

Scotch-Irish Emigrant Letters

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Appendix: Excerpts of Sample Emigrant Letters

Among the most interesting, for both historians and linguists, of the items documenting the movement of people from Ulster to North America are letters written back to family members in Ireland. Excerpts of two of these from the 18th century are presented below.

To the modern-day reader, such letters have erratic spelling and capitalization and virtually no punctuation. This reflects two things: the little formal education the writers had (it is in the schoolroom that such niceties are taught and stressed) and the consequent reliance of the writers on their ear (spoken language has no equivalent of capital letters and many marks of punctuation). In analyzing texts like these, misspellings are the key, because most of them reflect speech patterns. Many reflect familiar pronunciations (*aw* and *teechin* from the Murray letter, *sins* from the Brown letter). Others reflect colloquial grammar (*grows*, *comes*, and *is* from Murray) occur with plural noun subjects and follow the subject-verb concord rule identified earlier. It is interesting to note many words in the Murray letter that are Scotticisms and either did not migrate to or did not long survive in North America: *ged* "goed" [went], *ken*, *weans* "wee ones" [children], *bonny*, etc.

Letter of James Murray of New York to Rev. Baptist Boyd of Co. Tyrone, Ireland

(Reprinted from *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Oct. 27, 1737)

Read this Letter, and look, and tell aw the poor Folk of your Place, that God has open'd a Door for their Deliverance; for here is ne Scant of Breed here, and if your Sons Samuel and James Boyd wad but come here, they wad get mere Money in ane Year for teechin a Letin Skulle, nor ye yer sell wad get for Three Years Preeching whar ye are. Reverend Baptist Boyd, there ged ane wee me in the Shep, that now gets ane Hundred Punds for ane Year for teechin a Letin Skulle, and God kens, little he is skill'd in Learning, and yet they think him a high learned Man: Ye ken I had but sma Learning when I left ye, and now wad ye think it, I hea 20 Pund a Year for being a Clark to York Meeting-House, and I keep a Skulle for wee Weans: Ah dear Sir, there is braw Living in this same York for high learned Men: The young Foke in Ereland are aw but a Pack of Couards, for I will tell ye in short, this is a bonny Country, and aw Things grows here that ever I did see grow in Ereland; and wee hea Cows and Sheep, and Horses plenty here, and Goats, and Deers, and Racoons, and Moles, and Bevers, and Fish, and Fouls of aw Sorts: Trades are aw gud here, a Wabster gets 12 Pence a Yeard, a labourer gets 4 Shillings and 6 Pence a Day, a Lass gets 4 Shillings and 6 Pence a Week for spinning on the wee Wheel, a Carpenter gets 6 Shillings a Day, and a Tailor gets 20 Shillings for making a Suit of Cleaths, a Wheelwright gets 16 Shillings for making Lint Wheels a piece, Indian Corn, a Man wull get a Bushell of it for his Day's Wark

here; Rye grows here, and Oats, and Wheat, and Winter Barley, and Summer Barley; Buck Wheat grows here, na every Thing grows here. ---Now I beg of ye aw to come our here, and bring our wee ye aw the Cleaths ye can of every Sort, beth o'Linen and Woollen, and Guns, and Pooder, and Shot, and aw Sorts of Weers that is made of Iron and Steel, and aw Tradesmen that comes here, let them bring their Tools wee them, . . .

Samuel Brown, Philadelphia, to his brother, David Brown, Mill Street, Belfast, 23 December 1793 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland Collection T 3525)

Philadelphia Decr 23rd 1793

Dear Brother

I take this oportunity of Wrighting you Afew Lines to Lett you know that I am in good health at preasent thanks be to god and hopeing these Lines will find you and My sister And the Children Injoying the seam as is My Ever sinser Wish-Dr David I hope youl not think me Neglectfull not Wrighting to you Sooner for the times hav been So very Disagreeable sins I Came hear I Detianed to give you as full account of this Cuntry as possable I had a very Good passage of Eight Weeks and two days With out the Least sickness on the passage there Was a feavour aboard but Not mortal Wee Landed at New Castle on the Eight Day of September on account of a feavour that Prevealed in Philadelphia Thomas Stewart and Thos Smyth and I thought it better to Detain there for a few days to Wee Could Hear a better acount of the sickness which I think was Very fortunate for us only that I took A Feavour Which Continued for Near Four Weeks I Would Seen more of this Cuntry only on that acount for the feavour Was so shocking in Philadelphia I stoped there for Eight Weeks Which Cost Me ten Guineas With out-I Came to this Sitty on the 7th of Novb: Which Was Nearly the end of the Sickness When I got the acount of So many of My aquentanses being dead Shocked me Verry Much amongst these Was Mr Faulkner and Andrew Sproule Carpenter and Wm: Campble Stone Cutter & Medole the Beaker and Russal the Plummer and John Morrow Cabnit Meaker and A great Number two numerous to Mention the Number in Whole Died from the first of Agust to the 15th of Novb, in Concluded to be 6500 People this sitty is verry Much hurted by the Sickness and is thought by many it has a chance to brake out against the Spring it has Spoiled all kind of Trade there has numbers Left the sitty on Acount and not Coming back to after Spring I should not Came here only on the acount of the Lead I brought on our arival here put me to a studdy Whether to Leave the sitty or stay to Spring ...