

Musings on the Arisaid and other female dress

In most books about tartan and Highland Dress little, if any, space is given over to the discussion of traditional women's clothing, and in particular, the wearing of tartan by women. There are a number of reasons for this; principally it's because women were generally invisible in societal references before the early 20th century. Added to this, the romanticisation of tartan and Highland Dress was dominated by the Jacobite Risings of the first half of the 18th century, the subsequent ban of Highland Dress (Proscription), and the great Highland Revival of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, all of which are principally described in the context the events, prominent men and male dress of the period.

Early References

The plaid appears to have been widely worn outside the Highlands before 1700. Care must be taken not to assume references to the plaid, a garment, was synonymous with tartan, the pattern, or that it was necessarily the same as the Highland woman's plaid, the arisaid. In the late 1500s, women were vilified by John Knox for their '*vain apparel*', the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland stipulated that *grave colours*¹ should be worn by clergymen and their wives and '*all using of plaids in the Kirk*' was discouraged. In 1604 a Glasgow record noted that "*great disorder hath been in the Kirk by women sitting with their heads covered with plaids during sermon sleeping, therefore ordains intimation to be made that afterword none sit with their head covered with plaids during sermon time.*"

Very little is known about Highland Dress, particularly female clothes, before the 18th century. There are few early references to women's clothing before 1700, these usually describe the dress of poorer women and in particular, the Highland woman's veil or plaid. Many of these references are problematic because they were either written second-hand or by visitors to the Highlands who did not understand the dress, customs and language they were observing. These descriptions need to be understood in the social and political context of the time they were written, Dunbar's comment is pertinent "*I doubt very much if the trend of fashion has changed over the centuries. The gentry have nearly always spent a great deal on clothes, the middle classes have usually attempted to imitate their extravagancies, whilst the peasants have made do with what they could afford.*"ⁱ

Writing in 1578 John Lesley, Bishop of Ross described Highland women's clothing as "*....very becoming. Over a gown reaching to the ankles, they wore large mantles woven in different colours*"ⁱⁱ and a few years later Morysonⁱⁱⁱ stated that the "*inferior sort of Citizen wives, women of the Country, did wear cloaks made of a course stuff, of two or three colours in Checker work, vulgarly called 'Plodan'*". Perhaps Speed's cartouche of 'A Highland Woman in his c1620 map² (Fig 1) was an attempt to depict the arisaid; although it's unlikely that he ever visited Scotland, let alone the Highlands and so was relying on second hand descriptions. Writing towards the end of the century William Sacheverell^{iv} said of the inhabitants of Mull that "*The usual habit of both sexes is the pladd; the women's much finer, the colours more lively, and the square much larger than the men's, and put me in the mind of the ancient Picts. This serves them for a veil and covers both head and body.*"

Leaving aside the fact that Sacheverell cannot have known what



Fig 1. A Highland Woman c1620
Source: John Speed Map

¹ Grave colours were listed as Black, Russet, Sad Gray (sic) and Sad Brown.

² [The Kingdome of Scotland](#) Although this was published in 1662, Speed died in 1630 so the map, a revision of his 1610 edition, must have been completed c1610-30.

the ancient Picts looked like, from these descriptions we can tell that women were wearing wide checkered (tartan) plaids, but not how they were worn. From him we learn that women's plaids were *more lively* and *finer*, presumably busier or brighter, and thinner. A Gaelic poem³ of the mid-1600s alludes to the fact that white plaids⁴ were considered a sign of a woman's inferior rank. The poem praises the MacKenzie chief's mother and by inference, her social rank or class:

*A Mhic Coinnich na biodh gruaim ort
Cha do ghlac do mhàthair buarach
No plaide bhàn air a gualainn
Ach sìoda dearg is stròl uaine*

Be of good cheer, son of Kenneth
Your mother never grasped a cow-fetter
Nor did she wear a white plaid
She wore red silk and green cloth⁵

The Arisaid

The turn of the 18th century was a period of political and social turmoil and change in Scotland. It heralded the opening up of, and commentary on, the Highlands, its people and their culture and is when we first encounter references to the arisaid as a distinct garment.

