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Best tartan

By BRIAN WILTON

WITH thousands of tartans around the globe, the choice of five must at best be a very eclectic mix. Tartan means many things to those who wear it, but these five symbolise the diverse attractions and universality of this ancient Celtic art form.

1 LERMONTOV

This Russian family tartan typifies the adventurous, high-achieving Scots who left home in search of fame and fortune, and left Russia a proud legacy of over 450 surnames from Scottish mercenaries and entrepreneurs who settled there. George Lermont was one such early adventurer who left Fife in 1613 to fight for Tsar Mikhail Romanov and founded the famous Lermontov dynasty. The Lermontov tartan was designed in Scotland and was, this year, presented in Moscow to the Lermontov Family Association.

2 FIREFIGHTERS' MEMORIAL

In view of our own recent British fire disaster, this is a very appropriate new design from the United States to "salute firefighters everywhere in the world, who are ready to sacrifice their lives every day for the protection of others". Incorporated into this design is red for fire and the fire engines and black in remembrance of those who have fallen in the line of duty. A poignant touch are three red lines made up of three threads, four and three - 343 - the number of firefighters who lost their lives on 9/11.

3 BALMORAL

This unusual and distinctive tartan was designed in 1853 by Queen Victoria's Consort, Prince Albert, and takes us back to the great Victorian love affair with Scotland and its Highland inhabitants. Still worn today by the Royals, it is also a reminder of that other great love affair between Victoria and Albert. Their love of Scotland and its Highland dress was the accolade that set tartan on the road to its global popularity.

4 BLACK WATCH

Early records show this was the tartan appointed for the Highland Companies in 1725 and later for the Black Watch in 1739. It represents the world of the Scottish Regiments - fiercely heroic fighting men who have inspired friends and terrified enemies over centuries. Their exploits are the bedrock of military history and one of the most well-known military orders was said to have been given at the siege of Lucknow in 1857-8 by Sir Colin Campbell: "Bring forrit the tartan. Let my ain lads at 'em!" The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders that day won six Victoria Crosses before breakfast.

5 MACBEAN

From 19th-century India to 20th-century space travel, the MacBean tartan admirably demonstrates the uniqueness of tartan - the only fabric design in or out of this world that "flutters" in the space breeze of the moon's Ocean of Storms. Taken there in 1969 by Commander Alan Bean, Apollo 12's lunar module pilot, it highlights in dramatic fashion the great emotional niche occupied by Scotland's national icon of tartan.

Brian Wilton is an author, tartan designer and director of the Scottish Tartans Authority.


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