K is for KILTS by Kyle Granite A—Z of Scottish History

What is more Scottish than the kilt?! It is quintessentially Scottish and us Scots and those with Scottish blood are immensely proud of our tartan skirts. Yes, I know the Irish have kilts too, but let's face it, whenever we see anyone in a kilt, we think of the Scots. What was once a vital piece of Highland attire has now been embraced the world over, donned proudly at weddings, graduations, Burns Suppers, Ceilidhs, St Andrew's Day soiree and many other important events.

Highland chieftain Lord Mungo Murray wearing belted plaid, around 1680.

Despite popular belief, perpetuated by Hollywood and its fascination with films of Scots in the early fourteenth century running about in kilts (looking at you Braveheart!), the kilt, as we know it, originated in the early eighteenth century. It was known by gaelic Highlanders as feileadh beag, or 'little wrap', which evolved from feileadh mor, or 'big wrap', a belted plaid which has been recognised as the first identifiably 'Scottish' outfit that emerged in the late sixteenth century. It truly was a big wrap, measuring four to six yards in length and two yards wide.

The smaller kilt that we are familiar with today is in fact credited to an Englishman, Thomas Rawlinson, who hired Highlanders to work his furnaces in Glengarry, near Inverness. Evidently the smaller kilt was much more practical and less likely to cause catastrophic injury due to excess material catching in the powerful industrial equipment.

The kilt quickly became a symbol of the Scottish highlands, and subsequently a thorn in the side of the British government. This led to the 'Diskilting Act' in the wake of the disastrous defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746. The ruthless campaign of "pacification" of the Highlands in order to eradicate all cultural symbols of Jacobitism included the banning of the kilt and the bagpipes, which were both considered symbols of rebellion and primitive savagery. By 1782 the Diskilting Act was repealed.

Satirical caricature of European women curious about kilted Scottish soldiers, c.1815

Can anyone guess this tartan?

As the years wore on the kilt spread outwith the Highlands to the urban centres in the lowlands, becoming a fashionable token of 'Scottishness'. This idea of the kilt as a fashion statement was further promoted by Queen Victoria (who spent much of her time at Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire) and her obsession with the Scottish Highlands. Expressing her love for the Scottish pattern, Victoria decorated her private suites at Balmoral with tartan and wore dresses made from "Dress Stewart". By the twentieth century, women began to embrace the kilt, wearing a simplified version in the form of a pleated wraparound skirt.

Nowadays, the kilt has become more popular than ever with young Scots embracing the iconic Scottish fashion statement, with a hoard of kilts being a popular sight on school prom nights and at weddings.
Buying your first kilt is often seen as a right of passage for not only young Scottish men, but for those who consider themselves honorary Scots, like my dear Israeli-born husband, who some of you met in November, looking very handsome in his kilt, if I do say so myself! (see right).

And now one from the 17th century!

One of the earliest depictions of the kilt is this German print showing Highlanders around 1630