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Some Thoughts on the Wearing of Highland Dress By Alastair Campbell of Airds

Writing on the wearing of dress is a difficult task and on the wearing of Highland dress particularly so. Fashions, after all, do change, both from period to period and from place to place as well as from class to class. What is correct in one place at one time may be considered quite incorrect at another.

So there is bound to be a good deal of subjectivity involved - in other words, you may or may not agree with me, but for what they are worth, these are my views. . .

I have headed this article "Some thoughts on the wearing of Highland dress" since the kilt of today is exclusively Highland in origin. Lowlanders regarded it as a savage item of attire and contemptuously christened its wearers "redshanks" claiming that their naked limbs were what today we would describe as "blue" with cold. And although tartan was worn across Scotland, there is no ancient precedent for Lowlanders wearing tartan trews, or more properly, trousers (the original highland trews are a different garment) as a uniform form of identification. The fashion adopted by some Lowlanders of wearing their tartan in the form of trousers instead of the kilt has no historical precedent of any great age, being due to the fact that in 1881 the Lowland regiments of the British Army were clothed for the first time in a watered down form of the uniform worn by their Highland colleagues with tartan trousers instead of the kilt.

But the kilt has now become the National Dress of all Scotland and Lowland Chiefs whose ancestors would have shrunk from the idea are to be seen happily sporting a form of attire their ancestors would have regarded with disdain and derision.

In a previous article I stressed the view that the kilt is a National Dress and should be regarded as such and not be allowed to descend into mere Fancy Dress.

This is not a diatribe against dressing up as such. There is nothing against fancy dress on the right occasion provided it is quite clear that it is fancy dress and that the re-enactment group is a re-enactment group and no more: I am strongly against the situation when the two are allowed to merge. It is perfectly all right going round dressed as a Viking invader or whatever if that is what grabs you it is when you start thinking you are one or letting other people think you are one that I believe a dangerous situation arises. There is perhaps a bit too much of this for comfort, to my mind.

Some years ago I met a man who on being asked what his military experience had been replied "Two tours in Nam and second in the All American War Games Convention in 19-- . ' ' I remain fascinated and faintly horrified by this reply (suitably disguised); my friend had served with valor in as nasty a campaign as any in history and was apparently prepared to equate his real life experiences on the battlefield with those on the wargamers' tabletop.

A possible way to approach what is and what is not acceptable is to equate the various forms of Highland attire with its non-Scottish counterpart. The kilt has a range of uses, from full-dress evening attire through the equivalent of a suit to informal working dress and should be seen as a Scottish version of ordinary modern daily wear.

Gala evening occasions are one of the few times when I would suggest it is acceptable to wear everything you possess - if that is your wish; dirk, powder horn, brooch and plaid - although the wearing of this last particular article of dress has to all extent disappeared in Scotland and would be viewed somewhat askance if seen at one of the Gathering Balls. One thing seen overseas and never in Scotland at any time to my knowledge is the wearing of bonnets indoors which seems to be prevalent, possibly I suspect to allow the display of feathers which assumes a quite disproportionate importance overseas. But would you wear a hat indoors with your tuxedo! And would you wear a broadsword at the Office Party?

For the formal and semi formal event by day when you might expect to wear some form of suit, then a tweed jacket and tie with the kilt would be the norm. Don 't mix evening wear with day wear; an ordinary colored tie is not correct worn with an evening jacket by day -not unless you are in the habit of going to your office wearing a tuxedo and for the same reason your sporran should not be an ornamental evening one but something of more restrained pattern.

And do **Not** attempt to add to your day attire with a fly plaid and brooch; the fly plaid as sometimes worn in the evening is a purely ornamental article of evening dress. if you wish to carry a plaid by day it is the full and original length of tartan which is carried over the shoulder which can be used as it was in former days as a shield against the weather. In hot climates it is clearly superfluous and its use unnecessarily ostentatious. And the carrying of a broadsword or wearing of a dirk or any other weapon at normal, day events - unless you are in the habit of going about your daily life similarly armed - is not to be recommended .

