

The Prince's Own - An Error In Translation?

The MacRae/Prince's Own tartan is one of a group of similar designs that includes: Ross, Huntley, Lumsden, Rae, and Kinnoull. A number of writers, notably D.C. Stewartⁱ, have claimed that the Prince's Own is the original version. Quite how long it's been associated with the MacRaes is uncertain but irrespective of its origins it now appears that the design currently used is incorrect and that the Lumsden version has a stronger claim to be the correct setting.

Much of the confusion surrounding this design can be traced to D.W. Stewart's¹ 1893 publicationⁱⁱ in which he wrote of the design that '*Various circumstances tend to enhance the interest of this design, which is especially associated by Jacobite enthusiasts with the memory of Prince Charles Edward, and which was named during the campaign of 1745-46 from his personal use of it. Authenticated by specimens of contemporary and immediately subsequent dates-invariably bearing the legend of royal adoption-the pattern may be ranked amongst the earliest clan patterns extant in fabric. It is undoubtedly an old pattern of the MacRaes; and it was certainly worn by the Prince in their territory. But whether it was previously used by members of the clan, of whether it was adopted by them as a compliment to the wearer, cannot be determined.*

The trouble with so much of Stewart's work is that he did not offer any evidence to support his claims of a particular pattern's antiquity and so in this case which raises a number of questions:

- What circumstances?
- Where is the evidence to confirm the sett was used by Prince Charles Edward and/or named during the '45 campaign?
- Where are/were these supposedly contemporary specimens?

Stewart then contradicts himself saying that *It is undoubtedly an old pattern of the MacRaes* and then *But whether it was previously used by members of the clan,.....cannot be determined.* Either it was an old MacRae sett or it wasn't. Interestingly, the official MacRae Clan Society website makes no historical claims to the Prince's Own version which is surprising if there were surviving specimens from the '45 as Stewart claimed.

The fact is that the oldest known specimens of the Prince's Own are those in the Cockburn Collection of 1810 (Fig 1) and the Highland Society of London's (HSL) Collection (Fig 2) of 1816 in both of which it is called MacRae. The apparent colour (shade) differences in the samples are mainly due to the lighting conditions under which the pictures were taken. These two examples are the same sett. There is a second, contemporary specimen in the HSL named MacKay but that appears to be an error in mis-locating the original labels with the samples when the collection was re-mounted at a later date. The commonly worn MacRae tartan is a simplified version of this Cockburn/HSL sett with the section containing the yellow stripe omitted.

¹ D.W. Stewart was the father of D.C. Stewart.

The story is confusion further by the 'claimed' history of the oldest Lumsden tartan which is taken from a waistcoat (Fig 3) that belonged to Andrew Lumsden, Prince Charles Edward's Private Secretary during the '45. Authorities have therefore assumed that the waistcoat is contemporary with the Rising in 1745-6 whereas it's a Regency style garment of material woven by the famous tartan manufacturers Messrs Wilsons of Bannockburn. Andrew Lumsden died in 1801 so the waistcoat is more likely to date to c1790-1800.

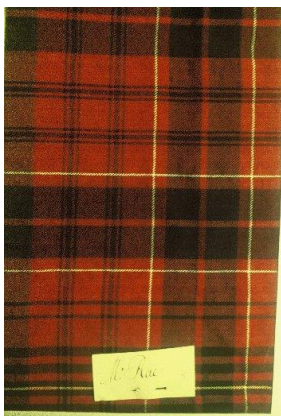


Fig 1. MacRae – Cockburn 1810

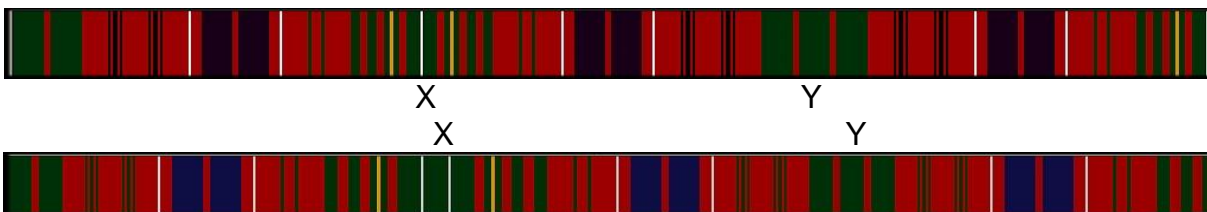


Fig 2. MacRae – HSL 1816



Fig 3. Lumsden Waistcoat

When the settings of the Prince's Own (below - top) and Lumsden (below - bottom) settings are compared the similarity of the two is immediately obvious. The first and second pivots of each are marked X and Y. The difference is that the Prince's Own has a white pivot centred on the green whereas the Lumsden has two white stripes spaced apart on a wider green which in effect introduces another bar of green which then becomes the pivot. The second pivot is marked Y to allow for the proportional differences in the graphics caused by the error at X to be appreciated.



If one assumes that these are in fact the same tartan and that one is an error for the other that begs the questions which is correct and how did the error occur? Examination of the Lumsden waistcoat confirms the full setting with the double white stripe. In order to understand how the Prince's Own error occurred one needs to understand how cloth, particularly a large sett such as this, was fitted to the loom by Wilsons of Bannockburn and earlier weavers. Such setts were used for plaiding which was traditionally woven at half the finished width and two pieces were then joined to make broad cloth - see my paper on [Joined Plaids](#) for a description of the method. This process meant that in the case of the Prince's Own the pattern was set on the loom finishing half way through one pivot, that marked X on the selvedge intended to be joined (Fig 4). The pattern ran across the warp to finish either on the second pivot if it fitted, or in a selvedge pattern or selvedge mark. If the length were then cut in half lengthways and joined the result would be a double white stripe on the green as in the Lumsden setting.



Fig 4. HSL sample showing the offset central green pivot.

As there are no earlier written records of the Prince's Own/MacRae before D.W. Stewart's and the fact that both the Lumsden Waistcoat and the HSL specimens exist, I am drawn to the conclusion that the error was Stewart's in assuming that the white strip was the pivot rather than the green and that the Lumsden setting is the correct historical one for the design irrespective of what it was originally called. Given the fact that the Cockburn, HSL and Lumsden waistcoat are all Wilsons cloth it is quite possible that they came across an old piece associated with the Charles Edward Stewart and were selling it as such which might explain why Andrew Lumsden would have wanted something in it to reflect his earlier association with the Prince's cause.

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ⁱ **STEWART D.C.** 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977

ⁱⁱ **STEWART D.W.** 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh