



## The Sgian Dubh

The **Sgian Dubh** (pronounced "skee(a)n doo") is a ceremonial dagger (Gaelic *sgian*) worn as part of the modern Scottish Highland dress along with the kilt. It is worn tucked into the hose with only the pommel visible. "Sgian" means knife or dagger, "dubh" means black. Skyclander touched upon 'Dubh' being black in his poem, 'Dubh Water.' Also there is in Celtic Mythology there is the black natured God "Dubh". There is discussion about the meaning of black in this connotation. The word Dubh, (black) comes from the usual color of the handle of the little knife, but the great majority of pundits believe that it means secret, or hidden, as in 'hidden away'. Also, some give credence to the story that because it was secreted away, - it was a dark weapon, others use the term "dubh" or black as in 'blackmail'.

Another theory suggests that the Sgian dubh evolved from the *sgian achlais* (ochles), the "armpit dagger" mentioned in connection with the Scots in the 17th and 18th century. This was a knife slightly larger than the *sgian dubh* and was carried in the upper sleeve of the jacket and drawn from the inside through the armhole, and sometimes even in the lining of the body of the jacket, under the left arm. If one were left handed of course, the whole process was reversed.

Courtesy of the times required than when entering the home of a friend or casual acquaintance, no weapons could remain concealed. Some say that when the armpit dagger was removed, the top of the men's hose was a convenient place to display it, (securely held by the garter (or flashes). Displaying it thus, showed the Scot had no dark intentions at the gathering.

Another theory is that the *sgian dubh* evolved from the small skinning knife that was a part of the typical set of Gralloch (or hunting) knives. Some of these do exist. They include a butchering knife with a blade of nine or ten inches and a skinning knife with a blade of only three to four inches. The Gralloch knives usually have antler handles, and do not fit the term black in either carry or color. There are still today, *Sgian Dubh* made with antler horn handles. This theory does have two facts in its favor: (1) Many early *sgian dubhs* are fitted with antler or horn handles, and (2) the skinning and butchering of wild game after the successful hunt was a duty of the upper class hunter's *ghillie*, literally "boy" in Gaelic. The well-to-do huntsman would not stoop to do such work. The attitude of officers in the military regiments suggest they resisted carrying of *sgian dubhs*, as they were initially considered fit only for "ghillies and serving rascals." The lower -- medium class clansmen had no such qualms as they did their own butchering and skinning and never depended on *ghillies* or servants.

When the *sgian dubh* first began to be worn full time in the stocking top, it is shown in oil paintings of the early to mid 1800's. Most nobility had their pictures painted in full dress and show the *sgian dubh*. In these paintings, around 1805 - 1812 the nobility and the Chieftains both had *sgian dubh* in their stockings and were easily seen in the paintings because of the kilts. There is a portrait in the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland showing the 15th Chief of

MacDonells of Glengarry, wearing what appears to be a sheath that holds two nested knives. The National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland has a similar sgian dubh in its collection.

Colonel MacDonell was the last of the great clan chiefs, in the sense that he always dressed in Highland attire, and never went anywhere without his suite of attendants. He was the inventor of the Glengarry bonnet, and became notorious for killing the famous Flora MacDonald's grandson in a duel, and for spending his clan into poverty. He was acquainted, perhaps friends with Sir Walter Scott, and was the model for the character Fergus MacIvor in Scott's novel "Waverly.\*" In Waverly there is a passage dealing with the sgian achlais. That little knife was not fully accepted by the upper classes is hinted at by the fact it is not worn by "that wee German Laddie," King George IV, when he was painted in full Highland regalia during his "jaunt" to Scotland in 1822. However by the 1850s' the sgian dubh was universally worn.

The early sgian dubhs were often crudely made by local Scottish smiths, with antler horn handles and were mounted in brass, with a simple leather sheath. They were longer than today's sgian dubh, by an inch or so. The handles were full round, with little consideration given to how the knife would fit the anatomy of the wearer. As time went by the sgian dubh was accepted as a full partner to the dirk; it then began to be decorated in the same way as the dirk, and frequently made to match each other, sometimes made 'en suite' with it, and kept in the same fitted wooden case with its larger companion.

