

# Writing from the margins: Donegal English invented/imagined

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## 1. Introduction

The English language was established in the north of Ireland with the Plantations, which caused significant waves of emigration from the neighbouring island. The linguistic geography of this area is characterised by its complex dialect source pattern (see Adams (1958, 1971; Gregg 1972; and Barry 1980). Traditionally, the speech of this part of Ireland has been divided into three different dialect areas: Ulster Scots, which is spoken in the north-east (Antrim, north Down, and parts of Co. Derry and Donegal); Mid-Ulster English, which comprises the Lagan valley, Tyrone, north Monaghan, north Fermanagh and some coastal areas of Donegal; and South Ulster English, which is spoken in the south of the province and which is sometimes overlooked in research dealing with Northern Irish English. This distribution, mainly based on vowel-length typology, originally had more to do with the phonological level (see Gregg 1972, Wagner 1958, and Harris 1984) but it is still useful as a description of the three main regional dialects extant in Ulster. To avoid creating terminological confusion that might render further discussion unintelligible, in this essay these terms will all be considered as part of what is called *Northern Irish English* (NIrE), that is, the English of the nine counties in the province of Ulster.

The English of county Donegal is considered as a variety of NIrE, due to the fact that it shares key features with the English of this area (see Harris 1985a, Hickey 2004, Hickey 2007: 142, and McCafferty 2007). There is, however, a distinction between Donegal and other dialectal areas in Ulster: first because west Donegal is the only area in Ulster that has remained as a *Gaeltacht* area, and secondly because of the influence that migration exerted on the linguistic development of this part of Ulster, particularly during the period of language shift from Irish to English.

This essay examines some of the characteristics of Donegal English, a marginal dialect which shows the convergence of the three formative stocks, that is, Ulster Scots, English and Irish. It will take as its source data of Donegal English the literary dialect of some Donegal authors. The first part of the essay reviews previous research into NIrE, contextualizing Donegal English as part of the NIrE variety. Then it goes on to explain the historical

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development of English in Donegal. The second part presents a brief analysis of the data, focusing on three structures: the *medial object perfect*, *contact relative clauses* and *singular concord*.

## 2. Northern Irish English and Donegal English

Research on the English of Ulster, or NIrE, dates back to the mid nineteenth century. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the publication of a considerable amount of descriptive work dealing with the English of Ulster. More accurate and systematic surveys were initiated in the 1950s with the *Belfast Naturalists' Field Club*'s project to compile an Ulster dictionary, and the creation of the *Ulster Dialect Archive* in the *Ulster Folk Museum*. *The Tape-Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English Speech*, which started in the 1970s (see Barry 1981: 18-46), made an important contribution to the study of dialectology in the North. The Belfast Sociolinguistic Projects, under the direction of James and Lesley Milroy, which analysed linguistic variables between different social groups from three particular areas of Belfast, set the ground for further sociolinguistic research in other areas like Lurgan (Pitts 1986), for instance. More recently, a sociolinguistic analysis of (London)Derry English has been carried out by McCafferty (2001), whose comprehensive study discusses the issues of ethnicity and language variation and change in NIrE.

Complete accounts and description of NIrE research are provided in Adams' (1981) chronological account, which covers the study of Ulster Dialects from 1860 to 1981, and updated by Corrigan (1990). Kirk's (1997) state-of-the-art report revises previous work and includes contemporary computer-based research, whereas McCafferty (2007) also discusses the most important studies dealing with sociolinguistic variation in NIrE. A recent volume by Corrigan (2010) also aims to provide insights into the evolution of NIrE.

Despite this relatively varied amount of work on the Ulster region, the area of Donegal seems to have received little specialised attention, as was pointed out above. Indeed, the amount of detailed linguistic work on Donegal English, in general, is scarce, with a few notable exceptions such as the contributions of Quiggin (1906) and Traynor (1953) to the study of lexicon, Ní Gallchóir (1981) in the field of bilingualism, and Adams (1976/1986c) in the field of phonology. Earlier glossaries like Simmons' (1890) also include a small list of certain Donegal words and expressions.

However, these are only exiguous in comparison with the studies carried out for other areas of Ireland. In that sense, this essay is meant as a modest contribution to the description of Donegal English, as part of NIrE.

