

A Regency Era Kilt

made from an 18th Century Plaid

In early 2016 the writer was contacted by a descendent of a John McNicol from Argyll to identify the tartan of the kilt he took with him when he emigrated to Canada in 1820. Remarkably the kilt survives¹ and offers a unique insight into the re-use of an older piece of material to make a fashionable garment during the height of the Highland Revival (Fig 1).



Fig 1. John McNicol's Kilt. © The Author.

The Kilt



Fig 2. Metal button at the waist (rear). © The Author.

There is a single plain metal button just below the waist between the fourth and fifth pleats (Fig 2) with no evidence of similar buttons elsewhere. This may suggest that it was part of the fastening, perhaps an anchor for a waist-tie which was the standard fastening method in the early 19th century.

The box-pleated kilt is made from a single width of cloth measuring 25" wide selvedge to selvedge and contains 3³/₄ yards of material which, whilst short, was not uncommon in the early 19th century. The kilt has 13 broad box pleats carefully pleated to stripe. It is unlined with the pleats sewn down both inside and out with linen thread for a distance of roughly 7¹/₂ inches from the waist.

¹ The kilt is now in the collection of the [Lanark and District Museum, Ontario](http://www.lanarkmuseum.org.uk/).

This style of kilt was the height of fashion during the Highland Revival and because of the cost of tartan was usually the preserve of the gentry and the military. The fact that this garment belonged to a shepherd is unusual; however, other artefacts belonging to the family suggest that the family might not have been as poor as that role suggests². John McNicol, a 'herd' (shepherd), was born and lived most of his life in Argyll, much of it in Breadalbane, which may be significant as discussed later. Latterly he lived at Letter³ on the north-east side of Loch Awe and was in his early 50s when he left for Canada. The fact that a Shepherd owned what was obviously a well-made and fashionable garment is surprising, the fact that it survives and in such good condition is very unusual.

A Re-Used Plaid?

The hand-woven cloth is 25" wide and of a good quality, woven with evenly spun singles (non-ply) yarn that was naturally dyed. Even without being tested it's clear that the dyes are likely to be those typically used in pre-19th century rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, plus indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green. The pattern is offset across the material and finishes in a four bar herringbone on one selvedge, the bottom of the kilt (Fig 3). This navy blue selvedge with a final thin red band is typical of a technique often found on 18th century plaids⁴. The number of bands and exact number of threads in



Fig 3. Detail of the herringbone selvedge. © The Author.

each differs between specimens but it appears to have been a popular technique. In this example the pattern runs from the plain (non-herringbone) selvedge for two half setts and into a third as far as the wide green followed by a selvedge mark of R10 B40 R10, the last 40 threads being herringbone (3 x 10 blue; 1 x 10 red bands).

The offset arrangement of the pattern across the cloth and the inclusion of the herringbone selvedge is indicative of plaiding that was woven so that it could be joined as a double width plaid⁵. Had it been joined the sett would have repeated across the whole width with the herringbone selvedge on both sides as shown in the reconstruction (Fig 4): 'S' = selvedge and 'J' = the central join. Whilst there is no indication that this material was ever joined, this offset technique was commonly used in rurally woven 18th century tartan. It seems to have out of use by 1800 meaning the material is likely to date to c1750-1800.

² A fine Regency era coat that belonged to John's wife, Flora Munro, survives in the Watson's Corners Museum, Ontario.

³ Letter, or Leatters, is an Anglicisation of the Gaelic word *Leitir* meaning a slope and is a topographical name found widely throughout the Highlands either on its own or in combination, for example; Letterfearn (slope of the Alders), Letterfinlay (Finlay's slope) and Letterewe (slope on the R. Ewe).

⁴ See the related papers on [Traditional Selvedge Patterns](#) and [Joined Plaids – Settings and Construction](#).

⁵ An explanation of the terms *plaiding* and *plaid* can be found in the *Joined Plaids – Settings and Construction* paper (Note 4).

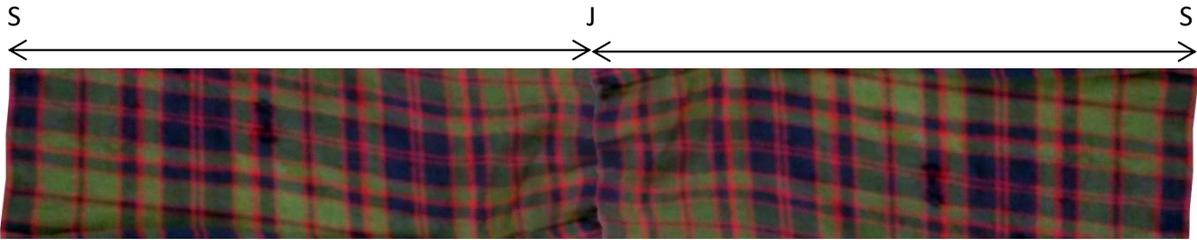


Fig 4. Reconstruction showing how the joined plaiding would have looked. © The Author.

