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The Irish, Scots and Scotch-Irish and Lessons from the Early American Frontier

Patrick Griffin

If the Irish and the Scots had not journeyed to the American colonies, American historians would have had to invent them. This is the case because both groups have been and continue to be so useful to historians, especially to those studying the frontier regions that many Irish and Scots peopled over the course of the eighteenth century. In a word, the ways in which historians have portrayed each group reflect how different sets of historians have characterised the frontier. The Irish and the Scots serve as exemplars of either its cultural fluidity or its racist rigidity.

For those searching for fluid social relations or indications of cultural understanding across lines of race, the Irish and Scots have produced some notable individuals. In many cases, these frontiersmen embraced both Indian ways and the traditions of white polite culture, allowing them to act as cultural brokers between two groups – Indians and Euro-Americans – who at times shared a great deal in common. As such, the experiences of both Irish and Scottish settlers point to the eighteenth-century frontier as a place where it was still possible to create a middle ground between Indian and European cultures. Less a hardened line than a zone of interaction, such borderlands were made by people who could cross boundaries. From this vantage point, we should think of people from the marchlands of the British Isles as being perfectly suited to the rigours of a world that required fluidity. These people were either formed by their Old World experience as liminal characters living on the edge or else were shaped by the New World realities of pluralism, a world they fit into quite well.

But the Scots and Irish have also been viewed as prototypical frontiersmen, the 'shock troops' for white civilisation in America. People from these borderland regions played a formative role in creating a frontier that would become with time a hardened line defined by rigid notions of race. In fact, the one group of people that historians single out as epitomising the brutal realities of race hatred on the frontier are none other than the hybridised group that bears the name of both peoples: the so-called Scots Irish or

'Scotch-Irish'.[1] There is little question that some of the most notorious acts of violence during the colonial and revolutionary eras – episodes that define the ways scholars conceive of anti-Indian prejudice, race hatred and even ethnic cleansing – were perpetrated by members of this group. Some have even argued that the Old World experiences of these people prepared them for life on a violent frontier where only a thin line separated the 'savage' from the 'civilised'. Fighting 'Papists' in Ireland hardened this militant group that had originally migrated from Scotland, allowing its members to translate one set of hatreds premised on religion and culture to another set based on race and culture.[2] Or perhaps the American frontier created them. The brutality and violence of a place so far removed from the conventions and standards of the metropole compelled these people to 'go native'. In a violent world they became violent. In a world of hardened identities, theirs were hardened still further. Either way, the sorts of attitudes this group embraced, some historians tell us, define the way that we should conceive of the frontier.[3]

In this paper, I would like to explore the issue of how these people could have played both roles at once: angels of the middle ground and devils of the frontier made famous by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner.[4] The answer I would posit does not lie in either the Old or the New World. Nor in fact does it have much to do with the Irish and the Scots at all. The answer lies in the stories that we, as American historians, have held fast to about the frontier. In a word, the Scots and the Irish are not schizophrenic. We are.

[1] On terminology, see Kerby Miller et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675–1815* (New York, 2003); and Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World* (Princeton, 2001).

[2] This had been a point hagiographers were proud to make a century ago. Nonetheless, others still cling to this view. For an especially egregious example of the older version, see Maude Glasgow, *The Scotch-Irish in Northern Ireland and in the American Colonies* (New York, 1936). Mainline scholars also adopted this perspective. A good example would be Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (New York, 1966). An example of the newer interpretation, really a modern variant of the old 'germ' thesis, would be David H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York, 1989). For historical understandings of the group, see Maldwyn Jones, 'The Scotch-Irish in British America' in Bernard Bailyn and Philip Morgan (eds), *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 284–313.

[3] This take on the frontier is best exemplified by Bernard Bailyn's *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York, 1985).

[4] Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, 1894), 199–227.

American historians have created models of the frontier that have one thing in common: they all propose a date or moment or event as being the critical watershed when cultural understanding breaks down for good. The Irish and the Scots are almost inevitably implicated in these stories, as they tended to have a strong presence in frontier regions when a number of these critical moments occurred. But the behaviour of these men and women was not distinctive. Indeed, the frontiersmen and women who feature in seventeenth-century accounts of the 'great transition' from more fluid understandings of social relations to increased rigidity and racialised conceptions were mostly of English origin.

Our focus, therefore, should not be on *groups*, but on *processes*. Only then can we understand how people acted. In fact, when we look at the frontier over the *longue durée* as a process, a very different picture of these groups begins to take shape. From the early seventeenth century until the American Revolution, borderland regions fluctuated, sometimes rapidly, between phases of settler-Indian cooperation and phases of conflict. Indeed, the colonial period was defined by this dynamic. The period of the American Revolution, however, represented a significant shift in this process. This period did not prove distinctive in terms of the ways in which Indians were perceived by settlers or because during the revolution the violence meted out against Indians was worse than in other periods; rather, unexceptional things happened at an exceptional time. Violence lasted over an especially long period, and settlers embraced more consistently-articulated racist attitudes, transforming the ways in which the broader white society conceptualised Indians within the newly emerging American state. As we shall see, the shift from fluid backcountries to hardened frontiers is more complex, yet a great deal simpler to explain, than we have been led to believe. The extent to which the Scots and Irish were implicated in this shift had a great deal to do with contingency and less to do with their so-called 'cultural baggage'. They happened to live in the wrong places at the wrong times.

