

THE KILT

When I decided to buy a kilt in 2007 I didn't know where to buy it. The House of Edgar [1] was supposed to be the worldwide market leader in Highland wear. In 1965 the company was purchased by Macnaughton Holdings [2], which had been run for two hundred years by the family of Blair Macnaughton, vice chairman of the U.K. branch of Clan Macnachtan Association Worldwide (CMAW). But Kinloch Anderson [3] had an online catalog that showed the most beautiful photos of highland wear (Fig 1).



Figure 1. Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit in the Kinloch Anderson catalog.



So I turned to The Capital Scot [4], a Web site dealing with all things Scottish in my area, near Washington D.C. Here I found a wonderful article [5] written by David Strother, in which he recommended, amongst others, his own kilt-monger, Dennis Booth, who operated "A' the Best Fae Scotland," which was situated at the foot of the Golden Mile in Edinburgh, across the street from the new Parliament, until his rent became unmanageable. Strother said that to get personal attention and quality work one would need to work with new management in the relocated Kilt Shop in Galashiels in the Scottish Border country (Fig. 2). That sounded good to me, as I was planning to attend the CMAW Tour of Argyll in July.

Figure 2. The Kilt Shop, Galashiels, Scottish Borders.

The bigger outfitters will take your measurements over the telephone and mail your attire, but when I phoned The Kilt Shop I spoke with Mark Wright (Fig. 3) who preferred I visit personally to be measured. The Web site was a bit primitive but Mark was very helpful on the telephone, by email and letter (the site has since been updated [6]), so on 3 July drove to Galashiels, thirty miles (50 km) south of Edinburgh. I had decided on a Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit as the most useful and economical starter kit and there was an 18% discount over the cost of buying each item separately. There were rarely more than two or three people in the shop at a time and it was marvelous to feel there was no time pressure to absorb what for me will probably be a once-in-a-lifetime event.



Figure 3. Mark Wright (left) with the author outside The Kilt Shop on 3 July 2007.



Figure 4. A swatch of the McNaughton Ancient tartan, with my sporrán, kilt pin and *scian dubh*.

I selected the McNaughton Ancient tartan (Fig. 4) for its bright and cheery red, blue and green. The heavyweight kilt is made from 8 yards (7.3m) of pure new worsted wool and is completely hand stitched. The apron front is flat but all the rest is pleated and flows in a way not experienced by someone who normally wears pants. Two 1¼ in. (3.2 cm) leather straps in the kilt at waist level secure the overlapping flat ends in front and all the pleats fall in the rear. I loved

the 2-1/8-in.-wide (5.4 cm) black leather belt and selected a large silver buckle embossed with a thistle, representing Scotland. For the 3½ in. (8.9 cm) sword pin I selected a McNaughton buckle crest; this is pinned to the bottom right hem of the kilt. Later on I bought a hanger with three pairs of clips to support the weight of the kilt.

Figure 5. The author at the 75th Anniversary Celebration for the Screen Actors Guild in Washington D.C. on 21 June 2008 with Molyneau DuBelle.



The Argyll jacket and vest are made of 19 oz (540g) all-wool black Barathea stock, a worsted fabric with twill hopsack weave. The vest has three ½-in (1.3 cm) buttons that are done up. The coatee has three ¾-in. (1.9 cm) buttons on each sleeve and three the same size on each side of the jacket that do not do up. On each shoulder there is a 4 in. (10 cm) by ½ in. epaulette made with a black plait and a ½ in. button. Each center-vent tail has four buttons that together form a partial circle. All the buttons are square, embossed and silver.

Figure 6. Tartan styles in 1600 (right) and 1660 as portrayed in the Scottish Tartans Museum.



