sup>7</sup> It's unknown if Thomas was the lady's ancestor or whether Harper conflated the two. Even if they were the same person that fact does not mean that it was regimental cloth; it could just as easily have been his own plaid. This evidence is crucial to the red tartan debate as it indicates that the rationale for the modern regiment wearing the Red Fraser was strongly influenced by Harper's and MacKay's musings over evidence that is at best circumstantial. The history of tartan research is full of claims over the antiquity of artefacts by individuals who assume that because the piece belongs to them then it belonged to their ancestor several generations earlier, something generally not borne out by examination of the specimens. Most people have little understanding of textiles and so often assume that because a piece was 'old' in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that it 'must' be mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and as is often the case, that the artefact was associated with Bonnie Prince Charlie and/or Culloden.



**Plate 6. Tartan of the 78<sup>th</sup> Frasers' Re-enactment Regt.**  
Photo courtesy of The 78<sup>th</sup> Fraser Highlanders, Montreal



MacKay's letter goes on to say of the fragment that *"...I got a piece of it for my friend the late Charles Iain Fraser of Reelig who was a Herald of the Lyon Court and he had a bolt of it made and all his family wear it now"*<sup>8</sup>. The resulting Reelig tartan is the standard Red Fraser used by the re-enactment regiment but which has slightly different shades (Plate 7) demonstrating how modern copies often concentrate on the overall sett and colours but that the exact shade of the individual colours and the exact proportions are dependent of the weavers' preference.

**Plate 7. Comparison of Fraser of Reelig's (top) and the modern 78<sup>th</sup> copies of the MacKay specimen.**  
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<sup>7</sup> Harper was mistaken. Thomas Fraser of Struy did accompany his regiment overseas. He is known to have served at Louisbourg in June 1758. He returned to Boston with his company, but on the forced march through Massachusetts died of a "Violent Fever."

<sup>8</sup> The family kilts were made by Campbells of Beauuly but it's unknown which firm wove the material.

## Thomas Fraser of Struy's Plaid

Recent research by the author identified a number fragments of Thomas Fraser of Struy's plaid; not all of these are now in the same location. The largest piece is the full width of the web and allows the sett and colours to be confirmed with certainty (Fig 8).



Fig 8. Fragment of Thomas Fraser of Struy's plaid. © The Author

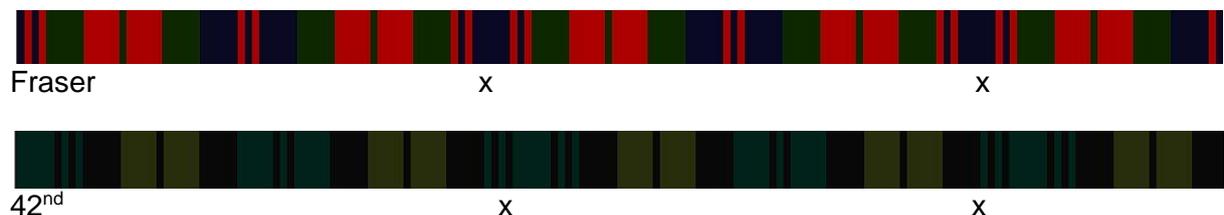
Whilst the claim that Struy wore this plaid at Culloden cannot be proven, the quality of the material and shades are consistent with being mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Although there are proportional colour similarities between Struy's plaid and the Red Fraser tartan, comparison of the setts show them to be structurally different (Fig 9). This difference is so pronounced that it is difficult to understand how MacKay could have got the details wrong but he may have been working with one of the smaller fragments and so conflated elements of the design with the Red Fraser which was widely available at the time.



Fig 9. Comparison of Struy's plaid (top) and the Red Fraser setts. © The Author

Having shown that Harper's 78th do not wear the tartan from Fraser of Struy's plaid it will not be considered further.

The setting of the *Red Fraser* tartan is almost identical to that of the 42<sup>nd</sup> or Government sett but with red for black and one less stripe bordering the double tramline pivot – mark X below.



Fraser

X

X

42<sup>nd</sup>

X

X

This red version of the Government tartan was being woven as *Fraser* by Wilsons of Bannockburn c1800 (Plate 10) and whilst it is tempting to speculate that they copied an earlier piece, perhaps the Struy fragment, the lack of supporting evidence makes this impossible to confirm. It's interesting to compare Wilsons' setting and shades with the two modern copies. The Wilsons' sett has proportionally slightly less red but the shades are similar to that worn by Harper's 78<sup>th</sup>.