## 2.1 History and development of NIrE and Donegal English

The arrival of settlers into Ulster from both England and Scotland from the late sixteenth century onwards significantly changed the language situation of this area of Ireland. The Cromwellian confiscations ‘transplanted’ (Adams 1976/1986a: 24) many of the Old English owners to south-east Connacht and new proprietors originating mainly from the West Midlands of England and from Scotland arrived in Ulster. The Scottish settlers initially established themselves in Antrim and Down and then spread further to the south and west of Ulster, thus endowing the English of these areas with a mixture of English and Scots which is what, according to Barry (1981: 59) ‘creates the generalised Northern Hiberno-English speech-type’.

The linguistic consequence of these plantations was, therefore, the introduction of different varieties of English which came into contact with the Gaelic language spoken by the indigenous population. The influence of the language(s) brought by the Scottish settlers on the language of Ulster has been described by Barry (1981: 59), who indicates that Scottish settlers outnumbered the English by 6 to 1 in Ulster. However, this influence does not seem to have affected the south-west of Donegal in the same way. According to Traynor (1953: xii) many of the first Scottish settlers in these areas seem to have eventually returned to their country. Braidwood (1964: 6) quotes the census returns of 1659 where it is stated that of a total population of 12,001 in Donegal, 3,412 were English and Scottish, and 8,589 were Irish. It is clear, then, that the predominant language in Donegal at the middle of the seventeenth century was still Irish.

According to de Fréine (1977: 73), at the end of the eighteenth century Irish still enjoyed a strong position as a vernacular in general in the island, however, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the use of Irish in Ireland began to decline (although situations of bilingualism still survived especially in rural areas), and the language shift from Irish to English, as is well-known, was set in motion. From that moment on, English became the language of prestige and power. Among the reasons which are often given for the rapid shift from the vernacular language to the language of the planters, are the progress of the railway connections between the two major

English-speaking towns, Belfast and Dublin, the influence of schools (where the use of Irish was banned), emigration, and the deaths caused by the famines.

The figures of the 1851 census show a drop in the number of Irish speakers (only 23% of the total Irish population). Although this is the first official census in which linguistic issues are documented, many authors have drawn attention to the fact that it underestimated the number of Irish speakers (see, for instance, Fitzgerald 1984: 120-121, Ó Cuív 1980: 20, de Fréine 1977: 80-82, and Adams 1973). In the case of Donegal, the census figures show 73,258 Irish-speakers in Donegal (counting monoglot and bilinguals together) out of a population of 136,476 Irish speakers recorded for Ulster in total (Adams 1976 /1986b: 129), that is, approximately 54% of Irish speakers in Ulster. Similarly, the census figures for the county as a whole in 1911 point to a decline of the Irish language, Donegal still holding the highest number of Irish-speakers in Ulster (59,313 out of a total population of 96,440 Irish-speakers in Ulster), that is, a little over 61% (see Hindley 1990: 16-19). These figures are significant in the context that we will be dealing with, as it explains why Donegal English is the most Gaelicised subvariety of NIrE, even despite the influence exerted by the migration factor, which is directly related to the language change of the county in general.

## 2.2 Migration and language change

Catastrophic economic conditions in the west of Ireland, caused by the great famine of the mid nineteenth century, led to massive waves of migration. Migrants to England and Scotland initially engaged in agricultural and construction work; later, industrialisation created other forms of employment.

Personal accounts of the experience of the Irish labour migrant (the *spailpín*) and the navvy exist in the form of fictional and semi-autobiographical novels (some of which I have discussed elsewhere, see Amador Moreno 2007, 2009). The novels of Donegal authors such as Charles McGlinchey (1861-1954), Michéal MacGabhan (1865-1948), Seamus Ó Grianna (1889-1969), Patrick MacGill (1891-1963), and Peadar O'Donnell (1893-1986) provide a valuable insight into the formation of Donegal English, not only as individual testimonies of how English was learnt, perceived and used, but also as recorded evidence of language use at

the start of the twentieth century, as will be discussed below. Their narratives all coincide in describing the influence of migration in their areas as a phenomenon which had a deep impact both sociologically and linguistically. McGlinchey's description of the use of English during his time is quite telling in that respect: 'There was no Irish allowed [in the schools], though the scholars could all speak it and the old master too. [...] There was little meas [respect] on Irish in my time. If you didn't know a bit of English you got nowhere' (*The Last of the Name*, p. 123).

