

The immigrants to America in the eighteenth century commonly called the "Scotch-Irish" were a people from Ulster, Ireland who were descended from Scottish lowland stock. They had unique experiences first settling the Ulster province and then colonial America, which shaped their character into a hardy, industrious people. The Scotch-Irish had a profound influence on American politics, religion, and culture at the time when the country was growing its all-important roots. Americans ought to recognize their indelible mark in such foundational events as the Great Awakening, the American Revolution, the Indian Wars, and the ratification of the Constitution. Far from clinging to their old-world heritage, the Scotch-Irish intermingled with the other races and cultures in America in a few generations to become simply quintessential Americans¹. By their recognizable accomplishments and early patriotism the Scotch-Irish added a foundational element to the American melting pot, which later groups melted into.

Americans throughout history have commonly regarded the Scotch-Irish as a fundamental element in the development of their national character and institutions. Henry J. Ford says, "...there is an appreciation of the

¹Wayland F. Dunaway, Scotch-Irish of Colonial Pennsylvania, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1962), 6.

Ulster contribution to American nationality².” Amid modern scholarship that questions the very existence of an American identity, it is an important study to see whether the facts of history validate the old impression that the Scotch-Irish contributed to what most Americans regard as their “national identity.” After researching past events, the evidence affirms the critical role that the Scotch-Irish had in America’s critical period of early development and its effect on subsequent generations.

Although this people preferred to regard themselves simply as Scots, English colonists in America commonly saw them as Irish. The term “Scotch-Irish” later emerged in the nineteenth century to distinguish these early settlers from the scores of Irish Catholics then landing on the east coast. Collective experiences from the “Plantation” of Scottish lowlanders in the Ulster province shaped their character, creating the Scotch-Irish people who later immigrated to America. This first immigration to Ireland prepared the Scotch-Irish for another, and gave them particular ideas on settlement that they would later retain when settling an even wilder shore.

² Henry J. Ford, The Scotch-Irish in America, (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1915), v.

Under the reign of the Stuarts in England in the seventeenth century the Irish Ulster province became a stronghold of transplanted Protestants³. The English and Scots who settled in Northern Ireland received the fertile farmlands while the native Irish lived in the more mountainous regions of the province. This was a part of the crown's strategy to gain a stronghold of loyal subjects in Ireland. King James I granted landholdings in Northern Ireland to Scottish lords or lairds, whom he instructed to hire only lowland Scottish or English tenants⁴. Farming in Northern Ireland was a rough undertaking, and much of the land had experienced little agriculture. The Scottish landowners in Ireland were constantly wary of an uprising by the native Irish, whom they regarded as so many poor uncivilized barbarians. This foreshadowed the way the Scotch-Irish would view the Indians in America. Their experience in creating a new life in Ireland among a strange, hostile people prepared them well for later transplantation in the New World. The Scots were particularly better suited to this rugged lifestyle than the English, who had enjoyed a more comfortable and

³R. J. Dickson, Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 2.

⁴James G. Leyburn, The Scotch-Irish, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 89.

affluent lifestyle in England. Experience in taming an apparently wild country prepared the Scotch-Irish for later experiences. Indeed, the problems they had with the Irish parallel nicely with the struggles that the Scotch-Irish would later have in America with the Indians.

As the seventeenth century progressed the province took on more of a Scottish character due to economic and religious considerations in Scotland, when the Church of England persecuted Scottish Presbyterians⁵. Some of the same economic and religious reasons that inspired the first migration would later induce thousands of Scotch-Irish to quit the Emerald Isle to make a home across the ocean in the New World. The immigrations to Ireland created a tradition and mindset of emigration in the Scotch-Irish. The emigration of British Protestants to Northern Ireland effectively came to an end by 1715 when the Presbyterian Church had triumphed in Scotland, the Americas provided an alternative outlet for Scots, and cheap land was no longer readily available in Ulster⁶.

The Scottish immigrants abandoned the old feudal ways the their new homeland, finding a new sense of freedom by which every man could strike his own bargains⁷. The Ulster

⁵ Dickson, 2.

⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷ Leyburn, 98.

Scots were more individualist than the lowland Scots. The abandonment of this feudal system released men from attachment to a particular locality, gave them diverse occupational choices, and broke down hereditary leadership⁸. The growth of the linen and woolen industries provided attractive alternatives to tenant farming. The Protestants in Ulster had an opportunity to become more business-like than they had been in Scotland. Social mobility emerged as a modern phenomenon among the Scottish race in Ulster. This would prepare them for later enterprising in the New World, where men had much greater social mobility than ever before.

Several "push factors" influenced the mass exodus of Protestant Irish to colonial America in the eighteenth century. As more British subjects poured into Northern Ireland, land became scarcer and communities more crowded. The Scottish Presbyterian communities felt pressure from the Church of England to assimilate into the Anglican communities, which received preference by the crown⁹. The Crown often treated Presbyterians with discriminatory laws regarding business, taxation, and political opportunities in Northern Ireland. The economic and religious causes for

⁸ Ibid, 141.

