

The Scottish Tartan Plaids

BY MARY M. ATWATER

AMONG the handsomest of the fabrics we make are simple all-wool fabrics decorated with the cross-barred patterns in colors that are generally referred to as "plaids." The word "plaid" originally meant the wide shawl-like scarf that is a prominent part of the national costume of the Scottish Highlands. This garment is always woven in one of these cross-barred designs, the pattern indicating the clan or "sept" of the wearer, and sometimes his rank and occupation.

We have come to use the word plaid in a loose way for the pattern rather than the garment, and speak of "fancy" plaids, "French" plaids, and the like. For the sake of clearness, however, I shall in the following notes use the word in its ancient sense, and refer to the patterns by the word "tartan" which is the more specific word for the ancient Scottish designs.

It is impossible to consider the old patterns simply as decorative arrangements of color, for they mean so much more. They are symbols: they mean to us William Wallace and Robert Bruce, the lost cause of the Stuarts, the romance of Walter Scott, down to the grim heroisms of the world war, with the tartan-kilted "Ladies from Hell" sweeping into action to the skirl of bagpipes.

The earliest form of the Scottish Highland dress consisted of a single length of fabric — "twelve ells of tartan or six ells of double tartan, neatly pleated and fastened around the body with a belt, the lower part forming the kilt while the other half, being fixed to the shoulder by a brooch, hung down behind and thus formed the plaid." Later, plaid and kilt were made of separate pieces. The kilt made of "six ells of single tartan, which being pleated and sewn, was fixed around the waist with a strap, half a yard being left plain at either end, which crossed each other in front." The plaid consisted of four yards of tartan about a yard and a half wide, fringed across the ends. This is the modern form of the costume. The short stockings worn with this must also be in the tartan pattern, either made of fabric or knitted. They usually show the figure on the diagonal. For full dress the doublet worn under the plaid should be of velvet fastened with diamond-shaped silver buttons, or open over a waistcoat of scarlet or white cloth, or of tartan. The bonnet must be "broad and blue, and should bear the crest of the wearer's clan, with motto, and also the evergreen badge of the clan or sept." The shoes should be low-cut, with buckles uniform in ornament with the shoulder-clasp and other ornaments. In addition the equipment includes a "sporrán" or pouch of goat's-hair — black, gray or white — ornamented with tassels and a mounting showing the crest and the clan motto; also a brooch to fasten the plaid on the shoulder, a waist-belt, a sword-belt, a claymore or broadsword, a dirk (worn in the stocking), a pair of pistols and a powderhorn. The pattern of the tartan

must, of course, be the traditional pattern of the clan, though it is allowable to adopt the clan-tartan of one's mother.

For ordinary wear it is allowable to wear a tweed jacket and vest with tartan kilt and plaid, and if the clan has several patterns for special use it is allowable to wear a kilt, of "clan" tartan and a plaid of "hunting" tartan, or vice versa. For dress the "dress" tartan must be used throughout.

