

# What the Highlanders NEVER WORE

People's love of the kilt has led to many misperceptions throughout history. Unfortunately, those misperceptions are often much better known than the facts. This page is intended to clear up those misperceptions with proof of historical fact.

One source of much misdocumentation is R. R. McLan's famous work, *The Clans of the Scottish Highlands*, published first in 1845. The book lists each clan's history, name derivation, tartan, arms, armorial insignia, badge, and war-cry. James Logan, an author of some renown and McLan's contemporary, provides the text. Although there is much useful information in the book, the pictures should not be taken for historical fact. Like his contemporaries, McLan and Logan believed the kilt to be of ancient origins, evolving from the animal skin loincloths that the "cavemen" must have worn. We know today that the kilt developed from the *brat* or mantle that the Gael wore around their shoulders, and not from any lower body garment.



This is a picture by McLan. It depicts the Fergusons. Unlike most tartans, it is not in the usual modern plaid format, being instead a mustard color. This is usually described as "saffron," and indeed the text goes on and on about the "Lein-croich" at length. Logan states, "[this] figure is introduced clad in one of the oldest garments peculiar to the Celts. This was called the Lein-croich, or saffron-colored shirt, which was dyed of a yellow color from that plant. This vestment resembled a very ample belted plaid of saffron-colored linen, being fastened round the middle..."

Logan fails to realize that he has greatly contradicted himself. In the same paragraph, he tells us that the "Lein-croich" is a shirt and then he tells us it is a belted plaid. Surely, it cannot be both at the same time. Furthermore, both the belted plaid and the saffron shirt are late-period garments (16th and 17th centuries, respectively). There is no documentation that the Celts ever wore either and therefore, the statement that this is "one of the oldest garments peculiar to the Celts" is entirely flawed. Please see "Man's Léine" and "The Evolution of the Kilt" and "Letter to Chivalry Sports" for a further discussion.

McIan seems to do no better with his drawing than Logan did with his words. Although it cannot be stated that the Highlanders did not wear mustard-colored belted plaids, they most certainly were not made of linen which would provide none of the weather protection for which the (woolen) plaid was worn. Indeed, "plaide" is the Gaelic word for blanket or rug. And in the damp and cold Highlands, why would one have a blanket or rug of linen?

You will notice that I keep calling the garment in the picture "mustard-colored" rather than "saffron-colored." My alternate choice of spice name is for the sake of accuracy. It has been substantiated by Henry Foster McClintock in his great source work, *Old Irish and Highland Dress*, among others, that the spice saffron does not dye linen a yellowish brown, but rather a pure yellow color. The *léinte* depicted in color by Lucas de Heere are all pure yellow. Therefore, the modern "saffron" kilts worn by Irish pipers have no basis in history. Indeed, the Irish never wore the belted plaid or any garment resembling a kilt (for a discussion on the lack of an "Irish kilt" see "Letter to Tir na nOg").

Thus, the illustration Logan describes as a "saffron shirt" is neither saffron nor a shirt. It makes one wonder if he was describing the same page we see.

McIan's picture appears to be drawn after 16th century illustrations of the saffron shirt by Lucas de Heere and others. The warrior wears a short, elaborately decorated jacket with a pleated pelplum not unlike an *ionar*. His shirt is finely pleated and has the long yet narrow sleeves of de Heere's *léinte*. Yet it is white instead of saffron-colored. We read in contemporary sources that, though saffron was the most preferred color (it is thought to be a sign of nobility), white and unbleached *léinte* were also worn. However, the triangular shape of the sleeves contradicts the rounded bag-sleeves of de Heere's *léinte*. The figure is barelegged and barefooted, also like de Heere's pictures of Irish kern. The only major incongruity is that, instead of his *léine* pouched over his belt, he wears a mustard-colored belted plaid. It is understandable that an illustrator who did not understand the drape of a *léine* would draw it such. But this should not be taken for proof that the "Lein-croich" was a type of belted plaid.

