

## Frank Mehan's Original article

The kilt is the national dress of the Celtic lands — Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Brittany and Scotland. It is far more popular at the moment in Scotland, where almost every clan has its own tartan.

The kilt was originally called the *feileadh mor*, a belled cloth of about twenty yards and partly pleated. To dress, the wearer first set his belt on the ground and laid the pleated cloth over it, with the distance from the waist to the upper part of the knee. Then lying down on it he would then fold the unpleated parts across his waist he would then grasp the belt and buckle it around his middle. Then standing up he would put the upper part around his shoulders tying it to the lower part with a brooch or pin, leaving his arms free.

In early Ireland there were no tartans like we have today. The main colours were crimson, grey, blue, green and yellow — purple could only be worn by the high king or *ard ri*; the minor kings alone could wear red. Many of the Norsemen who came to Ireland began wearing the kilt, particularly the nobility. The famous king of Norway Magnus Barelegs, who spent some years in both Ireland and Scotland, always wore a kilt.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries men in Ireland and Scotland began wearing shirts and the kilts were changed to the *feileadh beag* or *brat beag* similar to the modern kilt and consisting of about 10-12 yards of a woollen garment.

In the sixteenth century, Nicholas d'Arfelle, ambassador of King Louis XII of France to James V, King of Scotland, in a letter to his master wrote: the Scots, like the Irish, wear a large, full shirt coloured saffron, with a great garment also in saffron wrapped around the waist, tied with a belt and hanging to the knees.

The first person to wear a tartan or multi-coloured kilt was King James 111 of Scotland who reigned from 1460 till his death in 1488. In Scotland today almost every clan or family has its own tartan. Some of them have a few different kinds i.e. the chief's tartan, the clan tartan, the working tartan, the hunting tartan, the ceremonial tartan, etc.

In 1956 a piece of a tartan was found in Dungiven, County Derry. It was dated to about 1500-1650 but did not match any known Scottish or Irish cloth. It is now known as the Ulster tartan. Very few Irish clans had their own tartan. Among the clans that had were the FitzPatricks, princes of Ossory, and later barons and earls of Upper Ossory in Queen's County (now called Laois). They had no less than five tartans. The O'Murphys of Wexford, the O'Kennedy's of Ormond (North Tipperary) and a few other families.

A number of Scottish Galloglass clans had their own tartan as well, among these were the Duffs, or MacDuffs of Leix, the MacDonnells of Clanmalier, the MacSweeneys of Tir Connell, the MacDonalds of Antrim and a few more. In 1880 a book, *Clan Originaux* was published in Paris by J. Claude Fres et Cil and it had a number of Irish clan tartans in it. It is long out of print.

It is said that King James II granted the use of a special tartan to each county in Ireland in 1689. When the Penal Laws were enforced in Ireland against the Catholics by Queen Anne the wearing of kilts was frowned on and the men marked out for punishment as Jacobites, so to a great extent it fell into disuse.

After the Battle of Culloden in 1746, Scots were fined for wearing the kilt; in fact it was forbidden to wear it. In order to keep recruits in the army, King George III allowed the majority of Scottish regiments to wear the kilt and they became known as 'the ladies from hell'. Around 1820 Sir Walter Scott, the famous writer, defied the powers-that-be and wore a kilt in public.

In 1822 King George IV paid a state visit to Edinburgh and Sir Walter persuaded him to wear the Royal Stuart tartan, which he did. Then the nobility all turned up for royal receptions in Edinburgh Castle and Holyrood Palace in their kilts and clan tartans. It was again fashionable and the thing to wear a kilt on every special occasion.

Slowly also they came back into fashion in Ireland later during the reign of Queen Victoria. Young boys in secondary colleges wore it as a part of a school uniform. The Gaelic League encouraged male dancers to wear the kilt. Most of these kilts were not tartans, but saffron, green, blue and brown. Then in 1880 the Hon. Bernard Fitzpatrick wore a kilt of the Fitzpatrick tartan in the House of Commons as MP for Portarlington. He succeeded his father as 2nd Lord Castletown in 1883 and wore his kilt in the House of Lords to garden parties in Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, Dublin Castle and the Viceregal Lodge in Dublin. He was a fluent Irish speaker and a leading member of the Gaelic League. He encouraged young men to sing and dance at *feiseanna* throughout Ireland and to wear the kilt with pride. On his estates at Grantstown Manor in Laois and Doneraile in Cork, he always wore the kilt when receiving visitors.

Pierce The O'Mahony of Kerry (1850-1931) Home Rule MP for North Meath from 1886 to 1892, wore the saffron kilt with a black coat and green cloak in the House of Commons. A famous breeder of Irish wolfhounds and a well-known figure in Dublin society, he seldom wore a trousers.

Douglas Hyde (1860-1949) friend of Castletown and Ashbourne, founder of the Gaelic League, first President of Ireland, wore the saffron kilt also with pride, going to *feiseanna* and meetings all over Ireland.

Eamonn Ceannt, who was executed for his part in the 1916 Rising was married in a kilt. In Rome in 1908 for the Silver Jubilee of Pope Pius X he led the Irish athletes on to the field for the Jubilee Games playing the pipes with full Celtic costume and kilt. Later he played the pipes in St Peter's Square and was summoned the following day to appear and play for the Pope with some of the cardinals in a private session, which he did dressed in full kilt uniform.

Sir Shane Leslie 3rd Baronet (1885-1975) historian, author, cousin of Sir Winston Churchill always wore the Leslie tartan on his travels around the world.

The Marquis of Hamilton, later 3rd Duke of Abercorn (1869-1953) who was Governor of Northern Ireland from 1922-1945 and he also wore a kilt.

In France the famous clothes designer Jean Paul Gaultier, says the kilt is the best form of dress for men and wears one all the time with his own special tartan and long boots.

The kilt is slowly coming back into fashion for men. Irish film star Richard Todd wears one from time to time and he wore it in two films: the first film version of *Rob Roy* and *The Hasty Heart* in which his co-star was the former US President Ronald Reagan. Green Party TD Trevor Sargent was married in a kilt in 1998.

The extraordinary thing is that the word *kilt* is not Gaelic, yet it has become the *sine que non* of Celtic and Highland dress. The word is in fact English and was first used in the eighteenth century and it possibly was derived from the word *quilt*, because the padding and pleats gave a quilted effect, or because in earlier days it formed the main cover for men, but was also used as a blanket. It could also be derived from a word of Viking origin *tilt*, meaning to tuck up a garment with a string and a pin.

The Irish army does not wear a kilt even for ceremonial dress and only the Irish army and air force pipe bands wear the kilt.

In 1996 Admiral Sir Julian Oswald, a Scot and a former First Sea Lord at the instigation of Commander Hobbs of the Royal Navy got Queen Elizabeth II to grant to officers and men of the Royal Navy the right to wear kilts of Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Manx and Cornish origins at mess dinners and certain ceremonial occasions provided they wore the Navy short coat of the uniform. However if they wanted to wear the kilt they had to buy it themselves!

In Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, the kilt is now as popular as it is in Scotland, all due to a football match in 1993. A number of Scots settled in the city, married Estonian girls, opened a Scottish style public house and cafe and wore only the kilt. It caught on quickly and is now something the Estonians call their own and the city has its tartan and kilt shop.

In Dublin, one will find men wearing St Patrick's tartan and county tartans during the summer months. Yet it would be easier to find a needle in a haystack than buy an Irish county tartan kilt in Dublin. It seems most Irish kilts and tartans are now supplied by MacNaughtons, kilt makers and woollen mills in Pillockey, Scotland.

To return use BACK button on Browser.

