

Celtic Thunder

by Roger D. McGrath

"The Celts fear neither earthquakes nor the waves."

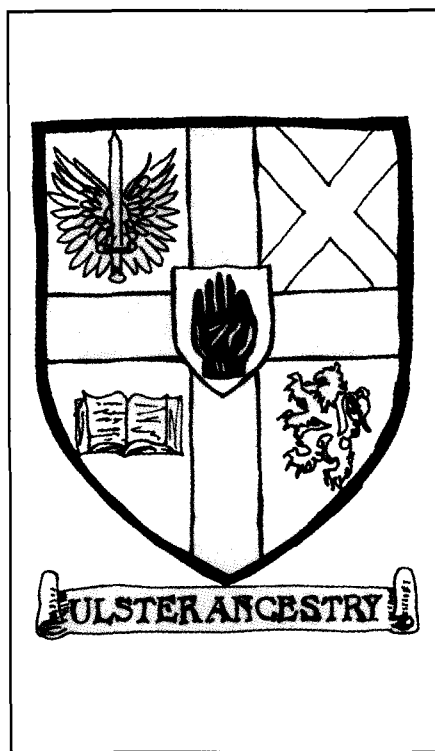
—Aristotle

**Born Fighting: How the
Scots-Irish Shaped America**
by James Webb
New York: Broadway Books;
369 pp., \$25.95

Nearly six years ago, *Chronicles* published "Death Before Dishonor," an article I wrote about the westward march of the American pioneer. Much of the time, I was writing about the Scotch-Irish—or Scots-Irish, if you prefer. These hard-edged folks were in the vanguard of the movement across the continent—and God help those who stood in their way. James Webb's *Born Fighting* is devoted to the occasionally perverse, often irascible, and always independent and courageous Scots-Irish. If ever a people were born fighting, it was these sons of Ulster.

Webb writes well and often—I read his *Fields of Fire* when it first appeared in 1978 (most Marines I knew did)—but not until now, after six novels, has he produced his first work of nonfiction. Part history, part sociology, part personal, and all fast-paced well-written romp, *Born Fighting* will keep the reader up at night turning page after page. It is not a comprehensive history of the Scots-Irish or a thorough analysis of their culture, which has been done well by James Leyburn in *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (1962) and Grady McWhiney in *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (1988), among others, but a thematic focus on the instinctive warrior nature of the people. From fighting Romans to An-

Roger D. McGrath is the author of *Gunfighters*, *Highwaymen*, and *Vigilantes*.



Melanie Anderson

glo-Saxons to American Indians to Charlie, the Scots-Irish were in the forefront. Webb relishes the fact.

Webb does not make the mistake that many others have by too narrowly restricting the bloodlines of the Scots-Irish. Since they were Protestant, so the reasoning goes, there were no Gaelic Irish among them. The Scots-Irish were purely the descendants of Lowland Scots who had been transplanted to Ireland, beginning in the early 1600's and then, after more than a hundred years in Ulster, shipped to the American colonies, especially during the 1720's, 30's, and 40's. There are two problems with this reasoning: First, the transplanted Scots—in Ireland for five or six or more generations—intermarried with the native Irish to some degree; and, second, in pre-Revolutionary War migrations to America from Ulster were significant numbers of Catholic Irish who lost their Catholicism on the frontiers of Pennsylvania or Virginia or North Carolina.

While such Gaelic surnames as Mc-

Bride, McGee, McGrath, or Kennedy are found commonly in both Scotland and Ireland, others, such as McGregor and McNamara, are distinctly Scottish or Irish. Many of the surnames (including Murphy, Doyle, and Connolly—all ancestors of Webb) in the records of those we call Scots-Irish are distinctly Irish. Folks with such names were clearly not transplants from Scotland to Ireland. Then, too, although many Americans do not seem to know this today, the Irish colonized the Highlands of Scotland beginning in the fifth century and conquered and assimilated the other Celtic peoples they found there. That is why Gaelic became the language of the Highlands and surnames began with the patronymic prefix *Mac* (whether abbreviated *Mc*, *Ma*, or *M'*) and some with *O'*. Irish blood and Gaelic culture, although to a more limited degree, spread to the Lowlands also.

