

The Scots-Irish by James H. Lynn

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The Scots-Irish or Scotch-Irish are descendants of the largely lowland, Presbyterian Scots who emigrated to the Province of Ulster in Ireland during the 17th century and whose progeny began to migrate in large numbers to America early in the 18th century.

The American expression, "Scotch-Irish", was used in America as early as 1695, often pejoratively, but it was not until the latter part of the 19th century that the expression came into common use in the United States. The expression was used by descendants of the 18th century Protestant immigrants from Ulster to distinguish themselves from the massive number of Roman Catholic Irish who migrated to the United States as a result of the great famine in Ireland in the 1840s.

Some linguistic purists prefer the expression "Scots-Irish" because Scotch is a drink, but "Scotch-Irish" is the term that became commonplace in the United States and by which descendants have described themselves. Descendants of the Scots still living in Ulster would generally be considered as "Ulster Scots".

Writers about the Scotch-Irish up to the first half of the 20th century tended to be uncritically maudlin in their praise of these people, reiterating and elaborating the view of the Scotch-Irish as rugged, individualistic, freedom-loving frontiersmen largely responsible for building the American nation. The Congresses of the Scotch-Irish Society of America from 1889 to 1901 in particular glorified these people and attempted to define them as a unique and distinct "race".

The literature of recent decades, particularly following the publication in 1962 of James G. Leyburn's book, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*, has generally been more searching and critical, although some writers continue to unreservedly reiterate the historical stereotype of the Scotch-Irish. Perhaps the most popular recent book is *God's Frontiersmen: The Scots-Irish Epic*, which was written by Rory Fitzpatrick in conjunction with an Ulster Television series that he produced.

Some writers have sought to deny that there was a unique ethno-cultural group who came to be known as the Scotch-Irish.

However, these efforts have not struck down the widely held view that, while they certainly did not constitute a distinct "race", the Scotch-Irish, particularly during their heroic period on the Colonial American frontier, were a unique social group. Their inherited character traits, combined with the environment and circumstances that they confronted on the frontier, and their resulting exploits, provided much genuine fodder for the construction of the stereotypical view.

The 17th century migration to Ulster also included English, Welsh, German Palatines and French Huguenots. The latter in particular shared a Calvinistic religious heritage with the Scottish Lowlanders. Some were of other religious persuasions.

And, despite what some people on either side of the great Irish divide would like to believe, there was intermarriage between the 16th century immigrants and their descendants, and the longer established Irish. But the substantive core of this body of people was lowland Presbyterian Scots.

Migration to Ireland:

Why did these people migrate from Scotland to Ulster?

Quite simply, they were caught up in one of the attempts by England to bring Ireland under control by encouraging the settlement of Protestants who would be loyal to the Crown.

An opportunity to initiate a major settlement program in Ulster came during the first decade of the 17th century when the last major leaders of resistance to the English, the earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnel, after much harassment, fled to Europe and were declared to be traitors.

In what became known as the “Plantation of Ulster”, King James I of England (King James VI of Scotland) allotted the temporal lands in the six forfeited counties to undertakers. The six forfeited counties were Armagh, Cavan, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Donegal and Coleraine, which was renamed Londonderry. In return, the undertakers were to bring in loyal Protestant settlers from England and Scotland.

The lowlands of Scotland, being geographically close and in economic distress at the time, became the source of some 30 or 40 thousand settlers, between 1608 and 1618. More migrated throughout the 1600s, particularly during the persecution of the Presbyterian Covenanters in Scotland, and after the defeat of King James II by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

Counties Antrim and Down were not part of the formal Plantation of Ulster. Lowland Scots began settling in these counties a few years earlier, largely through the efforts of two Scottish entrepreneurs from Ayrshire, Hugh Montgomery and James Hamilton. Land holding in County Monaghan had been anglicized in the 1790s, and since the Irish lords and freeholders in the county were not involved in the Flight of the Earls, their lands were not confiscated.

The migration into Ulster waxed and waned throughout the 17th century in response to economic, political and religious circumstances. A number of changes worked together to create a pool of farmers anxious to improve their economic circumstances by settling in Ulster—an expanding population, rising rents, poor harvests and changes in landholding arrangements in Scotland.

Religion became a more significant factor later in the century when James II, a Roman Catholic, assumed the throne, and when Charles II reneged on his promise to uphold the Scottish Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. Thousands of Presbyterian Covenanters fled to Ulster, particularly during the “killing times” of the 1680s. This, along with the Irish uprising of 1641, certainly contributed to the “siege mentality” that is often ascribed to this day to the Ulster Protestants.

While many may not have been practicing Presbyterians when they migrated, their need to band together and the persecution of Dissenters no doubt contributed to their adhering to the conservative, evangelical, Bible-based Presbyterianism that evolved in Ulster.

