

## MacGregor Black and Red (Rob Roy) Tartan

The simple black and red check commonly called *MacGregor Black and Red* or *Rob Roy* is one of the oldest surviving and undoubtedly the most widely depicted tartans. Although traditionally associated with the MacGregors, portrait evidence shows that it was worn widely throughout the Highlands during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the form of plaids, coats and trews.

In his *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans*<sup>i</sup> D.W. Stewart says that there is no documentary evidence of Rob Roy actually wearing the tartan but in their 1850 book *The Clan and Family Tartans of Scotland*<sup>ii</sup> the Smiths Bothers state: 'Of this distinguished personage no fewer than three original portraits exist - all taken from life, and all dressed in this Tartan. One of these, 1704 is at Broomhill near Hamilton, one being 1714 Scottish Antiquarian Society and one of 1734 in possession of George Buchanan, Esq, of Arden'. Buchanan himself on the other hand was not so certain of the attribution and thought the portrait "a thing his father had picked up in some Glasgow saleroom"<sup>iii</sup>. It seems likely then that the Smiths were mistaken. There is a number of surviving early 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits whose subject has erroneously been identified as Rob Roy but in none of these is the tartan worn the one under discussion.



**Plate 1. Lord Mungo Murray c1680 by Michael Wright.**

Jacobite Army at Culloden (Plate 2). The portrait<sup>2</sup> looks to have been painted from life but it is not clear when or where it was produced nor if the Prince actually wore the outfit or whether it was a form of romanticised Jacobite propaganda.

**Plate 2. Prince Charles Edward Stuart wearing the black and red tartan c1745-6.**



<sup>1</sup> Lord Mungo was the fifth son of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Atholl.

<sup>2</sup> The original portrait was (2012) on display at the National Trust for Scotland's Culloden Visitor Centre.



**Plate 3. David, Lord Ogilvy by Allan Ramsay 1745**  
Photo: Courtesy of Winton Estate

Irrespective of portrait's origins, it and Ramsay's contemporary portrait of David, Lord Ogilvy (Plate 3) are the earliest representations of the black and red tartan worn in clothing, other than hose<sup>3</sup>. Ogilvie was probably painted in Sep 1745 when Ramsay was summoned to Edinburgh and Charles was painted around the same time during the period he held Court at Holyrood. Shortly after the failure of the '45 Ramsay painted another two portraits<sup>4</sup> in which the subject wears a similar outfit of jacket and trows in the black and red check: Norman MacLeod of MacLeod, 22<sup>nd</sup> Chief (Plate 4) and Francis, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Wemyss (Plate 5). Wemyss also wears a plaid in the same tartan whereas MacLeod's plaid is Murray of Tullibardine.



**Plate 4. Norman MacLeod 22nd Chief by Allan Ramsay c1748**



**Plate 5. Francis Charteris, 7th Earl of Wemyss by Allan Ramsay c1748**

Comparison of all three Ramsay portraits reveals remarkable similarities in the style of jacket; so much so that it's entirely possible that they were in fact the same and that the one in the earlier Ogilvie portrait was used as a template for the latter two. Ramsay was renowned for his ability to paint faces and hands but he often sub-contracted interiors and

<sup>3</sup> Some reproductions of this portrait show it as a Red and Blue check but without supporting evidence and given the other Ramsay portraits I have adopted the working hypothesis that the original was Red and Black.

<sup>4</sup> Both portraits were completed in 1748.

costume to another artist, Joseph Van Aken<sup>5</sup> whom we know painted MacLeod's clothing and it's possible that he did the same in the case of the other two. The National Galleries of Scotland have a series of black and white chalk studies by Van Aken of MacLeod, and Wemyss and his wife where the costume is plain, non-tartan. One is therefore left to speculate about whether any of the sitters actually wore what is depicted or whether Van Aken simply added a tartan theme from something he had to hand in his studio. As the oldest, the Ogilvie portrait has the greatest likelihood of being genuine. There is one other portrait that is roughly contemporary with these four, that of Gregor Macgregor of Glengyle (Plate 6) and with it we find the earliest proven connection with the MacGregors who now claim it as their own. Dating the portrait is imprecise but judging by the sitter's appearance a date c1740-50 is a reasonable assumption.

Glengyle<sup>6</sup> is pictured wearing a waistcoat and trews of black and red dice, a plaid of the same tartan lies close by while his jacket is of a more complex red and black (possible blue and/or green) with evidence of finer overstripes. This mix of tartans together with other elements of the dress suggest that it was painted from life in which case, it is reasonable to postulate that these were Macgregor's own cloths rather than studio props. The possibility that MacGregor may have worn his own clothes does not mean that these were regarded as either a Glengyle or broader MacGregor tartan at the time.



**Plate 6. MacGregor of Glengyle c1740-50**  
Unknown artist

Irrespective of the early use of this sett it has come to be widely regarded as a MacGregor tartan. The current chief says of it that "My family have worn this particular tartan since the late 18th Century. My great, great, great, great grandfather would have worn it for good traditional reasons, not on a whim. The tartan is included in the Highland Society of London's collection of 1816". That specimen bears the Seal of the Arms of Sir John MacGregor Murray of MacGregor, Baronet, and signed John M. Murray where it is labelled *The MacGregor Tartan for undress ordinary clothing*. The chief is presumed to have sealed the tartans that his immediate family or other clan members had used for some time<sup>7</sup>.

