“Burns when at home, usually wore a blue or drab long-tailed coat, corduroy breeches, dark-blue stockings, and cootikens, and in cold weather a black-and-white checked plaid wrapped around his shoulders.”
(From a recollection of William Clark, servant of Robert Burns at Ellisland, near Dumfries, 1789-90).

Pennant, in his Tour Through Scotland (1772), tells us that in Langholme, Dumfries – “The manufactures are stuffs, serges, black and white plaids…”

The “Shepherd Tartan” is registered with the Scottish Tartans Authority (ITI 1253). In the authority’s notes the simple black and white sett is described as a traditional Border shepherd’s check… “also known as the Falkirk tartan because of the discovery of such a weave in the neck of a jar containing Roman coins buried about 260 A.D.”

The most ancient and primitive of Scotland’s tartans, the Shepherd tartan was woven simply with the wool of white and black sheep. The Red and Black MacGregor “Rob Roy” (ITI 1504) is a development of it, as is Wilson’s so-called “Robin Hood” (ITI 785), in green and black.

Many “authorities”, over a long period of time, have held to the opinion that tartan was uniquely a manifestation of Highland culture and was historically alien to the Scottish Lowlands. In refutation of this conviction there is now available to us an ample body of evidence, taken from central government, old burgh records and the observations of travellers, which reveals that in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries tartan was woven and worn in the Lowlands – indeed that it was a major national export.

Additionally, we have reliable information to the effect that in the early 1600s a community of weavers from Ayrshire was producing tartan in Ulster. Further to this there is the abundant evidence that from 1707 tartan was being worn in the Lowlands specifically as a protest against the Union of the Parliaments. The poem Tartana, written by Allan Ramsay in 1718, should also be taken into account because it strongly implies the existence of tartans bearing the names of Lowland families at that date.

Touching briefly on politics – tartan was a particular emblem of the Jacobites, and those who doubt the Jacobite sympathies of Robert Burns should consider these lines which he engraved on a window in Stirling –

“The injured Stewart line is gone,
A race outlandish fills their throne;
An idiot race, to honour lost;
Who knows them best despise them most.”

From the Old Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilwinning in Ayrshire we learn that in 1742 – “The wives of some of the more wealthy and
substantial farmers and tradesmen had silk plaids: but by far the
greater part of the married women, red or striped worsted ones. Young
women wore woollen cloaks, with
hoods of the same kind of cloth...”

Lest there arise dispute as to
whether “red or striped” denotes
tartan, the record of Wigton is more
specific –

“The old dress of the country
men, even the most respectable
farmers, a kilt coat, a blue bonnet,
and plaiding hose... The old dress,
too, of the country women, even of
the farmers’ wives and daughters,
the blue cloth cloaks and hoods, the
tartan or red plaides...” and of
Mid-Calder, Edinburgh –

“The tartan or red plaids...
constituted the dress of women in
the inferior conditions of life...”

We also know from Pennant
that, during the life of Burns,
Kilmarnock had a tartan industry.
The Old Statistical Accounts were
written by parish ministers in the
1790s. In the passages we have
quoted they are describing the
clothing of their parishioners as
worn over previous decades, with a
gradual change having taken effect
so that in many districts, by the time of writing, the fashions
had changed.

Hopefully, however, it has been demonstrated that tartan
plaids (as we understand these terms) were a commonplace
of daily life, not only in the Ayrshire of Burns’ day, but
throughout Lowland Scotland during the 18th century. It
may, however, be objected that, due to the Dress Act
proscribing the wearing of tartan, Burns would have been
unlikely to have come into contact with it during his youth.
In fact, the Dress Act did not apply to Lowland Scotland,
where tartan continued to be woven and worn and, indeed,
exported!

From available evidence it seems reasonably likely,
therefore, that in the years of the poet’s childhood and
adolescence, tartan plaiding would have featured among the
possessions of the Burns family and of their neighbours.