Where did the Ulster settlers come from in Scotland?

The migrants were heavily concentrated on the southwest coast of the Scottish lowlands. Another concentration was along the Border with England where the Scottish and English border reivers had feuded for generations. Some came from around Glasgow and Sterling. Others came from Argyllshire, but only a handful came from the Highlands.

Where did they settle in Ulster?

The heaviest concentration was in the northern part of County Down, and throughout County Antrim with the exception of the northeast corner which had been settled by Scottish Highland Roman Catholic mercenaries (the galloglasses) in an earlier period. There were also settlements through mid-Armagh, to the east of Londonderry over to Coleraine, and down the border of Donegal and Tyrone, in east Tyrone to Lock Neagh, and in Fermanagh and Cavan.

Many of the Scottish Borderers settled in Fermanagh and Tyrone, as far away as possible from their ancestral lands. The impact of the Scottish Borderers on the stereotypical view of the Scotch-Irish has probably been greater than their numbers would warrant. Generations of Borderers had grown accustomed to fighting, and their culture included the composition of ballads and stories about their life and strife on the borders—all good material for constructing a heroic view of a people.

The impact of the migration to Ulster was the creation of a tightly knit pool of folk with a particular set of characteristics. They were hardened by conflict.

The Irish rebellion of 1641, including the siege of Londonderry, and the persecution of the Scottish Borderers and Covenanters played large in their historical mindset. They had left the feudal system of Scotland for a more individualistic way of life.

They became commercially aware because of their extensive involvement in Ulster in the linen industry—producing, processing and marketing. Their intellectual leaders were tied into the social and political philosophies about individual rights and forms of government that emerged from the Scottish Enlightenment.

They shared the Scots belief in the importance of education and eventually they were relatively well educated. They were wary of rulers and particularly the ecclesiastical form of church government. Perhaps most important, they shared the brand of conservative, evangelical, covenanting Presbyterianism that evolved in Ulster.

Migration to America:

In the early 1700s, many of these people began migrating from Ulster to British America for a number of reasons, the relative importance of which would vary with economic circumstances and the political situation in the British Isles. Perhaps a quarter of a million people, many as indentured servants, but often as families and even whole Presbyterian congregations, had migrated by the onset of the American Revolution.

Traditionally, political and religious discrimination against dissenting Protestants was cited as the primary cause of migration of the Ulster Scots to America and these factors became an important part of the folklore surrounding the migration to America.

However, recent writers generally consider that economic factors were more important than religious or political factors in the decision to migrate. These economic factors included periodic crop failures, increasing rents, decreasing terms of leases, rapid population growth and a decline in the demand for Ulster's major exports of linen, cattle and whiskey. Of particular importance was the fact that small Ulster farmers had become deeply involved in the growing of flax and the weaving of linen during the first half of the 18th century, and during the latter part of the great migration period there was a depression in the linen industry. The growing industrialization of the linen industry was making the small farmer/weaver family group uneconomic.

It is also widely recognized that many were encouraged to emigrate by relatives and friends who had previously settled in America, and who reported back to Ulster about the opportunities in America. Glowing letters about the availability of land and living conditions in America, and sometimes money, were sent back to the old country.

Emigration was promoted at local fairs and through newspaper advertisements by migration agents and by ship owners anxious to secure passengers for the return trip to America after delivering cargoes of flaxseed to Ireland.

What was the pattern of settlement of the Ulster Scots in America?

There were pre-1800 settlements in New England and New York, as indicated by place names such as Belfast and Bangor, (in Maine), Londonderry, New Hampshire, and Ulster and Orange Counties, (New York).

Many early migrants arrived at the ports at the mouth of the Delaware River and settled in western Maryland, New Jersey and what is now Delaware.

When Philadelphia became the main port of debarkation, Pennsylvania became the core settlement area of the Scotch-Irish, endowed as it was with religious toleration, rich lands and opportunities. While often squabbling with the Quakers and the Germans, the Scotch-Irish spread out over much of the state, across the Susquehanna River and down the Cumberland Valley, and over the Alleghenies to southwest Pennsylvania. Ulster place names abound in southern Pennsylvania.

They moved down the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, into Georgia and Tennessee and into the hills of Appalachia, and the piedmont area of the Carolinas. Scotch-Irish settlements could be found down the whole length of the Great Wagon Road extending 700 miles from Philadelphia to Augusta, Georgia.

On the Pennsylvania, Virginia and Carolina frontiers, it is claimed that the Scotch-Irish became clannish, assertive, aggressive in espousing the rights of individuals, and adept at fighting native Americans, and the stereotypical view of the Scotch-Irish developed.

Their experience in Ulster may have helped nurture these characteristics, but the American frontier was quite different, and development of such characteristics was, quite simply, essential to survival.

