When Tartan Was Not Fake: The Disclothing Act in Gaelic Song

By Ellen L. Beard

Tartan is simultaneously a material object, a design template, and a symbol with multiple referents. As a patterned textile, it features straight lines, right angles, bright colours, and no ambiguity; as a symbol, its lines become fuzzy, its angles circular, its colours muddied, and its meaning polysemic (Brown, 9). While this paper addresses the significance of tartan for Gaelic speakers in 1746, some history is required for context. As documented by scholars such as Hugh Cheape (16–17), Meg Bateman and John Purser (547–48), tartan appears on the checked leggings of a Celtic captive in a Roman triumphal arch dating to 200 AD (in what is now Morocco), and in a remnant of checked fabric dating to the third century AD found in Falkirk and now held in the National Museum of Scotland. Written references appear by 1538, when James V purchased a suit of tartan clothing (Pittock, 35), and pictorial representations can be found in Burt (29) and early eighteenth-century portraits including a short kilt from c. 1712 (Bateman and Purser, 550). By that time, tartan was the everyday dress of many male Highlanders, although no longer in fashion for women (Stiùbhart, 173). As discussed below, Parliament banned tartan in 1746. Legalised again in 1782, it never resumed its previous role as ordinary attire, but instead was well-embarked on its next career as the uniform of the Highland regiments and the dress-up clothes of Highland elites (Dziennik 2012).

In the symbolic dimension, tartan served as a Jacobite emblem during all the Risings from 1689 to 1746 (Pittock, 36–39), leading directly to its proscription (Cheape, 17). By 1822, when George IV visited Edinburgh on 'The King's Jaunt' (Pebble), Walter Scott and David Stewart of Garth were actively coopting tartan into a revised narrative of Scotland as a distinctive but loyal component of Britain, symbolised by the Hanoverian king himself resplendent in red tartan kilt and pink tights. This display was controversial even at the time (Royle, 57–61), igniting a debate over 'authenticity' that has ebbed and flowed for the last two hundred years. The best-known sally in this culture war was Hugh Trevor-Roper's essay 'The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Hobsbawm and Ranger's collection *The*

Invention of Tradition. He began with a frontal attack:

> *Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. Before the latter years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders did not form a distinct people. They were simply the overflow of Ireland. […] The creation of an independent Highland tradition, and the imposition of that new tradition, with its outward badges, on the whole Scottish nation, was the work of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (15–16)*

This, of course, is demonstrably false, especially with regard to language and music, had Trevor-Roper informed himself of such matters. (See, e.g., Blankenhorn, ch. 1, and Lamb 2013 and 2014.) Instead, he went for the low-hanging fruit, including 'outward badges' such as tartan. Specifically, he claimed that while tartan cloth was present in the Highlands by the sixteenth century, the short kilt (*feileadh beag*), with its sewn-in pleats, was actually invented by an English Quaker industrialist, Thomas Rawlinson, about 1730, to protect Highland workers at his iron furnace in Invergarry (Trevor-Roper, 18–22). He then argued that the identification of specific tartans with individual clans was largely a nineteenth-century invention by enterprising textile manufacturers and the Sobieski Stuart brothers (30–40).

Trevor-Roper's deliberately provocative essay helps to explain why tartan has remained subject to charges of fakery into the twenty-first century, producing a 278-page book of essays as recently as 2010 (Brown, ed.). The Rawlinson thesis has been refuted (Bateman and Purser, 550; Brown, 98–99); although experts such as Cheape agree that the individual clan tartans known today were largely 'the inventions of astute manufacturers in the nineteenth century' and creative writers like the Sobieski Stuarts (22). But even Trevor-Roper does not deny that tartan – in some form – was a common aspect of Highland dress in 1745 when it was adopted by Prince Charles and his Jacobite army (20–21). Thus, for the Parliament sitting in London in 1746 tartan was a symbol of Jacobite rebellion; for ordinary Highlanders, it was their everyday clothing and a symbol of their distinctive culture – regardless of political or religious affiliations.

