

INTRODUCTION



This is the story of Irish immigrants who sought to recreate an Old-World ethnoreligious culture and in so doing established Presbyterianism in western Pennsylvania. This study attempts to understand their translation of religious belief and practice from the north of Ireland to western Pennsylvania, how ritual and that translation functioned, and how and why change occurred.

Although there have been numerous books on “Scotch Irish Presbyterians” (variously styled), this is the first sustained examination of Irish Presbyterian religious culture in the early national period, and in a region that saw a heavy concentration of Presbyterians from Ireland. Such a book is long overdue.¹

This is both a historical study of an American region transitioning from the colonial to the early republic eras and an examination of an Irish diaspora. The Presbyterians who contributed the making of western Pennsylvania at the turn of the nineteenth century largely understood their faith through the prism of Irish experience.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, Ireland’s Presbyterianism encompassed numerous, fractious, competing denominations and tendencies. Despite differences, Irish Presbyterians shared distinctive commonalities, especially within Ulster, Ireland’s northern province. Fundamental ideas of Presbyterianism, both creed and church governance, came from Scotland and that nation’s protracted reformation. So, too, did many Presbyterian families.

But they shared more than a common Scots legacy: their communities also had the experience of being Scots Presbyterians in Ireland, contributing to change in Ireland that altered their understanding of Presbyterianism even as Presbyterianism in Scotland underwent change. The Irish experience was a defining moment for the Presbyterians.

Situated between the disenfranchised Catholic Irish majority and the Anglican ruling minority, Ulster Presbyterians clung to their distinctive creed while creating through their church structure a kind of state within a state.² Through their attachment to a very Scottish brand of Presbyterianism in an Irish context, Ulster Scots created a regional particularism

that set them apart. The differences within their Presbyterianism became a hallmark of the Ulster Presbyterian system. Among Ulster Presbyterians, Irish conditions created loyalty to and understanding of their “Scottish” creed, which was not always readily accepted or recognized by American or Scots Presbyterians in the Pennsylvania backcountry.

When Presbyterians left Ireland, they did so for Irish reasons, their values, politics, and aspirations shaped by Irish history and experience. In the American colonies and new United States, these Presbyterians may have been distinguishable from immigrants of native Irish background who were Catholic in religion. But they were also distinct from Scots.³

Experiences in Ireland and migration across the Atlantic and into the American backcountry from 1770 to 1830 shaped the outlook of networks of individuals, families, friends, and old and new neighbors whose ethno-religious culture gave rise to a robust regional Presbyterianism. Presbyterians predominated in Irish migration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And western Pennsylvania figured as a preeminent destination. In a study published in 2016, Rankin Sherling makes a convincing argument that Irish Presbyterian clerical migration is a reliable indicator of Irish Presbyterian migration overall. Pennsylvania (as a whole) accounted for more than half of the known places of settlement for Irish Presbyterian ministers between 1770 and 1810.⁴ Those with origins in the north of Ireland, both lay and clerical, built regional Presbyterianism congregation by congregation. They brought with them organizational structures, rituals, and theology.

Leaving an Ireland in which they were “second-class subjects in a second-rate kingdom,” Presbyterians settling in western Pennsylvania looked to create a new Ulster free from the encumbrances and restrictions of landlordism and the episcopalian church establishment. Settlement in the transappalachian West meant economic opportunity, political liberty, and creation of godly communities according to the particular vision of various Irish Presbyterian tendencies. In his study of Irish Presbyterian migration to eastern Pennsylvania earlier in the eighteenth century, Patrick Griffin proposed, “Pennsylvania appeared to men and women of the north as a perfect Ulster, one where opportunities coexisted with religious freedom. In these years, therefore, as they looked inward to make sense of profound change, they also looked outward to reconstruct their vision of Ulster.”⁵ We argue here that something similar occurred in western Pennsylvania among later generations of migrants.