At this time, they were made, like the dirk, with carved ebony and occasionally, ivory handles. The carving was normally of the simple basket weave pattern that had become popular on the dirk, with silver pins at the corners of the carved panels. The handles were almost invariably black, flattened to lay against the leg, and some had the owner's crest or coat of arms mounted on them. Some had caringorns in the topmost point of the handle. Also some were black handle, Celtic carved, decorative motif. Military sgian dubhs frequently had some form of the regimental insignia on them. Rarely were the handles carved with the earlier style of Celtic knot work that had been popular on the dirk in the sixteen or seventeen hundreds, only when custom made 'en suite' with a dirk with that early style carving. The pommels held mounts and stones to match the dirk, and the occasional matching sporran and plaid\* brooch.

The earlier blades frequently had a clipped point, a style that is now associated with the bowie knife. Some had scalloped filework on the back of the blade that is common on all Scottish knives. As time proceeded, the blades were shortened slightly. The shape was altered to a spear point, and filework became universal. At least one sgian dubh is known that had a solid silver blade, useless for most chores due to it's softness. Strictly for show. Some regimental sgian dubhs had blades etched with regimental symbols.

The early leather sheath, like those on the early dirks, evolved into highly decorated pieces of art. Reinforced with wood and fitted with silver throats and tips, pierced and engraved. While this makes for great bragging rights, there was no practical purpose, as the sheath is hidden in the stocking while the sgian dubh is worn.

Victoria became Queen of England in 1837, and the Scottish romantic period began. She had Balmoral Castle in the Highlands renovated with many changes including tartan carpets, tartan covered furniture, tartan cloths everywhere. Lavish dirks and sgian dubhs reached their peak around the end of her reign in 1901, and continued until World War I, which ended that romantic period. However, her influence on the dress and the Clans of the Highlanders was immense. She brought Highland dress and weaponry into fashion in the Lowlands, where it had always been looked down on as the "strange Highland Dress". After Victoria arrived, every noble and

large castle or mansion owner got his very own tartan and had made for his family; the "strange Highland dress" he so despised prior to Victoria. Victoria made it the fashionable thing to do. Sgian dubhs found themselves buried in the mud of the Somme and Neuve Chapelle. After the war the gaudy military dirks and sgian dubhs were largely gone, but the flamboyant period saw some very extravagant civilian sets made. One set, made in 1925 for the Prince of Wales and now in the Tower of London Royal Armories, was auctioned in 1987 for \$403,333.

On the other hand, the tradition of the antler handled dirk and sgian dubh returned in the 1800s. Usually mounted in brass, they were and still are, worn for informal day wear. Most have some type of brass or silver pommel decoration, and some have stones mounted.

Over time, legends have grown around the sgian dubh. One is that the stone mounted in its pommel is carefully weighed and placed to properly balance the knife for throwing..... ridiculous, to anyone who has ever thrown a knife. It was 'not' a throwing knife, it is a stabbing knife. Another; - that like the dirk and the Gurkha Kukri; the sgian dubh is never to be drawn for trival or mundane purposes and must taste blood before it can re-sheathed, even if the user must nick his own finger...not true, but it makes an excellent tale.

In the Victorian age one piece dirks and sgian dubhs were made for young boys who couldn't be trusted with a real knife. Considering the recent laws passed in Britain against carrying knives, this may be the only way a Scot can support an honored tradition. The other alternative might be what was done by some members of kilted regiments - having the image of a sgian dubh tattooed on the leg.

For Band purposes, sgian dubhs (if worn) will be clean and polished, worn tucked inside the hose on the right leg, centered in the front-right quarter of the leg with only the handle showing. The scabbard will be completely concealed by the hose. The sgian dubh is option dress and prohibited at some games and events.