

# **Scots-Irish in the Carolinas**

**Lecture by Billy Kennedy  
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Ladies and gentlemen, I am privileged and honoured to stand before you tonight to speak on a subject which is very dear to my heart and I am quite sure to many of you also in these southeast states of America.

The Scots-Irish or the Ulster Scots, as they are known in my part of the world, were a unique race of people, and those of us in Northern Ireland who belong to that noble tradition exude with pride at the exploits and achievements of brave men and women who created a civilization out of a wilderness on the American Frontier, 200-250 years ago.

The interest in the Scots-Irish movement to America has been with me most of my life, but it was not until I visited the United States for the first time in June, 1993 that I came to fully appreciate the extent of their influence in the establishment of this country, particularly in the Appalachian states of the southeast. This independent and spirited people had been on the move for several centuries before they made the trek across the Atlantic in simple wooden ships for a new life on the frontier. Most of them originated in lowland Scotland; some were of French Huguenot stock. They settled in the nine northern counties of Ireland in the 17th century in what were known as the Plantation years.

As Presbyterians, these people were non-conformist to the Established Church of the day, the Anglican code, and during their settlement in Ulster they found great obstacles were raised to the means of propagating and witnessing for their Presbyterian faith.

Civil and religious liberty had been established in the British Isles by King William III through the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 and initially the Scottish Planter stock appeared to be getting a better deal for their dissenting religious beliefs.

Over a 100-year period from about 1610, the Scots had moved primarily into counties Antrim, Down, Tyrone, Donegal and Londonderry. They had worked the farms, established industry with the French Huguenots who had fought alongside King William at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and erected meeting houses for their Presbyterian form of worship and schools for the education of their children. In the Presbyterian culture, the church and the school are intertwined, and this was the case when the Scots-Irish arrived in Ireland and subsequently in America.

William's reign ended in 1702 and his cousin Anne ascended the throne of England. A High Anglican faction became dominant in Government circles in London, enacting legislation which weighed heavily on the minds and consciences of the Presbyterians of Ulster.

An Act was passed in 1703 which required all office-holders in Ireland to take the sacrament according to the Established Episcopal Church. As many Presbyterians held posts as magistrates in cities and towns like Belfast, Londonderry, Lisburn and Carrickfergus and exercised civil duties, they were automatically disqualified unless they renounced the dissenting Calvinistic faith of the forefathers in Scotland.

Members of the Roman Catholic Church, who in the main constituted the native Irish population in Ireland, also bore the brunt of the discriminatory Test Act. However, in the administering of religion, Roman Catholic priests were at least recognised by the High Churchmen as being lawfully ordained.

Presbyterian ministers were in no such position, and right across Ulster they were turned out of their pulpits and threatened with legal proceedings should they defy the Episcopal edict from London. Ministers had no official standing; they were unable to sanctify marriage; unable to officiate at the burial of their congregation and prevented from teaching in schools or any aspect of the faith.

This narrow ill-thought-out piece of legislation left the Presbyterian population, by then a highly significant section of the Ulster community, deeply resentful and almost totally alienated from their political masters in the English Established Church. The Act had the effect of making the Presbyterian people speak increasingly of starting a new life in America. Their protests had been ignored and there was, from the pulpit to the pew in some congregations, the feeling that this might be the only way to ease the suffering. . The harsh economics of life in Ireland in the early 19th century was another factor which made immigration more appealing. Four years of drought made life almost unbearable for the small peasant farmers of the hillsides of Ulster, and with the High Church landlords staking claims to exorbitant rents and the textile industry in recession, the movement of the Scots-Irish to America began in earnest.

The Eagle Wing is believed to have been the first ship to set sail from Ulster's shores to America, but its 1636 voyage from the little Co. Down port of Groomsport was aborted after a heavy storm in mid-Atlantic. Some 140 Presbyterians from congregations on both sides of Belfast Lough in North Co. Down and East CO. Antrim sailed from Groomsport on September 9 bound for Boston. The journey ended back in Carrickfergus Bay on November 3 with the ships shrouds asunder, mainsail in ribbons, and rudder badly damaged

It had been a traumatic experience for the voyagers who had completed three-quarters of the journey when one of the Presbyterian ministers accompanying them, the Rev. John Livingstone advised, in the face of the continuing storm, that it was God's will that they should return home. The

ship's captain was also of similar mind, and the 150-tonne vessel was turned around.

The Eagle Wing journey, notwithstanding its apparent failure, is remarkable in that it took place only 16 years after the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth Rock in Pennsylvania after crossing the Atlantic on the Mayflower.

