

GENTLEMEN - THE TARTAN!

by Evelyn K. Chagnon (from *The Sporrán*, January 1997)

Here's to it!

*The fighting sheen of it,
The yellow, the green of it,
The white, the blue of it,
The swing, the hue of it,
The dark, the red of it,*

Every thread of it!

*The fair have sighed for it,
The brave have died for it,
Foemen sought for it,
Honour the name of it,
Drink to the fame of it -- The Tartan! Murdoch Maclean*

Tartan - a two syllable word, comprised of only four different letters, but simple? Nae... the complex emotions, passions, genetic memory and pride of heritage this wee word evokes is worthy of volumes, not a humble filler article in an already bulging newsletter! I sincerely doubt that any other scrap of fabric in the history of modern man has more angst, anger, pride, proscription, heritage or hot headed controversy attached to it. How does one begin?? Fair Southern housewives (many with a rich, Scottish heritage) have a recipe for chicken 'n dumplings that begins: first you steal a chicken. Those of us who regard tartan as something more than a pretty, plaid fabric have a similar directive - first you need some tartan... albeit wise to pay with cash, check or credit card in these politically correct times! In order to do this wisely, one must have a rudimentary grasp of some basic guidelines or definitions, if you wish. So, without trying to turn this into a fifth grader's homework assignment, I shall try to provide you with a few of the most important ones.

Tartan - The generally accepted (and necessarily technical) description of tartan today is 'cloth woven with coloured yarns, in a sequence of bands, stripes, and lines which form a pattern that "repeats" regularly throughout the length and breadth of the cloth'. The points in the pattern where the sequence of colours begins to reverse are called the pivots: blue: green: red: **black**: red: green: blue. Before 1750, there were many more patterns which were 'asymmetrical' or 'non-repeating'. In these, the sequence of colours came to an end and then merely started again with the first colour of the original sequence, with no pivots: blue: green: red: black/ blue: green: red: black/ blue: green, etc. Tartan patterns are as clever as they are simple. They give the effect of many more colours than have actually been used because, wherever two pure colours cross (for example, blue and red) a 'half-tone' is produced (for example, red/blue). Using two pure yarns gives the effect of three tones, but nine pure yarns give the effect of 45 tones. No wonder that the Gaelic word for tartan is *breacan* which means 'speckled' or 'multicolored'. (The Gaels also called the trout *breac*, because of its speckled coloration.) A more familiar word to describe an effect with more than one colour is *brock* from the old Celto-British word for the badger, with its black-and-white striped face.

So, in common parlance, tartan is a cloth with a (generally) regular pattern of coloured stripes, although some may perceive the patterns in terms of square islands of colours. But where does a check end and a tartan begin? Technically, they are one and the same. In practical terms, however, a check might be described as a simple pattern with squares formed by no more than three colours, and with no lines or stripes crossing the squares to produce 'overchecks'. (see *The Clans of Scotland* by Micheil MacDonald)

It is difficult to define the tartan pattern. It is a check pattern, embellished with a regular arrangement of lines and stripes in contrasting colours; but there is more to it than that. The colours must be chosen so that they neither clash with others nor swamp them, so that where two colours cross, a good blended shade results;

and the yarn for weaving must be fine and smooth, so as to delineate a sharp "picture." (see *Tartan; A Fireside Chat*, by James Scarlett, as found in *Two "Shades" of Tartan: Tartan as Seen from Both Sides of the Atlantic*)

In truth, the origin of tartan is unknown. It is a relatively simple multicolored fabric art form, usually a series of different colored stripes, woven at right angles to one another to form the appearance of colored squares. What makes tartan distinctive from similar cloth woven throughout the world is that it has an association with a family name, a place, or an organization (*Tartan Talk* by Philip D. Smith as found in *Two "Shades" of Tartan: Tartan as Seen from Both Sides of the Atlantic*)

According to R.W. Munro in *Highland Clans and Tartans* , the standard definition of tartan, or *breacan* as the Gaelic has it, is 'a kind of woolen cloth woven in stripes of various colours crossing at right angles so as to form a regular pattern'. Size or scale of pattern is unimportant - what matters is the proportion of the different colours, or sett, that is the relative width of the stripes or lines which go to make up the whole.

