

The MacDonald of Kingsburgh Tartan A Jacobite Relic Restored

Introduction

Amongst the many tartans claimed to have been worn by, or associated with, Prince Charles Edward Stuart the MacDonald of Kingsburgh is one of few with definitive proof of its authenticity, and is the only tartan included in the Lyon In Mourning¹, a manuscript collection of Jacobite memorabilia 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 MacDonald¹.

A tartan waistcoat

After being disguised as Flora's female servant the Prince exchanged his clothes on Skye including a tartan waistcoat about which the Lyon In Mourning Mss states that:

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 Sevt 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 altogether 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 prisoner 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 remains². The remnants are quite small and comprises a piece of red and green tartan (Pate 1) and a piece of plain dull reddish cloth, presumably the inside of the waistcoat 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 tartan was actually a more complex sett.

¹ Flora married her kinsman, Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh in 1750.

² The samples are pasted into the rear cover of Vol 2.



Plate 1. Fragment of the waistcoat tartan. Photo NLS

It's probable that the tartan would have remained undiscovered but for the publication of *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*ⁱⁱ 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.

An incorrect reconstruction

Stewart quoted the extracts from Forbes' *Mss* alongside an elegant but woefully inaccurate silk plate (Plate 2). Given his access to the source material this error, and several others in his work, are inexplicable and seem to be evidence of a lack of attention to detail at the very least. Stewart's version gave incorrect colours, faulty shades and a defective setting as the comparison colour stripes demonstrate (Fig 1). In particular, the reduction of the areas of ground colours 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 specimen. Firstly, the red is not scarlet but a deep pinky shade typical of C18th reds dyed with cochineal and fixed with an alum or poor quality tin mordant. Secondly, the yellow is in fact quite clearly a second shade of green. Stewart's shades are very similar to what manufacturers today would call *Old* or *Ancient* colours.

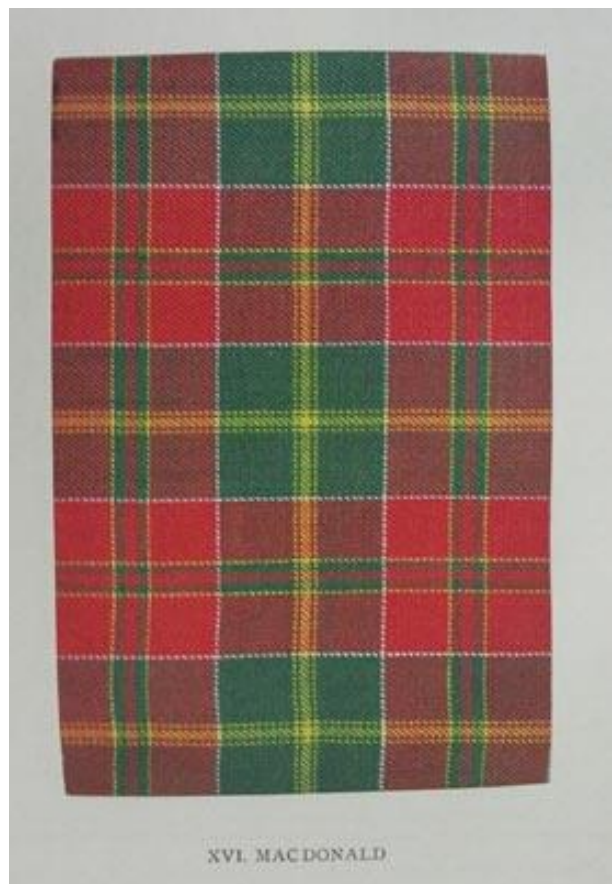


Plate 2. Stewart's Old & Rare Plate. © The Author



Fig 1. Comparison of the 1746 (top) sett and Stewart's 1893 copy. © The Author

The original setting

Comparing the original setting with Stewart's emphasises the extent of the proportional and colour differences. These are so pronounced that they appear to be two different tartans. Stewart's incorrect rendering has been followed by manufacturers for the past 100 years and no-one appears to have consulted the original specimen until now. In 2015 the author organised a short run of cloth based on the original setting (Plate 3).



Plate 3. A modern reconstruction of the original setting. © The Author

The reconstructed tartan is striking, and yet far more subtle than the standard commercial version where the yellow tends to dominate the green square. In the original setting the pattern is more visually balanced which from a distance gives the impression of a red and green tartan with a fine white stripe. It's only when viewed more closely that the subtlety of the finer lines can truly be appreciated.

In an interesting parallel to the story of the original waistcoat James Boswellⁱⁱⁱ wrote of meeting Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh in the 1780s: *"I was highly pleased to see Dr Johnson safely arrived at Kingsburgh, and received by the hospitable Mr MacDonald, who, with a most respectful attention, supported him into the house. Kingsburgh was completely the figure of a gallant Highlander,.... He had his Tartan plaid thrown about him, a large blue bonnet with a knot of black ribband like a cockade, a brown short coat of a kind of duffel, a **Tartan waistcoat with gold buttons and gold button holes**, a bluish philibeg, and Tartan hose"*. My emphasis. The wearing of civilian Highland Dress in the islands so shortly after the Repeal of the Act of Proscription is noteworthy. One can but wonder whether the waistcoat might have been similar to the one Kingsburgh gave to the Prince some 35 years earlier. Alas we will never know but it's interesting to speculate whether the waistcoat or plaid might have been of the same tartan he'd previously worn.

Conclusion

Very few tartans can be dated to the mid-18th century with such certainty, nor to have a provenance so closely associated with Prince Charles Edward. Whilst the evidence associates the waistcoat with Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh, hence its name, we have no idea of where he acquired it. The design is a simple decorated two colour check with the triple stripe (assuming the sett to be correct) found in a number of generally, though not exclusively, MacDonald tartans of the west coast. There is no reason to assume that it wasn't woven on Skye, Allan's home.

If the aim of reviving an historical tartan is to recreate as closely the original then Stewart's version, and thus modern weavings, of this tartan are wide of the mark. That however need not be the case as this recent reconstruction by the author shows (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Finished reconstruction of the original setting. © The Author

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ⁱ **FORBES, R. Revd.** 1746-75 *The Lyon In Mourning*. National Library of Scotland (3 Vols - shelfmark Adv.MS.32.6.16-25)

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

ⁱⁱⁱ **BOSWELL, J.** 1795 *The Journal of a tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*