

A Queensland Scottish kilt?

A search for nineteenth century uniforms worn by the local Defence Forces of the colony of Queensland, revealed a Gordon sett military kilt which may hold a significant place in our knowledge of the development of tartan, and its use by the Gordon Highlanders and Scottish regiments generally. Researcher Brian Rough and tartan specialist James D Scarlett analyse an unusual kilt held in the military heraldry collection of the Australian War Memorial.

Within the military heraldry collection of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) rests a uniform catalogued as being that of a private of the Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps. This corps was formed in the colony during the burst of patriotism associated with the Russian war scare of 1885. Being a volunteer body, only arms, ammunition and some instruction were provided by the Government, the Corps being left to supply its own uniforms and equipment, though they were able to do this through British Army stores. The Queensland Scottish only ever reached a strength of six companies, so there were never many uniforms in circulation. The one within the collection of the AWM was the only known example of that uniform, however on closer examination it was not quite what it seemed.

The dress uniform adopted by the Queensland Scottish in 1885 was that of the 92nd Gordon Highlanders. A requisition was sent to Queensland's Agent-General in London in October 1885, ordering NCOs and privates uniform of the Gordon Highlanders pattern, without badges or buttons, but including plain shoulder straps. It also specified that any other particular article of uniform worn by the Gordons, other than regimental mottoes or devices, not included in the requisition, be forwarded. The Agent-General was requested to obtain the uniform materials from the Royal Army Clothing Depot at Pimlico and reported in February 1886 that the material was ready. The uniforms arrived in Queensland in late June and were immediately issued to A and B Companies in Brisbane. The order was duplicated in December and arrived in early June 1887.

While there was little doubt as to the authenticity of most articles in the AWM collection, a close examination of the Queensland Scottish uniform found inconsistencies. Although the scarlet doublet had the correct facing colour and Queensland Scottish buttons, there were hints enough to lead to the belief it was actually a doublet of the New South Wales Scottish Rifles, dating to about 1900. The sporran packaged with the uniform had a Queensland glengarry badge attached, rather than the Gordon's sporran badge. Most surprising was the kilt, not for its sett by which it was readily identifiable as a Gordon military, but for its colour. It was unlike any of the Gordon colour variations observed before. It was considerably lighter in colour than the modern Gordon regimental tartan, and did not match the 'ancient' blueish colours worn around World War I. Suggestions that the light colour was caused by fading would not seem to be supported as the kilt, although it has seen some wear, retains a uniform colouring all over. As no other Gordon military kilt dated to the 1880s could be located for comparison, tartan specialist James D Scarlett joined the quest to identify the AWM kilt.

The known provenance of the uniform does not extend back further than the 1930s when it was allegedly acquired from a wax museum in Melbourne which had displayed uniforms of colonial soldiers. Analysis of the original stitching on the pleats by the AWM's conservators showed they were machined stitched, which places the kilts' assembly to a date no earlier than the mid-1860s. Analysis also showed that the colours of the tartan were definitely in vegetable dyes. That however does not satisfactorily date the tartan cloth. And dating a specimen of tartan is a tricky business.

Tradition tends to lead one astray for everybody, deep down and instinctively, wants a piece of tartan to be old, and tradition is a fragile thing; '1850' quickly becomes 'eighteenth century' and a bit of dirt soon becomes a bloodstain and a moth-hole a bullet hole, indicating that the kilt was worn at some dire battle, if not actually at Culloden.

Something better than that is needed for accurate dating and there is not much to be had, for the manufacture of tartan went on in much the same way for a very long time, perhaps centuries, and changes in technique were few and far between. In the earliest days, the fleece was removed from the sheep by hand, at the point of moult. Clipping came later but whichever method was used, the wool was either scoured, oiled, dyed and spun or spun in its natural grease and then dyed. Dyes were mostly of vegetable origin until after the middle of the nineteenth century, the native sources being supplanted by imported material when tartan manufacture of tartan shifted to the Lowlands and began to become big business following the Jacobite Rising of 1745. The Saxony type of spinning wheel came late to the Highlands, where the simple drop spindle was the predominate spinning tool; when mass-producing spinning machinery came to be invented, its resemblance was to a row of spindles rather than to one of spinning wheels.

