

1600 to 1725 — The Belted *Plaid*

Documented from the 15th century, and probably appearing much earlier, the saffron shirt was the signature garment of the Highland Scots, not the kilt or any of its precursors. In other words, *Rob Roy* got it right; *Braveheart* missed the mark.

Around 1600, the saffron shirt went out of use and never returned. This was probably due to the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland, the birthplace of the saffron shirt. The *plaid* became the universal dress of the Highland Scots. The belted *plaid* (*breacán filleadh*), the progenitor of the kilt, came into being around this time. The belted *plaid*'s earliest documented appearance is in Irish Gaelic in *The Life of Red Hugh O'Donnell* in a description of a corps of Hebrideans who had come to The O'Donnell's assistance in 1594: "They were recognized among the Irish soldiers by the distinction of their arms and clothing, their habits and language, for their exterior dress was mottled cloaks of many colors with a fringe to their shins and calves, their belts were over their loins outside their cloaks."

This is an important distinction. Up to this time, the *plaid* or cloak was pinned or wrapped or folded. Although belts are mentioned as girdles for both Scots and Irish dress earlier, this is the first instance in which the outer garment, and not just the shirt, is belted. It was apparently so important a difference that the Irish saw fit to mention that "their belts were over their loins *outside* their cloaks."



Earliest Illustration of a Belted Plaid



German Woodcut from 1631 (probably MacKay's Regiment serving under Gustavus Adolphus)

Like twins separated at birth, the *brat* "grew up" differently in Ireland and Scotland. By the 17th

century, the Irish brat had become shaped in the shoulders for easier wear. The long “hair” of the frieze wool was pulled and curled to make a warm interior. The Scottish version was still made out of *tartan* (light wool) and therefore continued to be wrapped as the thickened Irish version could not.

In the early 17th century, the belted *plaid* began to be worn with fabric stockings, shoes, and blue “bonnets” similar to tam o’shanter.

From John Taylor’s account of a visit to Braemar in 1618: “Their habit is shoes with but one sole apiece; stockings (which they call short hose) made of a warm stuff of divers colors which they call tartane. As for breeches many of them, nor their forefathers, never wore any, but a jerkin of the same stuff that their hose is of, their garters being bands of wreathes of hay or straw, with a plaid about their shoulders, which is a mantle of divers colors, much finer and lighter stuffe than their hose, with blue caps on their heads, a handkerchief knit with two knots about their neck; and thus they are attired.”

Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, recounts from the Highland part of the Scottish army at the beginning of the Great Civil War in 1639: “Their dress was as antique as the rest; a cap on their heads, called by them a bonnet, long hanging sleeves behind, and their doublet, breeches and stockings, of a stuff they call plaid, striped across red and yellow, with short cloaks of the same.” It is obvious that the word “plaid” has begun to take on its modern meaning.

William Sacheverell, Governor of the Isle of Man, in 1688 writes: “The usual outward habit of both sexes is the pladd; the women’s much finer, the colors more lovely, and the squares larger than the men’s and put me in mind of the ancient Picts. This serves them for a veil and covers both head and body. The men wear theirs after another manner, especially when designed for ornament: it is loose and flowing, like the mantles our painters give their heroes. Their thighs are bare, with brawny muscles. Nature has drawn all her stroaks bold and masterly; what is covered is only adapted to necessity -- a thin brogue on the foot, a short buskin of various colors on the legg, tied above the calf with a striped pair of garters. What should be concealed is hid with a large shot-pouch, on each side of which hangs a pistol and a dagger. A round target on their backs, a blew bonnet on their heads, and in one hand a broad sword and a musquet in the other.”

In Martin Martin’s *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* in 1703: “The first Habit wore by Persons of Distinction in the Islands was the *leni-croich*, from the Irish word *leni*, which signifies a Shirt, and *croch*, Saffron because their shirt was dyed with that herb: the ordinary number of Ells [yards] used to make this Robe was twenty-four: it was the upper Garb, reaching below the knees, and was tied with a Belt round the middle; but the Islanders have laid it aside about a hundred years ago.

“They now generally use the Coat, Wastcoat, and Breeches, as elsewhere; and on their heads, they wear Bonnets made of thick Cloth, some blew, some black, and some gray.

“Many of the People wear *Trowis*, some of them very fine Woven, like Stockings of those made of Cloath; some are colored, and others striped; the latter are as well shap’d as the former, lying close to the Body from the middle downwards, and tied round with a Belt above the Haunches. There is a square piece of Cloth which hangs down before. The measure for shaping the *trowis* is a Stick of Wood, whose length is a cubit, and that divided into the length of a finger, and half a finger, so that it requires more skill to make it, than the ordinary habit.

“But Persons of Distinction wear the Garb in fashion in the South of Scotland.” Martin’s description goes on to describe plaids and how they are made. He states that “every isle differs form each other

in their fancy of making *plaids*, as to the Stripes in Breadth and Colors. This Humour is as different thro' the main Land of the Highlands in so far that they who have seen those Places is able, at the first view of a Man's Plaid, to guess the place of his residence." This may be the precursor to "clan tartans." However, it has been established by many sources that the concept of "clan tartans" emerged after the Jacobite Rising of 1745 to foster nationalism through establishment of a national costume. It was for this same reason that the Act of 1746 banned all forms of Highland Dress.

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