

CHARLES WOODMASON AND THE SCOTS-IRISH PRESBYTERIANS

Because of their great involvement in the makeup of Southern Culture, they have been labeled as *the blue blood of the South*.

Many contemporary accounts, however, refer to them simply as *Irish* or *Irish Presbyterians*.

The great Scots-Irish migrations began in earnest, as thousands upon thousands left Ulster for the American colonies.

They boarded ship at Belfast, Derry, or Larne. They brought with them to America only the few clothes, tools, and books which they could pack in their wooden sea chests. Huddled below deck in the ship's hold, they endured a voyage which lasted eight weeks or more. They continued to come right up to the beginning of the Revolutionary War. Most of the Scots-Irish arrivals first settled in the mid-Atlantic colonies -- particularly Pennsylvania and Maryland. These Scots and Scots-Irish who poured into America were hardy middle-class farmers and craftsmen who suffered in the Old World from their industriousness and their religious beliefs.

The Quakers whom had earlier settled Pennsylvania, decided that these new arrivals could be very useful to them as a buffer against the natives to the west. So the immigrants were steered toward the western lands of Pennsylvania by the colony's Quaker officials, but as more and more entered the colony the land available to them became more difficult to obtain and problems began to arise between the Scots-Irish and the Quakers. James Logan, himself a Scotsman and the Secretary to Pennsylvania's Quaker government, was alarmed at the rapidly growing influx of settlers into Pennsylvania from Northern Ireland. Logan reported to the colonial government, *It looks as if Ireland is to send all her inhabitants hither, for last week not less than six ships arrived...The common fear is that if they continue to come they will make themselves proprietors of the province*. He further commented on the cause of his consternation, *...that the settlement of five families from Ireland gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people*.

After 1725 a land problem developed in Pennsylvania. Good land became scarce on the frontier and the cost of farms in the east had become prohibitive. This was the single most important cause for the southward movement. The frontier settlements grew particularly apprehensive because of their exposure to attack by Indian allies of the French. The prospect of war with France in Canada and the Ohio Valley caused a further migration. In order to rid themselves of the ever increasing rents and land prices in Pennsylvania these Scots-Irish once again began to look for greener pastures. They found them to the South, in the Valley of Virginia and eventually in the Carolina Piedmont.

The Scots-Irish began moving southward in 1726 down the Great Wagon Road into the Valley of Virginia behind the Germans who first began the trek. Within ten years, the Valley of Virginia had filled. This led to settlement of the Carolina frontier beginning with the Yadkin River Valley and then moving further west to the Catawba River Valley. The population grew rapidly, so much so, that by 1776 an estimated one half of the population of the entire colony was located above the fall line. Moreover, 79% of the white population was located in this same area. It was much the same in North Carolina with two-fifths of the population located west of the Yadkin

River.

One early English visitor to the area of the Catawba Valley left a description of the region and its early inhabitants. *Many creeks take their rise in this Quarter--so that a finer Body of Land is no where to be seen--But it is occupied by a Sett of the most lowest vilest Crew breathing--Scotch Irish Presbyterians from the North of Ireland--They have built a Meeting House and have a Pastor, a Scots Man among them.*

Between 1731 and 1776, an estimated 250,000 emigrants fled Northern Ireland, for one reason or another, to the shores of America. Many of these Scots-Irish eventually settled in this area of the Carolinas. One such immigrant was the Rev. William Martin.

William Martin of Ballymoney was ordained in 1757 in Northern Ireland. At the time of his ordination, he had pastoral care of the greater part of County Antrim in eastern Northern Ireland. Martin was a Covenanter Presbyterian and served the Kellswater congregation. During the agrarian revolts of the early 1770s in Northern Ireland, Martin and much of his congregation found themselves embroiled in the violence against the landlords and the British Crown. As a result, Martin gathered his people together and they set sail for new homes.