Finally, an important consideration that must be factored into the debate over a red sett is the high cost of the dyestuff<sup>9</sup>. When Lord Loudoun raised the 64<sup>th</sup> ([Loudoun's Highlanders](#)) he was advised to avoid too much red because of the cost. It is noteworthy that no other regiment wore a predominately red tartan until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by which time Wilsons of Bannockburn had perfected mass production of standardised colours using natural dyes.

### THE GOVERNMENT TARTAN

Much debate surrounds the origins of the Government tartan, the date it was first used and the early setting but what is absolutely clear is that the version we know today was definitely in use by c1760 and in all probability several years earlier. Portraits of the period show the tartan worn by officers the 42<sup>nd</sup> (Black Watch) and 87<sup>th</sup> (Keith's) and a few years later by the 77<sup>th</sup> (Montgomerie's), the latter two being roughly contemporary with the 78<sup>th</sup> (Fraser's). In these portraits the tartan is very clear but that's not

always the case and extracting the sett from a portrait can often be a difficult task, especially where the artist did not pay as much attention to the detail of the tartan as they did to other elements of the sitter's dress with which they were more familiar. However in the case of the Delacour portrait we are more fortunate and a detailed study reveals a partial match to the Government tartan (Plate 11).



Plate 10. Wilsons' Fraser c1810.  
© The Author

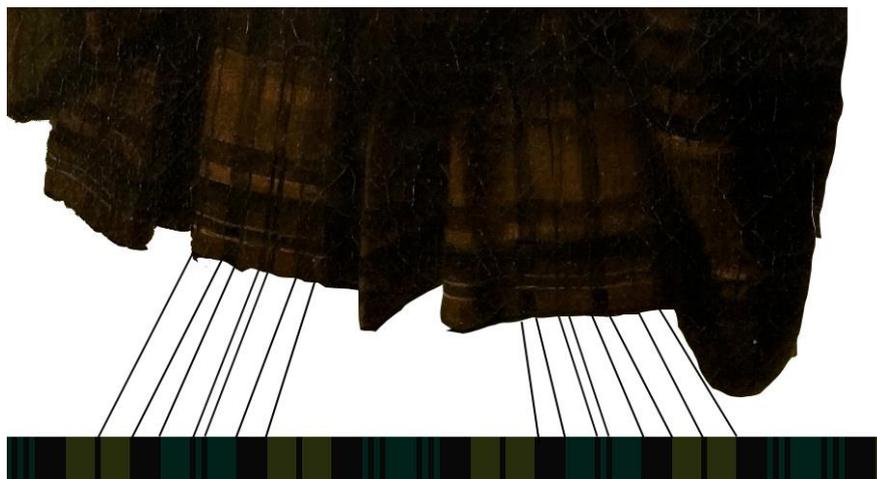


Plate 11. Partial alignment of the Government sett to the tartan in Delacour's portrait. © The Author

<sup>9</sup> The red in nearly all 18<sup>th</sup> Century tartan specimens examined was obtained from cochineal although occasionally madder was the source. Both were imported dyes and cochineal was particularly expensive.

Due to the folds in the kilt apron it is impossible to follow the sett fully but from the alignment of the sett that can be determined it seems probable that the underlined section of the colour strip in Plate 9 is concealed within the central fold and that this *is* the Government tartan. The green in surviving examples of early to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century specimens is often a dull mossy shade and the black rarely a true black but rather a greyish-brown shade so it is entirely possible that Delacour painted such shades in an overall brownish hue especially if the intent was to reflect the tartan and not record it. The inclusion of a selvedge pattern was mentioned earlier. They were often included on civilian plaids of the early-mid 18<sup>th</sup> century but had not previously known to have been used on military issue material although selvedge marks were. Both styles are discussed in greater detail [here](#). Assuming that this is the original 78<sup>th</sup> tartan then we have no way of knowing whether this selvedge pattern was common to the whole regiment or was perhaps an individual weaver's preference<sup>10</sup>.

