

Fragment of an 18th Century Plaid in the so-called MacGregor of Deeside/Glengyle Tartan

Some years ago I examined a portion of an 18th century joined plaid that dates to c1730-60. The remnant is 47" x 1.5" and made from two pieces of 23.5" material with a herringbone selvedge on the non-joined side. (Fig 1). The original piece was obviously cut up at some point and whilst some other sections probably survive – see below, it's unclear whether this was originally a plaid for wearing or one for domestic use; for example, as a bed cover.



Fig 1. Strip from the full width of a C18th joined plaid.

The tartan is a simple two coloured red and blue decorated check in which fine double stripes of one colour are centred on a square of the opposite one. Although not tested, this piece was undoubtedly dyed with indigo and cochineal with the shades typical of those found in 18th century tartans where shades were balanced against each other rather than being of a uniform hue as is the case in today's commercial colour ranges.

The simplicity of the sett meant that the material could be arranged as a balanced warp which was finished at the selvedge on the fine red stripe before the blue pivot. Care has been taken in joining the two halves and the use of blue yarn effectively makes the pivot stripe and allows the sett to repeat correctly (Fig 2).

Confusion surrounds both the origin and naming of this tartan. Several other fragments from the same plaid were collected by early tartan historians who associated the design with both the Hebrides and Aberdeenshire.



Fig 2. Pivot formed by joining yarn.

In 2006 Sir Malcom MacGregor of MacGregor, the Chief, wrote that the MacGregor of Deeside and the MacGregor of Glengyle tartans are really one and the same. He said that he had a specimen which his grandfather obtained from the Scottish artist Skeoch Cumming in 1922. Cumming apparently who got it from an old woman in Nairn who said it was the tartan of the MacGregors of Glengyle whence her people came. The Chief said *"My father believed this to be correct, bearing in mind the history of the MacGregors of Deeside. The MacGregors transported to Aberdeenshire by the Earl of Moray who came from his estates in Menteith to fight the Mackintoshes in about 1624, were almost certainly MacGregors of Glengyle and would have worn that tartan"*. What the Chief believed and what is historical fact are not necessarily the same thing and even if this was indeed from an old Macgregor of Glengyle family we do not know if they were part of the group that were moved to Deeside. It certainly doesn't mean that all the Glengyles wore it and there is no evidence to support its use by them in the early 1600s. The Chief claimed that his specimen was black and red but that is probably a mistake in identifying the dark blue. Another specimen of this sett is in the

possession of Andersons of Edinburgh which they believe to date from 1750. Not having seen either of these pieces it's not possible to say definitively but the similarities in the information about them suggests that they are probably pieces from the same plaid although it's possible that one or other of the specimens is from a different source. There is no indication whether the Nairn plaid was complete when Skeoch Cumming obtained it or whether it was just a portion but if this, the MacGregor and Anderson pieces are all from the same plaid, whole or remnant, it seems likely that Cumming divided it up some time after 1922. Examination of the other pieces would confirm if they were from the same plaid.

The connection of this sett with the Hebridies is vague and comes from old Tartan society records. It's certainly possible as such a simple sett was probably widely used in much the same way as the red and black check now called Rob Roy was. Interestingly, Andersons, now Kinloch Andersons, reinvented this tartan as a corporate design for Mary Erskin School, Edinburgh without apparently noticing that it already existed and that they had a sample in their collection, or perhaps they simply recycled it.

It's unlikely that much more will ever be known about the original piece beyond the fact that it is part of an old plaid and that a similar piece, almost certainly from the same plaid, belong to a descendent of the MacGregors of Glengyle. The Deeside link is even more tenuous and for that reason this tartan is now more usually called MacGregor of Glengyle.