

MacRae of Ardintoul

Amongst the records of Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) is a reference to a tartan said to have been taken from a jacket c1820-30 that belonged to Col. Sir John MacRae of Ardintoul. For many years the whereabouts and even the continued existence of the jacket remained a mystery but in Aug 2013 a colleague helping to re-catalogue the collection at the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery sent me a photograph of a tartan jacket that was instantly recognisable as the sett recorded by the STA as *MacRae of Ardintoul* (Plate 1). The accompanying catalogue entry states that the jacket is '...said to be early 19th century, worn by Lt Col Sir John Macrae of Ardintoul as chief mourner at the funeral of Marquis of Hastings 14th Dec 1826'.¹



Plate 1. Front and rear view of the jacket made for Col. Sir John MacRae of Ardintoul.
Original photographs courtesy of Catherine Gillies.

The jacket is a classic Highland Revival² example which probably had a matching waistcoat and kilt or trews. It is superbly cut and sewn on the bias with an extended tail, three-quarter lined, with cuffs, epaulettes and cloth covered buttons. In the picture the collar is turned up whereas it would normally have been worn turned down. Precise dating of Highland Revival clothing extremely difficult because it was widely made from Inverness to London and there is evidence of some stylistic features continuing in the Highlands long after they had been replaced by more contemporary fashion initiatives in London and Edinburgh. Sir John has a distinguished military career³ and was absent from Britain almost continuously from 1807 until he retired in 1826.

¹ Francis Rawdon-Hastings, 1st Marquess of Hastings was married to Sir John's 1st cousin.

² The Highland Revival covered the period c1780-1840 and included the Regency era with which it is often conflated.

³ Colonel Sir John Macra, K.C.H., (1786-1847). Commissioned into the 79th (Cameron's Highlanders) in 1805, and promoted to Lieutenant the same year and subsequently promoted to: Captain, 1812; Major, 1818; Lieutenant-Colonel, 1821; Colonel, 1837. He was created a Knight of the Order of Hanover (K.C.H.) in 1827.

Whilst it is tempting to say that the jacket was made in the latter half of 1826 once Sir John returned to Scotland it could equally have been ordered when he was in London briefly in 1818 or even whilst he was abroad so at present it cannot be dated more accurately than c1818-26.

The Tartan

From detailed photographs of the jacket it is possible to ascertain from the colours and quality of the cloth that the material was woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn. It appears to be an example of their *Fine Cloth* which was woven 25 inches wide and typically used for Highland outfits of the period. The sett differs considerably from the Princes' Own (sometimes called MacRae) and the related Ross (later renamed MacRae) tartans that Wilsons were weaving during the first half of the 19th century – see below.



MacRae of Ardintoul



MacRae, The Prince's Own



McRae (formerly Ross)

The relationship between the latter two is obvious whereas the Ardintoul sett is structurally and visually quite different with the fine black triple stripe being the only thing that they have in common. The Ardintoul setting is closer to the MacLean tartan which was produced by Wilsons from at least 1800 but the similarity is probably nothing more significant than a variation on the theme of the Royal Stewart tartan which formed the basis for a number of Wilsons' tartans.



MacRae of Ardintoul



MacLean

There is no evidence to date the Ardintoul sett before c1818-26 and it is likely that it was either specifically designed for Sir John by Wilsons or that he chose one of their off-the-shelf patterns that they were producing in increasing numbers from c1815. Whichever was the case it is clear that he wanted a showy sett with a large amount of red as was the fashion during the first half of the 19th century. The tartan is an archetypal Wilsons' Highland Revival sett with great intrinsic beauty but which is virtually unknown today. It deserves to be revived by the MacRaes.

Acknowledgements:

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