While obviously not the only ethnic or cultural group on the frontier, the Scotch-Irish were expected, and actively recruited by Colonial authorities, to settle and defend the back country and frontier areas. The Scotch-Irish bore the brunt of the dreadful conflicts with the native America Indians during the Seven Years War and Pontiac's War, and they became just as cunning and merciless as their foes.

Their involvement in the American Revolution also contributed to the heroic image of the Scotch-Irish.

Scotch-Irish formed the core of the Pennsylvania line of Washington's army. Scotch-Irish "overmountain men" were instrumental in significant Patriot victories in the south, particularly at King's Mountain in South Carolina, which is generally considered to be one of the major turning points of the conflict.

But the Scotch-Irish were not, as some apologists would like to believe, 100% patriots. For various reasons, some more recent migrants remained loyal, and there were Scotch-Irish on both sides throughout the Colonies and particularly in some of the nasty, vicious raiding and pillaging in the South.

The Scotch-Irish became involved in American politics and many descendants point with pride to the considerable number of American Presidents with Scotch-Irish blood.

Scholars claim that they can find traces of the Scotch-Irish in the speech and music of Appalachia. Many claim that American country and western music has its roots in the music

brought over by the Ulster Scots. On a mundane level, Appalachian moonshine has been attributed to the ingenuity of the Scotch-Irish.

The heroic period of Scotch-Irish migration in pre-Revolution Colonial America is the focus of the stereotypical view. However, migration from Ulster to the United States continued after the Revolution with perhaps another 100,000 leaving before the War of 1812 brought about restrictions on emigration. By this time, many Scotch-Irish were settling in major cities such as Pittsburgh.

The most intense migration from Ulster took place after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 until the famine in the late 1840s, when it is estimated that half a million emigrated from Ulster to America. The dense population over all of Ireland was putting great pressure on land prices and reducing the size of tenant land holdings. The serious decline in grain prices following the end of the Napoleonic Wars dramatically aggravated the situation.

Much of the migration from Ireland after 1815 was to ports in British North America although many moved on to the United States.

Many descendants of the early Scotch-Irish settlers remained secluded in the mountains of southern Appalachia. Others continued to migrate and move into the mid-west as it was opened. Many of the early settlers in Ohio, Illinois and Indiana were of Scotch-Irish descent. Scotch-Irish were also in the vanguard of the settlement of the far west. However, during the 19th century, the Scotch-Irish were gradually losing their identity as a distinct group as they merged with other major ethnic groups, particularly the English and to a lesser extent the Germans, to create what might be termed the quintessential American.

Migration to Canada:

In Nova Scotia, there was a third migration of the Ulster Scots, from New England to areas around the Minas Basin at the end of the Bay of Fundy, such as Truro, Nova Scotia where Scotch-Irish families from Londonderry, New Hampshire settled. This migration took place after the expulsion of the Acadians and before the American Revolution.

Family, church and community were vital to the lifestyle of these migrants and they were interested in developing social communities based on farming, linen production and basic trades. They do not at all sound like the heroic Scotch-Irish of the American frontier, no doubt because they faced a totally different set of circumstances.

There were also Ulster Scots among the United Empire Loyalists, but Ulster Scots did not begin emigrating directly to Canada or what was then British North America in significant numbers until after the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815.

They migrated primarily to Upper Canada (what is now Ontario) because of the British connection and the fact that many ships, returning to Quebec after discharging their cargoes of lumber, wanted passengers for the return trip.

By the time Ulster Scots began migrating to Canada, the Orange Order had been founded and many of the Ulster immigrants to Canada were staunch Orangemen. The antagonism between the two distinctly different cultural groups in Ireland was carried over to Canada.

Catharine Anne Wilson has written an excellent book on the group and chain migration of some 105 Ulster Scot families from the Ards Peninsula of County Down to Amherst Island, near Kingston during the 19th century. Her study concludes that these emigrants, who had remained in Ireland for roughly a century more than the classic Scotch-Irish migrants to the American frontier, were quite different from their distant cousins, taking a more cautious, rational and family-based approach to the migration process.

Legacy of the Scotch-Irish:

Some scholars attempt to identify a lasting legacy of the Scotch-Irish in the material culture of the United States. However, traces of a more lasting legacy may perhaps be found in the non-material culture—in the language and music of Appalachia, in the belief in the importance of the family farm, individualism, and public education—all features that one can detect in the typical mid-west American.

But the chief legacy of the Scotch-Irish was their religion.

The brand of evangelical Presbyterianism that developed in Ulster was unique due to the circumstances that the Scottish settlers faced in Ulster. Ulster Presbyterianism was strongly influenced by the conjunction of basic tenets of Calvinism, such as the abstruse theological concept of predestination and the concept of a covenant between God and his chosen people.

