

Origins of the MacColl Tartan

Introduction

The concept of clan tartans dates to the early 19th century. Amongst the numerous clan and family tartans that exist today, only a few can be dated back before 1782 and the Repeal of the Dress Act.¹ The MacColl tartan is one of these rare patterns. Although it was not named as such until the late 19th century extant specimens of the tartan now known as MacColl, dating to the mid-18th century attest to the antiquity of the design.

In the late 18th century, the firm William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn wove a version this tartan with a broad central stripe under the name 'Old Bruce' c.1790 (Fig 1). Some thirty years later they had clearly forgotten when and where they acquired the design.² The tartan has even been claimed to have been used for the wedding dress worn by the Highland heroine, Flora MacDonald; the is claim discussed later in this paper.

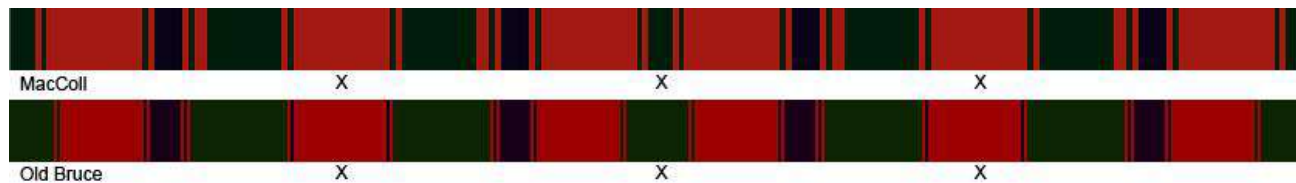


Fig. 1 Comparison of the setting differences between the MacColl and Old Bruce tartans with pivots marked 'X'.

A MacColl Tartan

The Clan MacColl had an historical association with the area around Loch Fyne in modern day Argyll and Bute. Clan MacColl is considered by some to be a branch of Clan Donald (MacDonald); because of this, many MacColls historically wore the MacDonald tartan. The clan lost their chief during a battle with the MacPhersons in 1603 and has been without a chief since. This explains D. C. Stewart's comment that *'No MacColl tartan is represented in any early work on the subject'*.¹

Writing in *Cuairtear*, the Journal of the Clan MacColl Society,³ the Hon. Treasurer, Hugh G. MacColl, noted that *'Until the beginning of this century the present MacColl tartan was very little known. The set (sic) was first brought to light by a tartan expert, Mr Murdo MacLeod MacDonald, who found patterns of it in the hands of an old weaver and amongst warehouses in Glasgow. One draft is said to be dated 1857. Another draft is said to be a copy of one which is at least 86 years old,⁴ having been copied from a piece of material, still older, which is now unfortunately lost. A piece of the tartan is to be found in Mr. MacDonald's collection of tartans which on his death was purchased by Wm. Anderson & Son Ltd., Edinburgh, in whose possession it now is. Most of the principal tartan warehouses in Glasgow have patterns made as MacColl tartan about 1880.'* Unfortunately, Wm. Anderson (now Kinloch Anderson Ltd) have no record of Mr MacDonald's collection and it is therefore impossible to identify or date the specimen. Comments on the weaving drafts suggests that one or

¹ The Dress Act prohibited the wearing of Highland clothes by men and boys other than those in the army. It did not ban the wearing of tartan per se but the commercial growth of tartan for civilian use only began after the lifting of the ban in 1782. The Act of Proscription is discussed in more detail in this companion paper - [http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Act_of_Proscription_1746 - The Tartan Ban - Fact or Myth.pdf](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Act_of_Proscription_1746_-_The_Tartan_Ban_-_Fact_or_Myth.pdf)

² Wilsons' note in their 1819 Key Pattern Book says *"This is perhaps the Clan Bruce Tartan, or what is more likely it may have been named after King Robert Bruce; both only suppositions. Named 'old' to distinguish it from the other Bruce patterns."*

³ *Cuairtear* Vol. 5, No.2. (September 1936).

⁴ That would date the older piece to c.1850.

more pattern did exist before 1900 but again, their disappearance means that the inferred earlier date cannot be verified.

In the early 20th century, the Clan Society was active in the official recognition of the pattern as the clan tartan by lodging a piece with the Highland Society of London (Plate 1). That sample was a modern copy of the specimen they referred to as the 'Lochaber Pattern', of which more later. Today, modern manufacturers produce the MacColl in only three colours: red; blue and green, despite the Lochaber Pattern and the officially sanctioned version including a fourth, brown.