I The Search for the 'Turnerian Moment'

One of the most important and interesting debates in early American history remains the nature and significance of the frontier. Truth be told, this is not much of a debate. Although scholars disagree vigorously about specifics, all are engaged in a common pursuit that I call the 'Search for the Turnerian

moment'. For better or worse, the ghost of Frederick Jackson Turner still haunts the frontier. No doubt, elements of his thesis have been dispatched with good reason and great justification. Turner thought of the frontier as a line separating 'civility' and 'savagery', which moved progressively westward during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the 'fall lines' along which the Appalachians descend steeply to the coastal plain, over the mountains and then on to places like the Ohio River Valley. He also thought of the frontier as a place that created certain typically American attributes such as individualism and resistance to authority. Since his time, scholars have come up with all kinds of redefinitions of the frontier as a zone of interaction, a site of encounter, an intercultural process, or a 'borderland' standing between empires, nations or societies. As Turner's idea of frontier as 'line' fell out of fashion, scholars bridled in particular at his racist notions of Indian culture and his aggressively Euro-centric understanding of 'civilisation'. We have at times been told to reject the term 'frontier' entirely, only to be instructed to use it once again but with all kinds of caveats. In fact, to discuss 'frontier' is to become caught in a thicket of semantics.[5]

For all the condemnation of Turner, when we step back and see how early Americanists have of late conceived of this thing conventionally called 'frontier', a new story that looks very much like the old story is beginning to emerge. Most historians now subscribe to an idea of frontier that goes like this: After the phase of initial encounter, Indians and colonists entered a period characterised by both conflict and accommodation, in which no one had the upper hand and people strove to make sense of one another. These were times in which contingency reigned, Indian agency mattered, and colonists did not have sole control over their own destinies. Fluidity defined these places and times. Using the preferred contemporary word for such places, we refer to them as 'backcountries'. These were areas far removed from established regions, in which the parameters of social relations were not yet locked into place.

According to these same models, however, change was inevitable.[6] Over

[5] On the changing definitions – and for the ways in which Turner has fallen out of fashion – see Gregory Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York, 1997), 3–18, 209–42. The semantic thicket is best described in the Introduction to James Merrell's *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999).

[6] See, for instance, Andrew Cayton and Fred Anderson, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York, 2005); Eric Hinderaker and Peter Mancall, *At the Edge of Empire: The Backcountry in British North America* (Baltimore,

time, colonists came to view Indians as being irredeemably inferior or marginal to their needs, while embracing the conceit of Euro-American superiority.[7] At this point, fluid worlds gave way to uncrossable cultural lines. All then entered into a world of frontiers. Within this world of hardened boundaries, crossing became more difficult, the imperative to understand became less insistent, and conflict usually became endemic.[8] What many studies of the frontier that use this narrative line also have in common is their explanation of the transition from backcountry to frontier. While acknowledging that external pressures such as war or settler land hunger pushed the process forward, many scholars today posit that the ideal way to gauge this transition is to study how Euro-Americans viewed Indians. In the earlier, fluid backcountry setting, they argue, settlers saw Indians as inferior, but culturally so. By the time backcountries were transitioning into rigid frontiers, settlers tended to think of Indians in essentialist, and often racialised terms.[9]

Historians of early America rarely recognise the degree to which they nearly all cling to this model, and it is because of this myopia that groups such as the Irish, Scots and Scotch-Irish are cast as exceptional peoples. For eighteenth-century American historians, the transition takes place in the eighteenth century. Fair enough. It is, perhaps, natural for any given group of historians to argue that the period they study is the period that sees the most meaningful action. And because the most provocative and persuasive studies explore the eighteenth-century phenomenon, the Scots and Irish feature. But for seventeenth-century American historians, the great shift occurs in the seventeenth century, a period that preceded mass migration to the colonies of the Atlantic seaboard from Scotland and Ireland. What all of these scholars have not reckoned with, however, is the possibility that the transition they present as being definitive in fact happened anew every few generations. In looking for Rubicons, we have missed ebb and flow. In other words, early American history is more accurately conceptualised as encompassing a series of 'Turnerian moments'.[10]

2003); and Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York, 1997).

[7] The classic work that makes this assumption is Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991).

[8] The now classic work, that challenged White's work and that took this tack, is Merrell's *Into the American Woods*.

[9] On language and race, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2006); and Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York, 2007).

[10] I elaborate on this point more fully in 'Reconsidering the Ideological Origins of Indian Removal: The Case of the "Big Bottom" Massacre' in Andrew Cayton and

II The Seventeenth Century

The seventeenth century offers a prime example of the phenomenon. In fact, historians working on this period have picked a number of dates to mark the great transition from backcountry to frontier. Some have argued for a date of around 1600, in the midst of the Nine Years' War in Ireland (1594–1603), or perhaps even earlier in the Elizabethan era when English adventurers ran roughshod over the Irish kingdom. It was here, we are told, that the English finely honed their attitudes toward the alien other, crossing at times the critical line of considering the Irish essentially different, a view that they then transferred to North American Indians.[11] Others suggest that the transition took place at the end of the so-called third Anglo-Powhatan War in 1646, when Sir William Berkeley, governor of Virginia, established a boundary line between English settlers and the Powhatans which the latter could not transgress without a passport. In this instance, a physical boundary line literally and figuratively stood for a cultural frontier. Further north, historians have cited the Pequot War (1637), when the Pilgrims and Puritans 'conquered' one of the more powerful Indian groups in the region by massacring innocents, as marking the transition from backcountry to frontier.[12]

The problem with 1637 or 1646 is that although colonists demonised certain groups of Indians, they still believed – as a general principle – that Indians could be civilised. Settlers, moreover, had decent relations with 'friendly' Indians. The English notion of civility, based on achieving a certain level of social and cultural development and corresponding manners, was undoubtedly patronising. The English of both New England and the Chesapeake believed that, with time and effort, Indians could – in theory – be 'reduced to civility', abandoning hunter-gatherer lifestyles and savage manners to become more like the English. Although at times a brutal process – English adventurers, for example, tended to kill the Irish to make them civil – the understanding of what made people civilised was based on an early-modern

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Stuart Hobbs (eds), *The Center of a Great Empire: The Ohio Country in the Early Republic* (Athens, OH, 2005), 11–35.

