

## ULSTER-SCOTS HISTORY AND CULTURE: A NORTH CHANNEL PERSPECTIVE

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Shortly before the outbreak of the 1798 rebellion, a French traveller in Ireland, Jacques Louis de Bougrenet, Chevalier de la Tocnaye, journeyed along the County Antrim coast and reached the village of Cushendun. In this part of the country, he paused to observe, the inhabitants, who were Catholics and, unusually for the province, spoke only Irish (CLT 217).<sup>1</sup> La Tocnaye continued his journey down the coast and then turned inland:

Quitting the coast I had to cross the mountains to get to the interior and I stopped at Brushin [Broughshane] where most of the inhabitants are Presbyterians. One could hardly imagine that he is among the same people. The way of speaking and even of dressing is much more Scotch than Irish. (CLT 218)

Later, when he arrived in Belfast, La Tocnaye observed: "Belfast has almost entirely the look of a Scotch town, and the character of the inhabitants has considerable resemblance to that of the people of Glasgow" (CLT 222).

Less than twenty years later, Sir Walter Scott, on a voyage in the company of Robert Louis Stevenson's grandfather, landed on the north coast of County Antrim near Dunluce Castle. Scott breakfasted at a nearby farmhouse and observed: "Mrs More, the good wife, a Scoto-Hibernian, received us with kindness and hospitality which did honour to the nation of her birth, as well as of her origin" (Scott 114).

Neither Scott nor La Tocnaye expressed particular surprise at the presence of Scottish traits and traditions in Ulster. Nor indeed should they have, for geographical proximity has long influenced the two places and the relationship between them.

At their closest point (between north-east Antrim and Kintyre) only some twelve miles of water separate the coasts of Scotland and Ulster. Indeed, in his account La Tocnaye likened the narrow stretch of water between the two places to a large river rather than the sea (CLT 217), adding that even his horse seemed to admire the dramatic view across to the Scottish coast (CLT 211). Yet perhaps to talk of the sea 'separating' the two places is itself to betray a very modern point of view, for until comparatively recently water was regarded as much a means of communication as a barrier to it. Indeed, the first settlers are thought to have arrived in Ireland by way of the North Channel; early ecclesiastical contacts were made across the channel in both directions, *from* Whithorn and *to* Iona; the Kingdom of Dalriada exercised a sea-borne hegemony over both coastlines; Scots settled in Ulster before, and after, the

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1 All references indicated in this manner (CLT) are to *A Frenchman's Walk through Ireland, 1796-7* by the Chevalier de La Tocnaye, first published in 1798.

official Plantation of the early seventeenth century; and educational, economic, and personal ties, for both Protestant and Catholic, continued to develop the relationship over later centuries. Inevitably, therefore, the very proximity of the two coastlines, the one visible daily – weather permitting – from the other, has had a profound and enduring influence in shaping the experience and history of the two places. Thus, instead of talking of separation it might be equally accurate to observe that the very narrowness of the North Channel has acted as a link rather than a barrier between Ulster and Scotland.

G.M. Trevelyan has summarised the longevity, diversity, and continuity of this cross-channel interaction thus:

The history of these early times no less than the settlement of Protestant Ulster in James I's reign and the Irish immigration into Clydeside in recent times, reminds us that the connection between West Scotland and North-East Ireland is a constant factor in history. (Trevelyan 57)

In other words, from the earliest times to the present – from Mesolithic settler and missionary saint to migrant seasonal labourer and contemporary medical student – the waters of the North Channel have witnessed and carried a constant traffic of people and ideas between Scotland and Ulster.

### ***The Ulster-Scots***

The diversity and continuity of Trevelyan's 'constant factor' need to be borne in mind in examining any aspect of the Ulster-Scottish connection. Indeed, in focusing on the Ulster-Scots community, we are seeking to define and examine only one particular aspect of this Ulidio-Scottish<sup>2</sup> interaction, albeit a substantial one. When we talk of the 'Ulster-Scots' we are not talking of the totality of the Ulidio-Scottish connection outlined above; rather, we are examining, broadly speaking, the community of Scottish descent established in Ulster, officially and unofficially, around the time of the Plantation in the seventeenth century.