The result of all this is that there is little to tell, from appearance or feel, whether a piece of tartan cloth was made in 1700 or 1850. The ancient vertical loom, the sort of thing that the Valkyries used to weave bits of warriors chopped off in battle into their tapestries, was as capable of weaving tartan as was the later horizontal loom, but it was not until well into the 1820s that a power loom was developed that would cope with the intricate colour changes required for tartan weaving.

After the middle of the nineteenth century, significant changes did occur. The fine, lightweight, hard tartan gave way to heavier, soft, material and synthetic dyes came along, first with the strident colours that we call 'modern' and later with the washed-out pastel shades known as 'ancient', but well-defined date-marks along the time-base are scarce. Dating of an individual specimen remains a matter for cautious guesswork and instinct, helped along by experience of tartan in general and the odd fragment of real knowledge. Being able to actually handle a piece also influences the judgement and so the alleged Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps kilt, half the World away from one of us, presented a challenge that could not be ignored.

The kilt is of hard tartan. Photographs show it to be a modern-style garment in the Gordon Highlanders tartan; detail was sufficient to permit a fairly consistent thread count to be taken, suggesting that the result was reasonably accurate. Colour-photography is far from perfect, but it is good enough to show that the green of the tartan is light, 'sage-ish', and the blue dark. Modern military tartans are nearly black overall and 'ancient' colours render blue and green as almost equal in weight, so there seemed to be some significance in this. Specimens of cloth from between 1800 and 1830 show a green that was universally light and, among several shades of blue, one that was dark but far from black. A piece of Cameron Highlanders tartan woven as art-work for a book jacket in colours carefully, though not exactly, matched to these, proved to be a remarkably close match to the earliest piece of 79th Regiment tartan in the Regimental Museum at Fort George. In this case, the shades of colour seemed to have some relevance to dating for, as everybody knows "the Black Watch is so called because of its dark tartan"; what everybody does not know is that the Black Watch did not acquire its present, almost black, tartan until after that information had been put in print, in 1822.

The thread count of the Australian War Memorial kilt came close to one given for Privates' kilts of the Gordons in a pattern book compiled in 1819, and it began to look as if something interestingly old had turned up. The thought arose that perhaps, at the end of some major war, surplus uniform was called in and stored in readiness for the next or for sale to some defence Force in the colonies. Taking everything into account, the rounding-off of the Napoleonic period seemed to be the most likely time for such a calling-in to have occurred, so that the kilt would have had to be in store for about seventy years; this would have been of no great import since pieces of old hard tartan periodically turn up, wrapped in scraps of brown paper, in peoples' lofts where they have lain for up to a couple of hundred years, suffering very little from the ravages of time and moth.

A timely reminder not to let one's enthusiasm run away with one came from the Scottish United Services Museum. A kilt, even an army one, is not an of-the-peg garment; when soldiers in those days were discharged, they were either given or sold their kilts and took them home with them. However, we learned that material might be kept thus in store, and for our purposes this made more sense, since the kilt cannot have been made before the invention of the sewing machine.

While the indications are that the material was certainly not new when issued, a latest possible date for its manufacture is more difficult to arrive at. It was General David Stewart of Garth who stated that the Black Watch was so named from its dark tartan and, although at that time the military tartans seem to have been fairly light in colour, some general research hints that the earliest military tartans, though nominally blue, black and green, often were nearly black, much blacker in fact, than a modern Black Watch tartan. No-one appears to know when military tartans became black again; it was probably not easy to make such sombre shades until synthetic dyes came along, so maybe the 1860s would be a likely latest date. Nor does anybody know when soft tartan supplanted hard. Queen Victoria is credited with having ordered the change when she saw how wet kilts chafed the soft backs of her soldiers' knees. It is unwise to discount such stories entirely, though they do tend towards spontaneous eruption;

a too-long kilt, as required by Victorian propriety, and a hairy tartan would certainly chafe, so it might be true. It is possible therefore that soft tartan did not begin to appear until sometime after 1837 which is when Victoria's reign commenced.

Taking everything into consideration, there is a very good chance that the cloth in the AWM kilt was woven around 1820. Being machine-stitched the kilt cannot have been manufactured before the 1860s. While it is tempting to simply accept that this unusually dyed kilt may have been one of those supplied through the Royal Army Clothing Depot to Queensland in 1885, it is impossible to prove. The question of whether the kilt was actually worn by Queensland soldiers consequently remains unanswered, and will remain so until a better-provenanced example is located for comparison. Little more can be said, but it is to be hoped that the kilt will be well cared for. It may be unique.

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