

History of Scottish Tartans & Clan Tartans

By

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Tartan has without doubt become one of the most important symbols of Scotland and Scottish heritage. With the Scottish national identity probably greater than at any time in recent centuries, the potency of tartan as a symbol cannot be understated. However, it has also created a great deal of romantic fabrication, controversy, and speculation into its origins, name, history and use as a clan or family form of identification.

What is Tartan?

Tartan is a woven material, generally of wool, having stripes of different colors and varying in breadth. The arrangement of colors is alike in warp and weft - that is, length and width - and when woven, has the appearance of being a number of squares intersected by stripes which cross each other. This is called a 'sett'. By changing colors; varying width and depth; and number of stripes, differencing is evolved. Tartan patterns are called "setts"; the sett being the complete pattern and a length of tartan made by repeating the pattern or sett over and over again.



Falkirk Tartan

Origins of Tartan

The Celts for thousands of years are known to have woven checkered or striped cloth and some of these ancient samples have been found across Europe and Scandinavia. The oldest tartan ever found was on the body of Chertsey Man, a 3,000-year-old mummy

discovered in the Takla-Makan Desert in western China. It is believed that introduction of this form of weaving came to the west of Northern Britain with the Iron Age Celtic *Scoti* (Scots) from Ireland in the 5th - 6th BC.

Early Romans talked of Celtic tribes wearing bright striped clothing - there was no word at that time for checkered. The Greek Historian Diodorus Siculus referred in 50 BC to Celtic races whose "cloaks are striped or checkered in design, with the separate checks close together and in various colors."

One of the earliest examples of tartan actually found in Scotland dates to the 3rd century AD, where a small sample of woolen check known as the Falkirk tartan (now in the National Museum of Scotland) was found used as a stopper in an earthenware pot to protect a trove of silver coins buried close to the Antonine Wall near Falkirk. It is a simple two-colored check or tartan identified as the undyed brown and white of the native Soay Sheep. Colors were determined by local plants that could be used for dyes. There is then a long gap before a traveler in 1582 said about the Scots: "They delight in marled clothes, especially that have long stripes of sundry colors. Their predecessors used short mantles or plaids of diverse colors in sundry ways divided."

By 1703 we have the first really clear account of tartan when Martin Martin recorded in "A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland" that "The plaid wore only by the men is made of fine wool, the thread as fine as can be made of that kind. It consists of diverse colors; and there is a great deal of ingenuity required in sorting the colors so as to be agreeable to the nicest fancy. For this reason the women are at great pains, first to give an exact pattern of the plaid upon a piece of wood, having the number of every thread of the stripe on it. The length of it is commonly seven double ells. The one end hangs by the middle over the left arm, the other going round the body, hangs by the end over the left arm also - the right hand above it is to be at liberty to do anything upon occasion. Every isle differs from each other in their fancy of making plaids as to the stripes in breadth and colors. This humor is as different through the mainland of the Highlands, insofar that they who have seen those places are able at first view of a man's plaid to guess the place of his

residence."

Tartan The Name

The word tartan we use today has also caused speculation and confusion as one camp says it comes from the Irish word - *tarsna* - crosswise and/or the Scottish Gaelic *tarsuinn* – across. The Gaelic word for tartan has always been – *breachdan* - the most accepted probability for the name comes from the French *tiretaine* which was a wool/linen mixture. In the 1600s, it referred to a kind of cloth rather than the pattern in which the cloth was woven.

History



German Woodcut of around 1631

One of the first recorded mentions of Tartan was in 1538 when King James V purchased "three ells of Heland Tartans" for his wife to wear. In 1587, Hector MacLean (heir of Duart) paid feu duty with sixty ells of cloth "white, black and green"- the traditional colors of the MacLean hunting tartan. An eyewitness account of the Battle of Killecrankie in 1689 describes "McDonnell's men in their triple stripe" but the first positive proof of the existence of what we now call 'Tartan', was in a German woodcut from early in the Thirty Years War, thought to show Highland soldiers -

no doubt mercenaries - in the army of King Gustavus Adolphus wearing a clearly identified tartan *philamhor* - the great kilt.

The next important milestone in the history of tartan was the 1745 rebellion ending with

the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and repression of all things Celtic in the Highlands. The romantic Young Pretender, *Charles Edward Stuart - Bonnie Prince Charlie* - ranged his inferior Jacobite forces of Highlanders against the Duke of Cumberland's Government forces. The Jacobite army was organized into clan-based regiments. As historian *Jamie Scarlett* explains "*here we have the first hint of the use of tartan as a clan uniform.*" To understand how this battle proved to be the catalyst for the great Clan Tartan myth, we have to look at the lifestyle and the terrain in which many of Scotland's major families or clans lived at that time.

