

Spring 2017

Scottish Culture: Scottish and Scots-Irish Music

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Citation Information

Olson, Ted. 2017. Scottish Culture: Scottish and Scots-Irish Music. *The Crooked Road's Mountains of Music Homecoming: The Official Homecoming Guide*. 32. http://mtsofmusic.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MOMH_ProgramGuide_FINAL-lowres.pdf

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Scottish Culture: Scottish and Scots-Irish Music



SCOTTISH CULTURE

SCOTTISH AND SCOTS-IRISH MUSIC ALONG THE CROOKED ROAD



A majority of the early settlers on the Appalachian frontier were immigrants from Lowland Scotland or from Northern Ireland (the Scots-Irish, who descended primarily from Lowland Scots). Those two groups were bound by a common Scottish heritage, and Scottish traditions profoundly influenced Appalachian culture—particularly the music. Today, echoes of Scottish culture and identity reverberate in the music heard and in the customs observed along the Crooked Road.

The term Scots-Irish refers to the Protestant people who in the late 16th century crossed the Irish Sea from Lowland Scotland to settle in Ulster (the section of Ireland that today is known as Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom). Promised better lives as tenant farmers on large agricultural estates owned by English landlords,

these Scots-Irish people (so-called because while living in Ireland they absorbed some cultural influences from their Irish Catholic neighbors) by the mid-18th Century had grown disgruntled at their economic, political, and religious marginalization. As a result, an estimated 250,000 of them emigrated to the New World and many of these settled in Appalachia. Scots-Irish influences along the Crooked Road can still be heard today in the characteristic regional dialect, the variety of local customs, and in the music.

Because the fiddle was ideal for accompanying dances and could be easily carried, Scottish and Scots-Irish settlers transported the instrument to Appalachia in the 18th century. A number of Scottish fiddle tunes soon became popular across Appalachia, including “Mrs. McLeod’s Reel” (which became known as “Hop High Ladies”) and “Lord McDonald’s Reel” (later called “Leather Britches”). Those settlers generally did not bring the iconic Scottish bagpipes to the New World because that instrument had been banned in Scotland after that country’s 1746 loss to the English military at the Battle of Culloden.

Many traditional ballads sung in Appalachia from the 18th century through the present-day, including “Gypsy Laddie,” “The Butcher Boy,” and “Pretty Polly,” originated in Lowland Scotland and were brought to the New World by immigrants. In ballad scholar Thomas Burton’s assessment, while England was historically cited as being the primary contributor of ballads to the Appalachian repertoire, Scotland was equally important as a wellspring of balladry.

A number of folk-revivalist musicians active in The Crooked Road area have specialized in exploring the influences of Scottish and Scots-Irish music (and other aspects of culture) on Appalachia. Jack Beck, a native of Scotland, who lives in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, is noted for his powerful performances of the Scottish ballad and song heritage. Other Crooked Road-area music acts known for their distinctive interpretations of Scottish and Scots-Irish music include The Celtibillies, Sigean, Fire in the Kitchen, and Sandra Parker.



*Ted Olson is the author of **Blue Ridge Folklife**, a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.*