This was the context for the Act of Proscription, designed primarily to disarm the Scottish Highlands and prevent future rebellions once and for all. The provision

known as the Disclothing Act stated:

> *That from and after the first day of August, [1747], no man or boy, within that part of Great Briton called Scotland, other than shall be employed as officers and soldiers in his Majesty's forces, shall on any pretence whatsoever, wear or put on the clothes commonly called Highland Clothes (that is to say) the plaid, philibeg, or little kilt, trowse, shoulder belts, or any part whatsoever of what peculiarly belongs to the highland garb; and that no TARTAN, or partly-coloured plaid or stuff shall be used for great coats, or for upper coats; and if any such person shall presume, after the said first day of August, to wear or put on the aforesaid garments or any part of them, every such person so offending, being convicted thereof […] shall suffer imprisonment, without bail, during the space of six months and no longer; and being convicted for a second offence […] shall be liable to be transported to any of his Majesty's plantations beyond the seas, there to remain for a space of seven years.*

This law seems to have infuriated every Highlander, especially members of clans that had fought for the government, since it applied equally to everyone in Scotland regardless of past conduct or political loyalties. As a result, it was roundly condemned by Gaelic poets from Jacobite MacDonalds to Hanoverian Campbells and everyone in between.

According to Ronald Black (2001: 457), the Disclothing Act produced 'such a torrent of Gaelic verse' that a collection of it would fill an entire book; I have considered only nine songs from two standard anthologies (Campbell 1933 and Black 2001). Common themes include praise for the beauty of the tartan (contrasted with the boring black coats and grey breeches of the Lowlanders), the comfort and versatility of the kilt when traipsing through the countryside, sleeping in the open air, and preparing to fight (compared to tight trousers), and its ability to attract the lassies with bright colours and a well-shaped leg. Most of the songs attack the stupidity and unfairness of punishing loyal and disloyal clans alike, and the deliberate targeting of a powerful and distinctive symbol of Highland identity. This was not peripheral to government policy but part of an ongoing effort to assimilate Gaels into the language, religion, dress, and behaviour of their southern neighbors. As a result, many poets flirted with sedition by calling openly for another Rising.

Four eighteenth-century Gaelic poets (MacDonald, MacIntyre, MacKay, and Campbell) illustrate these themes. Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald, c. 1693–c. 1770), who published the first book of secular Gaelic poetry in 1751, was a Jacobite schoolmaster from Argyll who was 'out' with the Prince throughout the Rising as a battlefield captain and propagandist, his home later pillaged and his family made refugees until the act of indemnity in 1747 (Black 2017, vol I: 41–47). His best-known song on the tartan, '*Am Breacan Uallach*' ('The Proud Plaid'), contains twenty-six verses that shift halfway through from cheerful praise of the tartan to a bloodthirsty call for revenge against George II and his son the Butcher of Cumberland. It begins:

Hé 'n clò dubh, Hó 'n clò dubh, Hé 'n clò dubh, B'fheàrr am breac - an.
Hé 'n clò dubh, Hó 'n clò dubh, Hé 'n clò dubh, B'fheàrr am breac-an.
'S fheàrr leam breac-an uall - ach, Mu'm ghuaill - ibh 's a chur fo'm ach- lais,
Na ge do gheibh - inn cò - ta De'n chlò as fheàrr thig a Sas- ainn.

[Hey, the black cloth, Ho, the black cloth, Hey, the black cloth, the plaid was better. More I loved the proud plaid, Beneath my arms and round my shoulders, Than any coat I could get, Though of the finest cloth from England.]

The tune is a waulking song, sung by women working cloth, which fits the subject matter and becomes an extended metaphor in the text, where the poet says of Prince Charles:

R'ar n-anam tha e fuaighte
Teann-luaidhte cho cruaidh ri glasan,
'S uainn cha n-fhaodar 'fhuasgladh,
Gu 'm buainear am fear ud asainn.

To our souls he's woven,

Firmly waulked, and tightly locked,
Ne’er can he be loosened,
From us till he is cut away.

(Campbell, 154–63; 302)

Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (Duncan MacIntyre, 1724–1812), best known as a nature poet, was also from Argyll and served briefly in the Hanoverian army as a paid substitute at the Battle of Falkirk, where the Jacobites won and the poet ran away (Black 2001: 477). He later composed two songs describing the battle, as well as ‘*Oran don Bhriogais*’ (‘Song to the Breeches’), which begins as follows:

'S o tha a' bhriog-ais liath - ghlas am bliadh - na cur mul - aid oirnn, 'S e 'n
rud nach fhac - as riamh oirnn, 'S nach miann leinn a chum - ail oirnn, 'S nam
bio - maid uil - e dì - leas don Rìgh bha toirt cuir - idh dhuinn, Chan
fhaic - te sinn gu dì - linn a' strioch-dadh don chul - aidh seo.