Presbyterianism represented the chief cultural marker of the majority

of Irishwomen and Irishmen who settled in the transappalachian West. The region, still home to a disproportionately large Presbyterian population, became a long-standing denominational bastion in the early republic and site of a Presbyterian-dominated Irish diaspora.⁶

Irish Presbyterians and the Shaping of Western Pennsylvania seeks to build on recent studies of Irish and Presbyterian migration to North America, including some volumes to which I contributed. Of particular relevance to this project are David Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States* (1998); Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name* (2001); Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David N. Doyle, editors, *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan* (2003); David A. Wilson and Mark G. Spencer, editors, *Ulster Presbyterians in the Atlantic World* (2006); Kerby A. Miller, *Ireland and Irish America* (2008); Warren Hofstra, editor, *Ulster to America* (2012); Joseph Moore, *Founding Sins* (2016); and Rankin Sherling, *The Invisible Irish* (2016). In numerous ways, the various scholars participating in these projects strove to produce insightful, evidence-based studies that looked at Irish Presbyterians of Scottish origin in the context of change within the Atlantic archipelago and wider Atlantic world. The authors' awareness of contextual dynamism help produce work often unlike the "Scotch Irish" studies of previous decades and generations.

As this book emphasizes the Irish origins of western Pennsylvanian Presbyterianism, I have relied on and benefited from the relevant historiography of Irish Presbyterianism. In particular, a debt is owed to Andrew Holmes and *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840*. Holmes offers a substantive portrayal of traditional Ulster Presbyterianism before the nineteenth-century triumph of evangelicalism, allowing for its internal differences while demonstrating its common contours. Holmes's book represents the "control" to this experiment, this exploration of diasporic religious belief and practice. In Ulster, Holmes concludes, "Presbyterians saw themselves as a separate community and as a covenanted people." As the following pages will make clear, this author makes a similar claim for those in western Pennsylvania.⁷

The present volume is not another book on the Scotch Irish (or, if one prefers, the Scots Irish). "Irish Presbyterian" as used in this book generally refers to the people often regarded as "Scotch Irish," "Scots Irish" or "Ulster Scots." Those terms, with their considerable and oftentimes misleading ideological baggage, do not appear in this study except within quotation marks. "Scotch Irish" is largely anachronistic with respect to the colonial and early national periods, as the immigrants tended to

refer to themselves as Irish.⁸ In earlier publications, “Scotch Irish” is often used only in connection with the colonial era. A leading twentieth-century historian of the group proposed that “the story of the shaping of the Scotch-Irish people and of the part they played in American life ends . . . with the Revolutionary War.” James Leyburn said that although migration from Ulster resumed after the Revolution, newcomers “did not seek out Scotch-Irish communities in their country of adoption.” These conclusions are demonstrably false with respect to western Pennsylvania. Leyburn’s consideration of postrevolutionary migration ignores (and in ignoring, misjudges) the volume of that migration.⁹

Most problematically, the term “Scotch Irish” is an invitation to overemphasize Scottish origins at the expense of the Irish realities that defined the group and its religiosity. “Scotch Irish” tends toward a homogenization of Presbyterianism that ignores the distinctiveness of Irish conditions, especially the civil penalties and political and economic subordination imposed on Irish Presbyterians and a religious life that often emphasized a hypertraditionalism.

The “Irish Presbyterian” designation employed throughout this study emphasizes the Irish dimension of the subjects’ transatlantic migration and the Irish origins of their worldview and cultural practices, in particular their Presbyterianism. “Presbyterian” is used for the obvious reason that the study is concerned with faith life and religious practices.

What does “Presbyterian” mean? In its most essential meaning, the term refers to a form of church government. A Presbyterian church structure, from the bottom up, consists of ever larger judicatories: session, presbytery, synod, assembly. A session consists of a congregation’s minister and elected elders. A presbytery is a representative body consisting of ministers and elders from several congregations with the responsibility of assisting and coordinating the work of the church within a specific geographic territory. Synods are church councils with representatives from presbyteries and broader geographic responsibilities.

But “Presbyterian” means more than the historic substitution of representative bodies for the episcopal hierarchy that had long dominated Western Christianity. As the collective product of the more radical variant of Protestantism that challenged Lutheranism in the sixteenth century, Presbyterian belief emphasized the sovereignty of a triune God, the insufficiency of fallen humanity to achieve salvation, and the indispensable role of grace. The preaching of the Word and the two sacraments prescribed by the Reformed tradition—baptism and communion—

became understood as the means by which humans receive grace. Presbyterians embraced scripture as the revealed will of God. Reformed Protestant formulations of belief, especially the Westminster Confessions of Faith (1646), served as revered summaries and applications of scripture. The Presbyterianism that came to western Pennsylvania grew out of experiences and struggles—spiritual, ecclesiological, and political—in Scotland first of all but later and especially in Ireland.