⁹ Dickson, 4.

emigration from Northern Ireland, while sending thousands to American shores, also sowed in them deep seeds of resentment against the Crown and Parliament that would later surface in the colonies.

Before expounding upon the Scotch-Irish influence on the American Revolution let us first consider their original prejudices related to the situation. Presbyterianism, the Scotch-Irish religion, was predisposed against an absolutist government¹⁰. Its Calvinist roots justified resistance to any ruler whose decree went against the laws of God. The Scots in Ulster came to regard the Presbyterian Church as superior to any royal order that appeared to thwart it¹¹. The implications of such an attitude, even if not widely considered at the time, suggest that not just one but any church may justly revolt. The only seeming antidote for peace in such a situation is to allow religious freedom to all under a government mute on religious matters. By personal experience, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians knew the evils of religious tyranny¹². The seeds of religious freedom gestated in the bosom of the Scotch-Irish.

¹⁰ Ibid, 145.

¹¹ Ibid, 146.

¹² Whitelaw Reid, The Scot in America, and the Ulster Scot, (London: Harrison and Sons, Printers, 1911) 24.

The Scotch-Irish quickly settled west of the Appalachian Mountains as they arrived, since Anglo-Americans already occupied many of the eastern lands. By far the largest number settled in Pennsylvania, with significant populations in the Shenandoah Valley and in the Carolinas. There is no doubt that land ownership was this people's greatest motivator that caused them to move west. The Scotch-Irish pushed to new unoccupied territory when they felt the eastern regions becoming too crowded and restrictive. As pioneers in America's first frontier, the Scotch-Irish became the prototype of American frontiersmen, experiencing lives that other groups would mimic in large numbers. Many Scotch-Irish settlers in the original eastern parts of Pennsylvania grew weary of the Quaker dominance there and their soft handling of the Indians¹³. These early Scotch-Irish frontiersmen inhabited an abundant land, but not an easy one. The opportunity for successful farming on the frontier could only be realized through hard toil and labor¹⁴. Through western settlement the Scotch-Irish soon garnished a reputation in the colonies of bold, hardheaded, audacity. The Great Philadelphia Wagon Road took thousands of these settlers across Pennsylvania and

¹³ Carlton Jackson, A Social History of the Scotch-Irish, (New York: Madison Books, 1993), 76.

¹⁴ Ibid, 80.

down to Virginia and the Carolinas before the American Revolution¹⁵. Some pushed on far into the frontiers of Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

The Scotch-Irish had a reputation for hostility against the Indians¹⁶. This image explains their annoyance at the peaceful manner in which the Pennsylvania Quakers handled the Indians they had contact with. This conflict with the Indians doubtlessly stemmed from the Scotch-Irish settlements, which tended to be farther west than most other groups. That these people felt more bitterly about the Indians and dealt with them more harshly is simply a result of their closer proximity and more frequent contact with the Indians.

Although some conflict existed between Scotch-Irish frontier settlers and local Indians, the situation never really heated up until the mid-eighteenth century, around 1754¹⁷. Frontiersmen fought for their very existence in Virginia and Pennsylvania, and the French were inciting the Indians against the English colonies¹⁸. Until that time conditions had been relatively peaceful. While the Virginia and Carolina colonies had made modest provisions for security, Pennsylvania had not anticipated conflict at

¹⁵ Ibid, 86.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Leyburn, 223.

¹⁸ Ibid, 225.

all. Many colonial leaders considered the western settlements a buffer to protect the east coast from Indian attack.

During the decade of conflict starting in 1754, the Scotch-Irish pioneers became convinced that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. This opinion would profoundly influence later generations of American pioneers¹⁹. The Indians' raids on the frontier were infamous for merciless killing and mutilation of unsuspecting victims, women, and children. Naturally those closest to such a bitter fight for survival had the strongest emotions against their enemy. The Scotch-Irish rose up to counter the foe almost to a man in the western regions²⁰. They perceived that they could not have any peace or safety until the Indians had been completely defeated and driven out. The Scotch-Irish bore the brunt of most of the guerilla warfare that flourished on the frontier during the French and Indian War²¹. They adopted the Indians' unconventional mode of battle, fiercely retaliated at every opportunity, and thus contributed greatly to the defeat of the Indians and the French in the Ohio Valley²².

¹⁹ Ibid, 226.

²⁰ Ibid, 227.

²¹ Ibid, 228.

²² Ibid, 229.

Presbyterianism in America flourished everywhere the Scotch-Irish settled, particularly in the West. As the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians settled west, their religious practice began to evolve into something more practical and related to human experience. At the same time Presbyterians wanted to have a personal experience with their God and affirm the old Calvinist theology²³. This movement sparked the Great Awakening. The Presbyterian "New Lights" led this revival. The Congregationalist "Old Lights", who composed mainly of Anglo-Americans, were opposed. The "Great Awakening", sparked by Scotch-Irish congregations, influenced several generations of Americans. America remarkably remains the most religious industrialized nation in the world today.