[11] Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established, 1565–76* (London, 1976); as well as his path-breaking article 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 30 (1973), 575–98; David B. Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca, NY, 1966).

[12] Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, 1975).

sensibility that posited that even those with foreign customs and traditions shared a basic humanity.[13]

The most persuasive arguments – and the most fashionable right now – for a critical seventeenth-century shift revolve around the years 1675 and 1676. In these years, the English – now becoming increasingly 'American' – were able to impose their authority fully and unambiguously over indigenous peoples in the backcountry.[14] They did so by employing racial notions of classification, resorting to perceptible physical characteristics, such as skin colour, as an indication of inherent capacity. In New England, the process of creating race involved writing Indians out of the story during and after the conflict known as Metacom's, or King Philip's, War (1675–6). This war represented a desperate final attempt by Wampanoags and Naragansetts in the New England region to stop English encroachments, which were rapidly growing in number. As Indians from allied groups attacked the towns and outposts of the New England colonies, capturing and killing both settlers and livestock, the colonists struck back in horrific ways. As they did so, they began to believe that Indians did not only differ from themselves in terms of culture but also in terms of physical characteristics. Colonists were becoming 'white'. This profound shift took place on the ground and in print, further inscribing racial difference and creating a wall between the two groups.[15]

As war raged in New England in the 1670s, poorer settlers in Virginia – down on their luck in a society that presented few bright prospects – were moving west into Indian lands, intimidating and killing Indians who, in turn, retaliated. This multitude, now incensed, then turned its fury on Governor Berkeley's administration, which was doing little to protect common people in the backcountry. Indeed, some officials and wealthy planters were even trying to exploit the situation to make money. Nathaniel Bacon, the self-appointed leader of the multitude, and his companions would eventually burn Jamestown to the ground in an event known to us as Bacon's Rebellion. In so doing, they would also burn the past of its fluidity. By boasting that they wanted to 'extirpate' all savages, these individuals interjected the dynamic of race into

[13] James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York, 1985). For a new perspective on this idea, see Rory Rapple, *Martial Power and Elizabethan Political Culture: Military Men in England and Ireland, 1558–1594* (Cambridge, 2009).

[14] Jenny Pulsipher, *Subjects Unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia, 2005).

[15] Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998).

a society in which culture and 'civilising' the savages was what determined status. In fact, Bacon's rebels and other Virginians began at this point to blur different conceptual frameworks. Tellingly, the idiom of race created strange hybrid terms such as 'Christian white servants' to distinguish English settlers from Indians, illustrating how colour, now believed to be a marker of essential difference, was beginning to animate an older framework of understanding based on cultural markers such as religion.[16]

We have recently discovered how and why colonists during the fateful years of 1675 and 1676 interjected an 'idiom of race' into the early-modern sensibility of civility. Earlier on, settlers acknowledged the humanity of Indians even as they stripped them of their land. These 'civilised' Christians from England may have believed themselves to be further along some developmental path than the 'savage', literally wood-dwelling, 'heathens' they encountered in the Americas, but they nevertheless retained the belief that Indians were essentially human, however depraved their culture. Sickness brought an unwitting end to such a sensibility. As Indians died from the invisible bullets of European childhood diseases, settlers began to rethink their ideas about essential equality. If Indian bodies fell so easily to sickness in an environment also peopled by Europeans and Euro-Americans, perhaps they were not equals after all. The Indians had flawed bodies, settlers reasoned, allowing them to essentialise difference as they sought to vanquish the indigenous people once and for all in both New England and Virginia. In so doing, the settlers subverted earlier understandings of human nature, replacing them with something far more pernicious and thereby dooming Indians to a marginal existence. In other words, violent backcountries had become frontiers.[17] Or so scholars tell us.

Scholars of seventeenth-century America suggest that the reformulations that occurred in this period shaped subsequent American history, and that a century of hardened lines and rigid notions of race lay on the horizon. It is worth noting that a few Scots and Irish lived in both New England and the Chesapeake during the violent years of 1675 and 1676, and that even more Irishmen had endured the violence of the Anglo-Powhatan wars. But truth be told, this is an English story.[18]

[16] The best treatment remains Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), 331.

[17] Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

[18] Patrick Griffin, 'The Irish in the South: A Plea for a Forgotten Topic' in Nicholas Allen and Bryan Giemza (eds), *Lost Colonies: Ireland in the American South* (Chapel Hill,

III The Eighteenth Century

The tragedy is that eighteenth-century historians have explained things in the same ways without taking on board the implications of seventeenth-century studies. Upon entering the eighteenth century, we should be in a world of darkness, certainly given the logic of the great transition of 1675–6. In fact, a very different picture emerges. What should be a dark time appears instead as a 'golden age' of the backcountry, if we use that term to suggest fluidity, contingency and boundary crossing. It is here that the Irish and Scots begin to take centre stage in the drama, not as Indian killers but as shape shifters at home in a fluid world.

