

The Widow of Balmoral: Mourning Tartans and Victorian Chromophobia

Faiers, Jonathan

University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Hassard, Kirsty

V&A Dundee, United Kingdom

Abstract

Queen Victoria's seclusion in a state of perpetual mourning as the 'Widow of Balmoral' following the Prince Consort's death in 1861, plunged the nation into black. While much has been written concerning the commercial expedience of mourning dress, comparatively little research has been undertaken on so-called 'funeral tartans' or 'mourning setts' as they are more commonly known. These monochromatic tartans, which typically supplement the brighter shades of a tartan for black, grey, and white, were yet another example of the expansion of 19th-century tartan manufacturing alongside the better known 'fancy' or 'dress' tartans. This paper examines the phenomenon of mourning tartans, ostensibly an economically advantageous development, and their sombre palette, which also signifies the more complex narratives that the authors explore as curators of the recently critically acclaimed exhibition Tartan at V&A Dundee.

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Victorian mourning

In 1861, following her mother's death in March of that year, and then unexpectedly that of Albert the Prince Consort from typhoid, in December, Queen Victoria plunged herself into a state of deep and profound mourning, declaring in a letter to her Uncle King Leopold of Belgium, 'My life as a happy one is ended! The world is gone for me!', and dressed in black for her remaining 40 years.¹

(Fig. 1)

Withdrawing from nearly all public engagements for 10 years following Albert's death, she secluded herself in her various royal residences, including Balmoral, clinging to the presence of her deceased husband, laying out his clothes and having jugs of water and clean towels put in his dressing rooms, ready for his use. Victoria surrounded herself with casts of Albert's hands, paintings, and busts of him, while her observance of the period's elaborate mourning rituals ranged from correct attire to chastising ministers for presenting documents that did not have a sufficiently broad black border. While her critics feared for her sanity, and questioned her fitness to rule, the impact Victoria's mourning had on the already flourishing Victorian mourning industry, especially in terms of clothing and textile production, cannot be overstated. As Lou Taylor suggests in her seminal *Mourning Dress* of 1983, 'It was Victoria, the middle class ideal of Christian widowhood, who fanned the cult of mourning, spreading it to all classes of society during her lifetime.'²

Victorian widows spent at least two years observing the successive stages of mourning. The first stage, known as 'full or first mourning' lasted for a year and a day, and consisted of wearing unadorned dresses made of matte black fabrics. These dresses would be covered in crape to produce an all-over shrouded, dull black appearance. Crape was manufactured in an astonishing variety of qualities and at different price points, including a fine black silk variety known as 'Albert' crape and mixtures of silks and worsteds, machine stamped to produce a crimped or crinkled appearance, including 'Balmoral' crape, which was on sale at Harrods in 1895. The demand for crape generated a whole industry kept buoyant by manufacturers, encouraging the belief that it was unlucky to keep crape in the house when not in mourning, and so for each new death, new crape would need to be purchased.

The following stage, known as 'second mourning', lasted six to nine months. Dresses made of silk were re-introduced, and full crape was removed from gowns but now applied ornamentally, gathered into bunches, or draped at strategic points across the body of the dress. Following Queen Victoria's example, many widows never left this second stage, wearing black silk dresses and black mourning caps lined with white lace for the remainder of their widowed existence. After a period of approximately 21 months, widows entered the

¹ Benson, Arthur Christopher & Esher, *The Letters of Queen Victoria; A Selection of Her Majesty's Correspondence Between the Years 1837-1861* (London: John Murray, 1908), p. 473.

² Taylor, Lou, *Mourning Dress*, 1983 p.122

third, or 'ordinary', stage of mourning, lasting three to six months. Confusingly, after a period of at least 2 years, widows also entered what was known as 'half mourning' which could last from 6 months to the rest of their lifetime, when muted colours such as soft mauves and grey relieved by white were worn.

Manufacturing mourning

The wealthiest and most fashionable women had their mourning clothes made up by Court or private dressmakers, while, as Taylor reminds us: 'Less well-off women used the services of cheaper dressmakers and by the middle of the century began to buy most of their mourning at the new mourning warehouses.'³

Advertisements of the period can give us a sense of the incredible success of the Victorian mourning industry. For example, Peter Robinson's Court & General Mourning Warehouse, which became known as 'Black Peter Robinson's', was situated on London's Regent Street and boasted a department called the 'Mitigated Affliction Department', which provided mourning dresses for women negotiating the subtle modifications in dress that characterised the different stages of mourning, and advertised that a brougham, harnessed with a coachman dressed in black and black clad lady fitters inside, waited outside the store ready to hurry off to the home of a newly bereaved widow. This was a necessary service given that the most observant and wealthy of widows could not be seen shopping for clothes immediately following her husband's departure.