In early 1772, five shiploads of immigrant families, 467 in all, under Martin's leadership set out from the Northern Ireland port cities of Belfast, Larne and Newry. They sailed aboard the *James and Mary*, *Lord Dunluce*, *Hopewell*, *Pennsylvania Farmer*, and *Freemason*. Finally in late October, the first of these ships arrived in Charleston. The remaining ships arrived in Charleston between that time and January 1773. They settled throughout the South Carolina counties of Chester, York, Union, Lancaster, Spartanburg, and Laurens; and they formed the backbone of the Scots-Irish resistance to the British Crown during the American Revolution.

The greatest number of the immigrants settled in Chester County, with York close behind. From the best information we have, an estimated twenty-nine families from the "Martin group" settled in York County; nearly all in the eastern or southwestern part of the county.

Among them were family names such as: Adams, Blair, Crawford, McCree, Gibson, Gray, Gaston, Stinson, Wylie, McKnight, and Beard to name just a few.

Local authorities and the prospect of economic opportunities encouraged migration into the area. As had been the case in Pennsylvania, the Scots-Irish were initially welcomed by the Carolina authorities as a buffer against the Native Indians. During the years 1754-65, Arthur Dobs, governor of the North Carolina colony and an Ulsterman himself, actively encouraged his fellow countrymen, both in Ireland and America, to move to his colony. Using letters, he explained how plentiful and fertile the land was so that by the early 1750s, dozens of Ulster families had moved into the area between the Yadkin and Catawba River Valleys. By the time the Revolution reached the region in 1780, the Backcountry contained an estimated population of more than a quarter of a million. Not all of these were Scots-Irish Presbyterians. There were smaller numbers of English, Welsh, native Irish, Swiss, French, and Germans included in the population estimates, but the Scots-Irish were by far the most numerous.

Most of the settlers were overwhelmingly allied by blood and religion. As there were no villages established in the region until after the war, the first inhabitants settled in loose, communal or clannish, family-related groups called *clachans*, much as they had originally done in Ulster, and later in Pennsylvania and Virginia. These clachans developed around the Presbyterian Kirks, or meetinghouses, and became the forerunners of the congregations. The congregation

generally encompassed a 5 to 10 mile radius centered on the meetinghouse as this was deemed the distance one could travel for service and back home in the same day. Within this congregation lived anywhere from 20 to 500 families. One English traveler recorded his observations; *...this Part of the Province...has been settled within these 5 years by Irish Presbyterians from Belfast or Pennsylvania...they built Meeting Houses and got Pastors from Ireland, and Scotland.*

In 1705, there were about seven Presbyterian congregations in North America. By 1728 it was reported that 200,000 Presbyterians from the Synod of Ulster, along with 130 of their ministers were on their way to America. By 1760, the number of Prebyterian congregations had grown to 600, proving that Prebyterianism was fast becoming the dominant religious force in American. In 1768, a missionary from the Synod of New York and Pennsylvania discovered 38 Presbyterian settlements in South Carolina. At the opening of the Revolution there were 70 of them in South Carolina.

Charles Woodmason, an itinerant Anglican minister from England sent into the Backcountry as a missionary in the 1760s, was shocked at the numbers of Scots-Irish he saw throughout the region. Woodmason was one of the more biased observers of the people of the Backcountry, but he was also a participant, and as such, his observations are worth looking at.

Commenting on the Waxhaw settlement, Woodmason stated that he traveled *...into the Waxhaw District among a Tribe of Presbyterians* and here he found the area, *...most surprisingly thick settled beyond any Spot in England...Seldom less than 9, 10, 1200 People assemble of a Sunday.* Woodmason also reported another visit to the Waxhaw settlement; *...having engaged my Self for next Sunday at the Settlement of Irish Presbyterians called the Waxhaws, among whome were several church People.* Still within the Waxhaw settlement, at Hanging Rock Creek in southern Lancaster County, Woodmason, *...found the Houses filled with debauch'd licentious fellows, and Scot Presbyterians.* On another one of his travels within the settlement, Woodmason came across another group, *...which consisted wholly of Irish Presbyterians and lawless Persons.* It is not clear whether Woodmason's reference to *lawless Persons* was a description of the Scots-Irish or the Scots, but knowing Woodmason it had to be one or the other.

