

Murray of Ochtertyre

Introduction

Like several other mid-18th Century patterns, the origins of the Murray of Ochtertyre tartan lie in a portrait, in this case that of Helen Murray of Ochtertyre¹, eldest child of Sir Patrick Murray of Ochtertyre, 4th Bt (1707-64). The portrait is one of the few of the period to show a female wearing tartan and the only one known to depict a girl (Plate 1). A gilt frame encloses the original portrait cutting off the rose at the right hand edge making the whole picture appear off balanced, something that has led to speculation that it may once have been larger and was damaged, or for some other reason reduced and reframed.

A Political Portrait?



Figure 1. Helen Murray of Ochtertyre c1750

Helen Murray was baptised (and probably born) in 1742, the eldest of three children; two girls and William, the youngest, later 5th Bt, born in 1746. Relatively little is known of either daughters' life including the dates of their births and deaths².

Little is known of the portrait's origins. Helen looks to be about 8 years old meaning it was probably painted c1750 and was presumably commissioned by her father but the inclusion of the white rose³ is interesting as Sir Patrick was ostensibly a Hanoverian. He was a Captain (commissioned Dec 1744) in Lord Sempill's Regiment of Foot⁴; captured at Prestonpans by the Jacobite army and "paroled" to his home at Ochtertyre until the Government army marched north. He was presumably present on the Government side at Culloden. Fear of a further Rising was very real in the years that followed the '45 which meant the display of such an overtly Jacobite symbol appears incongruous and would have been considered treasonous and potentially ruinous for the family if discovered.

If the portrait had originally been larger it may have followed the common practice and contained an additional figure, perhaps her father. Some may find it strange that the portrait was apparently painted during the early years of the Proscription but there is no anomaly as

¹ [Ochtertyre House](#) 2 miles NW of Crieff. The original house was demolished in the 1780's and replaced by the present one.

² The primacy of male inheritance in 18th century society meant that it was less important to record the actual facts of female births as they could not inherit directly from their father.

³ The Jacobites adopted the White Rose as their symbol. White Rose Day is celebrated on 10 June, the anniversary of the birth of [the Old Pretender](#) in 1688.

⁴ Sempill's Regt became the 25th of Foot and later the King's Own Scottish Borderers. In 2006 it amalgamated with the Royal Scots to become the 1st Bn The Royal Regiment of Scotland.

the Act, which banned Highland Dress but not tartan per se, only applied to men and boys as a means to deter martial prowess and did not apply to women's clothes.

There is no indication of the artist's identity but the style is typical of William Mosman, an artist noted for a number of Jacobite themed portraits during the 1740-50's. However, the family tradition is that it was painted by the Scottish artist [Miss Katherine Read](#) who was prominent for her Jacobite sympathies and followed Prince Charles Edward to Rome via Paris in late 1750. If she was the artist then the portrait would have had to have been completed that year, painted during the three years she was in Rome, or at some point after she returned and settled in London. Helen's apparent age belies a later date and so whether painted by Read, Mosman or some other artist, the portrait was probably completed in 1749-50.

The Tartan

Perhaps because the portrait remains in private hands and the fact that it depicts a child it has only been included in a few reference books on tartans, notably Heskethⁱ and Dunbarⁱⁱ, and as a result has been little studied compared with others of the period. The sitter is not wearing a dress as some have previously stated but is in fact wearing a skirt and separate jacket⁵, the skirts, front, collar and cuffs of which are edged with lace. Dunbar said of the portrait that it was '*The earliest illustration of a lady's tartan dress.....*' which he dated, incorrectly, to 1745 and described the tartan consisting '*of a red ground with dark blue, green or black stripes or lines.*' Having had the opportunity to study the portrait it 'appears' that there is not one but two similar red and black tartans (no blue or green) of a large sett as the extraction (Plate 2) and reconstructed setts (Plates 3 & 4) show.



Plate 2. Reconstruction of the bodice and skirt tartans

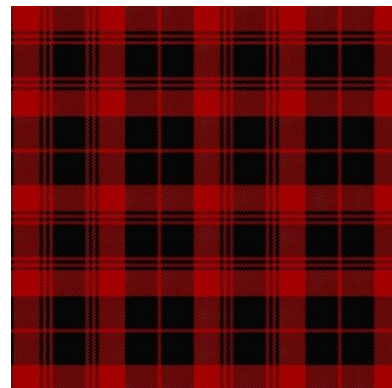


Figure 3. Bodice reconstruction



Figure 4. Skirt reconstruction

⁵ It has been suggested elsewhere that this outfit was a Riding Habit.

As these setts are identical but for the red over-stripes on one of the black grounds, which are single in one setting and alternating single and double in the other, there is the very real possibility that the artist made a mistake. The tartan of the jacket skirts also looks different but the irregularities are most likely the result of the artist attempting to replicate the folds and shadows in the cloth, although it is possible that this was a separate screen. I believe the former to be the case and also that the double stripe, which only appears in two sections of the skirt and only in one direction, were painted in error and that the correct setting is the simpler one with the single stripe. Below is a modern reconstruction of this setting (Plate 5).



Conclusion

The Murray of Ochtertyre tartan is one of relatively few associated with a clan that can be dated with certainty to the mid-18th century and so is linked to the era of the clan system. Large red and black setts feature commonly in 18th century portraits including in two others with local Crieff connections⁶. Ochtertyre is only about two miles from Barnkittock⁷ a small township at the edge of Crieff where in the 18th century the weavers were famous for tartan weaving and it is entirely possible that the cloth for Helen's dress and perhaps the outfits in the other portraits were made there. Unfortunately the weavers and their records are long gone so we will probably never know.

Helen's portrait is one of a small number that show a female wearing tartan clothing other than a simple screen. Almost nothing is known about the origins of the portrait. Unfortunately there is not a full inventory of either Read's or Mosman's works and so we are

⁶ John Campbell of Lochlan (John of the Bank) and James Moray, Yr of Abercairney.

⁷ Balla na Ciotaig, pronounced bal-na-hitoch – *the township where the plaids were woven*.

left to speculate not only about the identity of the artist but also the possibility that it was once larger, may have contained an additional figure or figures and that the inclusion of the white rose probably conveyed the family's Jacobite sympathies. Helen married Anthony Murray of Dollerie⁸ in 1765 and the portrait was probably moved to Dollerie House that year.

As is the case with all such early portraits and cloth artefacts, the fact that we now call the tartans by the surname of their wearer or family association is not evidence that any of these patterns were exclusive to a particular family. In most, if not all, cases the choice of pattern would have had more to do with the type of sett, large, busy, simple etc., preferred and the colours, particularly the amount and quality of the red, which was highly prized as a status symbol throughout the Highlands and more widely until the introduction of aniline dyes in the mid-19th century.

© Peter Eslea MacDonald May 2014

ⁱ HESKETH C, 1961 *Tartan*. Octopus Books. London

ⁱⁱ DUNBAR J. T. 1962 *The History of Highland Dress*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh

⁸ [Dollerie](#), is a small estate some two miles east of Crieff.