

MacDonald of Glenaladale

Background

The MacDonald of Glenaladale is one of a small group of tartans where an extant specimen survives that can accurately be dated to the mid-C18th. For many years confusion surrounded the history and correct setting of this pattern. In early 2010, after many years of searching, the author finally tracked down the original fragment (MG fragment) and within a month a major section of the original plaid was also discovered which enabled details of the tartan to be confirmed.

The tartan first came to prominence in 1968 when a piece was discovered on Prince Edward Isle (PEI), Canada. The MG fragment was handed down through descendants of Capt John MacDonald, 8th of Glenaladale and it is said to be from a plaid worn by his father, Alexander, at Culloden. Alexander, a Major in Clanranald's Regt., was severely wounded at the battle. John emigrated to PEI in 1773 taking the plaid with him and this small portion remains in the possession of his descendants. Lt. Col. Iain B Cameron Taylor of the National Trust for Scotland organised a weaving to reconstruct the pattern and for some time the tartan was adopted by the Trust as a house design at their Glenfinnan centre.

At about the same time details of a similar tartan arose in which a piece of cloth, ostensibly the same tartan, had been discovered buried with Alexander of Glenaladale in St Peter's, Rome. Given that there is no record of any Glenaladale having been buried in Rome it can be surmised that someone must have confused St. Peter's, Rome with the St Peter's Bay on PEI, home of the last owners of the plaid. It is unclear how the burial story arose and there is no evidence to support it. These two counts lead to a number of attempts to reproduce the sett including at least one asymmetric version which is the one still most commonly seen - Fig 1.



Fig 1. Modern asymmetric reconstruction of the Glenaladale sett. © The Author

The author had always believed these early attempts to reconstruct the sett to be incorrect and were the result of not understanding traditional weaving techniques; including offsetting of the sett to allow the pattern to repeat across a joined plaid, and also the use of selvedge marks¹.

The Original Fragment

After placing an enquiry on a local PEI online forum in early 2010 the author was contacted by the owner of the MG fragment copied in 1968. She had been given the sample and other artefacts by relatives who were direct descendants of Capt. John MacDonald's family. A photograph (Fig. 2) confirmed that the piece was a fragment of an 18th century plaid of what appeared to be the Glenaladale tartan.



Fig 2. The original fragment seen by Cameron Taylor. Photo: Mary Gallant, PEI.

The confusion over the correct setting arises because of the weft pattern in this piece. Moving from top to bottom, the first red square (1), its surrounding blue, and the initial green bar of the next red block conform to the warp but on the next red square down the central decoration of the first is repeated rather than the white enclosed by navy of the alternating warp pattern if the pattern in the traditional format. At the edge of that red square there is then a blue bar rather

¹ Details about Selvedge Marks can be found in this [companion paper](#).

than the green that one would expect. When only a portion of the material is seen, as in this fragment, the effect is to draw eye to the centre where the blue and green borders change and thus one sees a red large square, a smaller green and blue one and then another larger red one; and the tartan appears to be asymmetric. In this piece the top right section has a red square (1) on which is centred a navy stripe guarded by light blue, the whole square is bordered by navy blue on two sides. Next is one side of the green that borders two sides of the second red ground (2) on which is centred a white stripe enclosed by broad navy guards. Regrettably the sample was cut from the main plaid towards the edge of the red and so the other side of the green square is missing and had to be assumed. The author believed this to be a weaving error and, based on the warp setting, concluded that the correct setting should be symmetrical. This is discussed in detail later.

There is a turned edge at the top of the fragment which confirms that this was originally a finished plaid rather than a length of cloth, or a piece taken from some other item of clothing. Fig 3 shows a portion of the edge showing that the end was rolled and sewn with a running stitch using some of the red yarn from the plaid.



Fig 3. Detail of the sewing at the turned edge. © The Author

The fragment's selvedge shows no evidence of any floats (the point where weft threads are carried over during weaving process), nor any weaving in of weft ends; both of which provide evidence suggesting that this was the clean selvedge that would (should) be at the top and bottom of the finished joined plaid.