The eighteenth century was a period of large-scale migration from the marchlands of Britain and the European Continent. Whereas the seventeenth century in North America was dominated by the movement of adventurers to the Chesapeake and the establishment of a 'New' England by Puritans, the eighteenth-century story is one populated by Irishmen and women, Scots, Germans and, of course, Africans. Most of the free migrants and indentured servants would head toward the Middle Colonies. As a result, the backcountry shifted from New England, which saw minimal amounts of migration, and the Chesapeake, which also slowed as a destination for European migrants, to places like south-east Pennsylvania and then to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and the backcountry regions of the Carolinas. Irish immigrants dispersed throughout all of these regions. Scots, on the other hand, tended to settle in the Carolinas and sections of Georgia to the south.[19]

At first glance, many of the peoples who settled these regions had what seemed to be ingrained prejudices against 'others'. Lowlanders hated Highlanders and vice versa. Peaking in the 1750s, the movement from Scotland to the colonies would bring 50,000 people prior to the American Revolution.[20] In the case of the Irish migrants who would come to dominate some of the new backcountry regions, many harboured a violent hatred against 'Irish

forthcoming).

[19] On this shift, see Marianne Wokeck, *The Trade in Strangers: The Beginnings of Mass Migration to North America* (University Park, PA, 1999); Ned Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), which focuses on Scottish contributions to American society; Griffin, *The People with No Name*; and Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

[20] Tom Devine, *Scotland's Empire and the Shaping of the Americas, 1600–1815* (Washington, DC, 2003).

Papists'. From 1717 until the eve of the revolution approximately 200,000 Irish immigrants came over, many to Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River Valley and down the Great Wagon Road that headed south from Pennsylvania into the Virginian highlands and then on to the Carolinas. Most were Protestant. These people, some have surmised, were primed to hate Indians, who could usefully be compared to the 'savage' Papists of the Old World.[21]

As a rule, these settlers saw Indians as inferior. Significantly, however, their sense of superiority had a cultural and, more specifically, a religious basis rather than being defined by race. They did not even essentialise difference as many Protestants had done during the bloody Irish uprising of 1641. Furthermore, we know that Indians complained of these settlers squatting on their land time and time again, and that the Irish in particular had – as one official put it – 'no regard for Indian claims'. But how did the Irish try to justify their behaviour? When officials complained of their taking land that belonged to Indians, settlers claimed that 'it was against the laws of God and Nature that so much land should lie idle, while so many Christians wanted it to labor on and raise their bread.'[22] To these settlers, 'savage' Indians did not improve the land, and therefore the land was forfeit to Christians who would do so because they had already achieved a higher degree of civility. But the obverse was also true. If Indians changed their ways, they could be considered relatively civilised. In 1737, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* carried a letter from an Irishman in America to his countrymen. The unnamed writer was Presbyterian – he speaks of his minister in Ulster – and he extolled the virtues of America, proclaiming enthusiastically that it was 'a bonny country'. He also wanted to assure his countrymen that the Indians were not a threat. 'There is a great wheen of native folks of the country turned Christian', he asserted. 'They sing songs bonnily, and appear to be religious, and give their minister plenty of skins for his stipend.'[23] He exaggerated, certainly. But his exaggeration is telling. In his world – and by extension in the world of his readers – there was still a place for Indians at the table of humanity.

The period of eighteenth-century migration did not represent a golden age of inter-cultural harmony. Settlers at times treated Indians cruelly, took their land and plied them with alcohol. But the period was not marked by

[21] On numbers and historiography, see the introduction to Miller et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 3–10.

[22] James Logan to _____, 13 June 1729, James Logan Papers, III, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 304. See Griffin, *The People with No Name*, 104, 113–4.

[23] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 27 October 1737.

essentialised hatreds and violence. Settlers saw Indians as inferior. But they admitted that Indians were human. Non-Christian Indians were 'savages', 'heathens' and 'brutes'. But since such terms referred to cultural manners that could be improved, Indians were redeemable. These terms were used over and over again, suggesting that the framework of understanding human difference was one rooted in civility.[24] It is fair to say that the Irish were not exceptional. In New England and Virginia, the places where the idiom of race had first been unleashed, what we find is much the same. The terms or idioms of difference are once again rooted in culture. The race genie, in other words, had not left the bottle. Either that, or settlers had somehow reverted to an earlier understanding.[25]

In fact, historians regard the period between the late seventeenth century and the 1750s as a time called the 'Long Peace', a period when stable relations between the groups prevailed along the extended frontier on the eastern edge of the Appalachians. Many things sustained it: the so-called 'covenant chain', a multiparty alliance between the English colonies of the Atlantic seaboard and the Iroquois and their tributaries; the availability of land for settlement in places such as Virginia – much of it ceded by the Iroquois at the expense of their tributaries; and the fact that even the poorest Europeans could find land down the Great Wagon Road. Together, these factors kept simmering tensions from bursting through the surface.[26]

The early eighteenth century marked the high point of influence for cultural go-betweens in the backcountry. These individuals strove to keep the peace by straddling two worlds. George Croghan, for example, was born a Catholic in County Tyrone, converted to the established church, migrated to America in the midst of the Irish famine of 1741, and settled on the frontier. Here he became known as the 'King of the Traders'. He had an Indian wife, and was considered by the Shawnees of the Ohio Valley to be the most highly regarded official with whom they worked.[27] Throughout the period of the

[24] On this theme, see Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York, 2007), chapters 1 and 2.

[25] John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730–1830* (New York, 2006).

[26] Cayton and Anderson, *The Dominion of War*; Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Daniel Richter and James Merrell (eds), *Beyond the Covenant Chain: The Iroquois and their Neighbors in Indian North America, 1600–1800* (University Park, PA, 2003).

[27] On Croghan, see Merrell, *Into the America Woods*, passim; Nicholas Wainwright, *George Croghan: Wilderness Diplomat* (New York, 1959); and Griffin, *American Leviathan*, passim. Also see Miller et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 471.

