

An unnamed early 19th Century tartan attributed to Flora MacDonald

Introduction

Amongst surviving specimens associated with the weaving firm William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn are several unnamed tartans that are not often seen today. One is a pattern referred to in old records as MacDonald or, MacDonald of Prince Edward Isle. Three examples of this pattern are known to survive: an unnamed full-width length in Prince Edward Isle (PEI), Canada;¹ a small piece labelled Flora MacDonald;² and a length in the West Highland Museum, Fort William labelled *MacDonald Plaid said to have belonged to Flora MacDonald*.

The author has examined all three specimens, either physically or from hi-res photographs. All three examples have the same threadcount set at 52 epi³; the two lengths are 24-25 inches wide with two half sett across the warp. The width and density equate to Wilsons' 'Fine Cloth' which was their standard quality in the first half of the 19th century. These similarities point to all three being from a standard version of the pattern. It is likely that these pieces, and thus the pattern, date to c.1820-30 (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Detail of an unnamed early 19th century tartan (PEI) by Wilsons of Bannockburn. Photo: M Gallant

¹ The length belongs to a MacDonald family long resident in the Province.

² In the collection of The Scottish Tartans Authority.

³ Ends per inch, the density of the cloth.

A MacDonald Tartan?

Wilson's of Bannockburn were in the habit of naming patterns after famous individuals, many of these were highly romanticised. It is not known what Wilson's called this pattern but it is possible that they could have named it *Flora MacDonald*, to complement their *Prince Charles Edward tartan*. If that was the case, it is easy to imagine how the name could have been taken literally by later collectors. This might explain the alleged provenance of the piece donated to the West Highland Museum by the author Compton MacKenzie in 1953. There is no record of when and where MacKenzie acquired the plaid but it is possible that it coincided with his move to Barra in the 1930s, or the later success of his 1947 novel *Whisky Galore*. The plaid measures 24" x 116" with a 5" fringe at each end which was once loosely twisted (Plate 2).



Plate 2. MacDonald Plaid said to have belonged to Flora MacDonald. Photo: West Highland Museum

A similar sized plaid belonging to a family in Prince Edward Isles, Canada lead to the pattern being called *MacDonald of Prince Edward Isle tartan* in some 20th century records. Family tradition is that the plaid belonged to Capt John MacDonald of Glenaladale who emigrated to PEI in 1771. If it was indeed owned by him then it must have been towards the end of his life as he died in 1810. The 20th century naming is erroneous and based on the family's heritage and the location of the plaid. This piece measures 25" x 120" with a 4" fringe at each end which show evidence of once having been loosely plaited (Plate 3).



Plate 3. Detail of the PEI plaid showing the loosely plaited fringe. Photo: Mary Gallant

The Sett

The sett or pattern is based on the Black Watch tartan with additional design elements, notably the broad red stripes, and the yellow and white overstripes. The balanced weave has two half setts (one full repeat) across the warp (Plate 3) meaning that the material could have been used either single-width, as shown here, or joined to make a double-width plaid of two repeats 48" wide. The large and complex pattern that can only be fully appreciated when viewed as a joined piece as the reconstruction shows. (Plate 4). The broad yellow denotes the position of the join.

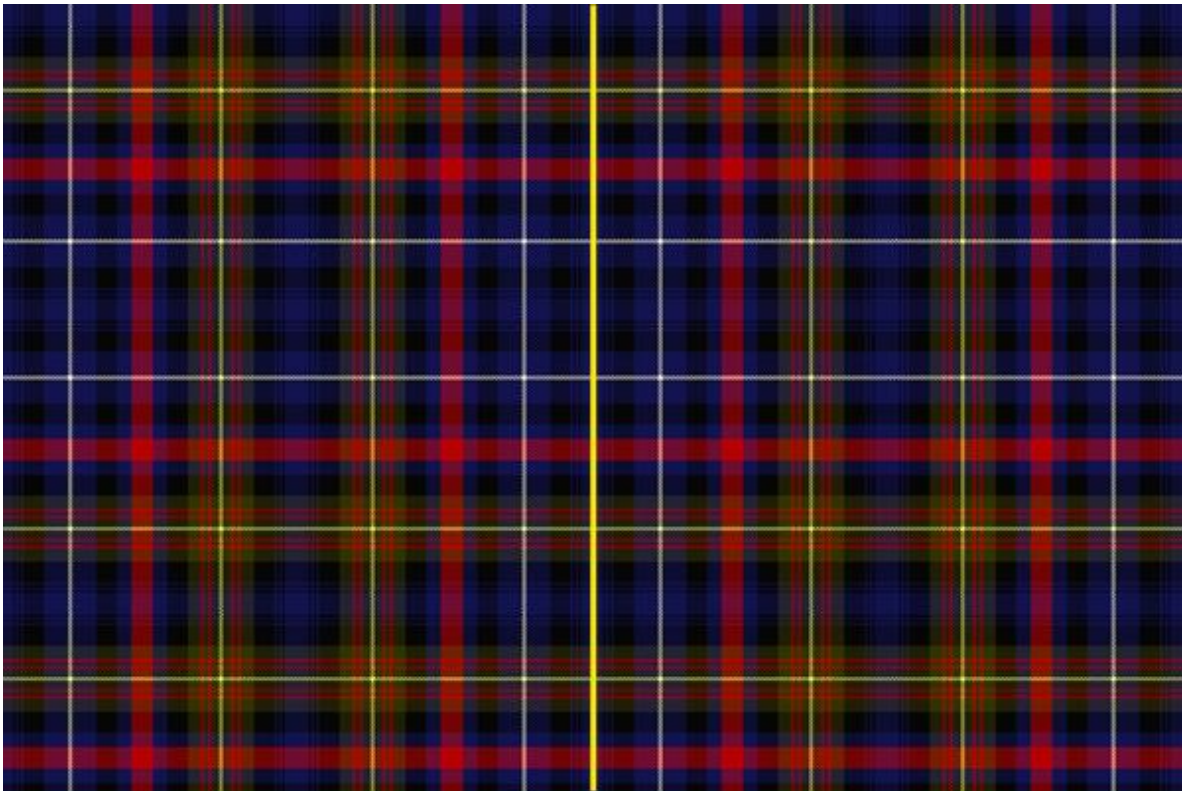


Plate 4. Reconstruction of the tartan showing two widths joined. © The Author

Conclusion

Whilst the three specimens are obviously all the same pattern, each is known by a slightly different name although all involve reference to *MacDonald*. The naming of the pattern as *MacDonald of Prince Edward Isle* seems to have been a recording error in the mid-20th century and based solely on a piece being in possession of a MacDonald family there. Similarly, the claim that this was a plaid that belonged to Flora MacDonald is not borne out by evidence. The author Compton MacKenzie seems to have mistaken the name that was apparently attached to the pattern as evidence of the tartan's history.

Wilson's of Bannockburn were in the habit of naming designs after popular characters, both historical and contemporary. The *Prince Charles Edward* was once such a pattern, as was their *Jacobite*, and it is possible that this was another, named after the eponymous heroine of the '45. Their Pattern Book No.4 c.1840 includes details of an entirely different pattern named *Flora MacDonald*, it was a simpler design which may have replaced this more complex one.

Each of the three pieces is of the same type and quality, so much so that they could have been from the same loom. The colours and weave confirm that they were woven by Messrs Wilson's of Bannockburn c.1800-1830 and represent typical examples of their 'Fine Cloth'. It is hoped that a detailed examination of the two plaids would clarify the apparent difference in their width and confirm a common setting. These complex patterns were very popular at the time and a staple of Wilson's' trade around the turn of the 19th century.

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