Nonetheless, because various forms of Protestantism, particularly Presbyterianism, became part of the cultural fabric of the Scots-Irish, they differed from their Irish Catholic cousins. As Webb notes, though, blood counts: "Once removed from Ireland, the common Celtic origins of these two groups brought many similarities, especially in their military traditions, their affinity for politics, and their literary prowess." I might have said "military prowess" and "literary traditions," but Webb has got it right.

Webb takes us all the way back to the building of Hadrian's Wall. In an effort to keep the wild Celts of Scotland from raiding Romanized Britain, the Romans erected the stone barrier across the narrow neck of the island. A pale remnant today of its former self, Hadrian's Wall was originally something akin to the Great Wall of China. Fifteen-feet

high and ten-feet wide, the Roman barrier stretched 73 miles from the Irish Sea to the North Sea. Every mile, a guard tower sat atop the wall; every four or five miles, a fort and a gate could be found. The wall was as impregnable as second-century technology could make it.

Occasionally, the Romans ventured north of the wall to punish the wild Celts but usually found such thrusts costly and unproductive. Cassius Dio described the people the legions encountered:

Their form of rule is democratic for the most part, and they are fond of plundering; consequently they choose their boldest men as rulers. They go into battle in chariots, and have small, swift horses; there are also foot-soldiers, very swift in running and very firm in standing their ground.

It sounds to me as if the Romans were fighting Daniel Boone, Andrew Jackson, and David Crockett.

Since so much of Scotland and Ireland was broken by rivers and mountains, imposing central control was always difficult, and the Celtic tie of kinship remained strong. Fighting alongside one's tribal or clan leader was an honor. "An offshoot of this ancient concept defines the unusually strong feelings about military service held by so many Americans of Scottish and Irish descent," writes Webb, "and helps explain why such a high percentage of American combat units in today's volunteer military are from Scots-Irish and Irish Catholic backgrounds."

Oddly, Webb suddenly changes his thrust to claim: "in the Celtic societies, if one stepped forward to serve, he was 'of the kin' so long as he accepted the values and mores of the extended family." That was accepted, however, only because they were all Celts! Webb has visited both Ireland and Scotland, and he should know that, if you are Gaelic, everybody looks like one of your relatives. The people are stunningly similar. Kinship meant just that. Values and mores were secondary. As John Prebble says about the Highlanders in *The Battle of Culloden*, "The ties of blood and name were strong among the people, and pride of race meant as much to a humbly in his sod and roundstone house as it did to a chieftain in his island keep." Edward Burt, an Englishman traveling in the Highlands in the 18th century, said, "They have a pride in their fam-

ily—almost everyone is a genealogist." After the Battle of Culloden, the British army slaughtered the cattle of the Highlands and raped the women. Those women who were impregnated aborted the babies or killed them when born. They were not of the blood. The clans were not a "Proposition Nation."

After backing away somewhat from the importance of race, Webb, when describing Scotland in the late Middle Ages, writes: "Having been altered in their blood and traditions by intermarriage with Normans and English royalty, the high families of Scotland now embraced further schemes." It is good that Webb put blood back into the mix, because he follows with an inspired description of William Wallace, shunned by the mixed-blood Scottish nobles but supported by the common folk and Gaelic clans from the Highlands, destroying English armies. Eventually, Wallace met his doom. "The hybrid nobility had betrayed him," says Webb.

If the hybrid nobility betrayed Wallace and the common folk, so did the Catholic Church. By the 16th century, Her corruption and political machinations enabled John Knox to organize a Calvinist revolt in the Lowlands of Scotland. The Lowland Scots' interpretation of Calvin's doctrines only added to their already fierce sense of independence.

As a consequence, when thousands of Lowland Scots were planted in Ulster, they were separated from the native Irish, their Celtic cousins, by religion. Most Irish had remained Catholic as an expression of anti-English nationalism after Henry VIII's break with the Church of Rome. Similarly, many Highland clans remained Catholic until well into the 18th century.