John MacLean (1655-1741⁵), the Mull bard used the word in a song that harked back to the end of the Civil War in 1651 "*De dh' earasiad fharsaing*" (*Of the broad arisaid*^{vi}). Another John, John MacDonald of Aird, Benbecula wrote in praise of his chieftain at the time of the 1715 Jacobite Rising:

*Is iomadh maighean bharrasach
D'am math a thig an earrasaid
Eadar Baile Mhanaich
Is Caolas Bharraidh a tha an dèidh ort*

Many a surprisingly beautiful maiden
For whom the arisaid is so well becoming
Between Balvanich
And the Sound of Barra, is longing for you^{vii}

These fleeting references in Gaelic poetry suggest that the term was not new in the early 18th century; unfortunately they don't offer any insight to the structure of the garment. Gaelic dictionaries, first published in the early 19th century, describe the arisaid (Gaelic *earasaid*, *earrasaid* or *fearrasaid*) as variously as:



Fig 2. The Arisaid
Source: R. R. Mclan

'An ancient Highland garment, or loose wrapper, worn by the women. It covered the whole body and was used without any under clothing'.^{viii}

'A square of tartan cloth, worn over the shoulders of females, and fastened before by a brooch', it is also described as a female robe, ornament, petticoat, hoop'.^{ix}

Dwelly^x follows the earlier translations and included a drawing taken from Mclan's 1845 work^{xi} which itself was based on Martin Martin's description published in 1703.

Both Martin^{xii} and Burt^{xiii} make reference to the arisaid as the dress of common (poor) women in the Highlands during the late 17th and the first half of the 18th centuries respectively. Although their descriptions differ, in both versions the garment is essentially a length of tartan cloth (plaiding) arranged in one form or other.

Martin stated that by the 1690's the garment was an archaic form of dress but his description is somewhat vague and open to differing interpretations whereas Burt's c1720 observation is

³ A song said to have been composed for Coinneach Òg, 4th Earl of Seaforth (1661-1701) by his nurse.

⁴ It's likely that referred to a plaid that was predominately white with a few coloured overstripes – see Martin Martin's quote.

⁵ A c1700 date has been assumed for the composition.

more specific. Some 50 years separated the two authors' writings and given economic and stylistic changes in Scotland between the late 17th and mid-18th centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that the descriptions differ especially if Martin's comment about the arisaïd being an 'ancient dress' was a reference to it being old fashioned or out of date.

*"The ancient dress wore by the women, and which is yet wore by some of the vulgar, called arisad, is a white plaid, having a few small stripes of black, blue and red; **it reached from the neck to the heels, and was tied before on the breast** with a buckle of silver or brass, according to the quality of the person. I have seen some of the former of an hundred marks value; it was broad as any ordinary pewter plate, the whole curiously engraven with various animals etc. There was a lesser buckle which was wore in the middle of the larger, and above two ounces weight; it had in the centre a large piece of crystal, or some finer stone, and this was set all around with several finer stones of a lesser size. **The plaid being pleated all round, was tied with a belt below the breast**; the belt was of leather, and several pieces of silver intermixed with the leather like a chain. The lower end of the belt has a piece of plate about eight inches long, and three in breadth, curiously engraven; the end of which was adorned with fine stones, or pieces of red coral. They wore sleeves of scarlet cloth, closed at the end as men's vests, with gold lace round them, having plate buttons with fine stones. The head dress was a fine kerchief of linen strait (tight) about the head, hanging down the back taper-wise; a large lock of hair hangs down their cheeks above their breast, the lower end tied with a knot of ribbands."* M. Martin

The fact that Martin was a native of Skye led some scholars to assume that his descriptions must be authentic but that assumption is far from certain, as discussed in this author's paper on [Sett Sticks](#). Martin's description of the arisaïd as a white plaid with fine overstripes of colour is perfunctory and very like the way one might describe the traditional Highland barred blanket pattern (discussed later). It also ties in with the allusion by the author of the song in praise of Kenneth MacKenzie's mother that the 'white plaid' was synonymous with the poor.

Burt's Letters also include a drawing (Fig 3) that illustrates his description that:



Fig 3. Woman in an arisaïd
Source: Burt's Letters

"The Plaid is the Undress of the Ladies; and to a Genteel Woman, who adjusts it with a good air, is a becoming Veil. It is made of Silk or fine Worsted, chequered with various lively colours, two Breadths wide, and three yards in length; it is brought over the Head, and may hide or discover the Face according to the Wearer's Fancy or Occasion: it reaches to the Waist behind; one Corner falls as low as the Ankle on one Side, and the other Part, in Folds, hangs down from the opposite arm."

