

KIRKIN' OF THE TARTANS

By Ken McNaughton

Although the Scots have been “taking the tartan” to church for centuries, there was a time it was forbidden by the English, even to be dressed in a kilt. This might explain why it is such a big deal for Scots to get dressed up for church, and why I visited the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. on Saturday 18th April 2009—dressed like Bonnie Prince Charlie—for the annual Kirkin' of the Tartans (Fig. 1). I arrived an hour early to claim a place on the aisle between the entrance and the sanctuary so I could photograph the procession coming and going and hear what the pipes and drums sound like in this voluminous cathedral (Fig. 2).



Figure 1. The author on the steps of the National Cathedral, dressed for the Kirkin' of the Tartans.



Figure 2. We anxiously await the start of the Procession while a lone piper plays in the gallery.

The procession formed up outside and a lone piper in the gallery warmed up the audience. On this sunny spring day the pews are filling with tourists who were wandering through the grounds, as well as devout Scots folk and friends of the Saint Andrew's Society of Washington D.C., sponsors of the event. Excitement mounts as the mighty organ launches into Johann Sebastian Bach's *Prelude and*

Fugue in G Major and the enormous sandstone pillars themselves seem to rock and resonate.

Figure 3. The Pipe Major leads the Procession.

Sunlight floods through the entrance and we see a glimpse of bearskin and hear the skirl of the pipes and the beat of the drums playing “Men of Argyll” followed by “Cullen Bay” (Fig. 3). The people we thought might have been devout worshippers rush into the center aisle to take photos of the oncoming juggernaut, but fade away as it progresses forward. The Pipe Major, the Pipes, the Drums, the Color Guard, the Master of Ceremonies with the members of the Saint Andrew's Society, the Choir and the Ecclesiastical Party—all move up to the dais (Fig. 4). Then the musicians drift off stage right to a fading drum beat, one of the most affecting moments of the whole service (Fig. 5).

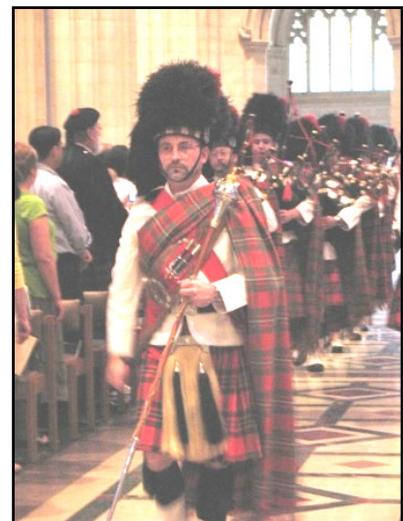
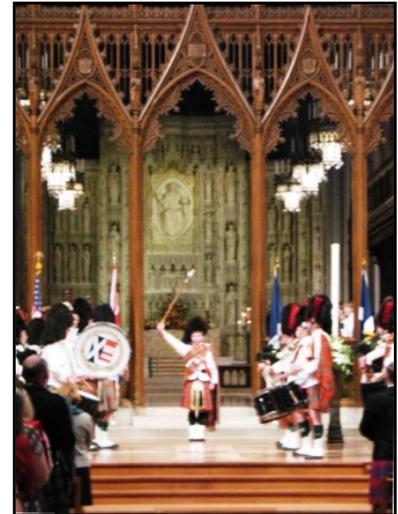




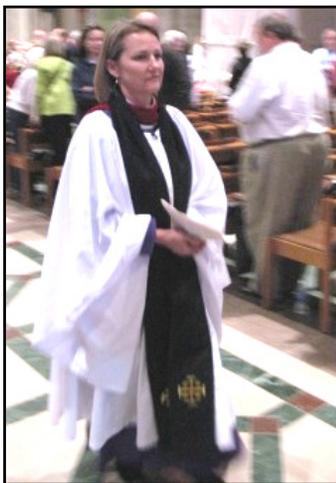
Figure 4. The choir processes to the dais.

There are prayers and readings and we all try to sing Hymn No. 569. This might sound easy but the lady next to me has to point out that I am thumbing through the Common Prayer Book instead of the Hymnal, which is why I am having trouble finding it. I have no trouble singing along, but three-quarters the way through the first verse I find I have been singing the words to Hymn No. 568 on the left hand side, instead of Hymn No. 569 on the right hand page. Of course, in this gathering we are all Catholics and Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Non-Believers—a typical Washington crowd anxious to see what this is all about. Fortunately the mighty organ can drown us all and it is stirring to recognize some of the ancient melodies that have accompanied church lyrics for centuries.

Figure 5. The Procession having arrived, the Pipe Major signals retreat.