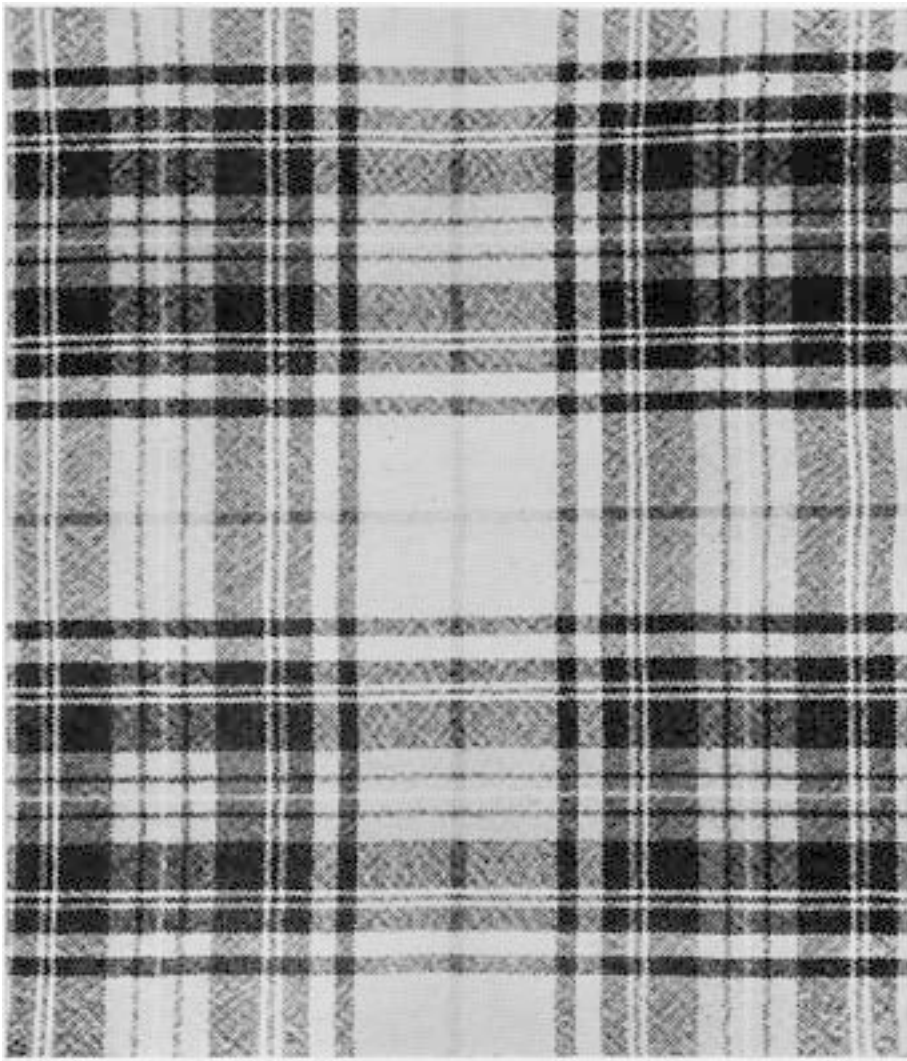
This is a barbaric and gorgeous costume, not in the least feminine in effect in spite of the skirt-like form of the kilt. I shall never forget seeing three authentic "Ladies from Hell" in attendance on a war-time exhibition in New York. The shortest was some six feet four of exceedingly rugged he-man, and all had a proud dignity and completeness that would have made them at home in any possible surroundings from battle and sudden death to the tea table and the ballroom. Enormously impressive.

Though we in this country cannot wear the traditional Highland costume with the sureness of right and in its completeness, many of us have at least a touch of Scotch in our ancestry and get particular pleasure from using the old traditional patterns in our weaving. Our own "he-men" delight in gorgeous trappings and brilliant colors as much as any savage — as witness the western cowboy in full regalia. Our men, I think, often suffer from the enforced sobriety of their conventional dress and have a real color hunger. So when we plan our weaving, why not make a tartan scarf for the head of the house? or a tartan shirt to wear on the next hunting trip into the woods? Believe me, it will be appreciated.

The tartan fabric should be of wool, and is usually woven in 2-2 twill. For scarves, dress-fabric and shirt-fabric, however, we in this country prefer the plain tabby weave, as this makes a fabric of lighter weight. The yarn used for warp and weft should be the same, though warp and weft may be of opposite twist if one prefers. For scarves and sports-shirts an excellent yarn is Bernat's "Fabri" which may be had specially dyed in the Scotch tartan colors. A warp-setting of 24 ends to the inch is the most satisfactory for the lighter weight fabrics in tabby weave. The same yarn set at 30 ends to the inch and woven in 2-2 twill gives a heavier cloth, desirable for skirts and for shirts for the winter hunting trip.

The colors used in the Scotch tartans are all strong, fairly dark, primary shades — a deep "royal" blue, a fairly dark bluish green, turkey red, and bright yellow. These colors, with black and white, are the chief shades used. In some plaids one finds a little light blue, and in some a dark, dull tan.

Black and white illustrations give very little idea of the effect of the tartan patterns, so I am giving brief descriptions that will aid in selection — when one wishes a pattern



The "Queen Victoria" or "Royal Stuart" Tartan

for a special use and does not care to be limited by the family tradition.

The sectional method of warping is impractical for any but the simplest patterns, such as the "Rob Roy" tartan, so that for these fabrics one must have recourse to the warping board. The warp should be made strictly in accordance with the "sett" or pattern, for as many repeats as required for width. In weaving the same arrangement of colors must be followed exactly, special pains being taken to weave exactly the same number of weft-shots to the inch as there are warp-ends to the inch in the reed. An allowance must, of course, be made for shrinkage, which is somewhat greater lengthwise than crosswise. The figures in the finished fabric must be neither long drawn out nor squatty, but exactly square. This is of first importance.

