

Dressing for Our Burns Dinner

by Kimberly Brangwin

The ritual of celebrating the life of Robert Burns began some years after his death by a group of his friends. Since then, the dinner has become an opportunity to celebrate all things Scottish. Those who enjoy an actual ancestral link to Scotland or those who enjoy a romantic inclination towards the poets and warriors of old, are all welcome. Initial Burns dinners were all male affairs, with men in formal white tie or the 19th century version of Scottish dress, kilts and waist length black wool jackets. As all events held by SITU, we choose to create the historical world we want, rather than re-create the world as it was

For those who enjoy the most authentic nod to their choice of raiment for this affair, here is some background information as to Scottish dress in the 18th century.

We all associate Scotland with the brilliantly colored tartan pattern, usually on wool. Today the stores carefully label these tartans with family names. This is largely a 19th c. and 20th c. affectation that grew out of desire to market these wool products and promote Scottish identity. Well known patterns, such as Black Watch or Dress Stewart, cannot be specifically linked to those Highland clans. Yet the tartan is a significant part of Scottish identity. So much so that after the massacre and failed rebellion at Culloden in 1745, the oppressive English outlawed the wearing of the plaid (the garment) and tartans (the pattern). Kilts, dirks, weapons of all kinds, along with many other real parts of Scottish culture were made illegal as well in the English attempt to trample down the Scottish soul.

Eventually, brighter minds prevailed and the ban on wearing of the tartan and plaids was lifted by 1782. As Scotland and England settled into a more peaceful relationship, the history of Scotland became romanticized by Sir Walter Scott and others. The success of Highland regiments in the Napoleonic wars led to a fad for Highland dress by 1815. From Queen Victoria to the current royal family, it has become de rigueur to adopt the kilt and other Scottish mode when visiting Scotland.

Traditional forms of Scottish dress come from ancient Celtic roots. It was homemade checked cloth from Highland sheep. The sporran is based upon the medieval belt-pouch. Basic elements for men include- the leine, a long linen shirt with a tie at the collar, not lace up the front; trews, footed hose; the plaid (a 12 to 18 ft long by about 5 ft wide cloth, pleated by hand and held in place with a belt). The end piece of the plaid would be pinned at the shoulder with a bodkin or iron pin. The *feileadh beag* (little wrap) -this is much like our modern version of a kilt- would be worn with a jacket. The jacket would end at the top of the hip. A waistcoat under the jacket may also have been worn. The *feileadh mor* (big wrap) was longer and bulkier. It was a man's blanket, bed, as well as clothing. The tartan pattern itself was created by the weavers in a particular area, using dyes of the region. In this way, it also may have been associated with a particular clan who populated that same area.

During the time that the plaid was outlawed, men wore breeches of various materials similar to those worn in England.

Women are not often portrayed in portraits of the time. Some of what they wore is based on conjecture. Next to their skin they wore a shift, stays, several petticoats (of cotton or wool depending on the season) the *arisaidh* (the female version of the plaid) a jacket and the head covering known as a *kertch*, if they were married. The plaid could be of silk, thin worsted wool or heavier flannel. It was belted about the waist, a section of fabric would be drawn up over the shoulder, pinned with a brooch, and fall to the heels behind. This piece could also go over the head and become a veil or wrap much like a cloak.

The *kertch* was a square of linen arranged as a three cornered cap. This would be fastened to the hair with silk cords or silver pins. The bonnet was a direct descendent of the soft crowned brimmed hat worn throughout the 16th c

We hope you will enjoy being a bit of Scottish heritage, whatever version of Highland dress you choose to wear for our Robert Burns dinner