The Plantation as such was not as tidy an undertaking as it is often imagined to be. The fact that large numbers of Scots had settled already in Counties Antrim and Down before the Plantation meant that Antrim and Down were excluded from the official Plantation scheme. Under that scheme, major Scottish settlement occurred, beyond Antrim and Down, in north Londonderry, north Tyrone and east Donegal: in other words, in those areas which were nearest to Scotland. Scottish settlements, particularly outside these areas, did not always maintain their distinctive Scottishness, often being absorbed into a locally dominant English culture. Similarly, strong Scottish settlement often drew small neighbouring English and Irish communities into their cultural influence. To this day Ulster-Scots language, in particular, extends be-

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2 I use the term 'Ulidio-Scottish' to embrace the relationship between Ulster and Scotland at its widest and to avoid any confusion between the term 'Ulster-Scottish' and the more specific 'Ulster-Scots.'

yond community, cultural and denominational boundaries, as it is regional rather than confessional. In Ulster few boundaries are impervious.

With this qualification in mind, we need to examine some of the traits of the Ulster-Scots community and its descendants. There had been Scottish settlement in north Antrim before the Plantation, settlement by Highlanders who were Gaelic-speaking and Catholic. The Plantation and its accompanying unofficial settlements marked a significant change in the Ulster-Scottish connection. The settlers who came in the seventeenth century were largely Lowlander, Scots-speaking and Protestant.

### **Religion**

The nature of Lowlander Protestantism was distinctive. It is important to remember that the Reformation which Scotland had experienced differed considerably from that of her English and Irish neighbours. In the sixteenth century Scotland was an independent country, neither its crown nor its parliament being united with those of England. Scotland's Reformation experience was derived directly from Europe and particularly, because of the 'Auld Alliance' with France, from francophone Europe. In consequence, the Reformation in Scotland was largely Reformed (that is, Calvinist rather than Lutheran or Anglican in character), so giving Scotland her distinctive Presbyterian polity, although Presbyterianism as such, after an ecclesiastically turbulent century, was finally established only under the Revolution Settlement of the 1690s.

In Ulster, Presbyterianism had a similarly unsettled history. Yet the common religious experience of the seventeenth century, the signing of the Scottish Covenants,<sup>3</sup> and the stories of the sufferings of the Covenanters became enduring symbols of persecution, righteous resistance, and eventual triumph for Scots in Scotland and Ulster alike.

Furthermore, within Presbyterianism there are certain attitudes and tenets which contribute to our understanding of the Ulster-Scots community. Presbyterianism is radical in its origins, democratic in its structures, and egalitarian in its outlook. Presbyterianism has no hierarchy of bishops, but exercises governance through a series of related church courts and committees with elected chairmen. It mistrusts and is instinctively suspicious of centralised authority and is structured to contain it. Additionally, fundamental to Presbyterianism is the Reformation commitment to the right of private judgement. Such a religious background has inevitably affected political and social attitudes. Marianne Elliott has commented on these attitudes thus:

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3 The Scottish Covenants – the *National Covenant* of 1638 and the *Solemn League and Covenant* of 1643 – were assertions, in differing circumstances, of Scotland's religio-political independence. The Covenanters – those who adhered to the Covenants – were suppressed, at times ruthlessly, by government in the latter part of the century. For a treatment of the Covenanting tradition in Scottish history and literature, see Cowan.

Translated into political terms such beliefs could be profoundly revolutionary. [... Presbyterians] were seen by successive governments as the most volatile element in Irish society, more dangerous even than the Catholics. From as early as 1649 they were deeply anti-parliamentary, and state discrimination throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries intensified their sense of persecuted purity and alienation from an infidel state. The outcome was an ingrained dislike of the entire hierarchical system of prelacy, aristocracy and authoritarianism in government, a notorious lack of deference towards landlords and politicians alike, and a tendency to resist as a matter of religious principle. (Elliott 117)

Ulster-Scots independence of mind and lack of deference are described well by a writer in the 1830s who, clearly exasperated at his failed attempts to influence an Ulster-Scots community in County Antrim, concluded:

... their dialect, idioms, customs, and manners are purely Scottish and by no means pleasing. Their manners, even when intending civility, are far from being courteous. [...] They are more than a little stubborn. [...] It is difficult to persuade them to any change. They may be led, but they won't be driven. (Day & McWilliams 11)

The last remark – on being led but not driven – is remarkably astute. Indeed, such Presbyterian attitudes gained them no friends. John Milton railed against the Presbyterians of Ulster when they protested at the English parliament's execution of the king, Charles I, in 1649. Later, in the 1790s, an exasperated Sir Boyle Roche described the Presbyterians as “a turbulent, disorderly set of people whom no king can govern, or no God please” (Smyth 55).

