

Scottish emigrants brought with them to their new countries a distinctive pattern of child-naming—a pattern which still has influence in Scotland to the present day. In the context of the American colonial period, we speak of such Scottish emigrants as “Scotch-Irish”, because most of those who made their way to America (and they came in large numbers between 1730-1760) first spent a generation or two in northern Ireland, where they preserved their distinctive folkways. Thus, when the Scottish onomastic pattern is encountered in America, it is typically called the “Scotch-Irish onomastic pattern”, and I shall observe that convention here.

The largest number of Scotch-Irish who came to America during colonial times, headed straight for the frontier, where the cheap land was, and where they could live in the way they preferred with minimal harassment by colonial governments with their English, and Anglican bias. They settled in these remote areas amidst German immigrants who were seeking the same things, but there was little intermarriage between these two kinds of communities until after the Revolutionary War. Consequently, conditions were ideal for the preservation of the Scotch-Irish onomastic pattern during this early American period, and that is what those like me, who specialize in researching this population find.

The pattern provides a template for naming all or most of the children a couple might have, and it runs thus:

The 1st son was named for the father's father.
 The 2nd son was named for the mother's father
 The 3rd son was named for the father
 The 4th son was named for the father's eldest brother
 The 5th son was named for the father's next eldest brother

The 1st daughter was named for the father's mother
 The 2nd daughter was named for the mother's mother
 The 3rd daughter was named for the mother
 The 4th daughter was named for the mother's eldest sister
 The 5th daughter was named for the mother's next eldest sister

and the pattern continues with subsequent children of each sex named for the next eldest same sex parental siblings.

In my estimation, this pattern was followed, at least for the first few children of each sex, by at least 80% of the first and second generation of Scotch-Irish settlers, and it was slow to attenuate thereafter, even though naming patterns in general tended to evolve rapidly in the wake of the Revolutionary War.

The Scotch-Irish onomastic pattern is therefore a major and indispensable resource for historians researching families of this subculture, but certain caveats need to be kept in mind.

Caveats

First, it was quite common to switch the first two naming rules for the children of each sex. I would estimate that in roughly a third of these families, the first child's name would come from his/her maternal, rather than paternal, grandparents. Second, the pattern was usually only loosely followed, if at all, after the third child of each sex: subsequent children were usually named for uncles and aunts, but girls might be named for paternal aunts, and boys for maternal uncles, and not necessarily with respect to birth order. Third, when Scotch-Irish married outside their cultural group (with Germans, or English) the pattern was less likely to be observed, especially where the husband was the outlander. Finally, we need to consider the problematics of actually applying the pattern to a given family.

Applying the Pattern

The main catch in applying this pattern to real Scotch-Irish families is the great difficulty of reconstructing complete families—determining the names of all the children, *and* their birth order. On the frontiers of Pennsylvania and Virginia (and later Kentucky, etc.) where these people settled, no public birth records were kept, few baptismal records have survived, and even marriage records are sparse. Moreover, very few bible or other private family records have surfaced, and even the gravestones (mostly in private cemeteries) have either disappeared or weathered to unreadability.

Wills, though, are typically of considerable use in reconstructing Scotch-Irish families, because only rarely were children omitted by these litigious, property-conscious people, and most lists in wills follow birth order—although children are more often than not itemized in several sublists, for example, all the sons, then all the daughters. Close analysis of wills is thus a very necessary art to acquire, though the gleanings from wills need to be further interpreted and fleshed out in the context of other surviving records.

One possible objection to the application of the pattern turns on the fact that there were many infant and childhood deaths in those days, and a single “lost” child could throw the pattern off. However, this is more a complication than a defeating objection, because another feature of the Scotch-Irish onomastic pattern called for the name of a deceased child to be re-used at the next opportunity—the birth of the next child of the same sex as the lost child. This rule no doubt accounts for many of the occasional out-of-order given names in these families when a child dies young, but it also rescues the pattern in the more frequent case where the deceased child is an infant under two.

Obviously, the pattern cannot just be applied mechanically, or at all (except conjecturally) where family data is sparse. Indeed, the *validity* of its application is *directly* proportional to the degree to which the family can be reconstructed without reference to onomastics, while the *value* of its application is *inversely* proportional to what is known.

In order to justify applying the pattern at all to a particular family, one must look for certain “tells”, and the best of these is where one finds the third child of each sex named for his/her parent. Where the third child isn’t definitely known, or where there is no third child, one needs to know the names of as many of the child’s grandparents as possible. The evidence that the pattern applies in a particular family is always probabilistic, like most scientific evidence, but the cumulative probability that the pattern applies, in most cases far exceeds the usual criteria of “scientific significance”—the 1 chance in 20, or 1 in 50 that the names were assigned in congruence with the pattern but according to some other scheme. Establishing that the names of two or at most three children fit the pattern is always sufficient to support the presumption that the pattern was followed.

However, granted that the pattern *was* followed, inference of the missing names should normally be confined to the names of the paternal and maternal grandparents, the name of the wife (or husband), and the names of the first three children, and it’s important to recognize that the odds that the inference of any one of the missing names from this set, is itself probabilistic, and considerably short of certain. Such odds ought to go up, though, with the number of names which can be shown to match the pattern.

Another way of increasing the odds both that the pattern was followed in a particular family, and that inferences from it are valid, is by working out the onomastics of all the sons of a particular couple. In my experience, the oldest son is the one most likely to follow the pattern scrupulously, but where the later sons do so as well, and where there are few of that surname in a particular area, these circumstances yield very strong evidence of a brotherly relationship, and correspondingly, inferences of the names of the common parents and grandparents becomes very much stronger—usually to the point of conclusiveness, in my opinion.