For the purposes of this study, “Presbyterian” refers to the communicants and institutions of several denominations.¹⁰ A majority belonged to the Presbyterian Church in the United States, or General Assembly church, the mainstream American equivalent of Ireland’s General Synod. But significant minorities belonged to the organizational expressions of a more traditionally orthodox or doctrinally strict (or, as some would maintain, faithful) Presbyterianism: Associate Presbyterians (or “Seceders”), Associate Reformed Presbyterians (“Union Seceders”), and Reformed Presbyterians (“Covenanters”). And there were other, smaller variants, almost always with a clear connection to Ulster Presbyterian religiosity.

Communicants of these differing and frequently warring theological and ecclesiological tendencies constructed the region’s Irish Presbyterian ethnoreligious culture. Individual place of origin in Ireland, the year and circumstances of departure, migration experiences, timing and places of settlement, and consequent social standing all contributed to shaping differences. So too did the particular variety of Presbyterianism to which they adhered.

Presbyterianism, its meaning derived from Old-World practice and reinterpreted by American experience, united and divided migrants of Irish origin. The story of early western Pennsylvanian Presbyterians is necessarily a narrative of negotiation and contest among Presbyterian disputants and Irish immigrant cohorts—among those who arrived at different times and under differing circumstances. Discord and disagreement, transported in their cultural luggage, direct our attention yet again to commingled Irish and Presbyterian legacies. Their Presbyterianism became a means by which the Irish in western Pennsylvania ordered their lives and understood the world.

By locating the beginnings of western Pennsylvanian Presbyterianism within Irish communities, this book can address an unspoken but open question: what exactly *was* a “Scotch Irish Presbyterian,” as referenced in studies of the Pittsburgh region and colonial and early national periods? The answers can be found in the actual lived faith experiences of Irish

Presbyterians, within thick webs of interpersonal connections, Irish and migration experiences, and a wealth of rituals and beliefs which infused a communal worldview.

Presbyterians—both in the north of Ireland and in western Pennsylvania—understood and shaped their world through the preaching and study of scripture, recitation and reference to the confessions of faith believed to aptly summarize scripture, and regular ritual performance. Irish Presbyterians participated in family worship, catechesis, prayer meetings, community worship, sacraments and related rituals of chastisement, inclusion and exclusion, and observance of Sabbath and fast days. Their Reformed Protestant faith formally dispensed with the ritual of confession, yet informally they practiced such a rite in preparation for communion. Their Reformation forebears rejected pilgrimage, but they trekked miles to partake in sacred events. The belief that they were a covenanted people gave particular urgency to Presbyterians' prescribed ritual practices. Basic to their outlook was the understanding that they were collectively committed in mutually binding relations with the Supreme Being. Such a relationship, they believed, had immediate and eternal implications.

Along with familiar religious practices, early Irish immigrants to western Pennsylvania brought with them the sensibilities of protoindustrial peasant society. In frontier and postfrontier transappalachian society, their translated communalism was reinforced by the exigencies of subsistence farming and new settlements. (The suggestion that the migrant "Scotch Irish" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were "rugged individualists" would have come as a surprise to families who built their economic and religious lives around cooperation with each other.) Economic and social change altered the context for the practice of their faith. The intensified economic development of western Pennsylvania following the failure of popular struggles that culminated in the Whiskey Rebellion gradually facilitated a transformation of Presbyterian religiosity.

Most western Pennsylvanians in the period under study lived in the countryside, in protoindustrial (if not, at times, precapitalist) farming communities. To be sure, Presbyterians from the north of Ireland also settled in the market towns of Pittsburgh, Washington, and Canonsburg, where some worked as shopkeepers, artisans, and laborers. But overall, the experiences of townspeople were not those of the rural majority. Washington County had the largest population of any county in western Pennsylvania for most of the period, and substantial Irish Presbyterian

settlement. Buoyed by the growth of Pittsburgh, the recorded size of Allegheny County's population surpassed that of Washington for the first time only in the 1830 federal census. The town of Washington had a population of fewer than two thousand in 1830—less than 5 percent of the total population in a county.

