

# ***Unnamed C18th Plaid dated 1796***

## **INTRODUCTION**

Amongst the pieces collected by Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912), the famous Folklorist and Antiquarian, is a plaid embroidered with the initials 'IC' and the date 1796. Unfortunately, like the rest of his textile collection, Carmichael didn't record where it came from or from whom he obtained it and little is known about its origins beyond the possibility that it was collected in Uist where Carmichael lived from 1864-82; however, he also lived for a while in the Oban area and it could equally have come from somewhere on the mainland. Notwithstanding the lack of information about its origins, examination of the plaid (Fig 1) offers some interesting insights that allow a number of deductions<sup>1</sup>.



Fig 1. Joined plaid – overview.  
Picture courtesy of Edinburgh University Library (EUL).

The exact measurements are not available but the plaid is approximately 56 inches wide and 70+ inches long and comprises two single width pieces of cloth 28 inches wide that have been joined. One end is turned and sewn, the other is has a twisted fringe.

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<sup>1</sup> The author has not been able to examine the cloth in person and worked from photographs supplied by [EUL](#).

## THE CLOTH

The cloth is of a good quality with evenly spun yarn, naturally dyed and hand-woven 27-28" wide with the pattern offset containing three half setts across the warp which continues into the forth and finishes with a slightly expanded blue bar. The last ten threads of the large red square and the remaining section of the selvedge are herringboned, a technique often found in C18<sup>th</sup> plaids<sup>2</sup>. Even without being tested it's clear that the dyes were those typically used in pre-C19th rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively, plus indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green.

## CONSTRUCTION

A cursory view of the plaid reveals that not only was the pattern poorly aligned when joined but that the wrong edges were joined resulting in the herringbone selvedges being in the centre rather than at the edges as should have been the case with an offset piece. The colour strips below represents the full the single width cloth with the herringbone selvedge underlined; how it has been joined and how it should have been joined as shown in Fig 2.

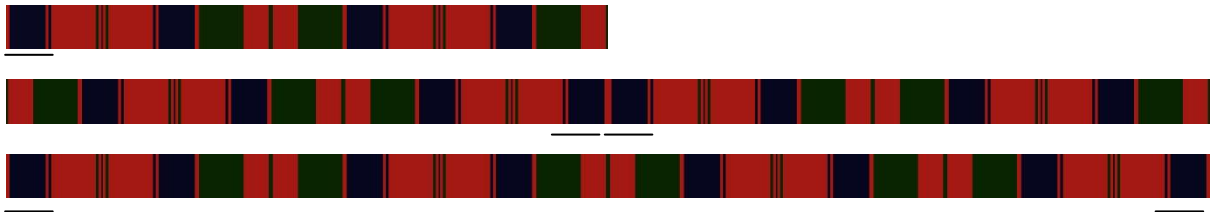


Fig 2. The two halves of the plaid re-arranged to show how they would look if joined correctly.

<sup>2</sup> See the articles on [Traditional Selvedge Patterns](#) and [Joined Plaids – Settings and Construction](#).

The different method of finishing the ends is unusual. There is no other known example of this mix of finishes which suggests that the cloth has either been re-used or used in a way not originally intended. Rolling/folding over the end and sewing down the ends of a plaid to prevent the cloth fraying was the traditional 18<sup>th</sup> century method of finishing a plaid (Fig 3).



Fig 3. Traditional rolled end.

Twisted fringing is a style that appeared round 1780 when plaids and other items of Highland Dress began to be worn across Scotland as part of the Highland Revival and later Regency era as fashion/theme clothing at which point much of the original functionality was replaced by increasing ostentation. The fringing on the plaid is very ragged and it has come untwisted in several places because no locking knot was tied at the end (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Twisted fringe.

## **DATE AND INITIALS**

To judge from surviving examples, the custom of embroidering initials and/or a date on plaids was uncommon, those with just initials being slightly more usual. With the exception of one, initialled and dated CY 1726, the practice appears to have been more common during the late C18th. This may reflect the different use of plaids by then, the fact that the fewer older ones survive or a combination of both. There is no evidence to show that Initialled and/or Dated plaids were worn and it's more likely that they were used domestically as bed covers and the like with the embellishments added as a commemorative marker; for example, for births, marriages, coming of age etc.

In this case the date and initials were embroidered from some of the same red yarn used in the tartan and which was also used to join the two halves. The date appears in the upper left corner; the initials in the upper right (Fig 5). Note the difference in the style of the embroidery used. This might indicate a different hand, possibly at a different date, but without any detail of the origins of the piece beyond being from *Uist* one can only speculate.



Fig 5. 1796 date and initials IC.

## Conclusion

Without any idea who 'IC' was or what the date '1796' signifies one is left to read the cloth and speculate on its eventual use. The single width of cloth was set and woven in the traditional method for material that was intended to be joined so that the pattern would repeat across the double width with a herringbone selvedge on each side. It is entirely possible that the material itself is older than the embroidered date and could easily date to the mid-C18<sup>th</sup> when single-width off-set tartan was commonly woven although the technique endured through to the early C19<sup>th</sup> in military plaids.

Collectively, the poor alignment of the join, the joining of the wrong selvedges, size of the piece and different finishes to the top and bottom ends all point to a lack of understanding of the traditional art of *Joined Plaids* beyond the fact that single material had to be sewn together if a wider piece was wanted, a fact not unique to tartan. There are examples both of weavers initialling pieces that they wove and also of individuals adding initials and dates to cloth woven by others. Where initials and dates are combined on surviving pieces they are always embroidered in the same style unlike here which lends support to the idea that they were done by a different hand or at a different time. Without collaborative evidence, a possible and logical scenario for this artefact is that a length of single width off-set material was:

- Made into a joined plaid, either to be worn or use as a domestic blanket but that was later damaged and so reused.
- Used as a single width at a later date by someone unfamiliar with the correct technique to join such cloth. The initials and date added then, later or at different times.
- Used as a single width plaid, throw or similar with both ends turned and the Initials added at that time. The material was subsequently, cut in half and joined (incorrectly), the two raw ends fringed and the 1796 date added.

The first option the least likely because an older plaid would more than likely have been joined correctly. If a single width piece of cloth was subsequently joined, which is the more likely scenario then it was either used in one form, a finished single width, then later reused with some of the unravelled yarn employed to join and embroider the date and initials; or an unused single width was joined dated and initialled. Based on a study of a number of older joined plaids including some with a date and/or initials I am inclined towards the latter being the more likely.

Whilst it is difficult to date the cloth accurately it seems likely that the finished article was made in or shortly before 1796, probably by someone whose initials were 'IC'. The dimensions of the piece are compatible with its use as a bed cover. We know that the so called Christina Young plaid of 1726 was a marriage piece and that is probably the case here with IC making it as a dowry piece.

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