The organ takes a back seat as the combined High School Men’s Choruses from West Potomac and Annandale sing “Ave Maria” by Franz Beibel and a thirteenth century plainsong called “Of the Father’s Love Begotten.” I can’t help thinking that this could have been sung when King Alexander III of Scotland signed over the castle of Fraoch Eileen to the Macnachtan Clan in 1267. The Reverend Gwendolyn Tobias, priest associate for the Washington National Cathedral, brings us Greetings, and I remember that the Picts, under the rule of Nechtan, forerunner of the Macnachtans, were a matriarchal society (Fig. 6). The sermon is delivered by the



Reverend Earnest Smart, senior pastor at St. Andrew’s Christian Community Church in Baltimore. He has a delightful Scots lilt from his native Aberdeenshire and has taken a garden theme for his homily. It’s not easy to inspire a diverse crowd like this and he tries to convince us that the Garden of Eden has no geographical location.

Figure 6. Rev. Gwendolyn Tobias, priest associate, Washington National Cathedral.

Actually Genesis Chapter Two is pretty specific about the location and mentions that “a river went out of Eden to water the garden and from thence it was parted and became into four heads” (Verse 10). The geography at this time could have been a bit different from what it is now, due to changing sea levels, but two of the locations mentioned are very familiar to modern ears. One is Ethiopia, source of many ancient hominid remains, and the other is the Euphrates River, which watered the first civilizations of Syria, Babylonia and Sumer. I have heard a good argument for placing the Garden under the present-day Persian Gulf, but of course, the interpretation could be confused, since there were numerous

creation myths current before Genesis was written, and Rev. Smart is probably right—if the story has any value, it is probably allegorical.

Figure 7. An open air performance with dancing after the ceremony.

The Offering is for the Washington Scots Charity & Education Fund, to provide student scholarships, so I am pleased to contribute and to see the bowls overflowing with green. The Pipes and Drums make a second entrance, bearing the tartans, which are blessed by the incoming chaplain of the Saint Andrew's Society, the Rev. Richardson Libby, and the outgoing chaplain, Rev. Robert Clyde Curry:



Bless, O Lord, these simple woven cloths, whose colors, warp and woof, bear the burden and honor of the history of the land of our ancestors, a people of your calling, a nation of your creation. May we sustain in the glory of our ancestors by wearing the kilt with honest pride and genuine humility honoring a people bearing the name of 'Scots.'



Figure 8. The Washington National Cathedral, scene of the annual Kirkin' of the Tartans.

Chaplain Curry read the names of recently deceased members of the Society and the Pipe Major played “Flowers of the Forest,” an ancient Scottish folk tune usually only played at funerals and memorial services. The Procession marched from the dais, down the aisle and out of the church to the tunes of “Scotland the Brave,” “Johnnie Scoobie”—a popular drinking song often sung at the end of a social gathering—and “Bonnie Charlie” (Will Ye No Come Back Again?). They

paused outside and then retired to the southern side of the church for a short open-air performance, which was joined by some of the Saint Andrew's Society Dancers (Fig. 7).

HISTORY

On January 24th, 1791, President George Washington commissioned Major Pierre L'Enfant to create a visionary plan for the nation's capital. It was L'Enfant who first imagined “a great church for national purposes,” but it was not until January 6th, 1893, a century later, that Congress granted a charter to the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation of the District of Columbia to establish a cathedral and institutions of higher learning. The Cathedral's foundation stone was laid on September 29th, 1907, northwest of the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue, thus commencing the longest running construction project in the history

of Washington, D.C., a project not completed until eighty-three years later in 1990 (Fig. 8). The architectural style is Gothic and the principal building material is a buff Indiana limestone.

Figure 9. These have got to be the socks of Saint Andrew.

The tradition of Kirkin' of the Tartans is all-American [1] and seems to have been started by the Rev. Peter Marshall, who was born in Coatbridge, Scotland, and migrated to New York in 1927 when he was 24. He graduated from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1931 and became pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. in 1937. He served two years as U.S. Senate chaplain from January 4th, 1947. Marshall was plain and pertinent, and thundered in his Scots brogue from the pulpit against liquor, sexy magazine pictures and Hollywood divorces, all the while calling himself progressive and liberal. He died suddenly aged 46. His wife Catherine wrote his biography, *A Man Called Peter* (1951), which was made into an Oscar-nominated film of the same name (1955) featuring Richard Todd.



During the Second World War Rev. Marshall held prayer services at New York Avenue to raise funds for British war relief. At one of these, on April 27th, 1941 (or perhaps May 1943), he gave a sermon entitled “The Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans,” with the funds going to a mobile kitchen. Marshall was a member of the Saint Andrew’s Society of Washington, D.C., which assisted him with the first Kirkin’ services. In 1954 the annual ceremony was moved to the National Cathedral. Today, many Scottish, Caledonian and St. Andrew’s Societies across the U.S. and Canada celebrate Kirkin’ of the Tartans (Fig. 9). Popular occasions are St. Andrew’s Day, November 20th, and Tartan Day, “April 6th”, and sometimes at Scottish Games and Gatherings in outdoor settings.

REFERENCES

1. Wilkinson, Todd, “The Kirkin’ of the Tartans Tradition,” The Scottish Tartans Museum, Franklin, NC <http://www.scottishtartans.org/kirkin.htm>

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