

Two Plaids from Antigonish County, Nova Scotia

In 1984 I received a letter from a gentleman in California containing details and photographs of an old plaid that he had located in Nova Scotia (NS). The plaid belonged to a woman named MacKenzie (nee Gillies) who lived outside the town of Antigonish but who was born and brought up in Arisaig, NS which is on the coast about 30 miles to the west. The plaid has come down through the Gillies family who had lived in Arisaig for many generations. The family came from Morar in the NW Highlands c1785. There is, according to my informant, a family tradition that the plaid is over 200 years old and came from Scotland. In 1997 I had an opportunity to visit Mrs MacKenzie and view the plaid which is in an excellent condition on account of its being kept in a chest with moth balls most of the time. Apart from being able to confirm the sett details and colours I was not able to gain much confirmatory information from the owner who said that her father would certainly have known about it. She knew that it was old but not how old; and that it had always been in the family.

If it is accepted that the plaid has always been in the Gillies family then it has to have been woven either in Scotland between before 1785 or in NS after 1785 and judging by the structure, before c1885. The size of the plaid, fringing and the nature of the border pattern (described below) mean that it is unlikely that this plaid was ever intended to be worn. It is more likely to have been woven for some special event such as a marriage and used domestically; for example, as a bedcover and/or decoration for special events like births, deaths, marriages and the like.

The plaid comprises two pieces of cloth 26.5" wide x 134.5" long which are joined at the pivot edge and finished with a 5" fringe. The offset pattern contains single full repeat roughly 13" wide plus an elaborate border sett approximately 13.5" wide - Fig 1 shows the construction diagrammatically, Plate 1 is the actual plaid. It is finished at 30epi which suggests a 28epi at the reed which in turn was probably woven with a 7 dent reed, 4 ends per split. Both the warp and weft yarns are singles and from the photographs both appear to be 'z' spun.

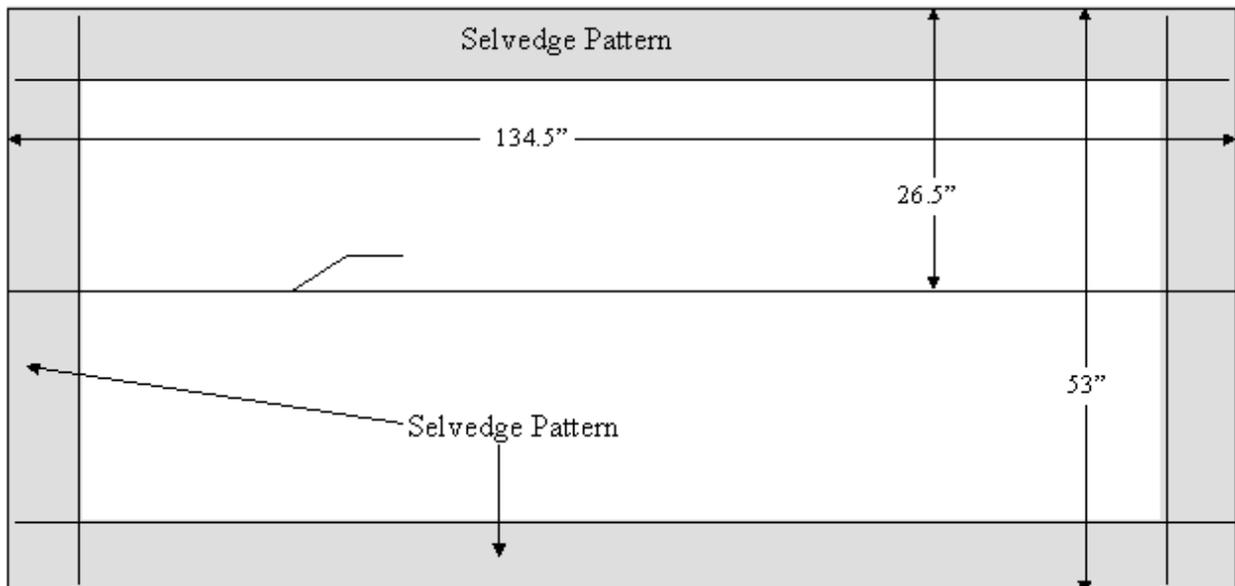


Fig 1: Diagrammatic representation of the Gillies plaid showing an example of a 'total border'.



Plate 1: The original plaid. Picture courtesy of Archie MacLellan, Antigonish.

The threadcount to the half sett, from the join out to, and including, the selvedge pattern is:

R G K R G W R K R K + selvedge K R K R W G R K W K R G R K
 26 12 52 4 52 2 12 4 12 13+ 13 12 4 12 2 52 4 52 2 12 4 4 4 50

Whilst the offset nature of the pattern allows the sett to repeat across the join (Plate 2) giving two full repeats and a selvedge pattern on each long side, it is only where this selvedge pattern intersects at the with the same arrangement at the ends that a unique square is formed, one in each corner (Plate 3).