The London General Mourning Warehouse, or Jay's, as it was known after its founder William Chickall, also stood on Regent Street where you could obtain everything from mourning accessories to funeral furnishings; and in 1893, it employed upwards of 600 people, including counter assistants, tailors, dressmakers, silk importers, and, like Peter Robinson's, a team of mobile tailors and seamstresses.

(Fig. 2)

Jay's initially offered competitive pricing, and could accommodate the needs of the lower classes. Their adverts in the 1860s emphasised low prices and quick turnarounds.

By the 1890s, innovations in clothing design and construction put Jay's on the cutting edge of ready-to-wear, which allowed the company to adjust its identity as a mourning emporium and change to an upscale dress shop. They touted their speciality in 'ladies high class mourning goods' and counted 'Her Majesty the Queen, the Princess of Wales, and many members of Continental Royal and Imperial Families, as well as the nobility and the elite of society'.

³ Ibid p.124

For those who could not afford to purchase new mourning attire, the obvious solution was to dye existing garments black either domestically or professionally, and a lucrative business arose specialising in the dyeing of clothes and accessories. The dyes used were so toxic that the dyeing process itself could often cause illness, and wearing these hand-dyed fabrics caused any number of skin and eye ailments, up to and including blindness.

Mourning tartans

So, what of so-called ‘funeral’ tartans or ‘mourning setts’ as they are also known? Little evidence survives of actual garments made up in funeral tartans, and, as with so many aspects of tartan history, it is shrouded in legend, inaccuracies, and wishful thinking. But what can be declared is that predominantly black, grey, and white variants of multi-coloured tartans were and still are produced, and a number of these have, over time, been designated as mourning variants. The most commonly being black and white variants of Macleod, Menzies, Grey Douglas, and additionally, a number of Stewart mourning setts where the normally brightly coloured red, blue, and yellow tones of Royal Stewart become monochrome.

(Figs. 3 & 4)

These were marketed as suitable to be worn for sombre occasions, and the prevailing morbidity of the era was quickly seized upon by tartan manufacturers keen to capitalise both on Victoria’s very public admiration of tartan and her state of perpetual mourning—a marketing ploy that would have been too good to pass over. The *Scottish Clans and their Tartans* state: ‘It should be borne in mind that many clans have from one to five various tartans such as the common Clan Tartan, the Chiefs Tartan worn by himself and heir, the Dress Tartan, the Hunting Tartan, and Mourning Tartan’⁴.

Just as the growth of mourning practices provided a boost to garment and textile manufacturing in the period, fashion too similarly increased the commercial profitability of tartan manufacturing. For example, what have become known as fancy or fashion tartans, were produced to satisfy the fashionable appetite for novelty, such as dress variants of existing tartans suitable for evening wear and for lighter fabrics such as silks, where the stronger ground colours of traditional tartans were replaced by white.

The historian Murray Pittock, in his publication *Scotland: The Global History. 1603 to the present* writes that ‘mourning tartan developed after the death of Prince Albert in 1861.’⁵

⁴ *The Scottish Clans and Their Tartans* (Edinburgh and London: W. & A.K. Johnston, Ltd, 1931) p.65.

⁵ Pittock, Murray, *Scotland, The Global History: 1603 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) p. 228.

However, evidence shows that mourning tartans were being produced for at least two decades prior to Albert's death, both in Britain and in America.

The material evidence of mourning tartan is limited. There are no known surviving mourning ensembles in museum collections, either for men or women. It is difficult to tell how widespread its use was, and there is no mention of it in Lou Taylor's *Mourning Dress*. Through photography, it is difficult to ascertain what a mourning tartan is, and what an example of a fashionable black and white tartan is. As with other mourning clothing, it can be assumed that the unhappy and unlucky connotations meant that garments were unlikely to be preserved.

