How Scotch-Irish is your English? The Ulster Heritage of East Tennessee Speech

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Growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the 1960s, I was required to take a six-week course on the state's history in the eighth grade.[1] There my classmates and I learned such notable facts as why Tennessee is nicknamed the "Volunteer State," what the "War of the Roses" political campaign of the late 19th century was, and who the three Presidents were the state contributed to that national office. The answer to the last question, Tennesseans should know, is Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Andrew Johnson. Our textbook also informed us that all three men were born outside the state (in the Carolinas, actually), but this mattered very little to us. Since they had adopted Tennessee, had built their careers there, and were elected from there, these men were Volunteers foremost. It was therefore a little unsettling to me, upon leaving the state in 1981 to take a job at the University of South Carolina, to learn that not only did both Carolinas fervently claim Andy Jackson, who was born in 1767 in a vaguely mapped area of the Carolina Piedmont called the Waxhaws, but that the two Carolinas were still arguing about the issue—putting forth rival claims and counterclaims—of the exact site of his nativity.

After a decade of living in Columbia and hearing the local arguments, I could finally begin to concede South Carolina a partial claim to Old Hickory, but little could have prepared me for the surprise at finding still another claimant—in what I thought was half a world away. When traveling in Northern Ireland in 1990 I discovered that the village of Boneybefore took credit for Jackson as well! Indeed, in this tiny County Antrim community, which one reaches a mile north of the medieval fortress town of Carrickfergus, fifteen miles from Belfast, one comes suddenly upon a roadside cottage which calls itself the Andrew Jackson Centre. In the summertime the site features a program of craftwork demonstrations and related events and a selection of historical videos, including "From Here to the Whitehouse," whose account begins in 1765 (two years before Jackson's birth), when "Andrew Jackson, Snr., his wife Elizabeth and sons Hugh and Robert left Boneybefore, Carrickfergus. They emigrated from Larne and sailed to Charleston, South Carolina." In presenting a chronology of "Andrew Jackson 1765-1845 7th President of the United States of America," the center's brochure asserts a local claim to be Jackson's pre-natal home, though of course he could not even have been conceived there.[2]

While the effort of this small place in northeastern Ireland, in the historical province of Ulster [3], to share some of Jackson's reputation might strike Americans as only rank local boosterism, it is in fact this and much more. Anyone who spends much time in the book shops of Northern Ireland, keeps up with the popular press there, or becomes acquainted with the activities of its local historical societies or the Ulster-Scots Agency (a government-funded body set up in 1999 as an outgrowth of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement) begins to discover an extensive popular literature and awareness on Ulster people who went to North America in the 18th or early 19th

century and contributed to the developing new country of the United States of America. One comes across small books such as W. F. Marshall's *Ulster Sails West: The Story of the Great Emigration from Ulster to North America in the 18th Century. Together with an Outline of the Part Played by Ulster Men in Building the United States*, Eric Montgomery's *The Scotch-Irish and Ulster: The Scotch-Irish in America's History*, Ronnie Hanna's *The Highest Call: Ulster and the American Presidency*, and Billy Kennedy's *The Scots-Irish in the Hills of Tennessee*.4 One finds articles in magazines, such as David Hume's "Garden of the Waxhaw," in which he declares that "Andrew Jackson was destined to be a great leader and to enter the White House as the first of the Ulster Presidents of the United States of America."5 Ulster Presidents? This is a term that few Americans are familiar with. I certainly wasn't. In Northern Ireland, though, there is an official ancestral homesite not only for him, but also for Chester Arthur and Woodrow Wilson (that this writer knows about—there may well be others).

This literature in Northern Ireland goes to considerable length to name the men of Ulster stock who signed the Declaration of Independence (at least eight, including Charles Thompson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, a native of County Londonderry), who printed the Declaration of Independence (John Dunlap, a native of County Tyrone), who led the assault at King's Mountain during the American Revolution, who served as generals during the American Revolution (twenty-one, by one reckoning), who later became President of the American republic (at least eleven, as many as seventeen by another count), and so on. Whether such calculations reflect something of modern political and cultural currents in Northern Ireland or are the product of an intense sense of history in the province (in whose six counties today around one hundred local historical societies flourish), the interest in Ulster-American connections is lively and genuine, and it represents far more than a ploy for American tourist dollars. Along with the extensive literature, there is a popular awareness, unparalleled in the British Isles or anywhere else, of strong historical ties between Ulster and the United States, even though these took place many generations ago. This awareness has increased markedly in recent decades, four demonstrations of which can be cited.

In 1976 the Ulster-American Folk Park was opened near Omagh, County Tyrone, at the birthplace of Thomas Mellon, who emigrated to the United States as a child in 1818 and founded a financial empire. The outdoor portion of the museum attempts to recreate the homesteads and community life that Ulster emigrants would have known two hundred years ago. The indoor portion features conventional exhibits, and a recently initiated computer database provides written records of many kinds on the process of people uprooting themselves from their families and native soil to sail to a distant, unknown land. Additionally, the museum has recreated something of the voyage that emigrants would have experienced, by constructing a replica of a passenger ship, and something of the world they would have found, by building a section of the Philadelphia waterfront of the early 19th century. An expanded gallery built in the mid-1990s further documents struggles and successes of Ulster emigrants and their descendants in the new environment, featuring the Batlle of King's Mountain, David Crockett, Andrew Jackson, and so on. The gift shop sells a full-color pictorial map, "Ulster-American Heritage Trail," which identifies the "ancestral home" in Ulster of, among many other persons, Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Foster, Amelia Earhart, and Neil Armstrong.

