

MacDonald of Belfinlay

INTRODUCTION

Mystery surrounds the origins of this rare MacDonald tartan which was unknown until MacKay's 1924 publication¹. He referred to the pattern as the *Clanranald (Full Dress)*, although today it's often called the *red Clanranald* to differentiate it from the usual clan tartan. In 2016 the tartan was re-titled *MacDonald of Belfinlay* in recognition of the original owner and the contribution the family made to highland life and culture.

Writing of the design (Fig 1) MacKay said:

"For the pattern, which we have no hesitation in giving as the Clan Ranald full-dress, we are indebted to Mr. Allan R. MacDonald of Waternish, Skye. It is taken from a plaid spun and dyed by an ancestress of Mr. MacDonald's, a daughter of Lachlan MacKinnon of Corry, the entertainer of Dr. Johnson and Pennant, and worn by her husband, Allan MacDonald of Baile Fhionnlaigh, Benbecula, a cadet of the Clan Ranald family, as a captain in the Clan regiment of the 45, and who was severely wounded at Culloden, whose portrait, dressed in the tartan, is shown on page 166. The plaid is a beautiful specimen of the old Highland hard tartan, and made of the wool of the aboriginal Highland sheep—the colours are still quite fresh and bright. According to John MacCodrum, the bard, c. 1715, the colours of the Clan Ranald tartan were crimson with carnation in the waft."



Fig 1. MACDONALD, Clanranald (Full Dress) MacKay 1924

DECIPHERING THE TEXT

There are a number of inconsistencies in MacKay's text. Dealing firstly with the portrait; MacKay confuses the sitter Ranald, 4th of Belfinlay¹ and Culloden hero, with Allan, 6th of the line². In the engraving (Fig. 2) the tartan differs³ from the Clanranald tartan given by MacKay, something that is unsurprising given the different individuals and the fact that there were no standardised clan tartans at that time.



Fig 2. Ranald MacDonald 4th of Belfinlay.
Source: MacKay 1924

Turning to the Waternish plaid; the question arises, where is it now? If it existed in 1924 then it's a reasonable assumption that it may survive with some member of the family⁴. Without seeing the plaid it's impossible to know whether it is/was actually as old as claimed. There are many examples of tartan artefacts that the owners erroneously believe to be much older than they actually are. However, for the purposes of this paper it is assumed that the plaid was a mid-C18th one. Allan MacDonald and Jean MacKinnon were married in 1761, so this plaid '*that she spun and wove*' would date to c1760-80 if MacKay's narrative is correct. Beyond the fact that '*the colours are quite fresh and bright*'⁵, one can tell little more about the plaid from the description other than the fact that it is said to have been woven in Skye⁶. MacKay gives no dimensions for the plaid, whether it had two different shades of red (warp and weft), if it was a narrow or joined one, nor whether it was complete or merely a portion of the original.

If the Culloden date for the plaid is wrong how can we be sure exactly how old it was or indeed that was even produced by Jean? In this case, we are dealing with a period of nearly 150 years between the alleged date of the plaid and MacKay's publication, probably 3-5 generations, and facts often get confused and conflated over such a period. Only a detailed examination of the plaid can answer this and unless the plaid survives we may never know for certain.

¹ Belfinlay is an unusual Anglicisation of *Baile Fhionnlaidh* in Benbecula.

² Ranald, 4th of Belfinlay (d.1749 unmarried) was uncle to Allan, 6th of Belfinlay (d.1784).

³ The whereabouts of the original portrait are unknown but if the engraving was in colour I would expect it to show the so called *Rob Roy* tartan; that simple two coloured red and black check widely worn in the early to mid18th century and today normally associated with the MacGregors who claim it as their own.

⁴ MacKay's correspondent *Allan R. MacDonald of Waternish* was presumably [Allan, 10th of Belfinlay and 3rd of Waternish](#).

⁵ MacKay cites an early 18th century bard but failed to comment on whether the plaid in question had a different shade of red in the warp and weft (waft). The bard, John MacCodrum, would have been a Gaelic speaker in which case he would probably have used a combination of *dearg*, *ruadh*, *carnaid*, *flane* and *corcair*, all shades of red in Gaelic, that someone later translated as crimson (deep red) and carnation (pink). Whether that was the case, or MacCodrum spoke English too (unlikely), one still has to factor in the individual's subjective use of colour terms for particular shades. Wiki describes crimson as a deep red colour, noting that it was originally produced with the insect dye *Kermes Vermilio* which is where we get the colour term vermillion. Others might call this shade the less technical 'claret' or 'wine'.

