

MacDonald of Borrodale

Introduction

There are a relatively few surviving tartans that date to the period of the '45 and the ending of the clan system, many are small fragments of once larger pieces. All too often, little or nothing is known about these precious pieces of fabric beyond the fact that they belonged to some collector, or were found in a bog, castle, shop, jumble sale etc. Some of the pieces are large enough to allow the whole design to be confirmed, others can only be guessed at. It is rare indeed to find more than one sample from the same web and even rarer that there is a good historical audit trail to support them. The MacDonald of Borrodale tartan is possibly unique in having both elements that combine to allow an accurate reconstruction of a tartan intimately associated with Charles Edward Stuart's escape following the collapse of '45 Rising. Three specimens from the same web are known to exist. They are in the collections of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, the West Highland Museum and the National Museum of Scotland.

The Stonyhurst Specimen

In 1984, the author was contacted by a Stonyhurst (SH) 'Old Boy' concerning a fragment of tartan in the possession of the College¹ (Plate 1). Stonyhurst, a Jesuit School, owns a number of artefacts associated with the '45 having acquired them via Henry Benedict, Cardinal, Duke of York, Prince Charles Edward Stuart's (PCE) brother and successor. The specimen was apparently old and said to have been part of a kilt worn by PCE during the period of the 1745 Jacobite Rising (the '45). Shortly after the defeat at Culloden PCE stayed with the MacDonalds of Borrodale, a cadet family of the MacDonalds of Clanranald. On taking his leave PCE was given '*a suit of new Highland clothes*' by Borrodale's wife (Catriona MacGregor), '*the better to disguise him and make him pass for one of the country*' (Taylorⁱ). PCE was taken via Benbecula to Eilean Glas² where his party arrived soaked after several hours in an open boat during a Force 7 gale. They stayed with a Robert Campbell, tenant of Scalpay, with whom PCE left/exchanged his wet clothes.³

The specimen was mounted under glass, hung in a south facing window and accompanied by a hand-written note:

"This piece of cloth is part of a kilt left by Prince Charlie in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30 April 1746.

Robert Hemsley, Tarber(?) House got it from a descendent of the Campbells and sent it to Walter Armstrong of Tarff house, Kirkcousan who gave it to

J S Maitland, 19 April 1887.

In landing on the Island, Prince Charlie got wet – his kilt was not dry in the morning when he wished to start, so he left his own behind and took one of the Campbell's kilts.

The story was told to me by W Armstrong of Kirkcousan, Glasgow April 1887.
J S Maitland H M Inspector of Factories."

¹ <https://www.stonyhurst.ac.uk/about-us/stonyhurst-college-historic-collections/museum-exhibitions>

² Island Glass (Eilean Glas) is better known as Scalpay, a small island situated off the east coast of Harris.

³ Taylor did not give any detail of what the *Highland clothes* comprised. It could have been some or all of a plaid, coat and/or kilt.



Plate. 1 The Stonyhurst specimen of Prince Charles Edward's kilt. Photo: Fairfax House

Walter Armstrong, an antique dealer from Kirkcousan (Kirkcowan), Wigtownshire, had a particular interest in Scottish artefacts. He must have had a second piece, as in August that year he offered for sale;⁴ *'A small piece of Tartan Kilt (belonging to P. Charlie) left in a house or hut; on Island of Tamasay⁵, Hebrides. R. Hornby Esqr.'*ⁱⁱ It is not clear whether Armstrong sold the collection or, if he did, whether the piece of tartan was included; the description is almost identical with that associated with a specimen in the West Highland Museum (WHM). This is the second of the Borrodale specimens (Plate 2).

The third specimen under consideration is that purchased by the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) from an unnamed seller in 1993 (Plate 3). The text reads *'Piece of Prince Charlie's kilt left by him in the House of Campbell, Island Glass, 30th April 1746'. The envelope underneath is addressed 'Isabel' and has 'Bits of Prince Charlie's kilt' written in the top left corner* (NMS). It is not known who *Isabel* was, nor when and from where the fragment had been acquired by the writer. The SH specimen measures approximately 4.8" x 4.27" and the WHM specimen is roughly the same size. Compared with these, the NMS piece truly is a fragment. However, the inclusion of the red stripe guarded by yellow, a feature found in the other pieces, confirms it is from part of the same original material. In all three, all the edges are frayed, the result of it having been cut from a larger piece.

⁴ Offered to Capt. Clark Kennedy, Knockgray House, Carsphairn, Kirkcudbrightshire.

⁵ Tamasay and Hornby were 1975 mis-transcriptions of Taransay and Hemsley respectively.