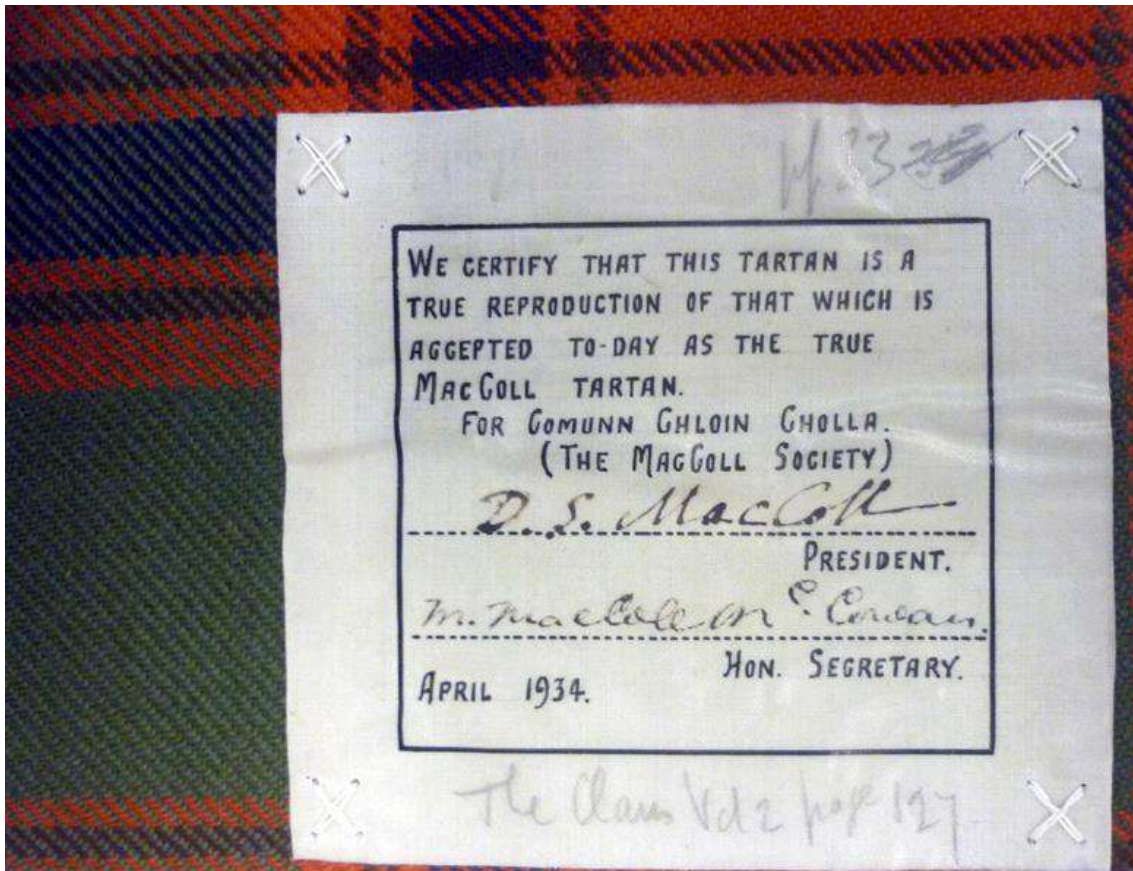


Plate. 1 MacColl Tartan in the Highland Society of London Collection, 1934 © The Author.

The Lochaber Pattern (Glencoe Folk Museum Specimen)

MacKay's 1924 *The Romantic Story of the Highland Garb*ⁱⁱ Included a picture of the tartan labelled *MacDonell of Glengarry* of which he said that:

"The pattern of tartan is from an old fragment picked up in Lochaber many years ago as the full-dress Glengarry. It is certainly very old, also made of the old native wool, and home dyed. That it is a MacDonald, we have no doubt, and we feel safe in suggesting it as the Glengarry full-dress. The design is on the same plan as the Sleat, Clan Ranald and Keppoch."

Regretfully, MacKay gave no details of exactly where in Lochaber or from whom he obtained the fragment. A later edition of the *Journal of the Clan MacColl Society*⁵ noted that they were in negotiation with MacKay to purchase '.... the oldest known known piece of MacColl Tartan. This piece was described as "the Lochaber Pattern".....'

⁵ Cuairtear Vol 5, No.3 (January 1937).

As discussed, the Society had the pattern copied and submitted a piece to the Highland Society of London. They acquired the original specimen from MacKay in 1937 and subsequently donated it to the Glencoe Folk Museum (GFM) by which time the story of it being from Flora MacDonald's wedding dress had been attributed to it⁶. The size of the Glencoe specimen is relatively small, approx. 12" x 13", and the sett size large, meaning that the piece is insufficient on its own to allow confirmation of the sett. One pivot, the triple green stripe, is obvious but the remainder beyond the broad green bar is unclear. Writing of the MacColl tartan, Hugh MacColl⁷ stressed the importance of the relative proportions of the fine brown⁸ and green lines but failed to observe that MacKay's plate was deficient because it rendered all the fine lines as green despite him having the actual specimen (Fig 2.)