Each area or community grouping would doubtless have, as one of its artisans, a weaver. He - they were invariably men - would no doubt produce the same tartan for those around him and that tartan would finally become what we now call a District Tartan - one worn by individuals living in close geographical proximity, such as in the same glen or strath. By its very nature, that community would be a huge *extended* family that soon became identified by the tartan which it wore, not to differentiate it from its neighbors in the next glen - but because that is what the community weaver produced! It was a short step from there to connect that tartan to the name of the wearers.

Weavers depended very much on local plants for their dyes, so the locality of the weaver might well have a bearing on the colors of the tartan that he produced. If he lived on the west coast of Scotland, *Gipsywort* gave him lettuce green, seaweeds gave him flesh color and seashore whelks might provide purple. If

"The Battle of Culloden" by David
Morier

he lived inland, then he would look to the moors for colors: heather treated in different ways gave him yellow, deep green and brownish orange; blaeberrries (the favorite food of the grouse) would provide purples, browns and blues; over twenty different lichens gave him a wide range of subtle shades. If he was affluent or dyeing and weaving for a customer of some substance, he would seek more exotic imported colors of madder, cochineal, woad,

and indigo.

If the concept of clan tartans was born at Culloden, that fact wasn't universally known - in that battle there was no way of differentiating friend from foe by the tartan he wore. The only reliable method was with a colored ribbon or *sprig* – a bit of plant – each combatant used to adorn his bonnet to show the affiliation by clan. This habit is shown in Scottish heraldry today as a plant badge worn by followers to show loyalty to a chief. There is a contrary view that this was caused, not by lack of clan tartans, but by the Highlander's propensity for discarding his cumbersome philamhor (belted plaid) before charging into the fray in his long shirt or *lein* and needed to show some unique form of identification.

After Culloden and the vicious repression that followed throughout the Highlands, the Government determined to destroy the Clan System and raised an Act of Parliament known as the “The Disarming Act”, one of the laws was to make the wearing of tartan a penal offence for the next 36 years until 1782. This proscription, however, applied only to common Highland men - not the upper echelons of Highland society, not to Lowland Scots and not to women. But most importantly, it did not apply to the Highland regiments that were being formed in the Government's army.

Clan Identification and Tartan

William Wilson and Sons established 1760 at Bannockburn near Stirling, was relatively unaffected by the ban on tartan (1746 – 1782) and continued to mass-produce setts of tartan for the military and upper classes. Wilson's "Key Pattern Book" of 1819 documents weaving instructions for more than 200 tartans - many of them tentatively named - produced at their Bannockburn dye works and weaving sheds.

There is no evidence that Wilson's Tartans had anything whatever to do with any ancient district or pre-1746 patterns.

Tartans worn at the battles of Sheriffmuir or earlier have almost all been lost forever. In 1816, an attempt was made to match clan to 'true' tartan. Tartans were gathered but these had more to do with regimental uniforms and Wilson's successful marketing than

Wilson & Sons 1819

any older patterns. But the idea that Tartan and Clan were paired had become firmly established.

When the restrictive laws were repealed in 1782, there was a resurgence of Scottish nationalism. Efforts to restore the spirit and culture of the Highlands after the lengthy period of repression were encouraged by the new Highland Societies in London (1778) and Edinburgh (1780).

A number of District tartans were registered in the late 1700s, including the Strathspey, adopted by Clan Grant in 1795.

Thanks to the personal planning of Sir Walter Scott, the 1822 visit of King George IV to Edinburgh was to see Highland Chiefs persuaded to attend the levee and other functions, attired in their Clan tartans (some wouldn't go). Almost overnight, tartan became popular. Families who probably had never before worn tartan, (and despised Highlanders, to boot) became the proud wearers of registered family tartans. Sir Walter's romanticizing of tartan in his novels also helped make clan and tartan become synonymous across the British Isles.

Another great boost to tartan came from Queen Victoria and her consort - Prince Albert. They fell in love with Balmoral - the royal residence on Deeside – along with tartan and *all* things Highland. Prince Albert designed the now world-famous Balmoral tartan. The royal couple bedecked room after room with it, further consolidating the Victorians' romanticized view of the 'noble' Highlanders.

A TOAST TAE THE TARTAN

**Gentlemen - Here's tae it!
The fightin' sheen o' it,
The yellow, the green o' it,
The white, the blue o' it,
The swing, the hue o' it,
The dark, the red o' it,
Every thread o' it.**

**The fair hae sighed fer it,
The brave hae died fer it,
Foemen sought fer it,
Heroes fought fer it.
Honor the name o' it,
Drink tae the fame o' it –
THE TARTAN.
(Murdoch Maclean)**

Over the last fifty years or so, tartan has developed into a multi-million pound industry dominated by a few large mills. Today, tartan holds a unique place in the annals of textile history and has come to symbolize, along with the kilt and bagpipes, the cultural identity of the whole Scottish nation.

One thing Murdoch MacLean forgot in his poem was – ***'Be Proud o' It'***

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