The Scotch weavers keep the sett of the pattern, not in words and figures on paper, but in colored yarns wound around a stick. It is a good idea to make up a sett of this kind for the pattern to be woven, as it is easier to follow, both in warping and weaving, than the written directions.

The simplest of the tartan patterns is the "Rob Roy" tartan. The famous Highland chieftain appears to have adopted this pattern after his family was outlawed and persecuted by the crown. He was a MacGregor, and, on

his mother's side, a Campbell. His tartan is entirely different from those of these clans. It consists of alternate red and black squares in a large, bold check. Warp and weave 48 threads red, 48 threads black, and repeat.

The clan MacGregor is very ancient and is mentioned in records of the early fifteenth century. The family came into conflict with the authorities when they refused to accept a crown charter for their lands but undertook to hold them by the ancient "right of the sword." King James VI sent a punitive expedition against them, but at the battle of Glenfruin in 1603 the MacGregors were victorious. The entire family was outlawed and the name absolutely proscribed after this battle, and in the next year the chief and many of his followers were executed at Edinburgh. In 1774 Parliament passed an act annulling the suppression of the name. The MacGregor tartan, the sett for which is given below, is a bold figure in green on a red ground, with a line of white through the center of the figure.

Sett of the MacGregor tartan:

72 threads, red	6 threads, white
24 " green	— center of figure
10 " red	2 " red
10 " green	10 " green
2 " red	10 " red
	24 " green

Repeat.

End, to balance, 72 threads, red.

Number of threads in each repeat, 170.

A simple red and black tartan, lighted with a touch of yellow, and very handsome in effect is the pattern of the Brodie family. The records of the family were destroyed when Lord Lewis Gordon burned Brodie House in 1645, but the family is very ancient.

Sett of the Brodie tartan:

6 threads, black	— center of red figure
68 " red	
32 " black	
4 " yellow	
32 " black	
8 " red	— center of black figure
32 " black	
4 " yellow	
32 " black	
68 " red	

Repeat.

End, to balance, 6 threads, black.

Number of threads in each repeat, 286.

Another simple pattern, this one in black and yellow with a touch of red, is the tartan of the clan MacLeod. The founder of this family was Leod, son of Olave, King of Man, and was born early in the thirteenth century. Much of the original land is still in the possession of this family and the seat of the chief is still in Dunvegan Castle, Skye. "The MacCrimmons, most famous of the Highland pipers, were for centuries the pipers of the MacLeods."

Sett of the MacLeod tartan:

6 threads, red — center of yellow figure
 40 “ yellow
 24 “ black
 4 “ yellow
 24 “ black — center of black figure
 4 “ yellow
 24 “ black
 40 “ yellow

Repeat.

End, to balance, 6 threads, red.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 166.

A more elaborate tartan, and a very beautiful one, is that of the Macbeth family.

The background of the Macbeth tartan is blue, with a lively figure in green, red, yellow, black and white.

Sett of the Macbeth tartan:

64 threads, blue	4 threads, red
8 “ yellow	2 “ black
8 “ black	12 “ red
2 “ white	20 “ green
4 “ blue	4 “ blue
2 “ white	2 “ white
4 “ blue	4 “ blue
20 “ green	2 “ white
12 “ red	8 “ black
2 “ black	8 “ yellow
4 “ red	
2 “ white —	
center of figure	

Repeat.
 End, to balance, 64 threads, blue.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 198.

Some of the large and powerful clans used several tartan patterns. Thus the tartans of the Stewart family include a “clan” tartan, a “dress” or “chieftan” tartan, a “hunting” tartan, and a special modification of the clan pattern known as the “Bonnie Prince Charlie” tartan. These are all very beautiful patterns and of particular historic interest. The hunting tartan is dark green in effect with the figure in black and blue, and with fine lines of red and yellow. The clan, and the Prince Charlie patterns are similar, differing only in the width of the red figure. The effect is chiefly red. The dress or chieftan pattern, sometimes called the “Royal Stuart” pattern, and sometimes the “Queen Victoria” tartan because it was the one used by the great queen, has a white background, with the figure in blue, green, red, yellow and black. This pattern is probably the most popular of all the tartan patterns. For sports shirts, scarves and dresses it is charming.

Sett of the clan Stewart tartan:

60 threads, red	16 threads, green
8 “ blue	8 “ red
12 “ black	2 “ blue
2 “ red	4 “ red
2 “ yellow	2 “ white — center
2 “ red	4 “ red
4 “ white	2 “ blue
2 “ red	8 “ red

16 threads, green	2 threads, yellow
2 “ red	2 “ red
4 “ white	12 “ black
2 “ red	8 “ blue

Repeat.