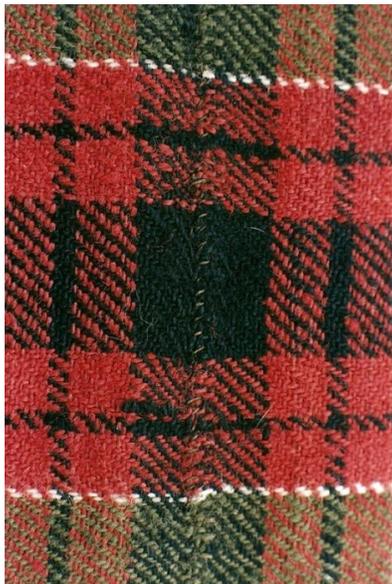


Plate 2 Central join at the offset pivot.



Plate 3. An example of the unique corner setting.

Pictures courtesy of Archie MacLellan, Antigonish.

In the 13 years between the time when this plaid was brought to my attention and actually seeing it I considered it to be a unique and important example in the development of tartan and the sole example of a border sett being woven on the top and bottom ends of the plaid as well as the sides. All previously known Scottish examples only have borders at the side, a technique that was once common practice but which had generally disappeared from rural cloth by c1800. The famous weaving firm of Wm Wilson & Son of Bannockburn (1765-1926) did list one 'Blanket Pattern' with a striped border in their 1819 Key Pattern Book¹; however this can be considered to be an anachronism that had probably ceased to be a widely used technique by that date. As there are no known examples of this 'total border' pattern in Scottish textiles it can be assumed that either it was not practised here, or that it was an old technique that has disappeared without trace but that was taken to NS and survived amongst that outpost of Gaeldom¹. An alternative hypothesis is that the technique was developed independently in Nova Scotia; however I doubt that early settlers had the time to experiment sufficiently to develop the technique to the level demonstrated in this plaid.

The 1984 letter that introduced the plaid also contained small thread samples of each colour taken from the fringe. These were subjected to spectrographic analysis by Dr. George Taylor of the York Archaeological Laboratories who report the following:

Sample	Description	Dye
1	Very Dark Green	indigotin + tannin + a little natural pigment
2	Olive Drab	indigo extract + a little tannin
3	Red	cochineal
4	Red/White	red, cochineal; white, natural unpigmented

The dyes in 1 are consistent with an attempt at getting a black. This was often obtained by heavy dyeing with woad or indigo on a drab ground produced from tannin (from bark or galls), or iron, or fustic chips (a yellow dye). The present result is most consistent with the first.

The olive drab was also dyed with blue and yellow, the latter again probably a tannin-containing material. The blue, however, was "indigo extract", made by treating indigo with sulphuric acid; this technique was invented in Germany in 1740, patented in England in 1748, and the blue was much used as a substitute for natural indigo as it was easier to handle. Olive greens made from yellow plus "indigo extract" were popular in Scotland in the early nineteenth century. However, "indigo extract" dyes fade quickly, and the dye went out of use late in the century when better, synthetic, blue dyes became available. It is likely that the olive in the plaid was originally a brighter green, a fact that which may be revealed by examining the inside of the bundle of olive threads in the textile itself. Both the reds were cochineal, which was the most common source for Scottish plaids from c1700. *"The date of the textile is obviously post 1750 and probably pre 1885"*. In fact, the colours in the main body of the plaid were less weathered/faded and the original colours more apparent. The 'very dark green' is black as suggested by Tailor and the green brighter than at the fringe which suggests that the plaid has been left partially exposed to the light at some period.

¹ This survival theory is not inconceivable given that the step dance tradition of the Highlands did exactly that and was only rediscovered in the middle the 20th century as were several older versions of Gaelic songs and fiddle tunes.

In attempting to trace to owners of the Gillies plaid I visited the Antigonish Museum, Antigonish, NS in 1997. Whilst there, the curator asked me to examine “a piece of cloth to see if it was a tartan”. What emerged from the storage box was a hand woven, naturally dyed single width plaid with a ‘total border’ (Fig 2). The plaid is 31.5” x 180”, woven at 30epi and had a 6” twisted fringe at each end making 192” in total with six repeats of the pattern plus the border (Plate 4). Apparently it had recently been donated by a family from Florida, USA whose origins were from the Antigonish area. The family tradition is that it was woven in c1895 by Jenny ‘the Widow’ MacDonald (nee Chisholm) who lived at St. Andrews, Marydale in Antigonish County. The family background is Knoydart MacDonalds, Moidart MacNeils and Strathglas Chisholms all of whom arrived in NS c1800-1840.

