

The Question of Clan Tartans

C.C.P. Lawson in *History of the Uniforms of the British Army* puts forth an important idea regarding the use of clan tartans: “Remembering the continuous clan feuds and the consequent state of more or less perpetual hostilities, a recognizable clan plaid would have been a positive danger to the wearer outside his own territory.”

Lord Lyon King of Arms, Sir Francis J. Grant, at a meeting of the Celtic Union in Edinburgh, 6 December 1948 "described the development of [tartan] for many names as ‘humbug.’ Records establish that tartans had been worn in Scotland as far back as 1440. But present-day tartans were not old. They only went back to the reign of George IV. Tartans worn before 1745 were quite different.” That dates present-day tartans to the early 19th century.

Major I. H. Mackay Scobie, past Curator of the Scottish United Services Museum, was convinced that clan tartans were not known before the second half of the 18th century. In a June 1942 article in *Chamber's Journal* entitled “Tartan and Clan Tartans,” he concludes, “‘clan’ tartans -- as defined and known at the present day cannot be shown to have existed as such prior to the 1745 period, and, indeed, are even later.”

If tartans did enable people to distinguish their clan members from outsiders, one would expect to find reference to such recognition in contemporary battle accounts. However, the opposite occurs.

From James Ray's *Compleat History of The Rebellion*, published in 1749, regarding the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745: “In the flight I came up with a pretty young Highlander, who called out to me: ‘hold your hand -- I'm a Campbell.’ On which asked him: ‘Where is your bonnet?’ He replied ‘Somebody hath snatched it off my head.’ I only mention this to shew how we distinguished out loyal clans from the rebels, they being dress'd and equipp'd all in one way, except the bonnet, -- ours having a Red or Yellow Cross or Ribbon, theirs a white Cockade. He having neither of these distinctions, I desired him, if he was a Campbell, to follow me, which he promised; but on the first opportunity he gave me the slip.” Had he been wearing a Clan Campbell Tartan, surely the writer would have mentioned it in this account.

In *A Journal of the Expedition of Prince Charles Edward in 1745, by a Highland Officer*: “We M'Donalds were much preplex'd, in the event of ane ingagement, how to distinguish ourselves from our bretheren and nighbours the M'Donalds of Sky, seeing we were both Highlanders and both wore heather in our bonnets, only our white cockades made some distinction.” In eighteenth century portraits of the MacDonalds, they wear a variety of tartans. This further supports the idea that “clan tartans” are a late invention.

In 1956, The Historical Association published a book called *Common Errors in Scottish History*. In this book, Haswell Miller writes: “But the ‘Scottish clan tartans’ as we know them from numerous books, post cards and other productions were never systematised before the appearance of such publications in the nineteenth century...”

“Authentic documentation of the tartan previous to the 19th century is limited to a comparatively small number of contemporary portraits, and is negative so far as it provides any suggestion of heraldic significance or 'clan badge' intention. In a range of Grant portraits at Castle Grant, no tartan repeats and none has any relationship with the tartan known as Grant to-day. MacDonald portraits of

the 1740s to the 1760s show the same person at different ages, wearing in one picture no less than three varying 'red' tartans and in the other a 'green' tartan, none of them bearing any relationship to the 'Tartan Book' patterns."