We know of its existence and presumed popularity through advertisements in journals and newspapers, such as Walter Gray, Silk Mercer and Draper, located on 121 Union Street, Aberdeen, which appears in an advert in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* from 1846. The advert states that Walter Gray stocks: 'Family Mourning – stock of mourning goods, Mourning Tartan Shawls, great variety. Black and White Tartans, for dresses, Superior Black Prints and Gingham, Black Gimps, new fringes, Crepe, trimmings – ribbon trimmings. Crepe flowers and wreaths.'

This is the earliest advert that has been found in this research, and it correlates with the full range of mourning dresses and accessories available, as seen in the advertisements for Jay's and Peter Robinson's. Walter Gray was listed as a silk draper in 1843, at the same location, alongside similar businesses such as silk mercers, dressmakers, and gentleman's drapery. Gray also appeared in the Aberdeen Post Office Directory, 1864–1865, as a wincey manufacturer, on the same street as saddlers, law stationers, spirit dealers, post horse masters, and smiths.

Another example from John Wight and Co, a tartan manufacturer based in a prime location on Edinburgh's Princes Street, shows the popularity of tartan mourning outerwear in the 1890s and 1900s. The advert displays several options for mourning capes and proclaims that 'our looms are busy with many black and grey checks'. It also advertises a 'reversible cape' – for which there is an advertisement for a non-mourning version, perhaps assuming that you could have both sombre checks, and brighter checks.

London based *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion*, from an edition published in March 1891, advertises Messrs Illingworth & Co of Wool Mills, Alyth, Perthshire. Alyth was a centre for flax, and other woven textiles produced through hand loom weaving. Road and railway improvements connecting Dundee and Alyth boosted, and led to coal powered steam mills in the town producing linen and later jute and wool textiles.

The Mill references the production of 'La Dauphine, a mourning tartan, [...] founded on the royal Stuart but with a black ground in the squares'. 'La Dauphine' can be assumed to be a reference to Mary Stuart, and an indication of the Victorian fascination with the doomed Scottish queen.

Mourning tartans and checks were not limited to Britain, and there are multiple examples of adverts in American newspapers, that are instead referred to as 'mourning plaids'. The

earliest example found appears in the *Republican Monitor*, Missouri, 28 November 1827, which proclaimed that “John Williams has just received from New York a full assortment of Fall and Winter goods embracing a great variety of new and fashionable goods, including ‘mourning plaid and fancy coloured gingham’”, which is advertised alongside other mourning fabrics, including black silks and gros-de-Naples. From this, can it be assumed that they were as popular as other, plainer mourning fabrics?

The adverts for mourning plaids are widespread, appearing in publications from Saramago, Illinois, Savannah, Georgia, Edgefield South Carolina, Haverhill Massachusetts, and beyond America, to Halifax in Canada. There is also an example of a woman wearing supposed mourning plaid, alongside a woman wearing full mourning, from 1860.

The adverts all support the idea presented by Rebecca Mitchell in *Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning* that there was an enjoyment of Victorian women in wearing fashionable mourning dresses.⁶ Although there are no examples found for Jay’s, specifically for mourning tartans, their existence, while tartan hit its peak popularity in the 1840s-1860s, aligns with the idea of the combination of Victorian fashionability with mourning dress.

Mourning dress adverts and the various goods they promoted are often credited with the commodification of mourning by encouraging middle class emulation of the mourning habits of the upper classes and ‘tethering mourning attire to current fashion trends rather than to emotional sobriety’.

Chromophobia

The chromatic substitution of arguably some of the most colourful of world textiles, for sombre black and grey, is a remarkable testament to the power of black. David Batchelor’s concept of ‘chromophobia’, literally a ‘fear of colour’, can help us understand the socio-cultural significance of mourning tartans.

*...colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded...As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia.*⁷

Ostensibly an economically advantageous development, mourning tartans’ sombre palette also signifies more complex narratives that we explored in the Tartan exhibition at V&A

⁶ Mitchell, Rebecca N. “Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2013): 595–620.

⁷ Batchelor, David, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion, 2000) p. 24.

Dundee. Narratives of violence, oppression, and denial, such as Tartan's prohibition following Culloden (popularly known as the 'time of grey'), its association with Jacobite martyrdom, the ferocity of the colonising Highland regiments, and the branded bodies of the Atlantic slave trade, emerge as shadowy narratives of repression that lie amongst Tartan's colourful grids.