From this description we can tell that the arisaïd was an outer garment, essentially a large shawl or screen, and that it was some 9 foot in length and made from two sections of joined cloth (single width or narrow plaiding). The construction was therefore the same as a man's belted plaid, just shorter in length (an perhaps width) and not worn belted as described by Martin and others. It may be that Burt's arisaïd was a development of the older, fuller, version that was said to have worn belted with or without underclothes. This basic design still being use by Wilsons of Bannockburn as late as 1820. Their 19" Superfine cloth, joined to make a 38" woman's shawls or plaid, appears to have been a continuum of the tradition described by Burt.

Attempts by 18th century foreign observers to illustrate the arisaïd, like other elements of Highland Dress, were less successful, such as these from the early 1740s (Figs 4 and 5).



Fig 4. Scottish Officer's Wife in Flanders c1743
Source Munro^{xiv}



Fig 5. Highland Soldier and his wife
Source Munro

Modern interpretations of how the arisaid was worn are generally based on Mclan's drawings and thus ultimately, Martin Martin's description. The mannequin previous on display at the Scottish Tartans Museum⁶ showing the Christina Young plaid is such an example (Fig 6). There is not space to dissect Martin's full description here, nor whether the arisaid was ever worn as describe by him, and shown here; however, this blanket was never intended to be used as an arisaid. It is far too big and heavy and the inclusion of the maker's initials and a date points towards a commemorative piece⁷.



Fig 6. Reconstructed Arisaid
Source: STM Website



Fig 7. Christina Young's initialed and dated blanket. © The Author

The relationship between the finer specimens of white based tartans, such as the examples below (Fig 8) and those of the heavier domestic blankets is unclear. Many of the surviving specimens of both weights are variations of the same design which may represent a traditional setting used for the arisaid that was utilised for domestic barred blankets when the garment when out of fashion, or possibly the finer material simply reflected a better level of

⁶ [Scottish Tartans Museum, Franklin, USA](http://www.scottishtartansmuseum.com)

⁷ Christina Young lived on Skye and is said to have spun, dyed and woven this blanket as a dowry piece for her marriage.

spinning and weaving skill⁸. Evidence for the continued popularity of the design at the turn of the 19th century is confirmed by its inclusion in Wilsons 1819 Key Pattern Book with separate counts for the 'Blanket Pattern' and 'Border'.



Fig 8. Two early 18th century portions of fine arisaid or barred blanket material. © The Author

The final word in this consideration of the arisaid is found in Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*^{xv} where he introduces the term 'iomairt' for cloth striped lengthwise, not crosswise⁹ and of which he said "*This cloth was confined to women's use, in the 'earasaid,' the 'tonnag,' the 'guaileachan,' and the petticoat*". The description exactly matches drugget, a type of coarse cloth popular in the Western Isles throughout the 19th century (Fig 9). However, Carmichael appears to have conflated these forms of clothing and the use of drugget in skirts and aprons still worn at the time with that of the older arisaid.

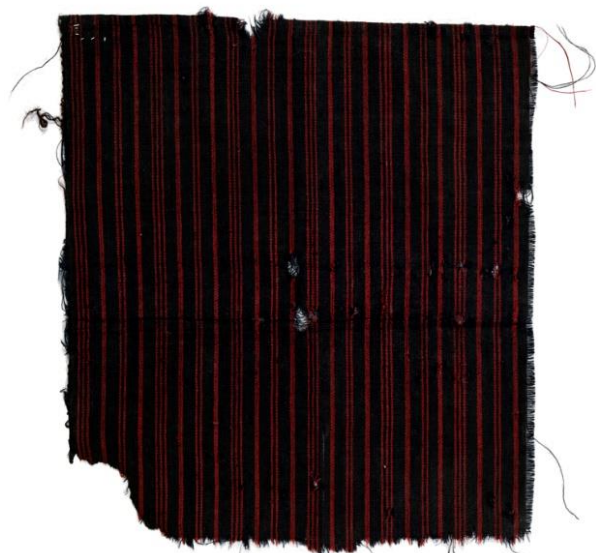


Fig 9. An example of drugget.
Source: West Highland Museum.

⁸ The Barred Blanket patterns are discussed in this companion paper.

⁹ While the warp of the 'iomairt' is composed of stripes of various colours, the weft is confined to one--generally light blue, dark blue, or black. The thread of the 'iomairt,' like that of the tartan, was very fine, hard-spun and double twisted, rendering the cloth extremely durable.

