

Tartan coat said to have been worn by Prince Charles Edward in 1745

Introduction

There are a number of tartans that are said to have been worn by, or associated with, Prince Charles Edward during the last Jacobite Rising, 1745-46. Evidence to support a connection to the Prince, or even the broad date, varies from piece to piece and is often based on family tradition rather than demonstrable proof.

One such example is a coat in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland¹ where it is recorded as an '18th century tartan frock coat' that 'once belonged to a prominent Jacobite family'ⁱ (Figure 1). The coat was loaned to the Exhibition of the Royal House of Stuart, London 1889 and the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1901 by Sir J. H. William Drummond Bt., where it was described as a 'Tartan Coat, which belonged to Prince Charles Edward'. It is not known when or from where the Drummonds acquired the coat.



Figure 1. **18th century tartan frock coat.** Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland

¹ The Jacobite family were the Drummonds of Hawthornden Castle, Edinburgh. The last baronet died in the 1976 and coat was donated to the NMS in 1979.

Other specimens of the tartan

Two small specimens of the same tartan are held in early 19th century sample books from Alexander McBean & Co.,² and the Romanes and Paterson³ (Figure 2). The specimens are labelled 'Prince Charles - Tartan worn by Prince Charles in 1745', and 'Culloden - Worn by Prince Charles in the year of the Rebellion 1745'. The McBean specimen is undated whereas the Romanes & Paterson book is dated 1839.⁴



Figure 2. Specimens of the tartan in the Inverness and Newtownmore samples books. Photo: The author

The Tartan

The tartan has the appearance of a 19th century fancy pattern rather than a typical mid-18th century design. In particular, it is unusual in having a large area of brown in the ground, something not often seen in specimens before the second half of the 19th century. There are also two different settings, that of the coat and McBean specimen, and the Romanes & Peterson one. The latter being slightly larger and the shades more intense (Figure 3). In all three examples, the white lines are silk as opposed to worsted wool used for the other colours. This technique was developed by the weaving firm Wilsons of Bannockburn towards the end of the 18th century and is not seen in any other tartan specimens from the Jacobite era.

² Now part of the Inverness Museum collection.

³ Now in the Clan Macpherson Museum, Newtownmore.

⁴ Romanes & Paterson was an Edinburgh based Ladies' and Gentlemen's outfitters that specialised in silks and tartans.



Figure 3. A comparison of the two versions of the Prince Charles' 1745 tartan. Image: The Author

Prince Charles' tartan?

Mention has already been made of the numerous tartan specimens associated with Prince Charles Edward and the fact that some of the attributions are of a later date. In the case of this tartan, it can be shown that Wilsons were weaving it by 1839, the date of the Romanes & Paterson sample book. However, in 1834 the artist William Simson exhibited a work entitled *The Pretender*, and whilst the finished painting has disappeared, an oil sketch from 1833 survives (Figure 4). It appears to show the coat, a fact borne out by John Horsburgh's mezzotint c.1835-50 in which the detail is far clearer, especially when the coat is aligned (Figure 5).



Figure 4. William Simson's oil sketch for *The Pretender*, 1833



Figure 5. Prince Charles Edward reading a Despatch from Sir John Cope by John Horsburgh, after William Simson. 1834 with the Drummond coat superimposed. © The Author

A Jacobite or Highland Revival artefact?

Based on Simson's 1833 oil sketch it is reasonable to assume that the coat, and therefore the tartan, was in existence by that date. It is also evident that Prince Charles Edward was associated with it by then, but how much earlier did it exist and under what name?

The style of the coat is unlike the few surviving 18th century tartan specimens (Figure 6). It is similar to another coat in the NMS collection, a Highland revival piece c.1830 made from cloth woven by Wilsons of Bannockburn (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Comparison of three 1745 era Highland coats and the Drummond one. © The Author

Waine, 2022 goes further, suggestion of Simson's painting that '...the coat was in fact a prop costume, commissioned for use in the artist's studio using a commercially available, historically resonant tartan'.ⁱⁱ This idea is not without merit and was a practice widely used by a later Scottish artist, William Skoch Cumming, who commissioned several pieces of mid-18th century themed costume for models in his paintings and tapestries. The question of the tartan's origin remains and whether Wilsons named it after an historical piece, or was one of their fashion patterns named after an historical character at a time of Highland romanticism in the wake of Scott's novels.



Figure 7. Comparison of the Drummond and a Highland Revival coat in the NMS collection. © The Author

Conclusion

There are a number of tartan artefacts that are said to have belonged to, or been associated with, Prince Charles Edward and the '45 Rising. Despite what the Drummond family may have believed about the provenance of the coat, something repeated by the NMS on their blog, there is no evidence to support this piece having belonged to the Prince, nor that it dates to the mid-18th century.

The material is typical of Wilsons of Bannockburn's cloth from the early 1800s, especially the inclusion of silk yarn, and two specimens of their cloth in this tartan appear in sample books from the 1830s. This timeframe is consistent with the style of the coat which is typical of the late Highland Revival period (c.1780-1840) but completely different to Highland coat styles of the mid-18th century.

Waine (2022)ⁱⁱⁱ notes that 'Referencing extant artefacts within historically themed art and literature was a common occurrence during the early decades of the nineteenth century.' And that 'When used as a source of inspiration, an artefact could come to embody assumptions about the past, or gain a provenance it had little claim to.' It would seem that this coat and the naming of the tartan fall into this assumption tradition and that the link to the Prince and the '45 is in fact a myth.

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ⁱ [Not just a jacket | National Museums Scotland Blog](#) accessed 26 June 2024.

ⁱⁱ WAINE, R. *Highland Style c.1745-1845*. NMS Enterprises Ltd, Edinburgh 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.