Six years after West's portrait of the *Death of General Wolfe* the English engraver William Woollett produced an engraving of the scene and as was the standard practice of the time prints were coloured later which lead to variations depending on the accuracy or whim of the individual colourist. In Plate 12 the colour of some individuals' clothing differs from West's portrait, including Simon Fraser's plaid which is rendered as a blue and green tartan. This probability had nothing to do with the original 78<sup>th</sup> but was due to the fact that the Government tartan was worn by newly raised regiments, including the 71<sup>st</sup> (re-raised Fraser's Highlanders) and would have been widely regarded as the standard military tartan by the mid-1770s.



Plate 12. The Death of General Wolff by Wm. Woollett 1776

## CONCLUSION

Before discussing the pros and cons of a red sett verses the Government tartan it is worth reviewing the timeline:

- 1739 - The 43<sup>rd</sup> Regiment (commonly called the Black Watch and subsequently re-numbered 42<sup>nd</sup>) was formed and is said to have adopted a blue, green and black tartan.
- 1750s - The 42<sup>nd</sup>, 77<sup>th</sup> and 87<sup>th</sup> were wearing the Government we know today.
- 1756 - 78<sup>th</sup> raised and wore Highland Dress of an unknown tartan.
- 1760 - Delacour's portrait of Malcolm Macpherson of Phoness in the uniform of the 78<sup>th</sup> shows a dark green (brown), blue and black tartan.
- 1770 - West's portrait of the Death of Wolfe shows a highlander, thought to be Simon Fraser, wearing a red tartan.

<sup>10</sup> The early records of the Black Watch describe how their first plaids were woven throughout Strathspey and this practice was probably the same for the other early regiments so individual variations are to be expected.

- 1775 - 71<sup>st</sup> Regiment (Fraser's Highlanders) raised. They wore the standard Government tartan.
- 1776 - Wm Woollett's engraving of West's earlier portrait shows Simpn Fraser wearing the standard Government tartan.
- 1810 - Wilsons' *Fraser* included in the Cockburn Collection.
- 1960s - Charles Fraser of Reelig had the fragment of red tartan belonging to a Fraser of Struy descendent copied by Campbells of Beauuly.
- 1960s - The Re-enactment 78<sup>th</sup> Fraser Highlanders adopted the *Red Fraser* based on the presumed mid-18<sup>th</sup> century origin of the Struy fragment.

There are a number of extant tartan fragments that the owners believe are 18<sup>th</sup> century and which are often said to be associated with Prince Charles Edward and/or Culloden but which examination reveals to be early 19<sup>th</sup> century and so is likely to be the case with the Struy fragment.

The idea that the original 78<sup>th</sup> wore a red tartan is unconvincing. There are no references, samples or portraits of the time to support the hypothesis and the expense of red based tartans further mitigates the rationale. If MacKay's original fragment is eventually rediscovered I fully expect it will prove to be a piece of Wilsons' cloth from the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

An interesting piece of circumstantial evidence in support of the 78<sup>th</sup>'s use of the Government or a similar type sett is found in the journals of John Knox<sup>11</sup> who wrote of an incident where a Fraser Highlander was shot by a British sentry at Halifax in September 1757 (Knox was not an eyewitness but heard of the incident). According to Knox<sup>i</sup>, when a sergeant "went to take a view of the dead man," he grimly told the young sentry that he had shot "one of our own men, and a Highlander...with his hair hanging loose and wrapped up in a dark-coloured plaid." The only Highland regiment at Halifax in 1757 was Fraser's Highlanders.

Whilst we can never be completely certain without the primary source material, having reviewed the evidence and especially the sett extracted from the Delacour portrait I'm inclined to the view that the regiment wore the standard blue, green and black Government sett or some variant of it rather than a red one, particularly the Red Fraser, which cannot be dated accurately before c1800 whereas the standard Government sett can be traced to c1760 with certainty and is thus roughly contemporary with the original 78<sup>th</sup>.

Acknowledgements:

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<sup>i</sup> Knox J. Capt 1769 *An Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America for the Years 1757, 1758, 1759, and 1760* London Ed. in 3 Vols by A.G. DOUGHTY A.G. Toronto (1914-16)

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<sup>11</sup> Knox was a lieutenant in the 43rd Foot when his regiment arrived at Halifax in 1757. He was present with his regiment in the battle on the Plains of Abraham, served the winter 1759-60 with Murray at Quebec, and fought at Sainte-Foy in April 1760 and subsequently returned to England.