It seems that the Scots and Scots-Irish have never been in need of descriptions, even in their own countries. They were either loved or hated, and have been variously characterized as *crafty, cunning, covetous, sly, and would venture very near the margin of hell for two-pence.* They were also known to be hard working and thrifty, with an ultimate goal of bettering their condition in life; but above all they were deeply religious. The Presbyterian beliefs of our early forefathers were not just segments of a religion, but were an entire attitude. This strong attitude sometimes meant that they were not the easiest to get along with. We have all heard, no doubt, that the Scots and Scots-Irish, *always kept the word of God (and anything else they could get their hands on).* We have a number of contemporary accounts of how the Scots and Scots-Irish were perceived by those around them. One such person who did not think very highly of these people was General Charles Lee, the commander of American forces in Charleston in 1776 when the British attempt to take the city failed. The American army in Charleston at that time was dominated by Scots and Scots-Irish. In his will Lee wrote, *I desire most earnestly that I may not be buried in any church, or church-yard, or within a mile of any Presbyterian or Anabaptist meeting-house; for since I have resided in this country, I have had so much bad company while living, that I do not choose to continue it when dead.*

Clement Eaton in his book, *A History of the Old South* described them thusly; *They were selfreliant and devoted to principle -- these serious Presbyterian folk, who often lacked humor, demonstrativeness, and an appreciation for esthetic qualities. Accustomed to turbulent border fighting in Ireland, they made excellent frontiersmen and Indian fighters. They were distinguished from their German neighbors by their zest and capacity in politics.*

From the history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church; ... *they enjoyed a life in which nothing of earthly comfort was wanting. Year after year the patch enlarged, the field becoming to the respectable dimensions of ten acres, and then a good clearing for a farm. Every Sabbath morning the parents, in their "Sunday clothes," with their neatly dressed and well-behaved little ones, might be seen at the log meeting-house; their pocket Bibles containing the old Psalms in their hands, and, turning over the leaves, they would follow the preacher in all the passages of Scripture cited by him, as he commented upon the verses. Their simple. Trustful piety caused the wilderness to rejoice.*

Albeit somewhat biased, the attitude of Woodmason toward the inhabitants of the region was indicative of the attitudes displayed by many of the colonial officials. He wrote of them that, *True Genuine Christianity is not to be found. And the perverse persecuting Spirit of the Presbyterians, displays it Self much more here than in Scotland. It is dang'rous to live among, or near any of them--for if they cannot cheat, rob, defraud or injure You in Your Goods--they will belye, defame, lessen, blacken disparage the most valuable Person breathing...They have almost worm'd out all the Church People who cannot bear to live among such a Sett of Vile unaccountable Wretches. [They are] Ignorant, mean, worthless, beggarly Irish Presbyterians, the Scum of the Earth, and Refuse of Mankind.. These Northern Scotch Irish...are certainly the worst Vermin on Earth.* Woodmason also mentioned a fellow Episcopalian minister who had felt the scorn of these Presbyterian wretches; ...*he could not escape the Censure of these flighty, Proud, Illprincipled Carolinians. They are enough to make any Person run mad--And they crack'd the Brain of one Young Man...I would not wish my worst Enemy to come to this Country (at least to this) Part of it...Such Enemies to Christ and his Cross, are these vile Presbyterians.* Now, in case there are any Baptist out there in the audience who are just now counting their blessings that Woodmason missed them, think again. He thought even less of the religious beliefs of the Baptist than of the Presbyterians; but because he is constantly in contact with the Scots-Irish Presbyterians, he reserves most of his comments for them. He does, however, refer to the Baptist as *the Venereal Distemper.*

Woodmason was also highly critical of what he considered "typical" Presbyterian worshippers; the meetinghouse *had a large Congregation--but according to Custom, one half of them got drunk before they went home.* On another occasion Woodmason reported, *This Day we had another Specimen of the Envy Malice and Temper of the Presbyterians--They gave away 2 Barrels of Whiskey to the Populace to make drink, and to disturb the Service...The Company got drunk by 10 oClock and we could hear them firing, hooping, and hallowing like Indians...They are the lowest Pack of Wretches--As wild as the very Deer--No making of them sit still during Service--but they will be in and out--forward and backward the whole Time (Women especially) as Bees to and fro to their Hives.*

