

THREE

CULT OF THE COVENANT

*For all the land which thou seest,
to thee will I give it and to thy seed forever.*

—Genesis 13:15

*And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and
thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting
covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.*

—Genesis 17:7

MYTH OF THE PRISTINE WILDERNESS

With the onset of colonialism in North America, control of the land was wrenched away from the Indigenous peoples, and the forests grew dense, so that later European settlers were unaware of the former cultivation and sculpting and manicuring of the landscape. Abandoned fields of corn turned to weeds and bushes. Settlers chopped down trees in New England until the landscape was nearly bare.¹ One geographer notes, “Paradoxical as it may seem, there was undoubtedly much more ‘forest primeval’ in 1850 than in 1650.”² Anglo-Americans who did observe Native habitat management in action misunderstood what they saw. Captain John Palliser, traveling through the prairies in the 1850s, complained about the Indians’ “disastrous habit of setting the prairie on fire for the most trivial and worse than useless reasons.” In 1937, Harvard naturalist Hugh Raup claimed that the “open, park-like woods” written about in earlier times had been, “from time immemorial, characteristic of vast areas in North America” and could not have been the result of human management.³

In the founding myth of the United States, the colonists acquired a vast expanse of land from a scattering of benighted peoples who were hardly using it—an unforgivable offense to the Puritan work ethic. The historical record is clear, however, that European colonists shoved aside a large network of small and large nations whose governments, commerce, arts and sciences, agriculture, technologies, theologies, philosophies, and institutions were intricately developed, nations that maintained sophisticated relations with one another and with the environments that supported them. By the early seventeenth century, when British colonists from Europe began to settle in North America, a large Indigenous population had long before created “a humanized landscape almost everywhere,” as William Denevan puts it.⁴ Native peoples had created town sites, farms, monumental earthworks, and networks of roads, and they had devised a wide variety of governments, some as complex as any in the world. They had developed sophisticated philosophies of government, traditions of diplomacy, and policies of international relations. They conducted trade along roads that crisscrossed the landmasses and waterways of the American continents. Before the arrival of Europeans, North America was indeed a “continent of villages,” but also a continent of nations and federations of nations.⁵

Many have noted that had North America been a wilderness, undeveloped, without roads, and uncultivated, it might still be so, for the European colonists could not have survived. They appropriated what had already been created by Indigenous civilizations. They stole already cultivated farmland and the corn, vegetables, tobacco, and other crops domesticated over centuries, took control of the deer parks that had been cleared and maintained by Indigenous communities, used existing roads and water routes in order to move armies to conquer, and relied on captured Indigenous people to identify the locations of water, oyster beds, and medicinal herbs. Historian Francis Jennings was emphatic in addressing what he called the myth that “America was virgin land, or wilderness, inhabited by nonpeople called savages”:

European explorers and invaders discovered an inhabited land. Had it been pristine wilderness then, it would possibly

be so still today, for neither the technology nor the social organization of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had the capacity to maintain, of its own resources, outpost colonies thousands of miles from home. Incapable of conquering true wilderness, the Europeans were highly competent in the skill of conquering other people, and that is what they did. They did not settle a virgin land. They invaded and displaced a resident population.

This is so simple a fact that it seems self-evident.⁶

THE CALVINIST ORIGIN STORY

All modern nation-states claim a kind of rationalized origin story upon which they fashion patriotism or loyalty to the state. When citizens of modern states and their anthropologists and historians look at what they consider “primitive” societies, they identify their “origin myths,” quaint and endearing stories, but fantastic ones, not grounded in “reality.” Yet many US scholars seem unable (or unwilling) to subject their own nation-state’s founding story to the same objective examination. The United States is not unique among nations in forging an origin myth, but most of its citizens believe it to be exceptional among nation-states, and this exceptionalist ideology has been used to justify appropriation of the continent and then domination of the rest of the world. It is one of the few states founded on the covenant of the Hebrew Torah, or the Christian borrowing of it in the Old Testament of the Bible. Other covenant states are Israel and the now-defunct apartheid state of South Africa, both of which were founded in 1948.⁷ Although the origin stories of these three covenant states were based on Judeo-Christian scripture, they were not founded as theocracies. According to the myths, the faithful citizens come together of their own free will and pledge to each other and to their god to form and support a godly society, and their god in turn vouchsafes them prosperity in a promised land.

The influence of the scriptures was pervasive among many of the Western social and political thinkers whose ideas the founders of the first British colonies in North America drew upon. Historian

Donald Harman Akenson points to the way that “certain societies, in certain eras of their development,” have looked to the scriptures for guidance, and likens it to the way “the human genetic code operates physiologically. That is, this great code has, in some degree, directly determined what people would believe and when they would think and what they would do.”⁸ Dan Jacobson, a citizen of Boer-ruled South Africa, whose parents were immigrants, observes that,

like the Israelites, and their fellow Calvinists in New England, [the Boers] believed that they had been called by their God to wander through the wilderness, to meet and defeat the heathen, and to occupy a promised land on his behalf. . . . A sense of their having been summoned by divine decree to perform an ineluctable historical duty has never left the Boers, and has contributed to both their strength and their weakness.⁹

Founders of the first North American colonies and later of the United States had a similar sense of a providential opportunity to make history. Indeed, as Akenson reminds us, “it is from [the] scriptures that western society learned how to think historically.” The key moment in history according to covenant ideology “involves the winning of ‘the Land’ from alien, and indeed evil, forces.”¹⁰

The principal conduit of the Hebrew scriptures and covenant ideology to European Christians was John Calvin, the French religious reformer whose teachings coincided with the advent of the European invasion and colonization of the Americas. The Puritans drew upon Calvinist ideology in founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as did the Dutch Calvinist settlers of the Cape of Good Hope in founding their South African colony during the same period. Calvinism was a Protestant Christian movement with a strong separatist political component. In accord with the doctrine of predestination, Calvin taught that human free will did not exist. Certain individuals are “called” by God and are among the “elect.” Salvation therefore has nothing to do with one’s actions; one is born as part of the elect or not, according to God’s will. Although individuals could not know for certain if they were among the elect, outward good fortune, especially material wealth, was taken to be a manifestation of election; conversely, bad fortune and poverty, not to speak of dark skin,

were taken as evidence of damnation. “The attractiveness of such a doctrine to a group of invading colonists . . . is obvious,” Aken-son observes, “for one could easily define the natives as immutably profane, and damned, and oneself as predestined to virtue.”¹¹

Since another sign of justification was a person’s ability to abide by the laws of a well-ordered society, Calvin preached the obligation of citizens to obey lawful authority. In fact, they should do so even when that authority was lodged in poor leaders (one of the seeds for “my country right or wrong”). Calvin led his Huguenot followers across the border into Geneva, took political control of the city-state, and established it as a republic in 1541. The Calvinist state enacted detailed statutes governing every aspect of life and appointed functionaries to enforce them. The laws reflected Calvin’s interpretation of the Old Testament; dissenters were forced to leave the republic, and some were even tortured and executed.

Although the US Constitution represents for many US citizens a covenant with God, the US origin story goes back to the Mayflower Compact, the first governing document of the Plymouth Colony, named for the ship that carried the hundred or so passengers to what is now Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in November 1620. Forty-one of the “Pilgrims,” all men, wrote and signed the compact. Invoking God’s name and declaring themselves loyal subjects of the king, the signatories announced that they had journeyed to northern “Virginia,” as the eastern seaboard of North America was called by the English, “to plant the First Colony” and did therefore “Covenant and Combine ourselves together in a Civil Body Politic” to be governed by “just and equal Laws” enacted “for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.” The original settlers of Massachusetts Bay Colony, founded in 1630, adopted an official seal designed in England before their journey. The central image depicts a near-naked native holding a harmless, flimsy-looking bow and arrow and inscribed with the plea, “Come over and help us.”¹² Nearly three hundred years later, the official seal of the US military veterans of the “Spanish-American War” (the invasion and occupation of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines) showed a naked woman kneeling before an armed US soldier and a sailor, with a US battleship in the background. One may trace this

recurrent altruistic theme into the early twenty-first century, when the United States still invades countries under the guise of rescue.

In other modern constitutional states, constitutions come and go, and they are never considered sacred in the manner patriotic US citizens venerate theirs. Great Britain has no written constitution. The Magna Carta arguably comes close, but it does not reflect a covenant. US citizens did not inherit their cult-like adherence to their constitution from the English. From the Pilgrims to the founders of the United States and continuing to the present, the cultural persistence of the covenant idea, and thus the bedrock of US patriotism, represents a deviation from the main course in the development of national identities. Arguably, both the 1948 birth of the state of Israel and advent of Nationalist Party rule of South Africa were emulations of the US founding; certainly many US Americans closely identify with the state of Israel, as they did with Afrikaner-ruled South Africa. Patriotic US politicians and citizens take pride in “exceptionalism.” Historians and legal theorists characterize US statecraft and empire as those of a “nation of laws,” rather than one dominated by a particular class or group of interests, suggesting a kind of holiness.

The US Constitution, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the writings of the “Founding Fathers,” Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, the Pledge of Allegiance, and even Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech are all bundled into the covenant as sacred documents that express the US state religion. An aspect of this most visible in the early twenty-first century is the burgeoning “gun lobby,” based on the sanctity of the Second Amendment to the Constitution. In the forefront of these Second Amendment adherents are the descendants of the old settlers who say that they represent “the people” and have the right to bear arms in order to overthrow any government that does not in their view adhere to the God-given covenant.

Parallel to the idea of the US Constitution as covenant, politicians, journalists, teachers, and even professional historians chant like a mantra that the United States is a “nation of immigrants.” From its beginning, the United States has welcomed—indeed, often solicited, even bribed—immigrants to repopulate conquered terri-

tories “cleansed” of their Indigenous inhabitants. From the mid-nineteenth century, immigrants were recruited to work mines, raze forests, construct canals and railroads, and labor in sweatshops, factories, and commercial farm fields. In the late twentieth century, technical and medical workers were recruited. The requirements for their formal citizenship were simple: adhere to the sacred covenant through taking the Citizenship Oath, pledging loyalty to the flag, and regarding those outside the covenant as enemies or potential enemies of the exceptional country that has adopted them, often after they escaped hunger, war, or repression, which in turn were often caused by US militarism or economic sanctions. Yet no matter how much immigrants might strive to prove themselves to be as hardworking and patriotic as descendants of the original settlers, and despite the rhetoric of *E pluribus unum*, they are suspect. The old stock against which they are judged inferior includes not only those who fought in the fifteen-year war for independence from Britain but also, and perhaps more important, those who fought and shed (Indian) blood, before and after independence, in order to acquire the land. These are the descendants of English Pilgrims, Scots, Scots-Irish, and Huguenot French—Calvinists all—who took the land bequeathed to them in the sacred covenant that predated the creation of the independent United States. These were the settlers who fought their way over the Appalachians into the fertile Ohio Valley region, and it is they who claimed blood sacrifice for their country. Immigrants, to be accepted, must prove their fidelity to the covenant and what it stands for.

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE ULSTER-SCOTS

The core group of frontier settlers were the Ulster-Scots—the Scots-Irish, or “Scotch-Irish,” as they called themselves.¹³ Usually the descendants of these Scots-Irish say their ancestors came to the British colonies from Ireland, but their journey was more circuitous than that. The Scots-Irish were Protestants from Scotland who were recruited by the British as settlers in the six counties of the province of Ulster in northern Ireland. The British had seized these half-million

