The Spirit of Tartan

For at least 300 years tartan has been more than a beautiful art-form. It has had power. It has been a force. It has been used psychologically and spiritually - spiritually, not in the religious sense, but as an expression of the spirit of a nation.

In 1707 tartan was worn throughout Scotland as a symbol of opposition to the Union of the Scottish and English parliaments, and to the loss of Scottish independence.

In 1745 tartan was worn by all Jacobite combatants in the Rebellion, whether Highland or Lowland, with many of those on the Jacobite side fighting primarily for Scottish independence.

In 1747 the wearing of tartan by males in the Scottish Highlands was made illegal specifically because it was known to inspire Scottish patriotic feeling.

An exception was made in the case of the Highland regiments of the British army because the Hanoverian authorities knew that the wearing of tartan would attract Scottish recruits. As a result of this policy, ironically some of the most revered tartans came to be (and remain) those worn in the service of the Crown of the United Kingdom.

This is all history, yet it was out of this history that the enduring significance of tartan was born. Today a Scotsman or Scotswoman may be a nationalist, an internationalist, a unionist, a monarchist, a republican, a person of almost any political or religious persuasion, yet in the wearing of tartan they are consciously declaring their unique national identity.

The nearest thing the Scots have now to a national military muster is (laughably and happily) the “Tartan Army” of supporters of the national football team. It is hugely telling that tartan is, indeed, the uniform of that irregular body.

There is, sadly, a negative side to the history of tartan. From the time that James VI of Scots removed his court to London to become James I of the United Kingdom, many ambitious Scots tried to rid themselves of any aspects of Scottish speech, dress or mannerism which might retard their upward progress in an English society which largely regarded them with

contempt. These Scots tried to be more English than the English. The situation was perhaps expressed most acutely in the 18th century by Dr. Samuel Johnson and his biographer, James Boswell –

"The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees, is the high road that leads him to England." (Johnson)

"Mr. Johnson, indeed I come from Scotland, but I cannot help it." (Boswell).

It has come to be known as the "Scottish Cringe". Generations of writers, academics, opinion-makers of all sorts, who sought (and seek) to "get on" in a society naturally dominated by institutions which are effectively English have sought to make themselves acceptable by belittling and mocking aspects of their own nation's history and culture. They pass off their treachery as academic maturity.

Journalistic attacks on tartan are often indirect assaults on Scottish self-esteem, and they are not always internal. That such exercises are essentially political is perhaps best evidenced by "The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History" by English historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper.

"It was first drafted in the mid-1970s as a part of Hugh Trevor-Roper's campaign against Scottish devolution. Once that danger was nullified by the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, he could lay the manuscript on one side… Now that outright independence is the issue, the book's /polemical purpose has a fresh urgency. It sets out to strip away the layers of myth that encrust three of the main components of Scottish identity: historical, literary and sartorial… in two wonderfully entertaining chapters he expresses just how recent were those two Scottish symbols, the kilt and tartan… It is to be hoped that Trevor-Roper's literary estate contains more unpublished gems." (The Sunday Times, May 25th 2008).

Tragically many Scots do allow such propaganda to undermine their confidence in their nation's validity – past, present and future. Such misinformation is not confined to Scotland or the British Isles. It is exported throughout the world -

"…as Trevor-Roper points out with ill-concealed glee, tartan and the kilt, those universal badges of Scottishness, are about as authentic as Disneyland." (The New York Sun, July 23rd 2008).

This is nonsense, of course, and we have to look no further than the illustration below of the Ulster Red tartan, which coincidentally bears a strong resemblance to the Lennox Tartan, and which dates from at least 1600 to prove that. However, well-researched and reasoned refutations of such attacks on Scottish history and culture do not find the same eager publication and widespread approval. There is, however, a natural instinct of self-defence which reacts to set the record straight. Such endeavour can be consciously political, purely academic, or perhaps more often, comparable with the response of a faithful lover to some affront to the beloved's honour. However motivated or considered, to defend the historical authenticity and validity of tartan as a national symbol is effectively, if indirectly, to defend Scotland's self respect, which defence may occasion positive economic, political and social consequences.

All of this is very hard-edged – verging on bitter. There is, yet, a healthier regard. An older, gentler and more profoundly beautiful way of appreciating – even loving – tartan. There is the very poetry of it.

Although tartan was always worn throughout Scotland, Highland and Lowland, there is a tendency for it to be thought of as essentially a manifestation of the predominantly Celtic culture of the Highlands. Originally the colours which made up the tartan patterns were obtained from dyes which were derived from the natural sources of the plant life of the straths and glens. Sheep were nourished by the grasses of these valleys and provided the wool of which plaids were woven. Native plants of various sorts contributed the spectrum of shades and hues. Human skill and imagination completed the process in designing the actual setts, woven by and for the clansfolk of those mountains and glens. In a sense these vibrant patterns were flowers growing out of the relationship between the soil and the people who were sustained by it. Their tartans were visible and practical expressions of their love of their land. Profound emotion may yet be stimulated by the sight of tartan. Like the sound of a lone piper it can speak, however distantly, of those glens.

