

The 18th Century and the Kilt



What we think of as "the kilt" today was purportedly invented in 1725 by an Englishman. Thomas Rawlinson, owner of an iron works in Glengarie and Lochaber. This gentleman had a number of Highlanders in his employ and came to fancy the Highland way of dressing. However, the machinery and fires of the iron works posed a danger because of the Highlanders' voluminous *plaids*. Rawlinson abbreviated the belted *plaid*, cutting off all material above the waist and further tailoring that below. What resulted is the skirt-like garment we know as the kilt today. In Gaelic, it is known as the *feileadh beag* (little wrap) to distinguish it from the *feileadh mór* (big wrap), the belted plaid.

Ivan Baillie of Aberiachan, Esq. attests to this story in a 1768 letter published in *Edinburgh Magazine* in March 1785: "And I certify from my own knowledge, that till I returned from Edinburgh to reside in this Country in the year 1725, after serving seven or eight years with writers to the signet, I never saw the *felie-beg* used, nor heard any mention of such a piece of dress, not (even) from my father, who was very intelligent

and well-known to Highlanders, and lived to the age of 83 years, and died in the year 1738, born in May, 1655."

Sir John Sinclair, renowned Highland Dress researcher, wrote in 1830 "...it is well known that the phillibeg [*feileadh beag*] was invented by an Englishman in Lochaber about sixty years ago."

After the Rising of 1745, both the belted *plaid* and the kilt were worn by the Highland regiments. Originally, the kilt was worn in undress order only, but soon the belted *plaid* was deemed too cumbersome for combat and abandoned altogether.

Recent scholarship has, to the great delight of Highlanders everywhere, disproven that Rawlinson "invented" the *feileadh beag*. The *Armorial Bearings of the Chief of the Skenes* (1692) clearly shows a man wearing a *feileadh beag*. There are other depictions showing the *feileadh beag* prior to Rawlinson. Peter MacDonald, textile and costume adviser to United Artists for Rob Roy and advisor to the National Trust for Scotland and the Royal Scottish Museum writes: "To begin with, and this is perhaps the central point which has always been missed, the *feileadh mor* was formed from two pieces of cloth joined length ways. It is therefore not beyond the wit of man not to join them and this seems to have come into fashion in the latter part of the 17th century as socio-agricultural practices, and perhaps also the nature of warfare, changed."

The Proscription

The Act of 1746 made the wearing of any form of Highland Dress illegal for all but soldiers in Highland regiments (it was their uniform). There were several reasons for this. The first and most predominant reason was to break up and absorb the Highlanders. As long as they identified themselves as a nation unto themselves, they were dangerous to English rule. Forcing them to take on English garb was expected to “subdue” them and decrease their identification with the Highlands. This same reason was used by Henry VIII in the 1537 prohibition on saffron shirts and mantles in Ireland. The second reason for the prohibition on Highland Dress was the unique functionality of the *plaid*. It was claimed that the *plaid* enabled men to better conceal themselves in the heather and therefore better surprise their robbery and murder victims. The *plaid* also allowed men the freedom to, at a moment’s notice, join a rebellion. Since the *plaid* was their blanket and bed as well as their clothing, they didn’t have to go home and pack. The third reason was more puritanical than the other two. The English claimed that the *plaid* encouraged idle living because one could lie around in it all day. Indeed, they professed that “now the laborers have put off the long clothing, the tardy pace, the lethargic look of their fathers, for the short doublet, the linen trousers, the quick pace of men who are laboring for their own behalf...” (Robertson’s *Agriculture of Perthshire* 1790)

The repeal of 1782 re-instated Highland Dress and it soon became all the rage with all classes of society. Indeed, even the Lowlanders began to wear tartans and kilts. In a painting from 1795, *Military Promenade* by John Kay, the Misses Maxwell, leaders of fashion in Edinburgh, wear ankle length skirts imitating kilts. This was a time of great national pride over the success of the Highland regiments in the Napoleonic Wars. Everything military was fashionable. Women often wore feminine versions of the uniforms of their fathers, husbands, and brothers much like 13th century crusaders’ wives wore heraldic tabards.

The victory at Waterloo and subsequent occupation of Paris lead to some wonderful records of Highland Dress in 1815. Of this time period, Sir Walter Scott wrote: “The singular dress of our Highlanders makes them particular objects of attention to the French.” An account of the occupation of Paris recounts that the Emperor of Russia requested a sergeant, a piper, and a private of each of the Highland regiments to parade before him in the Elysée Palace. He was particularly interested in Sergeant Thomas Campbell’s hose, gaiters and legs. After pinching the sergeant’s skin, “thinking I wore something under my kilt,” Campbell lifted his kilt “so that he might not be deceived.” Ah, the wit of the Scots.



Scott’s romantic writings about the people of the Highlands affected a wave of “sentimental Jacobitism.” In the royal visit of 1822, both the Lord Mayor of London and King George the

Fourth wore Highland Dress. This year marks the birth of Highland costume as the Scottish National Dress.



Engravings by Van Der Gucht of the Black Watch in 1743