Tartan Plaids and Dresses

Given tartan's popularity and apparent widespread use, especially as a symbol of anti-Union or Jacobite identity in the first half of the 18th century, and the fact that women's clothing was not included in the Act of Proscription, it is at first sight surprising that there is little evidence of it being used for manufactured female clothing, as opposed to a loose and unsewn plaid. Where women's clothing is depicted in portraiture it's generally associated with wealthy families in which the sitter wears usually fashionable European clothes. Sometimes they are shown wearing a tartan screen (shawl); for example, the portrait of Rachel Gordon (Fig 10) and the later ones of the Jenny Cameron¹⁰ (Fig 11), or the more famous one of Flora MacDonald (Fig 12). In the case of the latter two, the wearing of tartan, like the inclusion of the White Rose is a political statement and the arrangement of the plaid can be viewed as a gentrification of the arisaid. As with a number of Scottish themed portraits of the time, these must be approached with some caution; in particular, that of Flora MacDonald. The likelihood that the plaid in the portrait was a studio prop is discussed in this [paper](#). Notwithstanding the fact that neither the tartan or the plaid probably belonged to the sitter, the method of fastening by a button is unique in surviving feminine portraiture.



Fig 10. Rachel Gordon of Abergeldie
Unknown Artist c1700



Fig 11. Jenny Cameron
Jeremiah Davison c1745-50



Fig 12. Flora MacDonald
Allan Ramsay c1750

There are a small number of mid-18th century portraits that depict females wearing tartan dresses (Figs 12-14). None of the dresses survive but they were probably examples of what was worn as 'best' by a certain class of Highland gentry, a fact reinforced by the extensive use of red which was usually obtained from imported cochineal^{xvi}.



Fig 12. Flora MacDonald
by Richard Wilson 1747



Fig 13. Flora MacDonald (alleged)
Unknown artist c1750



Fig 14. Helen Murray of Ochtertyre
Unknown artist c1750

¹⁰ Jenny (Jean) Cameron, daughter of Archibald Cameron of Dungallon. She married Archibald Cameron M.D., brother of the Gentle Lochiel, the chief. Archibald was executed in London in 1753, the last Jacobite to be executed for taking part in the '45.

An interesting and unique example of mid-18th century women's clothing was discovered painted on the walls of Loevestein Castle¹¹ in the Netherlands (Fig 15). The woman is part of a group of dancers thought to show Jacobite refugees who fled to the Netherlands following the failure of the '45 Rising. Although damaged, enough of the detail survives to confirmation that the woman is wearing a red tartan dress, probably in two parts, with lace or linen cuffs, a white bodice and a front panel, an open fronted dress, or possibly an apron.



Fig 15. A mid-C18th dancing party including a woman wearing a tartan dress. © The Author

Conclusion

Like other clothing, female Highland Dress underwent a number of changes during the 300 years of the 16th–19th centuries. The modern interpretation of the historical arisaid is principally based on the drawings of RR Mclan who in turn used a description written almost 150 years earlier as his inspiration.

Early descriptions of the arisaid are of a garment similar to the male *breacan an fheileadh* or belted plaid that was intended to be worn outdoors. Although not proven it is a reasonable assumption that the adoption of the arisaid was roughly contemporary with the belted plaid in the late 1500s. A century later the use of the arisaid was undergoing a stylistic change from what appears to have been a female version of the belted plaid to a looser wrap or plaid. Martin Martin's observation that the garment was the *ancient dress worn by women* and that it was *yet wore by some of the vulgar* attests to a garment that was disappearing by the turn of the 18th century. His description is elaborate and errs toward the romantic and as such there must be questions over its accuracy. Other early writers similarly had difficulties in describing or depicting both male and female Highland Dress.

It is not until Burt's 'Letters' c1725 that we find a reliable description and supporting drawing of the arisaid. By then we can see the transition into a loose plaid of the style shown in a number mid-18th century portraits, this type of garment was still being produced by Wilsons of Bannockburn in the first half of the 19th century. At the same time as women were being painted wearing plaids we see evidence of Highland gentlewomen wearing tartan dresses. How widespread the wearing of these full tartan dress was is unclear. They may reflect social and economic changes that were increasingly prevalent for the early 18th

¹¹ <https://www.slotloevestein.nl/en/>

century but the dress from South Uist demonstrates the continued local production of tartan dresses in some parts of the highlands well into the mid-19th century (Fig 16).



Fig 16. A dress from South Uist c1840 made from locally dyed and woven tartan.
Source: West Highland Museum

This aim of this paper was to examine the origins and use of the arisaid and later use of tartan in women's clothing. Space does not allow a detailed study of all the evidence but it is hoped that this overview will spur the reader to further study of this oft neglected subject.

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