**Our Tartans**

by Sir Malcolm MacGregor, Chief of Clan Gregor
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*“Wearing a particular Clan tartan indicates that the wearer bears an allegiance to the Chief of that Clan. A tartan which uses the name of a Clan may only do so if the Chief of that Clan has given his approval to the particular design.“
~ Lord Lyon*

The tartans illustrated above are the **only** patterns officially recognized by the Chief of Clan Gregor, Sir Malcolm MacGregor.

**Introduction and Background**

This article was first written in response to a request in 2004 by the American Clan Gregor Society to give clarity on the subject of MacGregor tartans and armorials. I was delighted to do this, because it is helpful for the society to know the Chief’s opinions on these important matters. I am in possession of information and facts surrounding these two subjects that are not generally in the public domain. I should add that over the intervening years, I have acquired further information and had meetings with Mr. Peter Macdonald of the Scottish Tartans Authority. Mr. MacDonald has been very helpful as well as being extremely knowledgeable.

Space precludes setting the story of MacGregor tartan in an overall historical context. To a certain extent that needs to be understood, as the role of tartan in the emergence of a post jacobite Scotland was significant. Tartan was not really ascribed to clans until the end of the 18th century and that was done principally as a marketing exercise. Perhaps one of the cleverest in the history of marketing.

The Scottish Regiments were instrumental in making tartan and kilts a recognisable uniform. To form up a body of men in the same tartan was a remarkable achievement for the times, which only the military could do. The idea that clans could do it was a fiction – but became a reality by the time of the King’s visit to Scotland in 1822. It is extraordinary to think that tartan, which had been loathed as a symbol of Jacobitism and thus banned, should become such a powerful symbol of the Scottish Regiments, many of which were raised to subdue Jacobite clans like the MacGregors.

The other fact to bear in mind is the reemergence of the clan system after its decimation in the 45 uprising. Clan chiefs and others had been successful in the ever expanding British Empire and wanted to reestablish the history and nobility of their clans. Not only did they fall for the marketing of so called clan tartans, but also had their own personal tartans specially woven. However, MacGregor chiefs have always worn the tartan of their clans, probably because they (Sir John and Sir Evan) invented the design and/or decided which setts the clan ought to wear. Latterly, clan chiefs were quite unable to control the explosion of tartan and its assignation by manufacturers. It was just too difficult and time consuming. A similar analogy could be made today. I am hardly going to go to India, Pakistan or China to inspect the myriad of tartans being produced to check for authenticity.

For those with further interest, Peter Macdonald’s website [www.scottishtartans.co.uk](http://www.scottishtartans.co.uk/) is authoritative and one of the best on the internet. There are numerous articles and he has been very generous with his findings, putting them in the public domain.

**The Four MacGregor Tartans**

Some readers may be aware of an organisation called the Scottish Tartans Society based in Edinburgh. It is now defunct. But its website once listed no less than 10 tartans attributed to Clan Gregor. Some were described inaccurately and some were attributed twice to a specific area such as Glenstrae. Most of them have never been sanctioned by the Chief. How did this happen?

It happened because those who can speak with a fair degree of authority on the matter such as clan chiefs and their representatives were not consulted and because of the indiscriminate commercialisation. The more tartans there are, the more that are likely to be sold. With those 10 tartans a MacGregor could wear a different tartan for each day of the week and have three in reserve for special occasions. Every eventuality is covered. This approach is disingenuous and leads to confusion. Authority for clan tartans is vested in Clan Chiefs by Lord Lyon.

Since the demise of the Scottish Tartans Society, MacGregor tartans have been properly rationalised down to four as follows for good historical reasons.

* [MacGregor Red and Black](http://www.clangregor.org/article-ourtartans.html#MacGregor_Red_and_Black)
* [MacGregor Red and Green](http://www.clangregor.org/article-ourtartans.html#The_MacGregor_Red_and_Green)
* [MacGregor of Glengyle](http://www.clangregor.org/article-ourtartans.html#MacGregor%20of%20Glengyle/Deeside)
* [MacGregor of Cardney](http://www.clangregor.org/article-ourtartans.html#MacGregor%20of%20Cardney)

**MacGregor Red and Black**



This tartan existed before individual tartans became associated to particular clans perhaps because it is one of the easiest setts to weave. There are those who question MacGregors’ claim to this tartan as there are portraits of monarchs and other Highlanders wearing this sett. How and where this particular sett came into existence is not known. There is a famous painting of Norman Macleod of Macleod wearing it and yet it is very definitely ascribed to Clan Gregor. It is possible that due to its easy weave and striking sett that it was adopted by MacGregors during proscriptions. Whislt the banning of tartan in towns would have been easy, such a policy would have been very difficult to enforce in the wild and remote highlands. Miss Jean Rollo, who lived in Edinburgh in 1746, made it a point to wear a tartan gown in the Canongate in defiance of the law.

Whatever the history, it came to be regarded as MacGregor tartan. My family have worn this particular tartan since the late 18th Century. My great, great, great, great grandfather would have worn it for good traditional reasons, not on a whim. The tartan is included in the Highland Society of London’s collection of 1816.