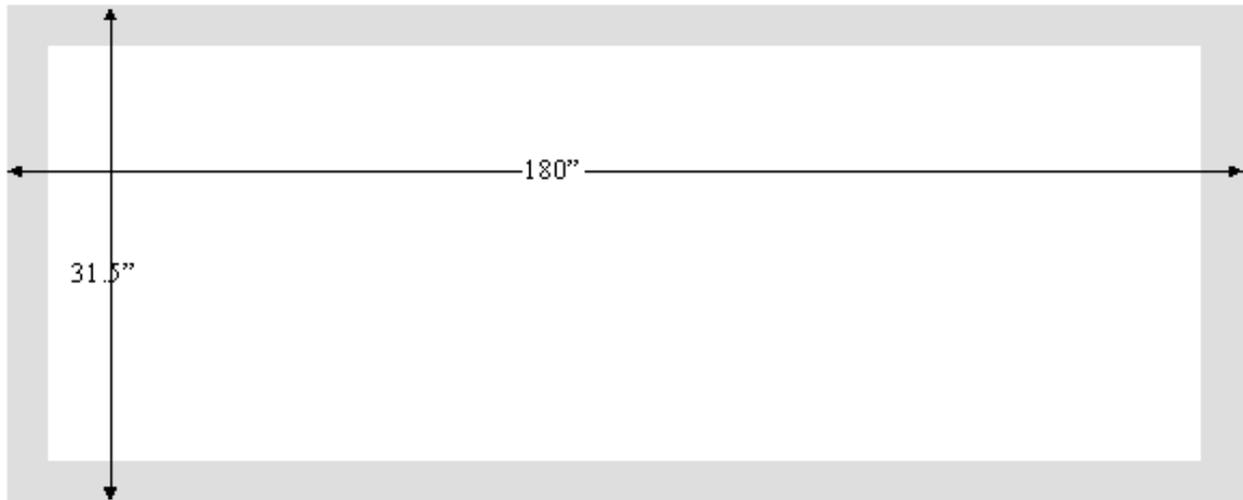


Fig 2. Schematic of Jenny the Widow’s plaid showing the ‘total border’ pattern.



Plate 4. Jenny the Widow’s Plaid with total border.

Picture Courtesy of the Antigonish Museum.

Jenny the Widow's plaid: count to the half sett from the centre out to and including the selvedge pattern:

R B G K W R + selvedge R W G K R B K W K R B G W
5 10 12 4 4 21 + 21 8 22 4 4 8 10 8 12 6 12 20 20

The use of a selvedge pattern, particularly of this nature, natural dyes and being woven in tartan makes the date of 1895 for this plaid suspect and 1795 would be more in keeping with the type of plaid shown in Fig 4.

Marydale and Arisaig are about 20 miles apart in Antigonish County. For two plaids both using a previously unknown development of a traditional Scottish Highland weaving technique to be unrelated in some way seems unlikely. Both use a singles yarn for their warp and weft, are naturally dyed with similar colours, have a similar density (30 epi) and most importantly use the selvedge pattern around the whole plaid, a technique that I have termed 'total border pattern'. There appears to be strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that they were produced by the same hand or at least from the same weaving circle. The dye analysis of the Gillies plaid suggests the use of sulfinated indigo which, if also used in the MacDonald (Jenny the Widow MacDonald), plaid would make that family's 1895 date even less likely. If small samples of each colour from the fringe were tested they would probably confirm this.

Given that this second plaid is single width and the Gillies plaid is a joined/double plaid, a process that would have required great skill to get the pattern to match correctly, the latter may be considered in many ways to be the finest known example of the Highland art of tartan weaving.

If this *total border* technique is unknown in surviving Scottish textiles and if the Gillies plaid was woven in Scotland then the technique must have died out sometime after c1785 when the family emigrated. If it developed in NS then that must have happened sometime after this date. Given the Morar (Moidart) origins of the Gillies, and the Moidart and close by Knoydart origins of the MacNeil and MacDonald families respectively, it is possible that this was a technique used in that part of the Highlands and taken to NS. It would have only needed one weaver to keep the tradition alive in an area of NS for several plaids to have been produced at a later date. Conversely, there are several problems with the idea of a NS origin:

1. 1785 was three years after the repeal of the 'Dress Act' of 1747, which forbade the wearing of Highland Dress by the common Highlanders. Many old techniques may already have been lost by the time that the emigrants left Scotland for NS.
2. The early years in Canada were extremely hard and it seems unlikely that people started weaving tartan immediately after their arrival, especially as they would probably have had insufficient wool for its production and their main concern was for survival.
3. The use of cochineal, and to some degree indigo, in these two plaids makes them an expensive financial outlay. Again this would suggest they were not produced immediately upon arrival.
4. Despite the claim that the MacDonald plaid was woven by Jenny the weaver in c1895 there appears to be no tradition of tartan weaving being carried out in NS whereas overshot

weaving was the common practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It might of course be that tartan weaving was localised to a small area Antigonish.

No other old pieces of tartan are known to have been found in NS/Cape Breton although given the isolated nature of the area until recently it seems likely that there are still examples to be found. The uniqueness of the two plaids described suggests a common origin but at this stage it is impossible to determine whether this is Scotland or NS. It seems very unlikely that such a selvedge pattern developed in isolation in NS and I feel it is more likely to represent a lost Highland technique. Everything about the quality of the material suggests a second half 18th century Highland origin. If these were woven in NS sometime between 1800 and 1885 then this would represent a further remarkable preservation of Scottish techniques that had disappeared here by that time. Much more research is needed on the origins of these two particular plaids and the dyes used in the MacNeill plaid. There should also be a concerted effort to identify other tartan relics in NS and Cape Breton before the further disintegration of their Gaelic Diaspora caused by the economics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries means that any clues are lost or dispersed.

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