

# Scotland

5 May 2024

Edinburgh, Scotland

## Digging into the Auld Sod

Pipers be pipin'

Bagpipers lead Edinburgh's May Day  
Parade down the Royal Mile in this photo  
shot by Emily..

# Castle and moat

Edinburgh Castle looms over this scene, which once was a flooded valley protecting the city's Old Town.



# Digging into the Auld Sod

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

The Scotch-Irish, whose lineage I can claim at least partly as my own (see my previous newsletter), are a complicated and conflicted people. Neither they nor ethnic scholars who've studied them agree about what they should be called — Scots-Irish, Ulster-Scots, Scotch, Irish or Scottish fit depending on where you ask the question — and a sizeable segment of the descendants of these folks even deny they're part of an ethnic group "because I'm an American." Sui generis.

As my favorite Scottish comedian/historian and former high school physics teacher Bruce Fumme says in one of his YouTube videos, "The Ulster Scots. Scotch-Irish. Call them what you will. The ones that ultimately led to Orangemen in Ireland and hillbillies in America. Pick your favorite. We've all got one."

That's hillwilliams to you, Bruce.

Only about 1% (3 million or so) Americans can claim, if they want or care to, Scottish ancestry. But at least 20 of the 46 U.S. presidents had some degree of that ancestry including Barack Obama, through his mother's people, to both countries, according to the Ulster-Scots Agency, an international organization "protecting, developing and promoting the language, heritage and culture of the Ulster-Scots people." The agency was established by the Belfast Agreement of 1998, which ended a 30-year stretch of religious violence in Northern Ireland.

This family trip to Scotland was premised on the knowledge that we have roots here among a group of people who left Scotland, which is on the northern tip of the island of Great Britain, to settle on the northeastern corner of the island of Ireland, but then left again to settle in the United States. Contrary to my "I'm an American" brethren, why all that happened enlightens me about my peeps.

There have been centuries of back-and-forth between Ireland and Scotland. On the rare sunny day, some parts of either place are visible from the other across the Irish Sea. The ancient Romans, who whose empire once covered Great Britain up to the Scottish border, but never Ireland, didn't care much for either group of warlike, bickering folks. Nevertheless, the Gaels, a group of Ireland inhabitants defined by their common language, brought the Latin name they'd been given by the Romans — Scoti — to what we now call Scotland long ago. Somehow "Scoti" embedded itself as a place name more firmly on Britain than it did on Ireland.

The political and religious factors that precipitated the serial migrations of my folks from here in Scotland to the US of A came to a head when Elizabeth I, Queen of England and Ireland, died in 1603. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. He went through six marriages and ensuing annulments, divorces, and spousal executions in a futile attempt to produce a male heir.

Hey, Henry. Y chromosomes were your job.

The collateral damage of all that marital discord was that the pope of the Europe's original Christian church, the Catholic Church in Rome, objected to the annulment that started it all. Henry's interpretation of the divine right of kings took advantage of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century fracturing of Christian Europe already underway, led by breakaway German Catholic priest Martin Luther, and royal squabbles elsewhere in Europe that weakened Clement's authority. Henry got Parliament to declare him the head of a new Church of England,

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whose members were no longer Catholic (meaning “all-inclusive”) but Anglican (English). Catholics could refuse to go along, in which case they were Catholic (Roman) at the sacrifice of English rights. The Irish were staunchly Catholic, and Henry’s disregard for the Irish was mutual.

Elizabeth never married and had no heir, earning her the nickname “Virgin Queen.” Thus, the crown of England and Ireland passed to her cousin James who, as it happened, already another one. He was James VI of Scotland, and he’d been king since the ripe old age of 13 months. That’s when his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, once Elizabeth’s rival for the English throne, was beheaded at age 44 on a death warrant signed by Elizabeth. Mary had been Scotland’s queen since she was six *days* old.

Mary was Catholic, and James was baptized in the Catholic church. But the ex-Catholic priest who preached the sermon at his Scottish coronation was an Edinburgh native and strident critic of Mary named John Knox, founder of another of the Protestant churches sprouting in Europe. It was the Church (or Kirk, in the Scots’ language) of Scotland. Its members are Presbyterians. Most of Scottish nobility supported the Protestant Reformation, and James was raised by Presbyterians. I’ll write more about Knox and the Presbies after we attend Sunday services at the church that elected him as its first pastor, St Giles, the High Kirk of Edinburgh.

