



What is Ulster-Scots

A People and their Heritage



Ulster-Scots Agency
Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch

What is Ulster-Scots?

A People and their Heritage

It sounds like a simple question, but it's actually very complex. Identity is a complicated issue, and even more so with a long-neglected, marginalised and misunderstood identity like Ulster-Scots. There are many important subtleties that this booklet can never adequately cover, so this will only serve as a simple introduction, not a comprehensive study.

A People and their Heritage

The term Ulster-Scots has, for nearly 400 years, referred to **people, not place** - the people who migrated from the Lowlands of Scotland to Ulster, and to the Ulster-Scots communities that they established right across the nine counties.

It is important to recognise that migrations between the two coastlines have been ongoing for thousands of years, but it is generally accepted that it was the Hamilton & Montgomery Settlement of May 1606

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that saw the floodgates open. Tens of thousands of Lowland Scots poured into Ulster:

“...Hamilton & Montgomery... did not wrest a fertile, cultivated and prosperous region from Gaelic proprietors. They came instead to a country devastated by war and famine... they created the bridgehead through which the Scots were to come into Ulster for the rest of the century...”
from ATQ Stewart *The Narrow Ground*, page 38 – 39

This first large wave of permanent migrants were not soldiers or mercenaries (as was the case in the other major Scottish migrations of the era, for example to Poland or Sweden). They were ordinary Scottish families, seeking a new life. They were mainly Presbyterian in faith and outlook, and overwhelmingly Scots-speaking in language. As John Hewitt summarised so well, it was:

“...a transplantation of Scots from not very far away to a climate and an economy very like home,

and to which the language, folk culture and lore had been carried without dilution...”
from *Ancestral Voices; the selected prose of John Hewitt*, page 66

This was just the beginning - these first Ulster-Scots settlements were built upon over the following centuries, through constant fresh migrations which both increased the size of the Ulster-Scots community and enriched our heritage and traditions. The permanent Lowland Scots imprint on Ulster is crystal clear.

Ulster-Scots heritage and traditions

So Ulster-Scots not only refers to these people, and their descendants, but also to their heritage and cultural traditions. The Lowland Scots brought industry, language, music, sport, religion and a myriad of traditions to Ulster. And many of these have become mainstream, not narrow cultural markers, but broad themes in our society.

None of these things were fossilised, frozen in a 1600s timewarp - the traditions have developed, changed and grown over time. In Scotland, what were once only markers of regional Highland identity have over time become markers of national Scottish identity. In the same way, some aspects of Ulster-Scots identity have adopted Highland influences too.

Is “Ulster-Scots” not just about the two places – Ulster and Scotland?

Some people assume that anything that links the two places of Ulster and Scotland should be described as Ulster-Scots. However, this confuses the term and clouds how it has been used over the centuries. Links between the two places might be more clearly described using a different term, such as Ulster/Scottish.

How old is the term “Ulster-Scots”?

Some people think the term Ulster-Scots is a recent invention, however this is not the case. The first known written usage of the term Ulster-Scots was in 1640. In the aftermath of Scotland’s National Covenant of 1638, the Presbyterian community in Ulster was seen by the government of the day as a very real threat, and Sir George Radcliffe wrote “... none is so dim-sighted but sees the general inclination of the Ulster Scots to the Covenant...”

The term “Ulster-Scots” in literature

In literature, the term crops up time and again. Here are just five famous examples from the late 1800s – early 1900s:

- Rev Henry Henderson (1820 – 1879) of Holywood wrote a column entitled “Ulster Scot’s Letters to his Friends at Home and Abroad” in the *Belfast Weekly News* under the pseudonym “Ulster Scot”, from 1869 – 1879. When he died, his son William carried on the column as “Ulster Scot junr”!
- The book *Three Wee Ulster Lassies*, published in London in 1883 includes three characters – the Ulster-Kelt, the Ulster-Saxon and the Ulster-Scot.
- Edinburgh author John Harrison published a series of articles, and later a book, in 1888 entitled “*The Scot in Ulster*” where he uses the term Ulster Scot throughout the text.
- In 1912 the US Ambassador to Britain, Whitelaw Reid (himself of Co Tyrone descent) delivered a lecture in both Belfast and Edinburgh entitled *The Scot in America and the Ulster-Scot*, which was later published as a book.
- In 1914 JB Woodburn published his epic 400 page volume *The Ulster-Scot*.

