

Misconceptions about the Scotch-Irish

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Despite lively debates on some issues, a number of widely held ideas about the Scotch-Irish are genuine misconceptions. Among these is that they represent a mixture or interbreeding of Scottish and Irish populations in Ulster. In fact, these groups usually remained in separate communities in Ireland, though they often lived close to and worked alongside one another. A second misconception is that the Scots who came to Ulster were outcasts—deportees, criminals, and ne'er-do-wells. In fact, the vast majority were driven by economic pressures and the lure of long-term leases on good land, not by political or legal expulsion. They came because land was available on good terms, and they intended to stay. Most of their descendants did, and it is they who constitute the bulk of the present Protestant population there, especially in Antrim, Down, Londonderry, and east Donegal.[17](#)

A third misconception is the view that the term "Scotch-Irish" is a 19th-century creation of Americans having Ulster ancestry who wanted to distinguish their heritage from that of the Catholic Irish, who were coming en masse to the U.S., particularly as a result of the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s. The term had been used, at least by outsiders (e.g. Anglican clergymen Jonathan Boucher and Charles Woodmason) in the 18th century. although it is not clear to what extent Ulster emigrants used it for themselves.[18](#) At least one well-informed scholar believes that, when arriving in North America, they most likely would have labeled their ancestry as simply "Irish."[19](#)

The consensus on the Scotch-Irish migration to America appears to be 1) that at least 150,000 people left Ulster for North America in the six decades preceding the American Revolution [20](#); 2) that they were overwhelmingly Presbyterian (as many as ten percent of the migrants were Catholic Irish and at least as many were probably Anglicans of English ancestry; smaller numbers of Baptists, Quakers, Huguenots, and other groups came); 3) that the great majority of these were of Scottish ancestry and tradition (whose forebears had migrated from Scotland one to four generations earlier in the previous century); and 4) that they left primarily for economic reasons. Most Ulster emigrants to North America had never owned land or enjoyed the status or security this afforded. Beginning around 1717 rents in Ulster were significantly raised (or "racked") as leases expired, crop failures brought scarcities of food, and downturns in trade (especially with linen, whose manufacture was the principal cottage industry) occurred, only to reoccur with unnerving frequency in succeeding decades. These factors tipped the balance for countless individuals who, though no doubt strongly attached to their native soil and communities, made the usually irrevocable decision to emigrate. The same factors affected all of Ireland in the 19th century, especially during the potato famine, as a result of which a million people left the Emerald Isle in the 1840s alone.[21](#)

From time to time because of their religious affiliation, Irish Presbyterians, called "dissenters" in their day, suffered a measure of political and religious discrimination (these were inseparable because of the established Church of Ireland, affiliated with the Church of England). The legal disabilities and the disaffection over paying compulsory tithes for the support of another denomination and its clergy spurred Presbyterian pastors to promote emigration, sometimes leading their congregations by enlisting a ship, recruiting passengers, organizing supplies, and undertaking the voyage themselves. From their pulpits they characterized their parishioners as an oppressed but chosen people and the American colonies as a veritable Promised Land. Even so, it is doubtful that many left Ireland solely or mainly for religious reasons, even though religious "persecution" by the established church later became a strong element in Scotch-Irish mythology, the set of beliefs which developed to recount how the people survived and overcame obstacles in crossing the Atlantic and how their experience in Ulster had uniquely prepared them for life on the American frontier. This mythology, through which has run a strong element of Calvinistic predestinarianism, has been articulated by popular historians in both Northern Ireland and the U.S. in recent decades, e.g. "Ideally suited for their new life by reason of their experience as pioneers in Ulster, their qualities of character and their Ulster-Scottish background, they made a unique contribution to the land of their adoption"[22](#)). Fitzpatrick's *God's Frontiersmen* and Kennedy's *Scots-Irish Chronicles* are only two of the most recent examples of the heroic version of this story. For 18th-century Ulster emigrants, such sentiments fed on existing convictions about events in the previous century, when the largely Scottish population in Ulster felt itself abandoned, particularly after the Siege of Londonderry in 1689, by the Stuart monarchy after having it induce them or their ancestors to move to Ulster in the first place, or so they argued. These sentiments have more recently been reinforced by a sense of political and cultural isolation of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland over the past quarter century.