Earlier, in 1733, Jonathan Swift, who had been an Anglican curate in County Antrim and who continued to smart under the indignity he experienced there – his church had been virtually empty while the neighbouring Presbyterian meeting-house had been well-filled –, had argued against the removal of the legal restrictions that prevented Presbyterians from holding public office. When a Presbyterian delegation visited Dublin to seek redress, Swift mocked them, expressing the view that, should they be successful, they would be even less likely than the Scots to secure government employment: “For, after all, what Assurance can a *Scottish* Northern Dissenter, born on *Irish* Ground, have, that he shall be treated with as much Favour as a TRUE SCOT born beyond the Tweed” (Swift 275).

Swift's use of the term ‘Dissenter’ reminds us of the tripartite nature of eighteenth-century Irish society: Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter. The term ‘Protestant’ referred only to the Anglican Church, while the Presbyterians, along with other smaller nonconformist groupings, formed the third part of Irish society – the Dissenters.

It is important to re-emphasise at this juncture that the Ulster-Scots community is not co-extensive with the Presbyterian community. There are many Presbyterians who do not claim to be Ulster-Scots, just as there are many Ulster-Scots who are not Presbyterians. Nonetheless, much of Ulster-Scots culture is rooted in Presbyterian history and, in seeking to understand the Ulster-Scots community, we can find important clues within the Presbyterian experience.

### ***Education***

One of the tenets of the Scottish Reformation – that each person should be able to read the Bible for himself – meant that the Reformation movement placed an emphasis on education. In consequence, the Scottish Reformers sought to establish not only a church, but also a school in every parish. The Ulster-Scots community sought to reflect this same emphasis on education. However, as Dissenters, Ulster-Scots found that access to the only university in Ireland, Trinity College in Dublin, was barred to them.

Hardly surprisingly, the Ulster-Scots community found the solution to their university education across the North Channel in Scotland. Hundreds, indeed thousands, of students walked to the cross-channel ports, crossed to mainland Scotland, and proceeded to walk the long road to Glasgow and the other Scottish universities. It was a journey which took several days. Today there are many Ulster students in Scottish universities. Many of them think that they are doing something new. They are not: it has been going on for centuries.

The presence of so many Ulster students in Scottish universities especially during the eighteenth century was particularly significant. The flowering of learning and ideas in what became known as the Scottish Enlightenment had its effect on the Ulster-Scots students and on their social and political outlook. Indeed, an Ulster-Scots student, Francis Hutcheson, who later returned to Glasgow to become Professor of Moral Philosophy, was known as the “Father of the Scottish Enlightenment.” Like many of his fellow students Hutcheson was entered into the books of the university as ‘Scotus Hibernus,’ Scotch Irish. His influence on his students, many of whom taught in Britain, Ireland, and America, is incalculable.

The importance of this educational relationship between Ulster and Scotland should not be underestimated: it reflects an experience different from that of the other parts of Ireland. Bruce Lenman has characterised the situation thus:

Anglican Armagh in this period may have looked to Dublin but Counties Londonderry, Antrim and Down did not. They looked to Glasgow and the west of Scotland, the heartland [...] of a Scottish Enlightenment which was also a northern Irish Enlightenment. (Lenman 116)

Indeed, a recent writer on the Enlightenment has referred to Ulster as “the other Scotland” (Herman 63). The historian L.M. Cullen was also remarking on the strength of the educational and intellectual connection between Ulster and Scotland in the eighteenth century when he observed: “A pan-Scottish world grew up on both sides of the North Channel with Glasgow as its intellectual centre” (230).

