The Power of Ethnicity: the Preservation of Scots-Irish Culture in the Eighteenth-Century American Backcountry

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Abstract
The character of the Scots-Irish has been shrouded in myth almost from the moment the first Ulster immigrants disembarked at Philadelphia in the 1710s. Contemporaries condemned the Scots-Irish as lazy, illiterate, uncouth, and violent. Later hagiographers, however, praised them as ruggedly individualistic, liberty-loving people who brought civilization to the American wilderness. Recent historians have done little to advance this debate. While re-stating these simplistic stereotypes, modern scholars have failed to ground their arguments in extensive analyses of primary sources. While numerous monographs studying other ethnic and cultural groups in colonial America have appeared over the last thirty years, none as been published on the Scots-Irish. My dissertation fills this gap in the historiography of colonial America. By comparing the cultural maturation of Scots-Irish communities in the Pennsylvania and North Carolina backcountries from 1715 to 1775, this study describes the growth and preservation of a unique Scots-Irish ethnic identity. Following the methods of ethnohistorians, it examines Scots-Irish economic, social, religious, and political values, attitudes, and behavior as a means of examining the continued strength of the group's unique self-image. The Scots-Irish in the eighteenth-century American backcountry illustrate the continuing power of ethnicity better than any other group of people. Although the novel conditions of the American frontier partially undermined Scots-Irish ethnic uniformity and distinctiveness, the settlers struggled to re-create as much of the identity and culture that they had known in northern Ireland as possible. In both colonies, Ulster immigrants preserved their unique institutions, traditions, and beliefs; observed strict ethnic exclusivity in their economic, social, and religious lives; and clashed with other ethnic groups in politics and social affairs. On the eve of the Revolution, ethnicity continued to determine many of the Scots-Irish immigrants' actions in western Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Their sense of themselves as a distinct people within the diverse eighteenth-century American backcountry remained very powerful. They still identified themselves as Scots-Irishmen or Irishmen more than Britons, Americans, Pennsylvanians, or North Carolinians.

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By the mid-eighteenth century, a chain of Scots-Irish settlements lay scattered along the "great wagon road," which hugged the eastern Appalachian foothills form Pennsylvania to Georgia. It was said that the Scots-Irish kept the Sabbath—and all else they could lay their hands on; pugnacious, lawless, and individualistic, they brought with them the Scottish secrets of whiskey distilling. In the South the power of great planters continued to be bolstered by their disproportionate ownership of slaves (not even distribution). Wealth was concentrated in the hands of the largest slaveowners, widening the gap between the prosperous gentry and the "poor whites," who were more and more likely to become tenant farmers. English (Irish and Scots) colonists now "owned" the land east of the Mississippi River. The land that had not been settled, therefore, became what is known as the backcountry. However, King George III, with his Proclamation of 1763, forbade settling on land west of the Appalachian Mountains, and one In the big picture, the aftermath of the British victory in the French and Indian War (1756–1763) brought with it some good and some bad things. These differences are what spawned the Regulator Movement in the Carolina backcountry, and the Paxton Boys incidents in the Pennsylvania backcountry. Following the French and Indian War, there was a notable break in the way American colonists and the English thought of each other.