The complexity of the history of the Scotch-Irish has required it to be sketched in some detail. This essay will not deal further with what happened in Scotland and Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries, but the preceding paragraph reveals one particularly important point. In studying the different groups who came to North America and their subsequent history (especially their own versions of this history), it is often quite difficult to separate sobering fact from dramatic interpretation, or what is demonstrably true from what is widely supposed. One must always ask on what basis a statement is made. Much 20th-century literature about the settlement of East Tennessee and the rest of Southern Appalachia, for instance, states that the most numerous, and in fact the dominant, group was the Scotch-Irish:

From Pennsylvania, many found their way along Virginia's Shenandoah and into the Valley of East Tennessee. Others who went from Philadelphia on a more direct route south into the North Carolina Piedmont were the source of subsequent migrations from middle Carolina westward into the Tennessee country. There were many English, some Germans—mainly from the Palatinate—and Welsh and Irish, a few Huguenots, but the dominant character of Tennesseans came to be identified with that of the Scotch-Irish. Fondness for migration was only one of their characteristics.[23](#)

If one were to ask how such a scenario has been determined, the answer would be surnames. This approach to gauging the ethnic derivation of a population is fraught with many difficulties, some better known than others, and many pitfalls, but it has proved to be the principal way to

estimate even roughly the relative proportions of different groups among a sample population, because surnames are the least elusive cultural element to trace.[24](#)

A standard assessment of the ethnic composition of the first federal census is *Surnames in the United States Census of 1790*, published by the American Council of Learned Societies.[25](#) Using surnames, this lengthy report judges the population of Tennessee and Kentucky combined to have been 57.9% English, 10.0% "Scotch," 7.0% "Ulster Irish" (i.e. Scotch-Irish), 5.2% South Irish, 14.0% German, 3.6% Dutch/French/Swedish, and 2.3% Miscellaneous (N.B.: people of African ancestry were not considered).[26](#) Subsequently it has become clear that for a variety of reasons, the Scotch-Irish are significantly underrepresented in this calculation. Some emigrants shifted their names after migrating, for instance, to enhance their social and economic prospects in the new environment (those with the Scottish name *McKean*, from *Mc* "son of" + *Ian* "John," sometimes changed it to *Johnson*; in like manner *MacAndrew* sometimes became *Anderson*). The ACLS study considered many names to be English (e.g. *Bell*, *Russell*, *Robinson*) or Scottish (e.g. *Campbell*, *Boyd*) that were and are quite common in Ulster. As a result, a reasonable estimate is that twelve to fifteen percent of the late-18th-century white population in the United States derived from Ulster, although again what is most relevant to East Tennessee and nearby regions is the fact that the Scotch-Irish and their descendants were concentrated in the back country. According to a recently published atlas based on the 1980 census, Tennessee is the state with the second-highest proportion of its population, after Massachusetts, having Irish ancestry; for nearly all Tennesseans, their Irish ancestors would have been the Scotch-Irish who left the island in the 18th century.[27](#)

It is beyond my purpose to recalculate the surname evidence or to rethink the ethnic proportions of the American population. This essay attempts to consider the Scotch-Irish emigrant stream in terms of its cultural and linguistic bequest to 20th-century East Tennessee and Southern Appalachia. Does the fact that most East Tennesseans have some, and many (like the present writer) have a great deal, of Scotch-Irish ancestry mean anything more than that many of us have names on our family trees that ultimately hark back to Ulster and Scotland? This writer has heard all of his life that most of his foreparents were Scotch-Irish, but so what? To what extent can the culture of East Tennessee be traced to Ulster?

That there is an inheritance of styles and traditions of music can hardly be disputed, but beyond such an obvious statement and a few very limited examples that can be pointed to, what more can be said? Can one make a more precise assessment? Can these musical influences be counted or measured or compared? Experts rankle, as well they should, at the notion of comparing, for instance, Celtic and African influences on country music. These are often inseparable. They have merged in many respects and taken lives of their own in others. They are qualitatively quite different and largely intangible, and individual performers use and blend traditions in multiple ways. Musical styles and traditions are difficult to document before the turn of the present century, making it hazardous to identify and connect traditions that would have crossed the water in the 1700s. Besides, since the Second World War, the influence has also flowed vigorously in the other direction, to Ireland and Scotland. For example, Appalachian Mist is a bluegrass band based in Irvine, Scotland, not in the U.S. However, there is one cultural phenomenon that, with some qualifications, is both measurable and comparable and that one can use to investigate the cultural heritage of East Tennessee.