The Original Plaid

We would have been left with my conjecture of the correct setting but for a remarkable coincidence. Less than a month after tracking down the MG fragment I was contacted by a small museum on PEI² concerning an old plaid that they were trying to learn more about and of which they said: *We have come across a piece of Tartan that says it was worn by Alexander MacDonald of Glenaladale, and that he wore it in the Battle of Culloden I've been searching and to me it doesn't look like any of the Pre Culloden MacDonald tartans.*

² Garden of the Gulf Museum, Montague, PEI, C0A 1R0 Canada.

A photograph (Fig 4) showed a folded plaid that was obviously a larger portion of the MG fragment on which I'd been working. It was an extraordinary discovery. In the space of three months, and after some 20 years of research, I had tracked down the MG fragment and also the remains of the original plaid said to have been worn at Culloden. The photographs offered a tantalising insight into the original cloth. There was some stitching that suggested that the cloth was joined, something which was commonly done in the 18th century to make double width material. It was also apparent that the ragged material had been cut at some point. Whilst I sought some additional pictures that showed the whole piece, at the same time I arranged for the owner of the fragment to visit the museum³.



Fig 4. The original Plaid (folded). Photo: Garden of the Gulf Museum

A photograph of the whole piece (Fig 5) showed that the plaid had been very badly damaged at some time and numerous pieces cut off. There is one large piece, marked 'A', which is 24 x 37 inches and includes one selvedge (on the left as viewed). Nine other fragments (B-J) have been roughly attached at some time, apparently at random, and presumably to keep the remaining pieces together. They vary in size and their current position does not reflect their original place in what would have been a considerably larger plaid. By studying the individual pieces, including the original fragment, it is possible to get a better understanding of the plaid's pattern and construction.

The plaid was displayed at an exhibition in 1892 where it was described as a *philibeg (kilt)* suggesting that it was intact at the time. One can only speculate as to why the plaid was cut into so many pieces and then many of them reconnected in such a haphazard fashion. The latter process suggests that whoever did it did not understand the original structure and/or could not gather more of the original pieces. A study of the individual pieces revealed that the one marked 'J' comprised two pieces, each with a different selvedge which appeared to have been joined with the same red weaving yarn (Fig 6). This joining technique is consistent with the vast majority of 18th century plaid specimens that survive.



Fig 5. The surviving fragments. © The Author

³ Despite living on a small island, neither the owner of the MG fragment or the museum staff was aware of the existence of the other piece of tartan.



Fig 6. Probable join of the original plaid. © The Author

The Correct Setting

Although the sett is large, it is a fairly simple pattern. Nonetheless, it seems to have caused the weaver a certain amount of difficulty as demonstrated by inconsistencies in the weft. This apparent difficulty is possibly explained by the warp layout which shows the full width of the warp on the loom (Fig 7).

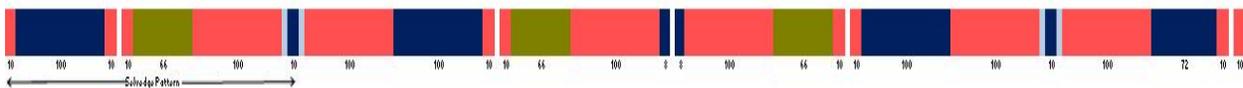


Fig 7. Layout of the original warp. © The Author

This warp layout is problematical and technically incorrect. It shows the red ground bordered by alternating blue and green bands, right and centre, and what appears to be a selvage pattern (marked by the arrowed section). However, in order for the sett to repeat when the two pieces of cloth are joined the warp would have had to be narrowed or widened to finish on one of the two pivots; for example, the narrow blue in the layout below (Fig 8).

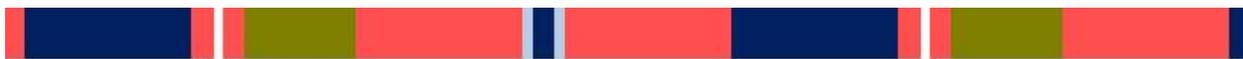


Fig 8. Adjusted warp to allow the correct repeat of the sett once joined. © The Author

The setting in Fig 8 would result in the pattern of the joined cloth repeating correctly (Fig 9).