As Adams notes (1958: 70), although some people from Donegal would have had some contact with the English already established in other areas of Ulster, this language was learnt by many only after leaving Donegal. Migration to Scotland during the harvesting season meant the acquisition of Lowland Scots, so that 'when eventually younger generations began to become bilingual at home it was this type of English which was passed on to them and reinforced when they in turn took to seasonal migration' (Adams 1958: 70). The linguistic situation between 1901 and 1911 is clearly reflected in the percentages recorded in the census returns.

In 1901, Donegal shows 78.9% of speakers who claimed to use English only, 20.7% spoke Irish and English and 0.4% claimed to speak Irish only. This increase in the number of English speakers affected mostly the young generations, and it was very closely related to the factor of migration. As some researchers have pointed out, knowledge of English was necessary for those who wished to emigrate.

The consequences that migration to Scotland had for linguistic analysis are interesting and complex. As Odlin (1997) claims, the evidence suggests that seasonal migration was a very important factor in the adoption of English in Donegal in general. The role of seasonal migrants, not only to Scotland, but also to the Lagan area – settled by colonists from Scotland, is worth taking into account especially because superstratum influence in Ulster has always been examined as being solely the result of the Plantations.<sup>1</sup> The Scots influence may well have been reinforced by further immigration (see Odlin 1997: 14).

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<sup>1</sup> Seasonal migration had consequences for the substratum account too. Given the close relation between Ulster and Scottish Gaelic (see Adams 1958: 56), it would be natural to think that monolingual Irish speakers would have used their native language to communicate with speakers of Scottish Gaelic who were often also employed as labourers (see Odlin 1997: 22). This means that many of the Gaelic features which can be found in Ulster English today might represent the influence of both Gaelic languages, not only

Although many of the migrants lived and worked in gangs that would have communicated among themselves through Irish, ‘repeated spells in an English-speaking environment must have led to a considerable familiarity with English’ (Daly 1990: 164). This is rendered in the autobiographical novels by Charles McGlinchey and Patrick MacGill referred to above, as is the use of code-mixing where loanwords are incorporated not only as part of the fictional dialogue of the characters, but also in the narrative of the stories.

### 3. Sociolinguistic analysis through written sources

Written corpora can compensate for the relative dearth of recorded data available during a particular period of time. For the variationist linguist, written sources such as private correspondence, memoirs, trial records and other types of texts that attempt to reflect natural speech behaviour are of great value, as they reflect speech features that may have been characteristic of a given speech community at a particular point in time, before the advent of recording devices. As Schneider has argued these sources often provide us with ‘a representation of a speech act that we would have liked to have listened to and recorded acoustically and that without the written record would have been lost altogether’ (Schneider 2002: 67). The validity of written documents for sociolinguistic analysis has been discussed from the perspective of historical sociolinguistics, traditional dialectology, and, more recently, corpus linguistics too. In the context of Irish English, Montgomery (1995), for example, argues for the validity of emigrant letters,<sup>2</sup> whereas Sullivan (1976, 1980), Kirk (1999), and McCafferty (2005) delineate the value of literary attestations. This essay uses the work of Charles McGlinchey and Patrick MacGill as well as 97 letters written by Irish emigrants abroad as linguistic evidence.

The novel *The Last of the Name*, by Charles McGlinchey is included due to its near-speech style. Edited by Brian Friel, McGlinchey’s memoir was collected by Patrick Kavanagh between the late 1940s and 1950s, when

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because they were brought by the Scottish emigrants to Ulster who spoke Gaelic or Scots (which had already adopted features of Scottish Gaelic before the Plantations), but also because Donegal migrants to Scotland might have incorporated features of Scottish Gaelic to their own native form of English.

