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## Identity in an Atlantic World

**B**ETWEEN 1718 and 1775, more than 100,000 men and women journeyed from the Irish province of Ulster to the American colonies. Their migration represented the single largest movement of any group from the British Isles to British North America during the eighteenth century. In a first wave beginning in 1718 and cresting in 1729, these people outnumbered all others sailing across the Atlantic, with the notable exception of those bound to the New World in slave ships. By sheer force of numbers, this earliest generation of migrants had a profound influence on the great transformations of the age. Even before they left Ulster, they contributed to the triumph of the Protestant cause in Ireland, paving the way for an unprecedented extension of English power into the kingdom. They also figured prominently in the British transatlantic trading system by producing linen, one of the most important commodities exchanged throughout the empire. Sailing when they did, Ulster's Presbyterian migrants played a formative role in the transition from an English to a British Atlantic. Before their migration, Puritans and adventurers leaving England during the seventeenth century for the North American mainland and the Caribbean dominated the transatlantic world. After men and women from Ulster boarded ships for America, the cultural parameters of the Atlantic broadened, as they and thousands of land-hungry voyagers from the labor-rich peripheries of the British Isles sought their fortunes in a vast, underpopulated New World. In America, Ulster's men and women again had a hand in a number of defining developments of the period, including the displacement of the continent's indigenous peoples, the extension of the frontier, the growth of ethnic diversity, and the outbreak of religious revivals. In the abstract, therefore, the group contributed to the forces and processes that dwarfed the individual but yoked together disparate regions into a broad Atlantic system.<sup>1</sup>

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The group's participation in these seminal transformations, however, escaped the notice of contemporaries. Indeed, colonists in America consigned these men and women to irrelevancy. While the scale of Ulster Presbyterian migration impressed American colonists, the behavior of individuals from Ulster did not. Settling on the frontier far from the east, the "so called" Scotch-Irish seemed "audacious," leading a Pennsylvania official to declare, "The settlement of five families" from Ulster "gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people."<sup>2</sup> The famous "American Farmer," Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, doubted that they could become "Pennsylvanian" or American. Distinguishing Ulster's migrants from the more industrious and sober Scots, Crevecoeur argued, "The Irish do not prosper so well." In particular, he found that "they love to drink and to quarrel; they are litigious and soon take to the gun, which is the ruin of everything; they seem beside to labour under a greater degree of ignorance in husbandry than the others."<sup>3</sup> Far from significant contributors to the epic developments of the age, the men and women who sailed from Ulster seemed to their contemporaries the period's sordid refuse.

Although Ulster's earliest migrants tried in vain to convince Pennsylvanians that they were "not quite as bad as we are represented,"<sup>4</sup> they particularly bristled at the titles their neighbors bestowed upon them. Although contemporaries used the term "Scotch-Irish," migrants did not. A Presbyterian minister who traveled to Pennsylvania during the first wave of migration despised such "ill natured titles" as "Scotch Irish" and protested any comparison of his people to the "Irish."<sup>5</sup> Referring to themselves simply as "frontier inhabitants," Ulster's Presbyterian migrants had a better idea of what they were not than what they were.<sup>6</sup> Their confusion is understandable. The group's Irish background offers few clues in finding a fitting name. These Protestant men and women rejected any suggestion that they were "mere"—or Catholic—Irish. Similarly, although they had reconstructed the institutions of Scotland's Presbyterian kirk in Ulster, during the eighteenth century they did not regard themselves as "Scotch," which at this time in Ireland connoted radicalism. In most cases, Ulster Presbyterians called themselves "northern dissenters" in recognition of their status within Irish society as well as their geographic concentration in Ulster. However, in Pennsylvania, a colony an ocean away

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from Ulster and one in which religious toleration prevailed, such a name became meaningless.<sup>7</sup>

For the eighteenth century, therefore, the Presbyterian men and women who left Ulster for Pennsylvania proved an elusive people to pin down. In both Ireland and America, they inhabited the cultural margins of a dynamic Atlantic world centered in London. They tended to move from place to place, leaving a scant paper trail in their wake. Although these men and women embraced Scottish traditions, their experiences in Ireland diverged from those of their coreligionists within the kirk. In Scotland, Presbyterians enjoyed established status; in Ireland, they did not. Though not Irish, they considered Ireland their kingdom and, consequently, along with other inhabitants had to contend with Ireland's political and economic subordination to English imperial interests. But they did not enjoy the same political power and religious rights that those Protestants who received communion within the established Church of Ireland did. By law they could not participate in official government institutions, and they tended to rent, rather than own, arable land. Finally, after sailing to America, they bypassed eastern cosmopolitan towns and cities to settle on the frontier. Poor and mobile, they scratched a precarious existence out of the woods beyond the reach of the law and polite society. The people with no name did—and still do—elude easy classification.