This is language—the cumulative vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and other usages that are shared within a region and that often distinguish one region from another. It should be possible to examine a select set of expressions common to East Tennessee and Southern Appalachia (but not generally known to the country at large) and then to trace as many of these as possible back to the British Isles to ascertain their probable source. After this is done, the number of usages having a "Scotch-Irish" source can be counted and compared to those found elsewhere (and presumably brought by emigrants from those places), to explore the relative contributions of different regions of Britain and Ireland to the modern-day language of East Tennessee. In part because of the sketchiness of the records for many words, it turns out that such a systematic investigation is more impressionistic and less scientific than one would like, and it will be attempted only for grammatical patterns here. However, it is difficult to imagine anything other than language through which one might seek to what extent the antecedents of East Tennessee culture are Scotch-Irish, English, a mixture of these, or something else. One long-encountered and often-heard idea in East Tennessee is that traditional mountain speech is "Elizabethan" or "Shakespearean."²⁸ It will be interesting to discover how far this may be true (if one takes these terms literally as applying to the time period and location of Shakespeare—Southern England around 1600) and how this inheritance compares to that from Scotland and Ireland. As we will see, East Tennesseans owe much of their traditional speech to Scotch-Irish emigrants of more than two hundred years ago, in fact considerably more than to ancestors who can be traced back to Elizabethan England. Of course, much of East Tennessee speech either was brought in common by emigrants from many parts of the British Isles, or it originated in the United States. These latter two points are especially true for vocabulary. They are not germane to the question at hand, though they remind us of the complexities in establishing the etymological and geographical sources of East Tennessee speech and warn us against oversimplifications. The question is also complicated by the fact that linguistic usages have often undergone changes after reaching American shores.²⁹

What are some of the Scotch-Irish terms? One is the pronoun *you'uns*, the traditional mountain equivalent of the plural pronoun *you* and the general Southern American pronouns *y'all* and *you all* (the latter have also been used in the mountains, but less often and in somewhat more formal situations). *You'uns* is a contraction of *you + ones*; in East Tennessee English *ones* contracts to form other terms, such as *young'un* "child" and *big'un*. Another example is the combination of helping verbs like *might + could*, as in "I wonder if you *might could* help me." Also one can cite the adjective *airish* "windy, chilly" and the preposition *till* "to" in expressions like "a quarter *till* five (o'clock)."

It becomes evident from considering only these four expressions that many of the terms useful for comparison (in that they are traceable to the British Isles and are more or less confined to the larger region surrounding East Tennessee) will be old-fashioned and now probably unknown to many younger, particularly urban, speakers. We will sometimes have to scratch beneath the surface of today's speech to identify the "traditional" language of the region, what is sometimes known as "folk" speech, but all of the expressions discussed in this essay are used today, though they are more widely attested in interviews with older East Tennesseans, in old letters, and in dialect stories written in the 19th century (for the most part there is not space to demonstrate these sources).

We also realize from considering these few terms that many traditional usages have acquired a negative reputation in the schoolroom, where they are now considered "country" or "uneducated" or "improper" or "incorrect." Legions of schoolteachers have preached and enforced the values and virtues of "Standard" English. They have given a bad name to and tried to erase many forms, like several to be cited, whose ancestry is as authentic and respectable as any others, even though they may be labeled as "errors" by grammar books today. Whether these expressions are up to snuff for the modern-day classroom and "proper" enough for use in writing is an entirely different issue (and a debatable one) from their historical validity, but there are no grounds to dismiss terms like *you'uns* and *might could* as "corruptions" or "ignorant." They are traditional spoken usage, in many cases the literary style of a bygone day, and will accordingly be discussed here as ordinary language distinct to or particularly prevalent in the Southern Appalachian region.

Retracing the ancestry of words to the British Isles is a very different, and usually more difficult, matter than tracing a family tree. While people reproduce and disperse rather slowly, words are more fluid. They can spread across large territories or groups of people quickly and can easily be modified in meaning, sound, or use. Individual people can usually be dated and located with some precision and their relations across generations can be traced in a linear fashion. While words are a common currency used by countless individuals, they are by comparison often extremely elusive and cannot be traced so directly. Historical linguists and compilers of dictionaries are at the mercy of the written documents that survive if they wish to discern the speech patterns of the common people of a bygone day. Each word has a history of its own, and groups of words can never be traced like families. Usually because they have differing social significance, words and pronunciations have variations that compete with one another, meaning that each generation, even each individual, assesses anew the language it inherits, and it makes choices sometimes quite different from its predecessors. Every dialect and variety of language, no matter how isolated or far removed from the effects of the schoolroom, is in a state of constant change.