<sup>2</sup> Ongoing work by McCafferty and Amador Moreno on CORIECOR (Corpus of Irish English Correspondence) also highlights the value of emigrant letters for the study of the development of Irish English.

the narrator was in his late eighties-early nineties. Kavanagh wrote down in longhand what his friend had to tell, but it was not until Kavanagh's son gave the manuscript to Friel to edit in book form that McGlinchey's conversations with Patrick Kavanagh were published in 1986. This memoir is presented as the narrative of McGlinchey's voice in the form of a monologue, where the reader takes the place of the patient listener of an old man's voice. As Friel points out in his introduction, the original manuscript was frequently erratic and repetitive: 'a conversation has a right to be meandering and repetitive – maybe for emphasis, maybe for the music of the speech, maybe just because the old man is forgetful' (McGlinchey 1986: 3). Friel's main imposition as editor was an attempt 'to fragment that flowing, conversational speech into chapters and to give those chapters titles' (McGlinchey 1986: 2) but the essential spoken mode, the jumps from one story to another, and the use of spoken discourse features make the text an interesting source of data for the analysis of Donegal English.

By the same token, Patrick MacGill's autobiographical novel, *Children of the Dead End* (published in 1904), and its sequel, *The Rat Pit* (which appeared one year later), are also valuable sources of linguistic analysis. As discussed in Amador Moreno (2006), these novels provide documentary evidence of great value not only at a sociohistorical level, but at a sociolinguistic level too. The fact that MacGill was a self-taught writer, who received very little formal education as a child, adds to the interest of his writing from a linguistic viewpoint. His recreation of Donegal English is particularly interesting not only because his fictional dialogues display a high degree of speech realism, but also because this element is equally contained in the narrative voice.

The last set of documents used as linguistic evidence here comes from the Emigration Database (IED), at the northern Irish Centre for Migration Studies, which holds a collection of primary source documents on Irish emigration to the USA and Canada in the 18th and 19th centuries. The IED contains a variety of original material which, apart from emigrant letters, also includes newspaper articles, shipping advertisements, shipping news, passenger lists, official government reports, family papers, births, deaths and marriages and extracts from books and periodicals. For the purpose of this analysis two sets of documents were used:

1. A collection of 56 unrelated personal letters written between 1889 and 1910 by emigrants to America to family members back in Donegal.
2. 41 letters written to Donegal emigrants throughout the world by relatives in Donegal during the same period.

The letters show how the emigrants stayed in contact with home. In general there are a number of aspects common to all the letters: requests for replies, apologies for not having written sooner, concern for the welfare of the people at home, references to the farming, and to the money sent by those abroad, mention of people who have died, etc. From a more linguistic point of view, they show lack of punctuation, spelling mistakes, some unintelligible words that the transcribers have guessed and written a question mark beside, and, of course, a number of features that belong to the style of letter writing. The most interesting aspect from a sociolinguistic point of view, though, is that, given their personal, unselfconscious and spontaneous nature, letters are a good source of data for linguistic analysis. In Schneider's categorization of the relationship between a speech event and its written record, they belong to the realm of the imagined: '[c]learly, letters do not represent spoken utterances; but when persons who have had but limited experience in writing and exposure to the norms of written expression are forced to write nevertheless, their writing reflects many features of their speech fairly accurately: what they do is put their own "imagined" words on to paper, if only with difficulty' (Schneider 2002: 75-76). This type of *imagined* speech complements *invented* speech such as literary dialect, where the 'fictitious utterance is intended to be characteristic of its – frequently also fictitious – speaker.' (Schneider 2002: 73).

#### 4. Findings

The appearance of Irish-based structures and vocabulary in the fictional data confirms the slight divergence of Donegal English from other NIrE subvarieties. Although this is more noticeable in the area of lexis (the analysis of vocabulary in the novels by MacGill and McGlinchey reveal a high percentage of Irish loanwords), due to space limitations the discussion below will focus on a selection of syntactic features.

