

The MacDonald of Kingsburgh Tartan – A Jacobite Relic Restored

Amongst the many tartans claimed to have been worn by or associated with Prince Charles Edward the MacDonald of Kingsburgh has perhaps the greatest claim to authenticity and is the only tartan included in the Lyon In Mourning¹, a manuscript collection and one of the best contemporary records of the '45.

Like so many truly old tartans nothing is known of the origins of the Kingsburgh beyond the story surrounding its use by Charles Edward Stuart and subsequent preservation by his supporters. Following the Jacobite defeat at Culloden the Prince spent months in hiding amongst his supporters on both the mainland and Western Isles, most famously assisted by Flora MacDonald, wife of Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh. After being disguised as Flora's female servant the Prince exchanged his clothes on Skye including a tartan waistcoat. The following are extracts from the Lyon In Mourning Mss:

The Above are pieces of the Outside and Inside of that identical Waistcoat which, MacDonald of Kingsburgh gave to the prince, when he laid aside the Womans clothes at the Edge of the Wood. The said waistcoat being too fine for a Sev't the prince exchanged it with Malcolm MacLeod. Malcolm MacLeod, after parting with the prince and finding himself in Danger of being seized, did hide the Waistcoat in a Cleft of Rock where, (upon his Returning home in the Beginning of Sep^r 1749) he found it all rotten to Bits, except only as much as would serve to cover little more than One's Loof & two Buttons, all of which he was pleased to send to me. The Waistcoat had laid more than a full year in the Cleft of the Rock; for Malcolm MacLeod was made prisioner for some Time in July 1746. Robert Forbes

Writing to Forbes in Oct 1747 Malcolm MacLeod said: '*... You received from the bearer all that was to the for of the weast Coat that the P. gave to me, because no Body cou'd get it where I put it till I came home my self likewise two of the Buttons that wer in it.....*'.

The buttons subsequently disappeared, perhaps when the Mss was sold, but the waistcoat material remains. The remnants are quite small and comprises a piece of red and green tartan (Fig 1) and a piece of plain dull reddish cloth, presumably the inside referred to by Forbes. The regularity of the tartan fragment indicates that it has been cut from the waistcoat perhaps in order to tidy it up or that the remains were further divided amongst the Prince's supporters. The resulting small section means that it's possible that the original was actually a more complex sett.



Fig 1. Fragment of the original waistcoat

It's probable that the tartan would have remained undiscovered but for the publication of *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*² in which the author noted that previous publications had failed to reproduce tartans accurately and as a result he'd gone to great trouble to reproduce the designs in woven silk in order to represent the colours and proportions accurately.

¹ FORBES, R. Revd. 1746-75 *The Lyon In Mourning*. National Library of Scotland (shelfmark Adv.MS.32.6.16-25),

² STEWART D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh

Stewart quoted the extracts from Forbes' Mss alongside an elegant but woefully inaccurate plate (Fig 2). Unfortunately this incorrect rendering has been used by manufacturers ever since.

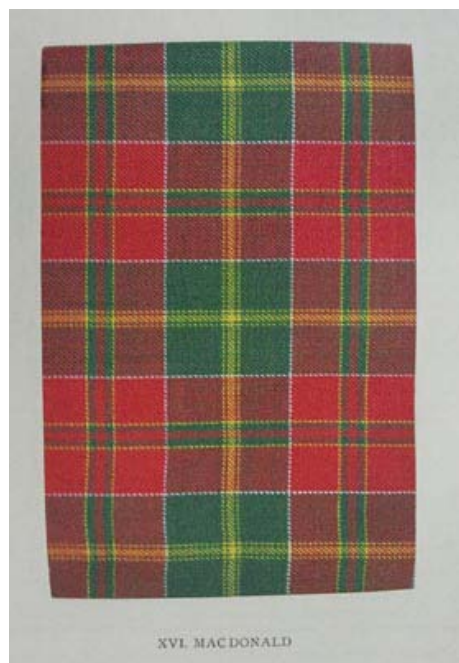


Fig 2. Old & Rare Plate

Stewart's version was wrong in colour, shade and setting (Fig 3). Given his access to the source material this error, and several others in his work, are inexplicable and seems to be evidence of a lack of attention to detail at the very least. His reduction of the areas of ground colour by some 50% in his Kingsburgh results in a much busier design that lacks the subtlety of the original where the fine lines give accent to the pattern rather than dominate it.

Two other mistakes are quickly apparent when examining the original: firstly the red is not scarlet but a deep pinky shade typical of C18th reds dyed with cochineal and an alum or poor quality tin mordant; secondly, the yellow is in fact quite clearly a second shade of green. Whereas DW's colours are very similar to what manufacturers today would be called *Old* or *Ancient*.



Fig 3. Comparison of the 1764 and 1893 setts

Comparison of the original setting with Stewart's emphasises the extent of the proportional and colour differences which are so pronounced that they appear to be two different tartans.

The original tartan can be dated to 1746 and Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh, hence its name. The design is a simple decorated two colour check with the triple stripe (assuming the sett to be correct) reminiscent of a number of generally, though not exclusively, MacDonald tartans of the west coast. We can only speculate where it was woven but as it has all the characteristics of rural C18th tartans there is no reason to assume that it wasn't woven on Skye although the actual waistcoat could well have been made elsewhere.

If the aim of reviving an historical tartan is to recreate as closely as possible the original then Stewart's version, and thus modern weavings, of this tartan are wide of the mark.

With access to the original shades and count it is possible to recreate this lovely C18th tartan as it would have been originally. If you are interested please contact me at info@scottishtartans.co.uk