The Ulster Scots found that the English considered them simply another version of the Irish—a people who did not conform to the Church of England, rebellious and troublesome. They were denied many of the civil rights that were denied the native Irish and began to understand that the English were using them to pacify Ulster for the benefit of England and Englishmen. They fought wars and skirmishes, suffered massacres and famines, and were still insulted and discounted by the ruling English hierarchy. When Parliament passed a number of acts, beginning in the early 1700's, that hit the Presbyterians in Ulster as hard as they did the Catholics, the great migrations to the American colonies began.

By this time, most of the Lowland Scots

had been in Ireland for more than a hundred years, and some of the families were thoroughly intermarried with Irish. They thought of Ireland as their home; the Scottish connection was distant. Moreover, they hated the English like all other Irishmen. They came to America as Irishmen, and it was not, with rare exceptions, until generations later that they were referred to as Scotch-Irish, essentially an attempt by Protestant Americans to separate them from the Catholic Irish during the 1830's, 40's, and 50's.

Most of the Scots-Irish came to Pennsylvania, where they were guaranteed religious freedom. Puritan New England was not welcoming, referring to them as "these confounded Irish." Mobs actually stopped the landing of ships. Those who made it to shore immediately beat a path to remote frontier regions of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. Meanwhile, the provincial secretary for Pennsylvania was an Irish-born Quaker, James Logan. Thinking that frontier settlements of Scots-Irish would provide a barrier against Indian attacks on pacifist Quaker areas, Logan granted tracts of land to the immigrants. No sooner had the fierce fighters settled, however, than they were off to pioneer new regions, all the time claiming "squatter's rights." Five families of them, said Logan, "gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people." They are "troublesome settlers to the government and hard neighbors to the Indians."

Soon, the Scots-Irish were moving down the Shenandoah Valley into Virginia and then into North Carolina. A generation later, they reached Kentucky and Tennessee. By then, they had also pushed the frontier through western Pennsylvania and into Ohio. On the eve of the American Revolution, one Anglican bishop attributed much of the "rebellious spirit" in some of the colonies to the arrival from Ireland "of nearly three hundred thousand fanatical & hungry republicans in the course of a few years."

Smaller versions of Scottish and Irish clans formed in every mountain hollow, and leaders rose to assume positions similar to the chieftains of old. By his mid-teens, every able-bodied male was part of a local militia. Whether beating back Cherokee attacks on outlying settlements or annihilating a British army at King's Mountain, the Scots-Irish were in the forefront.

While many historians argue that the Scots-Irish began to lose their identity in the years following the American Revolution, Webb contends that not only did

they retain their identity, but their culture subsumed those of others, including English, Welsh, and Germans who began settling and intermarrying with the Scots-Irish on the frontier.

With the establishment of the United States, those on the frontier found themselves enfranchised and wielding political power. The leaders they chose were most often populists and warriors. If any leader was like a clan chieftain of old, it was “Irish Andy” Jackson. Webb argues that Old Hickory “remains in a class by himself.” Devoting an entire chapter to Jackson, Webb is clearly inspired by the man who inspired the frontiersmen, militiamen, mountain folk, Indian fighters, Irish immigrants, and workingmen of America.

By the 19th century, most of the Scots-Irish had left the Presbyterian Church and become Methodists or Baptists or members of some sect of their own invention. Many were swayed by fundamentalist preachers, sowing the seeds of what would become the Bible Belt. Nonetheless, Celtic genes exercised a powerful influence, and the preacher’s words were

countered on a daily basis by the heavy drinking that had come, along with the stills, from the glens of Ireland and Scotland, and by an equally long addiction to devilish music, sensual pleasures, constant physical challenge, and an inbred defiance of authority.