Fig. 2 Comparison of the 'Lochaber Pattern' setting with that from MacKay's plate which omitted the brown lines.

In addition to the incorrect colour make up, MacKay's picture (Plate 2) only showed part of the pattern or sett, as does the Lochaber specimen that he copied (Plate 3). Whilst the section shown by MacKay is technically correct, it is not clear if the second pivot was assumed to be the broad green as the Lochaber specimen might suggest, or the correct pivot on the broad red. The latter, as shown in Fig. 1, was confirmed by a record of a larger specimen that was displayed at the International Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938. Both were obviously cut from the same original length. Presumably, the larger segment was not available to MacKay at the time of his publication which points to him having obtained the Lochaber Pattern from a different source.



Plate. 2 MacDonnell of Glengarry (Full Dress)
MacKay, 1924



Plate. 3 The Lochaber Pattern
Photo: EF Williams

⁶ Cuairtear Vol. 7, No.20. (September 1938).

⁷ Cuairtear Vol. 5, No.2. (September 1936)

⁸ In the Lochaber Pattern the majority of the fine lines are brown with only those that are part of the triple-stripe pivot being green.

West Highland Museum Specimen

Amongst the specimens of early tartans in the collection in the West Highland Museum⁹ (WHM) is a piece that tradition associates with being from Flora MacDonald's wedding dress (Plate 4). The WHM and GFM¹⁰ specimens are clearly part of the same original material. Two other pieces are known from early 20th century correspondence, but their current whereabouts is not, nor whether they survive.



Plate. 4 WHM specimen said to be from Flora MacDonald's Wedding Dress. Photo: EF Williams.

According to the MacColl Society, the WHM piece was larger when displayed in 1938.

"The tartan is undoubtedly a pattern of what is now known as MacColl tartan; it is 23 inches across from selvedge to selvedge and 17¹/₂ inches long; and out of one corner there has been cut a piece 7¹/₂ inches x 8 inches. The tartan is identical with the Lochaber Pattern except that it is much more faded and, in fact, it can clearly be demonstrated that the Lochaber Pattern has at one time been cut off from this piece as a corner diagonally opposite from where the piece 7¹/₂ inches x 8 inches has been cut. The cut is not quite straight and the irregularities in the cutting fit exactly when the two pieces are placed together; and the set of the tartan is then contiguous, thus providing further confirmation that both were originally one piece. The piece 7¹/₂ inches x 8 inches was we learn cut out of the Exhibition pattern about ten years ago (c1930) and given to Mr Wiseman MacDonald of Los Angeles, U.S.A¹¹. The cut is obviously very much more recent than the cut of the edge from which the Lochaber Pattern was removed. This fact, coupled with the fact that although for many years past both patterns have been kept in the dark, the exhibition pattern is faded to so much greater an extent would seem to indicate that the two patterns were separated very many years ago."

⁹ <https://www.westhighlandmuseum.org.uk/>

¹⁰ The stain on the fragment is ink from a later, unknown, date.

¹¹ The 'gift' was probably in recognition of Mr Wiseman MacDonald's philanthropy. In 1925 he bought the Castle Tioram, former seat of the Clanranald Macdonald's, and then spent a considerable amount of money preserving the castle.

Sometime after the International Exhibition Miss Macdonald¹² sold the L-shaped piece to a Glasgow antique dealer, Muirhead Moffat & Co; they in turn sold it to a Capt. David Nicholas, in 1942 for ten guineas¹³. As a condition of the sale the auctioneers, who described the piece as 'L-shaped', said that they wished to keep the smaller leg for their records and would cut it off before selling the larger part to Capt. Nicholas. It is the larger section that he donated it to the WHM in 1961 (Plate 4). The likely relationship of the pieces to each other is at Fig 3. The green section shows what is said to have been exhibited in 1938, the green hatched section being the piece retained by Muirhead Moffat & Co. The company is no longer in business and what happened to the smaller piece is not known.