For all these reasons, it would be a good idea, before turning directly to my investigation, for us to consider how realistic it would be to expect a clear and strong linguistic carryover from Scotch-Irish emigrants of the 18th century and their descendants. Though they came in large numbers to the back country, they are also known to have lost, largely or entirely, many aspects of their culture early on—their Presbyterianism, for example, and most of their musical instruments. The traditional folktales of Northern Ireland and Appalachia today are quite different from one another. The effects of time, education, the dispersal of people, contact with other groups, and other factors at work since the colonial period to smooth away differences in language cannot be doubted. However dominant the Scotch-Irish and their descendants may have been in some places, they often did not constitute a majority. In the early days the population everywhere was ethnically diverse, and it became only more so in succeeding generations. Many Scotch-Irish expressions used early on would no doubt have been considered "provincial" and would not have been reinforced by either the written language of schoolbooks or the accents used in colonial and state capitals.

Another reason one might doubt a significant residue of Scotch-Irish language patterns is the absence of Ulster-derived place names where the Scotch-Irish and their descendants settled.

Often after an emigrant group arrives, it begins to name its communities after those it remembers from the old country (this is why the names of so many towns in Massachusetts are the same as those in Southern and Eastern England). There is little, if any, evidence of this in East Tennessee, though one perhaps shouldn't expect very much of it since its settlers were usually a generation or more removed from arrival on the coast. Outside southeastern Pennsylvania and southern New Hampshire, names reminiscent of Ulster are hardly to be found in the Shenandoah Valley, the Carolina Piedmont, or other areas of notable early Scotch-Irish settlement. Rather, towns were given names whose origin was English or local, and natural features (rivers such as Nolichucky and Chattahoochee, lakes, etc.) and territories (Tennessee, Alabama, etc.) often kept pre-existing names of indigenous origin.

Further, the great dissimilarity in accents and tones of voice between present-day East Tennessee on the one hand and Northern Ireland and Scotland on the other would rarely prompt one to suspect that two hundred years ago people in these different parts of the world had similar-sounding voices. However East Tennessee speech has been described over the years, it has not been with an "Irish lilt." In neither speech nor music does Dolly Parton, from Sevierville, Tennessee, sound remotely like James Galway, from Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Finally, there has been the presumption that people in the Southern mountains speak to a significant degree a remnant of "Elizabethan" English. It is difficult to identify the precise source of this notion, though it has been around for at least a hundred years. William Goodell Frost, President of Berea College in Kentucky in the late 19th century and a tireless speaker and writer on the positive qualities of mountain people, was probably more responsible for its popularity than anyone else. The idea has appealed to both mountain people and outsiders, though for different reasons. It received its fullest and most simplistic and romantic, if not extravagant, articulation in the first third of the twentieth century, and it is still very much alive today.³⁰ Until a few years ago, the North Carolina Department of Commerce was distributing at the state's interstate welcome centers a booklet titled *The Queen's English*. However, even cursory consideration tells us that William Shakespeare, from Southern England, would on the whole have used a type of language quite different from his early 17th-century counterparts in the northern reaches of the British Isles, though they would have shared many usages, even many that have passed entirely from fashion in modern-day English. It is certain that East Tennessee speech has influences from both Scotch-Irish and Elizabethan ancestors, and it should be possible to separate these to some extent. Since the question of this relative inheritance has not been investigated in a thorough manner until very recently, the popular myth about the "Elizabethan" ancestry of Appalachian speech has gone more or less unchallenged.

Having read this far, the reader may now wonder whether very much Scotch-Irish influence can be identified at all. Linguists have patiently collected a great deal of material on the speech of East Tennessee and Southern Appalachia in recent decades.³¹ While it is true that the linguistic influence of the Scotch-Irish is not as apparent in this as it might be and that it is often difficult to discern earlier speech patterns from written documents, detective work does enable us to piece together a reasonably clear picture, especially for grammatical features, of how much can be traced to the Scotch-Irish. In this essay I share the results of my own research, which includes work over many years in archives in Belfast, Edinburgh, East Tennessee, and elsewhere. Because people in these parts of the world sound and talk quite differently today, one cannot

simply compare what modern-day dictionaries and studies have to say. Instead, one must rely when possible on evidence from historical documents, the most crucial of which are emigrant letters that were written back to the British Isles by family members who had made the move. Thousands of such letters are deposited in archives in the British Isles. At the end of this essay are appended portions of two emigrant letters having phonetic spellings and other evidence of speech patterns, to exemplify the kinds of documents most useful in discovering the language patterns of the Scotch-Irish emigrants themselves.[32](#)