

Poetry as a Source of Knowledge on Historic Dress in a Social, Political, and Economic
Context: The Scottish Highlanders from 1603 through 1830 as an Example
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ABSTRACT

Dress is both an individual and a societal means of communication. Understanding the meaning of dress within a society, culture, and specific time period can aid researchers in understanding the social, political, and economic events and changes that take place in dress. The Scottish Highland dress differed in the 17th and early 18th centuries from that of the Scottish Lowlanders (i.e., people of Scotland below the Highlands) due to differences in culture and geography. Highland dress has been difficult to study because few extant garments exist before the 19th century and most of the records that exist deal with the upper class garments.

The purpose of this research was to determine whether or not poetry (i.e., poems, ballads, and songs) could be used as a source of knowledge on historic dress in a social, political, or economic context, using the dress of Scottish Highlanders from 1603 through 1830 as an example, and to triangulate the findings with other sources that portray dress through the written word or visual image. This research cross-referenced the items of dress with social, political, and economic events that occurred in the lives of the Scottish and Highland people. The main source of documentation for this research was 3,501 Scottish poems written between 1603 and 1830 gathered from 18 anthologies and there were 394 poems with male dress references and 245 poems with female dress references, which was 18% of the poems. A large number (N=1531) of individual dress items were referenced within those poems. The poems were triangulated with 34 letters and 332 portraits from the same time period.

The study of Highland dress in poetry expanded the knowledge base regarding specific items worn by males and females. The majority of the poems and dress references were found in the 18th century. The plaid and the kilt were the focus of poems related to war. The letters and portraits provided new information on dress, as well as providing support for the information gathered in the poems. Triangulation with the letters and portraits validated poetry as a source of Highland dress between 1603 and 1830.