

Culloden Tartan

Introduction

The Culloden tartan is well known to many, not only because of its vivid colouring but also because of the story surrounding its origin which associated it with the battle in 1746. It is therefore amongst the oldest surviving designs known and one of a small number of surviving tartans that date to the period of the last Jacobite Rising.

First shown in D. W. Stewart's (DWS) *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans* (1893),ⁱ the design has been widely reproduced since. In his forward, Stewart claimed that *'The method adopted in the present work has been to weave the tartan to be represented in its proper colours in fine silk. The shades required for each specimen having been dyed, the weaving was executed by the hand-loom in exact proportion to the original'*. From this statement one might therefore assume that his silk plates were accurate copies of the specimens lent for the book.

The writer had long suspected that the tartan of the original coat was not the bright shades shown by DWS and that the dark yellow and purple of his plate (Plate 1) would more likely to have been green and blue respectively. Scarlett also raised this as a possibility although he speculated that Stewart had copied a piece that had faded to the shades shown.ⁱⁱ

Despite having seen a copy of the coat¹ (albeit in a different tartan) made for the artist Wm. Skeoch Cumming c.1900, the key to determining the original shades was to find the original one. This was something that had alluded this writer for over 30 years. However, a chance discovery cast new light on the design and shows that what has been produced for years as an accurate reproduction is fundamentally incorrect.

The Original Coat

During a visit to the newly refurbished Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow in 2007 the writer was astonished to see an item on display that was instantly recognisable as the Culloden Coat (Plate 2). The artefact had been identified by the National Museum of Scotland as a fine example of an 18th Century tartan jacket some years ago but no-one had recognised the tartan and therefore made the connection with Stewart's design.



Plate 1. Coat worn at Culloden. Old & Rare, 1893

¹ The copy was in the collection of the Scottish Tartans Society.



Plate 2. Culloden Coat. Photo: Kelvingrove Museum

Even though the colours and proportions of the original tartan differ markedly from those DWS depicted there is no doubt that it is the same coat. The colours were more like those that the author had suspected would have been the case. The original green is quite faded and very mossy, almost khaki but clearly nothing like the vivid gold colour that Stewart depicts, nor would it have been then. The style of the coat is typical of examples seen in portraits of the period. It would probably have been worn with trews and is cut for equestrian use.

Very little is known of the Coat's origins. From the structure of the material, dyes, style etc., it is possible to state that it is contemporary with the period of the '45. The quality and workmanship of the coat suggests that it belonged to someone of rank; that might have been anyone from a chief or prominent clansman to a wealthy Jacobite supporter. At present it is not known where the cloth was dyed and/or woven, whether that was in the Highlands, or even Scotland.

Ownership of the coat can be dated with a degree of certainty to c.1840-45 but it is unlikely that its ownership during the previous 100 years will ever be determined. At the time Stewart wrote his *Old & Rare* (c.1890) the artefact belonged to Gourlay Steell RSA (1804-91), who loaned it for the book. It had previously belonged to James Drummond RSA (1816-77), and before him to W.B. Johnston RSA (1804-68). Before Johnston it may well have belonged to the family of the individual that is said to have worn it at Culloden but there is no information on who he, and thus the family, was. It is therefore impossible to associate the coat with any particular clan, family or area. The artist Skeoch Cumming copied the coat, albeit in a different tartan, and used it as the basis for one or more of the coats in his painting *The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans, 1745* (Plate 3). The original coat was donated to the Kelvingrove Museum & Art Gallery, Glasgow c.1990 by a Dr Hendry from Glasgow but nothing more is known about when and where he obtained it.