Long Peace, Croghan was one of those men who comfortably seemed to inhabit two worlds, gliding between the two, keeping the peace, and in the process becoming a man of some influence and esteem. William Johnson had a similar experience. Born into a Catholic Jacobite family in Ireland—in this case County Meath—he too converted, and settled near the Mohawk River in the colony of New York. Here he fathered children with an Indian woman and came to be known by the Iroquois as one of their own. Arguably one of the most powerful men in eighteenth-century America, Johnson was at home with both the Mohawk and British officials. Johnson invited other Irish immigrants, both Catholic and Protestant, to settle in the regions around Johnson Hall. A sizeable contingent of Scots, largely Highlanders, also settled on or near lands he held in the Mohawk River Valley. He seemed to be most comfortable with people from the margins of the British Atlantic world.[28]

To be sure, these men defrauded Indians out of land; they also defrauded Euro-American settlers and financial syndicates, as well as the British government. Like all good eighteenth-century men, they saw their opportunities and they took them. Croghan and Johnson thrived on early-modern understandings of human difference. In fact, this sensibility explains their success. As former Catholics, now esteemed men and Protestants, they themselves had lived the reality of civility in moving up the rungs of the developmental ladder. And although they short-changed Indians from time to time, they also liked, esteemed and respected them.[29]

Scots, too, seemed to excel at shape shifting. One need only think of two prominent examples. The first, John Stuart, a Highland migrant who worked his way up to become the British superintendent for Indian affairs south of the Ohio River, was right at home with the Cherokee. Stuart lived amid other Scots in the Carolinas and employed Scots as his deputies. He proved as adept as Croghan and Johnson in working with Indians. The Cherokees esteemed him as an honest broker, and they were right to do so. Although he speculated in land and served the Crown, he also did what he could to secure the rights of Indians against encroachment. The second example is Lachlan McGillivray, a trader who migrated from Scotland and married a Creek woman. He was the father of an even more remarkable man, Alexander McGillivray, who was educated in Charleston in Latin and Greek and who became a leader of the

[28] On these aspects of Johnson's life, see Fintan O'Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America* (New York, 2005).

[29] For this reading of the eighteenth century, see Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2005); and Griffin, *American Leviathan*.

Creek nation around the time of the American Revolution. Like Croghan and Johnson, these men believed that Indians could become subjects. After all, they themselves had made the transition from barbarous inhabitants of the marches – Irish Catholics and Scottish Highlanders – to civilised, Protestant Britons in America.[30]

No doubt, the Irish and Scots played prominent roles as go-betweens during the Long Peace. The list of traders from both places is especially long.[31] But then again, the Long Peace happened to coincide with mass migration from Ireland and the shift to steady in-migration from Scotland. Old World marginalisation may have prepared these peoples for the rigours of living on the margins in America. But people born as Irish Protestants – those who did not convert – also exhibited these sensibilities. The list of so-called Scotch-Irish traders would be a long one as well. And Conrad Wesier, perhaps the most honest and effective frontier diplomat of the eighteenth century, did not come from the borders of the British Isles at all. He was German. In short, even if the Irish and Scots were well prepared to understand Indians, contingency can explain a great deal.[32]

IV The Critical Period?

Scholars tell us that this early eighteenth-century era of fluidity came to a crashing halt, and that the Scotch-Irish were the cause. If 1676 stands as the critical date when backcountries became frontiers in the seventeenth century, 1763 stands as the 'Turnerian moment' for the eighteenth century. With heightened immigration, more bitter imperial rivalry between Britain and France, less affordable land, and rapacious speculators looking to make a killing, lands which Indians considered their own became increasingly vulnerable. The period of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), during which Indians attacked backcountry communities and settlers repaid Indians in kind, brought a bloody end to the Long Peace. No sooner had the war ended than

[30] Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (New York, 1999). On this view of Stuart, see Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1815* (New York, 2002), 186.

[31] See, for instance, 'List of Traders Killed by Indians', December 1763, in Louis M. Waddell (ed.), *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, vol. 6 (Harrisburg, PA, 1994), 317.

[32] This suggests that the interpretation found in David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* does not stand up to scrutiny. Fischer argues that a culture of violence on the 'borders' in the Old World shaped the culture of the frontier in the New World.

the British – now freed of their worries about the French – instituted a garrison government and discriminatory policies in the west, driving Indians to lash out in what is now called Pontiac's War (1763–6), leading to another round of killing in backcountry regions.[33]

During this period, settlers and Indians entered a world of ethnic cleansing, as historian Daniel Richter persuasively argues.[34] The one event historians point to as the watershed moment is the Conestoga Massacre of 1763. During the Seven Years' War, the colonial government in Philadelphia sent little aid to the backcountry or, at best, was stingy in doing so. Unable to do anything against Indian raiders, a group of men – largely from Ireland or the descendants of Irish immigrants – from a settlement near a place called Paxton, which had been attacked a number of times in the preceding years, found a group of Indians they could decimate. In December 1763, this group of settlers, dubbed the 'Paxton Boys', travelled to Conestoga Manor, an area from which squatters had earlier been evicted while Indians were permitted to stay. Ostensibly, they were after an Indian who was rumoured to have given information about local settlements to western Indians. They did not find him there, but they did find six peaceful Conestogas, all with Christian names and well known to the raiders. The Paxton Boys butchered these innocent people in almost unimaginable ways. The rest of the Indians from Conestoga Manor were shepherded by Quaker government officials into the Lancaster workhouse for safekeeping. Undeterred, the Paxton Boys rode to Lancaster where they brutally killed fourteen more Indians. They hacked off arms and legs, scalped, smashed in skulls and blew heads to smithereens. They even mutilated two three-year old boys.[35]

Colonial officials were aghast by what had happened. How could these men kill men, women and children whom everyone knew were innocents? The Paxton Boys had no such qualms, describing Indians as 'perfidious' and as being the 'vilest race of savages'. The most famous apologist for their butchery, an Irish-born minister named Thomas Barton, summed up the logic that had gripped backcountry enclaves. According to Barton, nine-

[33] Fred Anderson, *The Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000) is best on the war and its violence.