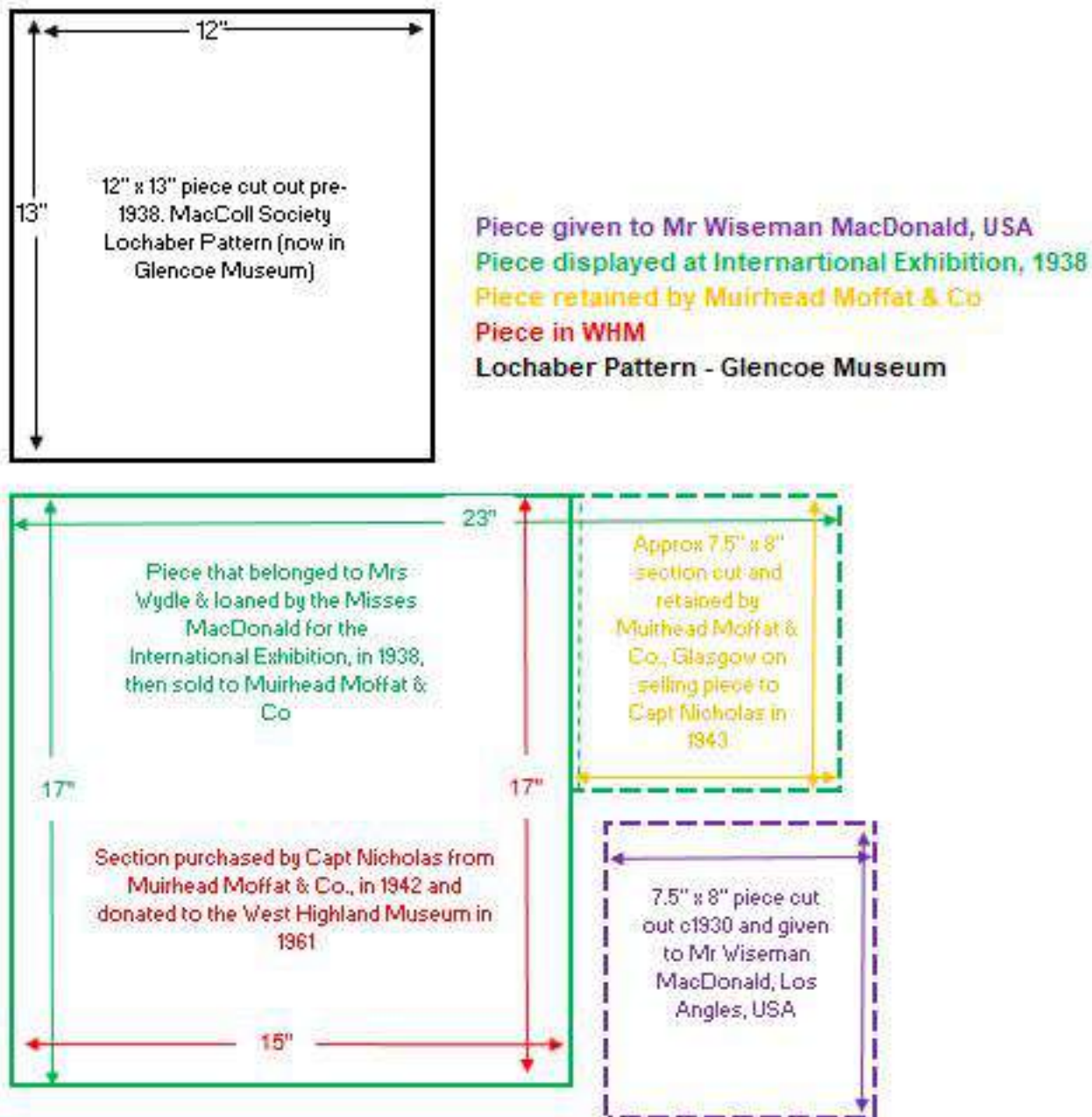


Fig. 3 Likely relationship of the known specimens to each other. © The Author

¹² Miss Flora A E MacDonald, daughter of Rev. A J MacDonald who'd been given the piece by Gen Macdonald.

¹³ A guineas was the equivalent to one Pound and one Shilling (£1. 1s), roughly £52 in today's value meaning the piece cost the equivalent of approximately £520 today.

Attribution to Flora MacDonald

The tradition that Flora MacDonald's wedding dress was tartan can be traced to MacGregor's 1882 work, 'The life of Flora Macdonald' where, writing of her wedding he says:ⁱⁱⁱ

"The bride, robed in a dress of Stuart tartan, with which she was presented when in London¹⁴ by a lady friend, on condition that she would wear it at her marriage, looked remarkably well."

There are a number of discrepancies in MacGregor's narrative of her life and this may be one such. He does not say which Stuart tartan, nor that the supposed tartan was red. The concept of named tartans as they are understood today did not exist in the mid-18th century and the claim is unreliable. Allan MacDonald of Belfinlay was more forthright in his criticism^{iv}:

"The marriage festivities were conducted on a very large scale, and, if we can believe Mr MacGregor, "lasted for the greater part of a week." This writer informs us that "the bride" was "robed in a dress of Stuart tartan with which she was presented when in London by a lady friend, on condition that she would wear it at her marriage," Mr MacGregor does not tell where he obtained this information, but the dress which has been preserved by her descendants as her wedding dress was made of black silk."¹⁵

If the family tradition of Flora's wedding dress having been black silk is correct, then these pieces clearly cannot have been part of it. This is supported by the inclusion of the herringbone selvedge in the cloth and the lack of evidence of any shaping or stitching. The structure of this piece argues against it having been used for any type of fitted clothing.

