

The Original Cameron of Erracht Cloth?

INTRODUCTION

The Cameron of Erracht tartan is one of the few early military tartans not derived from the Government (42nd or Black Watch) tartan. It was designed specifically for the 79th Regiment of Foot (Cameron's Highlanders) raised by Allan Cameron of Erracht in 1793. As a military tartan it was in continual use by the British Army from the late 18th to the early 21st Century when it was laid aside on the formation of the Royal Regiment of Scotland in 2004.

Little is known about the choice of the design which resembles the Clan Donald (MacDonald) tartan. It has been claimed that Allan Cameron himself was influential in the design and incorporated elements of his mother's tartan, the MacDonald, into the Government sett. However, his mother was a MacLean and this is probably nothing more than a modern (20th century) myth that arose due to the similarity of the tartans and an earlier family connection¹. Although the basic design has blue, green and black fields like the 42nd based tartans, the addition of several red

overstripes makes this, and the MacDonald², far more showy, and incidentally expensive to produce pre-1855 when the red dyestuff, cochineal, was relatively expensive. Wilsons of Bannockburn recorded this as *79th or CAMERONS REGIMENT* in their 1819 Key Pattern Book and all the details refer to specifications for military cloth. An extant Wilsons' sample in a collection of the time is named *79th Cameron*³ (Plate 1) and judging by specimens of their cloth in two c1830 commercial sample books, by that time it was simply named *Cameron* for the civilian market.

The shades of the colours in modern military specimens (c1850-2000) were always very dark whereas in Wilsons' cloth the shade of green was generally a mid-moss that was counterbalanced by a navy blue, the standard practice in their patterns. In view of this, the version in the Collection of the Highland Society of London's Collection (HSL) which was 'sealed' as a *piece of the original regimental cloth*, is interesting. A piece off the same web is shown in (Plate 2) and the difference with the Cockburn specimen is striking with both the blue and green being very dark.

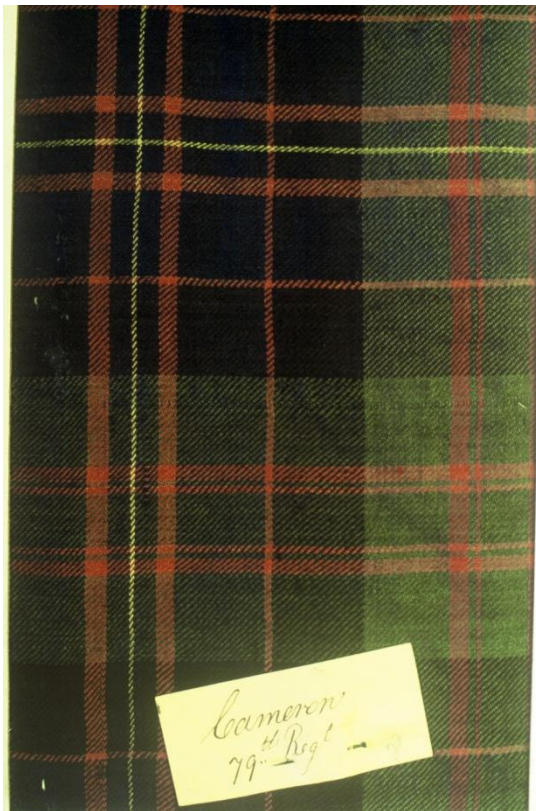


Plate 1. Wilsons' specimen labelled Cameron 79th Regt. (Cockburn Collection 1810-15). © The Author

¹ Allan's paternal Grandmother was Margaret MacDonald.

² The origins of the MacDonald (Clan Donald) tartan are equally vague but the similarity between the two, and also the MacDonell of Glengarry, suggests that the latter two were also military, probably Fencible, tartans, a theory supported by MacDonell of Glengarry in a letter in which he refers to the tartan being worn by his regiment.

³ Cockburn Collection (1810-15), Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

THE ORIGINAL CLOTH?