[34] Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). See also the essays in a collection Richter co-edited with William Pencak entitled *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 2004).

[35] The literature on the massacre is vast. For a summary, see Griffin, *The People with No Name*; and Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*.

tenths of the frontier folk supported the actions of the Paxton Boys, who had justifiably slaughtered 'perfidious villains'. These Indians were, in his words, 'cruel monsters', a parcel of 'treacherous, faithless, rascally' savages, and 'idle vagabonds' who gloried in 'inhuman Butcheries'.[36]

In the wake of the Conestoga Massacre, colonists realised they had nothing in common with Indians. Perhaps a true vein of racism deep beneath the surface had finally erupted.[37] Or maybe, as some have recently argued, Pennsylvanian settlers had discovered their whiteness and longed for 'lines' to be drawn between Indians and themselves. Anxious about their social position in American society and the broader British Empire, settlers projected their inner anxieties onto Indians as a whole. Liminality created anxiety which spurred whiteness. Skin colour now determined human difference, creating a violent frontier world of 'red' against 'white'.[38]

We could regard this as the Irish, or perhaps even the Scotch-Irish, 'Turnerian moment'. Certainly, some scholars do. Contemporaries, after all, branded the Paxton Boys a parcel of 'O'Haros' and 'O'Rigans', ignoring the fact that nearly all the butchers were Protestant. Resorting to old stereotypes of Irish perfidy, Quaker officials and opponents of the Paxton Boys tapped into a deep and resonant well.[39] If the prejudices of Pennsylvanians do not stand up to scrutiny, perhaps the methods of the Paxton Boys are more convincing. The men who killed the Conestoga Indians acted much like Irish rural insurgents. Indeed, an argument could be made that they simply adapted Irish practices to the New World. Leaving aside the fact that many of those living on the margins of the British Atlantic world – be they Scottish, English, Irish or Pennsylvanian – used similar tactics, the argument that the Paxton Boys were employing Irish tactics would seem to hold water. Maybe, in other words, this was an ethnic incident after all.[40]

If methods can be explained by ethnicity, the reasons why the Paxton Boys did what they did cannot. In fact, to focus on the ethnicity of the

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[36] Thomas Barton to the Secretary, 16 November 1764, in W.S. Perry (ed.), *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, vol. 2 (New York, 1871), 369; Thomas Barton, *The Conduct of the Paxton-Men, Impartially Represented* (Philadelphia, 1764), 6, 8, 14, 29.

[37] This dynamic is suggested in Merrell, *Into the American Woods*.

[38] Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–63* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

[39] John Dunbar (ed.), *The Paxton Papers* (The Hague, Netherlands, 1957), 156, 168, 225.

[40] This is a theme that Kevin Kenny suggests in *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment* (New York, 2009), 186-7.

perpetrators is to miss the point. Settlers indeed used the term 'white' to define themselves.[41] But they did so in much the same way that Virginians or New Englanders had done in 1676. In fact, to look backward to the seventeenth century, rather than to look ahead to the dark inevitabilities of the nineteenth century, is the best way to explain what motivated the Paxton Boys.

This entails a careful dissection of this event and its aftershocks. When we look at the ways in which the Paxton Boys and their apologists sought to justify the killing of peaceful Indians, what we find may perhaps surprise the eighteenth-century historian but not the seventeenth-century historian. In fact, I would argue that the Paxton Boys and their apologists continued to operate within the very cultural framework that many historians tell us they had rejected wholesale. They too shared the sensibility that had defined the encounter between settlers and Indians from day one. But in the context of ongoing violence they could not wait for Indians to develop more civilised ways, even if they had made the transition to becoming Christian. Although settlers claimed that officials were 'maliciously painting' them 'in the most odious and detestable Colours', they did not demonise Indians as 'reddish', as Benjamin Franklin suggested. In fact, they claimed that of all involved in the sordid events surrounding the killings – Quakers, Indians and settlers – only the Paxton Boys had acted in the 'character of a good Subject.' While they referred to themselves as 'White People', they accepted the same cultural assumptions that led Quakers to defend Indian 'custom'. For example, they agreed that the French had 'instigated the Indians', suggesting that they too saw Indians as empty vessels. Moreover, they did not see Indian societies as monolithic, nor did they view all Indians as enemies. For instance, they regarded the Iroquois as a group which had 'ever retained some reputation for Honour and Fidelity' as allies. Although the Quakers had called into question their own civility by refusing to defend the frontiers, even these savages, the apologists argued, had the good sense to make war on the Delawares in the West and had 'shook them by the Hair of the Head, as they express it.' Indians were still capable of improving; but settlers could not afford to wait.[42] And so they killed because the government would not. This frightening variation on the old civility model emerged in backcountry regions during times of profound stress, war and demographic change, giving settlers what they regarded as a justification

[41] Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*.

[42] 'The Apology of the Paxton Volunteers', n.d., Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1–4, 6, 8, 9–10.

for killing Indians that would at least be understood by others. What they were doing was revealing the dark, evil side of the early-modern sensibility that allowed those from 'superior' cultures to smash those from 'backward' cultures.[43]

In 1763, as in 1676, the old cultural model began to strain, suggesting another hallmark of these backcountry crises. Benjamin Franklin, as he often did, hit the nail on the head in explaining what was going on. He judged these people the 'Christian white savages' of the backcountry.[44] Franklin's formulation almost exactly echoes the terms bandied about by Virginians in 1676, who had distinguished Indians, no matter what their status, from 'Christian white Servants'. Pennsylvanians on the 1763 frontier also mixed an idiom of race – the term 'white' – with terminology that denoted cultural difference, namely the words 'Christian' and 'savage'. Settlers employed racial idioms but – and this is the critical point – they did so within the bounds of the older framework. We can hardly regard the use of such mixed metaphors as a discursive shift. Settlers and Indians had, in effect, moved back to the future, or forward to the past. During these moments of profound crisis and violence, understandings of human difference did not, in fact, become clearer, but rather became increasingly blurred.

