

# THE CLOTHES PRESS

FALL, 2010 No. 100

## BOLD BRIGHT AND IN YOUR FACE

*Message from Editor Bonnie Elliott*

In this issue we are going to focus on Scottish dress, then and now. Robert Doyle recounts his take on the evolution of the English suit and the Scottish kilt. Veronica Maclsaac, a Halifax designer who utilizes tartan and Celtic motifs in contemporary fashion, talks about her work.

Recently I have been thinking about the meanings behind clothing and how dress is often charged with conflicting messages. A good book which explores the characteristics and traits of national identity & imagery while probing at how fashion and dress are expressions of, in this case, English culture and character is *The Englishness of English Dress*, edited by C. Brevard, B. Conekin & C. Cox (Berg, 2002)

When I think about it, the tartan and all things Scottish transmit a variety of messages. The 'get up' of kilts, sporrans, plaids and tartans of Scottish dress are bold, bright and 'in your face' and not dissimilar to the effect of bag pipes on my ears, and yet I have a sneaking regard for it and some of what it embodies. Mostly this can be explained by the fact that I grew up in Montreal where I was as much aware of the contributions of Scottish culture to the making of the city as to the vivacity of French society. Then there are the genes. Being partially of Scottish heritage, I feel drawn to the perfect blue and intersecting lines of my own clan tartan. From an early age I was slipped into a kilty skirt and told about my Scottish lineage, along with the important values of education and hard work that came along with it. The tribalism we call 'clannishness' is a less appealing attribute. It therefore came as a shock to learn that most of the legend and myth of what I had learned was just that. For a provocative look at this I recommend Trevor-Roper's *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History*, particularly part III, "The Sartorial Myth" in which he writes a sobering essay that sifts out the over romanticised myths we have come to love and tell from the historical account in the evolution of Scottish dress.

One estimate claims that there are 15.1% or 4.7 million Canadians of Scottish descent and when it comes to acknowledging this heritage we probably celebrate it more than actual Scots living in Scotland do. In the late 1980's Nova Scotian Mrs. Jean Watson led the charge to establish an annual "Tartan Day" now set on April 6th which most other provinces in Canada have by now adopted. Then there is the annual Gathering of the Clans where you are sure to see a trooping of the masses buckled into tartanned garments in the pipe bands and highland dance regalia. Besides the visual feast of the fashion there is sustenance behind what the Scots were able to build and foster in Nova Scotia and elsewhere which is worth remembering and celebrating. Thanks to our contributors for reminding us of the history and the future of Scottish attire.



*1930's wool check suit, worn in Montreal by Helen Doris Gales. Editor's collection.*

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## THE ENGLISHMAN'S SUIT VERSUS THE SCOTSMAN'S KILT

by Robert Doyle



Excepting the colourful forms of National dress, masculine garments throughout the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century consist of a few basic pieces, the jacket, a vest or waistcoat and trousers; worn with a shirt and, accessorized by a variety of ties, ascots, belts, cufflinks, rings etc. and maybe a sweater: Made from a variety of fabrics, with the very popular denim being a must for the modern gentleman. These items are often artfully combined to become the three piece suit in as varied a combination as the individual's personality demands.

The suit of clothes was an idea that originated around the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when John Evelyn, the English diarist (1620 – 1706) wrote in his diary (1666) that the vest, of Persian origin was first worn at court (of Charles 11, England) thus beginning the concept of a suit of clothing. The casaque or cape, commonly worn at this time was buttoned closer to the body to become the origin of the coat. Petticoat breeches, then in style were trimmed of their fullness to a slimmer, less bulky garment. These three pieces came into their own more modern form by the late eighteenth century when English country gentlemen had them made up in matching woolen cloths; since then it has been the English gentleman's wardrobe staple. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century George Bryan Brummell (1778 -1840), popularly known as "Beau" Brummell, one of London's most extravagant and arrogant, yet fashionable dandy's, dictated the correct colour and quality of the gentleman's suit of clothes.



Brummell was not so much a creator of fashion but a perfectionist of its style. In his immaculately groomed accessories, the well starched and ironed linen shirt, the conservatively coloured vest and neatly pressed and folded neck cloths, well waxed and polished boots and clean doe-skin gloves set the standard for the well dressed gentleman of his day. The suit had many variations, from the superb examples at the hands of master tailors of London's fashionable Savile Row, whose suits were of the highest quality for those who could afford such fine workmanship, to the less exotic, mass manufactured versions shown in the world's fashion magazines: Both inspired this most English masculine garment. But, it was not as *colourful* as the garment that glorified the gentlemen to the North: The Scotsman and his kilt.