The indefinable nature of the migrants from Ulster seems at odds with the experience of other groups who moved throughout Britain's Atlantic world during the eighteenth century. Far from blurring, most ethnic and national identities were coming into sharp focus at this time. In the Old World, subjects from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales were busy fashioning themselves into Britons. As the formation of the early modern British state reached a point of completion with the Glorious Revolution, politically powerful provincials, as well as the English, coalesced around a concept of Britishness rooted in prescriptive notions of individual rights, the consent of the governed, the ancient constitution, and Protestantism.<sup>8</sup> Under this veneer of emerging nationalism also lay a unifying ethnic identity emerging from a shared belief in the origins of mankind and the unique place of Britons within the world. Although championed by a group of intellectual elites within the Atlantic archipelago, this ethnic theology bound to-

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gether men and women living in England with those who settled the Celtic peripheries of Ireland and Scotland.<sup>9</sup> In the early modern period, therefore, a common set of political institutions premised on the sovereignty of the King-in-Parliament and a mutual belief in the distinct place of Britons in God's plan allowed people throughout the British Isles to invent a sense of themselves as a people.

In the New World, especially in the Middle Colonies, identities also became more coherent over the course of the eighteenth century. Within a region of great diversity, migrants from Europe created ethnic, religious, or, as some would argue, ethnoreligious identities to carve out meaningful cultural space in a plural world.<sup>10</sup> Each group of migrants to the New World overcame the religious and regional divisions of their place of origin to invent markers of membership that bound the group together. Only in America, therefore, did men and women who left Scotland become Scots, or migrants from German-speaking regions of Europe discover a semblance of German unity. This process of invention called on these migrants to resurrect Old World ways, often religious traditions and practices, and infuse them with new meaning. So, for example, on reaching America, migrants from far-flung regions of Scotland united around the vital piety of the Scottish Calvinist tradition and in the process redefined themselves as Scots. To embrace evangelical Protestantism in the Middle Colonies was to assert a Scottish, as opposed to an English, identity.<sup>11</sup>

No less than the New World's Scots or Germans, Ulster's Presbyterians were caught up in this dynamic of redefinition on both sides of the ocean. Indeed, by some accounts, at one time or another the group embodied, if not embraced, a number of emerging forms of identity. At times they defined themselves as Britons, sometimes joining with Ireland's established churchmen to repel the threat of Catholicism; at other times their interests diverged from those of the established church as they invoked their rights as loyal Protestants to enjoy a full measure of religious and political liberties.<sup>12</sup> In America, they acquired an ethnic identity by rooting their shared sense of self in traditions imported from Ireland or retained from Scotland. How we view the origins of, for example, vital piety determines whether Ulster's Presbyterians became Scots, Scots Irish, or Irish in the New World. If evangelical fervor arose from Scottish traditions, Ulster's migrants

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merged with Scots in America; if in Ireland, they invented some semblance of Irishness.<sup>13</sup>

The Ulster Presbyterian experience illustrates how slippery terms like “identity” prove. Often employed but rarely defined, “identity” most often connotes a group’s “sense” of itself, suggesting that individuals from the same region with a common past gravitate toward ethnic, religious, or British markers of identification. Assumed more than dissected, identity implies equilibrium, stability, and coherence. The group gropes for a unifying principle, it is argued, and finds one at the end of the day. Therefore, although the content of identity may differ from group to group, the proffered story line usually appears the same. To define the identity of groups within Britain entails charting the acceptance of a bundle of traits, ideas, or practices—recognized as British—by peoples inhabiting the British Isles. In America, the task involves tracing the evolution of traditions carried from Europe and resurrected in America, and then recounting how this act of transmission allowed each group to lay out distinguishing cultural boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

This approach, however, does not work for the elusive Presbyterians of Ulster. Any search for the group’s Britishness—or its participation in an archipelagic process of state formation—must take into account the fact that these people did not comprise the political nation, those few who held the reins of political power.<sup>15</sup> For the New World side, by overemphasizing the group’s Scottish origins we risk rendering these men and women invisible, losing them amid the Scots who peopled the Middle Colonies. Similarly, focusing on their experience in Ireland underestimates the Scottish roots of their traditions. In short, failure to take these people on their own terms, as men and women without easily identifiable identities, is to distort the group’s experience. Since mapping a genealogy of traditions raises significant concerns, uncovering how Ulster’s migrants understood themselves and their world entails exploring the circumstances they encountered. To do so involves reconstructing in detail the world migrants left and the one they peopled.