Professor Michael Maxwell of McGill University, speaking to the BIFHSGO Conference in 1996, concluded that it was the ideas of immigrants that left the deepest impressions on the cultures in which they settled. In his view, the concept of the covenant was a fundamental feature of the Ulster-Scot mindset explaining the: “paradox of the tendency for parts of the Protestant population in Ulster to combine strong expressions of loyalty to the state with an equally strong tendency to defy authority.”

He wondered if such a mindset could be found today among descendants of the Ulster-Scots.

In colonial America, many Scotch-Irish left the Presbyterian Church, often because of the difficulty of getting properly trained and educated ministers on the frontier, a requirement about which other denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists were more relaxed. Nevertheless, some legacy of Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism, albeit in a transformed way, no

doubt lingers in the fervent religious evangelism and revivalism found in the “Bible Belt”, an area where many of the Scotch-Irish settled.

The people who became known as the Scotch-Irish developed a particular set of characteristics during their experiences in Scotland and Ulster. These characteristics, combined with the circumstances into which they were thrust on the American frontier, led to their becoming a quite distinctive and significant group of people, for a specific period of time, in a particular place. In other places, at other points in time, and under different circumstances, their story is not as dramatic.

- For the latest word in the debate over “Scotch-Irish” versus “Scots-Irish”, see Michael Montgomery, “Eighteenth-Century Nomenclature for Ulster Emigrants”, *The Journal of Scotch-Irish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 2001) pp. 1-6.
- *Proceedings of the Scotch-Irish Congress*, published by order of the Scotch-Irish Society of America, Robert Clarke and Co. 1889, 10 volumes, 1889-1896, 1900-1901. For an interesting review and analysis of these proceedings pointing out the dilemma of reconciling the traits of the Scotch-Irish who had become very successful with those who had remained in some of the more backward regions of Appalachia, see Matthew McKee, “‘A Peculiar and Royal Race’: Creating a Scotch-Irish Identity, 1889-1901” in *Atlantic Crossroads: Historical Connections Between Scotland, Ulster and North America*, edited by Patrick Fitzgerald and Steve Ickringill. Newtownards, County Down, Colourpoint Books, 2001, pp. 67-83.
- James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*, Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 1962. Rory Fitzpatrick, *God’s Frontiersmen: The Scots-Irish Epic*, London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1989.
- See the chart on page 32 of Raymond Gillespie, *Colonial Ulster: The Settlement of East Ulster, 1600 to 1641*. The location of the migrants is based on the location in Scotland of surnames found in Ulster muster rolls around 1630.
- See the chart on page 21 in Fitzpatrick op. cit.
- See the “New Introduction” by G. E. Kirkham to the 1988 reissue of *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775* by R. J. Dickson, Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1988.
- See the chart on pages 110-110 in Fitzpatrick, op. cit.
- A recent pamphlet issued by The Ulster-Scots Agency entitled “Ulster-Scots & United States Presidents” identifies some degree of Ulster-Scot ancestry in 17 of the 43 presidents to date. See the website of The Ulster-Scots Agency at <http://www.ulsterscotsagency.com/> (accessed 4 April 2003).

- Robert McCrum, William Cran, Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, pp. 152-161.
- Alan Crozier, "The Scotch-Irish Influence on American English", *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (winter, 1984) pp. 310-331.
- Joseph Earl Dabney, *Mountain Spirits: A Chronicle of Corn Whiskey from King James' Ulster Plantation to America's Appalachians and the Moonshine Life*, Lakemont, Georgia: Copple Houe Books, 1974.
- Carol Campbell, "A Scots-Irish Plantation in Nova Scotia: Truro, 1760-1775" in *Making Adjustments: Change and Continuity in Planter Nova Scotia 1759-1800*, Edited by Margaret Conrad, Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1991, pp. 153-164.
- Catherine Anne Wilson, *A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada*, Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1994. For a shorter version of her work, see Catherine Anne Wilson, "The Scotch-Irish and Immigrant Culture on Amherst Island, Ontario", in *Ulster and North America: Transatlantic Perspectives on the Scotch-Irish*, edited by H. Tyler Blethen and Curtis W. Wood, Jr, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997. A study of the settlement of Ulster-Scots in Mono Township in Dufferin County, Ontario describes them as individualistic and materialistic.
- See R. Cole Harris, Pauline Roulson and Chris De Freitas, "The Settlement of Mono Township", *The Canadian Geographer*, vol. XIX, no. 1 (spring, 1975) pp. 1-17.
- Donald Harmon Akenson, *God's Peoples, Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), Ch. 4: "The Covenantal Culture of the Ulster-Scots to 1920" for a description of the concept of the covenant and how it became part of the Ulster-Scot mindset.
- Michael Maxwell, "Scottish Migration to Ireland During the Early Modern Period, 1603-1720", *Anglo-Celtic Annals: Proceedings of the BIFHSGO Conference, 1996*.

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