The origins of the Scottish kilt are lost in the mists of highland folklore; although the modern kilt is documented from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, its origins beyond this is unfortunately lost to history, but could be placed from around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, about the time of Roman occupation in Britain. But then who knows for certain. Suffice to say the kilt in its earliest form was simply a length of hand woven cloth, usually seven ells long (an ell is a linear measurement equal to approximately 37 inches), a length approximating the Roman *Toga*, of twenty one feet. This early kilt may or may not have been made from cloth of a woven pattern of mixed colours. This length of cloth was laid on the ground and roughly pleated over a wide belt, the whole was then drawn around the body and secured. Part of this length of cloth would have been left free so that it could be wrapped over the wearer's shoulders to keep him warm; it was in fact quite a crude garment. The wearer would also have worn a tunic type shirt of Celtic or Roman origin, woven from locally grown natural linen fibre; this shirt and kilt was worn without any form of underwear, beginning the tradition of the Scotsman not wearing underpants under his kilt.



Sheep raised for use in producing fleece for early Scottish textiles were selected so that there was a black sheep to mix its wool with the natural white of the flock producing several shades of gray, and the mixed brown, white and black sheep breeds from which other mixtures were obtained providing a variety of earthy colors from which the country, or shepherd checks were woven. These cloths were know as “breacan” meaning speckled, referring to the multi-coloured yarns spun together in the weave, and “chlamys” from the Greek, meaning cloak. Natural dyes were an Asian product traded through Roman territory, finding their way through trade into all corners of the then Roman world. These dyes added various colours from which tartan weaves slowly evolved into their now colourful form. Natural dyes, accessible locally provided colours that would create weaves to became known as regional, “clan” or family tartans. It was this eventual collective identifying strength that caused the Eng-



lish to wage war on the Scots in order to finally weaken this clannish-ness and its fighting strength, thereby ending border conflicts between the two countries. The great rebellion of 1745, culminating with the Battle of Culloden banished the wearing of the kilt and their associated tartan cloths to quell identifying clans from any further uprisings.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Englishman Thomas Rowlinson, a Quaker ironmaster from Lancashire was commissioned to build the roadways into the Scottish Highlands. Requiring labourers, he saw that the Scottish worker, wearing his clumsy wrapped kilt was not appropriate wear for work in the iron foundry. He arranged with the local regimental tailor, a Mr. Parkinson to re-design the old kilt, reducing the rough pleating into a formalized and orderly manner, stitching down the fullness, cutting away unnecessary bulk so that the pleated back of the kilt lay smoothly over the wearer's hips. The front overlapping panels

finished off the kilt and was held secure with a decorative pin. Because there were no pockets in this garment, a purse-like accessory known as the *sporrán* was belted around the hips and hung from a position over the genitals, thereby affording some form of protection. Doing away with the length of cloth worn over the shoulder made for a more efficient and safer garment. The extra drape, now called the “plaidie” was added for dress wear. The modern kilt, or as it is known in Gaelic as the “*philibeg*” was born.



The evolution of Highland costume by the late nineteenth century, tailored in this case in Robertson tartan for evening wear. NMS

By the late eighteenth century this new financially secure labor force, now wearing the shortened and more efficient kilt was to establish a kinship among families. Intermarriages and the mixing together of tartan styles and colours in time established formal identifying patterns known as “*setts*” that would soon establish family and regional unity, a unity that simply strengthened the bonds of community. The kilt and its handsome tartan patterns are now seen the world over wherever Scots have settled.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s Industrial Revolution hand woven tartan was a rapidly dying craft and was in dire need of an infusion of public interest. A delegation of the Scottish Weaver’s Guild approached Queen Victoria for her help in stimulating its growth. She popularised the wearing of tartans at court and, with her Consort Prince Albert bought and decorated Scotland’s Balmoral Castle, using tartans as their inspiration. The tartan became and is still one of the world’s most admired fabrics as seen in this very stylish suit made for the Duke of Windsor in the 1930’s as the Prince of Wales, made from the MacDonald, Lord of the Isles tartan.



The tartan sample above is Mr. Doyle’s family tartan, The “Henderson.”