After the French and Indian war, the Scotch-Irish felt little need for help from Britain and continued on with their independent style of living. Subsequent events and the Scotch-Irish disposition towards government, particularly the one in England, soon caused deep resentment among the western Scotch-Irish communities²⁴. This resentful sentiment would have a profound impact on the way other Americans saw Great Britain. Thousands of

²³ Jackson, 96.

²⁴ Ibid, 119.

new immigrants from Ulster arrived during the twelve years preceding the War for Independence²⁵. The Scotch-Irish already in America became angry when the crown restricted access to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains and levied taxes without their consent. The new arrivals were still irate at the crown for causing the conditions, which made them leave Northern Ireland in the first place²⁶.

These two elements combined to make the Scotch-Irish in America one of the most revolutionary groups. Because of several factors including a desire for access to western lands, their commitment to the War for Independence was widespread and fundamental²⁷. Contemporary George Bancroft noted that, "the first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve all connection with Great Britain came, not from the Puritans of New England, nor from the Dutch of New York, nor from the cavaliers of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians²⁸." At the time of the revolution the American colonists gained respect for the Scotch-Irish and the British learned disdain because of their common commitment to Revolution and Independence.

While the Scotch-Irish in Pennsylvania and on the western frontier was undoubtedly pro-Independence, the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 120.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 121.

southern communities were divided in their loyalty at the onset of hostilities. This can partially be attributed to a previous failure to resist oppressive British forces during a previous battle in 1771 at Alamance Creek, North Carolina²⁹. Whatever the reason, many southern Scotch-Irish were either Tories or "tepid patriots" at the beginning of the War. No doubt many southern settlers in the western parts of the Carolinas and Georgia resented the eastern lawmakers, who had previously proven apathetic to western needs but now wanted the Scotch-Irish fighting on their side.

Over a period of several months that disposition began to change, as the Scotch-Irish took up freedom's cause. Several Scotch-Irish communities across the colonies began to draft declarations of Independence following the "Intolerable Acts" of 1773³⁰. The Scotch-Irish revolutionary spirit began to kindle, sparked by recent events and fueled by past wrongs, growing into an insatiable fire that would not quit until the tyrant was disposed.

During the War for Independence the Scotch-Irish involved themselves with great fervor, contributing a major

²⁹ Ibid, 122.

³⁰ Ibid, 123.

contingent to every force in every major engagement on the Revolutionary side. They dominated activities in the Carolinas and Pennsylvania in particular³¹. The Ulster-born John Armstrong, a veteran of the French and Indian War, became a Brigadier General in the Continental Army³². He engaged in battles surrounding Philadelphia in 1777. The Battle of King's Mountain in 1780 was essentially fought between loyal highland Scots and revolutionary Scotch-Irish Americans. The Scotch-Irish prevailed, causing the British General Cornwallis to retreat from North Carolina. Three months later colonial forces under the command of General Daniel Morgan, a native of Ulster³³, won an epic battle at Cowpens, South Carolina, which eventually led to Cornwallis' entrapment in Yorktown. The Scotch-Irish proved themselves to be capable and courageous warriors when it came to the War for Independence.

The Scotch-Irish played a key role in American politics in the years following the War for Independence. They were instrumental in drafting the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1780. Their heavy involvement in business and land speculation began to show the Scotch-Irish a need for a change in the Constitution, as the Articles of

³¹ Ibid, 128.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 129.

Confederation did nothing to prevent excessive tariffs between states or to coin a single currency³⁴. The Scotch Irish's Presbyterian form of church government predisposed them to hierarchical arrangements in which decisions appealed to the highest authorities³⁵. The Presbyterian organization of churches, the presbytery, synod, and general assembly resembled very much the federalism of local, state, and federal levels. The Scotch-Irish had come to believe that governmental power had to be shared through their experiences in Scotland, Ireland, and America so they favored the checks and balances provided by the three branches of government³⁶. Indeed, heavily Scotch-Irish states such as Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey were among the first to ratify the Constitution. They apparently had a profound influence on the acceptance and ratification of the U. S. Constitution.

The legacy of the Scotch-Irish is a unique one, from which Americans today can trace many of the peculiar American aspects. The independence of thought and deed, the disdain for hereditary power, the fierce individualism can be traced in a large respect to the Scotch-Irish who immigrated to America in the eighteenth century. They were

³⁴ Ibid, 133.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

instrumental in the original westward expansion, in the War for Independence, and in the formulation of the present American form of government. By involving themselves in critical early American events, that we now look upon to define our very foundations, the Scotch-Irish assimilated into the other contemporary cultures perhaps even more fervently than the others to create what Americans now regard as their identity. That is to say, if the Anglo-Americans were the base stock, those qualities that we attribute to them were even more pronounced in the Scotch-Irish who accompanied them at every step. They were the predecessors to later immigrants who would come and add their spice to the American melting pot. Though the Scotch-Irish have faded away as a distinguishable ethnic group, their mark remains, noticeable in the original broth that makes up the American melting pot today.

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