

Letter from Colonel Alan Cameron of Erracht to Henry Thorpe, Esq. regarding the abolishing of kilts in Highland regiments, in favour of tartan trews

October 27, 1804  
GLASGOW

Sir, - On my return hither some days ago from Stirling, I received your letter of the 13th inst. (by General Calvert's orders) respecting the propriety of an alteration in the mode of clothing Highland regiments, in reply to which I beg to state, freely and fully, my sentiments upon that subject, without a particle of prejudice in either way, but merely founded upon facts as applicable to these corps - at least as far as I am capable, from thirty years' experience, twenty years of which I have been upon actual service in all climates, with the description of men in question, which, independent of being myself a Highlander, and well knowing all the convenience and inconvenience of our native garb in the field and otherwise, and perhaps, also, aware of the probable source and clashing motives from which the suggestion now under consideration originally arose.

I have to observe progressively, that in the course of the late war several gentlemen proposed to raise Highland regiments, some for general service, but chiefly for home defence; but most of these corps were called from all quarters, and thereby adulterated with every description of men, that rendered them anything but real Highlanders, or even Scotchmen (which is not strictly synonymous), and the colonels themselves being generally unacquainted with the language and habits of Highlanders, while prejudiced in favour of, and accustomed to wear breeches, consequently averse to that free congenial circulation of pure wholesome air (as an exhilarating native bracer) which has hitherto so peculiarly befitted the Highlander for activity, and all the other necessary qualities of a soldier, whether for hardship upon scanty fare, readiness in accoutring, or making forced marches, &c., besides the exclusive advantage, when halted, of drenching his kilt, &c., in the next brook, as well as washing his limbs, and drying both, as it were, by constant fanning, without injury to either, but, on the contrary, feeling clean and comfortable, while the buffoon tartan pantaloons, &c., with all its fringed frippery (as some mongrel Highlanders would have it) sticking wet and dirty to the skin, is not very easily pulled off, and less so to get on again in case of alarm or any other hurry, and all this time absorbing both wet and dirt, followed up by rheumatism and fevers, which ultimately make great havoc in hot and cold climates; while it consists with knowledge, that the Highlander in his native garb always appeared more cleanly, and maintained better health in both climates than those who wore even the thick cloth pantaloons.

Independent of these circumstances, I feel no hesitation in saying, that the proposed alteration must have proceeded from a whimsical idea, more than from the real comfort of the Highland soldier, and a wish to lay aside that national martial garb, the very sight of which has, upon many occasions, struck the enemy with terror and confusion, - and now metamorphose the Highlander from his real characteristic appearance and comfort in an odious incompatible dress, to which it will, in my opinion, be difficult to reconcile him, as a poignant grievance to, and a galling reflection upon, Highland corps, &c., as levelling that martial distinction by which they have been hitherto noticed and respected,

- and from my own experience I feel well founded in saying, that if anything was wanted to aid the rack-renting Highland landlords in destroying that source, which has hitherto proved so fruitful for keeping up Highland corps, it will be that of abolishing their native garb, which His Royal Highness the Commander-in chief and the Adjutant-General may rest assured will prove a complete death-warrant to the recruiting service in that respect. But I sincerely hope His Royal Highness will never acquiesce in so painful and degrading an idea (come from whatever quarter it may) as to strip us of our native garb (admitted hitherto our regimental uniform) and stuff us into a harlequin tartan pantaloon, which, composed of the usual quality that continues, as at present worn, useful and becoming for twelve months, will not endure six weeks fair wear as a pantaloon, and when patched makes a horrible appearance - besides that the necessary quantity to serve decently throughout the year would become extremely expensive, but, above all, take away completely the appearance and conceit of a Highland soldier, in which case I would rather see him stuffed in breeches, and abolish the distinction at once -

I have the honour to be, &c.

Alan CAMERON,  
Colonel 79th or Cameron Highlanders

Note: In 1804 the question of abolishing the kilt seems to have been under the consideration of the military authorities, and a correspondence on the subject took place between the Horse-Guards and Colonel Cameron. In a letter dated "Horse Guards, 13th October 1804," Colonel Cameron was requested to state his "private opinion as to the expediency of abolishing the kilt in Highland regiments, and substituting in lieu thereof the tartan trews." To this Colonel Cameron replied in four sentences! as above