Robert Doyle, C.M,  
Stratford, Ontario, 2009

Mr. Doyle, was the founder and Director of several design programs in Canada, the most notable being the Costume Studies program at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He has written several books on costume. An active Stage Designer, he was until recently the designer for the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. For further information see [www.sartorialpresspublications.com](http://www.sartorialpresspublications.com)

**This excerpt is reprinted courtesy The Peloponnesian Folklore Museum, Nafplion, Greece and was a part of the exhibition “Endyesthai” (To Dress) catalogue, in April, 2010, towards establishing a Costume Cultural Museum in Athens.**

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- Hardy Amies, *The Englishman's Suit* Quartet Books Ltd., London, 1994
- G.F. Curtis, *Clothes and the Man*, Jonathan Cape, Butler and Tanner, London, 1927

## Illustrations

- English Gentleman "Beau Wilson" in the early version of an 17<sup>th</sup> century suit. Author's collection.
- Beau Brummell, a copy from the original by the author
- Young men's suits, a catalogue from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, author's collection.
- Highland soldier in government service from the National Museums of Scotland collection
- Three portraits by Kenneth MacLeay, 1864, National Museums of Scotland collection
- Late 19<sup>th</sup> century Highland dress costume, National Museums of Scotland
- Suit made for the Duke of Windsor as the Prince of Wales in 1930, made from the MacDonald Lord of the Isles tartan, from the collection of Mohamed Al Fayad.

## VICTORIAN FASHION SHOW &amp; TEA

Tickets will go on sale in early September for the library fund raiser, Victorian Fashion Show & Tea. The Cape Breton Regional Library is presenting a Victorian Christmas Fashion Show and Tea to be held at St. Andrew's Hall in Sydney on November 21, starting at 1:30 P.M.. The featured fashions are from the collection of Pam Newton and will showcase a variety of outfits from the Victorian era, including bathing suits, sportswear, wedding gowns and more. Pam has been busy all summer making some new outfits for the show. Tickets for this event will be \$25 per person. During the afternoon, there will be a silent auction of beautiful items for people to bid on. All proceeds from this event go toward funding the programs and services of the Cape Breton Regional Library. For more information, phone 562-3279 or 562-3161.

## INTERVIEW WITH VERONICA MACISAAC OF VERONICA MACISAAC APPAREL

By Bonnie Elliott

Since Halifax based Veronica MacIsaac emerged as a designer the reviews of her work have been very positive. Riding on a wave of popularity, this talented artist shows a lot of promise with the



fusion of Celtic and tartan with elegant yet practical everyday women's wear.

1. Why do you think people are taking notice of your work?

*I think people are taking notice of my work because it's different. There's nothing out there like it. I also try not to follow trends too closely, so my designs tend to be fairly timeless, and people appreciate having those pieces in their wardrobe.*

2. One of the hallmarks of your work is the incorporation of Celtic motifs and an inventive use of tartan into contemporary fashion. Do you think you would have received the same reaction say 20 years ago?

*I definitely think that my line is received better now than it would've been 20 years ago. People are much more open to traditional things being used in modern ways. I think it will only improve as time goes on.*

3. You grew up in St. Peters, CB in a family that owned and still owns a kilt making business. Did you always have an instinct that tartan had a wider purpose beyond highland dance wear and outfits for pipe bands?

*I did always have that instinct, yes. I've been making modern things out of tartan for as long as I can remember. I never thought it was anything special, I just knew that a mid-calf length pleated skirt wasn't my own personal style. But I also knew that I wanted to represent my family heritage. It took me a long time to figure out that other people felt the same way.*

4. What is it about tartan you find appealing?

*For me, it's all about the tradition, and the heritage. I love representing my family with something that's been around for hundreds of years. I love making something modern for someone in their family tartan, and having them feel so proud to show their culture.*

5. As demonstrated by your tribute to Alexander McQueen in the Montreal Runway Show, you took inspiration in how he was able to draw upon his Celtic culture for his designs. To what extent is a role model important to the development of an artist?

*I think all artists have role models, and I do think it's a very integral part of an artists' development. For me, I've always been very inspired by McQueen and his collections. But I would say my role model (as cheesy as it sounds), is my mother. She has a degree with a major in textiles, and sewed her whole life. She taught me how to sew when I was 4, and I've looked to her for sewing advice ever since.*

6. For all forms of art and craft there is a bedrock of technical skills that need to be learned and developed before he/she can become a master in their own right. How have you been able to acquire these skills in cutting, drafting and design?