Notwithstanding the Chief's declaration some 50 years later there remained controversy over the Rob Roy 'claim' as evidenced by Kenneth MacLeay<sup>iv</sup> when he wrote:

*"The famed Rob Roy, was a cadet of the Glengyle family. The MacGregor Tartan, common like other tartans, to the whole clan has erroneously been styled 'Rob Roy' in the shops."*

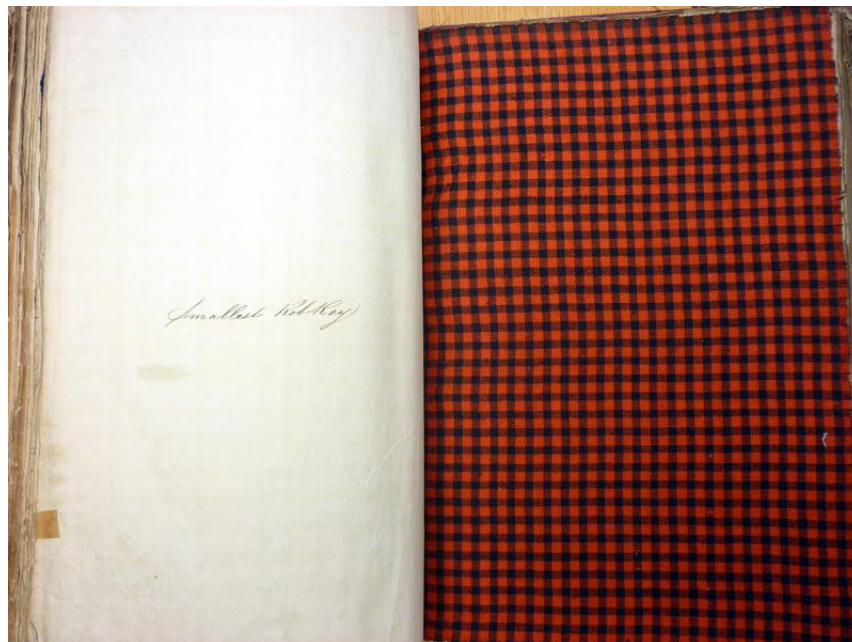
<sup>5</sup> See my paper on the [Early Use of the Tullibardine Tartan](#).

<sup>6</sup> Gregor Glun Dubh (Black Knee) Macgregor VII of Glengyle was the son of John, VI of Glengyle, Rob Roy's elder brother.

<sup>7</sup> This was not always the case and several chiefs sealed recently invented or attributed tartans as their 'true clan pattern'.

Structurally, a two-colour diced cloth is the simplest design of what we now understand as tartan. Often described simply as checks, where they have been associated with Highland Dress and/or clans then they are upgraded to the status of a tartan, albeit that they do not conform to what many people would consider a proper tartan with multiple checks and lines of differing colours and proportions. Being so simple these basic tartans can easily be woven in a variety of sizes depending on the desired use and can be varied by making the colours of different proportions.

Letters dated 1792 and 1794 sent to Wilsons of Bannockburn with examples of the pattern survive but it is not known by what name, if any, it was referred to<sup>8</sup>. A few years later we know that Wilsons were selling the tartan as *Rob Roy*, a choice of name that may have been prompted by the clan connection which they exploited by associating the design with the most famous historical MacGregor or they simply piggy backed onto the popularity of Sir Walter Scott's novel of the same name published in 1815. There is a sample of their cloth named *Roy Roy* in the Cockburn Collection compiled 1810-15 and it features regularly amongst their correspondence in the early 1820s and sample books c1820-40. In their [1819 Key Pattern Book](#) Wilsons gave a number of settings in a variety of sizes and proportions under the names *Rob Roy's Tartan* and *No 93 or Small Rob Roy*. The colour stripes below illustrate the differences between the counts for the largest size, roughly 2 inches, and smallest setting at 1/8 inch. A c1830-40 sample of *Smallest Rob Roy* is shown in Plate 7.



**Plate 7. Wilsons' sample of Smallest Roy Roy c1830-40**  
Photo: © The Author.

There is no doubt about the antiquity of this simple tartan which can be dated with certainty to the late-17<sup>th</sup> Century and given the simplicity of the design it's reasonable to speculate that it may pre-date Wright's 1680 portrait by many years. Other evidence shows that it was

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<sup>8</sup> Examination of the actual letters may reveal what by what name Wilsons sold it in the late C18th.

widely worn and/or used as a generic symbol for tartan in portraiture at the time of the last Jacobite Rising. Around the same time there is the first evidence of the use of the pattern by a MacGregor (Glun Dubh of Glengyle). This portrait was possibly the source of the later Chief's claim that the tartan was a MacGregor one notwithstanding its wider early use. The attribution of the name *Rob Roy* to the design seems to have been a Wilsons' one; they wove a similar Green and Black check as *Robin Hood*. Today the pattern is widely regarded as a MacGregor one but in historical terms it could be worn by anyone as a general tartan regardless of their surname.

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<sup>i</sup> **STEWART D.W.** 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh.

<sup>ii</sup> **SMITH W. & SMITH A.** 1850 *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*. W & A Smith, Mauchline.

<sup>iii</sup> **BARR J.** 1893 *Life in Balloch, the Vale of Leven and Lochlomondside 1820-45*. [Lennox Herald](#).

<sup>iv</sup> **MACLEAY K.** 1870 *Highlanders of Scotland*. Mitchell, London.