

Glenorchy – the Original Setting

Introduction

The Glenorchy tartan, also known as *MacIntyre*, *MacIntyre and Glenorchy* and to a lesser extent *Cumming* is one of the few tartans that can be traced back to the 18th century and the end of the clan era. By the early 19th century there were a number of variations in circulation and it appeared in all the early collections and publications¹ although there is no uniformity in which setting or name was used. It is also unusual if not unique in having both symmetric and asymmetric settings, the latter is thought to be the older and as such is relatively rare amongst examples of old tartans still in use.

District or Clan Tartan?

Whilst often regarded as a District tartan, the Glenorchy has a long association with the MacIntyres whose lands once encompassed the region. Similarly but with an older association, the design was named *Cumming or Cumming Glenorchy* in early collections; apparently because the clan once owned Inverloch Castle near Fort William although that's not actually that near Glenorchy. Unhelpfully, the more commonly used Cumming tartan, a completely unrelated design, is also sold by some manufacturers today as *Cumming Glenorchy*. Writing in the early 1800s David Stewart of Garthⁱ stated that

".....Thus a MacDonald, a Campbell, a MacKenzie, etc. was known by his plaid; and in like manner the Athole, Glenorchy and other colours of different districts were easily distinguishable".

Leaving aside the contentious subject of uniform District tartans as historic fact, it is clear that Garth thought there were at least some and that he counted the Glenorchy amongst them. Whilst we don't know to which tartan he referred we do know that the Glenorchy/Cumming tartan existed at the time and so it is a fair assumption that they were one and the same. In keeping with the early 19th century development of clan tartans it seems self evident that this sett was adopted as a clan tartan firstly by the Cummings and then later, the MacIntyres. Wilsons of Bannockburn, the great tartan manufacturers, were the source of Cockburn's² *Cumming* specimen (Fig 1); similar specimens can be found in two surviving sample books where they are named *Cumming*³ and *McIntyre Glenorchy*⁴. A later note in the latter says 'same as Cumming No 77'.

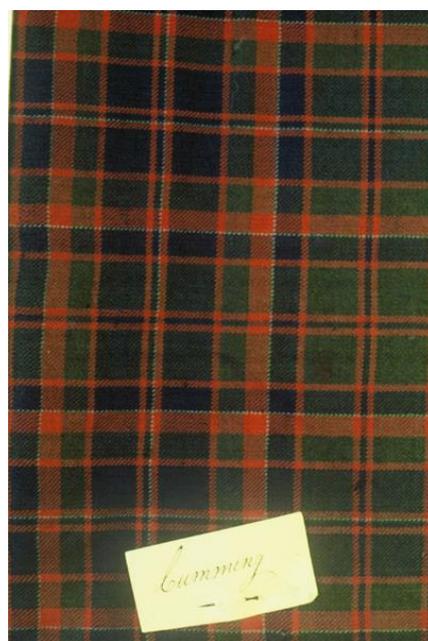


Fig 1. No26 Cumming from the Cockburn Collection 1810-15.
© The Author

¹ Less the *Vestiarium Scoticum* (1842) where the authors invented their tartans claiming a spurious historical pedigree for the setts which included a completely different and previously unknown MacIntyre tartan.

² The Cockburn Collection 1810-15, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

³ Scott-Adie: Wilsons' sample book c1830-40 now in the possession of the Scottish Tartans Museum, Franklin, NC, USA.

⁴ Harrison & Co: Wilsons' sample book c1830-40 now in the possession of the Textile College, Galashiels.

Which Setting?

There have been a confusing number of variations of this tartan over the years many of which were the result of incorrect copying or interpretation of earlier specimens. Notably, the navy blue has at times been rendered as black. Wilsons wove at least three versions of the design, one of which, the oldest, involved an extended setting with the pivots centred on alternating green grounds. Their other two follow the more conventional arrangement where the pivots are centred on alternative blue and green grounds. The colour strips below show the increasing deviation/error in the sett over the years.



1810 – Wilsons' sample in the Cockburn Collection as *Cumming*



1819 – Wilsons' 1819 Key Pattern Book as *Glenorchy*



1830 – Wilsons' samples in Harrison & Co and Scott-Adie sample books



1830 – Norwich Weavers' Collection



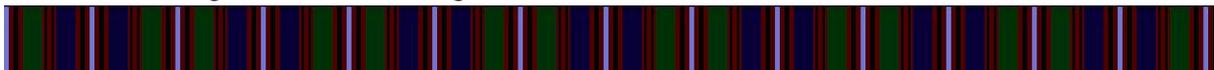
1850 – Smiths' as *MacIntyre*



1850 – Smibert as *Cumyn*



1880 – Clan Originaux as *Cumming*



1880 – Clan Originaux as *MacIntyre*



Logically the setting from the Cockburn Collection is the oldest of those above and that is certainly the case judging by the extant samples which includes a fine Highland Revival era jacket on display in the West Highland Museum, Fort William (Fig 2) where it is named *Cumming*. Further work is needed to ascertain whether it was acquired/donated as such or whether the name was attributed at a later date. Amongst the settings so far considered this one, the Cockburn setting, is unique in having a double green ground; one decorated, the other plain, which has the effect of doubling the sett size. Given Garth's comment it is reasonable to presume that this setting dates to some point before about 1800. In Wilsons' other settings the more common blue-green ground

Fig 2. Highland Revival Jacket in Wilsons' cloth.
© The Author

arrangement is used but the setts are made more complex by the introduction of additional colours in some of the fine lines. The 1819 setting is particularly interesting as it includes fine pink and well as light blue lines which suggest it was a contemporary *fancy setting* based on the plainer version of the earlier specimens. However, it must have been popular at the time in order to have been included as one of their 'Key Patterns'. By c1830 Wilsons' main rival, the Norwich Weavers, were also producing a version based on the 1819 setting.

The versions offered by both the Smithsⁱⁱ and Smibertⁱⁱⁱ can all be categorised together as 'printing errors' and there is no evidence to support their actual existence as opposed to being incorrect copies of Wilsons' tartan(s). Smibert's setting is particularly faulty where he gives black for blue, but nonetheless it appears to have found favour with a later manufacturer as it was included in an 1880 sample book called the Clans Originaux but with one major change; the light blue pivot had been moved from the centre to the edge of the surrounding black thus making the sett asymmetric. That version is still woven today as *Cumming* and was given added credence by its adoption in the 1960s as their family tartan by the *Buchans* who have a long connection with Clan Cumming. This plethora of designs and the widespread use of the different names for the same setting is confusing. Considering the design as a whole it is clear that the Cummings were the first to adopt/be attributed it as a clan tartan in the early 1800s and that the MacIntyre connection dates to the mid-1800s. That would probably have been the end of the matter and we would never have been able to trace the design before Wilsons' c1800 specimens but for a chance discovery.

A rare find

In 1975 the author's family purchased an old coarse and dirty tartan cushion at a house sale in St. Fillans, Loch Earn in Perthshire (Fig 3). The material looked like Glenorchy and had obviously been reused; a fact confirmed when the cushion was taken apart.



Fig 3. Plaid reused as a cushion cover. © The Author

Although only portion of the plaid survived there was enough to confirm the asymmetric setting and the fact that it was originally a joined plaid made from single width cloth with a herringbone selvedge comprising 4 x bands of 10 threads (Fig 4). The cloth is clearly hand woven and although quite fine it contains a number of threading errors in the warp that, together with the way it was arranged and joined, plus the dyes used, is consistent with tartan of the period c1700-50 (Fig 5).



Fig 4. Herringbone selvedge detail.
© The Author



Fig 5. Detail of the join on the original plaid & threading errors.
© The Author

Whilst clearly a version of the Glenorchy/MacIntyre/Cumming tartan, albeit that the green is very faded, this C18th specimen is similar to Wilsons' setting in the Cockburn specimen (see below). However, the earlier piece is structurally simpler in having only one light blue stripe and was made asymmetric by placing it at the edge of what is in Wilsons' and later settings the pivot. Mention has already been made of the extended setting of the Cockburn version.



c1750 plaid



1810 – Wilsons' sample in the Cockburn Collection

The regularity of the asymmetric light blue throughout the older specimen shows that it was woven that way deliberately and was not an isolated warping error. It is interesting that this asymmetric setting reappeared in the 1850 works by the Smiths and Smibert however, their setting included not only the extra light blue stripes of the Cockburn specimen but also gave black for the normal dark blue, all of which suggests that the authors were confused by the large Wilsons' setting and took only the light blue of one pivot thus making the sett

asymmetric by mistake. In doing so they returned to the apparent older setting albeit with the addition of the extra light blue lines.