*Well, as I mentioned above, my mother has a degree in textiles, and she taught me how to sew when I was 4 years old. Unfortunately for me, I was never able to receive the formal school training for design. I've always learned everything the hard way. Either from my mother, or on my own.*

## EVENTS, EXHIBITS, CONFERENCES

**CANADA**

Bata Shoe Museum

416-979-7799. [www.batashoemuseum.ca](http://www.batashoemuseum.ca)

Until September 2010-05-29

*Socks: Between You and Your Shoes* featuring the history of hosiery & *On a Pedestal: From Renaissance Chopines to Baroque Heels & Beauty, Identity, Pride: Native North American Footwear.*

Midwestern Region, Costume Society of America

Study Tour of Ottawa/Gatineau.

October 1-2, 2010

[http://www.costumesocietyamerica.com/RegionIII/event\\_workshop\\_sym.htm](http://www.costumesocietyamerica.com/RegionIII/event_workshop_sym.htm)

**U.S.A.**

Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology

[www.fitnyc.edu](http://www.fitnyc.edu)

Until November

*Eco-Fashion: Going Green*

Costume Society of America Northeastern Region I and the American Textile History Museum

Fall Symposium

High Style: Betsy Bloomingdale and the Haute Couture

Saturday, October 23, 2010, 8:30-3:30pm, American Textile History Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts

**U.K.**

Victoria & Albert Museum

[www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

[Grace Kelly: Style Icon](#)

17 April - 26 September 2010

The spectacular wardrobe of Grace Kelly is on display which traces the evolution of her style from Hollywood actress in the 1950s to Princess Grace of Monaco. Over 50 of Grace Kelly's outfits together with hats, jewellery and the original Hermès Kelly are exhibited.

## CSNS CONSERVATION SUPPLIES LIQUIDATION SALE

- White cotton gloves, one size  
\$1.50 now 75 ¢ a pair
- Unbuffered acid free tissue, sheet (30" X 40")  
\$1.35 now 75¢
- Orvus Paste, 1.25 oz vial  
\$2.00 now \$1.00
- Heavy-weight, unbleached cotton, 120 cm. wide  
\$5.00 now \$2.50 a metre
- Light-weight, unbleached cotton, 120 cm.  
\$5.00 now \$2.50 a metre
- White cotton sheeting, 112 cm.  
\$5.00 now \$2.50 a metre
- Interfacing piece (144 cm X 56 cm)  
\$4.00 now \$2.00
- Netting piece (50 cm X 90 cm)  
\$10.00 now \$5.00
- Silk thread spool (200 meter spool)  
\$6.85 now \$3.50

Supplies are limited so don't wait.

## THE COSTUME SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA

c/o Association of Nova Scotia Museums  
1113 Marginal Road, Halifax NS  
B3H 4P7  
costumesociety@ednet.ns.ca  
www.costumesociety.ednet.ns.ca

### THE COSTUME SOCIETY OF NOVA SCOTIA

The Society encourages interest in the history, development and conservation of Nova Scotian costume and personal adornment, and offers learning opportunities through workshops and hands-on programs. The Society's membership is diverse, including collectors, museum professionals, designers, costumers, reenactors, researchers, historians, and students.

CSNS was founded in 1981 and is a member of the Costume Society of America, the Association of Nova Scotia Museums, and the Dartmouth Heritage Museum.

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### *LIBRARY RESOURCES*

The Costume Society of Nova Scotia donated its library collection to the Costume Studies Program at Dalhousie University. This costume reference library is available to members of CSNS by contacting Dianne Kristoffe @ 494-2178 [dianne.kristoffe@dal.ca](mailto:dianne.kristoffe@dal.ca). The library collection is housed within the Costume Studies accommodations at 1515 Dresden Row, Suite 202 in the City Centre Atlantic. Please allow time for scheduling visits as the room is used for classes also.

Also check out the Spring Garden Branch of the Halifax Public Library. There is a growing costume collection in the Reference section on the second floor.

### *THE CLOTHES PRESS*

#### Editorial Committee

Bonnie Elliott— editor, Sally Erskine Doucette, Anita Campbell, Karen Pinsent

Contributors Robert Doyle, Bonnie Elliott

#### Submissions

The Clothes Press encourages content from its readers. Send articles, reviews, and letters to the Editorial Committee. The Clothes Press is published quarterly by the Costume Society of Nova Scotia. Views expressed in The Clothes Press are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent CSNS or its supporters.