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Author(s): J. Reoch

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THE FÉILEADH-BEAG IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

J. REOCH

IN the *Journal of John Aston*, which relates his experience as 'a privy chamber-man extraordinary' to Charles I., when the king was with the English army during the campaign of 1639, known as the First Bishops' War, there occurs a graphic description of the Highlanders attached to the opposing Scots army. Aston, whose journal shows him to have been a cultured and intelligent gentleman, of an observant disposition, visited in person the encampment of the Scots on Dunse Law, so that his testimony is that of an eye-witness. The following is the passage referred to (I quote it in full, as it is of great interest and not at all well known):—

'Most guessed them [the Scots army] to bee about 10 or 12,000 at the most, accounting the highlanders, whose fantastique habitt caused much gazing by such as have not seene them heertofore. They were all or most part of them well timbred [well-made] men, tall and active, apparrelled in blew woollen wascotts and blew bonnetts. A paire of bases of plad, and stockings of the same, and a paire of pumpes on their feete: a mantle of plad cast over the left shoulder, and under the right arm, a pocquett before for their knapsack, and a pair of durgs [dirks: or possibly intended for *dags*, *i.e.* pistols] on either side the

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pocquet. They are left to their owne election for their weapons; some carry onely a sword and targe, others musquetts, and the greater part bow and arrowes, with a quiver to hould about 6 shafts, made of the maine of a goat or colt, with the haire hanging on, and fastned by some belt or such like, soe as it appeares allmost a taile to them. Theise were about 1000, and had bagg-pipes (for the most part) for their warlick instruments. The Laird Buchannan was their leader. Their ensignes had strange devices and strange words, in a language unknowne to mee, whether their owne or not I know not.'

This passage is especially interesting in that it contains, so far as I know, the earliest distinct reference to the wearing of the kilt and shoulder plaid as separate garments, as distinguished from the belted plaid. The words, 'a paire of bases of plad and stockings of the same . . . a mantle of plad cast over the left shoulder and under the right arm,' clearly point to this. The word *bases* signified a plaited skirt, reaching from the waist to the knee, appended to the doublet or secured to the girdle. It was sometimes worn over armour, and the expression, 'a pair of bases,' occurs in this sense in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, ii. 1. It is evident that Aston here uses the term to describe the *féileadh-beag*, and there could scarcely be clearer evidence of the incorrectness of the story that the kilt as a separate garment was the invention of two Englishmen, viz. Rawlinson, the manager of an ironfoundry at Invergarry, and Parkinson, an army tailor, about the year 1728. This story, which did not appear in print until 1785, has obtained wide currency—even such well-informed writers as the brothers Stuart (so-called), authors of *The Costume of the Clans*, accepted it as correct; and, in spite of its inherent improbability, it reappears time after time, although the mere fact that it never saw the light of day until half a century after the supposed inventors were said to have manifested their 'stroke of genius,' as it has been described, is surely sufficient to bring it under suspicion. And no

contemporary, nor indeed any independent, evidence has ever, so far as I am aware, been produced in its support.

In confirmation of Aston's description, we have the testimony of Thomas Kirk in 1677, in his account of his tour in Scotland in that year, in a passage also pointing to the kilt and plaid as separate garments. He describes them as follows: 'A sort of breeches, not unlike a petticoat, that reaches not so low, by far, as their knees, and their stockings are rolled up about the calves of the legs, and tied with a garter, their knee and thigh being naked . . . a plaid over the left shoulder and under the right arm,' etc.

The frequently quoted passage from Taylor, the 'Water Poet,' descriptive of the Highland dress in 1618, is scarcely clear enough to justify one in assuming that he refers to the use of the *féileadh-beag* at that time; although, if his description is intended to apply to the belted plaid, it seems strange that he does not mention its most characteristic feature, the belting of the plaid in folds round the waist, seeing, more especially, that he actually wore the costume himself.

There is also, in Sir William Brereton's account of his visit to Scotland in 1635, a passage which, though vague in its terms, might be read as referring to the *féileadh-beag*. He says: 'Many Highlanders we observed in this town [Edinburgh] in their plaids, many without doublets, and those who have doublets have a kind of loose flap garment hanging loose about their breech, their knees bare,' etc. From this one might infer that it was only those who had doublets who wore the 'loose flap garment,' as distinguished from the plaid, and it would almost appear that it was by the well-to-do ('those who have doublets') that the kilt as a separate garment was first worn, while the poorer had to content themselves with the plaid, which served them for upper clothing during the day and a blanket at night.