

## History of Kirking of the Tartans

What is The Kirking of the Tartans? Etymologically it simply means: *Kirking*, from the Scottish Gaelic word *kirk* which means church, in this usage means “blessing.” *Tartans* are the traditional plaid emblems of Scottish clans represented in unevenly spaced colored lines and rectangles on woven wool cloth.

Historically, the story is a bit more varied. The popular legend goes as follows:

On July 25, 1745, the young Prince Charles Edward Stewart, “Bonnie Prince Charlie” returned from exile in France and landed at Lochnanaugh in Scotland where he began to enlist the Highland Clans for an unsuccessful attempt to dethrone George II of England and to restore the Scottish throne to the Royal House of Stewart.

Following this defeat, the Act of Proscription — to subdue the vanquished Highlanders — banned the wearing of any sign of the Tartan, forbade any speaking in Gaelic, outlawed Scottish music, dancing, or the playing of the pipes. The Scottish Highlanders subsequently hid pieces of tartan under their clothing and brought them to church for a secret blessing or *kirkin’* at a particular point in the service by the minister.

During the 36 years following the Disarming Act of 1746 when the Hanoverian English government strictly enforced this ban, during the Sunday service Highlanders would touch the hidden cloth when the minister gave the benediction, thus rededicating themselves to God and their Scottish heritage.

A curious wrinkle in this legend is that many people in Scotland don’t know this history about the Kirkin’. It is difficult to find an unbroken line of history tracing the practice back specifically to this origin in the mid-18th century.

A more recent and better documented version of the story is that this began as a Scottish-American custom:

The Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans service was created or “revived” during World War II by Reverend Peter Marshall, perhaps best known by the biographical book and film *A Man Called Peter* — who was originally from southwest Scotland and at one time pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. In 1943 he was the first Chaplain of the U.S. Senate. In order to encourage Scottish-Americans to sign up to fight on behalf of Great Britain, Peter Marshall recreated the Kirkin’ o’ the Tartans ceremony to try to instill pride among Scottish-Americans in their Scottish homeland. The ceremony was at that time held in Presbyterian churches of Scottish heritage across the US. Today, the celebration is not limited to Presbyterian churches, but is found in Episcopalian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and other denominations across the world. Now, in present day celebration, the Highlander patriotism, faithfulness, and strong independence are remembered by the displaying of tartans and public parade of the clans to the sound of the bagpipe.