Plaid - (acc. to *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*) [Gael, *plaid* <*peallaid*, a sheepskin, < *peall*, a skin or hide.] A large rectangular outer garment or wrap, frequently of tartan, worn by Highlanders and others in Scotland; a fabric woven in a tartan pattern; such a cross-barred pattern. Spelled *plaid* in Gaelic, it is pronounced "plaage" with a very long 'A'. Ezra Pound once said, "England and America are two countries separated by a language." The American common or vernacular usage of this one syllable word, plaid, is certainly a case in point. The American fashion industry has convinced us that any fabric with stripes both vertically and horizontally is a plaid. Many humble scholars of the "Scottish Connection Ilk" cringe when we hear our fellow countrymen use the word plaid used in relation to a tartan kilt. I fear I may be a bit too strident (I have been accused of being a self proclaimed "Grammar Czar" or "Miss Manners of the Written and Spoken Word" - give me a wee break! I've been living with your 'umble Sennachie for more than 40 years; we all know what a TB [i.e. technical ba....d] he can be! Get him going on Scotchman vs. Scottish. Scotch is whisky... we are Scottish. In my observations, some of us ARE, at times Scotchmen (i.e. men full of whisky).

When speaking of things Scottish, try to limit your use of this word to the blanket like garment worn over the shoulder. The word "Plaid" should be limited to Parochial school girls' uniforms (some are true tartan and some are mongrel "plaids") and generic clothing found at a K Mart blue light special.

Saxony - (acc. to *Living Webster*) A fine wool originating from Saxony, Germany; the soft, compactly woven cloth made of this or similar wool; a fine-textured woolen yarn. In my experience, I find that tartan yardage classified as Saxony has a softer, lightly napped finish, similar to a fine grade of wool flannel. It is often a wee bit less expensive than worsted tartan.

Selvage/selvedge (acc. to *Living Webster*) [self and edge; lit. 'an edge formed of the stuff itself' self edge; self end] A woven border on a fabric, made of the threads of the fabric, and designed to prevent fraying. In application to tartan, I have found that much of the fabric woven or loomed has an undyed or off color selvedge. Depending on your plans for said fabric, this can be a critical factor. If you are building a kilt, self dyed selvedge is a must, for a kilt, in order to have proper "swing" of the pleats, must not have a sewn-in hem. The selvedge edge becomes the "hem" or bottom edge of the kilt. On the other hand, for ladies fashions, blazers, skirts, vests etc. or household goods such as table linens, pillows, throws, draperies, this is no critical issue, for the white or off color selvedge will be cut away.

Sett - a specific configuration of tartan; a proportional ratio used by weavers in order to produce a specific tartan. The sett can be quite narrow (Buchanan, with three inches, bare) or wide (Sutherland is the widest, with thirteen and three-quarter inches) A sett can be simple (Menzies, the simplest, with two colours and fifteen divisions) or complicated (Ogilvy, the most complicated, with seven colours and eighty one divisions). Sett is a technical term, unique to tartan weavers. The word is not found in most dictionaries. For us nontechnical, common folk, it is safe to refer to a tartan necktie as being made with a small sett, a 16 oz. worsted kilt as having a large sett. The size of the sett with the same tartan is determined by the thread diameter in the warp and weft... thicker thread or yarn will yield a larger sett.

The sett of a tartan refers to the order and proportion of colors, rather than the number of ends per inch. Usually, the same order is used for both warp and weft. The numbers are not necessarily the actual numbers of yarns used but show the lowest number possible to retain the proportion. The scale of the pattern is adapted to the size of the end use. For large textiles, such as kilts, use multiples of the numbers to achieve a large-scale repeat; for small pieces, such as ties, use the smallest possible sett or even a miniaturized sett made

by decreasing the largest color groups. Each color order shows a half-repeat. The full repeat is made by mirror-imaging the half-repeat at the pivot point, the number in bold at each end of the sequence. The pivot point number is not doubled. For instance, 4 black, 2 yellow, 8 black, 16 red would repeat 4 black, 2 yellow, 8 black, 16 red, 8 black, 2 yellow, 4 black, 2 yellow, 8 black, etc.

Twill - the weave used for tartan, in which the threads cross first over two, then under two producing the effect of a diagonal rib on the web. (*Highland Clans and Tartans*)

Worsted - acc. to *Living Webster* [From *Worsted*, now *Worstead*, town in Norfolk, England] Firmly twisted yarn or thread spun from combed long-staple wool, used for weaving, knitting, crocheting and the like; any kind of cloth woven of such yarn... author's note: in practical usage of today's manufactured tartan, I find that the yard goods classified as "worsted" (as opposed to "Saxony") has a crisper, harder hand or finish. It holds a press well and tends to resist lint and wrinkles.

A delightful Scots proverb holds that if you put two Scots in a room for a discussion, you'll soon have three viewpoints. We might paraphrase this to read, "Bring up the subject of Tartan, and any of the recognized experts and specialists on both sides of the Atlantic will quickly give you more viewpoints than you have bargained for."

If you have views on the subject, please let the [Sennachie](#) know.
