

An Unnamed C18th Specimen from Bridge of Cally

Introduction

In Nov 2004 I was loaned an old piece of 'Hard Tartan' for comment. The owner knew little is known of its origins, he owned the specimen for a long time having been given it by a colleague many years earlier. In turn, the colleague is thought to have obtained the sample in Edinburgh perhaps as early as c1950-60. The specimen (Plate 1) was mounted on a piece of fine card on which 'Old Sett' and '84' were written in pencil. The elegant looped hand writing is of a style that was common before the 1930s which, together with the number, suggests that the piece may have been part of a collection compiled at some point prior to that date: possibly that of Alexander Carmichael or John Telfer Dunbar. Examination of the piece, and dye analysis of other examples of a similar antiquity, suggests that the dyestuffs used in this sample were cochineal (red) and indigo (blues) plus an unknown yellow source used in combination with indigo for the green. The specimen was twill weave and woven @ 40 epi using singles in both warp and weft; it measures roughly 22 x 15 cms with one of the shorter edges being a selvedge.



Plate 1. Unnamed fragment examined in 2004. © The Author

A Remarkable Coincidence

In February 2013 the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA) was donated two short lengths of tartan that exactly matched the 2004 specimen and which examination revealed was undoubtedly off the same web. The chances of such a coincident are rare enough but the donation to the STA was accompanied by information about the material's origins including who made it, where and when. The donor claimed that the material had been woven by her forebear, Janet Spalding in 1770, when she farmed/crofted at Braes of Clayquhat (now *Cloquhat*) near Bridge of Cally, Perthshire (Plate 2).



Plate 2. Section of plaiding showing the setting. © The Author

From the STA donation it is possible to deduce a great deal more about the original material that was apparent from the earlier fragment. The two pieces measure 62 and 51 inches long respectively by 22 inches wide and the cloth was woven with four half setts across the warp. Although the sett appears balanced; that is, it repeats equally in both directions from the centre to the selvages, it is in fact slightly off-set with one selvedge (right above) being the pivot or centre of the large red square whilst on the other side the red is slightly extended and comprises 4 bands of alternating 12 thread chevron (Plate 3). Chevron selvages, as opposed to herringbone ones, on C18th plaids were extremely unusual and this is only the second known example.



Fig 3. Detail of the chevron selvedge. © The Author

Being off-set the material was clearly woven so that it could be cut and joined to make a 44 inch plaid in which the sett would repeat correctly across the whole width.

One end of one of the pieces is rolled and sewn in the traditional way (Plate 4); the other three ends are frayed. There is no evidence that the two lengths were ever joined and it is likely that the material was finished at both ends, used single width and divided subsequently.



Plate 4. Turned and sewn end. © The Author

Dyes Used

Although no dye analysis has been carried out, the shades are consistent with the traditional natural dyes: Cochineal = red, Indigo = dark and light blues, and Indigo plus an unknown yellow = green. Throughout the piece the colours have not taken to yarn evenly, a fact evident in Plates 3 and 4, which is the result of the yarn having been spun from fleece in which the kemp¹ had not been removed, a fact that supports the rural, non-commercial production of the piece.

The Setting

A number of similar counts for different specimens have been recorded over the years:

R/2 LB6 B4 R12 G36 B4 R/46 – from the sample loaned to the writer and confirmed in the STA pieces.

R/2 LB6 B4 R12 G36 LB4 R/46 - count from the Mss version of the Smith Bros' 1850 work *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland*.

R/2 LB6 B4 R16 G48 N4 R/60 - scale by James McKinlay from a sample in the Marquis of Bute's Collection.

¹ Brittle, dead, fibres in a sheep's fleece which is desirable as it does not accept dye.

There is clearly a very close resemblance between all three of these tartans, so much so in fact, that one has to question whether the latter two were actually mis-recordings of the former. However, the fact that both record the stripe at the edge of the large red as being LB (light blue) or N (gray) and, if one accepts that the N (not a traditional colour) was probably a mistake for LB and referred to the same specimen, then I'm inclined to conclude that they recorded a different piece of what is basically the same tartan but for the shade of thin blue line bordering the large red square. The fact that the count for McKinlay's sample has slightly different proportions is explained by the fact that he did not count the threads but measured the stripes and squares and multiplied by 4 to give the number of threads. It is possible that he measured the third sample accurately, but equally possible that he made a measuring/calculation error. Presumably the sample that he measures is extant and still in the Bute Collection in which case it would simply be a matter of checking it to confirm the threadcount. Unfortunately, the collection is no longer thought to be at Mount Stuart on Rothesay,² nor is its location known and so is not possible to verify McKinlay's scale. Regrettably there is no information on the current whereabouts of either that or the sample that the Smiths recorded in their Mss and so we would have been left to wonder about the settings, origins and possible connection of the latter two specimens.

Structurally, this design has similarities to the Stewart of Fingask, another old Perthshire tartan but that may be nothing more than coincidence.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the specimen I examined in 2004 was an off-cut of the material recently donated to the STA. One can only speculate why it was cut off but it would not be the first example of a plaid that was cut up so that later family members had a piece of their *family plaid* as a heritage keepsake. Assuming that that was the case with this plaid that does not make this a Spalding or Craigie³ tartan but rather an old plaid that belonged to that particular family.

This is a fine example of a piece of 18th century tartan and one of a handful of surviving ones that date to the Proscription era which may help explain why the piece was never joined although at 44 inches wide a joined plaid would be too short to be used as an adult belted plaid. The quality of the material suggests that the length was not woven by a novice, a loom was not a general household item normally associated with a farm and it is quite possible that whilst the wool was spun and dyed by Janet Spalding that the actual weaving was done by a local professional weaver. Unfortunately nothing further is known about this piece which, allowing for its quality and the period it was made, must have been a significant family piece and was perhaps intended for a wedding gift or something similar.

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² Many of the Bute samples were collected from the west coast and islands and it may be that this design originated from there.

³ Janet Spalding was married to Peter Craigie but kept her maiden name in the traditional Scottish manner.