⁶ Jean MacKinnon lived at [Corry](#) in Skye.

THE SETT

The setting of this tartan may be viewed as a development or variation of the red Lord of the Isles tartan where the plain green and black overstripes are decorated by stripes of the opposite colour. Both patterns show what D. C. Stewartⁱⁱ called *The MacDonald Motif*, a broad stripe with narrow guards (Fig 3), which is found in a number of old tartans, particularly those associated with Clan Donald.



Fig 3. Comparison of the Lord of the Isles (top) and red Clanranald tartans showing the MacDonald Motif .
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The Lord of the Isles tartan dates to the c1750 and the portrait of *The MacDonald Boys* (Fig 4) where it appears in the coat of the younger. It is one of four tartans⁷ worn by the brothers. All four tartans are likely to pre-date the portrait but by how much is not known. The tartans of the coat and kilt worn by James, the elder brother, share elements of their design with that that are found in both the Lord of the Isles and Clanranald setts. Much more study is required into the structure of old tartans, particularly those from the west coast, to determine whether there is any significance in these similarities. Alternatively it could be simply coincidence and these red tartans may be nothing more than examples of the preference for red tartan amongst the gentry of that time.



Fig 4. The MacDonald Boys
Attributed to William Mosman c1750

A CLANRANALD TARTAN?

Whilst there was no such thing as a clan tartan when Jean MacKinnon wove the plaid, the modern classification of this as a Clanranald tartan by MacKay is logical. The Belfinlay cadet line descended from Allan, 8th Captain of the clan. The suffix *Full Dress* may seem a little grand but needs to be understood in the context of the post-Victorian codification of tartan and Highland Dress. It's highly unlikely that MacDonald of Waternish would have referred to it as such; he would have been more likely to refer to it as 'an old family plaid', 'the red plaid' or some such name. MacKay presumably chose the term to differentiate this design from the standard Clanranald tartan that he also included in his work. Although usually called the red Clanranald

⁷ There are actually five tartans if the red and white dice of their hose is included.

tartan today, it is sometimes referred to as ‘the Chief’s sett’ because it is worn by the current chief⁸ (Fig 5) and his son.



Fig 5. The MacDonald Chiefs - The Chief of Glengarry, The Chief of Sleat, Lord Macdonald of Macdonald, The Captain & Chief of Clanranald (kilt in the red Clanranald), The Earl of Antrim. Photo: Anthony MacMillan.

The fact that Clanranald wears the red sett has led some authors to claim that the tartan is restricted for the use of the chief and his immediate family. However, it is clear that Clanranald himself is less dogmatic. Writing to the author in 2014 he stated that *“You seem to know more than I do about the red Clanranald, which I and my family wear, more by dint of having been given a kilt and Plaid by the Edinburgh Clan Donald Society than by any research down to me.”* Nowhere does he lay claim to the exclusive right to the tartan, nor indeed should he because his family is not descended from the MacDonalds of Belfinlay. It is a matter of historical regret that the current chief is likely to be the last of the line and the title is likely to be in abeyance thereafter.

CONCLUSION

The structure of the design is consistent with the claimed mid-18th century date of the Belfinley plaid, however, an examination of the artefact would be needed to confirm its age.

There is no historical reason to support the view that this tartan is the preserve of the Chief and his immediate family and there is no reason why it should not be worn more widely by anyone who likes it. In particular, those that descend from the Belfinlay and Waternish cadet lines

⁸ Ranald Alexander Macdonald of Clanranald, 24th Chief and Captain of Clanranald.

would have a direct connection to the plaid, or other Clanranald MacDonalds for that matter. It is not a tartan that's readily available but can be produced as a special order (Fig 6).



Fig 6. Handwoven reconstruction of the red Clanranald tartan by the author. © The Author

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ⁱ **MACKAY J. G.** 1924 *The Romantic Story of Highland Garb*. Anear MacKay, Stirling

ⁱⁱ **STEWART D.C.** 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh