

# *Isabella Fraser's Wedding Dress c1785*

## *A Reappraisal*

### Introduction

Amongst the displays at the Inverness Museum & Art Gallery is a fine example of a tartan wedding dress from the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The dress was worn at, and probably made for, the wedding of Isabella MacTavish to Malcolm Fraser, both from Stratherrick, in 1785. The tartan has similarities to a number of old pieces collected in Strathspey and Badenoch which raises the intriguing possibility of a preferred regional style or theme.

This paper examines the tartan and brings to light evidence that makes this costume a unique example of a tradition that must once have been commonplace, especially after the introduction of the Disarming Act (The Act of Proscription) in 1747 but for which there is almost no extant evidence.

### The Dress



Fig 1. Isabella MacTavish's Wedding Dress c1785.  
Photo courtesy of the Inverness Museum

The style and construction of the dress (Figure 1) have been discussed elsewhere. It is not my area of expertise and I shall not comment further beyond noting that the tartan was not well matched in the construction and has all the appearance of being home-made rather than made by a professionally seamstress. The plaid has one turned end, the other is an unwoven or unpicked und finished with a sections with a simple overhand knot (Figure 2).

What has been missed by those who previously studied the costume is that fact that that it was made from an old plaid or plaiding material<sup>1</sup> and that the cloth itself is probably considerably older than the dress and possibly dates to c1740-60. As such, this is the only known surviving example of such a reuse and gives us an insight into the thrift and relative poverty of the average Highlander compared to the gentry in 18<sup>th</sup> century rural Scotland.



Fig 2. Plaid showing knotted and turned ends.  
Photo courtesy of the Inverness Museum.

<sup>1</sup> Plaiding is a term that refers to material, often of a large pattern, woven off-set and frequently with a selvedge pattern or selvedge mark, the latter often herringboned, and intended for joining to make double width cloth rather than used for tailored clothing.

## The Tartan

Given that this outfit is one of very few pre-1800 examples to survive it seems odd that no-one has looked at the tartan in detail and that all references simply refer to the dress being of 'a red tartan'. Apart from being 'red', the first thing that strikes one is the large sett size. Closer examination reveals that the pattern is asymmetric or non-reversing. Isabella MacTavish was from Ruthven in Dores, Stratherrick and this tartan is remarkably similar to a number of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century plaids from the Rothiemurchus/Kingussie area in adjacent Badenoch as the colour stripes below show.



Isabella Fraser's Wedding Dress



Plaid from Rothiemurchus



Plaid from Nethybridge



Plaid in Am Fasgadh, Kingussie

The first two plaids are asymmetric, the latter two symmetric. They are all 'red' tartans; technically they can be described as alternating red grounds enclosed by alternating large green and blue bars separated by a red stripe/bar, the red grounds having green and/or blue stripes centred on them. The survival of a plaid belonging to [MacDonald of Glenaladale](#) demonstrates that this type of setting was not unique to the Badenoch area but the similarity of these designs lends support to the idea that this type of setting may have been popular in the area or perhaps to a particular weaver.

Judging from the surviving 18<sup>th</sup> century specimens, asymmetric tartans were far less common than standard 'balanced' setts which is not surprising as a non-repeating pattern is much more difficult to match effectively when the cloth is joined. Joining an asymmetric sett also results in the twill, the diagonal structure of the weave, running in opposite directions in each half of the plaid as this example in an old Glenorchy (Figure 3). As there are a number surviving examples of joined plaids made from asymmetric tartans our modern preference for balanced patterns was apparently less important 250 years ago and cloth of bright or expensive colours a more significant factor in choice. The use of a large amount of red marks these out as expensive pieces that would have been the reserve of the gentry and the time they were woven.



Fig 3. Join in an asymmetric plaid showing reversed twill.  
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Because the costume is in a display cabinet it has not been possible to study the material in detail; for example, the width of the material is unknown. The plaid has been described as *loom-width approximately twenty to thirty inches* which is not particularly enlightening save for the fact that it suggests that the cloth is single width and not joined. Whether it was a joined plaid that has been separated and reused or was simply a length of plaiding will probably only be determined by close examination of the material. The yarn is evenly spun and expertly dyes, almost certainly using cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, and indigo plus an unknown yellow for the green.

The cloth is finely woven with little evidence of errors or inconsistencies. Assuming a 36 epi which was average for this type of rural cloth then the sett would be approximately 15.75 inches per block - below.



Photographs reveal that one selvedge finishes blue/red, the other green/red and in each case the final threads are two pairs of green threads. Thirty inch cloth was uncommon in 18<sup>th</sup> century rural weaving, the average width was 24-26 inches but it is impossible to reconcile the size of the sett and the different selvedges unless the cloth is about 30 inches in which case the total setting of the warp would look like this.



Assuming this warp setting is correct then if the material had been joined it would have resulted in a double width plaid of 60 inches looking like this.



## Conclusion

The use of a large amount of red means that this would have been an expensive and highly prize piece of cloth at any point in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Assuming that the dress was made for Isabella's wedding then it was made shortly after the end of Proscription<sup>2</sup>; however, the cloth is consistent with having been an old plaid or length of plaiding material that is older probably dating to c1740-60 although there is evidence that the traditional of rural tartan weaving continued to some degree throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century and this cloth could be later. We will probably never know exactly when, where or by whom it was woven but whenever that was, the cloth was not intended for this dress or similar clothing.

Whilst the tartan of the dress has always been classified as a Fraser one it seems more logical that it should be considered a MacTavish one and as such is much older than the tartan now by the clan.

This is the only surviving example of what must have been a common practice of incorporating tartan as part of women's clothing in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, the historical importance of this dress has generally been overlooked in favour of male costume and it is worthy of further study.

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<sup>2</sup> The Act of Proscription banned the wearing of Highland Dress but not tartan per se.