

# Introducing the Ulster-Scots Language

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In May 1606, one year before the British established Jamestown in Virginia, the Hamilton and Montgomery Settlement became the first permanent Scottish settlement in Ireland. The Ulster Plantation was not the first contact between Ulster and Scotland, but it marked the beginning of a century of large-scale Protestant migration that led to a shared Catholic-Protestant heritage in Northern Ireland.

Among the many traditions that the Scots brought to Ulster was their language, which shared the same ancient Germanic roots as English but developed independently to become the internationally recognized “language of Robert Burns.” Ulster-Scots, the dialect of Scots spoken in Ulster, was rich in song, stories, and sayings. The late 1700s saw a stream of publications in Ulster-Scots by the Weaver Poets, a school of self-educated textile workers whose politically radical verse appeared in Ulster newspapers. The most famous of these men was James Orr (1770–1816), the Bard of Ballycarry, who is often called “the Robert Burns of Ulster.” This “United Irishman” participated in the failed Rebellion of 1798, fled to the young United States, and eventually returned home to County Antrim.

When Ulster-Scots immigrated to America in the eighteenth century, they took their language with them. Publications such as David Bruce’s *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, Originally Written under the Signature of the Scots-Irishman*, which appeared in western Pennsylvania in 1801, and Robert Dinsmoor’s *Incidental Poems*, published in New Hampshire in 1828, are the best examples of the language from the early days of the United States. Michael Montgomery’s study, *From Ulster to America: The Scotch-Irish Heritage of American English*, documented nearly 400 Ulster-Scots words in contemporary American English, from afeard (frightened) to young’un (child).

Today, Ulster-Scots is enjoying a revival in Northern Ireland. A language of the field, the heart, and the home, Ulster-Scots is a regional tongue with an international impact. Boosted by the tireless work of the Ulster-Scots Language Society, a grassroots organization, Ulster-Scots was officially recognized in 1992 in the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. (Its inclusion in the charter was endorsed by the U.K. government in 2001.) After centuries of marginalization and scorn, the situation has now turned full circle: there is an ever-increasing confidence and pride in the language. Linguistically, historically, and culturally, Scotland, Ulster, and the United States share a three-way *auld* acquaintance that should never be forgot.

*Mark Thompson is Chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency, an organization established following the Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement of 1998. He is committed to the mainstreaming of Ulster-Scots and to developing the cultural and economic potential of Ulster-Scots identity. He works in the design and advertising industries and lives just a few miles from his childhood home on the Scottish-facing coast of the Ards Peninsula in County Down.*



This Ulster-Scots sampler, completed in 1923, was discovered in Canada. Photo by Mark Thompson