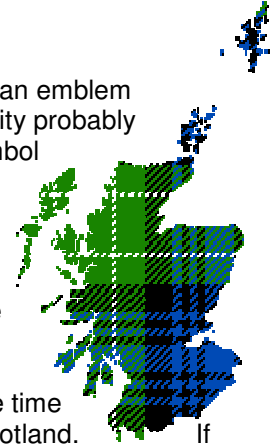


History of Scottish Tartan

Tartan has become the main symbol of Scotland and Scottish Culture. It is an emblem for those of Scottish descent around the world. With Scottish National identity probably greater than at any time in recent centuries, the potency of Tartan as a symbol cannot be understated.



There is evidence that Celts have used striped and checked material for thousands of years. The Scoti, who settled Western Scotland from 5-6thC onward and eventually gave the whole country their name, are said to have used striped garments to signify rank. One possible derivation of the word Tartan comes from the Irish *tarsna* - crosswise & Scottish Gaelic *tarsuinn* - across. The basis of the pattern, dress style and word may date back to the time when the Scots introduced their Gaelic culture into what was to become Scotland. If early Tartan, like the Gaelic language, were used across Scotland in the 10thC, by the 13thC it would have been confined to the Highlands. Lowland Scotland began adopting the language of the northern Angles and Norman social structure from the 12thC.

However, another derivation may be from Old French *tartaine* - cloth, implying the introduction of checked woolen cloth in the early middle ages which simply became popular in the Highlands..

In 1538 there is a reference to 'Heland Tartan'. A Frenchman at the siege of Haddington in 1537 describes Highlanders who were present as wearing what appears to be Tartan. From 1581 there is a description of 'variegated garments, especially stripes, and their favorite colors are purple and blue'. Poet John Taylor clearly describes the woolen Tartan garments of Highlanders at Braemar in 1618. Martin, a doctor on Skye around 1700, gives the first descriptions of Tartan which imply their significance as regional and the importance to weavers of ensuring that their cloth always has precise local patterns. Martin states that it is possible to tell from a man's plaid where he came from. There is no implication from any of this that specific families or Clans wore their 'own' Tartans - the patterns appeared to be regional.

The battle of Culloden in 1746 saw the end of Jacobite claims to the throne. Many Highlanders, but by no means all, had backed the losing side of Prince Charles Edward Stuart. The great importance of Tartan and associated dress to Highland Culture at this time can be deduced from the fact that the government banned it from 1746-82. This proscription however applied only to common Highland men - not the upper echelons of Highland society, not to Lowland Scots and not to women. But most importantly, it did not apply to the Highland regiments that were being formed in the Government army.

The new regiments were mainly associated with specific Clans, containing the men of that Clan and often led by the Chief or a senior member of his family. The first regiments used the 'Government Tartan', the Black Watch, but others quickly adopted distinctive new patterns. From this it appears that specific regimental Tartans became Clan or family Tartans and not vice-versa.

Central in this 'new Tartan' industry was the Lowland company of William Wilson. He met the growing demand for Tartan by inventing new patterns. He supplied the Army and the flourishing demand for cloth in the Lowlands. All his patterns were initially simply given numbers but some quickly became popular in certain areas and became known by that regions name - thus were born the regional Tartans. Others were commissioned for a specific person and soon the surname of that person became the name of the Tartan!

New patterns appeared each year for Wilson's salesmen to market. There is no evidence that Wilson's Tartans had anything whatsoever to do with any ancient regional or pre-1746 patterns. The Tartans worn at the Battles of Sheriffmuir or Culloden have almost all been lost forever. In

1816 an attempt was made to match Clan to 'true' Tartan. Tartans were gathered but these had more to do with regimental uniforms and Wilson's successful marketing than any older patterns. But the idea that Tartan and Clan paired had become firmly established.

By the early 19thC the Gaelic mythology of Ossian had been translated and was popular. Sir Walter Scott's novels were popular. At times almost half the British army was Highland and the worldwide success of these regiments was legend - never mind the Clearances, look at our nice new Empire (a note of sarcasm from the author). When in 1822 George IV visited Edinburgh, Tartan and Highland Dress was the order of the day thanks to Sir Walter Scott's personal planning. Tartan was seen as Scottish rather than just Highland.

The variety of Tartans has never stopped growing. Many Clan Tartans have become available in ancient, modern, weathered, dress or hunting. Almost every surname from the British Isles has been associated with a Clan and their Tartan. People's wish to wear 'their' Tartan has been enthusiastically met by manufactures. Companies, organizations and sports teams have their own Tartan.

To finish, however, returning to the initial point. For all its doubtful pedigree and commercialization, Tartan symbolizes Scotland and Scottish Culture more than anything. And as a born-again Scotland moves into the new millennium, Tartan will continue to play its central symbolic role.

And anyway - it looks good !