Fig 9. Adjusted warp repeat for joined pieces. © The Author

If the adjusted setting is used then the pattern repeats normally across the whole cloth and finishes with a selvedge mark on each side. So why was this not done? This unbalanced warp is not unique and there are at least two other early-mid 18th century examples of plaid settings where the pattern does not repeat correctly. The reason may have been the fact that the width of the cloth was paramount and the adjusted sett would have resulted in material that was either too narrow, even when joined, or too wide. The weaver could of course have amended the threadcount to fit the width, however the resulting sett would have been very large. Alternatively, the intended warp may have been miscalculated and was wider than the available loom, resulting in the woven cloth finishing short of the intended joining pivot. Regardless of reason, I believe that the original setting can be shown to have been a repeating sett (Fig 10).

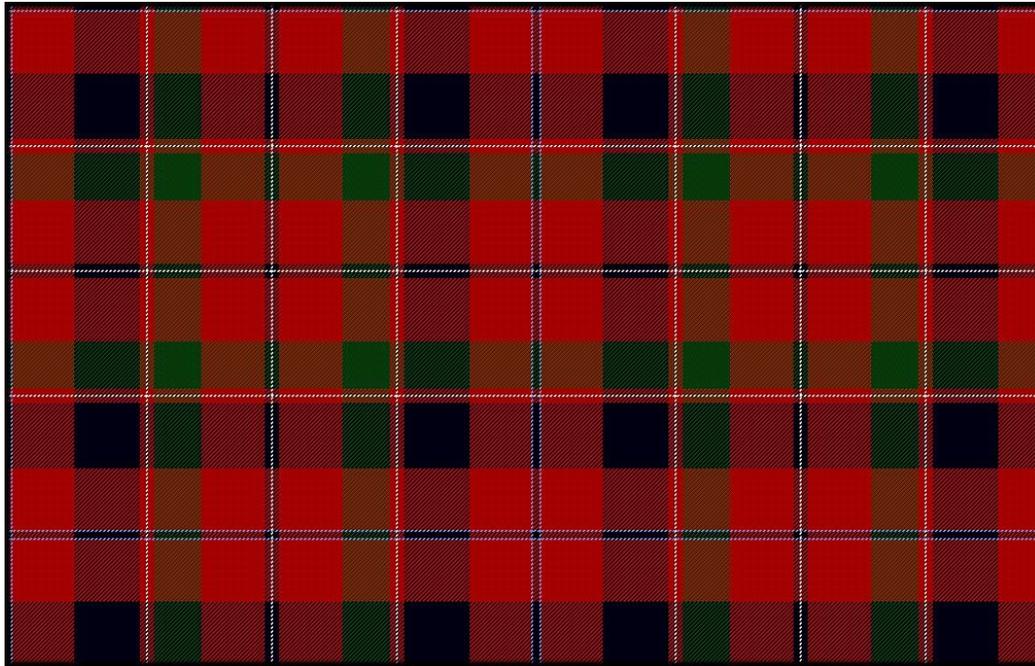


Fig 10. Reconstruction of the Glenaladale tartan. © The Author

In this type of pattern there are two red ground areas, often decorated (having fine stripes on them). Each is alternately enclosed within a blue and then a green border which in turn are separated by a stripe of the ground colour (red) often accompanied by other fine stripes; in this case it's white. This type of layout is typical of a number of surviving 18th century plaids which lends support to this setting being a more logical one. A comparison is at Fig 11. Of the four, only the one from Rothiemurchus (the fourth strip) is asymmetric, which was a rarer technique.