In the light of the later, mass-produced and synthetically dyed setts, the foregoing may seem idealised and romantic. In our time a tartan can represent an association not just of clan to territory, or citizen to town or burgh, of soldier to regiment, but of employee to corporation, of member to institution, of supporter to club… and so very much else.

Even so, the tartans of the 19th century, and those of today, are the direct descendants of the patterns which were so much the products of nature.

They remain essentially symbolic of the bond between people and place, between Scots and their nationality.

The Tartan of the Vale of Leven - The Lennox Tartan

The names Lennox and Leven are closely related. The River Leven takes its name from the Gaelic *leamhain*, meaning “elm water”. Lennox - the district surrounding the Leven - is derived from *leamhnachd* or *Levenachs*, “the fields of the Leven”. The place name first seems to have been recorded on the map devised by Ptolemy in the 2nd century as *Lemannonius*, to the north of which were the Caledonians. *Levenax* was the Latin usage which appeared in mediaeval charters, and this word may yet be seen, for example on the old Dunbartonshire heraldry at Police Headquarters in Garshake, or at the former Police Station in Hill Street, Alexandria. The Earldom of Lennox, then, takes its name from the River Leven.

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Matthew Stewart, 4th Earl of Lennox, married the Lady Margaret Douglas in July of 1544. She was the daughter of Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, and Margaret Tudor, sister of King Henry VIII of England.

Margaret, Countess of Lennox, gave birth to a son on 7th December 1545. The boy was named Henry Stuart (the family had adopted the French spelling of their surname). His proper Scottish title was the Master of Lennox, but he was to be known by the English affectation of “Lord Darnley”.

At the age of 19 years, in July of 1565, Henry married Mary Queen of Scots in the Palace of Holyrood, Edinburgh. Thus he became King Consort, and the Countess of Lennox became the mother-in-law of Mary Queen of Scots.

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In the year 1893 the book “***Old and Rare Scottish Tartans***” was published. Its author, D.W. Stewart, was a partner in the Edinburgh firm of Romanes & Paterson, the “Royal Tartan Warehouse”. Stewart

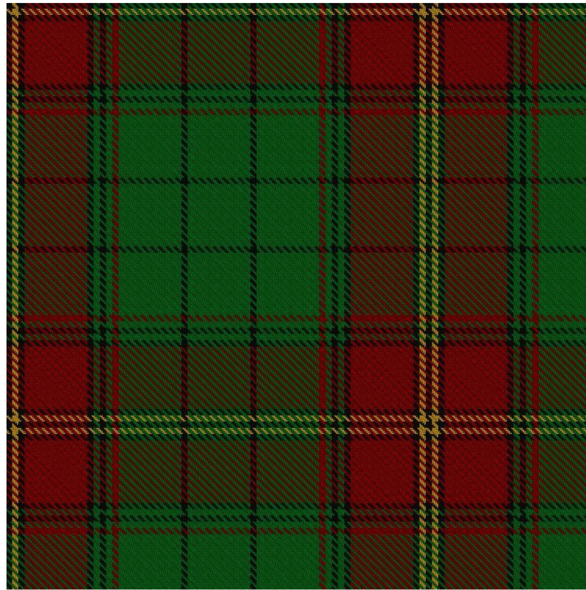
reproduced from a (frustratingly now lost) portrait of the Countess of Lennox, the Lennox Tartan –

Lennox

We live in a cynical age, and the history of tartan is one field which has certainly given rise to much dismissive scepticism, most often from the ill-informed. There will, therefore, be those who will doubt the authenticity of D. W. Stewart's claim for the provenance of this tartan. It will be suggested, for example, that the portrait was not that of the Countess of Lennox, or that the Countess would never have worn tartan. In fact, there is a body of respectable evidence to support the belief that Mary Queen of Scots herself, ***and her courtiers***, wore tartan on certain occasions, so there is no reason at all why Margaret, Countess of Lennox, the queen's mother-in-law, might not have worn it also.

There may be protests that the tartan worn in these days looked quite unlike the patterns with which we are now familiar. Not so. For example, the Lennox tartan is not greatly dissimilar in appearance to another tartan,

a remnant of which was forensically examined by Audrey Henshall, of Edinburgh's National Museum of Antiquities and dated to 1600-1650.


Ulster Red

There is no compelling reason to doubt the Countess of Lennox provenance. The late James D. Scarlett (who has been described by the Director of the Scottish Tartans Authority as "…*one of the towering figures in the world of professional tartan research*.") expressed this opinion of the Lennox tartan –

"On the whole, I think that there is a good chance that it is a portrait of the Countess, that the copy [of the tartan] was a good one, and that the tartan was both a personal choice and a local product."

(Correspondence dated 6th July 1993)

So, setting argument aside – an undeniable fact remains that for well over a hundred years the Lennox tartan has been regarded as the district tartan of the Vale of Leven. One profoundly significant witness to this association is the fact that from the year 1939 the Lennox tartan was worn by the Bonhill Parish Pipe Band. The Lennox is further recognised as the tartan of the wider Dunbartonshire area – roughly consistent with the ancient Earldom of Lennox – as celebrated by its being worn by the Dumbarton and District Pipe Band.

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