End, to balance, 60 threads, red.

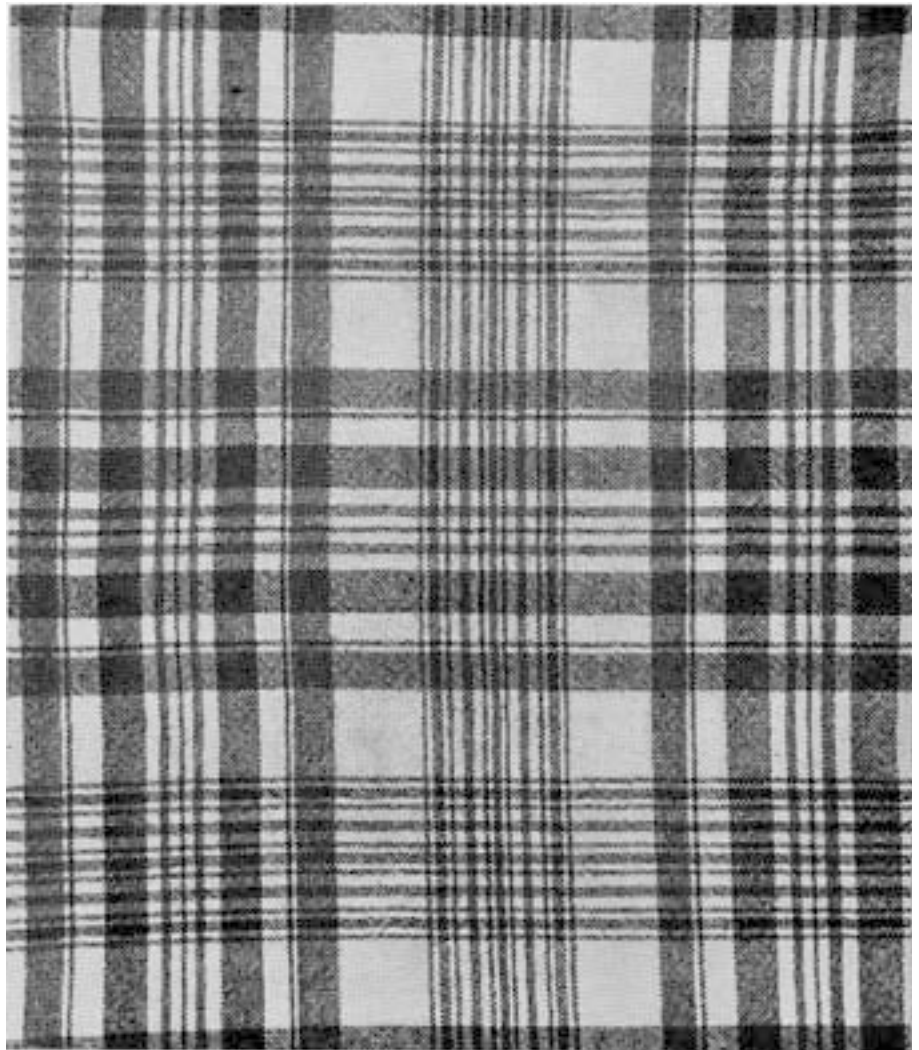
Number of threads in one repeat, 186.

For a larger figure, double the number of threads in each stripe of the sett.

For the Prince Charlie pattern make the wide red stripe of 30 instead of 60 threads. Pattern figure the same as above.

Sett of the Royal Stuart tartan:

4 threads, red
36 “ white
6 “ blue
8 “ white
8 “ green
2 “ yellow
2 “ green
2 “ white
16 “ green
8 “ red
2 “ green
4 “ red
2 “ white — center
4 “ red
2 “ green
8 “ red
16 “ green
2 “ white
2 “ green



Pattern “Murray of Tullibardine”

2 threads, yellow
 8 “ green
 8 “ white
 6 “ blue
 36 “ white
 Repeat.
 End, to balance, 4 threads, red.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 194.