Plate 3. The prayer for victory, Battle of Prestonpans, 1745 Wm. Skeoch Cumming

The Sett

Stewart did not include threadcounts in his work and merely stated that the proportions were correct. However, based on the plate in his son, D. C. Stewartⁱⁱⁱ (DCS) gave a threadcount in which he described the purple as Heliotrope,² a non-standard tartan colour term. Comparison with the original shows DWS's version to be incorrect in both colour and proportions (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Comparison of D. W. Stewart's setting with the original. © The Author

² <https://www.color-name.com/heliotrope.color>

Comparing the two settings, a number of differences are apparent:

- The two main ground colours shown by Stewart are wrong. The originals are green and blue as opposed to Stewart's yellow and purple.
- The pivot stripes of the original are twice the size shown by Stewart and thus proportionally more dominant compared with the ground colours.
- The ground colours (blue, black & green) are broader in the original so making the light blue stripes appear less dominant.
- Finally, the white stripe that divides the black and blue is twice the size of the guard stripes to the pivots, whereas the Stewarts shows them all to be four threads.

Stewart's plate is also defective in that it includes a weaving error in which one of the light blue pivot guard stripes is wider than the other (Plate 5). This error is not found in the original material and its inclusion belies DWS's claim of accuracy.

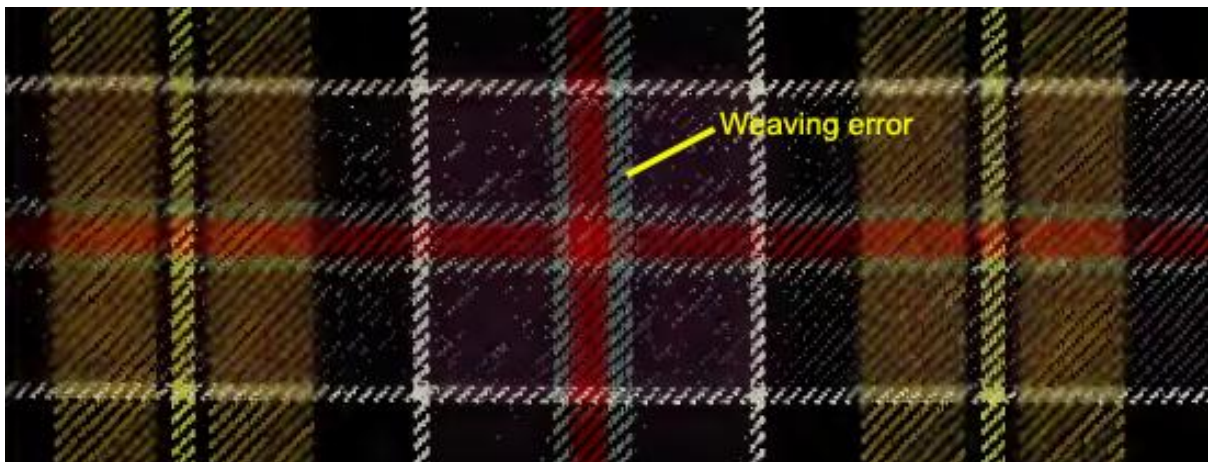


Plate 5. Old & Rare specimen showing weaving error. © The Author

Following an examination of the coat the author organised the weaving of a length matched to the original setting and in colours closer to what the original coat might have looked like when new (Plate 6). This revision was later included as part of the House of Edgar's Genesis Collection (Plate 7).



Plate 6. Reconstruction of the Culloden Coat tartan. © The Author

Conclusion

Surviving specimens of tartans dating to the period of the last Jacobite Rising are rare, extant clothing even more so. The Culloden Coat is one such piece. The quality of the material, cut and construction of the coat indicate that it was a status piece and almost certainly a garment intended to be worn with trews. Unfortunately, the ownership of the coat in the 100 years following Culloden is not known and so the identity of the original owner is likely to remain a mystery.

D. W. Stewart had access to the coat during the production of his *Old & Rare* but his 'accurate reproduction' of the tartan was anything but. Both the colours and the setting were demonstrably wrong compared with the original specimen, a feature not unique to this entry in his book. The identification of the coat in the Kelvingrove Museum and subsequent study allowed details of the pattern to be corrected and an accurate reconstruction of the original tartan to be undertaken.