This specimen was loaned by the Rev. A. J. MacDonald's daughters¹⁶ to R. G. Lawrie Ltd and displayed on their stand at the Empire Exhibition held in Glasgow in 1938. At the time, the piece was larger and comprised the full width of the material selvedge-to-selvedge and featured the label that is still accompanies it (Plate 5).

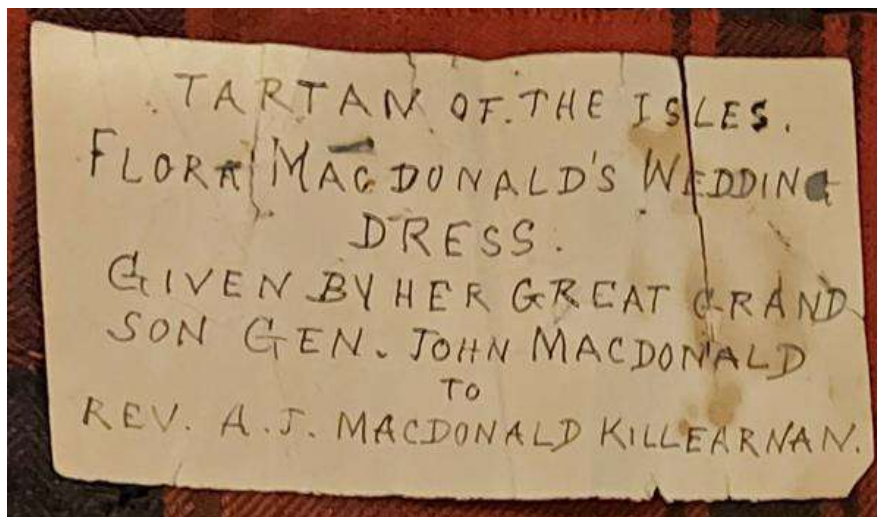


Plate 5. Label attached to the WHM specimen. Photo: West Highland Museum

¹⁴ Following her brief imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1746, Flora MacDonald was pardoned in June 1747 after which she returned to Scotland. She visited London again in Jun-Jul 1749 which is probably when she was painted by Allan Ramsay.

¹⁵ According to MacDonald, "Flora MacDonald's black silk marriage dress was in the possession of Miss Emily Livingston, Edinburgh (a great-great-granddaughter), until her death a few years ago. After her death it was taken by a relative to Vancouver, Canada." That would presumably have been the early 1900s and it may therefore still exist today.

¹⁶ Misses Flora and Diana Macdonald.

In a letter to Miss Macdonald, the MacColl Society noted that the label was modern and written by Messrs Lawrie for the 1938 Exhibition.¹⁷ On the back of the label written in pencil is “Mrs. Wylde, grand-daughter of Flora, gave this bit of tartan to her nephew General John Macdonald”.¹⁸ It is not known when and by whom the pencil note was written but the mention of Flora’s grand-daughter giving it to her nephew makes the Rev Macdonald or one of his daughters the most likely candidate.

Mrs Wylde was the authoress of the ‘Autobiography of Flora M’Donald’^v and ‘The life of Flora M’Donald.’^{vi} She was also a popular novelist which perhaps explains the somewhat romanticised ‘Autobiography’ of a grandmother she never met, and written despite there being no evidence that Flora MacDonald ever wrote an account of her life.¹⁹ Neither work mentions the wedding dress or tartan and unfortunately, she gives no clue of when and from where she acquired the specimen claimed to be part of the dress. There is, therefore, the very real possibility that the whole attribution of the piece being from Flora MacDonald’s the wedding dress is based on MacGregor’s 1882 work.

In the early 1890s an enterprising weaver, James MacBean from Lochcarron²⁰, was advertising that he wove the ‘Flora MacDonald Tartan Gown.’²¹ In one advert he made reference to the gown being popular in the mid-18th century (Plate 6). It seems unlikely that any self-respecting lady, let alone a royal, would want to wear an antique style dress in public in such a fashion-conscious age and it must be assumed that he meant the tartan and not the style of the dress,.



Plate 6. Flora MacDonald Gown Advert,- Northern Chronicle and General Advertiser for the North of Scotland - Wednesday 02 September 1891. Source: British Newspaper Archive. Accessed 11 Aug. 21

In 1893 MacBean sent a present of a *Flora Macdonald tartan gown* to Princess Mary of Teck as a marriage gift.²² Although many of the wedding gifts were displayed in an exhibition that year, MacBean’s tartan gown was not included.²³ Whilst it is not known what pattern MacBean was referring to, the name and the alleged age means it is possible that he was weaving this (the MacColl) tartan. How much earlier he was making the *Flora MacDonald Tartan Gown* is not known but assuming that it was the same (MacColl) pattern, then he must have had access to a specimen at some point.

¹⁷ Letter Hugh G MacColl to Miss (Flora) Macdonald date 25th October 1938.

¹⁸ Maj Gen John Macdonald, born at Salem, Madras, was a contemporary of the Rev MacDonald and so seems like the likely candidate.