#### 4.1 The ‘medial object perfect’

The use of the so-called *medial object perfect* (Filppula 1999: 107 ff., Kallen 2000, 2001), for example, is one of the most salient features in McGlinchey’s novel. This type of perfect is often described in research as focussing ‘more on the state that results from some anterior action’ (Harris 1985: 42) than its Standard English (StE) perfect counterpart. Formally it resembles the StE perfect construction except for the fact that the IrE structure places the direct object before the participle, as the following example suitably illustrates:

- 1 She took the cow home with her and had her milked before night-fall. (*The Last of the Name*, p. 35)
- 2 My father could sing it well when he had a drop taken. (*The Last of the Name*, p. 110)

Two main hypotheses have been formulated to account for the existence of the high rate of occurrence of this structure in IrE in general, one which sees the Irish construction shown in [3] as its source (see, for instance, van Hamel 1912: 276; Henry 1957; Bliss 1972; Sullivan 1976: 125-133; Greene 1979; or Filppula 1996),

- 3 *Tá an bad diolta agam.*  
V + N + verbal adj. + Prep.+Pron.  
Is the boat sold at-me  
(Harris 1985: 40)

and another one which argues for the role of the superstrate. The latter is observed by authors such as Taniguchi, who writes that this construction ‘is the survival of the practice in the earlier stage of English, which was preserved as late as the fourteenth century. It is practically obsolete in present ordinary English except dialectally.’ (1972: 59). Split perfects like those found in Shakespeare (see [4a-b] below), for instance, are quoted in many studies throughout the literature as evidence of the existence of analogous older English patterns. Harris (1985: 48) takes the following two examples quoted by Kirchner (1952: 402), to illustrate this:

- 4a He which hath your noble father slain (*Hamlet* IV, vii, 4).  
4b Have you the lion's part written? (*Midsummer Night's Dream* I, ii, 68)

(Harris 1985: 48)

On the basis of historical evidence Harris (1985, 1991) also argues for a ‘reinforcing or preservative’ influence of Irish in this case, rather than seeing it as an ‘exclusive or direct’ one. However, Filppula’s survey into the occurrence of this structure using the Helsinki Corpus (OE, ME and EModE periods) shows that ‘towards the end of the ME period perfects with mid-position objects become restricted to verse texts’ (Filppula 1996: 48-49). This, together with evidence drawn from the study of parallels in conservative BrE dialects, leads him to the conclusion that ‘although it does not seem possible to rule out superstratal influences on HE M[edial] O[object] P[erfect]s, the evidence for a significant and not merely reinforcing, role played by Irish is very strong’ (Filppula 1999: 116; 1996: 54). In support of the substratum account too, Greene goes as far as to suggest that the survival of this feature in Gaeltacht areas can be seen as evidence of Irish influence: ‘in Gaeltacht speech, it still retains sufficient subjective and emotional content to make it an aspectual category which distinguishes it clearly from the purely temporal perfect of Standard English with which, however, it overlaps at certain points.’ (Greene 1979: 41). The fact that it is found in McGlinchey’s narrative, where the narrative voice displays strong discursive influence from Irish, seems to corroborate this hypothesis.

#### 4.2. The ‘subject contact relative’

The use of the *subject contact relative* is also of interest in our fictional corpus (*The Dalach Rua was a man had great power*, *The Last of the Name*, p.76). As can be seen in this and other examples from McGlinchey’s novel (There were few could handle a stick as well, p. 115; [...] it was a thing came naturally to my hand, p. 141), in these defining (or restrictive) relative clauses the relative pronoun (acting as a subject) has been omitted. This is very unusual in the StE variety, where it is possible to omit object relatives (e.g. I bought the book you recommended), but not when the relative is acting as subject, as in the examples from the novel. This omission, which is often found in informal or colloquial speech (Quirk et al. 1972/1989: 865), and is also quite common in other dialectal or nonstandard varieties of English other than Irish English (Filppula 1999: 285), however, seems to be

more prevalent in Irish English (Taniguchi 1972: 35, Moylan 1996:88, Henry 1995, Ó hÚrdail's 1997: 194). In his analysis of NIrE, Doherty (2002) points to a fairly high frequency in the use of the contact clause particularly in the north. However, the existence of this type of relative clause in earlier English has made some authors discount the possibility of substrate influence in this case (see Braidwood 1964: 88, and Taniguchi 1972: 36). The persistence of this 'archaic' grammatical feature in Donegal English, though, seems to be bound to a less restricted kind of relative construction, embedded in *existential there* sentences such as: There's no man on this boat could take a rise out of me (*The Rat Pit*, p. 125). The fact that examples like this are salient in the novels seems to indicate that the retention of older constructions is another characteristic of Donegal English.