The Tartan

The sett in McNicol kilt is a variation of the Glenorchy tartan⁶, a pattern long associated with Breadalbane, an area roughly from Central Perthshire to Loch Awe in Argyll, where John McNicol lived. The only difference between the two tartans is the addition of a fine light blue stripe in the Glenorchy. A specimen of a similar tartan, albeit proportionally slightly smaller, was collected by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael⁷. Regrettably Carmichael did not record where he obtained it but in common with his other specimens it's likely to have been from the Western Isles or Argyll/Appin areas of the mainland. Fig 5 is a comparison of the three setts; the similar colour bands are identified by the underscore lines.

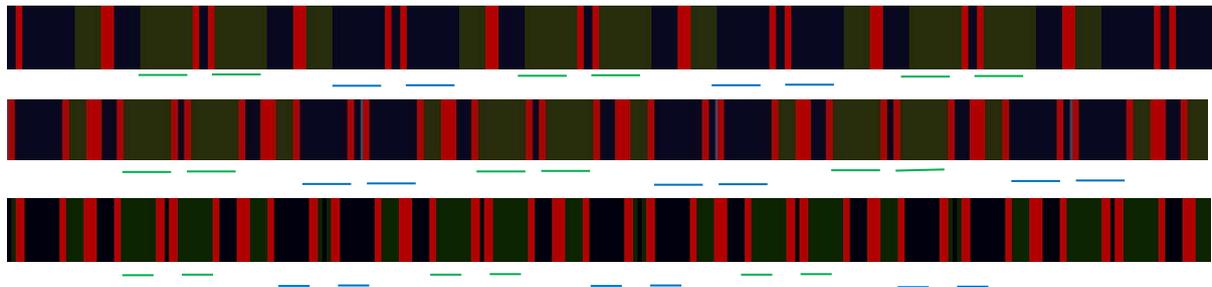


Fig 5. Comparison of the settings of the kilt, Glenorchy and Carmichael tartans. © The Author

The similarity of these three tartans is obvious and is very unlikely to be coincidental. This broad design differs from the majority of surviving 18th century tartans where red is generally the predominant ground colour. Here the sett is composed of a blue and green ground with red overstripes giving a very different visual effect.

Conclusion

John McNicol's kilt represents an important and rare example of early modern Highland Dress. Dating costume by its style is generally straight forward; dating old pieces of tartan can be more problematic because the traditional rural weaving and dyeing techniques did not change much between the mid-17th and late 18th centuries. John McNicol's kilt must have been before 1820, the year he emigrated. Due to effects of Proscription⁸, civilian kilts were a relatively new fashion at the time, this one is probably c1800-20 and presents something of an anomaly. The pleating to stripe and general construction has been done with skill yet all other surviving examples of the period were made with cloth from a manufacturer, normally Wm. Wilson & Son of Bannockburn. In this case the cloth was not woven by Wilsons and its style and construction is consistent with traditional 18th century rurally woven cloth.

⁶ This Glenorchy setting is from a mid-18th century specimen in the author's possession. More details in this [paper](#).

⁷ Alexander Carmichael [Scottish folklorist and author](#).

⁸ The Act of Proscription is discussed in this paper - [Link](#).

John's descendent and the author's correspondent wondered if this might have been a kilt of a Fencible or Militia unit⁹. There were numerous local militias formed at the time of the American War of Independence and later threat from Napoleon. The uniform of many of these is a mystery but by the Napoleonic era all the tartan seems to have been supplied by Wilsons. There is no evidence of this tartan having been used in this connection nor that John was a member of either organisation and it is considered an unlikely scenario.

The spinning, dyeing and weaving techniques used to make the material in John's kilt are consistent with those of mid-late 18th century rural cloth from the Highlands. The uniformity of all three elements, plus the offset setting is indicative of a skilled spinner and weaver, possibly they were one and the same. From the available evidence it seems likely that John McNicol had a kilt made from a length of locally produced tartan, cloth that was originally woven with the intention that it could be joined to make a plaid or domestic furnishing such as bed hangings.

We cannot know for certain where the material came from but the similarity to the Glenorchy tartan, a pattern with a long local connection, means that there is a strong likelihood that it was woven locally and was quite possibly a re-used family piece. Whether that was the case and whether from his or his wife's family we will probably never know. Given that this material pre-dates the concept of clan tartans it should not be regarded as either a MacNicol or Munro tartan but rather as an unnamed 18th century Glenorchy type tartan. There is the intriguing possibility that this material represents the proto-type Glenorchy design and that the asymmetric version with the light blue fine stripe was a later development. If that were the case then this simpler design, but not necessarily this actual material, would pre-date c1750.

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⁹ [Highland Fencible Corps](#).