

## Robert Burns and Tartan

It is a matter of recorded fact that Robert Burns wore tartan.

"Burns when at home, usually wore a blue or drab long-tailed coat, corduroy breeches, dark-blue stockings, and cootikens, and in cold weather a black-and-white checked plaid."

(From a recollection of William Clark, servant of Robert Burns at Ellisland, near Dumfries, 1789-90).

Pennant, in his *Tour Through Scotland* (1772), tells us that in Langholme, Dumfries -

"The manufactures are stuffs, serges, black and white plaids..."

The "Shepherd Tartan" is registered with the Scottish Tartans Authority (ITI 1253). In the authority's notes the simple black and white sett is described as a traditional Border shepherd's check... "also known as the Falkirk tartan because of the discovery of such a weave in the neck of a jar containing Roman coins buried about 260 A.D."

Many "authorities", over a long period of time, have held to the opinion that tartan was uniquely a manifestation of Highland culture and was historically alien to the Scottish Lowlands. In refutation of this conviction there is available to us an ample body of evidence, taken from central government, old burgh records and the observations of travellers, which reveals that in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries tartan was woven and worn in the Lowlands - indeed that it was a major national export. Additionally, we have reliable information to the effect that in the early 1600s a community of weavers from Ayrshire was producing tartan in Ulster. Further to this there is the abundant evidence that from 1707 tartan was being worn in the Lowlands specifically as a protest against the Union of the Parliaments. The poem "Tartana", written by Allan Ramsay in 1718, should also be taken into account because it strongly implies the existence of tartans bearing the names of Lowland families at that date.

Touching briefly on politics - tartan was a particular emblem of the Jacobites, and those who doubt the Jacobite sympathies of Robert Burns should consider these lines which he engraved on a window in Stirling -

"The injured Stewart line is gone, A race outlandish fills their throne; An idiot race, to honour lost; Who knows them best despise them most."

From the *Old Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilwinning in Ayrshire* we learn that in 1742 -

"The wives of some of the more wealthy and substantial farmers and tradesmen had silk plaids: but by far the greater part of the married women, red or striped worsted ones. Young women wore woollen cloaks, with hoods of the same kind of cloth..."

Lest there arise dispute as to whether "red or striped" denotes tartan, the record of Wigton is more specific -

"The old dress of the country men, even the most respectable farmers, a kilt coat, a blue bonnet, and plaiding hose... The old dress, too, of the country women, even of the farmers' wives and daughters, the blue cloth cloaks and hoods, the tartan or red plaides..."

and of Mid-Calder, Edinburgh -

"The tartan or red plaids... constituted the dress of women in the inferior conditions of life..."

We also know from Pennant that, during the life of Burns, Kilmarnock had a tartan industry. The Old Statistical Accounts were written by parish ministers in the 1790s. In the passages we have quoted they are describing the clothing of their parishioners as worn over previous decades, with a gradual change having taken effect so that in many districts, by the time of writing, the fashions had changed.

Hopefully, however, it has been demonstrated that tartan plaids (as we understand these terms) were a commonplace of daily life, not only in the Ayrshire of Burns's day, but throughout Lowland Scotland during the 18th century. It may, however, be objected that, due to the Dress Act proscribing the wearing of tartan, Burns would have been unlikely to have come into contact with it during his youth. In fact, the Dress Act did not apply to Lowland Scotland, where tartan continued to be woven and worn (and, indeed, exported).

From available evidence it seems reasonably likely, therefore, that in the years of the poet's childhood and adolescence tartan plaiding would have featured among the possessions of the Burns family and of their neighbours.

In his poem "The Vision", written in 1786 when Burns was 27 years old, it is surely most significant that he garbs his "native muse" in tartan.

"Down flowed her robe, a tartan sheen, 'till half a leg was scrimply seen..."

His muse is specific to Ayrshire -

"Of these am I - Coila my name: and this district as mine I claim..."

"Coila" is Kyle, and it is unthinkable that the Bard would clothe his "Vision" in tartan if it were not absolutely a feature of the culture of his native county and of his personal experience.

Robert Burns recorded the extent to which he had been influenced by the poetry of Allan Ramsay. Burns was certainly familiar with Ramsay's "Tartana". (Indeed, its influence can be felt in his own "Vision").

Ramsay's lines alluding to a Keith tartan (in 1718) -

"With what a pretty action Keitha holds Her Plaid, and varies oft its airy folds..."

may well have arrested the attention of Burns, his grandmother having been Isabella Keith.

The Bard's choice of the Shepherd tartan was very much in keeping with his last place of residence and with his self-image. In a letter to Alexander Cunningham, in March of 1794, Burns gave the correct heraldic description of a coat of arms which he had contrived for his personal use:

"On a field, azure, a holly-bush, seeded, proper, in base; a Shepherd's pipe and crook, Saltier-wise, also proper, in chief - On a wreath of the colours, a woodlark perching on a sprig of bay-tree proper."

As for the sett of the plaid which may have warmed him against the cruel winters in Mount Oliphant, Lochlea or Mossiel, we will probably never know.

Epistle From Esopus To Maria The crafty Colonel leaves the tartan'd lines, For other wars, where he a hero shines: From the traditional John Highlandman by Robert Burns. With his philibeg an' tartan plaid, An' guid claymore down by his side, The ladies' hearts he did trepan, My gallant, braw John Highlandman.

## The Battle of Sherrifmuir

To hear the thuds,  
and see the cluds  
O clans frae woods  
in tartan duds

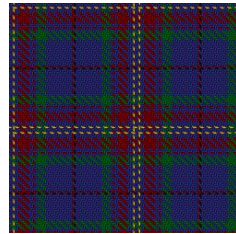
Burns



Burns Heritage



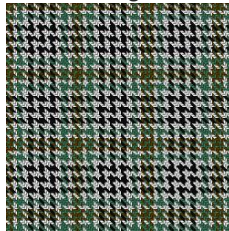
Rabbie Burns



Burns 1930



Burns Heritage Check



Rabbie Burns Legacy



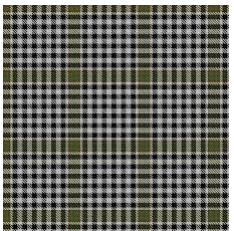
Burns Battalion



California Burns



Burns Check



Glen Burns



Almost 50 years ago the late Baron Marchand of Messrs George Harrison & Co. of Edinburgh explained to E.S. Harrison of Johnstons of Elgin, how the Burns Check came about. He related that he had been approached by a friend from 'The Scotsman' newspaper with the suggestion that he create a Robert Burns tartan. The first idea had been to base it on the Campbell - a clan with which the Burns family were connected - but after much discussion it was decided more appropriate to model it on the Shepherd's Check. The overcheck introduced 'the hodden grey and a' that' and a little flavour of green fields was added. There was thought of calling it the 'Ayr Tartan' but that was discarded in favour of the present name which more aptly celebrated the bicentenary of the poet's birth. In June 1959 the Burns Federation accepted the design with the condition that all goods should be made in Scotland. This was superceded by the Burns Heritage Check (ITI 2206) which in turn has been superceded by the Burns Heritage Tartan (ITI 4515). Various woven samples of #1736 (original Scottish Tartans Authority reference) with 5, 6 and 7 black bands.

As can be seen, there are at least 10 different takes on the Burns Tartan.