

# MacDonald of Glencoe

## Introduction

In the 1980s the weaving firm D. C. Dalgliesh Ltd wove a tartan they called MacDonald of Glencoe (Plate 1). Whether it was woven as a special commission or was one of the firm's stock patterns is unclear but the pattern was later added by the House of Edgar to their Muted colour range (Plate 2).

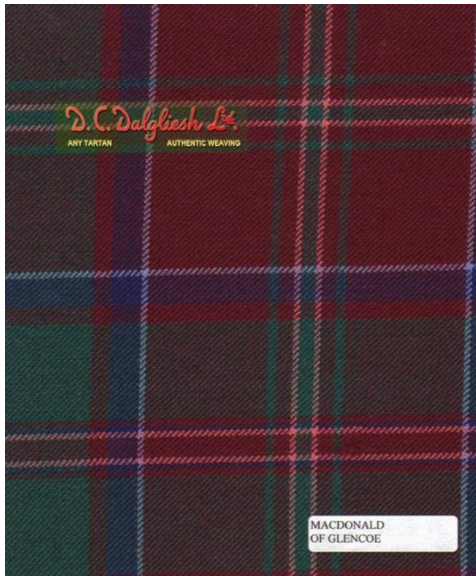


Plate 1. MacDonald of Glencoe. D. C. Dalgliesh Ltd



Plate 2. MacDonald of Glencoe. House of Edgar

These modern versions are based on records of a specimen in the collection of the West Highland Museum (WHM), Fort William. According to the museum's Annual Report for 1939, the tartan is listed as "*Piece of Old Hard Tartan<sup>1</sup>, spun, woven and dyed by John Rankin, Glencoe, about 200 years ago. Presented by his great-grand-daughter, Miss Mary A. Rankin, Glencoe.*" Based on this history, the specimen dates to c.1740

## A MacDonald Tartan?

The concept of clan tartans began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century whereas this tartan is at least 70 years older. The attribution of this pattern to the MacDonalds appears to have been by Dalgliesh who knew of the Glencoe connection and added MacDonald, either out of ignorance of the original weaver, or simply to make it more commercially appealing. The MacDonalds have long been associated with Glencoe, so too, but less well known, families of Hendersons and Rankins. In fact, a Rankin is said to have been the first man killed during the infamous massacre in 1692.

Assuming the tradition associated with this piece is correct, it could be argued that the tartan should be called *Rankin* or *Rankin of Glencoe* rather than *MacDonald*. However, there is another old specimen associated with the MacDonalds, discussed later in this paper, which may have a bearing on the use of the design in the Lochaber area.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hard tartan is a term that refers to a type of traditional fine, coarse material that was tightly spun and woven. Some older examples were lindsey-woolsey (having a linen warp and woollen weft). This type of cloth went out of fashion in the mid-1800s.

## The Original Specimen

The WHM specimen measures 20.5" x 14.5" and was woven at 46 ends per inch (epi) using singles (unplied thread) in the warp and weft. It has one selvedge and three rough edges meaning that this was cut from a larger piece (Plate 3). The blue at the edge of the piece is extended to form a selvedge mark which is herringboned with 54 ends alternating in 5 irregularly sized alternating bars and a final red stripe of 8 ends with the last to paired through the same (2<sup>nd</sup>) heidle (Plate 4) and (Fig 1).



Plate 3. The original specimen woven by John Rankin. Photo E F Williams



Plate 4. Herringbone selvedge mark. Photo E F Williams





Fig 1. Arrangement of the irregular herringbone at the edge of the broad red.

A selvedge mark comprising a blue bar, often herringboned, with a final red stripe is typical of 18<sup>th</sup> century civilian plaiding. Such patterns were woven offset<sup>2</sup> and designed to be joined to form double-width cloth in which the pattern repeats correctly across the whole width. In this case, the original material is likely to have been off-set, 24 inches wide with 4 half setts and into the 5<sup>th</sup> as far as the LB and finished with the selvedge mark (Plate 5). When joined, two lengths would have 8 half setts (4 full repeats) plus a selvedge mark of each side (Plate 6).