¹⁹ Flora Frances Wylde was the daughter of John Macdonald (3rd son of Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh and Flora MacDonald, 1722-90) and Frances Maria Chambers, the daughter of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Judicature in Bengal. Her paternal grandmother and namesake was the Jacobite heroine Flora Macdonald (1722–1790) and Wylde edited Macdonald’s autobiography in 1870. She married Edward Randyll Wylde, R.N. and the couple lived in Cheltenham. After her husband died in 1853, Wylde turned to literature. Her first novel, *The Tablette Booke of Ladye Mary Keyes* (1861), professes to be the journal of Lady Jane Grey’s younger sister complete with Tutor grammar and spelling. Her second novel, *The Life and Wonderful Adventures of "Totty Testudo"* (1873), is the 200-year autobiography of a tortoise brought to Portugal. Her last novel, *The Widow Unmasked* (1875), is a more traditional domestic romance. She died in 1888 at home. Source: http://www.victorianresearch.org/atcl/show_author.php?aid=1786 - Accessed 26 Jul 21

²⁰ James MacBean had been a weaving in Inverness but started his own business in Lochcarron in 1883.

²¹ In an 1893 advertisement MacBean described himself as the ‘royal tartan weaver’ despite having no Royal Warrant.

²² Mary of Teck married Prince George Frederick Ernest Albert, later King George V, on 6 July 1893.

²³ Email correspondence MacDonald-Royal Archive, August 2021.

The Cloth

The cloth is typical of mid-18th century rurally produced tartan. It was woven at 50 ends per inch (epi) using singles (unplied thread) in the warp and weft. No dye analysis has been conducted on either piece but if tested, it is probable that the dyes were those typically used in 18th century rural tartan; cochineal and indigo for the red and blue respectively; indigo and an unknown yellow source for the green; and an unknown brown dyestuff. Throughout the WHM specimen the brown in the weft is cockled, this is indicative of that yarn being spun more tightly (Plate 8). The sample is too small to determine whether this was a feature of the whole length of cloth but the lack of evidence in the corresponding warp threads may indicate that the weaver ran out of the brown yarn whilst weaving and that a second batch was required in order to finish the piece.



Plate. 7 Detail of the WHM specimen showing the cockling in the brown weft yarn. Photo E F Williams

What neither MacKay (1924) or the MacColl Society (1938) mentioned was the fact that the blue bar at the edge is slightly broader than the other blue bars and comprises 5 bars of herringbone weave and finishing with a narrow red. In this case it is formed by extending the blue bar at the edge of the large red square from 36 to 46 threads and includes four bars of irregular herringboning that start on the eleventh blue thread (Plate 8).



Plate 8. Detail of the herringbone selvedge mark. Photo: E F Williams

This threading suggests that the warp was tied onto a previous length rather than the herringboning threaded specifically for this piece. The last 8 threads of blue follow the standard twill weave direction and finished with 12 red; the last 2 ends being threaded through the same heddle. This layout makes the herringboning appear broader than it actually is (Fig 4). It would be technically better balance if the herringboning had been 50 threads that started with a change of direction on the first blue and arranged as 5 bars of 10 threads followed by the final red stripe. The result would have been a balanced herringbone that fits the width of the selvedge mark (Fig 5).



Fig. 4 Original selvedge mark with irregular herringboning starting on B11.



Fig. 5 Revised selvedge mark with a balanced herringboning starting on B1.

This type of ‘selvedge mark’ is typical of 18th century plaiding that is found on many surviving examples c.1730-70. In such pieces, the warp was usually off-set with the other selvedge being 2/2 twill, like the body of the cloth, and finishing on a pivot so that two lengths could be joined to make a plaid/broad cloth.²⁴ Whilst there is no evidence that this piece was ever joined to make a wider piece, had it been, the whole piece would have been approximately 46 inches with six half setts and a herringbone selvedge on each side.

The piece exhibited in 1938 was the full-width of the material, selvedge to selvedge, however; the two museum specimens were cut from the same side of the cloth meaning that the second selvedge is a matter of speculation. Both the Wiseman and Muirhead Moffat & Co., specimens are believed to have been cut from the other side and should therefore be able to confirm the second selvedge, if one or other could be located. In the absence of either it is possible to reconstruct the setting of the original cloth based on the reported width and surviving examples of similar tartans.²⁵ It is likely therefore that the pattern was off-set with three half setts across the warp and continued into the fourth sett to finish with a blue herringbone selvedge and final red stripe. The other selvedge would have been in the middle of the broad red pivot. Assuming that arrangement, it is possible to position the WHM and GFM pieces relevant to the warp (Plate 9).

