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## Tartan's Power

2022 marks the bicentenary of King George IV's visit to Edinburgh, an event that defined tartan's unique place in Scotland's history.

*By all the information I could procure, their only Crimes [are] Poverty and Tartan, which too often Appear coupled.*

So wrote Hugh Forbes, jailer at Musselburgh prison, on 1 August 1747. This was the same day that wearing tartan was forbidden in 'certain' parts of Scotland for anyone other than 'officers and soldiers in his Majesty's forces'. The geographical area of the prohibition was later specified (equally unhelpfully) as north and west of the 'Highland line'. Penalties included enforced enlistment into the army, one context in which tartan was permitted.

Within a century, tartan had been reappropriated by royalty: George IV sporting a jaunty kilt for his 1822 visit to Edinburgh, and Victoria adopting more demure skirts and sash on her Highland holidays to Balmoral. I write 'reappropriated' because the earliest written record is probably the 1538 reference to James V's 'Heland tartane' checked hose, which would have lent the king something of the romance of a medieval hunter. Tartan's distinctive check may be reflected in its name, similar to the Old French word *tertaine* or *tiretaine* meaning a cloth woven of linen warp and wool weft, both of which are visible in the finished artefact. *Tertaine* itself recalls the Old Spanish word *tiritaña*, incorporating the onomatopoeic *tiritar* for the rustle or swoosh of fine silk fabric (satin). In fact, the tartan depicted in many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits was as likely to be woven from silk or cashmere as from sheep's wool.

The political implications of tartan went back to 1713 when a Jacobite 'Edinburgh' plaid enabled those who donned it to display in plain sight their allegiance to the deposed Stuart monarchs and desire for a pre-Union state, as legal sanctions were directed against seditious words, not weave patterns. Even then, when William Mosman produced his nostalgic portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie around 1750, it is the Garter Star brooch that declares the prince's royal status, and the blue bonnet with white cockade – standing in for the white Jacobite rose – his partisanship. In the beautiful marriage portrait of Flora Macdonald, the sitter wears a blue bodice decorated with flowers, the white rose closest to her heart. She is also swathed in the distinctive Jacobite tartan, a bold image considering she had only just been released from the Tower of London, as it was she who rescued the prince as he fled Culloden.

It was this irreducible ability to represent loyalty and power that resulted in tartan's absorption into military and even royal visual language. The 1747 ban had been repealed in 1782 and in 1789 the three Hanoverian royal princes, George, William Henry and Frederick, attended a London ball in full Highland dress. With their family's more tenuous claim to the throne, they needed to borrow legitimacy from their more entitled Stuart relatives. The same period saw tartan gradually associated more with the Scottish Highlands than with the Lowlands, which asserted the idea of Scots as muscular mountain men. It is in this guise that the Prince Regent, later George IV, is depicted in the uniform of the 42nd regiment (the Black Watch) in a popular print published in Edinburgh, *before* his renowned visit to the city in 1822.

Even in the aftermath of the defeat of the Jacobite uprising at Culloden in 1746, the rich associations of tartan allowed it to represent forces that were anything but insurgent. John Campbell, cashier of the Hanoverian Royal Bank of Scotland, was depicted in 1749 by William Mosman wearing a tartan jacket and short kilt. He was not breaking any laws:

Edinburgh is safely south and east of the 'Highland line'. Tartan even became a symbol of government opposition when Tory gentlemen who had nothing to do with Scotland wore plaid waistcoats at Westminster.

Campbell's short kilt, worn above the knee, and neat jacket decorated with gold embroidery along the edges, pockets and buttonholes contrast with the multi-purpose 'great plaid'. This was a large expanse of fabric that could be wrapped around the waist and still leave enough fabric to cover shoulders and head, and also act as a camping blanket (sometimes referred to now as a 'male sari').