There is a further fascinating twist to the story of the plaid. The old cushion was found in a chest from Glentarken⁵ together with a C19th whisky bottle engraved with a series of Highland figures and the date 1847 (Fig 6).

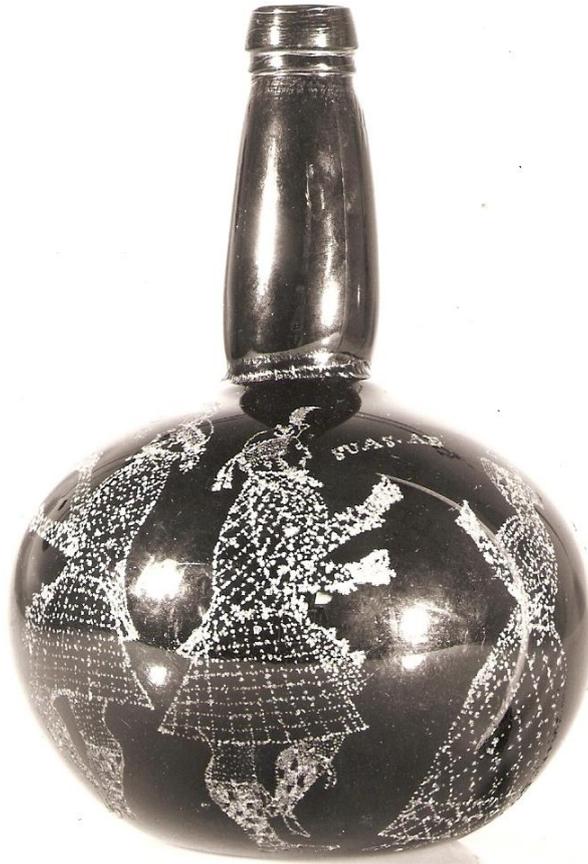


Fig 6. Marriage Bottle from Glentarken. © The Author

The bottle is typical of what are often referred to as marriage bottles and which usually include the names of the bride and groom. In this example for some reason only the name *Elizabeth McIntyre* appears (Fig 7).

It is impossible to know whether the tartan belonged to her but the inclusion in the same family chest as the tartan is strong evidence of association and if that were the case it could be that it had been handed down the MacIntyre line. However, it



Fig 7. Elizabeth McIntyre's name inscribed on the Marriage Bottle.
© The Author

⁵ Glentarken lies above St. Fillans at the end of Lochearn, Perthshire. In the early C19th the inhabitants of Glentarken were evicted and settled in a new village named Little Port, now St. Fillans.

must be stressed that however compelling this idea is it is only supposition and there are many other possible reasons for the plaid and bottle being in a chest together over a hundred years after the date on the bottle.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the original Glenorchy/MacIntyre/Cumming tartan is old and one of the few surviving tartans that can be dated from extant specimens to the first half of the C18th. We have no idea what it was originally called nor can we be certain if it was connected with any particular clan but early records connect the design with the Glenorchy/Fort William area of Breadalbane. Whilst the only known C18th reference, the remnants of an old plaid, are from southern Perthshire there are connections with both the MacIntyres and Breadalbane, the latter being only separated by a hill pass from Glentarken above St. Fillans where Elizabeth M^cIntyre lived. It is therefore possible that the plaid originated elsewhere in the Highlands and was brought into the glen where it was possibly owned by Elizabeth M^cIntyre or her family⁶.

Whilst there are a number of variations in the setting of the tartan the oldest and simplest is that from the original C18th plaid (Fig 8). With only one example it's impossible to know whether the setting was always asymmetric or if it was a one off but it is likely that this setting was the basis for Wilsons' early version included in the Cockburn Collection as *Cumming*, and that they quickly produced at least one 'fashion' variation, one or more of which was the source of later writers' versions listed under a variety of names.



Fig 8. Glenorchy - Original setting. © The Author

© Peter Eslea MacDonald – December 2012

ⁱ STEWART OF GARTH D, 1822 *The Sketches of the Highlanders of Scotland*, Constable & Co, Edinburgh.

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

ⁱⁱⁱ SMIBERT T. 1850 *The Clans of the Highlands of Scotland*. James Hogg, London

⁶ The chest in which the tartan and bottle were found also contained a King James' Bible dated 1715 when it was owned by a James McNab, presumably an ancestor of the family that owned the bottle. The MacNabs also lived over the pass in Breadalbane and so the plaid might equally have originally belonged to James McNab.