

Scotch-Irish Vocabulary

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For East Tennesseans, the vast bulk of their vocabulary (by which is meant their nouns, adjectives, most verbs, and most adverbs) consists of either terms that originated in the United States or that were brought by settlers from several regions of the British Isles. Some two to three dozen terms can be determined to have a Scotch-Irish origin—admittedly a relatively small number, but more than twice as many as those coming from Southern England. Some terms of Scotch-Irish origin are specialized or technical, such as ones from distilling: *singlings* "liquor that has been run through a still once" and *double* "to redistill"). Most can be described as traditional, some as now becoming old-fashioned. Here are the more common of these terms, with definitions and examples [34](#):

- 1) *airish* "windy, chilly": "It's right *airish* out today."
- 2) *backset* "a setback or reversal (in health)": "He took the whooping cough along about Christmas time and was out of school for a month, and then he took a *backset* and was out of school again."
- 3) *beal, bealing* "an abscess, boil, festering sore": "Mary had a *bealing* on her neck."
- 4) *bonny-clabber* "curdled sour milk."
- 5) *bottom(s), bottom land* "fertile, low-lying land along a river or creek": "The house was right out in the middle of a little *bottom*."
- 6) *chancy* "doubtful, dangerous": "It was a *chancy* thing to do."
- 7) *contrary* (as a verb) "to vex, oppose": "Don't *contrary* him any more."
- 8) *creel* "to twist, wrench, give way": "His leg *creeled* under him."
- 9) *discomfit* "to inconvenience": "I hope it won't *discomfit* you any."
- 10) *fireboard* "mantelpiece": "She got a big pistol and laid it up on the *fireboard*, and she said, 'you see this gun? If anything takes place here tonight,' she says 'I'll use this gun on you'."
- 11) *hull* "to shell (beans or peas)": "We *hulled* two bushels of butter beans last night."
- 12) *ill* "bad-tempered": "He was acting awful *ill* this morning."

- 13) *kindling* "twigs, pine needles, and scraps of wood to start a fire": "Before we began the fire, we made sure we had plenty of *kindling*."
- 14) *let on* "to pretend": "She *let on* that she didn't care."
- 15) *mend* "to improve physically": "He's *mending* very slowly."
- 16) *muley* "hornless cow": "Come on, Robert, let's get our little *muley*-cow to work again."
- 17) *nicker* "whinny": "Sure enough in a few minutes four lank horsemen were dismounting at the gate amid much *nickering* of horses and yapping of hounds."
- 18) *palings* "upright stakes (of a fence)": "That's what the mountain people called them, *palings*. They're split out just like boards."
- 19) *piece* "distance": "It's a far *piece* to town and back."
- 20) *redd up* "to tidy up, get a place ready": "I mean to wash and *redd up* the house before I do any special cooking."
- 21) *soon* (adjective) "early": "I hope that we can get a *soon* start in the morning."
- 22) *take up* "begin": "Has the meeting *taken up* yet?"

Just as the descendants of Scotch-Irish emigrants spread far beyond Tennessee and across much of the United States as the country grew, their vocabulary did as well. Some terms in the foregoing list, as well as other features cited in this essay, are or were known in parts of the Midwest, the Lower South, and the Southwest. Some disappeared where they had formerly prevailed. This is true for two intriguing terms brought by Ulster emigrants in the 18th century, both of which were applied initially to back country whites. One is *cracker*, now most often referring to a white native of Georgia or Florida. The other is *cohee*, once referring to a less-cultivated person in the backwoods from Virginia to the Carolinas. *Cracker* in 20th-century Ulster parlance refers to an expert talker or raconteur, a master of good *crack* or a boaster; in colonial America it was used in the latter sense. In 1766 a Mr. Gavin Cochrane wrote from the American colonies to The Earl of Dartmouth in England: "I should explain to your Lordship what is meant by Crackers, a name they have got from being great boasters; they are a lawless set of rascalls on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland."³⁵ *Cohee* derives from *co he* or *quo he*, originally a phrase used in oral narration, whereby one reports another's speech by "quo he," "quo she," "quo I," etc. (literally "he said," etc.); this is still known in Ulster. In the 18th century the speech habit was brought to the American colonies, where it became a nickname for the people who had it. Thus, in an 1815 letter from western North Carolina a writer said, "The back country people [of Virginia] are called 'Co-hees' from some of the back country people using frequently the term 'quote he' or 'quote she' or as they usually speak 'coo he' and 'coo she'."³⁶ *Cohee* did not catch on like *cracker*, apparently dying out a century ago.³⁷ Neither is used in East Tennessee or elsewhere in the U.S. today with their traditional meaning.