

Ulster Presbyterians and the Scots Irish Diaspora, 1750-1764

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Until about 15 years ago the complex history of the links between the north of Ireland and colonial America was something of a brackish backwater in 18th-century Atlantic studies. Admittedly, the internal history of Ulster Presbyterianism had already come alive, thanks to the work of David Hayton on the early 18th century, and of David Miller and Ian McBride on the final decades. But the appearance close in rapid succession of three outstanding books, Marianne Wokeck's study *Trade in Strangers* (1999), Patrick Griffin's *The People With No Name* (2001), and the meticulously edited anthology of eighteenth-century emigrant letters by Kerby Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce Boling and David Doyle, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan* (2003), promised to change all that and to give the subject a transcontinental prominence.⁽¹⁾ Strangely that did not happen, for despite the official championing of Ulster Scots studies as an exotic dividend of the Northern Ireland peace process, the momentum was not maintained. Only two collections of essays building on these works appeared in the next decade.⁽²⁾ Thus the recent arrival of Benjamin Bankhurst's short but tantalizing monograph is doubly welcome: it signals once again the importance of the general field, and it presents a fascinating case study within it.

The demographic importance of Ulster migration to the middle and southern colonies of British America has long been recognized, yet its size, cyclicity and composition remain in some dispute. It was less Protestant and certainly less exclusively Presbyterian than once assumed, but it is indisputable that young men bearing family names of Scottish extraction were the typical indentured servants leaving northern Irish ports in the half century before the American Revolution. Bankhurst goes along with the most recent estimate that at least a quarter of a million migrated from Ireland as a whole in the century up to 1815, which may be on the high side. But demography is not Bankhurst's concern; rather it is the social, religious and cultural consequences of that migration for the sending community in the era of the Seven Years War. The focus, therefore, is fairly narrow, but the case is well made as to why Ulster and why then.

The late 1740s to the early 1770s were a period of notably high, if fluctuating, transatlantic migration, not least to the Carolinas, and of strengthening Ulster trade connections with the Middle Colonies. It was also a time when the extant sources throwing light on the formation of Protestant public opinion in the province were becoming quite rich, notably the *Belfast Newsletter* – 'the puritan-journal, impress'd at Belfast' (p. 41),

the region's first (and still surviving) newspaper; although established in 1737, few issues before 1750 survive, but by that point it was probably the most successful provincial newspaper in Ireland. Bankhurst makes excellent use of the *Newsletter* files for the 1750s and 1760s and credits the Joy family, its long-serving owner-editors, as critical in providing the dissenter world of east Ulster with an enlarged window into what was happening to their kin and co-religionists in the woody wildernesses of Pennsylvania, Virginia and north Carolina, and also giving them a voice to reflect on it all. The actual role of different family members of the Joy family remains shadowy (this indeed may be difficult to establish), but if their role was so critical, some comparison with other 18th-century newspaper publishers in Ireland and Scotland might have been illuminating.

But Bankhurst has shaped, from the *Newsletter* and some limited archival nuggets, a strong argument: that the reportage of Native American violence, combined with ancestral memories of Irish Catholic violence against settlers in 1641, helped mould a pervasive and quite distinct sense of British imperial identity among Ulster Presbyterians, first evident in the 1750s. His content analysis of the *Newsletter*, benchmarked against two Dublin titles, does indeed suggest a particular northern fascination with news from the frontier – or at least with news that fitted the positive narrative of settlers and their heroic struggles. The less than heroic reports of the Paxton Boys in western Pennsylvania and the political controversies surrounding their violent attacks on the Conestoga Indians evoked only 'limited coverage' in the *Newsletter*, despite the Ulster origins of the protagonists (p. 173n.).

But Bankhurst's principal argument provokes a litany of questions: how does this moment of imperial enthusiasm relate to the strong but passive support in Presbyterian Ulster for the American cause in the 1770s? Here one would have liked far more engagement with Vincent Morley's arguments on Irish (and principally) Catholic attitudes towards empire and America in the lead-up to the Revolution.⁽³⁾ And what implications does the argument have for our understanding of the political radicalism of many Ulster Presbyterian communities in the 1780s and 1790s? And how does public sentiment in Presbyterian Ulster in the 1750s and 1760s compare with the spectrum of attitudes towards empire in lowland Scotland, or in Anglican Ulster for that matter, or indeed among Presbyterians in Dublin (who at least get a minor walk-on role here)?