Plate 5. Probable layout of the original warp with four half setts, part of the fifth and the selvedge mark.



Plate 6. Layout of the joined cloth: Eight half setts and the selvedge marks.

No dye analysis has been conducted on the piece but if tested, it is probable that the dyes were those typically used in 18th century rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the reds and blues respectively; indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green.

<sup>2</sup> The traditional method of offset weaving is discussed here - [http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined\\_Plaid.pdf](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined_Plaid.pdf)

## The Sett

The Glencoe tartan is amongst a group of traditional patterns that can be described as having alternating red and green grounds, separated by a blue bar. This basic arrangement was often decorated with finer stripes. The red and green grounds are sometimes of equal size, as is the case here, but more commonly, the red ground is proportionally larger. A number of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century tartans followed this structure (Fig 1).

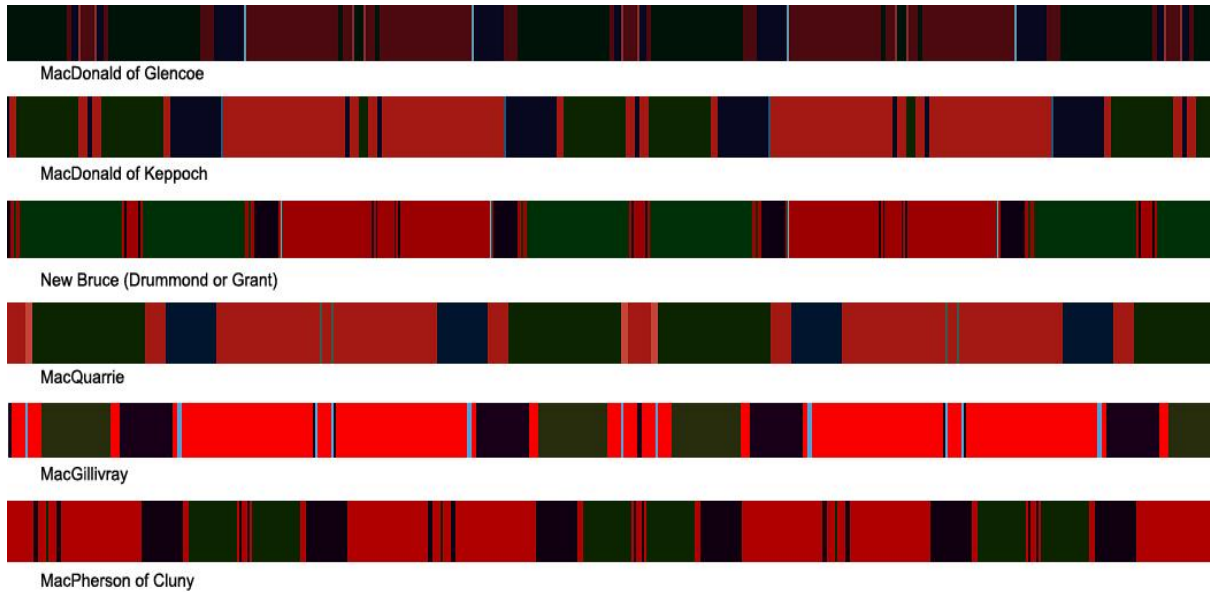


Fig 2. 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century designs with alternating red and green grounds separated by a blue bar.

Several include a triple-stripe; a broad one flanked by two narrow ones, on the red. This triple-stripe arrangement was called the *MacDonald Motif* by D.C. Stewart<sup>1</sup> because of the propensity of old tartans associated with the clan that include it (Fig 2).

