

The Original MacDougall Tartan

In July 2010 I examined a set of MacDougall tartan curtains complete with tartan valance hanging on the first floor of Dunollie House, Oban¹. The material was 'Hard Tartan'² and whilst there was evidence of some light damage in the form of fading in the areas that had been exposed to the sun, overall the cloth and colours were in remarkable condition. (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Curtains opened to show sett.

Examination revealed the curtains, plus a further tartan valance used elsewhere in the house, were made from a length of 27¹/₂" wide plaiding³. Each curtain was roughly 9' long and made by joining three pieces of plaiding to give a curtain 82" wide. The material was offset with a herringbone selvedge, a technique that had generally died out by the late 18th century, which at first suggested that the curtains may have been made from an old (early-mid 18th century) plaid. However, an estimate showed that 35-40 yards of cloth would have been required for the curtains and two sets of awnings and it's inconceivable that such a large amount of a single web of cloth would have survived into the 21st century. It therefore looked as if the material was a copy, probably c1790-1800, of an older piece which would not be without precedent. A portion of a plaid found at Culloden and said to have been connected with Prince Charles Edward was copied in 1821 by a Jedburgh firm and sold widely as a tartan with true historical origins. But for a throw threads difference in the large red and green blocks the threadcount of the MacDougall

curtains is almost identical to that recorded by the famous weaving firm Wm Wilson & Son of Bannockburn in their 1819 Key Pattern Book. In their notes on the specimens that they supplied to Logan for his workⁱ they said "*The.....pattern is the real size of the clan Tartan*" and went on to comment that it was copied from a piece "*that was over a hundred years old*". We don't know what piece Wilsons copied nor how they could be certain of its age but there seems little doubt that they copied an older piece that they had obtained or were sent; which brings us back to the material under consideration.

The offset nature of the setting for the material with a herringbone selvedge (Fig 2), was anachronistic by c1800 and indicates that the cloth was a copy of an older specimen that would undoubtedly been part of a pre-c1750 plaid⁴. Without corroborating evidence it's not possible to ascertain whether the material for the MacDougall curtains was woven by Wilsons



Fig 2. c1800 traditional style blue and red herringbone selvedge.

¹ Dunollie is the Seat of the Chief of the MacDougalls.

² Tartan woven with a worsted yarn that was left unfinished i.e. not washed, shrunk or fulled.

³ The term *plaiding* refers to an 18th century technique where single width material that was intended to be joined to make double width cloth was woven with the pattern offset (not centred on the loom) and frequently had a selvedge pattern, often herringboned.

⁴ With the general exception of the military the use of plaid was banned by the 1747 Act of Proscription.

or some other firm but the fact that their records state that around the same time they were weaving MacDougall based on an old piece means it's quite possible they wove the curtain material as a copy of the earlier specimen. The large 20 inch sett can really only be appreciated when two pieces of the material are joined. Figs 3 and 4 show respectively the single and joined settings of the material.



Fig 3. The warping arrangement for the plaiding used in the MacDougall curtains at Dunollie.



Fig 4. The setting across a joined plaid – 2 full setts plus selvedge pattern including herringboned final blue and red.

Although they have not been analysed, the original dyestuffs were almost certainly imported cochineal and indigo for the reds and blue respectively plus indigo and an unknown yellow



source (possibly an indigenous dye) for the green which is now much faded and appears a yellowish-brown. The shades in the unfaded areas of the material are exquisite (Fig 5) and although not exact matches to standard natural dyes of the time are probably an attempt to recreate the shades of the original piece in the same way as the setting arrangement does.

Whether the material was originally intended as curtains is unclear but they are the oldest, and possibly original, setting of the MacDougall tartan and as such are extremely important in our understanding of

the development of the clan tartan through the 19th century. In addition, the cloth provides an excellent example of the pre-1800 traditional tartan weaving techniques.

The original material has been removed for preservation and a copy made to replicate the curtains. The design has been named the *Heritage MacDougall Tartan* and is being sold to support the work of the Dunollie Trust. Details are available from the:

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¹ LOGAN J. 1831 *The Scottish Gael*.