[And since the light-grey breeches This year made us so sorrowful, Such things were never seen on us, Nor do we care to keep them on; And had we all been faithful To the King who asked for aid from us, We would not be for e’er beheld A-yielding to this sort of garb.]

As a member of a Hanoverian clan, he was particularly angry that the King and Parliament had punished the Campbells and others who had loyally enlisted in the Argyll Militia and helped Duke William (aka the Butcher of Cumberland) defeat the rebels. He concludes:

Tha command aig Sasunn oirnn
O smachdaich iad gu buileach sinn;

Tha angar agus duilichinn
'San am so air iomadh fear
Bha 'n campa Dhiùc Uilleam,
Us nach fheairrd' iad gun bhuidhinn e;
Nan tigeadh oirnne Teàrlach
'S gun éireamaid 'na champa,
Gheibhte breacain chàrnaid,
'S bhiodh aird air na gunnachan.

For England has command of us
Since she did wholly conquer us;
There's anger too and misery
In many a man now at this time,
Who was in William's camp before
Who's now no better that he's won;
And if Prince Charles to us returned
We would arise and follow him,
The scarlet plaids once more be worn
And all the guns be out again.

(Campbell, 218–25; 305)

The melody – 'Seann Triubhais Uilleachain' ('Willie's old trews') – seems to be a fiddle tune suggested to the poet by the relevance of its title.

Rob Donn MacAoidh (Robert MacKay, 1714–1778), lived in Hanoverian Sutherland, far from most of the battles of the Forty-Five but personally sympathetic to the Stewarts and sufficiently incensed by the Disclothing Act to compose a furious song called '*Oran nan Casagan Dubha*' ('Song of the Black Coats'), which begins as follows:

Làmh' Dhè leinn - e, dhaoin - e, c' uim - e chaoch - ail sibh fas - an? 'S nach eil

5

ag - aibh do shaor - sa, fiù an aod - ach a chleachd sibh, 'S i mo

9

bhar - ail mun dèigh tha'n agh - aidh fhèil - eadh is os - an, Gum bheil

13

car - aid aig Teàr - lach ann am Pàr - la - maid Shas - ainn.

[May God help us, O people, Why this change to your fashion? You have lost all your freedom, E'en the clothes you were wearing. I think this proclamation Against the kilt and short hose Shows that Charles has an ally In the Parliament of England.]

Like MacIntyre, he dwells at length on the government's ingratitude towards members of loyal clans who supported King George, pointing out:

Ma gheibh do nàmhaid 's do charaid
An aon pheanas an Albainn,
'S iad a dh'èirich nad aghaidh
Rinn an roghainn a b' fheàrr dhiubh.

If your enemy and your friend receive
The same punishment in Scotland,
Those who rose against you
Made the better choice.

He then bitterly laments the political divisions of the Scots which permitted the English to prevail, and calls – like MacDonald and MacIntyre – for a new Rising:

Nis, a Theàrlaich òig Stiubhaird,
Riut tha dùil aig gach fine
Chaidh a chothachadh crùin dhuit

’S leig an dùthaich na teine.
Tha iad mar nathraichean falaicht’
A chaill an earradh an-uiridh,
Ach tha ’g ath-ghleusadh an gathan
Gu èiridh latha do thighinn.

And now, young Charles Stewart,
You’re the hope of the clansmen
Who went to win you a crown
And set the country on fire then.
Who now hide like serpents
That cast their skins just a year since,
But are sharpening their fangs
To rise on your coming.

(Beard, 52–54)

For this, he was summoned before the local authorities, but apparently escaped with a lecture. The tune, known as ‘Alastair of Glengarry’ for an earlier elegy, was also used for MacIntyre’s ‘Battle of Falkirk’ and other big songs requiring dramatic musical settings.

Mairearad Chaimbeul (Margaret Campbell, d. 1775), the wife of a Presbyterian minister in Argyll and the final poet in this survey, completes the spectrum of commentators from Jacobite to Hanoverian (Black 2001: 458). She alone does not call for a new Rising. Rather, her critique of the Disclothing Act attempts a lighter touch, suggesting that women would shun men dressed in boring grey clothes, but she also notes the Act’s harshness towards law-abiding citizens, its disrespect for tradition, and its practical impact by making everyday Highland clothing unusable. Finally, like Donnchadh Bàn and Rob Donn, she emphasises the counter-productive nature of the government’s policy:

Tha call aig an rìgh ann
Mas fhiach mo bharail:
Tha ’n cusmann a dhìth air
Gun phrìs air dathan,
Marsantan na rìoghachd
A’ caoidh gun aran —

’S nam measadh a’ chuirt e
Thig mùthadh fhathast.