Sett of the Stuart “Hunting” tartan:

4 threads, yellow
 22 “ green
 6 “ black
 4 “ green
 12 “ black
 4 “ green — center of first figure
 12 “ black
 4 “ green
 6 “ black
 22 “ green
 4 “ red
 22 “ green
 12 “ black
 2 “ green
 2 “ black
 2 “ green
 2 “ black
 2 “ green
 12 “ blue
 4 “ green — center of second figure
 12 “ blue
 2 “ green
 2 “ black
 2 “ green
 2 “ black
 2 “ green
 12 “ black
 22 “ green
 Repeat.
 End, to balance, 4 threads, red.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 216.

A very somber pattern, all in dark green, dark blue and black, is the tartan adopted in 1739 for the famous “Black Watch” Highland regiment. The blue in this tartan is a dark navy shade.

Sett of the “Black Watch” tartan:

4 threads, black
 20 “ green
 20 “ black
 20 “ blue
 4 “ black
 4 “ blue — center of first figure
 4 “ black
 20 “ blue
 20 “ black
 20 “ green
 4 “ black
 20 “ green
 20 “ black
 4 “ blue
 4 “ black
 4 “ blue
 4 “ black
 20 “ blue — center of second figure
 4 “ black
 4 “ blue
 4 “ black
 4 “ blue
 20 “ black
 20 “ green
 Repeat.
 End, to balance, 4 threads, black.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 272.

A simple but very bright and effective pattern in red and white is the tartan of the Clan Menzies.

Sett of the Menzies tartan:

68 threads, red
 8 “ white
 8 “ red
 8 “ white
 16 “ red
 4 “ white
 2 “ red
 24 “ white — center of figure
 2 “ red
 4 “ white
 16 “ red
 8 “ white
 8 “ red
 8 “ white
 Repeat.
 End, to balance, 68 threads, red.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 184.

Murray of Tullibardine.

Sett of tartan:

2 threads, green
 4 “ red
 4 “ blue
 6 “ red
 16 “ green
 10 “ red
 2 “ green
 2 “ red
 14 “ blue
 32 “ red
 2 “ blue
 2 “ red
 4 “ green
 2 “ red
 2 “ blue
 4 “ red
 4 “ blue
 4 “ red
 4 “ blue
 2 “ blue
 2 “ red
 4 “ blue — center
 2 “ red
 2 “ blue
 4 “ red
 4 “ blue
 4 “ red
 2 “ blue
 2 “ red
 4 “ green
 2 “ red
 2 “ blue
 32 “ red
 14 “ blue
 2 “ red
 2 “ green
 10 “ red
 16 “ green
 6 “ red
 4 “ blue
 4 “ red
 End, to balance, 2 threads, green.
 Description: This is a handsome and lively pattern, chiefly red in effect.
 Number of threads in one repeat, 242.

Douglas tartan — blue and green with a fine white line and a touch of black. Simple but effective.

Sett of the clan Douglas tartan:

4 threads, white
 40 “ blue
 40 “ green
 4 “ blue
 16 “ black — center
 4 “ blue
 40 “ green

40 threads, blue
End, to balance, 4 threads, white.
Number of threads in one repeat, 188.

Clan MacKay — blue, black, green.

Sett of the pattern:

4 threads, black
26 “ green
24 “ black
4 “ green
24 “ blue
4 “ green — center
24 “ blue
4 “ green
24 “ black
26 “ green
End, to balance, 4 threads, black.
Number of threads in one repeat, 164.

Clan MacQueen — red and black with a touch of yellow.

Sett of the pattern:

4 threads, yellow
44 “ black
16 “ red
4 “ black
16 “ red
4 “ black — center
16 “ red

4 threads, black
16 “ red
44 “ black
End, to balance, 4 threads, yellow.
Number of threads in one repeat, 168.

These are only a few of the many tartan patterns, each with its history and its special interest for those of the name. The ones selected have been chosen to give a wide variety, — from the light and dainty “Queen Victoria” tartan to the dark and solemn “Black Watch.”

The tartan patterns can be used with handsome results for couch blankets and automobile robes. For this use a heavier yarn than Fabri should be used, of course. For a couch blanket, Shetland yarn set at 15 to the inch and woven in plain tabby or set at 18 to the inch and woven in twill will be found satisfactory. For an automobile blanket a heavy knitting yarn set at 10 or 12 to the inch is suggested.

Like other all-wool fabrics the tartans should be washed when taken from the loom, and pressed while still damp. This is usually the only finish required. If a fluffy, thick fabric is desired, use a fuzzy yarn and brush the finished cloth with a wire brush. If the fuzzy warp gives trouble — as it is likely to do — treat it with warp-dressing.