INTRODUCTION

Defining These Varied People

Who are the Scots Irish? The answer seems simple: the Scots Irish were one of the largest non-English immigrant groups in eighteenth-century America. These Scots Protestants (mostly Lowlanders and Presbyterians) were the quintessential “peoples in motion” of the early modern Europe. Encouraged by the English to relocate to Ireland’s northern province of Ulster, they had migrated across the Irish Sea during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to “plant” themselves as a Protestant colonizing force among Ireland’s native Roman Catholics. Later in the eighteenth century, when economic, political, and religious conditions in Ulster turned against them and their interests, large numbers of these Scots Protestants (estimates suggest about 250,000 people before 1815) uprooted themselves again and migrated across the Atlantic to the American colonies, particularly to Pennsylvania.

Still, when we think of the Scots Irish, as they came to be known in America, we imagine not a Pennsylvanian but a southerner and, most often, one man, Andrew Jackson. Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, was the son of Scots Irish immigrant parents who left Ulster in 1765 and settled in the Carolina backcountry (probably by way of Philadelphia), where Jackson was born two years later. Nicknamed “Old Hickory” for his toughness on the battlefield, Jackson earned respect and fame as a Tennessee planter, merchant, and slaveholder, a ruthless soldier, and a formidable political leader of the nascent Democratic Party. Since his own time, he has epitomized popular portrayals of the Scots Irish as a hardy, vigorous, and assertive “breed” who were “born fighters” and who became America’s prototypical backcountry pioneers.
Historians have long argued that the Scots Irish arrived in America desperately poor, with only the democratic principles of their Presbyterian religion to anchor them. Led by men who were armed with axes and rifles and who carried quarts of whiskey to fire and soothe their tempers, these families, whose female members remained mostly in the shadows, hacked their farms out of the wilderness and then fiercely defended their claims by fighting Indian and British enemies. Their popular image, epitomized by Jackson, is that of a strong, courageous, and masculine people who embodied the core American values of patriotism, pragmatism, and individualism and a willingness to defend those values with a fight.4 With Jackson as a symbol of their rise from rags to riches and power, the Scots Irish not only assimilated to America; they assumed mythic proportions as an American success story. Today, because their “traits . . . grew into a national identity generalized across the cultural landscape,” they remain emblems of American identity; America, in sum, became more like them.5

Alongside this mythic image, however, is a competing, derogatory image of the Scots Irish as “rednecks” or “hillbillies.” The setting is still the Ameri-
can backcountry stretching from Pennsylvania south to the Carolinas and Georgia. Yet this group portrait of men, women, and children is fuzzier than that of Jackson because the Scots Irish settlers in it are anonymous, and the log house behind them is long demolished. Also unlike Jackson, whose proud, upright stance and formal dress express his power and status as a man, these settlers are defined by their disadvantages. As their log dwelling, simple clothing, and humble surroundings suggest, these people suffered from poverty and cultural isolation.

Today, in our polarized political climate, group portraits like this one elicit divergent responses. Some might look on it empathetically because they have some historical understanding of how tough frontier life could be, or because they identify with the conservative politics of today’s undereducated, underemployed, and impoverished rural white working class. Others might be more judgmental, labeling these modern-day Scots Irish as “hillbillies” whose intolerance of immigrants and pessimistic view of the United States, born of their anger over their declining economic opportunities and their general fear of the future, helped elect Donald Trump as president of the

United States. These negative assessments echo many of the similarly harsh assessments offered by observers in the past. Earlier critics pointed to the hillbilly image as confirmation that the Scots Irish were a separate and inferior “breed” whose members lived in poverty because their men were quarrelsome and hot-tempered and lacked the industriousness and sobriety to prosper in America, and their women were burdened by continual childbearing and nursing and years of child rearing. These people were the “sordid refuse” of America; their story was a cautionary tale.

The persistence of these sharply contrasting and heavily stereotyped images of the Scots Irish suggests that this group defies easy description or categorization. But why is that so? The negative reactions to them seem puzzling, given their privileged status as white people who spoke English and were committed Protestants. What was it about this early immigrant group that makes them such slippery historical subjects?

To begin, there is considerable confusion about what to call them. They have so many names that one historian calls them the “people with no name.” In early modern Ireland, these Scots Presbyterian settlers were often called “Ulster Scots,” “northern Scots,” or “northern dissenters.” Once in colonial Pennsylvania, where Irish Catholics were few in number until the nineteenth century, most of their Anglo-American contemporaries referred to them simply as “Irish,” a designation that acknowledged the Irish cultural identity (likely exemplified by their Irish-style brogue) that many had acquired in Ulster. The hyphenated term “Scotch-Irish,” which is by far the most popular name used to describe them, did not come into wide use until the nineteenth century when American Irish Protestants used the label to distance themselves from the waves of Irish Catholic immigrants who began entering U.S. ports after 1815, and especially during the famine era of the 1840s and 1850s.