But what those red things on his forearms are is anyone's guess.

Here's an interesting mixture — another illustration of McIan's. This is the page that appears under "Mac Arthur." Logan quotes from Martin's *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* describing Angus, the son of Lauchlan Mackintosh "...clothed in a yellow war-coate, which among them is the badge of chieftains or heads of clans..." However, this figure does not wear a "war-coate" but, like the former, wears a mustard-colored belted plaid (see "Padded Armour" for a history of the "war-coate"). But unlike the previous example, this one goes further in an attempt to marry the *léine* with the belted plaid. The subject wears a mustard-colored belted plaid that hangs surprisingly straight and unpleated across the front of the legs. The back of the "plaid" drags on the ground behind and yet seems to be pinned on the man's left shoulder. Considering the weight of the voluminous cloth, whether lightweight linen or heavy wool, if a garment were ever pinned thus, it would pull the jacket to which it were pinned so far back that the fastening at waist level would be up at the throat.

Again we see triangular sleeves, but these seem to be attached somehow to the belted plaid. I am at a loss to discern how this is possible. The shirt



underneath is red and tight-sleeved. This is an impossibility for a number of reasons. Primarily, shirts were made of linen, cotton being a tropical fiber not yet available in any Northern clime. Linen does not take dye well. Therefore, a shirt would not be red, but rather white, off-white or "saffron." Additionally red was made with an expensive dye. No one would choose to dye a shirt with so costly a substance only to have it shortly fade away. Also, the sleeves of undershirts were always full. Tight sleeves would be quite encumbering for a warrior.

Another word on the use of saffron as a dye. Saffron is an expensive spice that does not grow in either Scotland or Ireland. However, a similar color dye can be made from *Sticta crocata* or *Solorina crocea*, lichens common in both lands. The frequent statement by contemporary writers that the saffron shirt was the garb of "persons of distinction" has never been substantiated by native sources. However, in that the head of every household in Gaelic culture is deemed a King (*Rígh*), every person in these cultures is either the son, daughter, or cousin of a King and therefore noble...and therefore entitled to wear saffron. Perhaps the foreign writers did not realize that ALL Gaels are "persons of distinction."



This innocuous picture depicts a Scot in a *filleadh beag* and flannel shirt. It is not unreasonable for a post-18th century illustration. Unfortunately, Logan's description states, "The illustrative figure is clothed in a flannel shirt and a simple feile-beag, a scanty covering, but such as the hardy Gaël of former years often appeared in..." The accuracy or inaccuracy of the drawing is entirely dependent, then, upon the reader's estimation of how long ago "former years" were. However, to Logan's merit, he puts his subject in a hairstyle "very common a century ago." In 1745, the *filleadh beag* may have been worn. Please see "The Kilt in the Eighteenth Century" for documentation.

This picture appears to show a leather "ionar" like those depicted by Derricke in his *Images of Ireland* in 1581. If that is the case, then this picture is inaccurate. The lower-body garment depicted is a *filleadh beag* or

little kilt, which was invented in the 18th century. At the time of Derricke, the *filleadh mór* has not yet been devised, much less the little kilt. If the leather jacket is simply a jacket of indeterminate origins, the picture is reasonable for the 18th century and later. Logan's text, however, makes reference to Derricke for this illustration. Therefore, it is inaccurate for the period it strives to portray.

Another depiction of McIan's that, if not misdated by Logan, might have been accurate. The subject appears in a modern kilt. Yet Logan states that he is fighting one of Cromwell's soldiers. This dates the picture to the middle to late 17th century. Furthermore, he says of the kilt, "This part of the dress has been called a late improvement, and introduced by an Englishman! We are prepared to maintain its antiquity." I assure the reader





that I would be the last person to ascribe to the English that which is not theirs. However, even Scottish-born scholars today are of the opinion that the kilt was invented by the Englishman to which I credited it in "The Kilt in the Eighteenth Century." I welcome any information to the contrary. And let me remind the reader that, although the "abbreviation" of the belted plaid which resulted in the little kilt may have first been undertaken by an Englishman, the belted plaid still stands as the true and noble dress of the Scottish Highlanders. It is beautiful and demonstrative of the grand Gaelic culture. Nothing could change this fact.