Ulster’s earliest migrants lived during momentous times. Even if thousands had not elected to journey to America, the period on the eve of migration would have been of crucial importance for Ulster’s

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Presbyterians. These years witnessed the Glorious Revolution, the enactment of penal laws, and the rise of a political Ascendancy. In the period preceding mass migration, Ireland also drew closer to Britain through increased trade, as well through a redefinition of the political relationship among the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Upon arrival in the American colonies, migrants encountered societies also caught in the throes of profound change. This period saw the development of provincial political institutions and a frontier economy, the growth of transatlantic trade, and the Seven Years' War. As migrants arrived, the colonies were also evolving from societies dominated by the descendants of Englishmen and women into ethnic and racial mosaics. They left an Old World and settled a New World, therefore, during a critical moment for Britain, Ireland, the American colonies, and the empire.

Although living on the empire's margins, Ulster's Presbyterians had to come to terms with each of these developments. They did so in three ways in both Ireland and America. First and foremost, Ulster's Presbyterians moved. Thousands, of course, ventured across the ocean. In America, many Ulster settlers did not sit still, instead striking out for new frontier regions. Second, religious traditions sustained the group during times of often profound change. Ulster's men and women drew on many aspects of a Reformed Protestant heritage, demonstrating a great capacity for reshaping older traditions to address their immediate needs. Third, at moments when the group confronted threats to life, liberty, and property, Ulster's Presbyterians asserted their rights as freeborn Britons to full participation in the state and empire, even as others sought to curtail them.

In such a world of flux and motion with a number of adaptable traditions to employ, no single concept of the group emerged. In fact, by reconstructing the Ulster Presbyterian response to a broader social reality, a much different picture of identity formation emerges. In both the Old and New Worlds, any attempt to fashion a single vision for the group generated ambivalence, struggle, and in some cases indifference. For Ireland's migrants, identity, as it has been used, proved ephemeral, disappearing and reappearing in a different guise, and changing in response to conditions they encountered and traditions they employed. Amid periods of change men and women defined and

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redefined their understandings of themselves and the world around them. The messiness of the Ulster Presbyterian response to a larger world, therefore, underscores the limitations of identity. The term obscures the richness and detail of experience, underestimates contingency, and mutes dissonant voices.

For the men and women who left Ulster, identity resembled less an ideology, vision, or static set of traits than a dynamic process through which individuals struggled to come to terms with and acted upon the world around them. Only as men and women confronted the challenges and possibilities of everyday life, familiar and unfamiliar material conditions, as well as the extraordinary, did they reinvent traditions to give these developments meaning. Identity, then, for these people did not amount to the group's acceptance of unifying cultural markers—quite the contrary. Ulster's Presbyterians continually remade themselves as they struggled to make sense of experience in rapidly changing contexts by giving a useable past a number of different and often contradictory meanings.<sup>16</sup> Because they moved between cultural margins in the Atlantic archipelago and America, Ulster's migrants negotiated this dynamic in two settings in short order. Ultimately, the shared experience of this two-step process—one in Ireland, the other in Pennsylvania—defined the complex ways Ulster's Presbyterians understood themselves and their world.

Exploring this process of identity formation on both sides of the ocean offers a closer glimpse of the larger transatlantic community Ulster's Presbyterians inhabited. By most accounts, the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world resembled a structure, system, or place—much like a map on a wall—with England at its center, and Ireland and America on its peripheries. Sketched on a broad canvas, the contours of the Atlantic world were defined by lines of trade fashioned by a merchant elite, channels of institutional authority created by governing officials, and the perpetual motion of migrant groups. The Atlantic was, of course, all this.<sup>17</sup> But it was much more. Ulster's Presbyterians, and people like them, animated this world. They suffered the dislocation of migration and produced and consumed the goods that filled the hulls of ships. They flocked to hear itinerant preachers, withstood sieges and Indian raids in imperial wars, and cleared land on the frontier. Little came easy in such a world. Eigh-

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teenth-century Ireland and America presented distinct challenges to Ulster's migrants, each requiring a different set of responses from the same font of tradition. Although the process of identity formation for Ulster's men and women would bear striking similarities on both sides of the ocean, the ways in which individuals struggled to reinvent traditions reflected the cultural imperatives of each society. Movement, Reformed Protestantism, and rights discourse—the tools migrants used in the face of broad change—took on profoundly different meanings in each context. The group's participation in the developments that defined the eighteenth-century Atlantic and the ways they negotiated these, therefore, reveal a grittier, more properly proportioned world, made up of a complex composite of similar yet distinct societies.

The Ulster Presbyterian transatlantic experience underscored a story of men and women on the cultural margins controlling their destinies as best they could in the face of profound transformations beyond their immediate control. Migrants did not make sense of sweeping change by deploying simplistic formulas as defensive measures; rather, on both sides of the ocean they displayed creativity and resourcefulness in giving meaning to a larger social reality. As each chapter of their experience unfolded, they groped for, fought over, and employed the cultural materials and practices the world had to offer to comprehend and manage the transatlantic forces that threatened to overwhelm. To be sure, in doing so they had to reinvent themselves. But in the process they also created their world.<sup>18</sup>