Webb follows the Scots-Irish into the Civil War and argues that Southern boys—a disproportionate number of whom were Scots-Irish—had been reared with a “warrior ethic” and fought because someone had invaded their land, because their chieftains had rallied the clan, because there was a fight to be fought. They fought least of all, probably not at all, for slavery. Although Webb only briefly mentions it, those regions of the South that were virtually 100-percent Scots-Irish—the western part of Virginia and the eastern parts of Kentucky and Tennessee—were Union in their sympathies. Webb attributes this to loyalty to local leaders who “went with the Union.” I wish he would have opined why they sided with the North. It is clearly evident to me that the Scots-Irish hated the aristocratic planters and their privilege, reminiscent of English landlords in Scotland and Ireland.

Scots-Irishmen made up the bulk of the Confederate Army, says Webb, including most of its leaders—such men as Albert Sidney Johnston, Nathan Bedford Forrest, Jeb Stuart, and Stonewall Jackson. The Union Army was run like a business, a machine, argues Webb. The Confederate Army was a clan,

a living thing emanating from the spirit of its soldiers—daring, frequently impatient, always outnumbered, often innovative, relying on the unexpected and counting on the boldness of its leaders and the personal loyalties of those who followed.

There are those who have said that the Southern boys lost the war “because they were too Celtic and their opponents too English.” Not so, counters Webb. The South, lacking materiel and manpower, fought as well and for as long as she did only because she was “so wildly and recklessly Celtic.”

Webb also discusses the aftermath of the war and Reconstruction, a “mess that Yankees made.” His analysis is sharp, but it is really more about the South than about the Scots-Irish. His most interesting observation comes in noting the migrations of Scots-Irish out of the South, particularly to the West. The Celts have always been on the move westward. Driven by a folklore describing a paradisaical land to the west, the Celts fought and trekked their way across Europe until they got to the Atlantic seacoast. They then built ships and sailed to the British Isles. Saint Brendan and other Irish monks sailed to Iceland and Greenland and may have reached North America. Now California claims the greatest number (although not percentage) of Celts in the United States. Where do they go from the Golden State?

While most scholars have argued that the Scots-Irish as an identifiable group were well on their way to the oblivion of assimilation by the time of the Civil War, Webb sees the characteristics and traits of the wild Celts everywhere in American life, especially in the military, in country music, and in fundamentalist Christianity. He sees them in his own family, generations of his family, be they Webbs or Hodges, Doyles, Smiths, McKnights, Murphys, Walkers, or Cochrans. He loves his people, and he loves their ways. He seems mostly proud that they always stood their ground and never backed down.

The Peculiar Path

by Paul Gottfried

Demokratie-Sonderweg
Bundesrepublik: Analyse der
Herrschaftsordnung in Deutschland
by Josef Schüsslburner
Fulda: Lindenblatt Media Verlag;
798 pp., \$39.80 EUR

A Bavarian legal scholar who has been attached to the U.N. Secretariat and to the E.U. Commission in Brussels, Josef Schüsslburner has disagreements with the German Basic Law, enacted in 1949 as an interim constitution for the West German Federal Republic. The author describes this guiding document and the circumstances that helped shape it as “democracy’s peculiar path for the Germans.” It is a path that mandates an “order of control” (*Herrschaftsordnung*) that leaves little room for real constitutional freedom or for any meaningful practice of popular government.

While the Basic Law (Article 146) claims to be only provisional and, in fact, subject to replacement by a new, permanent constitution once Germany is reunified, its origins determined both its later development and the virtual impossibility of superseding it. The law came out of Germany’s defeat and demoralization and has special features that her occupiers inflicted on their subjects. These include a federal court for interpreting the Basic Law (Bundesverfassungsgericht) and the federal and provincial agencies known as the Verfassungsschutz, which were organized in 1949, at the command of the Allied Occupation, to document “extremist” threats to German democracy. Such institutions interpret the constitutionally guaranteed right to make fundamental changes in the Basic Law as an antidemocratic attack on German “militant democracy” (*wehrhafte Demokratie*). Although Articles 79 and 146 provide for the possibility of amending part or all of the Basic Law, the “state protectors” of Germany’s democratic transformation and of the entrenched parliamentary blocs insist that any public advocacy of constitutional revision, particularly by conservative nationalists, should be suppressed. Courts have come down hard on those who express politically uncongenial opinions, and those groups that