Although the plaid cloth draws attention today, the focus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have fallen as much upon the weaponry and accoutrements of Highland dress with which Campbell is depicted. In addition to a leather sword belt with a tooled – and possibly even jewelled – buckle, on the table lies Campbell's powder horn and pistol. On the wall at the top left hangs the *targe* (leather shield), which speaks of strength, safeguarding and defence for the financial transactions that Campbell ensured. These transactions are represented by a banknote on the table, folded in such a way that Campbell's signature as guarantor is visible. Campbell's sporran (gaelic for a purse) is a circular leather money bag closed with strings, as befits his profession, and not the furred flat pocket more familiar today. (In contrast, George IV's much more extravagant sporran was parodied as a complete fox fur in George Cruikshank's cartoon marking the king's 1822 visit to Edinburgh, *Geordie and Willie 'Keeping it up'*.) Campbell's dirk (dagger) hangs over his sporran, guarding its contents while a heart-shaped brooch on the sword belt represents faith and loyalty. He is throughout depicted as the epitome of trust.

The distinctive red tartan worn by Campbell is nevertheless difficult to identify. It is closer to what is now identified as Robertson tartan than to today's many variations of Campbell plaid which are predominantly green. Perversely, the Scottish Register of Tartans includes a 'Campbell, Red' the source for which is the Mosman portrait! In any case, red had long been the colour of the professions in Europe, whether scholars, lawyers or politicians. Tartan, in so far as it gradually came to be associated with specific groups, is as much about pattern or 'sett' as colour, however, a point demonstrated by the example of a red version of the distinctive dark blue and green Black Watch or Government plaid produced for the musical bands of the 42nd and 93rd regiments around 1820.

In 1778, the Highland Society of London sent out requests to clan leaders 'to furnish the Society with as Much of the Tartan of his Lordship's Clan as will serve to show the Pattern', signed and sealed with the clan's armorial bearings. Many could not provide a specific design but were delighted to be given such recognition by London of their heritage and aristocratic status. Some, such as the Macdonalds, set about establishing 'a perfectly genuine Pattern' as a result of this request.

In his 1814 novel *Waverley*, Walter Scott turned the relatively recent history of distinct clan tartans into an ancient custom to construct a romantic scene in which clan members identify with one another through the unspoken language of dress and pattern:

By the light which the fire afforded, Waverley could discover that his attendants were not of the clan of Ivor, for Fergus was particularly strict in requiring from his followers that they should wear the tartan striped in the mode peculiar to their race; a mark of distinction anciently general through the highlands, and still maintained by those chiefs who were proud of their lineage or jealous of their separate and exclusive authority.

Considering the humour and irony of *Waverley*, it is quite possible that Scott was poking fun at the clan chiefs' relatively recent adoption of 'a perfectly genuine Pattern', laying it on thick by referencing tartan as both 'anciently general' and a marker of 'exclusive authority'.

In 1819 the Wilson family of Bannockburn, who had established a successful weaving business in the second half of the eighteenth century, produced their *Key Pattern Book* specifying the evolution, establishment and thread count for 100 stock tartans, still only a proportion of the patterns they were weaving at the time. The 1822 royal visit only encouraged more enquiries about specific tartans and requests for new designs. The Wilsons were asked by one merchant: 'Please send me a piece of Rose tartan, and if there isn't one, please send me a different pattern and call it Rose.'

Sir Walter Scott collaborated with Daniel Terry and William Murray of the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh to design a theatrical spectacle with the king, George IV, in the leading role. George IV had reason to parade his position: he had been regent since 1811 and was finally crowned only a year earlier on 19 July 1821. Although the events of August 1822 are dismissed by John Prebble in *The King's Jaunt* (1988) as 'a bogus tartan caricature' of Scotland, the efforts involved in fact underlined the significance of the event.

