

Cameron of Lochiel

The Cameron of Lochiel is amongst the small number of clan tartans that is claimed to date to the mid-18th century and thus one of the few thought to be associated with a clan at that time of the last Jacobite Rising. Iain Cameron Taylor¹, wrote, "Of the unknown Cameron tartans in existence today, the Chief's personal tartan, the Cameron of Lochiel, is undoubtedly the oldest." The sett is said to have been taken from a portrait in Achnacarry of the XVIII Chief, Donald Cameron, the Gentle Lochiel painted by Sir George Chalmers² in 1764 (Plate 1). Lochiel died in France in 1748 and the portrait was therefore painted some 12 years afterward his death. This raises a number of questions; not least, if it was not painted from life what was the source, an earlier drawing or portrait?



Plate 1. Donald Cameron of Lochiel
by Sir George Chalmers c1764

Of far more interest to this discussion than the sitter's exact identity is the fact that whilst there are similarities the tartan of his plaid differs from the Cameron of Lochiel tartan as we know it today. Extracting the sett from a portrait is often difficult especially where the sett is large, as here, complex, or the colours difficult to determine, as here. Chalmers' portrait shows a large red and dark, apparently black, sett although the dark bands could possibly have been dark blue or green or a combination of all three. There are a number of 18th century portraits in which the sitter wears a red and black plaid and based on the available evidence the dark colour here is assumed to be black.

The Gentle Lochiel is said to have bought a quantity of tartan in Glasgow for the clansmen he raised to meet Pr. Ch. Ed, at Glenfinnan in 1745 and whilst it is tempting to speculate, there is absolutely no evidence to support the view that the plaid in Chalmers' portrait shows that tartan. The approximate setting of the plaid is shown in the colour strip below.



The similarity between the sett in Chalmers' portrait and the Cameron of Lochiel tartan in use today (below) is obvious. Allowing for the different interpretation of the dark stripes, the principal difference is the inclusion of the fine white stripes in the latter which are definitely missing from the originally Achnacarry portrait.



¹ Lt Col Iain Cameron Taylor was a noted Clan Cameron historian active during the 1950-70s.

² [Sir George Chalmers](#) came from a Jacobite family and studied under Allan Ramsay.

The Lochiel tartan worn today³ was first recorded in the Smith brothers' book¹ where they said of it:

"The pattern here given was sent to us by Lochiel, the undoubted Chief of the Clan, who says it is what he has always considered the Tartan of the Camerons, and is the same as represented upon a portrait of one of his ancestors, in the possession of Sir Duncan Cameron of Collart⁴."

Sir Duncan Cameron of Fassifern and Callart⁵ died without a male heir and the portrait disappeared. It may have been left to his daughter Christina⁶ or, it may have gone to the Chief as the nearest male heir. Either possibility raises the intriguing prospect that the portrait shows a different sitter? If that were the case then John Cameron of Fassifern, brother of the Gentle Lochiel is a possible contender.

The Smiths' comment is evidence that as early as the late 1840s⁷ the Chief considered the Lochiel tartan as the correct clan sett. But what the source of the tartan was that Lochiel sent to the Smiths is unclear. Most, if not all, of the plates in their work were copied from samples supplied by Wilsons of Bannockburn, either directly or via the various Chiefs and it seems likely that they would have been the source of the Lochiel tartan too. The current Chief inherited a joined plaid in this sett that is thought to date to c1820-40 which if true would almost certainly be of Wilsons' cloth and would add support to them being the source of the Smiths' sample. The precise dating of this setting is clouded by the misattribution of two other portraits of the Gentle Lochiel both of which have been confused with the original one by Chalmers. For ease of comparison the three are shown together in historical order (Plates 2-4).



Plate 2. Donald Cameron of Lochiel by Sir George Chalmers 1764.



Plate 3. Donald Cameron of Lochiel Blaikie Collection c1800-20.



Plate 4. Donald Cameron of Lochiel Artist Unknown post 1850.

The engraving in Plate 3 is taken from the Blaikie Collectionⁱⁱ and clearly shows the sett worn today. The print is plainly based on the original portrait with minor differences including the 'extra' white lines. The origins of the engraving are unclear but are presumed to be based on an earlier portrait, either the original one or possibly the one mentioned by the Smiths, if that was a different one in which case it was probably a late 18th or early 19th century copy.

³ Wilsons of Bannockburn produced a completely different *Lochiel* tartan c1780-1820, later renamed and still sold as *Munro*.

⁴ 2nd Baronet of Fassifern. The title fell into abeyance when Cameron died without a male heir in 1863.

⁵ Sir Duncan's father, the 1st Baronet, was the Gentle Lochiel's cousin and Sir Duncan therefore Lochiel's nephew.

⁶ Married Alexander (Cameron) Campbell, of Monzie and Inverawe.

⁷ The standard Clan Cameron tartan first appeared in the Sobieski Stuarts' 1842 *Vestiarium Scoticum* so either the Chief had used the Lochiel tartan for longer or did not consider the Stuarts' tartan as genuine, or both.

It is also possible that the engraving was a copy of the original portrait made during the early-mid 1800s when the romanticisation of the Jacobite cause was at its height and the artist simply used the Lochiel tartan available at the time rather than attempt to decipher the sett from original portrait.

Whilst the portrait in Plate 4 has also been attributed to Chalmers it is very obviously of a completely different style and undoubtedly of a later date. The relationship to the earlier pictures is obvious but it departs from them significantly by omitting the plaid and using the current tartan (from Plate 3) in the coat. The origins and location of this portrait, which I believe to be post-1850, are a mystery. It has little to tell us about the origins of the Cameron of Lochiel tartan beyond confirming that the current version, with the white line, was in existence by the time the portrait was produced. MacLeay's printsⁱⁱⁱ show that the Lochiel tartan was still being worn (Plate 5) as late as 1870 by ordinary clansmen⁸ alongside the more recent clan sett commonly worn today.



Plate 5. John Chisholm (wearing Clan Cameron), Colin Stewart Cameron & John Cameron (wearing Cameron of Lochiel) by Kenneth Macleay 1870



Plate 6. Plaid (possibly Wilsons') worn by Donald Cameron of Lochiel. XXVI Chief

The tartan of the 1764 portrait appears to have been used as the basis for the Lochiel tartan. When and why is uncertain but on the evidence currently available it is reasonable to conclude that the Cameron of Lochiel tartan we know today dates to the early 1800s and was possibly (probably?) one of Wilsons of Bannockburn's designs for the chief around the time of the visit of King George IV to Scotland in 1822. Further research is required to determine the origins and dates of the later Lochiel portraits (Plates 3 & 4) and confirm the age of the chief's plaid (Plate 6).

© Peter Eslea MacDonald May 2014

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

ⁱⁱ BLAIKIE WB, 1854-1928 [Collection of Jacobite Pamphlets, Broadsides and Proclamations](#). National Library of Scotland

ⁱⁱⁱ MACLEAY K, 1870 *Highlanders of Scotland*. Mitchell Publisher, London

⁸ Subsequent chiefs have regarded this as a personal tartan for their immediate family and not one for general clan use.