Informal wear is something else and there are a wide variety of options available. Discard your jacket, keep your tie and roll up your sleeves if you wish to retain some vestige of formality; otherwise an open neck sleeveless shirt is obviously perfectly acceptable. Although in Scotland it is not done, I rather like the American practice of wearing a service shirt with medal ribbons with the kilt. I am less happy with the practice of wearing tartan slides on shoulder straps of a shirt; this has no military equivalent or historical precedent at all in the Home Country and it would seem a bit unnecessary if the wearer is anyway wearing a kilt of the same tartan.

One thing which is prevalent and which is not to be encouraged is the wearing of any actual British or Commonwealth military uniform, whether partially or completely, with actual regimental insignia and even, on occasion, medal ribbons. I am not referring to re-enactment reconstruction's but to the purchase of bits of actual uniform which are then worn by the purchaser on Scottish occasions as a variation of normal dress - almost always incorrectly, incompletely, or just plain scruffily. The wearing or miswearing of a uniform or part of a uniform to which you are not entitled is in dubious taste at the best of times and can be source of very real annoyance to those who have served in the unit concerned and those whose relations have fought and perhaps died in it.

The difference in climate between Scotland and many parts of the world in which Highland dress is now worn is of course a problem. It is not always realized that in spite of the well ventilated nature of the kilt that it is very much a cold-weather garment which is not suited to heat and which our ancestors usually discarded as soon as they could, even in military uniform, in favor of any available garb better suited to the climate. The use of lighter weight materials is perfectly permissible and is the obvious answer.

As regards headgear, Highland regiments have worn a variety of hats with the kilt in both hot and cold climates including various forms of tropical helmet, wide brimmed slouch hats and fur hats, Russian style. So there is certainly a precedent for other things apart from the bonnet. But don't, as stated above, mix purely military headgear with your civilian attire; however attractive, it is not correct for instance to wear the white helmet of the Royal Marines as I have seen being done. Of the options, I personally prefer the wide-brimmed ten-gallon or Australian Akubra to the ubiquitous baseball cap with the kilt, if you really find the bonnet inadequate. And I do not think it correct to adorn the civilian bonnet with military feather hackles.

One thing I have noticed around the world and including Scotland is that many people today are wearing the kilt far too long, right down over the kneecap so that virtually no bare leg appears between the hem of the kilt and the top of the stocking. The result is frequently grotesque. The edge of the kilt should cut the kneecap, not hang below it. On a rather delicate subject, if you are wearing the kilt in the

traditional way you Must know how to sit in it correctly. I cannot but remember the recent overseas visit of a prominent Scottish functionary who was obviously wearing a kilt for the first time in honor of this trip and who on a succession of platforms revealed to those present views of Scotland which are not usually on the tourist itinerary. It doesn't take much practice in front of a mirror to get it right and avoid embarrassment.

And one entirely personal hate: the use of white stockings by day as well as by night with the kilt. I now see this described as 'traditional' - a word to be treated with the utmost suspicion whenever it appears. There is nothing historic about the practice at all; it came in, to the best of my knowledge, some twenty five years ago or so when it was difficult and very expensive to get diced or tartan knitted hose for evening wear. Its use has now spread to day wear for which there is no historical precedent white being a most impractical color. It is a matter of little importance but next time you think of buying a pair of white stockings for evening wear, try substituting a pair of plain red, blue, dark green or even yellow ones. You may be pleasantly surprised.

These remarks as I warned you are highly subjective and will not please some people. Taste is a very personal thing but as a general rule, you can seldom go wrong by understatement. Highland dress has real glamour and romance and you do not have to go over the top in any way in order to make the best of it.

And I would stress that I am far from just having a go at the American Scot in writing as I have; many of these remarks apply to Scotland as well as to places overseas. To reinforce this, I would just say that by far the best book I know on the subject of wearing Highland Dress is by my friend J. C. "Scotty" Thomson - and he is a US Citizen. It is currently available in print and all who wear the kilt, whether indigenous to Scotland or not, should buy a copy if they seek guidance.

Once again, the important thing to stress is that we are talking of National Dress not Fancy Dress and we must be very careful not to bring the former into disrepute by allowing it to degenerate into the latter.

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