Between 1717 and the American Revolutionary War years of the late 1770s and early 1780s, an estimated quarter of a million Scots-Irish Presbyterian settlers left the Province of Ulster in the northern part of Ireland for the new lands across the Atlantic. They traveled in extremely hazardous conditions, in simple wooden sailing ships from the ports of Belfast, Lame, Londonderry, Newry and Portrush for the far-off berths of Philadelphia, New Castle (Delaware), Charleston, Baltimore and New York. Huddled together with the most meager of belongings and money, they were a people forced to move because of the severe restrictions placed on their faith by the ruling British establishment of the day, and because of the economic deprivations prevailing in their Ulster homeland.

The first ships were in the main thrust of emigration to the United States. They were chartered in 1717, and in that year, when drought completely ruined the crops on the Ulster farmlands, 5,000 men and women headed to Pennsylvania. There were five great waves of emigration to America from Ulster in the 18th century: 1717-18; 1725-29; 1740-41; 1754-55 and 1771-75.

Poverty had taken its toll on many families and the promise of a better life in a new world seemed irresistible. The Irish famine of 1740-41 led to the third great wave of immigration to America by the Scots-Irish. An estimated 400,000 people perished in that famine. When the Presbyterian settlers arrived in America on that trek, they set their sights beyond the borders of Pennsylvania — along the path of the Great Valley of Virginia (the Shenandoah region) and to South and North Carolina.

The 1754-55 exodus resulted from appeals by colonists in America. to settle the new lands of Virginia and the Carolinas and from another calamitous drought in Ireland. In the last great wave of 1771-75, land leases in Ulster were cited as the main reason for the movement. Evictions were commonplace in Ulster at the time, and not enough ships could be found to carry the throng of Presbyterians who left the Province then.

Next to the English, the Scots-Irish became, by the end of the 18th century, the most influential of the white population in America, which, by 1790, numbered 3,173,444. At that time the Scots-Irish segment of the population totaled about 14 percent, and this figure was much higher in the Appalachian states of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina.

In all an estimated 250,000 Ulster-Scots Presbyterians moved to America in the 100 years from 1710. They were people who became totally assimilated into the fabric of American society; they were after all the first Americans in many regions particularly in East Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia and the Carolinas, North and South.

Their involvement in the American War of Independence is recorded in chapter and verse and the bravery and determination shown in battle like Kings Mountain underline the sort of people they were. Soldiers like Andrew Pickens from South Carolina stood out.

Tennessee's three Presidents – Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk and Andrew Johnson, were all born in the Carolinas. Jackson was born at the Waxhaws, Polk in Mecklenburg County, and Johnson at Raleigh. All three were of the Scots-Irish tradition. In fact, Andrew Jackson was born 18 months after his parents left Carrickfergus in Co. Antrim in 1765, and he is the nearest kind that we have to an Ulster-born American President. There were no fewer than 10 other Presidents with direct family links to the Scots-Irish settlers: James Buchanan, Ulysses Simpson Grant, Chester Alan Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, Richard Millhouse Nixon, James Earl Carter and William Jefferson Clinton.

John C. Calhoun, that redoubtable South Carolina statesman of the early 19th century, was vice-president over two terms. His father, Patrick Calhoun, was a Co. Donegal-born Presbyterian. And then there was Charles Thomson, the venerable patriot. Thomson left his Co. Londonderry homeland of Maghera at the age of 10 and, after becoming arguably the most influential personality in the Continental Congress in the years following the Revolutionary War and a close aide to George Washington, he designed the Great Seal of America.,

Frontiersmen, soldiers and politicians Davy Crockett and Sam Houston were of the Scots-Irish tradition – Davy born at Limestone in East Tennessee, the grandson of an Ulster emigrant, and Sam Houston, born near Lexington in Virginia, of second generation Scots-Irish family from Co. Antrim. Their stories are legendary.

The two men who founded the great city of Nashville, John Donelson and James Robertson, were also of Co. Antrim stock as were those sturdy founding fathers of Knoxville, James White, John Adair (he who raised the money to arm the militia at Kings Mountain) and George McNutt. There were illustrious churchmen like Revs. Samuel Doak, Joseph Rhea, John Craig, William Martin, William Tennant and Samuel Black, and the first mapmaker of Tennessee in the early 19th century, Matthew Rhea.

And there was Arthur Dobbs, who was instrumental in populating large Ulster-Scots settlements in North Carolina in the 1740s-1750s.

Many Civil War soldiers of distinction were of Ulster-Scots origin: Thomas John Jonathan ‘Stonewall’ Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart, Ulysses Grant, George Brinton McClellan and Philip Sheridan. In the Carolinas, North and South, it is estimated that 40 percent of Confederate soldiers were of Scots-Irish lineage. North Carolina suffered the highest casualties of the War. Company ‘B’ of Jackson’s Guards from the Waxhaws, a Scots Irish stronghold, had the biggest loss of any Confederate unit, 80 killed or wounded at Gettysburg.