Moreover, Ulster-Scots students did not simply take their ideas back to Ulster but also to America. This was the era of considerable Ulster-Scots emigration to America and the emigrants took with them their own radical disposition sharpened by the thinking of the Enlightenment. Terry Eagleton has talked of Ulster and Scotland at this time as forming “an intellectual free-trade area, with outposts in North America”

(121). Ian McBride observed that the ‘Scoti Hiberni’ students from Glasgow “not only sustained the intellectual life of Presbyterian Ulster but as Scots-Irish emigrants to North America they became the chief exporters of enlightenment to the colonies” (74). In both places, such thinking had political consequences.

### **Literature**

Unsurprisingly, reading and literature within the Ulster-Scots community, like education, also reflect their Scottish origins. In the eighteenth century the writings of Allan Ramsay joined the works of earlier Scottish authors among the stock issued by the Belfast and provincial presses. However, the publication of the writings of a new poet, Robert Burns, at the end of the eighteenth century, put the popularity of previous writers in the shade. The publication of the Edinburgh edition of Burns’s poems was swiftly followed by a pirated edition published in Belfast, the first centre outside Scotland to publish the bard’s works. The local newspaper press celebrated the bard by publishing poems to, about and by him. In Ulster itself, a school of vernacular poets, known as the Rhyming Weavers, wrote and published poetry in the same mode as Burns. It used to be asserted that these authors were mere imitators of Burns, but it is now recognised that they were of, and writing within, the same tradition, and also drawing on the same sources as Burns himself. One of the Weaver Poets, Samuel Thomson, who had met Burns, described his own poetic identity thus:

Indeed Fate seems to have mistook  
The spot at first design’d for me;  
Which should have been some flow’ry nook  
In Ayr or on the banks of Dee.

I love my native land, no doubt,  
Attach’d to her thro’ thick and thin;  
And tho’ I’m *Irish* all *without*,  
I’m every item *Scotch within*. (62)

Indeed, the Weaver Poets have recently become a new area of study for Scottish Burns scholars.<sup>4</sup> One earlier critic, John Hewitt, while recognising the importance of Burns for the Weaver Poets, concluded that Burns taught them to do better what they would have done for themselves (16-17). Nonetheless, these poets have never found a place within the established canon of Irish literature.

While the literary voice of the Weaver Poets was certainly distinctive, so too was the language of the communities from which they came. This Ulster-Scots language, certainly different, was by no means pleasing to all. One writer, William Carleton, found it so unpleasant that he took the decision to banish it utterly from his writing. On introducing one of his works, Carleton says:

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the chapter “‘On Irish Ground’: Burns and the Ulster-Scots Radical Poets” in McIlvanney (220-40).

In the language and expression of the northern peasantry he [Carleton] has studiously avoided local idiom, and that intolerable Scoto-Hibernic jargon which pierces the ear so unmercifully — but he has preserved everything Irish, and generalised the phraseology so that the book, wherever it may go, will exhibit a truly Hibernian spirit. (xi)

Later, vernacular writers in Scotland turned to prose and included writing in the Kailyard tradition.<sup>5</sup> The authors of this tradition were popular in Ulster, and writings in the same style also emerged there.<sup>6</sup> Scottish periodical literature also appeared regularly in Ulster, from the *British Weekly* to the *People's Friend*.

### **Industry and Politics**

The Ulster-Scots community provides parallels with Scotland in areas other than religion, literature, and popular culture. The Scottish historian, Tom Devine, recognised the continuing nature of the connection with Ulster when he wrote that: “[f]or Irish Presbyterians, Scotland in the early nineteenth century was not a strange land [...] and the links [established at the Plantation] with the mother country had been strengthened in subsequent decades through trade, education and family links” (500). Indeed, as the nineteenth century progressed, Belfast and Glasgow, the industrial capitals of Ireland and Scotland, saw the emergence of a Lagan-Clyde industrial corridor, with the development on both rivers of shipbuilding and heavy engineering. Indeed, in the previous century, Belfast’s first shipbuilder, William Ritchie, was a Scot, just like the town’s first printer, Patrick Neill, who had been invited to Belfast from Glasgow by the town’s mayor. That mayor, like many of the town’s merchant class – a class which was to be debarred from political influence by the provisions of the Test Act in the eighteenth century – was himself of Scottish descent.