Estimates suggest that some 300,000 people – more than ten per cent of the entire population of Scotland at the time – came to Edinburgh to see the king. Souvenirs were quickly produced and snapped up by an eager and curious populace: from jugs and plaques to banners and scarfs. The visit was embedded in Edinburgh's urban fabric in the shape of George IV bridge, the raised roadway that connects the Old Town with the level area to the south, and in Bannockburn the Wilsons named their new mill 'The Royal George'.

Scott's unsubtle *Hints Addressed to the Inhabitants of Edinburgh and Others* was published to make sure that the populace was properly turned out, as much to be inspected by the king as to witness his visit. As the English generally thought that Scots were mutinous Jacobites, the idea was to reconstruct that identity as quite the opposite. For the king's 'public and formal entrance' to Edinburgh, gentlemen were instructed to wear the colours of Scotland with blue coat, white waistcoat and pantaloons. Scott declared no less that, 'King George IV comes hither as the descendant of a long line of Scottish Kings. The blood of the heroic Robert the Bruce – the blood of the noble, the enlightened, the generous James I is in his veins ... Still more, he is our kinsman ... In short, we are THE CLAN, and our king is THE CHIEF.' Scott even reached out to clan leaders personally, asking them to attend the king along with some of their clansmen, which they did on 20 August. For the occasion, however, the king dressed in a field marshal's uniform, not tartan.

The king's 'most magnificent dress of the royal [Stuart] tartan' was, Scott reported, made specially for the Highland Ball at the Assembly Rooms on George Street (named after the king's father). George IV's tartan was not made of wool, but combined luxurious satin, velvet and cashmere specially provided by the London and Edinburgh tailors, George Hunter and Co. at a cost of £1,354 (more than £187,000 today). Costly fabrics were accessorised with gem-encrusted brooches and weaponry with gold decoration, and even gold filigree shoe rosettes that were designed to quiver with every step. In Cruikshank's cartoon, the king is accompanied in the same dress by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Curtis, or 'Bonnie Willie', as he became known. Curtis could not claim Scottish ancestry and his corpulent figure proved a goldmine for contemporary wits. Here his chain of office has become a string of sausages (referring to the king's German ancestry) and his sporran a turtle (referencing the king's licentiousness): turtle soup, a rare luxury, was reputed to have aphrodisiac properties and was one of the dishes served to the king at the reception at Parliament House in Edinburgh.

Official and unofficial images of George IV in his Highland dress show different tartans, and not the predominantly red fabric with contrasting and crossing broader bands of blue and green and narrower lines of white and yellow of the Royal Stuart sett. Cruikshank's cartoon shows a cloth of green and blue which is closer to the Stuart Hunting Ancient or Black Watch (Government) sett. On the other hand, when David Wilkie, one of the London-based Scottish artists who made a pictorial record of the visit, made sketches for an official portrait of the king he showed the king in a red plaid consistent with the Royal Stuart sett.

In deploying the Stuart plaid, George IV made it more royal than Jacobite. However, an even more royal and exclusive tartan was produced for Queen Victoria and her descendants. Only a year after purchasing the Aberdeenshire estate, in 1853 Prince Albert commissioned the Balmoral tartan. Consisting of a mid-grey ground with red and black bands, it was designed to reference the hues of local granite. In January 1937 the Edinburgh clothing company Conachie & Co contacted the royal household for permission to manufacture the plaid. The reply was that it was 'purely personal and private' to the royal family, a restriction that remains to this day (with the exception of the queen's piper). What makes these controls possible is the carefully guarded pedigree of the Balmoral sett.

Gradually, since the late eighteenth century, tartan's power has been aligned ever more closely with royal and noble lineage and even used to create a sense of antiquity and mystery where it never existed. What started as a cloth of necessity – made more appealing through the accidents of warp and weft dyed with the colours to hand – has become a symbol of allegiance, whether to people or place. At the same time, there are still endless possibilities and new patterns are being registered all the time. As Sir Walter Scott demonstrated, tartan is a powerful yet malleable commodity.

