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A bonny time to be Scottish

First Robbie Burns, now Tartan Day, thanks to work of N.S. woman

By [KELLY SHIERS](#) Staff Reporter

When Scots around the world don traditional tartans and brogues to celebrate Tartan Day each April, they have Nova Scotia's Jean Watson to thank for two things.

The first is that Tartan Day exists at all and the second is that it's not held in a cold winter month, when even the hardiest would be left shivering in their kilts.

Affectionately known as the "Mother of Tartan Day," Mrs. Watson persuaded MLAs to proclaim Tartan Day in Nova Scotia in 1986 and then successfully lobbied every other provincial legislature to mark April 6 as the day to celebrate Scottish culture, history and heroes.

Twenty years later, Tartan Day is a worldwide phenomenon, along with Robbie Burns Day, which is being celebrated today.

Tartan Day has spread to the U.S. and places as far away as Australia and New Zealand and even back to Scotland, where Mrs. Watson's efforts are well-known.

New York City, for instance, celebrates a week of activities capped off by a huge parade.

"The thing is, it's Jean Watson who pretty well single-handedly stickhandled through this whole concept of Tartan Day," said David Hunter, president of the Scottish Studies Foundation, a charity designed to further education on Scottish heritage in Canada.

The Scottish Studies Society, which raises money for the foundation, has named Mrs. Watson this year's Scot of the Year, an award that will be given to her at a special dinner April 18 in Toronto.

"In this day and age of committees, corporations and bureaucracy, it's kind of nice to know that a dedicated individual who acts alone can make something positive happen, isn't it?."

On Wednesday, the Lower Sackville woman recalled that she was the only volunteer in 1986 when the Federation of Scottish Clans of Nova Scotia asked for a committee to take on the task of getting Tartan Day officially proclaimed here.

"I seconded the motion that we should do it and when the president called for people to go on a committee, mine was the only hand up waving around," Mrs. Watson laughed. "So I got stuck on a one-person committee for 10 years."

Mrs. Watson said one of her first jobs was to recommend a date for Tartan Day.

"Actually, I was told that I was to find a date that would start off the Scottish events for the year, and yet a date that it wasn't too cold for the wearing of the kilts," she said.

After poring over significant dates in Scottish history and getting some advice, the federation approved April 6 as Tartan Day, the date of the Scottish Declaration of Independence in 1320, also known as the Declaration of Arbroath.

By 2003, every province had proclaimed April 6 as Tartan Day.

Mrs. Watson said she is amazed at how the idea has caught on around the world. Three years ago, she was lauded with the Flora Macdonald Award at the St. Andrews Presbyterian College in North Carolina for her work.

She's just as amazed by the Scottish Studies Society's decision to name her Scot of the Year, an award that honours people with Scottish connections who have achieved distinction through their contributions to Canadian society or the



Jean Watson of Lower Sackville has been honoured as Scot of the Year for creating Tartan Day, a worldwide celebration of Scottish culture. (Eric Wynne / Staff)

international community.

"I can't ever remember not looking up Scottish history. I think it's in the blood."

Her goal now is to have April 6 recognized on calendars, the same way St. Patrick's Day and other special cultural days are marked. She'd also like to see the federal government recognize Tartan Day.

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