Also in 1976 a group of historians at the University of Ulster at Coleraine organized the first Ulster American Heritage Symposium, an increasingly lively biennial gatherings that includes scholars across the humanities, amateur historians, genealogists, and the public at large. The conference alternates between Northern Ireland and the United States, with recent gathering attracting attendance of well over a hundred. The next symposium is scheduled for Knoxville, Tennessee, in June 2006, to be hosted by the East Tennessee Historical Society.

Third, in 1989 Ulster Television broadcast the four-segment series *God's Frontiersmen: The Scots-Irish Epic*, produced by Rory Fitzpatrick, who also authored a pictorial book of the same title recounting the lives of individuals of Ulster extraction such as frontiersmen Crockett and Sam Houston and Civil War generals Stonewall Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant 6. The program was broadcast throughout the British Isles and was received with great interest. A final example that can be cited is a special twelve-page section titled "American Country" (commemorating American Independence day) of the morning daily *Belfast News Letter* that emphasized the historical influence of Ulster on Southern Appalachian music. Among other stories, this included a long feature article on "The Queen of Tennessee" (Dolly Parton—who else?). The newspaper's special correspondent wrote dreamily about the Smoky Mountains in an article titled "Magic in the Place of the Blue Smoke" about how East Tennessee was settled largely by men and women of Ulster ancestry whose modern-day descendants faithfully preserve the culture of their forebears.7

While these phenomena are undoubtedly important reflections of the cultural psyche of Northern Ireland today and of the conviction that the province should put on record its own unique contributions, that topic belongs to a separate essay. The purpose here is to put them into perspective with a series of historical events and to relate them to cultural and linguistic developments in the United States following the emigration from Ulster. Historically speaking, two things are most important here. One is that such demonstrations of Ulster-American connections, seen most broadly, are part of a larger phenomenon: extensive annals, academic and popular, over the past century on the emigration of people, largely of Scottish heritage, from Ulster in the six decades before the American Revolution.8 Nothing comparable exists for any region of the British Isles, large or small. These are people who are called "Ulster Scots" in Ireland but in the U.S. usually "Scotch-Irish" or, much less often, "Scots-Irish."9 Arguably the first account of their trans-Atlantic contributions was James Craighead's *Scotch and Irish Seeds in American Soil: The Early History of the Scotch and Irish Churches, and Their Relations to the Presbyterian Church of America*.10 The most voluminous study is Hanna's two-volume *The Scotch-Irish, or the Scot in North Britain, North Ireland, and North America* 11, while the most heroic portrayal appears in *The Winning of the West* by Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote that they were the "vanguard of the army of fighting settlers, who with axe and rifle won their way from the Alleghenies to the Rio Grande and the Pacific."12.

Similar enthusiastic, testimonial accounts can be found today in both America and Northern Ireland) and sometimes arouse great fanfare.13 However, modern-day American versions are more often the critical work of seasoned historians who rely on original sources, quantitative methods of interpretation, and dispassionate assessment. Among the best of the latter kind from a generation ago are R. W. Dickson's *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America 1718-1775*, David Noel Doyle's *Ireland, Irishmen and Revolutionary America 1760-1820*, Kerby A. Miller's

Migrants and Exiles, and James G. Leyburn's *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History*. The first three of these cover only segments of the migration period, while Leyburn provides a detailed chronicle beginning in 16th-century Scotland. Within more recent years three important volumes that have appeared are Patrick Griffin's *The People with No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World, 1689-1764*, Kerby A. Miller et al.'s *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America 1675-1815*, and Marianne Wokeck's *Trade in Strangers: The Beginning of Mass Migration to North America*.14

The other important historical point is that although the vast majority of Ulster emigrants landed in Philadelphia or elsewhere in the Delaware Valley (Charles Town, capital of the colony of South Carolina, was a distant second in popularity), most soon migrated to what became known as the "back country," the inland parts of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas, as well as nearby regions like Kentucky and East Tennessee. This movement resulted in the Scotch-Irish often being the dominant settlement group in much of the territory, and their traditions had a profound formative influence on other groups, according to many historians (David Hackett Fischer, the most ambitious of these, identifies twenty-four broad cultural "ways" that connect the Scotch-Irish with Southern Appalachia in his *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*).15

Although there are many accounts of the pre-Revolutionary emigration of people from Ulster to North America, controversy remains over what label should be assigned to them ("Scotch-Irish" is employed here because it is the conventional term in the U.S.), over the size of the emigration, and over the relative distinctiveness of this emigrant stream from others that came from the British Isles. "Scotch" (a term that represents a contraction of "Scottish" and is a traditional form for the latter) element of the population originated from the 17th-century "Ulster Plantation" of Scottish and English settlers in the north of Ireland, a process that brought them and the "native" Irish into intimate contact and often conflict from the first quarter of that century. By the year 1659, the year of one rough survey, 60% of the Ulster population was Irish, 30% Scottish (primarily in the northeastern counties of Antrim and Down), and 10% English. The heaviest influx of Scots was still to come—in the 1690s, to escape famine and religious strife in the Scottish Lowlands.16