This tartan has also been misappropriated as ‘Rob Roy.’ Kenneth MacLeay in his book ‘Highlanders of Scotland’ written in 1870 states:

*“The famed Rob Roy, was a cadet of the Glengyle family. The MacGregor Tartan, common like other tartans, to the whole clan has erroneously been styled ‘Rob Roy’ in the shops.”*

My belief is that thanks to Sir Walter Scott and his book *Rob Roy*, peoples’ romantic imagination got the better of them and the tartan industry spotted a marketing opportunity. They named it ‘Rob Roy’ in defiance of the accepted norms of the time.

DW Stewart in his book *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans* says:

*“The pattern is accepted by sound authorities as the MacGregor pattern. There are fine examples of it in the collection of tartans made by the Highland Society of London 1816/17 labelled and sealed ‘The MacGregor tartan for undress ordinary clothing. The seal and arms of ‘Sir John MacGregor Murray of MacGregor, Baronet.’  Letters dated 1792 and 1794 were sent with patterns to Wilson of Bannockburn, the great tartan outfitters of the day, for an order.”*

This tartan should be known as MacGregor Red and Black.

**MacGregor Red and Green**



The exact origins are unknown but we known from various paintings that it was in wear from 1800. According to Mr. Peter Macdonald the colour red in a tartan such as this one was expensive and came from cochineal in India. Using red in a tartan was a display of wealth or ‘means’. It can be seen in the Cockburn Collection of the same period as the Highland Society of London sample of the Red and Black. Sir William Cockburn was a fellow member of the society with Sir John MacGregor Murray. Wilsons of Bannockburn listed this tartan as MacGregor-Murray so there was a family association with it. This tartan was worn by his only son, Sir Evan MacGregor Murray, 2nd Baronet as commander of the MacGregor Guard of Honour during the King’s visit to Edinburgh in 1822.

This tartan should be known as MacGregor Red and Green.

**MacGregor of Glengyle**



I used to call this Glengyle/Deeside, but on the advice of Mr. Macdonald it should simply be known as MacGregor of Glengyle. The Deeside connection with the MacGregors of Glengyle is undoubtedly true, but using the story to connect with MacGregor of Glengyle tartan is an embellishment and something of a red herring. I have a specimen of this tartan (see illustration) which my grandfather obtained from the Scottish artist Skeoch Cumming in 1922. He got it from an old woman in Nairn who said it was the tartan of the MacGregors of Glengyle whence her people came. It is red and dark blue in colour. The MacGregors transported to Aberdeenshire by the Earl of Moray to fight the Mackintoshes in about 1624, were almost certainly MacGregors of Glengyle. Another specimen of this sett is in the possession of Andersons of Edinburgh, believed to date from 1750.

This tartan should be known as MacGregor of Glengyle.

**MacGregor of Cardney**



The Scottish Tartans Society used to refer to this as ‘MacGregor Hunting’ when in a burgundy shade. This is quite wrong as there never has been a MacGregor hunting tartan. We have never gone in for dress, undress, dress down, fancy dress, hunting, or any other such descriptions unlike other clans. Ross and Johnston listed this tartan c. 1930 as MacGregor Hunting without my grandfather’s approval or authority. Subsequently, in January 1966, when the Scottish Tartans Society was being formed, the society failed to take advice from my father on this particular tartan, which has needlessly led to confusion on various MacGregor websites and within the Tartan industry.

The origin is as follows. My great uncle Alasdair MacGregor of Cardney decided to have some red and green MacGregor tartan made using wool from his own sheep and the old vegetable dyes which had been used in the 17th and 18th centuries. The red came out a ‘shocking pink’ colour and he redyed the wool achieving the wine colour at the second attempt. He liked the colour and had a bolt of tartan woven.

The MacGregors of Cardney have worn this tartan ever since and it should only be worn by that family. However, owing to the erroneous nature of its presentation, many MacGregors have bought this tartan in good faith, not realising its history. They should continue to wear the tartan as normal.

This tartan should be known as MacGregor of Cardney.

**Summary**

The authority for a tartan is vested in the chief and the only ones that I recognise are those specified above. I do not recognise any other tartan and most certainly not one entitled ‘Lady MacGregor’. This implies that only Lady MacGregor should wear it which goes against the ethos of clan tartans.

One exception is the MacGregor dance tartan, which is green and white in colour. This was authorised in response to a request by people competing in dancing competitions. To keep pace with the fashion MacGregor dancers wanted a distinctive type of tartan. This was granted, but it should only be worn by those on the dance circuit.

Tartan like armorials, has great symbolic value. As a cloth it is instantly recognisable around the world as being Scottish. A raft of organisations such as clans, businesses, and military units use it as a form of identification or branding. Wearers of MacGregor tartan are making a statement about themselves. They are displaying a loyalty to clan and family which should not be treated lightly. To that end, only the four tartans discussed should be worn by clansmen and women. Anything else is not approved and should be treated with caution in shops and on the internet.

**Tartan Notes**

* The Court of the Lord Lyon: the official heraldry office for Scotland
* How to Measure for a Kilt
* [Tartan and the Scotswomen](http://www.clangregor.com/wp/tartan-and-the-scotswoman/)
* MacGregor of Cardney (aka Hunting Macgregor) weaving notes
* [The Clothing of Our Ancestors](http://www.clangregor.com/wp/the-clothing-of-our-ancestors/)
* Albannach.org: lots of tartan information here