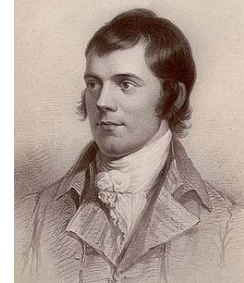




Robert Burns and Tartan



"It is a matter of recorded fact that Robert Burns wore tartan."

Such an assertion may sound like fighting talk to some, but Willie Scobie has been focussing his research and analytical skills on the Lowland Bard. Here he puts to flight, those who have always scorned any connection between Burns and tartan.

"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 despite 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...”

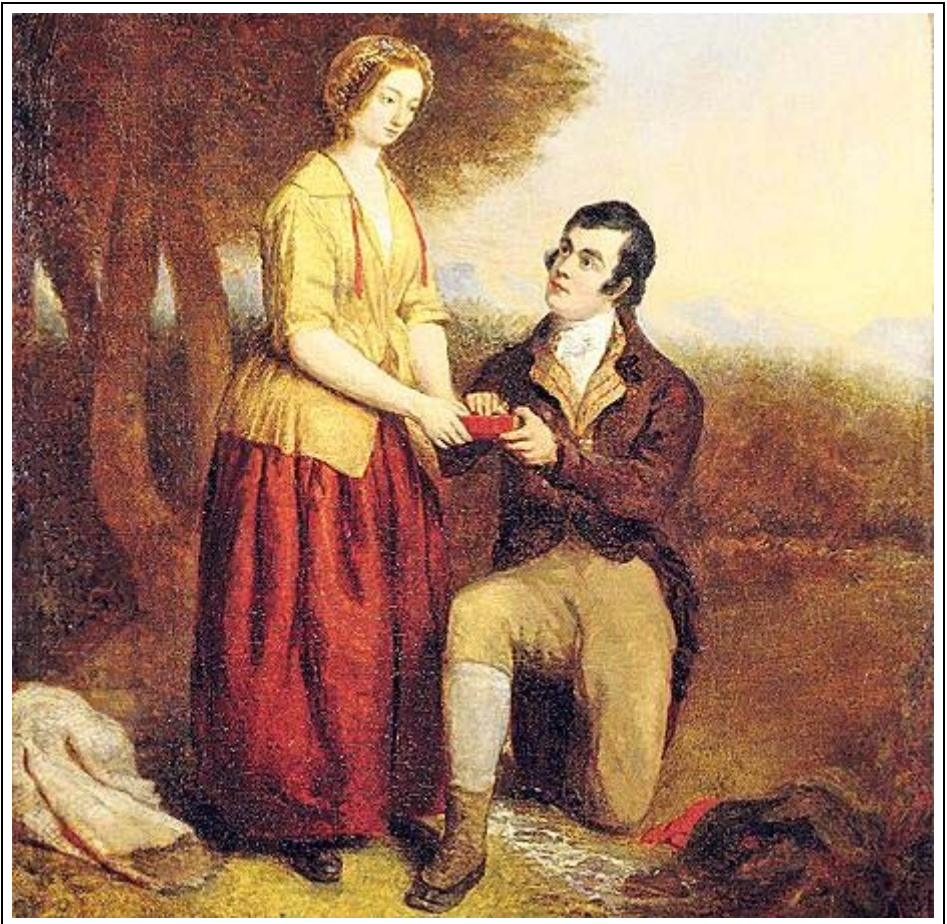
We also know from Pennant that, during the life of Burns, Kilmarnock had a tartan industry. The Old Statistical Accounts were written by parish ministers in the 1790s. In the passages we have quoted they are describing the clothing of their parishioners as worn over previous decades, with a gradual change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

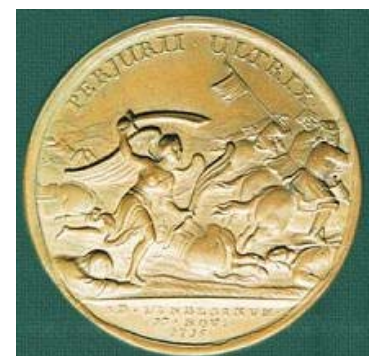
“With his philibeg an’ tartan plaid,
An’ guid claymore down by his side,
The ladies’ hearts he did trepan,
My gallant, braw John Highlandman.”
(The Jolly Beggars)



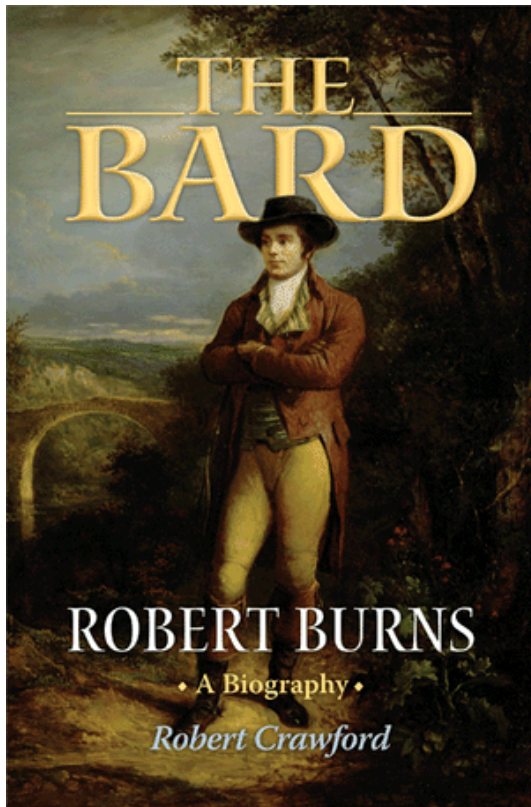
An 1844 painting by Charles Lucy.
'The Parting of Robert Burns and his Mary',
Ed. Is that a plaid I see before me? (bottom left)

“An’ Lord! if ance they pit her till’t,
Her tartan petticoat she’ll kilt,
An’ durk 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)



Right: A medal struck in 1715 by the Duke of Argyll who regarded himself the victor at Sherrifmuir. Notice the kilts on the fleeing horsemen.



*“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 blows 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 grandmother 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” (Wilson’s 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



A 1950’s postcard “Burns & Highland Mary” whose originator obviously thought that Burns and tartan were ‘thegither.’ Burns appears to be wearing the familiar Shepherd’s Plaid.

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!