Some of Woodmason's impatience with the people may have been justified. On one occasion he recorded that while he was attempting to deliver a sermon to an assembled group,

...the Service was greatly interrupted by a Gang of Presbyterians who kept hallooing [hollering] and whooping without [the] Door like Indians. On another occasion he noted, they hir'd a Band of rude fellows to come to Service who brought with them 57 Dogs (for I counted them) which in Time of Service they set to fighting, and I was obliged to stop. When everything quieted down Woodmason tried to continue, and again the service was interrupted by the barking and fighting dogs. He further explained his situation in not seeking charges against this band of ruffians, ...as all the Magistrates are Presbyterians, [and] I could not get a warrant--if I got Warrants as the Constables are Presbyterians likewise, I could not get them serv'd--If serv'd, the Guard would let them escape.

This may have resulted in his haranging the members of congregations where he preached to, *Bring no Dogs with You--they are very troublesome.* Woodmason also chastized the people to withhold from the *...unseemly, rude, indecent Custom of Chewing or of Spitting* during the service *especially in [the] Women.*

In the 1770s a new group of Ulster Scots arrived in the area. These Scots-Irish families hailed from the Larne area of County Antrim, Northern Ireland. They were Covenanters under the leadership and guidance of Rev. William Martin, who with his congregation, left Larne to settle in what would eventually become York, Chester, Lancaster, and Union counties of South Carolina. These Covenanters had come to America to escape the persecutions of the British authorities, and they would not easily forget the British Crown.

The Scots-Irish settlers naturally looked to the leadership of their ministers in nearly all aspects of life. This was due in large measure to the Presbyterian insistence on a well-educated clergy. This insistence also placed pressure on the families to produce a more literate community. The interest in literacy led to the creation of a number of reading societies prior to the Revolution. Many of these societies were at the center of revolutionary ideas and became the objects of British attention as in the case of Rev. John Simpson, the minister of Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church in Chester County, who had his library burned by Captain Christian Huck of Tarleton's Legion in the summer of 1780. Rev. Simpson served in rebel forces as a simple rifleman a number of times during the war.

The Presbyterian ministers who followed the settlers into the wilderness, according to author Lewis Wright, *...were apostles of both religion and learning.* They were the most influential voices within their communities. As the late Chalmers Davidson of Davidson College once put it; *The seeds of resistance to British authority were sown in the Presbyterian Churches that made captains and colonels out of deacons and elders.* The Presbyterian ministers preached them into battle, much as their Covenanter ancestors had done in Scotland. Rev. William Martin, who had arrived in 1772, became the minister of Rocky Creek Presbyterian Church of Chester County. He had left Ballymoney, County Antrim, Northern Ireland for the South Carolina Backcountry with his flock during the Agrarian Revolts. In 1780, he was arrested and charged with *preaching rebellion from the pulpit.* One John Harris, the minister of Bethesda Presbyterian Church in southern York County was said to have preached with his musket propped against the pulpit and a powder horn around his neck.

There were a number of other ministers from the Catawba River Valley who played a significant part in the revolutionary movement within the region. The *father* of this revolutionary movement was Rev. Alexander Craighead.

A native of County Donegal, Northern Ireland, Craighead came to the Catawba River Valley in 1758 as the minister of Rocky River Presbyterian Church in North Carolina. He lived the remainder of his life in the Valley. Before his death in 1766, Craighead was instrumental in forming many of the original churches in the Backcountry. He was noted for *preaching sermons peculiarly calculated to awaken careless sinners*. He was most famous, or infamous, for his adamant views on civil government and religious liberty, often delivering discourses on the necessity of the separation of church and state. After Craighead's death, his standard and that of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians would pass to William Richardson.

