

MACMILLAN TARTAN

Those who have attended any of our clan gatherings will have been aware of the plethora of “MacMillan” tartans being worn. Many too are the arguments as to which is the right tartan and who is entitled to wear it. Well, in a sense they are all wrong, and all right, at the same time.

Tartan goes back a long way and is not peculiar to Scotland. However in Scotland it was adopted to an extent it became a national characteristic. Furthermore it was not necessarily associated with a clan or a name. It was associated with a district. So all the people in one area would wear clothes made of a similar cloth and this would have the distinctive sett of the locality. That they would, in the Highlands at any rate, belong to the same tribe was incidental. Incomers who settled would adopt the same sett. But prior to 1800 communication between adjacent communities would at best be difficult, and in winter, impossible.

So before 1745 tartans were geographical rather than family and if one did travel, cloth picked up on the way would be worn indiscriminately. At Culloden the Jacobite side wore any tartan to hand and in many cases several different ones at the same time. What identified the members of Prince Charlie's army were their blue bonnets not their tartan.

After 1746, the wearing of highland dress and tartan was proscribed by the Act of Disarming, not repealed until 1782 by which time a generation had grown up to wear broadcloth. (Not altogether though, tartan cloth was re-dyed with varying success or, at the domestic level, buried in a bog to kill the contrast. Hence the still prevalent race memory that a kilt should never look new).

Tartan and the kilt owe their survival to the Government decision to put the Highlanders' warlike tastes to good use by organising them into Regular Army battalions with a distinctive uniform, and an identifiable one: the Government Tartan. About 1778 there was a wave of Scottish enthusiasm resulting in the forming of a Highland Society in London and all things Scottish were “in” from George III down. Sir Walter Scott's novels were launched on this wave and when George IV visited Edinburgh, he wore kilt, tartan and, unfortunately, pink tights. At first only the Government Tartan (Black Watch) but later, as weavers fell in with the new rage, a whole range of tartans were sold, initially by number. So unless you were called MacEight or MacTwelve you were hardly buying by your name. But as a better sales pitch, the tartans were given titles ascribing known district tartans to local names and others were invented.



ANCIENT MACMILLAN IN OLD COLOURS



DRESS MACMILLAN IN OLD COLOURS



HUNTING MACMILLAN IN OLD COLOURS

One of the earliest illustrated accounts of this phenomenon was a series of prints produced by Ronald McIan in the 1830s and 40s. Eventually he illustrated most of the then accepted “clan” tartans. Plate 51 of this collection shows a MacMillan wearing a short kilt and little else in fierce combat with a Cromwellian soldier. (This is itself anachronistic as 17th Century highland dress would almost certainly have been a full plaid). His tartan is described Buchanan but it is quite recognisable as our Ancient MacMillan and does not have the Buchanan white stripe. By comparison Plate 3 shows a Buchanan consisting of a simple yellow/red/green check nothing like the present day version. (Somerset MacMillan always maintained that the Buchanans, who at one stage were related to the MacMillans, added the white stripe to our tartan and called it their own).

Ancient MacMillan. The most authentic and long lived MacMillan Tartan is the Ancient, varying by the use of different dyes from near khaki to psychedelic, with most wearers opting for something in between. If any tartan is a true MacMillan it is the Ancient being readily identifiable in the McIan print.

Dress MacMillan. This sett is reputed to have been worn by Robert the Bruce and passed to members of Clan MacMillan. Being only red and yellow, it can be rather garish for ordinary day use and is uncommon.

Hunting MacMillan. Former President of the Clan MacMillan Society, Major Cameron Macmillan, always referred to this as Baillie Macmillan's tartan. Cameron was a boy in the 1890s when this tartan was a new product issuing from the baillie's highland outfitting establishment in Partick. It did not really catch on until the late Chief, General Sir Gordon MacMillan, decided to dress all his family in it to make them easily identifiable from the rest of the clan who wore the Ancient. An idea which rather collapsed by Sir Gordon's move popularising the Hunting sett. The Hunting Tartan is predominantly green with yellow and red lines. The green can vary with dyeing from a bluish mid-green to almost black (a form found in North America).

Clan MacMillan. There remains one other. Donald Macmillan, father of one time Secretary of the Clan MacMillan Society, Catriona, was a Glasgow kiltmaker who found the Ancient Tartan awkward to sett. So to make things easier for himself, he took the same colours as the Ancient, but altered the setting to suit his requirements and went into business purveying his tartan. Anyone going to his shop got this tartan, often in ignorance. It is unlikely that any more of this particular sett will ever be made.

So there it is, if you like a tartan, wear it, but remember, it has only been “your” tartan for 150 years!

*Compiled by Nigel Macmillan,
Past President of The Clan MacMillan Society (of Scotland).*

DYING FOR A DIFFERENT TARTAN?



*McIan's "MacMillan" from the 1830s
wearing the Ancient in Old Colours*

All three basic MacMillan tartans - the *Dress*, the *Ancient*, and the *Hunting* - can be varied considerably by the use of different dyes. Most tartan manufacturers produce versions using modern chemical dyes, which tend to be darker - or brighter, depending on your point of view! - and which are therefore called “Modern” or “New” colours; and versions using vegetable dyes, which tend to be lighter - or less bright - which they call “Ancient” or “Old” colours. A third variant which has become popular in recent years is the “Weathered” version – so far in the MacMillan only of the *Ancient* and *Hunting* setts - which purports to represent the tartan after its burial in

a bog! Unfortunately some manufacturers have further muddied things by calling their “Weathered” versions “Muted”; a name that might better be applied to the vegetable dye (or “Old” colours). The fact that the vegetable dye colours are also sometimes called “Ancient” instead of “Old”, confuses things yet more; since the manufacturers that do this have then to refer to *Ancient* tartans as *Old*: or rather the “*Old* in Ancient Colours”; which for the sake of brevity - and maximum customer confusion - often comes out as the “Ancient *Old*” (and they don't italicise the name of the tartan either)!

So always ask to see samples from each shop or weaver before ordering a M'millan tartan so you know what you're going to get.

BAXTER, BELL & BLUE tartans also exist. These have been commissioned in recent years by North American bearers of these M'millan septnames - or their organisations - and can most easily be obtained in the USA, though the Clan MacMillan Centre does possess samples of them for exhibition to visitors.