By “western Pennsylvania” I refer to the territory west of the central Pennsylvania spine of the Appalachian Mountains (and west of Laurel Ridge), the region known as the Upper Ohio Valley—the territory drained by the Ohio's major tributaries (Allegheny, Monongahela, and Beaver) and the myriad creeks and streams feeding those rivers. The focus of this study is largely on the southwestern counties of Allegheny, Washington, and Westmoreland, then as now the region's population centers.

The period covered by this study, 1770–1830, begins with the trans-appalachian migration preceding the Revolutionary War and ends during the first administration of Andrew Jackson, the son of Irish Presbyterian immigrants and the first Irish American president. These years saw high levels of Irish Presbyterian migration to North America, much of the early development of western Pennsylvania, and the formative phase of regional Presbyterianism. The period ends before the completion of a transportation infrastructure (canals and railroads) vital for the region's full integration in the market, Pittsburgh's transition from a commercial to an industrial center, the immigration of large numbers of Irish Catholics, and the schism in mainstream Presbyterianism—and near the apogee of institutional change within Irish Presbyterianism.¹¹ The first two chapters describe the Irish migration to western Pennsylvania from 1770 to 1830 and the institutional beginnings of Presbyterianism in the region during those years. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the content of Presbyterian practice. Chapter 5 examines the revivalism that occurred in the wake of the Whiskey Rebellion. Chapter 6 uses the lens of revivalism to look closely at doctrinal differences among Presbyterians. The final chapter considers the effect of increased commercialism on precapitalist religious understanding and practices.

This study relied heavily on Presbyterian Church records, immigrant letters, contemporary publications (including newspapers, sermons, and polemical pamphlets), and civil records. The church records are mostly minutes kept by sessions and presbyteries of various denominations. Although an (approximate) end date of 1830 limited the range of available session minutes, those examined provided indispensable windows into religious and community life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Examination of records of western Pennsylvania presbyteries

of the mainstream church and other Presbyterian denominations provided information on local and regional activities and concerns. Records of synods and assemblies completed the survey. Congregational and presbyterial histories also offered up valuable information; those written in the nineteenth century were often derived from interviews with older communicants and sometimes drawn from records no longer available.

Although the names of major players in early regional Presbyterianism occasionally appear in the pages, the research for this book attempted to uncover facets of the lives of women and men seldom referenced unless in sweeping statements. Repeated searches of the sources yielded instances of faithfulness and foolishness, reconciliation and recalcitrance: the repeated warp and woof of the Irish Presbyterian fabric woven from 1770 to 1830. Due in large part to their appearance before sessions, we have the names of otherwise obscure individuals—farmers, artisans, laborers—whose lives intermeshed with others in the migration into western Pennsylvania and the creation of settlements and congregations.

Who, exactly, were these Presbyterians, and what did they want? Andrew Holmes, in his definitive study of Ulster Presbyterianism, suggests that “being a Presbyterian for some people had little to do with attendance at meeting. Their identity signified attachment to certain cultural, ethnic, and political ideals that were informed but not necessarily beholden to the peculiar doctrines of Presbyterianism.”¹² Something similar seems true for western Pennsylvania and its Presbyterian-dominated Irish diaspora. But if formal membership mattered less than a shared sense of peoplehood, then ministers, elders, and communicants—with all their hopes, pieties, and anxieties—provided a collective sense of meaning and direction. Some migrants had arrived in the region seeking to create a new, godlier Ireland and a more perfect Ulster, a place where humble social origins and simple faith could be exalted, and material and spiritual existence uplifted. For Joseph and Mary McClorg, living in the near-wilderness of the Shenango Valley in the 1820s, western Pennsylvania seemed “a land of liberty and Gospel Light.”¹³

West of the Alleghenies, a constellation of factors—rebellion, economic dislocation, weekly prayer meetings, electrifying sermons, conviction of sin, yearning for “right relations” with God—repeatedly triggered a more heightened sense of connection to a Presbyterian tradition informed by Irish experience.