The speculated setting of the original warp is supported by a remarkable discovery by the author during a visit to the WHM to examine the ‘Flora MacDonald wedding dress specimen’ in 2021. Amongst some other specimens examined was a length of what appeared to be early 19th century cloth²⁶ in essentially the same pattern and which was similarly *off-set with three half setts across the warp and continued into the fourth sett to finish with a blue herringbone selvedge and final red stripe*. The green pivot in the C19th cloth is narrower than in the older specimen and the guard stripes are brown rather than the original green. In addition, the guards to the blue bar are brown in the original and blue in the later piece. Finally, the brown stripe before the herringbone in the original is blue in the later specimen and the number of threads in the selvedge differs (Fig. 6) and (Plate 10).



Fig 6. Comparison of the settings of the 18th and 19th century specimens.

²⁴ The traditional method for weaving and joining cloth for plaids is discussed here - http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Joined_Plaids.pdf

²⁵ An example is this length of plaiding of a similar pattern - <http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/A-length-of-Unnamed-C18th-Plaiding.pdf>

²⁶ Listed as ‘Old hard tartan plaid, green and red, 3 yards 2" x 26". 3 pieces sewn together”



Plate. 9 The WHM and GFM specimens aligned to the likely warp arrangement. © The Author



Plate. 10 Comparison of the 18th and 19th century specimens at the WHM. Photo: E F Williams

There is no other known example of an 18th century red based tartan with brown stripes, the original pattern appears to be unique. Notwithstanding the slight differences in the setting, it is the opinion of the author that the later piece was intended as a reconstruction of the original. The discrepancies can be explained by the weaver of the later piece either working from second-hand information that was faulty, or working from an incomplete specimen. One can only speculate, but the fact that the 19th century piece has the same overall layout as that estimated for the older one favours the idea that the later weaver was working from a faulty threadcount.

It is not known who wove the material but the shades, quality and width²⁷ is consistent with Wilsons of Bannockburn's *Fine Cloth* which was popular c.1820. There were a number of other weavers producing tartan around that time, including James MacBean in Lochcarron, who might also have woven this piece.

The Sett

The MacColl tartan can be described as a red based tartan with alternating plain and decorated pivots, the latter comprising a triple stripe; a broad one guarded by two narrower ones. There are a number of other surviving 18th century examples of the basic design (Fig. 7) which appears to have been popular in the Appin/Lorn area.²⁸ In every case, the pattern included a blue herringbone selvedge mark and a final red stripe. The design was the basis for a number of early 19th patterns including the Munro and Dalziel tartans.

²⁷ It was woven at 54 epi and is 25½ inches wide,

²⁸ Appin and Lorn (or Lorne) are part of what is now Argyll & Bute.

http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/Evidence_for_a_Regional_Motif_in_old_Tartans_from_Appin_&_Lorn.pdf

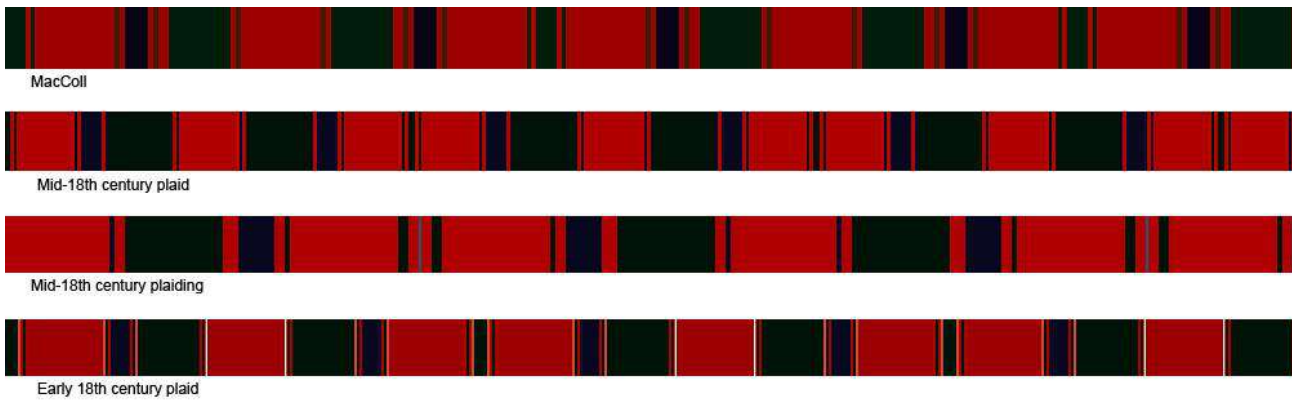


Fig. 7 Comparison of the setting of the MacColl and three other 18th century tartans showing a similar structure.

The Glencoe Folk Museum has a mid-18th century joined plaid that has a similar setting as the Lochaber Pattern (MacColl) tartan but in only two colours, red and green. As is so often the case with old pieces, nothing is known about the origins of the plaid which includes a herringbone selvedge. Comparison of the two reveals close similarities in design and construction, these are so close that they raise the tantalising possibility that they are in some way connected, perhaps from the same weaver or local area (Plate 11).