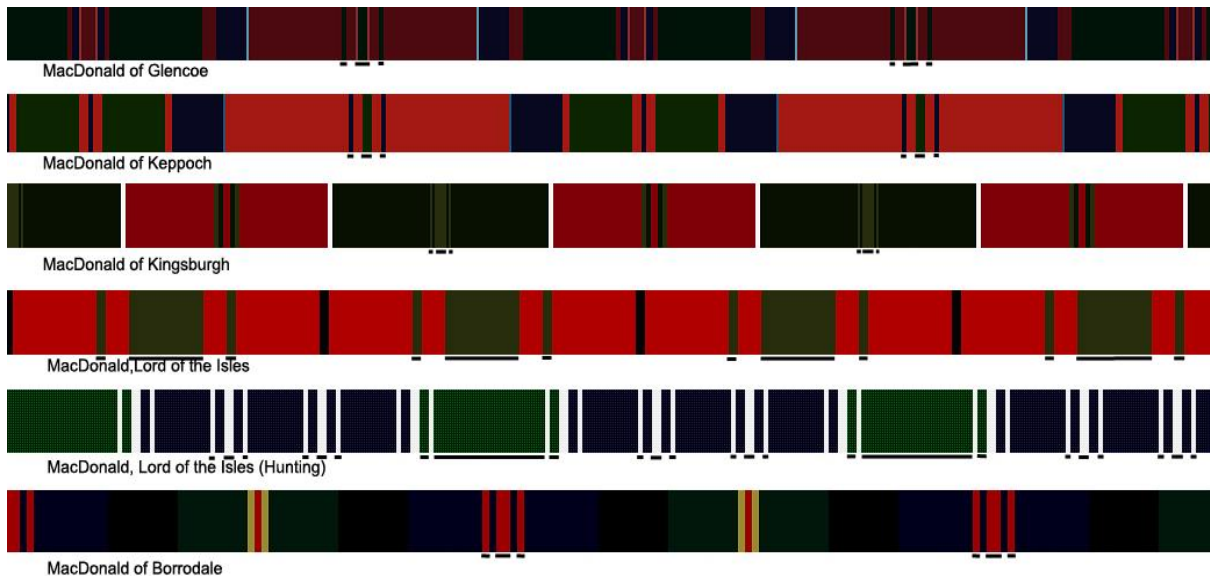


Fig 3. 18<sup>th</sup> century tartans associated with Clan Donald that include the 'Triple-Stripe Motif'.

The close similarity between the Glencoe and Keppoch tartans is apparent when the setts are compared in the same shades (Plate. 7). The red and green are different sizes in the Keppoch tartan, and the blue proportionally large but the tartans are otherwise structurally close.<sup>3</sup> Both

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/MacDonnell\\_of\\_Keppoch.pdf](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/MacDonnell_of_Keppoch.pdf)



the original specimens are from locations some 30 miles apart by road<sup>4</sup>, but closer using the old mountain passes, in what is now Lochaber<sup>5</sup>. There were no clan tartans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the similarity in the design of the two tartans hints at the possibility that they are in some way connected, perhaps from the same weaver or weaving group/tradition.



Plate. 7 Comparison of the MacDonald of Glencoe and MacDonald of Keppoch tartans. © The Author

## Conclusion

According to family tradition, this piece was spun dyed and woven c.1740 by a Rankin from Glencoe and was handed down in the family until it was donated to the WHM in 1939. The quality of the spinning and weaving, plus the inclusion of a herringbone selvedge mark, all support an early-mid 18<sup>th</sup> century date for the specimen. It is likely to have been from a length of offset plaiding intended for joining in the traditional manner used for plaids. The lack of the joining selvedge, or a turned edge, in the specimen means it is impossible to tell whether the cloth was ever joined or used 'single-width'.

There is a close similarity in the design with that of the MacDonald of Keppoch tartan, another mid-18<sup>th</sup> century pattern with close geographical ties. The similarities are so close that they may point to a common or popular design in the Lorn and Lochaber area, they might even have been woven by the same weaver or weavers.

There is no definitive proof that the piece had any direct connection with the MacDonalds of Glencoe and the name for the tartan appears to be an attribution by D. C. Dalgliesh Ltd c.1970. Notwithstanding this, it is the name by which it is known today and generally accepted as a MacDonald tartan.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald Sep 2021

---

<sup>i</sup> STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977

---

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald of Keppoch lived at Keppoch House in Glenroy, some 3 miles east of Spean Bridge. <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23795/roybridge-keppoch-house>

<sup>5</sup>Historically, Keppoch was in Lochaber and Glencoe in Lorn.