In a number of his poems and songs he mentions tartan
and plaids. Some are original works and others are
traditional songs which the poet has reworked. Here are a
few examples which should demonstrate that Robert Burns,
throughout his life, was no stranger to tartan, either
physically or psychologically.

“With his philibeg an’ tartan plaid,
An’ guid claymore down by his side,
The ladies’ hearts he did trepan,
My gallant, braw John Highlandman.”
(The Jolly Beggars)

“An’ Lord! if ance they pit her till’t,
Her tartan petticoat she’ll kilt,
An’ dark an’ pistol at her belt,
She’ll tak the streets...”
(The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer)

“To hear the thuds, and see the cluds,
O’ clans frae woods, in tartan duds,
Wha glaum’d at kingdoms three, man...”
“But had ye seen the philibegs,
An’ skyrin tartan trews, man,
When in the teeth they dar’d our Whigs,
And covenant True-blues, man...”
(The Battle of Sherramuir)
As I gaed down the water-side, 
There I met my shepherd lad: 
He row’d me sweetly in his plaid, 
And he ca’d me his dearie…” 
(Ca’ the Yowes to the Knowes)

Altho’ my bed were in yon muir, 
Amang the heather, in my plaidie, 
Yet happy, happy would I be, 
Had I my dear Montgomerie’s Peggy…” 
(Montgomerie’s Peggy)

The westlin’ wind blaws loud an’ shill; 
The night’s baith mirk and rainy, O; 
But I’ll get my plaid an’ out I’ll steal, 
An’ owre the hill to Nanie, O…” 
(My Nanie, O)

It can be seen from these quotations that Burns writes of tartan in the context of Highland clans, as a National symbol, and as the ordinary wear of a shepherd or Lowland peasant-farmer (almost certainly autobiographically in the last instance). Most significant, surely, is the way he brings it into his poem The Vision, written in 1786 when Burns was 27 years old. Here he garbs his “native muse” in tartan - “Down flowed her robe, a tartan sheen, ‘Till half a leg was scrimply seen…” and his muse is specific to Ayrshire – “Of these am I – Coila my name: and this district as mine I claim…” “Coila” is Kyle, and it is highly unlikely that the Bard would clothe his “Vision” in tartan if it were not absolutely a feature of the culture of his native county and of his personal experience.

Robert Burns placed on record the extent to which he had been influenced by the poetry of Allan Ramsay and he was certainly familiar with Ramsay’s Tartana... indeed, its influence can be felt in his own Vision.

Ramsay’s lines alluding to a Keith tartan (in 1718) - “With what a pretty action Keitha holds, Her Plaid, and varies oft its airy folds…” may well have arrested the attention of Burns, his grandfather having been Isabella Keith. The Keith tartan which is registered now (ITI 253) appears in Wilson’s 1819 Key Pattern Book as “No. 75 or Austin” (Wilsons were producing named clan tartans during the lifetime of Burns), but it was being sold as Keith by the Edinburgh company of Romanes & Paterson in the early 1800s. But of course we have no way of knowing if this was the Keith tartan with which Allan Ramsay seems to have been familiar.

Ayrshire gentry tartans which may have been around during the lifetime of Burns would include – “Montgomery” (ITI 1802), which, according to D.W. Stewart, was adopted by the Montgomeries of Ayrshire around 1707, and “Dalrymple of Castleton” (ITI 7420), which was taken from a portrait of Sir Robert Dalrymple, painted circa 1720.

The Bard’s own choice of the Shepherd tartan was very much in keeping with his last place of residence and with his self-image. In a letter to Alexander Cunningham, in March of 1794, Burns gave the full heraldic description of a coat of arms which he had designed for his personal use. The inclusion of a shepherd’s pipe and crook emphasises his identification with the role of the shepherd.

“On a field, azure, a holly-bush, seeded, proper, in base; a Shepherd’s pipe and crook, Saltier-wise, also proper, in chief – On a wreath of the colours, a woodlark perching on a sprig of bay-tree proper.”

As for the sett of the plaid which may have warmed him against the cruel winters in Mount Oliphant, Lochlea or Mossgiel... we will probably never know!