V Ebb and Flow (and Ebb Again)

This world of blurriness would come to an end. After the Seven Years' War, Pontiac's War and the butchery of the Paxton Boys, places to the west of the Appalachian mountains such as the Ohio River Valley became America's new backcountries. While the crises of the late seventeenth century had been followed by a cooling-off period in the backcountries during the first half of the eighteenth century, the same did not happen after 1763. Indeed, tensions in regions west of the mountains, especially in the Ohio Valley, began to increase in the years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. And violence between settlers and Indians continued.

Nonetheless, the period after 1763 also represents a highpoint for the old civility model. When the British tried to figure out how to make sense of the immense holdings gained after their victory over France in the Seven Years'

[43] Griffin, *American Leviathan*, chapter 2.

[44] Benjamin Franklin, *A Narrative of the Late Massacre in Lancaster County* (Philadelphia, 1764).

War and in the wake of Pontiac's War, they embarked on a 'civilising mission'. Indeed, this sensibility would animate the ideology of their territorial American empire west of the Appalachian mountains. Not only did the British divide their holdings with a line running along its eastern continental divide – the so-called Proclamation Line of 1763 – to carve out no-go areas west of the mountains for settlers and speculators in an effort to protect Indians, but they did so on the basis of the civility model. While men on the ground such as Johnson and Croghan argued that the west – or at least those areas they were not investing in – should be left unmolested so that Indian societies could develop over time, officials in London began to adopt the language of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers to rationalise their treatment of Indians living in the American West. Embracing ideas espoused by 'stadial' theory or 'conjectural' history, the chief architects of the Proclamation Line argued that if left alone, Indian societies would eventually emerge from their savage state, move through a barbarous/pastoral age and then graduate to a level of civility commensurate with a fully-developed culture. Such arguments stemmed in part from a fiscal crisis at home and a shortage of troops in the West; nonetheless, however expedient, the very basis of the new empire was premised upon older sensibilities now systematised by Scottish thinkers and embraced by British statesmen, as well as by their Scottish and Irish officials on the ground. Indeed, so prevalent was this line of thinking that just a few years after the Proclamation Line was laid out, Principal William Robertson of Edinburgh University – who had written a history of Scotland replete with stadial notions – contacted the barely lettered Irish Indian trader George Croghan for his take on stadial theory and the prospect of civilising Indians, notions both men believed in. Ideologies make strange bedfellows.[45]

The period of fluidity and ebb and flow between conflict and cooperation was coming to an end, however. From the mid-1760s until the mid-1790s, the men and women in the Ohio Valley – Indian and settler, wealthy and poor – lived through a prolonged period of uncertainty, chaos and violence. British, American, Virginian and Pennsylvanian government officials alike paid scant attention to western grievances. When they did, it was to exploit the uncertainty of this long period of turmoil in order to further territorial or speculative aims. The period after the Seven Years' War can therefore be viewed as merely forming one phase of a broader pattern of ebb and flow. What made it exceptional, however, was the duration of hostilities. In some

[45] 'The Opinions of George Croghan on the American Indians', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 71 (1947), 152–9.

regions, men and women – both Indian and settler – dealt with the spectre of violence for upwards of forty years. And as we would expect, the older civility model or sensibility of understanding human difference was straining. Indeed, it would crack.[46]

VI Crossing the Rubicon?

One infamous incident indicates that a critical shift had taken place. In the early 1780s, at a place called Gnadenhutten on the Muskingum River in Ohio, Moravian missionaries ministered to a flourishing community of Delaware Indians. These Indians had remained neutral throughout the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) and were by all accounts Christians who had adopted 'civilised' ways. In 1782, a body of militia from Washington County, Pennsylvania – once again largely Irish – entered the mission town of Gnadenhutten and condemned the Indians there to death. Their crime? They possessed goods that only 'whites' were deemed capable of using, such as clothing, tea kettles and axes. The men from Washington County argued that the Delawares must have plundered these items from whites they had killed, for Indians could never use them. Condemned, the Indians sang psalms throughout the night, and were executed in brutal fashion the following morning with tomahawks and wooden mallets. Over ninety men, women and children, whose only crime had been that they were not 'white', were murdered in cold blood. These views, we know, were shared by common people up and down the backcountry.[47]

Once again, if we focus on ethnic identity, we miss the point. Massacres even on this scale were, alas, not new. But note the rationale. Settlers killed Indians because they could never use the types of things a white person would use. Settlers had moved far beyond idioms. They made no mention of 'savagery', 'civility' or having to wait for Indians 'to develop'. The explanation for this sort of violence is complex, but has little to do with Irishness, Scottishness or life on a violent border in the Old World. Nor does it lie in the inherently violent nature of the New World. Again, the answer lies in process. Whereas the Paxton

[46] A number of scholars now view what used to be seen as discrete episodes on the frontier as part of a much longer struggle that would last for decades. On this, see Cayton and Anderson, *The Dominion of War*.

[47] The savagery of the massacre is captured in Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986), 75–8; and Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 221–3.

