

Reconstructing Thomas Fraser of Struy's Plaid

Introduction

The records of the Scottish Tartans Authority (STA)¹ include a sample of silk tartan labelled *Fraser of Altyre* which was obtained from Andersons (now Kinloch Anderson) in the 1960s (Plate 1). In correspondence with the author the firm were unable to confirm when, or for whom, they produced this rare tartan; nor were they able to say why it was so named.

Working in the 1950s the tartan scholar John MacGregor-Hastie dated the sett to about 1850 on the basis of a claim by '*an old lady (c.1938) who said that a kilt of this pattern had been in the family for about 100 years*'. He gave no further information but the similarity of the brief description with that of another old Fraser tartan suggests that his record was second-hand and is likely to have come from the military historian Capt. William MacKay.



Plate 1. Fraser of Altyre, silk sample from Andersons. © The Author.

¹ The Authority's early records came from its predecessor organisation, the Scottish Tartans Society.

Alexander Carmichael, the Scottish folklorist and antiquarian had obviously seen the tartan as he left a drawing (Plate 2) in which he describes it as having been a plaid from which a coat was made for Prince Charles in 1745. The authority for this claim appears to be a Miss Juliette Macdonell but who she was and why the connection with the Prince is unknown. And amongst the archives of the tartan scholar James D Scarlett (STA Collection) is a slide of a fragment of tartan. He gave no details of the piece, what it was called and importantly, where he found it. Work by the author to clean up the image revealed a fragment typical of early-mid C18th rurally produced tartan (Plate 3) and whilst the shades differ, the pattern matches Anderson's so-called *Fraser of Altyre* tartan and Carmichael's record too. Although there is no proof that this piece was the source it is reasonable to assume that this is part of the plaid on which the Andersons' silk was based.

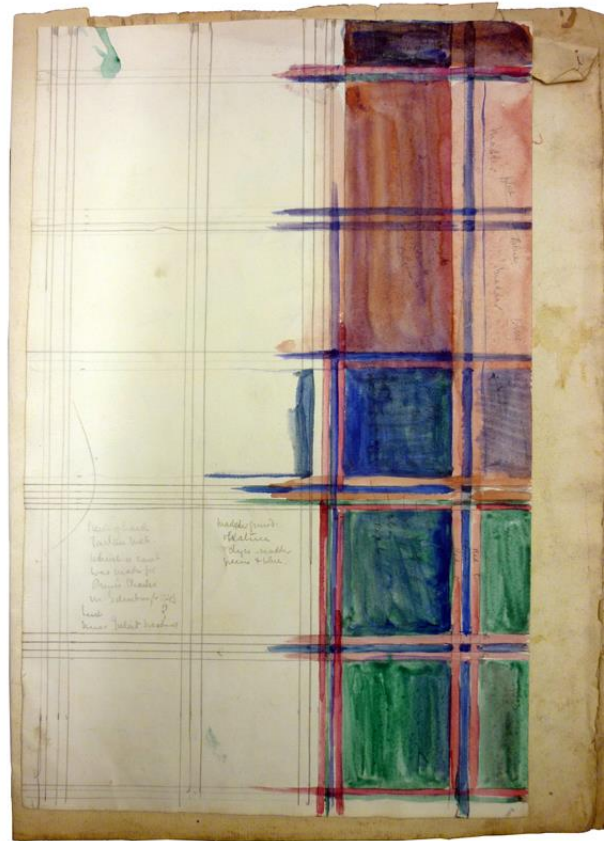


Plate 2. Prince Charles' Coat by Alexander Carmichael. © The Author.



Plate 3. Unnamed C18th specimen (*Fraser of Altyre*?) from the Scarlett Collection. © The Author.

Fraser of Struy

Thomas Fraser of Struy fought at Culloden and following the Jacobite defeat he later joined the newly raised 78th Regt of Foot (Fraser's Highlanders) in 1757. He embarked with the regiment for Canada and died there 'of a violent fever' the following year. Writing in the early 1970s Capt MacKay said of an old piece of tartan he'd acquired that '*The old Fraser lady who gave me the piece of tartan nearly 50 years ago [i.e. c.1923] said that it had been worn by her ancestor, a Fraser of Struy at Culloden*'. MacKay speculated that this plaid may also have been worn by the Fraser's Highlanders; something thought unlikely - see the related paper on the [Tartan of the 78th Regt of Foot](#).

The Struy Plaid

The piece of tartan given to MacKay was thought to have been lost; however, quite by chance the author stumbled across a picture on social media of some fragments in the Nairn Museum said to be part of Thomas Fraser's plaid. The Museum was unable to confirm when or from whom they had acquired the pieces but they almost certainly came from MacKay who live not far away on the other side of the Cromarty Firth. Examination by the author confirmed that all three fragments came from the same plaid and that they were structurally consistent with the claimed mid-18th century date. The straight sections on the larger fragment are evidence of a portion having been cut out with scissors at some point (Plate 4), perhaps by MacKay who is said to have sent a piece to Col. Harper².