Born in England of Scottish descent, William Richardson attended the University of Glasgow. At the age of 21 he emigrated to America from Scotland. In the colonies, he was a student of the famous Rev. Samuel Davis of Virginia. Richardson was licensed by Cumberland Presbytery in 1758. Ordained as a missionary the following summer, he was sent to the Cherokee Upper Towns. On his way to the Cherokees he ordained Alexander Craighead at Rocky River. Richardson later married Craighead's daughter. Finding the Cherokee unwilling to accept his offers to preach among them he returned to South Carolina and accepted the pastorate at the Waxhaws. By the time of his death he was well known throughout most of the South Carolina Backcountry. Woodmason, who was acquainted with Richardson, explained that he was, *...a good sort of man, had been of the Church of England but was refused ordination and so had turned to the Presbyterians*.

The news of Charleston's surrender came in early spring of 1780. *Still worse news came from across the river [Catawba] -- of the inhuman massacre of Buford's command by Tarleton's corps at Waxhaws. This event gave a more sanguinary character to the war. Directly after this appalling announcement, spread the rumour that a strong party of British was posted at Rocky Mount, that the people of Wateree were flocking to take protection as loyal subjects, and that the conquerors were sending forces in every direction to reduce the Province to subjection. Such was the aspect of affairs up to a certain Sabbath in June, 1780. On the morning of this memorable Sabbath, the different paths leading up to the log meeting house were unusually crowded. The old country folk were dressed with their usual neatness, especially the women, whose braw garments, brought from Ireland, were carefully preserved, not merely from thrift, but as a memorial of the green isle of their birth.*

Upon this particular Sabbath, the whole neighborhood seemed to have turned out, and every face wore an expression of anxiety. Groups of men might be seen gathered together under shade trees in every direction, talking in loud and earnest tones, some laying down plans for the assent of their friends; some pale with alarm and listened to others telling the news; and some, transported with indignation, stamped the ground and gesticulated vehemently as they spoke. Everywhere the women mingled with the different groups, and appeared to bear an active part in what was going on. At eleven o'clock, precisely, the venerable form of William Martin, the preacher, came in sight. He was about sixty years of age, and had a high reputation for learning and eloquence. He was a large and powerful man, with a voice that might be heard at the distance of a mile. As he walked from the place where he hitched his horse, towards the stand (it being customary when the congregation was too large to be accommodated in the meeting-house, to have the service in the open air), the loud and angry words of the speakers must have reached his ears. The voices ceased as he approached, and the congregation was soon seated in

silence upon the logs surrounding the stand. When he arose to speak every eye was fixed upon him. Those who had been most noisy expected a reproof for their desecration of the Sabbath, for their faithful pastor was never known to fail of rebuking those whose deportment was unsuited to the solemnity of the day. But at this time he also seemed absorbed with the great subject that agitated every bosom. "My hearers," he said, in his broad, distinct Irish dialect, "talk and angry words will do no good. WE MUST FIGHT! As your pastor, in preparing a discourse suited to this time of trial, I have sought for all light; I have examined the Scriptures and other helps in ancient and modern history, and have especially considered the controversy between the United Colonies and the mother country. Sorely have our countrymen been dealt with, till forced to their declaration of independence. Our forefathers in Scotland made a similar one, and maintained that declaration with their lives. It is now our turn, brethren, to maintain this at all hazards." After the prayer, and singing of the Psalms, he calmly opened his discourse. He cited many passages of Scripture to show that a people may lawfully resist wicked rulers; pointed to historical examples of princes trampling upon the rights of the people; painted in vivid colors the rise and progress of the Reformation in Scotland; and finally applied the subject by fairly stating the merits of the revolutionary controversy. Giving a brief sketch of the events of the war, from the first shedding of blood at Lexington, and, warming with the subject as he proceeded, his address became eloquent with his fiery energy. In a voice like thunder, frequently striking with his clenched fist the clapboard pulpit, he appealed to the excited concourse, exhorting them to fight valiantly in defence of their liberties. As he dwelt upon the recent horrid tragedy -- the butchery of Buford's men, cut down by the British dragoons while crying for mercy -- his indignation reached its height. Stretching out his hand toward Waxhaws -- "Go see," he cried, "the tender mercies of Great Britain! In that church you may find men, though still alive, hacked out of the very semblance of humanity; some deprived of their arms, some of one arm or leg, some with both legs cut off, and others with mutilated trunks. Is not this cruelty a parallel to the history of our Scottish forefathers, driven from their conventicles, and hunted as beasts of the forest? Behold the godly youth, James Nesbit, chased for days by the British for the crime of being seen on his knees upon the Sabbath morning!" To this stirring sermon the whole assembly responded. Hands were clenched and teeth set in the intensity of feeling; every uplifted face expressed the same determination, and even the women were filled with the spirit that threatened vengeance upon the invaders.