#### 4.3. Singular concord

Finally, one of the most dominant features in the letter data is *singular concord*, which affects the subject-verb agreement system. As was the case with the structures discussed above, the occurrence of this feature in the letters indicates a widespread spoken pattern. The 48 examples of singular concord found in the letters show plural subjects in collocation with a verb showing the third person singular -s ending (e.g. Prices is pretty well cut here). From a diachronic point of view, this phenomenon is 'very well documented in the history of Scots' (McCafferty 2005). As Milroy states, it 'goes back to Middle-Scots (and before) where it is found in the politer sort of literary texts. [...] So it has a long and respectable history in the language'.

The analysis of the Donegal data confirms in general the results obtained in studies of the singular concord, and it yields interesting conclusions in relation to the categories into which the subject types have been classified. Items [5] and [6] below illustrate the use of plural N[oun] P[hrase]s in existential *there* clauses in the letters, which, on the other hand, is not unusual in present-day English English:

- 5 There is just two girls of us Ellen Ann and I. We have no brothers.
- 6 [...] you have heard about Bella Duncan and Nox [Knox?] getting married There was two songs made on them and they are [very?] angry about it.

Existential *there* clauses with plural NPs are found in other varieties of English (Clarke 1997; Henry 2002) too and, as can be seen in [7] and [8], they occur with the verb *be* both in the present and the past tense (*Be* is of course the only verb to show agreement in the past tense in English):

7 [...] and there is some looking for work that is always so at this time of the Year.

8 [...] there was a few people firing shots at Gordon's but that was all.

Collective NPs such as *people* also tend to appear (as in 8), and conjoined NPs also seem to trigger singular –s agreement, as in 9 and 10:

9 William & Tommy is away drawing turf for Uncle Charles to day

10 [...] my sister Martha and brother Kirk and famity [family?] was all well at the time [...]

Demonstratives pronouns can also show lack of agreement:

11 [...] those was only [i---zr] down to [May?] 98

The comparison of these tokens with the MacGill's data shows some similarities:

- a) Plural NPs followed by –s endings: e.g. [...] your wages is going to be sixteen shillings a week [...] (*Children of the Dead End*, p.183)
- b) Existential *there* constructions: e.g. Wasn't there big offerings? (*Children of the Dead End*, p. 24); There was no policemen about (*Children of the Dead End*, p. 298); Mother of God! But there is strange things in foreign lands! (*The Rat Pit*, p. 54)

Despite it not being exclusive of NIrE (McCafferty 2005: 196-197), singular concord has been regarded as the result of diffusion from the Ulster-Scots dialect into the other two major dialect groups of the island, i.e., Mid-Ulster English and Southern Irish English. However, the high occurrence of this feature in the Donegal letters in addition to its attestation in the fictional data both seem to indicate that its occurrence in such a Gaelicised dialect as Donegal English may be attributable to the English with which Donegal

emigrants were in contact during their migratory spells in Scotland. As McCafferty (2003) discusses in relation to its survival in the major regional dialects of the northern province in general, in the case of Donegal English, it seems plausible to claim that the reinforcement exerted by the Scottish use of this feature may have ensured its survival in a marginal dialect such as Donegal English.

### 5. Concluding remarks

This essay has discussed the significance of Donegal English as a contact variety which shows traces of Irish, English and Scots. Despite having a certain degree of ‘marginal identity’, the Donegal dialect shows interesting features which are closely related to the socio-historical development of the area. Through a selection of texts, this study has highlighted some dialectal structures as evidence of the language contact that took place in this part of Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. At a period when no recording devices were available, the texts included in this study are taken as written records of spoken language, and they indeed contain “spoken” features, some of which are discussed briefly here. The use of the *medial object perfect*, the *contact relative clauses* and the *singular concord* are all found to be significant in the overall description of Donegal English. The existence of these structures in the corpus is also representative of a language contact situation which despite sharing certain aspects with other NIrE dialects, also set it apart. While having in common the retention of some features introduced by the sixteenth century English settlers in Ulster, the survival of Irish-based structures and Irish lexis is much stronger in Donegal English than in any of the other dialects of Ulster. Also, as the work of the Donegal writers discussed here records, the reinforcement of linguistic features brought by the emigrants from Scotland probably reinforced the use of features introduced by Scottish settlers during the seventeenth century.

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