Plate. 11 Comparison of the Lochaber Pattern and an Unidentified Plaid in the Glencoe Folk Museum.
Photo: E F Williams

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the WHM and GFM specimens are from the same piece of cloth and that structure is consistent with mid-18th century rurally spun, dyed and woven tartan c1730-70. Based on the description of the section displayed at the 1938 International Exhibition, the original cloth was

23" wide. The inclusion of a herringbone selvedge mark points to the pattern having been offset with the other selvedge being standard twill-weave. This arrangement results in the pattern repeating correctly if two sections of plaiding are joined and makes it likely that the original material was either a joined plaid or a length of plaiding intended for joining. The basic design is shared by a number of other surviving 18th century specimens which suggests that it was a popular design, especially in the Appin and Lorn (Lochaber) area.

The 1938 section was but a small portion of what would have been a longer length or garment. Regrettably, the specimen was further divided by Muirhead, Moffat & Co in 1942 and the section that they retained, which included the second (twill) selvedge, subsequently disappeared. Despite this, surviving examples of plaids of a similar design, together with the reported selvedge to selvedge width, allows the pattern of the full width to be reconstructed with a high degree of certainty.²⁹ If the specimen given to Mr Wiseman MacDonald c.1930 could be located it would confirm the supposition. However, the early C19th length in the WHM of what is thought to have been a reconstruction further supports this arrangement.

Evidence to support this tartan, and in particular the pieces of material at the WHM and GFM, being from Flora MacDonald's wedding dress, is unreliable. The claim appears to be based on MacGregor's account that she wore an unidentified Stuart tartan at a time before clan tartans existed. The claim has a ring of Victorian romance about it, a theme that pervades MacGregor's 1882 work. MacKay (1924) made no mention of Flora MacDonald in connection with the 'Lochaber Pattern', nor did the Clan MacColl Society at the time they purchased it (1937). The later attribution to her seems to have occurred after the specimen was donated to the GFM. It is not known what narrative was attached to the specimen given to Mr Wiseman MacDonald but it and the Lochaber Pattern show that the original cloth had been divided by the early 20th century and probably much earlier. The first definitive reference to the tartan and specimens being from Flora's wedding dress is from the label accompanying the specimen show at the 1938 Glasgow Exhibition. It was also the first reference to the specimen having belonged to Mrs Wylde and Gen, Macdonald, Flora's grand-daughter and grand-nephew respectively. The family tradition that Flora MacDonald wore a black silk dress further undermines the credibility in the tartan wedding dress claim which is unreliable and almost certainly erroneous.

There is circumstantial evidence to link the original tartan with the MacDonalds, MacKay certainly thought so, albeit not Flora MacDonald, a MacDonald of Sleat, but either the MacDonalds of Glengarry, or Keppoch, both of which had lands in Lochaber. This connection is reflected in the Glencoe Folk Museum's acquisition card which listed the Lochaber Pattern as '*Tartan (MacDonald) on loan from Clan MacColl Society*'.

Irrespective of the original owner, the tartan was adopted by the MacColls in the 1930s and may have used by them for some time earlier too. The tartan is usually reproduced incorrectly by modern weavers who omit the fine brown lines in favour of green throughout. Technically, that means it's not the MacColl tartan as authorised by the clan in 1934. In order to preserve this pattern correctly for future generations it would be preferable if they encouraged manufacturers to revert to the original sett rather than the simply three coloured version.

Acknowledgement:

The author would like to thank the Glencoe Folk Museum and West Highland Museum for allowing access to examine the various specimens and information concerning their acquisition.

²⁹ Of the many surviving 18th century examples examined by the author, in only two is the warp not arranged to allow the pattern to repeat when joined. These are the exception to the normal practice but whether they were the result of design or miscalculation is not known.

-
- ⁱ **STEWART D. C.**, 1972 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*, Second Edition, Shepheard-Walwyn, London
- ⁱⁱ **MACKAY J. G.**, 1924 *The Romantic Story of Highland Garb*. Aneas MacKay, Stirling
- ⁱⁱⁱ **MACGREGOR A.**, 1882 *The Life of Flora Macdonald and Her Adventures with Prince Charles*, Edinburgh
- ^{iv} **MACDONALD A. R. of Belfinlay and Waternish**, 1938 *The Truth About Flora MacDonald*, Northern Chronicle, Inverness
- ^v **MACDONALD, F. and WYLDE FF.** 1870. *The autobiography of Flora M'Donald, being the home life of a heroine*, W.P. Nimmo. Edinburgh
- ^{vi} **MACDONALD, F. and WYLDE FF.** 1875. *The life of Flora M'Donald*. W.P. Nimmo. London

© Peter Eslea MacDonald September 2021