By the time Victoria and Albert purchased Balmoral in 1852, the clearances had systematically drained the Highlands of its indigenous cultures, what might be understood as traditional local colour. This eradication, or process of chromophobia, was necessary for a British Victorian vision of Scotland to take its place, epitomised by the Anglo-Germanic tartanised interiors of Balmoral, and the Royal couple's escape into tartan fancy dress. But the contamination of colour is always dangerous, and so Victoria's plunge into colourlessness mourning can also be understood as a necessary act of chromophobia, re-asserting English supremacy, while mourning tartans, although an anomaly in the textile's history, remain none the less a salient manifestation of the suppression of Scottish culture.



Fig. 1

William Bambridge, Queen Victoria in Mourning 1862, Albumen print.

Credit: Robert B. Menschel and the Vital Projects Fund
 Permission: Creative Commons

Fig. 2

The county families of the United Kingdom; or, Royal manual of the titled and untitled aristocracy of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (1860).

Credit: Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center
 Permission: Creative Commons

MOURNING.

JAY'S
LONDON GENERAL MOURNING WAREHOUSE,
247 & 249, REGENT STREET.

The Proprietors of this Establishment, in respectfully addressing themselves to the attention of the Nobility, the Gentry, and the Middle Class, beg leave to receive their thanks for the extraordinary patronage they continue to receive. Every article necessary for a complete outfit of Mourning, either the Family or Household, may be had here, and made up, if required, at the shortest notice; whilst the attendance of competent persons connected with the Establishment upon families of rank, and of every respectable denomination, enables the proprietors to attend to the wishes of their assistants to at once suggest or supply everything necessary for the occasion, and suited to any grade or condition of the family.

SKIRTS, &c.

Widowhood and for Family Mourning, are always kept made up; and a note, descriptive of the relation of the parties to the case, will ensure at any time the proper supply of Mourning being forwarded, both as to quality and distinction, according to the exigencies of the case; it being needless only to send dresses for patterns, when every requisite will be carefully prepared and sent to render the appointments complete.

JAY'S
LONDON GENERAL MOURNING WAREHOUSE,
Nos. 247 & 249, Regent Street, two doors from Oxford Street, London.

