

## *Kirkin' O' The Tartan*

### *(Kirkin' Defined and Historical Intent)*

*Kirkin' o' the Tartan is a traditional Scottish service performed at church to petition the Lord for success at arms and the safe return of soldiers. A military unit prior to leaving for battle, usually members of the same clan, would gather in full Highland regalia at the local church for the symbolic blessing of its clan tartan.*

### *(Peacetime Change of Intent)*

*When Scotland was at peace, the kirkin' o' the Tartan took on a more peaceful symbolism and ritual change. To avoid the appearance of a breach of church loyalty, it was expected of a new bridegroom that he bring his bride to church on the first Sunday following his wedding. For this occasion he was also expected to wear his tartaned kilt. This symbolized commitment to regular church attendance by the new couple. A line from Sir Walter Scott mentions this newer tradition, "I am to be married in the morn and kirkit on Sunday."*

### *(American Adaption)*

*In America the kirkin' o' the Tartan has evolved with a new emphasis. Here the Scots are so widely scattered that it is difficult to assemble more than a few members of any one clan for the kirkin' (churching) of its particular tartan. Therefore the pragmatic Scottish Americans have made it a communal church service for all members with varying tartans. The two beneficial purposes are the well-being of all Scots and the preservation of the laudable Scottish tradition of the Kirkin' o' the Tartan. The Sun City Scots Club is proud to be part of this tradition in furthering this exemplary ethnic ceremony.*

### *(Tartan Definition and Description)*

*In simplest terms, a tartan is a distinctive Scottish design woven with various colors on a fabric with a solid color background. Each tartan is*

sufficiently different in pattern and color so that each Highland clan has its own readily recognizable tartan. The tartan design and coloration connotes membership in a particular Scottish clan. While each tartan is different in coloration, every authentic tartan must have in its basic design unevenly spaced color stripes which are repeated in sequence and cross each other at right angles. Because of the exactitude of the specifications, most Scots can recognize the true tartans from imitations.

#### (Historical Importance of the Tartan)

To understand why the Scots have had such a long, unabated regard for their tartans over the past 800 years, the following information is pertinent. For hundreds of years the kilt, the tartan, and the bag-pipe were strong unifying Scottish symbols. The British were also acutely aware of this, because Highland dress was banned in Scotland after the Scots lost the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Because of persistent world-wide protest by the Scots, the Act proscribing Highland dress was repealed in 1782. The British tried again to abolish individual clan tartans by trying to impose a single tartan on all Scottish military units. This also failed through the organized pressure of the clans.

Highland garb for dress occasions became popular in the Midlands and Lowlands of Scotland as well. Of historical interest is the fact that the Lowlanders were the first Scots to muster a tartan-kilted military unit, the Royal Company of Archers.

#### (Uses of the Tartan. Plaid Defined)

Non-Scots may be surprised to learn that in the past the number of colors in a tartan indicated the wearers' status in the social and economic structure of Scotland. For example, the Royal Stewart Tartan of seven colors is still reserved for the British monarchs. The nobility has a six-color tartan, and the clergy five. The land-owners' tartan, followed by the professions, had a reduced number of colors down to the two-color tartan for the shepherd. Americans refer to this two-color tartan as a "shepherd's plaid".

Correctly, by Scottish custom, the plaid is a rectangular length of cloth woven with a tartan design and fastened by Highlanders at the left shoulder. They used the plaid either as a garment by day or a battlefield blanket by night.

The tartan, therefore, is a design or pattern woven into the plaid. The plaid is a garment or a blanket. With the passage of time all tartans are today in the public domain in America and can be worn by anyone, Scottish or no, including the Royal Stewart, if worn with propriety. In Great Britain, however, permission to wear the Royal Stewart tartan must still be obtained from the Queen because it is a proprietary possession of several of her regiments. Scottish regiments are not bound by the color restrictions because their troops customarily are entitled to wear the tartan of their organizing founders. Most clans which have brightly colored tartans also have a second, more muted tartan for hunting practicality.

(Sun City's First Kirkin' O' The Tartan Service)

Due to the historical attachment to the tartan, it was inevitable that the Scottish church would early on honor the tartan concept with an appropriate church service. That same traditional service, call "Kirkin' o' the Tartan", will take place for the first time in Sun City, Arizona, at the Faith Presbyterian Church on Sunday, November 28, 1982, in accordance with prescribed pageantry.

This article prepared and written by John D. Chisholm, member of the Sun City Scots, at the request of Alex Jardine, president of the Sun City Scots. October 1982