Setting aside such questions, there is no disputing that the robust human and commercial links between Belfast, Derry, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston and their respective hinterlands had huge cultural ramifications. Yet identifying and measuring these reciprocal relationships is no easy task. The fluidity of identity among the 'Scots Irish' in colonial America (the inverted commas tell their own story) and, later, the fluidity of communal memory as to who they were and where they came from has tricked many an historian. Here Bankhurst's careful reconstruction of American Presbyterian fund-raising among Ulster congregations is exactly the kind of concrete evidence needed to advance the argument: it seems that despite active fund-raising little or nothing was contributed in Ulster in the 1750s in the drive to support Princeton, whereas relatively generous contributions were made in 1760–2 to support Presbyterian ministers in the backcountry. Outside Antrim and Down, financial support came from Dublin and from the north-west; some of the wealthiest Presbyterians in the country (bankers and linen merchants) were to be found in the capital and not yet in Belfast, but why the relative generosity of the north-west? The answer must be that since the 1710s it had been one of the strongest centres of emigration to America, and thus it turns out that two of the townships in Lancaster County where the Paxton Boys hailed from carried the names 'Derry' and 'Donegal'.

In explaining the general background to such fund-raising, Bankhurst provides a somewhat uncertain picture, at times characterizing 18th-century Ulster as a fairly depressed, exploitative world where tenants were weighed down by onerous tithes and rising rents, but at others recognizing it as a region that was very actively engaged in the north Atlantic economy and a real beneficiary of empire. The reader is left somewhat unclear as to where the emphasis should lie. In fact, the principal districts of heavy Presbyterian emigration in the east and north-west of the province had indeed suffered very depressed conditions and severe food shortages in the 1720s, coinciding with the first upsurge in migration westwards, but those migrating between the mid-1740s and the 1770s were leaving what was now the most prosperous region in Ireland

thanks to the development of the rural linen industry, an industry dependent on the wholesale importation of flaxseed from the Middle Colonies and enjoying privileged access to colonial American markets for the end product. In the third quarter of the century great numbers were still departing from the Ulster ports in seasons when linen prices were depressed, but the young and predominantly male Protestants were now opportunistic rather than crisis migrants. Scots Irish memories of the old country rarely, one suspects, captured how much it was changing for the better.

That said, Bankhurst is certainly onto something very interesting in focusing attention on the Seven Years War. After the near panic and fears of French victory in 1755–6, the public reaction to the news of military and naval victory in the *annus mirabilis* of 1759 was unprecedented and extravagant across the whole British world: no surprise here. But in suggesting that the intense public celebrations and patriotic displays meant very different things in different cultural settings, Bankhurst is building on what Stephen Conway first argued a decade ago.⁽⁴⁾ Here the case is much more strongly demonstrated, and this should encourage historians of 18th-century Ireland to re-examine these years as a critical moment in the moulding of the public sphere. But the implications may be wider. As he reminds us, the Seven Years War was the first European conflict in more than a century where Protestant and Catholic powers were neatly ranged against each other, and this encouraged a providential reading of its outcome. Thus, even such a sturdy political economist as Arthur Dobbs, Ulster landowner turned governor of North Carolina, could begin to see in British victories the working out of prophecy ‘as the time of the end approaches’ (p. 72). Doubtless many of the Antrim migrants whom he had recently encouraged to cross the Atlantic may have shared his apocalyptic world view. These were perhaps ‘Britons’ indeed, but with a difference.

Notes

1. Marianne S. Wokeck, *Trade in Strangers: The Beginnings of Mass Migration to North America* (University Park, PA, 1999); Patrick Griffin, *The People With No Name: Ireland’s Ulster Scots, America’s Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic world, 1689–1764* (Princeton, NK, 2001); Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling & David N. Doyle, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canann: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675–1815* (New York, NY, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ulster Presbyterians in the Atlantic World: Religion, Politics and Identity*, ed. David A. Wilson & Mark G. Spencer (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006); *Ulster to America: The Scots-Irish Migration Experience 1680–1830*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Knoxville, TN, 2012). To these could be added two major but very different works: Fintan O’Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America* (London, 2005); and Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn’s Holy Experiment* (Oxford, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Vincent Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution 1760–1783* (Cambridge, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Stephen Conway, *War, State and Society in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2006), esp. chap. ten.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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