

Fraser of Altyre – A Reappraisal

Introduction

The records¹ of the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) include a sample of silk tartan labelled Fraser of Altyre which was obtained from Andersons (now Kinloch Anderson) in the 1960s (Fig 1). In correspondence with the author the firm were unable to confirm when, or for whom, they produced this rare tartan; nor were they able to say why it was so named.

Working in the 1950s the tartan scholar John MacGregor-Hastie dated the sett to about 1850 on the basis of a claim by *'an old lady (c.1938) who said that a kilt of this pattern had been in the family for about 100 years'*. He gave no further information but the similarity of the brief description with that of another old Fraser tartan suggests that his record was second-hand and is likely to have come from the military historian Capt. William MacKay.



Fig 1. Fraser of Altyre, silk sample from Andersons. © The Author.

Amongst the archives of the tartan scholar James D Scarlett is a slide of a fragment of tartan. He gave no details of the piece, what it was called and importantly, where he found it. Work by the author to clean up the image revealed a fragment typical of early-mid C18th rurally produced tartan (Fig 2) and whilst the shades differ, the pattern matches the so-called Fraser of Altyre tartan. Although there is no proof that this piece was the source it is reasonable to assume that this is part of the plaid on which the Andersons' silk was based.

¹ The Authority's early records came from its predecessor organisation, the Scottish Tartans Society.

Fraser of Struy

Thomas Fraser of Struy fought at Culloden and following the Jacobite defeat he joined the newly raised 78th Regt of Foot (Fraser's Highlanders) in 1757. He embarked with the regiment for Canada and died there 'of a violent fever' the following year. Writing in the early 1970s Capt MacKay said of an old piece of tartan he'd acquired 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*'. MacKay speculated that this plaid may also have been worn by the Fraser's Highlanders; something thought unlikely - see the related paper on the [Tartan of the 78th Regt of Foot](#).



Fig 2. Unnamed C18th specimen (Fraser of Altyre?) from the Scarlett Collection. © The Author.

The Struy Plaid

The piece of tartan given to MacKay was thought to have been lost; however, quite by chance the author stumbled across a picture on social media of some fragments in the Nairn Museum said to be part of Thomas Fraser's plaid. The Museum was unable to confirm when or from whom they had acquired the pieces but they almost certainly came from MacKay who live not far away on the other side of the Cromarty Firth. Examination of more detailed photographs confirmed that all the fragments came from the same plaid and that they were structurally consistent with the claimed mid-18th century date. The straight sections on the larger fragment are evidence of a portion having been cut out with scissors at some point (Fig 3), perhaps by MacKay who is said to have sent a piece to Col. Harper².

² Founder of the Canadian 78th Fraser Highlanders Re-enactment Regiment.



Fig 3. Fragments of Thomas Fraser of Struy's plaid. Image courtesy of the Nairn Museum.

Thomas Fraser's wife remained in Inverness-shire when he embarked for Canada with the 78th. It is presumed that he left the plaid he is said to have worn at Culloden at home and that it was passed down through the family to the point when MacKay was given a piece. Whilst none of the Nairn fragments is sufficiently large enough to show the sett of the original plaid there is enough to extract elements of the sett which the author recognised as identical to that of the so-called Fraser of Altyre. By overlaying the larger of the Nairn specimens onto that of the piece recorded by Scarlett it is possible to demonstrate that the settings match and therefore conclude that they are all from the same plaid (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Alignment of the Struy and Scarlett fragments. © The Author.

The Sett

The piece photographed by Scarlett shows the full width of the warp and is big enough to allow confirmation of the sett, which is a typical mid-18th century red, blue and green pattern of a style similar to a number of others of the period. In Scarlett's specimen the warp is offset³ and finishes at a different point on each of the selvages (Fig 5).



X

Fig 5. Colour strip to show the layout of the warp of the Struy plaid. © The Author.

One of the selvages is the red pivot on the green and would have been the edge intended to be joined (marked x) to allow the pattern to repeat across the doubled width plaid (Fig 6).



X

Fig 6. Colour strip to show the layout of the Struy cloth if joined to make a wide plaid. © The Author.

Despite the offset layout of the warp being intended for joining, there is no evidence on the surviving specimen that it was ever actually joined. This does not mean that it wasn't, simply that there is no surviving thread to show that it was; however, other surviving examples of offset plaiding used singly show that such cloth was not always joined as intended by the weaver.

Conclusion

Altyre was a Cumming territorial designation and, apart from the 16th century marriage of Mary Fraser to James Cumming of Altyre, there is no known connection of the Frasers with Altyre. There is however, evidence to support the claim that the Nairn fragments are from the plaid that belonged to Thomas Fraser of Struy and it has been shown that the unnamed piece photographed by Scarlett is a portion from the same plaid. It is not known why Andersons called their silk material Fraser of Altyre but circumstantial evidence suggests that the sett was copied from a piece of the plaid that belonged to Fraser of Struy. In the absence of any proven Altyre connection it is the author's contention that this tartan was misnamed/attributed and that it should more correctly be called *Fraser of Struy*.

MacKay's supposition that the tartan of the Struy plaid was also used as the sett for Fraser's Highlanders is fanciful and completely without foundation⁴. Examination of the Nairn fragments and further research to find the piece photographed by Scarlett will undoubtedly lead to a better understanding of the original plaid's construction. Unfortunately we may never know for certain how or why the plaid was cut up, nor when or by whom.

³ An offset warp is one that doesn't balance (run in sequential order) from the centre to each selvage.

⁴ See the [78th Regt - Fraser's Highlanders](#) paper for a discussion on the original regiment's tartan.