# GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP

## Notes following the Seventeenth Meeting, 18th April 2012

The seventeenth meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Carole Biggam, who acted as master of ceremonies, and to Christian Kay and Carole Hough who organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was Dr Anita Quye, Lecturer in Conservation Science at the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History, University of Glasgow.

### Anita Quye spoke on 'Scotching the Myth of Traditional Tartan Dyes'

Her abstract is as follows:

"All old traditional Scottish tartans are perceived to be muted in colour and believed to be dyed with native flora. A surprising result from scientific dye analysis of an eighteenth-century tartan fragment, carried out by Anita Quye when she was the analytical chemist at the National Museums of Scotland (NMS), has led to a long-term multidisciplinary research project, involving the Scottish textile collections and related archives, in collaboration with Prof. Hugh Cheape (University of the Highlands and Islands) and Dr John Burnett (NMS). From complementary research relating the scientific dye analysis of selected tartans in the collections of the NMS, the West Highland Museum, and the Highland Folk Museum with documented historical evidence for their production, and taking into account historical and cultural aspects, a picture of these emblematic textiles is emerging which differs from the popular idea of parochial practices in a culturally remote society. It is becoming evident that a quality product, typically utilising expensive imported dyes for specific colours, was available even in remote regions of Scotland during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."

Commentary (Carole Biggam):

The research project carried out with Prof. Cheape and Dr Burnett, as described in Anita's abstract above, started with a fragment of tartan plaid said to have belonged to Bonnie Prince Charlie (as are many other artefacts). As work progressed, other tartan fragments were found or donated from locations as far apart as Southampton and Fort William, all associated with the same tradition. In at least two cases, a note was attached to the fragments stating they had belonged to a kilt left by the Prince on 'The Island of Glass' (Eilean Glas?). It was said that the Prince had been given a change of clothes in 1746 when he was in process of leaving Scotland after the Battle of Culloden. The fragments had the same tartan pattern.

The research on these fragments, including the chemical analysis of the dyes, led to a larger project to investigate the colours, colour preferences and colour usage evident on historical Highland dress. The research drew on various sources for information, such as chemical analysis, sample books, songs, poetry, letters, travel accounts and

illustrations. It has long been thought that tartans were dyed from the often muted colours produced from native plants, but Anita's analysis of dyes on quality historical tartans showed that bright colours (especially red) were not only praised in Gaelic literature but were actually obtained and used in the fabrics. Such colours often resulted from imported dyes which appeared to be widely available in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The research team, with the help of the West Highland Museum and the Highland Folk Museum, sought out tartan samples of the period which had good provenances and reasonably secure dates. The tartan-maker, William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn had an archive of samples, plus other evidence such as receipts and letters, and this written information was augmented from the National Archives of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland. The material included some eighteenth-century ladies' shawls, called *arisaids*, which often survived as bedspreads. Anita eventually tested 144 samples, by means of chromatography (which measures the proportions of the components of a chemically prepared sample) and spectrometry (which identifies specific components).

Anita's analysis of her samples identified some exotic substances. For reds: cochineal (from an insect of South America, later farmed in southern Europe); and lac (from an insect of Asia, not naturalized in Europe). For yellows: quercitron bark (from a North American tree); and old fustic (from a Central and South American tree). For green, old fustic was used with imported indigo or woad with various mordants (chemical 'fixers' of the dye in the textile). Mordants can make a considerable colour difference, for example, alum with heather-dye produces an acid yellow. Surprisingly, the dyes commonly found in European dress of the period, such as madder red and the yellow dyes weld and greenweed, were not found on the samples. In fact, none of the native dyes commonly believed today to have been used for tartans were present in Anita's samples, such as the plant called ladies' bedstraw, and cudbear (extracted from lichens) for reds, nor bog myrtle, gorse, silver birch and willow for yellows. Only one yellow sample was dyed with heather. After considerable work on the tartans, Anita found she could often distinguish between insect red and plant red by eye (although she did not rely on this method). This suggests that items of dress could have been recognized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as low-quality or high-quality products.

## News

- Carole Biggam's book, *The Semantics of Colour: a Historical Approach* was recently published by Cambridge University Press. The book aims to provide readers with a general introduction to the linguistic study of colour semantics, and then to suggest how to retrieve information from texts about the colour systems of past societies. Full information can be found at www.cambridge.org/9780521899925 and **the contents list is given at the foot of this page.**
- Members are reminded that the next Progress in Colour Studies conference, PICS12, will take place in the University of Glasgow from the 10th to the 13th July 2012. The web-pages can be reached from the GCSG website at

http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/seminarsandevents/glasgowcolourstudiesgroup/

- If you have suggestions for, or offers of GCSG talks (any format) for the academic year of 2012-13, please contact Carole Biggam at c.p.biggam@btinternet.com

**Contents of *The Semantics of Colour* by C. P. Biggam (for publication details, see under 'News' above)**