In 1603, when James got his second crown and name, James I of England, he moved from the Scottish capital of Edinburgh to the English capital of London. It was the more prestigious gig. He returned to Scotland, which remained a separate sovereign state, only once after his second coronation, dying in 1625 as Scotland’s longest-serving monarch.

James I-VI’s impact on the United States was three-fold:

1. In his second year as James I of England, he sponsored an English translation of the Bible for the Church of England that became known as the King James Bible. Among other things, it’s considered a masterpiece of written English in a time when William Shakespeare was also actively writing. And it’s the “correct” version of the Bible for many American Christians, particularly fundamentalists.
2. The first successful English settlement in America, Jamestown, was founded in 1607, his fourth year as James I, in the royal colony of Virginia, named for the Virgin Queen, his predecessor in London.
3. He decided to “civilize” the Irish Gaels into English-speaking Protestants by confiscating land in the province of Ulster, a nine-county area of north Ireland, and “planting” Anglican and Presbyterian colonists there as tenant farmers. It was called the Plantation of Ulster, begun in 1609, and subsidized by private business interests in London.

The reality of James’ plan was that tracts of about 3,000 acres / 1,200 hectares would be given to wealthy Scots and Englishmen, called “undertakers,” each of whom promised to build a home fortified against the Irish. These castles became towns, including Belfast and Londonderry, in what previously was sparsely settled countryside. The Irish were forbidden to become tenants; only Scottish and English Protestants could farm the land. Over a 90-year period, about 200,000 Scots, mainly poor Presbyterians who had no land in Scotland and were being displaced by their “lairds’ (lords), took up the offer to move to the plantation.

“Imagine what it would have been like,” Fummey says, “going to where they don’t speak your language, to cut new land where the landlord was required by law to build a big protective house for himself because the locals are so hostile. They’ve only just finished a killing war because of folk like you. And to top it all, when you get there, it’ll still be rainin’.”

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The Ulster Scots occupied a legal status between the English and Irish. English law prevailed in Ulster, yet Ulster Scots were not English subjects. Their Presbyterian marriages were not valid unless registered in an Anglican church. Becoming an English subject required an oath of loyalty to the English crown and payment of a fine. Within five years of Charles I succeeding his father James as king, Presbyterians in Scotland were in open rebellion against Charles for trying to impose Anglicanism in Scotland and Ireland. Irish Catholics rebelled against Charles in 1641, killing 4,000 Protestant colonists and expelling 8,000 more, which prompted the Scottish Parliament to send a 10,000-man army to Ulster the next year. Concurrently, the new British colonies in America were becoming more profitable for London businesses to invest in than Ulster.

So began the second migration, this time to Pennsylvania, where religious laws were more favorable to Presbyterians, and then along the Great Wagon Road through Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and into the Carolinas and Georgia, where land was cheap. Between 1710 and 1775, a year before the Declaration of Independence, 200,000 Ulster Scots made the Atlantic crossing to become the Scotch-Irish I'd heard about in my childhood.

They fought America's indigenous tribes on behalf of Britain to keep the stolen land they bought on the cheap. Then they signed the Declaration of Independence. Then they fought for American independence from Britain. Then they fought the Whiskey Rebellion against George Washington's nascent government, which taxed the whiskey they distilled, to pay off U.S. Revolutionary War debts. Later, as moonshiners, they souped up ordinary American family cars to outrun federal revenueurs thus inventing the sport of stock car racing called NASCAR.

Scotch-Irish were victims and victimizers, slaves and enslavers. They toughed it out in tough places, loved poorly and well, broke every one of the Commandments and then died rich and poor.

My Cowan ancestors owned slaves, some of whose labor they donated to the Presbyterian Church to build North Carolina's Davidson College in 1837. Most people in the San Francisco Bay Area would never have heard of Davidson had not Steph Curry — its black basketball hero — changed the way the game is played as a long-range shooting star with the Golden State Warriors.

The Scotch-Irish can hold a grudge. I've known some who would never make the trip I'm on because they'd have to change planes in London.