Logan goes on to say that "The Highlanders retained the practice of stripping off their plaids when hotly engaged (fighting)...and, had the belted plaid been the garment then worn, they must have stood 'pugnare in nudo corpore,' at least with the exception of the shirt..." Yet there are many contemporary accounts stating that the Highlanders were "naked but for their shirts" in battle (See Jean de Beagué and Lindsay of Pitscottie's accounts in "From Ancient Times to 1600 — léine and brat" for quotes). Logan's 19th century

sensibilities may not have allowed him to fathom such a thing. Indeed, we know that the ancient Celts of Gaul and Briton fought naked against the Romans. Why would their descendents not continue this custom, even though sixteen centuries later? Even if they did not fight naked, we know their shirts to have been made from 25-40 yards of linen. That is certainly enough to cover oneself. Furthermore, remember again that the "plaid" is a cloak, not a lower-body garment. After all, who fights in his cloak? It is easier to throw it off. This simple fact should stand as further substantial proof of the origins of the kilt.

Ah *Braveheart*. So noble a story. So inaccurate a display of historical clothing. This should teach us once and for all never to trust Hollywood for our history lessons. This movie won every Academy Award it was nominated for, except one: Costume Design. I don't doubt it was because *Restoration*, with all its seventeenth century grandeur, was released the same year and not for any reason of lack historical accuracy. Nonetheless, it made me glad. The story takes place in the late thirteenth century. The belted plaid was not worn in Scotland until the very end of the sixteenth. But that is not the great problem with *Braveheart*. If you study the movie carefully,



you will see that the costume the Scots are wearing is not a belted plaid at all. Instead, the fabric, which only appears to be a yard or less wide, is wrapped from right front, around the back of the body, and thrown over the left shoulder. It is then belted so that the shoulder sash stays in place. The end of the fabric reaches the waist in back (please see "To Wear the Belted Plaid"). This makes the fabric required about three yards. I am certain that between takes, the garment would have to be constantly readjusted to preserve its look. We know that belted plaids are made from four to six yards of double-loomwidth cloth (~60"). Anyone wrapping this amount of cloth around themselves in a manner as was done in the movie would only find it restrictive. Keep in mind that the kilt derived from a cloak, not a skirt. Clothed in a

*Braveheart*-style kilt, a re-enactor would find his shoulders cold.



I don't pretend to know anything about modern clan tartans except this: they didn't exist before the Georgians invented them. This fact is substantiated by many Scottish researchers and a summary of their findings can be found in "The Question of Clan Tartans." In *Braveheart* I have noticed that fathers and sons (The Bruce and his father, Sheamis and his...) often wear the same tartan. I do not know if these tartans are the modern-day clan tartans of the families depicted. Nonetheless, certain colors or arrangement of stripes were not family-specific historically and *Braveheart* should not be taken as proof that they were.

A Highland Scotsman of Wallace's time would have been attired much more similarly to the Irish mercenaries in *Braveheart* (woolen tunics and mantles), though that is obviously too unexciting for Hollywood's taste.

In addition, the women's costumes, though of a more probable cut, date from the 14th century at the earliest. The clothing of 1280 was much less fitted. Buttons down the back of the sleeves point to about 1340. Additionally, the Princess and her lady-in-waiting's gowns seem to be invariably of polyester crushed velvet in the most improbable colors (pink, coral...). And as the Renaissance would not begin for another century, the gold brocades worn by the Prince of Wales simply wouldn't exist, even if they weren't polyester.

And what is that coif that The Bruce is wearing made out of? And the plates on his pants that make him look like he should be in the next *Star Wars* sequel? And the "ring mail" on the guards? In *Xena* maybe. Sheesh !.