I took a long time examining the semi-dress, day-, and full-dress sporrans and eventually chose a full-dress sporrán in silver-grey fur with black leather straps and silver chains (Fig. 4). It has three fur tassels with silver caps on silver chains and a silver Celtic-design clasp that includes three Scotch thistles and a 3/16-in. (0.5 cm) amber-colored stone in the central thistle. Mark called this topaz, but my local jeweler identified it as rhinestone, meaning glass with a colored foil backing. Mark told me the fur came from a seal kill in Greenland that is mandated because the seals eat the fish, but I was still concerned when I got back to the USA, so I asked him how to contact the supplier, who turned out to be based in Edinburgh.

When I got this man on the telephone and asked him if I could get a registration certificate for the origin of the fur he was indignant and said it was not required.

Figure 7. 1700 (left).

I got heavyweight Gleann Righ off-white socks with 46% merino wool and McNaughton tartan flashes on the garters. I spent some time walking around the shop in different sized black leather Ghillie brogues, to make sure they would be comfortable in the long haul. The shoe has a steel protector in the heel and there is no tongue, so the white sock shows through the lace ups. The laces are extra long and criss-cross three times up the sock, and the tassel ends tie at the top of the calf. Brogue comes from the Gaelic *bróg* meaning shoe, and ghillie comes from *gille* meaning lad or servant. The lack of tongue helped water drain from the shoe and the laces up the calf didn't get stuck in the mud.



The *Scian Dubh* (“Skene Doo”) or black knife is 7½ in. long (19 cm) with a 3½ in. steel blade. It is sheathed in black carved leather and adorned with silver thistle designs. I chose a McNaughton crest and an amber-colored head, which Mark called topaz and which my local jeweler said was plastic. The manufacturer, “Gaelic Themes of Scotland,” claims it developed from the short utility knife favored by Highlanders as a way around the period of proscription when weapons were forbidden to them. It was kept in a hidden pocket under the armpit, but over the years tradition dictated that it should be worn openly and visibly above the hose top. I already had a tuxedo shirt with black bow tie, studs and cuff links, but added an off-white Highland or ghillie shirt for casual occasions. Later on I also bought a black wool Balmoral bonnet with red pom-pom and 15-in. black swallowtails.

Figure 8. Portrayal of Rob Roy Macgregor, 1715.

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Figure 9. 1720 (right) and 1740.



Fig. 10. 1747 (right) and 1790.

WEARING THE KILT

Purchasing the outfit was one thing; wearing it was another. It hung in my closet in Ellicott City for months until one day I decided to wear the kilt (not the whole outfit) on my three-mile (4.8 km) walk up the Patapsco River and down the Trolley Trail in the Patapsco State Forest. It was a magical occasion. One of my first encounters was with a gang of three rough-looking road workers and I thought, “Uh oh, this could be tough.” As I approached, one of them looked

at me, smiled and mustered up some Irish slang, the closest he could get to an appropriate comment, which I took as a compliment. A lady doctor I knew was moving her aging mother into her log cabin house and was delighted to see my attire. A conservative walker on the Trolley Trail muttered as I passed, “Nice outfit.” Another friend complimented me and I was able to tell him it was my first excursion.



Fig. 11. 1830 (left)



On my next walk in the kilt I was able to do without underpants, which was a freeing change from my long time practice. When I wore the Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit to the 75th Anniversary of the Screen Actors Guild in Washington D.C. (Fig. 5) an English actress friend sidled up at the end of the evening and asked if I was dressed traditionally, to which I was pleased to answer “Yes.” I also dressed for the 2008 Scottish Christmas Walk in Alexandria, Virginia [7], and the 2009 Burns Night Celebration held by the St. Andrew’s Society of Washington D.C. [8].

Fig. 12. 1890.

In preparing for these occasions I found it helpful to read “So You’re Going to Wear the Kilt” [9], for history, etiquette, and explanations of the individual items. I was also delighted to discover the Scottish Tartans museum in St. Giles Street on the Royal Mile, 200 meters from Edinburgh Castle (Figs. 6-13). The accompanying photographs are not high quality and the history texts are not legible but they do give some idea of how the tartan has been worn through the ages.



Fig. 13. Styles of the 20th century.

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