Before this trip, I talked to Alison van Diggelen, a Scottish immigrant friend and BBC journalist from Glasgow, who joined my Presbyterian church in San Jose nearly 30 years ago. What was her upbringing like, and what had she gleaned from it about the character of her Scots?

Her family watched the Queen's speech on the telly every Christmas Eve, Alison said. Her mother Frances, a nurse, would put on her pearls for the show. Her father Peter, a medical technician and staunch anti-royal who fought for the rights of working people, would mock the Queen, saying "she burps and farts like the rest of us." Alison explained the co-existence of such opposites in the same family with an aphorism involving a mythical Scot, Jock Tamson, part modest everyman, part George Washington.

"We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns," she said in her brogue.

In American English: We're all John Thomson's children.



## Great Scott

Sir Walter Scott's historical fiction and poetry earned him one of the largest monuments to a writer in Edinburgh's New Town.



# National animal

The Mercat Cross on the Royal Mile features a unicorn on the top.



# Tolbooth Tavern

Taking people's money for more than 400 years, not necessarily for buying drinks.



# Notes on photos

**PIPERS BE PIPIN'** — We went to church Sunday at the High Kirk of Edinburgh, better known as St Giles' Cathedral, and emerged just as the city's May Day Parade came marching down the Royal Mile with two bagpipe bands. May Day in many countries is the equivalent of Labor Day in the United States, an opportunity to celebrate working people in addition to the arrival of spring in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. Edinburgh's parade was quite the contrast with what I would have expected to see in the U.S. The marchers included protesters concerned about Gaza and Ukraine as well as Scotland's Labour and Communist parties. There seemed to be nothing controversial about any of it, judging from the reception of the crowd and the police, who escorted the parade and blocked off streets.

**CASTLE AND MOAT** — This is an example of urban renewal in the Scottish sense. On its north side, Edinburgh Castle towers over a deep ravine that runs east and west creating the northern border of the Old Town. A lake was created in the depression as part of the castle's defenses. But by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Edinburgh had earned the nickname "Old Reeky" for its crowded Old Town tenements that belched smoke from burning peat for heat, creating permanent smog, and the sewage that flowed into the lake. The city's upper crust began to migrate to London, a more modern, less smellable city. Edinburgh's answer was to drain the moat, build a station for the new-fangled railroad at the bottom that ran through the ravine, and build the New Town on the other side for the upper crust with a grid plan and harmonized Georgian architecture. The north side of the ravine was turned into a city park called the Princes Street Gardens, the vantage point of this view toward the castle, and build the National Galleries of Scotland on one the bridges that linked the old and new sides of town.

**GREAT SCOTT** — This monument to one of Scotland's greatest writers, Sir Walter Scott, is the focal point of the Princes Street Gardens. I wrote about the monument in the photo notes of my previous newsletter.

**NATIONAL ANIMAL** — Scotland's national animal, the unicorn, exists only in the minds of investors, romantics and whomever designed Scotland's royal coat of arms in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, the unicorn is nearly always found on what are called mercat crosses, like this one at Parliament Square on the Royal Mile. These crosses identify the central market areas of towns and cities.

**TOLBOOTH TAVERN** — It is what it sounds like, the odd combination of a pub in a toll booth. "Tolbooths" in Scotland are more than what we call toll booths today, however. A tolbooth was the official government building housing municipal offices, courtrooms and jail in one of 16 settlements significant enough to be designated a "burgh," pronounced "bruh," in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. The one in Edinburgh was built in the city's wall at Canongate, a portal through which people entered the city after paying a toll.

**DISPELLED RUMOR** — This uniquely shaped coffee shop is on Cockburn Street, which climbs diagonally up the hill from Waverley Station, Edinburgh's passenger rail hub, to the Royal Mile. JK Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, wrote them mostly in Edinburgh and drew inspiration for many characters and places from Scotland. Edinburgh is a pilgrimage site for Harry Potter fans. Many speculated that Cockburn Street was the inspiration for Diagon Alley, which in the books is in London, but Rowling has denied that. Doesn't stop fans from coming here, though.



# Dispelled Rumor

JK Rowling said it wasn't true.