The king will be the loser here
In my opinion:
If there’s no demand for dyestuffs
He forfeits customs,
The merchants of the land complaining
For lack of bread —
And if the court were to consider it
Change will come yet.

(Black 2001: 190–91)

And change did come, but only MacIntyre lived to see it.

In conclusion, these were political protest songs with well-developed polemical arguments in the aftermath of a civil war and subsequent military occupation by what many Scots considered a foreign power and royal family. Of course, the Forty-Five was the last Jacobite Rising, and the real ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’ aged slowly into exile, irrelevance, and myth. But these songs predate the myths, and exemplify the unified cultural nationalism of Scottish Gaels in defence of a deeply felt and daily worn symbol of their distinct and increasingly threatened identity.

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The tune is a waulking song, sung by women working cloth, which fits the subject matter and becomes an extended metaphor in the text, where the poet says of Prince Charles:

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Like MacIntyre, he dwells at length on the government's ingratitude towards members of loyal clans who supported King George, pointing out:

Ma gheibh do nàmhaid 's do charaid
An aon pheanas an Albainn,
'S iad a dh'èirich nad aghaidh
Rinn an roghainn a b' fheàrr dhiubh.

If your enemy and your friend receive
The same punishment in Scotland,
Those who rose against you
Made the better choice.

He then bitterly laments the political divisions of the Scots which permitted the English to prevail, and calls – like MacDonald and MacIntyre – for a new Rising:

Nis, a Theàrlaich òig Stiubhaird,
Riut tha dùil aig gach fine
Chaidh a chothachadh crùin dhuit

’S leig an dùthaich na teine.
Tha iad mar nathraichean falaicht’
A chaill an earradh an-uiridh,
Ach tha ’g ath-ghleusadh an gathan
Gu èiridh latha do thighinn.

And now, young Charles Stewart,
You’re the hope of the clansmen
Who went to win you a crown
And set the country on fire then.
Who now hide like serpents
That cast their skins just a year since,
But are sharpening their fangs
To rise on your coming.

(Beard, 52–54)

For this, he was summoned before the local authorities, but apparently escaped with a lecture. The tune, known as ‘Alastair of Glengarry’ for an earlier elegy, was also used for MacIntyre’s ‘Battle of Falkirk’ and other big songs requiring dramatic musical settings.

Mairearad Chaimbeul (Margaret Campbell, d. 1775), the wife of a Presbyterian minister in Argyll and the final poet in this survey, completes the spectrum of commentators from Jacobite to Hanoverian (Black 2001: 458). She alone does not call for a new Rising. Rather, her critique of the Disclothing Act attempts a lighter touch, suggesting that women would shun men dressed in boring grey clothes, but she also notes the Act’s harshness towards law-abiding citizens, its disrespect for tradition, and its practical impact by making everyday Highland clothing unusable. Finally, like Donnchadh Bàn and Rob Donn, she emphasises the counter-productive nature of the government’s policy:

Tha call aig an rìgh ann
Mas fhiach mo bharail:
Tha ’n cusmann a dhìth air
Gun phrìs air dathan,
Marsantan na rìoghachd
A’ caoidh gun aran —

'S nam measadh a' chuirt e
Thig mùthadh fhathast.

The king will be the loser here
In my opinion:
If there's no demand for dyestuffs
He forfeits customs,
The merchants of the land complaining
For lack of bread —
And if the court were to consider it
Change will come yet.

(Black 2001: 190–91)

And change did come, but only MacIntyre lived to see it.

In conclusion, these were political protest songs with well-developed polemical arguments in the aftermath of a civil war and subsequent military occupation by what many Scots considered a foreign power and royal family. Of course, the Forty-Five was the last Jacobite Rising, and the real 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' aged slowly into exile, irrelevance, and myth. But these songs predate the myths, and exemplify the unified cultural nationalism of Scottish Gaels in defence of a deeply felt and daily worn symbol of their distinct and increasingly threatened identity.

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