Plate 4. Fragments of Thomas Fraser of Struy's plaid.
© The Author.

Thomas Fraser's wife remained in Inverness-shire when he embarked for Canada with the 78th Regt. It is presumed that he left the plaid he is said to have worn at Culloden at home and that it was passed down through the family to the point when MacKay was given a piece. Whilst none of the Nairn fragments is sufficiently large enough to show the sett of the original plaid there is enough to extract elements of the sett which the author recognised as identical to that of the so-called *Fraser of Altyre*. By overlaying the larger of the Nairn specimens onto that of the piece recorded by Scarlett it is possible to *demonstrate that the settings match and* therefore conclude that they are all from the same plaid (Plate 5).

² Founder of the Canadian 78th Fraser Highlanders Re-enactment Regiment.



Plate 5. Alignment of the Struy and Scarlett fragments. © The Author.

In 2016 the author stumbled across a larger piece of the original plaid in a collection belonging to the Inverness Museum (Plate 6). A comparison of the dimensions of that piece with the one photographed by Scarlett suggest that they are not the same and that that specimen is must be elsewhere, probably in private hands..



Plate 6. Larger portion of the Struy plaid. Photo Credit: Inverness Museum.

The Cloth

The fragments of Struy's plaid was hand-woven at approximately 42 epi³ and the original cloth is approximately 25 inches wide (50 inches if a joined plaid). The yarn is singles (not plied) in both warp and weft and was naturally dyed, almost certainly with imported cochineal (red) and indigo (blue), plus indigo and an unknown yellow in combination for the green. These dyestuffs were commonly used in 18th century tartans.

The Sett

The piece at Plate 6 shows the full width of the warp and is big enough to allow confirmation of the sett, which is a typical mid-18th century red, blue and green pattern of a style similar to a number of others of the period. In the specimen the warp is offset⁴ and finishes at a different point on each of the selvages (Fig 1).



X

Fig 1. Colour strip to show the layout of the warp of the Struy plaid. © The Author.

One of the selvages is the red pivot on the green and would have been the edge intended to be joined (marked x) to allow the pattern to repeat across the doubled width plaid (Fig 2).



X

Fig 2. Colour strip to show the layout of the Struy cloth if joined to make a wide plaid. © The Author.

Despite the offset layout of the warp being intended for joining, there is no evidence on the surviving specimen that it was ever actually joined. This does not mean that it wasn't, simply that there is no surviving thread to show that it was; however, other surviving examples of offset plaiding used singly show that such cloth was not always joined as intended by the weaver. Irrespective of whether the cloth was joined or used single width, the overall design is that given at Plate 7.



Fig 8. Reconstruction of the tartan in Fraser of Struy's plaid. © The Author.

³ The density of the cloth measured in ends, or threads, per inch in the warp.

⁴ An offset warp is one that doesn't balance (run in sequential order) from the centre to each selvage.

In 2017 the author commissioned a special run of double width cloth matched to the original specimen (Plate 8).



Plate 8. Reconstruction of the tartan in Fraser of Struy's plaid. © The Author.

Conclusion

The 25-inch width of the specimen is not unusual amongst surviving plaids from the mid-18th century⁵; however, even if joined it would have been relatively narrow for use as a belted plaid. It is more likely therefore that it was used as a separate upper plaid, something that could have been worn with a fheileadh beag⁶ or truibhas (trews).

Altyre was a Cumming territorial designation and, apart from the 16th century marriage of Mary Fraser to James Cumming of Altyre, there is no known connection with the Frasers to Altyre. There is however, evidence to support the claim that the Nairn fragments are from the plaid that belonged to Thomas Fraser of Struy and, as has been shown, that the

⁵ The vast majority of surviving specimens are short pieces of plaids rather than complete ones.

⁶ A fheileadh beag was the early version of the kilt in which the pleats were gathered and held in place by a belt or loops rather than being sewn like a modern kilt.

unnamed piece photographed by Scarlett is also a portion from the same plaid, the largest piece of which is in Inverness Museum. It is not known why Andersons called their silk material *Fraser of Altyre* but circumstantial evidence suggests that the sett was copied from a piece of the plaid that belonged to Fraser of Struy. In the absence of any proven Altyre connection it is the author's contention that this tartan was misnamed/attributed and that it should more correctly be called *Fraser of Struy*.

MacKay's supposition that the tartan of the Struy plaid was also used as the sett for Fraser's Highlanders is fanciful and completely without foundation⁷. Unfortunately, we may never know when or why the plaid was cut up, nor by whom. Further research to find the piece photographed by Scarlett would undoubtedly lead to a better understanding of the original and its later division.

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⁷ See the [78th Regt - Fraser's Highlanders](#) paper for a discussion on the original regiment's tartan.