Boys had justified their actions by referring to the older model – suggesting that Indians were redeemable even as they killed them – by 1782 settlers as a rule refused to admit the capacity of Indians to improve their status even if they were Christians. The corresponding connection between level of development and manners had been sundered once settlers argued that inherent racial characteristics defined what made Indians different from whites. By 1782, the backcountry was not only violent but was in fact defined by bloodshed. In this Hobbesian world of all against all, settlers seem to have degenerated. By the time of the massacre at Gnadenhutten, many Indians had reined in the terror of their raids. Settlers had not. Indeed, white violence against Indians had become so relentless, cruel and brutal that officials had come to regard the settlers as 'white savages'.[48]

Settlers naturally contested the labels applied to them. Significantly, they did so not by shying away from the appalling things they had done or by downplaying their significance, but by rejecting the very model officials employed on the grounds that it failed to explain their social reality. In times of intense violence that extended for many years, and after repeatedly being challenged, the older civility model no longer made sense. The old sensibility of human difference became irrelevant, as it failed to reflect what was happening on the ground. And the attacks against it, as Indians fell, were unrelenting. The killers at Gnadenhutten and their ilk up and down the Ohio Valley killed Indians because they saw Indians as inherently inferior and animal-like. Religion made no difference. Nor did time. Indians would not nor could not develop. They could never be as whites. The violent world that the settlers had created taught them that.

Such attitudes, of course, did not only hinge on violence and discourses, just as earlier transitions did not hinge on idioms alone. Bloodshed and essentialised hate were part and parcel of frontier ebb and flow. At the time of the American Revolution, however, the role of the state was critical. Likewise, the duration of violence, the nature of warfare practised in the west, as well as rivalries between social classes and between patriots and loyalists, fed into this new sensibility. The broader patterns of frontier creation were the same as in 1676 and 1763, but in this instance appalling violence occurred as a nation was born. This 'Turnerian moment' would be different to the others.

Thomas Jefferson, we know, did not regard Indians in the same way that common settlers did. Neither did most of the federal officials who manned

[48] Griffin, *American Leviathan*, 170–3. For a similar explanation, see Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors*.

the new American government, which included people such as Secretary of War Henry Knox. They still believed, or at least they claimed to believe, in the older formula. Jefferson embraced a variation of the stadial vision when it came to understanding Indians. This led him to argue that Indians equalled whites in terms of capacity and that with the right influence, their societies could develop over time. Yet, however much he entertained the idea that Indians and whites were inherently equal, the point was moot in these years.[49] For even as Jefferson reflected on the basis of Indian equality while compiling his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in the early 1780s, frontiersmen absolutely certain that they were essentially superior to Indians would settle for nothing less than to have their frightening vision define the way the new government regarded the west. Throughout the 1780s and early 1790s, both wealthy and poor settlers in the west argued that they would not rest, and that revolutionary violence would not cease, until the state acted on their behalf.

The state response is well known and does not merit repeating in detail here.[50] But suffice it to say that after a few abortive attempts to chastise Indians, the government would send a substantial force to conquer Indians, and would draw up a line through present-day Ohio, not far from Gnadenhutten, to hive off Indian lands from white lands. Eventually, Jefferson would become the first president to imagine an America east of the Mississippi River free of Indians. Unlike Governor William Berkeley's line, established in 1646, those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would be impermeable.[51] And unlike the British Proclamation Line of 1763, American lines were put in place not to protect Indians from the bad influence of degenerate settlers, but to safeguard white society from an implacable enemy. Jefferson may have come up with an ideological rationale for taking the west and for carving out new states, but the immediate impetus for doing so came from a racist rabble hungry for land, many of whom were

[49] Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York, 1975), 91–127, 139–57; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, edited by David Waldstreicher (Boston, 2002), 111, 120–4; Peter Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville, VA, 2001), 16–27. On these themes, see also Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2009).

[50] Nobles, *American Frontiers*, 99–132.

[51] Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Bernard Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill, 1973).

Irish, Scottish and Scotch-Irish. It was the great misfortune of the Indian tribes whose territory lay in the path of America's westward expansion that they were confronted by a rabble that refused to be constrained by a civility discourse at the very moment a new nation was coming into being. It was the combination of these two factors that makes the Revolution *the* critical moment.

VII Conclusion

To appreciate this point means focusing less on people and their folkways and more on process. If we look at the *longue durée*, there is an ebb and a flow to Indian hating in America's backcountries. Each generation of settlers, with the exception perhaps of that of the early eighteenth century, discovered this poisonous attitude anew, thereby sustaining the cycle of the backcountry-frontier dynamic. Lines were created over and over again, hatreds were rediscovered, sensibilities were strained, and violence ensued. Language represents a critical feature to watch. But context proves critical as well. Frederick Jackson Turner, unfortunately, was right. Turner may not help us to understand the fluidity that defined the nature of the early American backcountry, but he was right about the line that would emerge. Those historians who champion the Irish and the Scots as exemplars of the middle ground or who demonise them as representatives of the racist frontier err equally in not stepping far enough back to see the whole. They are therefore unable to see how the experiences of Irish and Scottish settlers fit into a broader pattern, one that is much larger than the groups on which they focus.

In many ways, the Scots, Irish and Scotch-Irish were well suited to this world of ebb and flow. The worlds they left behind were defined by such dynamics. Their Old World experiences had been shaped by moments when hatreds took on a racist quality and strict lines existed between groups, as well as by moments of accommodation when inter-cultural boundaries proved porous and even the barbarous and savage were seen as redeemable. This history, however, did not make these people exceptional, any more than any particular period on the early American frontier was exceptional. Ebb and flow, hatred giving way to accommodation, and violence occurring during critical moments of state formation defined life on the margins of the British Atlantic world. The Scots and Irish just happened to inhabit two corners of a

dynamic and troubling world during a dynamic and troubling period, whether those margins were in Derry, Culloden or Paxton. This was their blessing and their curse. This is why we remember them, and this is why if they did not exist, we would have had to invent them.

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