Plate 2. Portion of the original 79th Regimental Cloth.
(HSL Collection 1816). © The Author

At the time of writing the author did not have access to the bound HSL specimen but the sample in Plate 2 is a 10.5 x 4.5" piece from the same source and which has a selvedge (right above) and three cut edges. The cloth is coarse hard tartan woven at 50 epi giving a 9" sett. As with all cloth of the time it is naturally dyed but unusually, the yarn is singles in both warp and weft as opposed to the more common 2 ply which, together with the very uneven selvedge and odd threading errors, suggests that the cloth was rurally woven as opposed to the commercial mass production of the time as carried out by Wilsons, and to a lesser degree others, where there was much greater uniformity. However, the dyeing is of a high quality suggesting that it was done professionally so it is also possible that the yarn was sent off to be dyed commercially and then returned to be woven locally.

In this, and the piece in the Cockburn Collection, the large areas of blue, green and black are of equal size comparison with Wilsons' 1819 settings where the black square is always larger by some 5-12%. The thread count from the sample gives a sett (Fig 3 - top) that differs in both proportion and size to those in the 1819 but interestingly, is very close to the Cockburn specimen (Fig 3 - bottom) which is almost certainly Wilsons' cloth.



Fig 3. Comparison of the settings of the Original (top) and Cockburn (Wilsons'?) specimens. © The Author.

Without access to a full width specimen of the HSL cloth the detail of the second selvedge remains unknown and one cannot be sure from that shown above whether the cloth was intended for joining to make a double plaid or was for kilts. The remaining selvedge finishes in the centre of the sett so technically the cloth could have been joined on that edge but as it is a clean (non-float) selvedge the likelihood is that it was kilt cloth. This specimen is all wool whereas in the Cockburn sample the yellow stripe is silk which was a common Wilsons' practice during the 1820-30 but which does also

feature in some of their earlier *Officers'* cloth⁴. It's entirely possible that the Cockburn sample is a piece of early Officers' cloth and although it does not follow the 1819 counts or proportions the use of silk means that it is undoubtedly Wilsons' material as no other weaver is known to have employed this technique.

SOURCE OF THE ORIGINAL CLOTH

The quality of the HSL cloth is contemporary with material of the mid-late 18th century and if the claim⁵ is taken at face value then it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that this is a piece of the original 79th regimental cloth. There is also the tantalising possibility that the piece came from Allan Cameron himself and may have been part of his kilt/plaid. Examination of the bound HSL piece will confirm whether the seal remains (many of the specimens were cut down when the collection was rebound and the piece with the seal often discarded). Of those that remain reveal that some specimens were sealed by the Chief, others by the Society's Secretary, George Wedderburn, presumably to confirm what had been submitted but not sealed by the chief directly.

CONCLUSION

The fact that the shades and weaving density of the HSL specimen differ from those commonly used by Wilsons suggests that this piece was woven elsewhere. It could have been produced by another commercial weaver of the time such as those operating in the Borders but it could equally have been woven rurally in the Highlands, a fact considered more likely, possibly in the Fort William/Great Glen area given Allan Cameron's origins. If that is the case this specimen may well be a piece of the original length of the Erracht tartan ordered by/for Cameron himself. This hypothesis is supported by the Cockburn specimen which is Wilsons' cloth but which conforms to the earlier (HSL) setting and so may have been their early Regimental Officers' cloth before the variations in sett size were introduced as later weavings called for different qualities in the Officers', Sergeants' and Privates plaids in keeping with the widespread 19th century practice amongst the Highland Regiments.

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⁴ Under the 1819 entry for the 78th Regiment (Ross-shire, later Seaforth Highlanders) is a note stating that the 'white in the Officers' cloth is always in silk'. There is also a 92nd (Gordon) kilt c1794 in Edinburgh Castle in which the yellow stripe is silk.

⁵ The claim is found written on an original label attached to the larger bound piece in the HSL Collection and so is likely to be contemporary with the sample's submission,