The pedigree of the term “Ulster-Scot” is undeniable.



What is Ulster-Scots?

Shouldn't it just be "Scots in Ulster"?

At what point did the early settlers cease to be simply Scots in a different land, and become something else? Some would say that by the 1650s when the first generation of Ulster-born Scots were becoming adults there were clear signs of them being different than the mainland Scots their parents had left behind.

For example, when some of the Ulster-based Presbyterian ministers went back to Scotland in the late 1630s, the Scottish ministers were not impressed by some of the religious practices they had developed in Ulster; in 1640 the General Assembly criticised many of these practices as "Irish innovations". So even by 1640, the cultural practices of the Ulster-Scots were becoming slightly different from those of their Scottish kinsfolk. This process of change and adaptation would continue, right up to the present day.



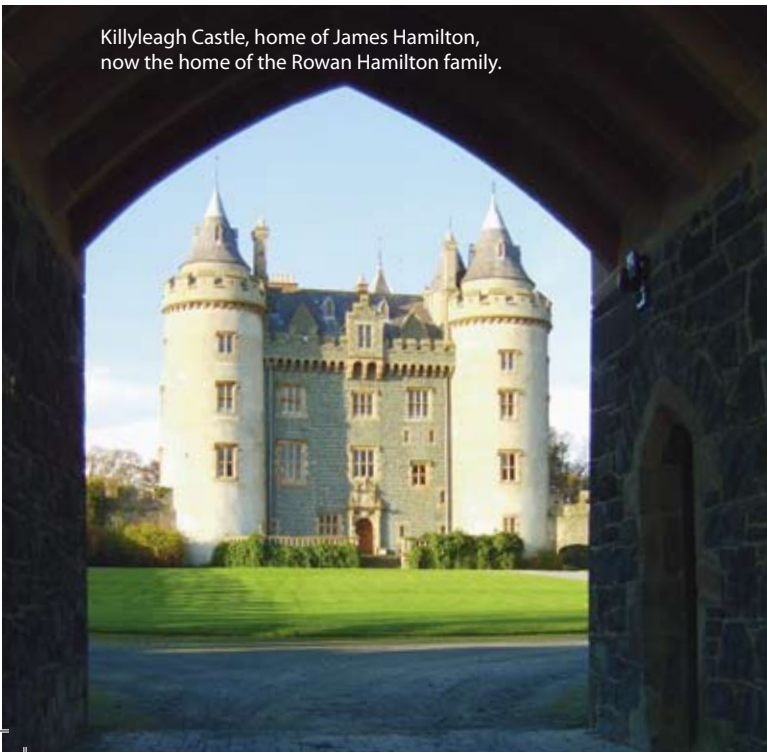
Stained Glass Window detail, Dunlop Church, Ayrshire.

Conclusion

When you glance across some of the key chapters through history - from King Robert the Bruce's links with Ulster in the 1300s, to the organic settlements and organised plantations of the early 1600s, the period of Covenants and "Killing Times", the great popularity of Robert Burns in Ulster, the Scottish Enlightenment of the 1700s and the role played by the Ulster-Scot Frances Hutcheson, and the great industrial partnerships that linked the shipyards of Belfast and Glasgow throughout the 1800s and 1900s - it's clear that the Ulster-Scots story is of massive significance to both countries, and to people on both sides of the slim stretch of water.

At the narrowest point, only 13 miles of sea separate Ulster and Scotland. In 1606 the sea crossing took just three hours. Scots and Ulster-Scots folk alike have much to gain by strengthening our deep historic ties, and to understanding the Ulster-Scots story.

Killyleagh Castle, home of James Hamilton, now the home of the Rowan Hamilton family.







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