



## Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America

By Jim Webb

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More than 27 million Americans today can trace their lineage to the Scots, whose bloodline was stained by centuries of continuous warfare along the border between England and Scotland, and later in the bitter settlements of England's Ulster Plantation in Northern Ireland. Between 250,000 and 400,000 Scots-Irish migrated to America in the eighteenth century, traveling in groups of families and bringing with them not only long experience as rebels and outcasts but also unparalleled skills as frontiersmen and guerrilla fighters. Their cultural identity reflected acute individualism, dislike of aristocracy and a military tradition, and, over time, the Scots-Irish defined the attitudes and values of the military, of working class America, and even of the peculiarly populist form of American democracy itself.

*Born Fighting* is the first book to chronicle the full journey of this remarkable cultural group, and the profound, but unrecognized, role it has played in the shaping of America. Written with the storytelling verve that has earned his works such acclaim as "captivating . . . unforgettable" (the *Wall Street Journal* on *Lost Soldiers*), Scots-Irishman James Webb, Vietnam combat veteran and former Naval Secretary, traces the history of his people, beginning nearly two thousand years ago at Hadrian's Wall, when the nation of Scotland was formed north of the Wall through armed conflict in contrast to England's formation to the south through commerce and trade. Webb recounts the Scots' odyssey—their clashes with the English in Scotland and then in Ulster, their retreat from one war-ravaged land to another. Through engrossing chronicles of the challenges the Scots-Irish faced, Webb vividly portrays how they developed the qualities that helped settle the American frontier and define the American character.

*Born Fighting* shows that the Scots-Irish were 40 percent of the Revolutionary War army; they included the pioneers Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, Davy Crockett, and Sam Houston; they were the writers Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain; and they have given America numerous great military leaders, including Stonewall Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, Audie Murphy, and George S. Patton, as well as most of the soldiers of the Confederacy (only 5 percent of whom owned slaves, and who fought against what they viewed as an invading army). It illustrates how the Scots-Irish redefined American politics, creating the populist

movement and giving the country a dozen presidents, including Andrew Jackson, Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. And it explores how the Scots-Irish culture of isolation, hard luck, stubbornness, and mistrust of the nation's elite formed and still dominates blue-collar America, the military services, the Bible Belt, and country music.

Both a distinguished work of cultural history and a human drama that speaks straight to the heart of contemporary America, *Born Fighting* reintroduces America to its most powerful, patriotic, and individualistic cultural group—one too often ignored or taken for granted.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Former navy secretary Webb (*Fields of Fire*; etc.) wants not only to offer a history of the Scots-Irish but to redeem them from their redneck, hillbilly stereotype and place them at the center of American history and culture. As Webb relates, the Scots-Irish first emigrated to the U.S., 200,000 to 400,000 strong, in four waves during the 18th century, settling primarily in Appalachia before spreading west and south. Webb's thesis is that the Scots-Irish, with their rugged individualism, warrior culture built on extended familial groups (the "kind of people who would die in place rather than retreat") and an instinctive mistrust of authority, created an American culture that mirrors these traits. Webb has a genuine flair for describing the battles the Scots-Irish fought during their history, but his analysis of their role in America's social and political history is, ironically for someone trying to crush stereotypes, fixated on what he sees, in almost Manichaean terms, as a class conflict between the Scots-Irish and America's "paternalistic Ivy League-centered, media-connected, politically correct power centers." He even excuses resistance to the "Northern-dominated" Civil Rights movement. Another glaring weakness is the virtual absence of women from the sociological narrative. Webb interweaves his own Scots-Irish family history throughout the book with some success, but by and large his writing and analysis are overwhelmed by romanticism.

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* In telling the story of the Scots-Irish in America as a robust and passionate tale, novelist Webb writes straightforward, no-nonsense, readable history that clips right along while it is also very personal and highly idiosyncratic about a people who, he claims, are largely invisible--taken for granted--to the general public and who, seldom thinking of themselves in ethnic identity terms, mostly don't know their culture. Webb maintains that Scots-Irish attitudes form the bedrock of American society, especially among the working class. Scots-Irish culture has produced American presidents from Andrew Jackson to Bill Clinton, soldiers from Ulysses S. Grant to George Patton, pioneers, preachers, and others whose most common characteristics may be described as fierce individualism, persistent egalitarianism, and a strong sense of personal honor. Perhaps the most visible examples of broad and ongoing Scots-Irish legacy are the fundamentalist Christianity (a potent combination of Scottish Calvinism and headstrong populism) of America's Bible Belt and country music. Webb begins the Scots-Irish saga in Scotland, where, he says, the Scots-Irish character was formed, moves on to the Ulster Scots of what is now Northern Ireland, and follows them to the Appalachians and points beyond as well as through the American Revolution, the Civil War, and up to the present day. Popular history at its finest. *June Sawyers*

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### Review

“Born Fighting is a bombshell—or else the most brilliant battle flare ever launched by a book. James Webb reveals the all-but-invisible ethnic group that has created the core beliefs of democracy American-style: our rights come from God, not the Government; all of us are born equal, and “born aristocrats” don’t exist; and tread on either of those two truths, and we’ll fight you down to the last unbroken hyoid bone. The Scots-Irish, for such is their name, have fought *all* our wars for us, including Vietnam. James Webb was there, and he can count. He has written not only an engrossing story but also an important work of sociological history in the tradition of the great James Graham Leyburn.”

—Tom Wolfe

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#### **Gwendolyn Harrison:**

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