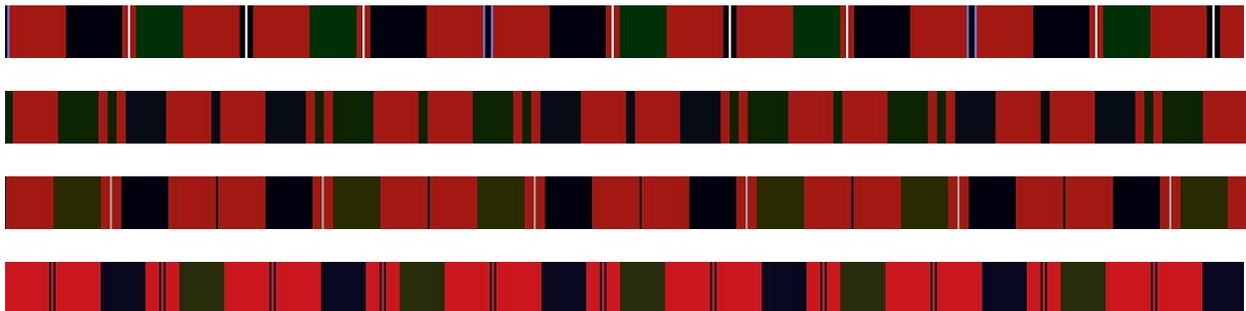


Fig 11. Comparison of the revised Glenaladale, Lumsden of Kintore and unnamed plaids from Nethybridge, Rothiemurchus. © The Author

Conclusion

The structure of the cloth is consistent with the claimed mid-C18th origin and the tartan can be dated with certainty to the period c1740-70. It is also one of the few surviving specimens of the time that can be connected to an individual family. The discovery of a significant portion of the original plaid leaves us in no doubt about the correct setting or the fact that the tartan should be symmetrical. And although it's impossible to say whether or not it was actually worn at Culloden it certainly could have been. Examination of the fragments allows a number of deductions:

- The single width of the material was wider than 24".
- The selvedge on pieces A and B (Fig 5) have white whip stitching over the whole length but these do not join the two pieces. Fragment J shows that the two pieces of the plaid were joined by red yarn on opposite selvedges.
- An error in the original MG piece appears in the centre of fragment A also (the stripe where the central large hole is should be blue guarded by white). Because the MG fragment has a turned end which is missing in fragment A it means that there were at least two similar weaving errors in the weft.

And what of the original MG fragment? It cannot be fitted to any of the remaining fragments but it can be orientated to fragment A and aligned with the setting of the larger portion (Fig 12).

A double plaid of the mid-C18th would normally have been made from two sections of single width cloth 26-30" wide – see my paper on the [Nova Scotia plaids](#) for an example. Commonly the warp would have been offset in order that one edge would have finished at a pivot, so that when turned and joined the pattern would repeat. Piece A is 24" wide and ends in a ragged edge on one side. The original fragment aligns with and slightly overlaps this edge by some 1.5 inches. It seems to offer the logical solution to the second selvedge meaning that the original cloth would have been 25-26 inches wide. Such a width is consistent with cloth of the period and would mean that the warp would have been two half setts plus a continuation into a third for the border. This does not explain why the blue and green blocks at the selvedge are transposed. Perhaps the weaver made a major error in the warping and then decided to weave the material without correcting it. Alternatively, it was done deliberately as a form of selvedge pattern. Neither explanation is particularly satisfying. As a weaver I would have wanted the pattern to repeat correctly or would have added a more elaborate border. We will probably never know why the cloth was woven this way.



Fig 12. Possible position of the MG piece compared to the main section of the plaid. © The Author

Further enquiries are being made in PEI to try and find any other surviving specimens. The Garden of the Gulf Museum has given permission for a dye analysis of the yarn and this is being pursued. It is likely that it will confirm that cochineal and indigo were used for the red and blue respectively with an unknown yellow mixed with the indigo for the green.

The Museum acquired the plaid c1950-60 by which date it had been cut up and the pieces reconnected. Why it was cut up is unclear but it was probably divided up as keepsakes or mementos, and later someone try to collate as many of the surviving pieces as possible before donating the remains to the museum. Ideally, the individual fragments should be separated and mounted on a backing cloth to reflect their correct position as part of the original plaid.



Fig 13. The author wearing a kilt in his hand-woven reconstructed of the Glenaladale tartan. © The Author

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mary Gallant, owner of the original fragment, and Connie Spencer of Garden of the Gulf Museum for providing detailed photographs of the pieces of tartan. Without their help details of the Glenaladale tartan would have remained a matter of historical conjecture.

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