Others of Scots-Irish roots were Samuel Lanthorn Clemens (Author Mark Twain), Cyrus McCormick, the man who revolutionized farming; songwriter Stephen Foster, and James Stewart, the Hollywood movie star. The wealthy Hearst publishing family can trace their history back to John Hearst, a Co. Monaghan Presbyterian who sailed from Newry in Co. Down in 1764 for a fare of four shillings and eight pence.

The Scots-Irish who headed west 200-250 years ago belonged to the same breed of people who today constitute the majority Protestant and Unionist community in Northern Ireland. Virtually all of these emigrants were so embittered by the discriminatory practices leveled against them by the officers of the Crown that they led the vanguard against the British in the War of Independence in the 1770/1780's. . In Northern Ireland today, the Scots-Irish (the Protestant-Unionist population) pledge themselves to the maintenance of the link with Britain. The complexities of the several hundred years of British history since fully explain this paradoxical situation in terms of economic benefit and cultural attachments for the one million people who presently hold this view.

In the United States today, an estimated 40 million people claim Irish extraction. But while the Irish-American community, the descendants of the Roman Catholic emigrants who moved at the time of the potato famine in the mid-19th century are the most vocal and politically active on behalf of Ireland, 56 percent of Americans with Irish roots are of Protestant stock, whose forebearers were the Scots-Irish Presbyterians who settled on the frontier in the 18th century. My books, 'The Scots-Irish in the Hills of Tennessee', 'The Scots-Irish in the Shenandoah Valley', 'The Scots-Irish in the Carolinas', and 'The Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania and Kentucky', record for posterity the daring exploits of a people who tamed the frontier. These were a people undeterred, a God-fearing people. The Scots-Irish who moved to America in the 18th century deserve our full recognition and appreciation.

## QUOTATIONS

It was General George Washington, who said: “If defeated everywhere else, I will make my stand for liberty, among the Scots-Irish in my native Virginia”.

President William McKinley said: “The Scots-Irish were the first to proclaim for freedom in these United States; even before Lexington Scots-Irish blood had been shed for American freedom. In the forefront of every battle was seen their burnished mail and in the retreat was heard their voice of constancy”. Confederacy leader General Robert E. Lee was once asked: “What race of people do you believe makes the best soldiers?” He replied: “The Scots who came to this country by way of Ireland”.

President Theodore Roosevelt said: “it is doubtful if we fully realized the part played by this stern and virile people. They formed the kernel of that American stock who were the pioneers of our People in the march westwards. They were bold and hardy people who pushed beyond the settled regions of America and plunged into the wilderness as the leaders of the white advance. The Presbyterians were the first and last set of immigrants to do this: all others have merely followed in the wake of their predecessors”.

“The Scots-Irish had a system of religious faith and worship which has ever borne an inflexible front to illusion and mendacity, and has preferred rather to be ground to powder like flint than to bend before violence or melt under enervating temptation”. – 19th century historian, J.A. FROUDE.

“The beauty about a Scotch-Irishman is that he not only think he is right, but he knows he is right”. – PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON, whose grandfather James Wilson emigrated from Strabane, County Tyrone, in 1807.

“They are a colony from Pennsylvania of what we call Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who, with others in the neighboring tracts, had settled together in

order to have a teacher, i.e. a minister of their own opinion and choice”. – GOVERNOR ARTHUR DOBBS, writing in 1755 of 75 families who had settled on lands at Rowan County, North Carolina.

“We have good reason to be proud of the early pioneers, from Ireland and Germany, others of English, Welsh and Scotch descent.. They laid the foundations of their homes, they were men and women who suffered from conscience sake, or fled from despotism to seek liberty and happiness unrestrained by the shackles of a worn-out civilization”. – American historian, the REV. JETHRO RUMPLE.

“It is against the law of God and nature that so much land should be idle when so many Christians wanted to work on it and raise their bread”. – The view on the Scots-Irish settlers of Watauga in North Carolina in the 1770s when facing British and Indian opposition to their annexation of land west of the Allegheny Mountains.

“We were apprehensive from the Northern Indians. I therefore thought it might be prudent to plant a settlement of such men as those who formerly had so bravely defended Londonderry and Inniskillen as a frontier in case of any disturbance”. – JAMES LOGAN, Ulster-born Secretary of State in Pennsylvania in the early 18th century.

The Scots-Irish have been described as clannish, contentious, hard to get along with, set in their ways. A prayer attributed to them from 18th century American frontier folklore ran: “Lord grant that I may always be right, for Thou knowest I am hard to turn”. Their thrift was proverbial, it was said they “kept the commandments of God and everything else they could get their hands on”.