The term had more ambiguous connotations in the eighteenth century, when the most privileged of Pennsylvania’s Scots Irish colonists—those who remained mostly in and near Philadelphia—perceived “Scotch-Irish” as a derogatory label; they preferred to call themselves “Irish,” or “Irish Presbyterians,” signifying their geographic origins within the margins of Britain’s empire and their religious identity as stalwart, though dissenting, Protestants. Scots Irish colonists of humbler economic means, however, especially male heads of household who lived in the colony’s turbulent backcountry of the 1760s, referred to themselves explicitly and proudly as “Scotch-Irish.” For them, this name was a way to separate their interests from those of other, competing groups—Scots, Irish (mostly Quaker), Germans, and Indians—who lived around them in the backcountry and to lay claim to a distinct political identity in the colony.
Today, although “Scotch-Irish” is perceived by some as a pejorative term—since scotch is the name of a whiskey rather than a people—it is still used by many of the descendants of the early settlers and continues to appear in much of the popular literature written about them. Scholars, by contrast, have for the most part adopted “Scots Irish” (the term used in this volume), “Ulster Irish,” or “Ulster Presbyterians” as the preferred names for this ethnic group. Although these terms are imprecise in their own way too, scholars favor them because they capture the group’s culturally hybrid status, including their Scots ethnic heritage and residency in Ireland, their geographic concentration in Ulster, and their standing as dissenting Protestants, which distinguished them from others in Britain’s Atlantic World.

Why should we care that the Scots Irish have so many names? Names express identities, and for the members of an ethnic group, their name points to their distinctiveness as a people. The profusion of names given to and used by the Scots Irish reflects an identity that varied according to the different geographical and cultural contexts in which they lived. Mobility from one cultural borderland to another within the British Empire defined much of the Scots Irish experience. Over the course of two centuries, they moved from Scotland to Ireland and from Ireland to America. Once in America, they moved from Philadelphia and New Castle west into the Pennsylvania backcountry and the Midwest, and south into Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. In each place, they lived among others who were sometimes hostile to their presence. In Ireland, they lived among Catholic Irish and English; in America, they lived among many other European ethnic groups, Indians, and even some Africans. Surviving and even prospering in each of these cultural circumstances demanded adaptability.

The Scots Irish were also a highly diverse group of migrants that included men and women of varying class backgrounds and economic interests. Having a flexible sense of who they were as people allowed them to accommodate their differences. Many of them had sufficient economic means to immigrate to Pennsylvania as free people, often traveling in families. With education and connections on their side, these men became traders, merchants, and professionals in Philadelphia or in interior towns such as Carlisle; they were farmers, millers, and rural landowners; some even rose to power as military and political leaders during the American Revolution and the early national period; they also became the founding patriarchs of long-lasting Irish American families. Their wives bore, reared, and educated their children; many also helped advance their family’s economic fortunes by engaging in various domestic manufacturing enterprises, such as spinning or dairying, or by acting as “deputy husbands” who ran family farms or businesses during a spouse’s absence.
A large segment of those who left Ireland, however, did not possess such advantages; these Scots Irish immigrants came to Pennsylvania as indentured servants, traveling alone, rather than in family groups. When freed, these men and women, who typically remained single during their time of service and are mostly anonymous to us today, often became mired in poverty, existing on the margins of Pennsylvania society. Women had a tougher time than men. In the patriarchal world of eighteenth-century America, those women who remained single were the most vulnerable; it was not unusual for them to end up in one of Philadelphia’s poor houses. Men had more options. It was easier for even the poorest among them to keep moving as they worked to build families, find land, and define their place in America. Although these men and their families remain mostly forgotten to us today, their pursuit of opportunity played a fundamental role in extending Pennsylvania’s—and America’s—frontier and displacing its native peoples, often violently.  

Through it all and regardless of their class standing stood their religion. Although the Scots Irish diverged many times in how they expressed their Calvinist beliefs, Presbyterianism held them together, anchoring their cultural lives as a diverse and mobile people of the borderlands.  

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THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY of these Scots Irish migrants and their experiences in early Pennsylvania. As such, it offers a much-overdue synthesis and reassessment of a critical chapter of their history in the United States. Its chronological concentration is on the “long” eighteenth century, the era stretching from approximately 1700 to 1820, which marked the heyday of the Scots Irish. During this time they emigrated in large numbers from Ireland and played pivotal roles in the settlement and development of America. The book’s geographic focus is on Pennsylvania, the colony and state where the Scot Irish made their first American home and where many of the developments that would define them as an ethnic group in America took place.