Additionally, Ulster-Scots and Scots shared common ground politically after the eighteenth century, through their espousal of Liberal politics, but strains appeared in the relationship when Liberals in Ulster, facing the prospect of Home Rule for Ireland, became Liberal Unionists and later Conservatives. Eminent Ulster-Scots, like Thomas Sinclair, appealed for Scottish Presbyterian and English nonconformist support in their campaign, but their success was limited. Nonetheless, as Graham Walker has suggested, at the beginning of the twentieth century the unionist case seemed effectively ‘hijacked’ by Ulster-Scots imagery when opposition to Home Rule was symbolised by the adoption of a Solemn League and Covenant (Walker, “Scotland and Ulster” 95), in a direct appeal to Scottish seventeenth-century history and to

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5 The school of Kailyard (literally ‘cabbage garden’) writing depicted, in a sentimental manner, rural idylls in which certain characters exemplify solid and often self-sacrificing virtues. The best known writers in this school are Ian Maclaren, J.M. Barrie, and S.R. Crockett. Barrie and Crockett also wrote in other genres.

6 The best known Ulster writer of this genre was Archibald M’Ilroy. Among his works in this style were *When Lint was in the Bell* (1897) and *The Auld Meetin’-Hoose Green* (1898). M’Ilroy’s work, while consciously within the genre, is relieved by humour.

a sense of persecuted piety and righteous resistance.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, perceptions of the very nature of political sovereignty itself also display an important Scottish influence. Scottish tradition locates sovereignty with the people; English tradition centres sovereignty on the Crown in Parliament. In summarising Mrs Thatcher's attitude in the 1980s to the possibility of political devolution for Scotland as "We say no, and we are the state," the Scots replied, "Well we say yes, and we are the people."<sup>8</sup> An instinctive, rather than a conscious, acknowledgement of this tension is often detectable in contemporary Northern Ireland politics.

### ***Re-Presenting the Tradition***

The recent revival of interest in, and the assertion of, an Ulster-Scots tradition and identity therefore do not represent a new phenomenon. The emergence of Scotch-Irish heritage groups in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, the adoption in Ulster of Scottish historical symbolism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the publication of Woodburn's book *The Ulster Scot: His History and Religion* during the First World War, all point to the existence of a community identity, hitherto rarely articulated but valued nonetheless. The current reawakening of interest in Ulster-Scots language and culture, inspired initially by the resurgence of interest in the Scots language in Scotland, therefore draws on an established but unasserted identity.

Shortly after the publication of Woodburn's book, one of John Buchan's characters, Andrew Amos, "the last of the Border Radicals," described Ulster as "a dour, ill-natured den, but our own folk all the same" (58). If an increasingly diverse Scotland no longer feels able to adopt such a simplistic attitude towards a diverse Northern Ireland and if, as Graham Walker has suggested, Ulster-Scots and Scots have, over past decades, neglected "their striking historical intimacy" (*Intimate Strangers* 189), then political change, in both places, may renew old relationships.

Scotland's reluctance to engage with Ulster over the last thirty years for fear of exacerbating its own sectarian problems – problems complicated by immigration from Ulster and often perpetuated through football allegiance – and Ireland's difficulty in coming to terms with a culture apparently alien to a largely monist national model may now be transformed through the structures put in place by the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement.

If the Good Friday Agreement recognises, as it seems to do, different identities and cultural allegiances not as a problem but as a means to a solution founded on diver-

7 See also footnote 3. While taking its title from the Covenant of 1643, the spirit and nature of the Solemn League and Covenant of 1912 took its inspiration from the National Covenant of 1638, not only in its intent and outlook but also in the widespread popular response to it.

8 Canon Kenyon Wright to the opening meeting of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, 30 March 1989.



sity, and if the Agreement recognises, as it does, not simply a north-south but also an east-west dimension to Northern Ireland's complex set of relationships, then the Ulster-Scots tradition ceases to be an anomaly and becomes instead a contribution to accommodation and cultural wealth.

Talking of the early Christian period, Proinsias MacCana observed that one might with justification "speak of a North Channel culture-province within which obtained a free currency of ideas, literary, intellectual and artistic" (105). Since insular study can sometimes neglect Trevelyan's 'constant factor,' the poet Michael Longley has warned of the tendency "to undervalue, even to ignore, the Scottish horizon" (34). If, as Edna Longley has suggested, Ulster is indeed a cultural corridor, then new circumstances may allow the North Channel to become, once again, a connection instead of a barrier.

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