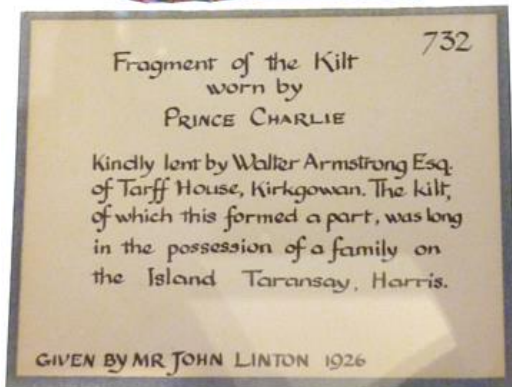


Plate. 2 A specimen of the Borrodale tartan in the WHM. Photo: The Author



Plate. 3 A specimen of the Borrodale tartan in the NMS. Photo: NMS

The Cloth

Examination of the SH specimen confirmed the material is handwoven in plain weave⁶ at 26 ends per inch (epi) in the warp and 22 epi in the weft (Plate 4). Both warp and weft yarns are singles (unplied) hand-spun wool; the warp being 's' spun and the weft yarn 'z' spun. Plain weave examples are rare amongst surviving 18th century tartan specimens, they are exclusively found in pieces from the West Coast⁷ and being less dense, may have been principally for women's wear⁸.



Plate. 4 Detail of plain weave in the SH specimen. Photo: WHM.

The shades are very dark, so much so that it was difficult easily to distinguish between the blue, black and green without lightening the images (Plate 1). They offer good evidence to

⁶ Plain weave, also called Tabby weave or Linen weave is where each weft thread passes over a warp thread with each row alternating. It makes a strong cloth but is more open than a staggered 2/2 twill more often used for tartan.

⁷ Principally the Western Isles. This does not mean that the technique was not used more widely on the mainland, only that no examples survive.

⁸ There are a number of early 19th century plain weave tartan dresses made in Uist.

counter the oft cited claim that natural dyes are lighter and less intense than shades produced with artificial dyes that were introduced in the mid-1800s. Due to its original position in a south facing window the yellow of the SH specimen had faded almost to white but the subsequent identification of the WHM piece confirmed that the shade was originally yellow. The blue, green and black shades were much less affected by the light due to the use of indigo which is much more light-fast. Dye analysis conducted by York Archaeological Trust identified the following dyestuffs:

- Red - Cochineal
- Blue - Indigo
- Black - Indigo + an unidentified tannin
- Green - Indigo + an unidentified yellow dye
- Yellow - An unidentified yellow dye

Both the dyes and weaving techniques are typical of those found in early-mid 18th century rurally produced tartan when cloth was generally 22-26 inches wide. Due to the small size of the three specimens, and the fact that none includes a selvedge, it is impossible to know what size the original material was.

The Sett

Despite the small size of the individual specimens, each includes the red stripe enclosed by yellow guards. This, combined with the other elements in each piece allowed the pattern to be reconstructed with a high degree of confidence to which they can then be aligned relative to each other (Plate 5).



Plate 5. The three Borrodale specimens aligned to the reconstructed pattern. © The Author.

Surviving examples of blue, black and green based tartans from the first half of the 18th century are relatively unusual. This is in part due to the fact that generally only the better off could afford to own more than one set of cloths and such people preferred red based tartans for best. The MacDonalds of Borrodale were Highland gentry, this cloth may therefore be an example of everyday wear, rather than best.

In 1990 Stonyhurst commissioned a reconstruction of the tartan based on the author's research. A length was presented to Her Majesty The Queen when she visited College in 1991 (Plate 6) and this was later made into a pair of trousers for HRH The Prince Edward (Plate 7). The tartan was subsequently adopted as the school tartan and is worn a part of girls' uniform (Plate 8).



Plate 6. HM The Queen presented with a length of Borrodale tartan by Stonyhurst College, 1991.



Plate 7. HRH The Prince Edward wearing the Borrodale tartan.

Conclusion

There are several examples of tartans bearing similar stories of having been worn by Prince Charles Edward; some certainly could not have been worn by him at the time and place stated. Armstrong acquired his specimens over 140 years after the date the Prince is supposed to have worn the material, plenty of time for a story of romantic attachment to have grown up around it. Various authorities have written that the Prince never wore the 'kilt' as such during his time in Scotland, preferring trews and plaid. That does not necessarily invalidate this particular story; it is generally accepted that he did use several plaids and the belted-plaid is sometimes referred to as the 'great-kilt'. Thus, in some instances the words 'kilt' and 'plaid' may be taken as synonymous.

The structure of the material and dyestuffs used are consistent with the claimed antiquity and is similar to several other West Highland specimens known to be of 18th century origin. Whilst it cannot be proved that the Prince actually worn this, he is known to have stayed with MacDonald of Borrodale following Culloden and on the balance of probabilities it seems likely that the story is true.



Plate 8. Borrodale tartan used for Stonyhurst Girls' uniform. Photo: Stonyhurst College

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ⁱ Taylor H & A. 1938 *1745 and After*. London.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.dgnhas.org.uk/tdgnhas/3051.pdf> Accessed 17 Sep 21.