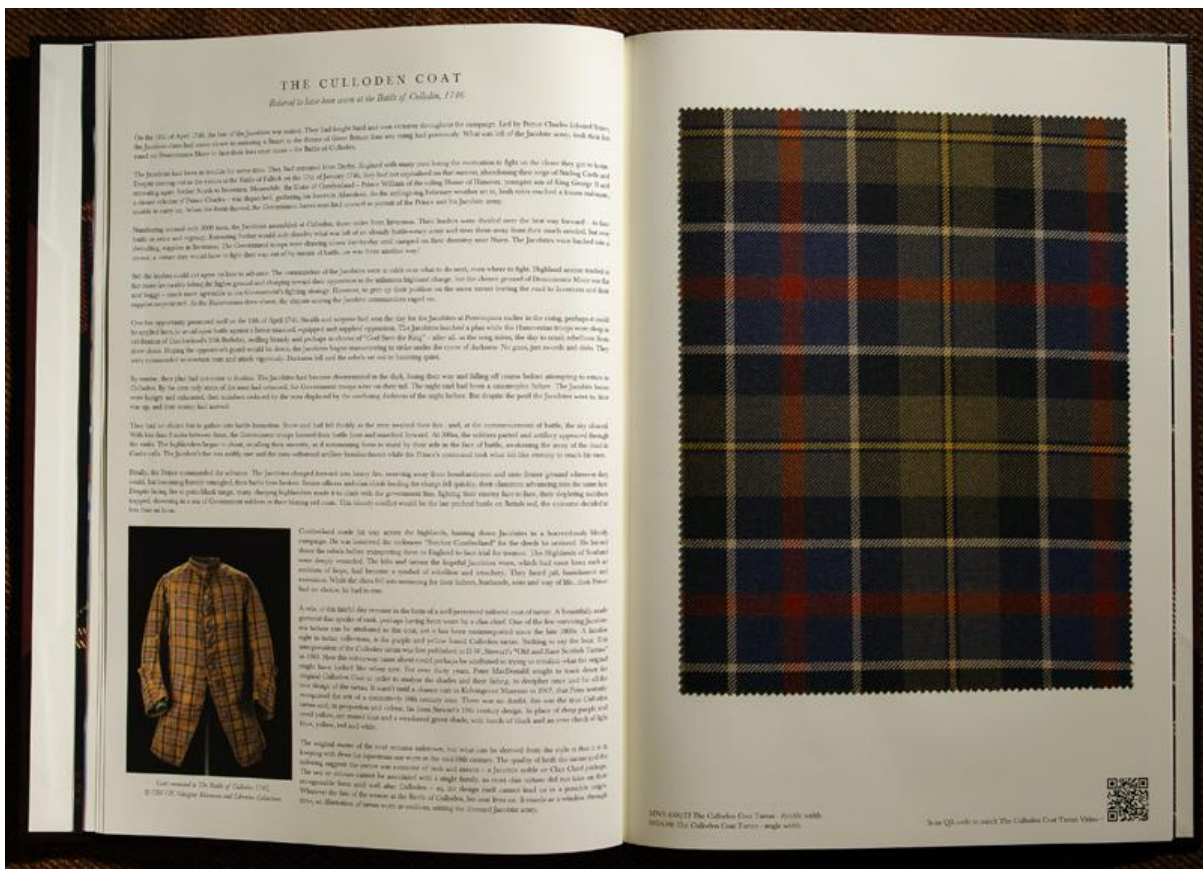


Plate 7. Culloden Coat tartan from House of Edgar's Genesis Collection. © The Author

© Peter Eslea MacDonald Sept 2021 (Revised Apr 2026)

- i STEWART D.W. 1893 *Old & Rare Scottish Tartans*. Geo. P. Johnston., Edinburgh
- ii SCARLETT J.D. 1990 *TARTAN: The Highland Textile*. Shephard-Walwyn, London
- iii STEWART D.C. 1950 *The Setts of the Scottish Tartans*. Oliver & Boyd., Edinburgh. Revised Edition Shephard Walwyn., London 1977