Woodmason offers some insights into the teachings of the Presbyterian ministers. *Not less than 20 Itinerant Presbyterian...Preachers are maintain'd by the Synod of Pennsylvania...to traverse this Country Poisoning the Minds of the People—Instilling Democratical and Common Wealth Principles into their Minds—Embittering them against the very Name of Bishops, and all Episcopal Government and laying deep their fatal Republican Notions and Principles—Especially—That they owe no Subjection to Great Britain—That they are a free People.* A British Lieutenant captured after Kings Mountain and marched into North Carolina as a prisoner commented on what he considered the outlandish beliefs of the Scots-Irish Presbyterians. *Sunday, 29th [October, 1780] Col. Cleveland waited on Capt. DePreyster and the rest of the officers, and asked us if we, with our men, would come and hear a sermon at ten o'clock. He marched the militia prisoners from their encampment to the town [Bethabara], and halted them; and sent an officer to acquaint us they were waiting for us. We then ordered our men to fall in; marched to*

the front of the prisoners; the whole then proceeded on to a height about half a mile from the town. Here we heard a Presbyterian sermon, truly adapted to their principles and the times; or rather, stuffed as full of Republicanism as their camp is of horse thieves. These two Englishmen were not alone in their attitudes and observations of the ministers of the Scots-Irish. The same views were shared by many in Great Britain itself. British writer Horace Walpole declared; *There is no use crying about it. Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson, and that is the end of it.*

In the Backcountry, due to their isolation from the coast, past resentments could be put aside--at least temporarily. When war arrived after 1776, at first the Scots-Irish were rather lukewarm toward the idea of independence from Great Britain. Here they were content to remain neutral so long as they were left alone. The conflict as most of the Scots-Irish saw it was between the British Crown and the Charleston aristocrats, whom most resented as much as the British officials. The problems between the Backcountry and the Crown finally boiled to the surface in the form of a *Presbyterian Rebellion*.

In 1780, when the British finally arrived in the Backcountry, and particularly in the Lower Catawba River Valley, they were met by the Presbyterians ministers and their congregations. Woodmason noted the importance of the churches to the Scots-Irish; *They have now got a Schoolmaster...An old Presbyterian fellow, or between that and a Quaker--They send their Children to him readily, and pay him, tho' they would not to me, who would have educated them. Such is their attachment to their Kirk.* Banastre Tarleton, in his memoirs of the campaigns in the South in 1780 and 1781, makes mention of a *short expedition* [by Colonel Lord Rawdon in June 1780] *into a settlement of Irish, situated in the Waxhaws.* When Rawdon left the settlement, the church was burned because, *All Presbyterian churches are shops of sedition.* Tarleton made further reference to the Scots-Irish when he wrote, *...the Irish were the most averse of all other settlers to the British government in America.*

Other, later historians have also recognized the contributions of the Scots-Irish to the American cause in the Revolutionary War. One noted English historian remarked some years after the war that, *Throughout the revolted colonies...the foremost, the most irreconcilable, the most determined in pushing the quarrel to the last extremity, were the Scotch-Irish.* George Bancroft, recognized as the *father of American Historians* and the most dominant historical personality of the 19th century once wrote, *...the first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve the connection with Great Britain came, not from the Puritans of New England, nor the Dutch of New York, nor the planters of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.*