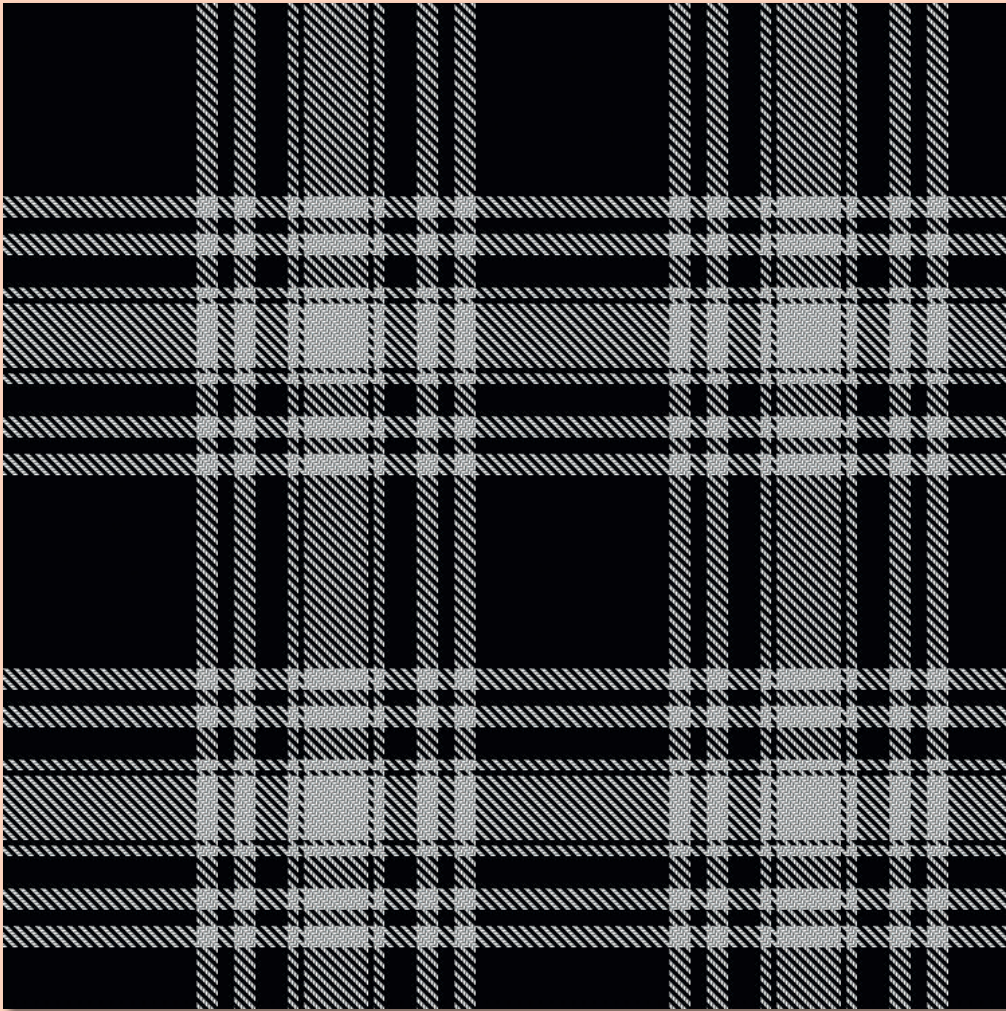


Fig. 3

Menzies tartan (Black & White).
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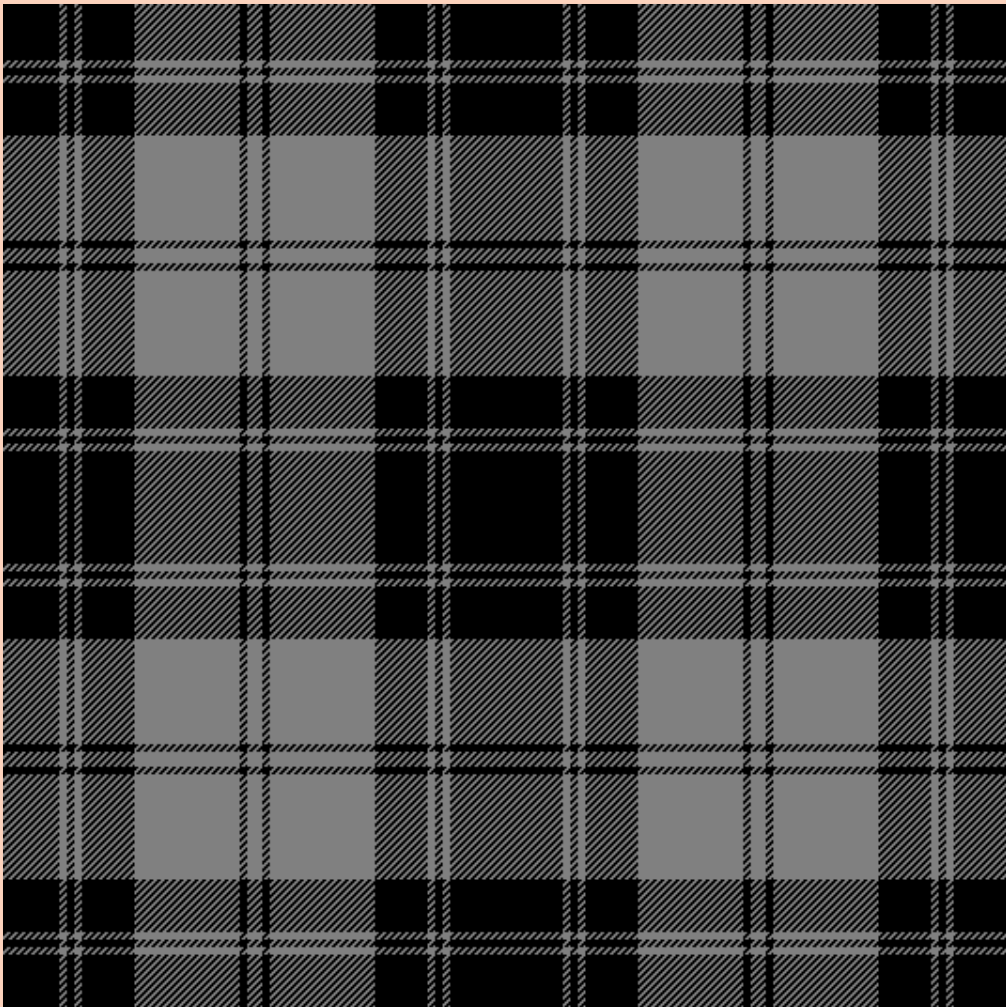


Fig. 4

Grey Douglas tartan.
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