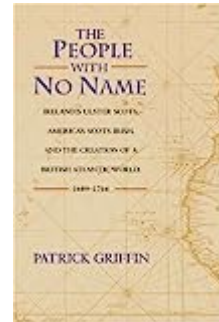


Patrick Griffin. *The People with No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots, America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World, 1689-1764.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xv + 244 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-07462-7; \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-07461-0.



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At Last: A Sane and Sophisticated Analysis of the Creation and Recreation of a Group Identity

At Last: A Sane and Sophisticated Analysis of the Creation and Recreation of a Group Identity

Nineteenth-century nationalist rhetoric is only too alive and well, whether in the Balkans recently, or in the guise of studies of “national identity formation,” in unstable, even dangerous formulations from some in Academe. When one regards imaginative literature as a primary source for sweeping conclusions about complex communities one can end up deep in intellectual trouble. One can therefore welcome with open arms this fine piece of technically competent but accessibly written history that takes an historical community of pivotal importance for the history of the American Revolution, and indeed for the early decades of the history of an independent United States of America. As is so often the case, the subtitle is a better guide to the substance of the work than the catchy title. These people had, if anything, too many names. In the early 1730s Mr. Thomas Cressap summed them up as “Damned Scotch Irish Sons of Bitches,” but then he also called the Proprietor and people of Pennsylvania “Damned Quakering Dogs” (p. 138). Mr. Cressap came from Maryland and had been sent to wage terrorist war

on the inhabitants of those parts of Pennsylvania claimed by Maryland on the strength of its quite outrageous Caroline charter. The Ulster men and women who are the subject of this study called themselves various names, including Irish, which they were, among other things, but what his book shows with insight and economy is that they always qualified their own definitions with others, usually equally valid. They were Presbyterians, not Papists, nor were they those Irish people who constituted the exclusive political nation of eighteenth-century Ireland—members of the Anglican established Church of Ireland. They had close connections with the west of Scotland where many of their clergy went for university education, but they were not Scots.

Governor Patrick Gordon, both parts of whose name indicate roots in the North East shoulder of Scotland, clearly did not deem the immigrants from Ulster fellow Scots. When he was wrestling with their settlement in Pennsylvania in the 1730s, he regarded them as distinctive, hardy, and useful like the Palatine Germans who were also pouring in and often lived beside them. Many colonists agreed with him about the Germans, but had

grave doubts about “the Irish.” Immigrants from Ulster complained of violent prejudices that depicted them as “Kidnappers, Pickpockets, Knaves and Villains” (p. 103). One of the great strengths of this book is that it moves with as much assurance in the north of Ireland as it does on the frontiers of colonial Pennsylvania and Virginia. It shows the complex background from which these people came. Above all it shows that though the whole Kingdom of Ireland was poor in relative terms for much of the eighteenth century, these people were far from being the poorest in Ulster. On the contrary, they had seized on the opportunities offered by an expanding linen industry to supplement an agriculture that was itself entrepreneurial, with cash crops and exports crucial to it. They had entered into a commercial world where they, like American Puritans, worried about the impact of materialism on that Sheba, human egoism, or Self. Partly because of their more sophisticated lifestyle, they were particularly vulnerable to the hazards thrown in the way of their sense of community by the rate of social and economic change. Theologically, they saw their presbyteries and synods, the source of their social discipline and of much of their identity, divided by disputes between the Old Lights and the New Lights. Economically, of course, they were subject to the cycle of boom and slump. When this corresponded with an old-style subsistence crisis such as struck in 1718 and 1719, or again in 1739 and 1740, they would emigrate in droves.

Another excellent feature of this book is the sane way it treats the evidence of the role of the Irish landlord in this saga. Long blamed for all the problems of Ireland and unforgivably abused by English writers in the aftermath of the 1918 to 1922 fighting in Ireland, when these people were finished, defenseless, and irrelevant, they emerge here as European landlords. They functioned like any other landlords, and certainly were not in a position to rack rents above economic levels for any length of time. On the contrary, they could not collect rents when the situation was bad. Very interestingly, there is evidence in this book that Ulster merchants found land a poor investment. That does seem to have been a chronic problem: Ulster businessmen were refusing to buy parts of the Dufferin estates offered for sale in the 1880s for exactly the same reason. Tithes for the Established Church were probably more resented than rents, which were paid by most Europeans, though of course in bad times rent was

a problem.

Intriguing is the stress here on the positive side of emigration. These mobile and entrepreneurial people tried to recreate in America what they had come to regard as desirable but could not attain in Ulster: economic prosperity, easy access to fertile land, freedom of religion in the fullest sense, and religious and social unity. Women seem to have been well aware of the enhanced chances of rapid social advancement through marriages with males much better off than those they could normally aspire to at home. As they settled the frontiers of Pennsylvania and poured down into the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, they gave short shrift to people like Marylanders or Indians who stood in the way of their ambitions. For a British government that in their view failed to protect them they came to feel deep contempt and argued, correctly, that without protection there was no obligation to give obedience. Between 1718 and 1775 some 100,000 men and women from Ulster reached North America, making them the single biggest group from the British Isles (one of their many identities from time to time was British) to move across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century. They were “British” and became “American,” just as later many went from Presbyterian to Baptist. They invented and reinvented themselves and in doing so invented much of the framework of values and attitudes still found in the United States, including perhaps the absence of a real name for its people or itself.

America is the whole hemisphere and Mexicans and Argentinians are clear they are Americans. Hence the often richly comic pursuit of other adjectives like Columbian, which dates from 1757, and occasional bursts of Columbus mania (blessedly now politically incorrect, save for Italian Americans). We all invent and reinvent ourselves all the time. We all have multiple identities and those who deny this right to us are invariably up to no good. Our shifting self-images always have a manipulative element in them, which can become strident and aggressive when tied to sectarian or linguistic or ethnic group interests. We need to be far more aware and sophisticated in our analysis of the many and changing identities of any one person or group, which can vary with the audience which that person or group is addressing. This small but important book is a good start and a model monograph.

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