acres from Ireland in the early seventeenth century, driven the indigenous Irish farmers from it, and opened it to settlement under English protection. This coincided with the English plantation of two colonies on the Atlantic coast of North America and the beginning of settler colonialism there. These early settlers came mostly from the Scottish lowlands. Scotland itself, along with Wales, had preceded Ireland as colonial notches in the belt of English expansion. Britain's colonization of Indigenous lands in North America was foreshadowed by its colonization of northern Ireland. By 1630 the new settlers in Ulster—21,000 Britons, including some Welsh, and 150,000 Lowland Scots—were more numerous than British settlers in all of North America at the time. In 1641, the indigenous Irish rebelled and killed ten thousand of the settlers, yet Protestant Scots settlers continued to pour in. In some formerly Irish areas, they formed a majority of the population. They brought with them the covenant ideology of Calvinism that had been the work of the Scotsman John Knox. Later John Locke, also a Scot, would secularize the covenant idea into a “contract,” the social contract, whereby individuals sacrifice their liberty only through consent. An insidiously effective example, the US economic system, was based on Locke's theories.¹⁴

So it was that the Ulster-Scots were already seasoned settler colonialists before they began to fill the ranks of settlers streaming toward the North American British colonies in the early eighteenth century, many of them as indentured servants. Before ever meeting Indigenous Americans, the Ulster settlers had perfected scalping for bounty, using the indigenous Irish as their victims. As this chapter and the following one show, the Scots-Irish were the foot soldiers of British empire building, and they and their descendants formed the shock troops of the “westward movement” in North America, the expansion of the US continental empire and the colonization of its inhabitants. As Calvinists (mostly Presbyterian), they added to and transformed the Calvinism of the earlier Puritan settlers into the unique ideology of the US settler class.¹⁵

In one of history's great migrations, nearly a quarter-million Scots-Irish left Ulster for British North America between 1717 and 1775. Although a number left for religious reasons, the majority

were losers in the struggle over Britain's Irish policies, which brought economic ruin to Ireland's wool and linen industries. Hard times were magnified by prolonged drought, and so the settlers pulled up stakes and moved across the Atlantic. This is a story that would repeat itself time and time again in settler treks across North America, the majority of migrants ending up landless losers in the Monopoly game of European settler colonialism.

The majority of Ulster-Scot settlers were cash-poor and had to indenture themselves to pay for their passage to North America. Once settled, they came to predominate as soldier-settlers. Most initially landed in Pennsylvania, but large numbers soon migrated to the southern colonies and to the backcountry, the British colonies' western borders, where they squatted on unceded Indigenous lands. Among frontier settlers, Scots-Irish predominated among settlers of English and German descent. Although the majority remained landless and poor, some became merchants and owners of plantations worked by slaves, as well as politically powerful. Seventeen presidents of the United States have been of Ulster-Scots lineage, from Andrew Jackson, founder of the Democratic Party, to Ronald Reagan, the Bushes, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama on his mother's side. Theodore Roosevelt characterized his Scots-Irish ancestors as "a stern, virile, bold and hardy people who formed the kernel of that American stock who were the pioneers of our people in the march westwards."¹⁶ Perhaps as influential as their being presidents, educators, and businessmen, the Scots-Irish engendered a strong set of individualist values that included the sanctity of glory in warfare. They made up the officer corps and were soldiers of the regular army, as well as the frontier-ranging militias that cleared areas for settlement by exterminating Indigenous farmers and destroying their towns.

The Seven Years' War between the British and the French (1754–63) was fought both in Europe and in North America, where the British colonists called it the French and Indian War because it was mainly a British war against the Indigenous peoples, some of whom formed alliances with the French. The British colonial militias consisted largely of frontier Scots-Irish settlers who wanted access to Indigenous farmland in the Ohio Valley region. By the time of US

independence, Ulster-Scots made up 15 percent of the population of the thirteen colonies, and most were clustered in majority numbers in the backcountry. During the war for settler independence from Britain, most settlers who had emigrated directly from Scotland remained loyal to the British Crown and fought on that side. In contrast, the Scots-Irish were in the forefront of the struggle for independence and formed the backbone of Washington's fighting forces. Most of the names of soldiers at Valley Forge were Scots-Irish. They saw themselves, and their descendants see themselves, as the true and authentic patriots, the ones who spilled rivers of blood to secure independence and to acquire Indigenous lands—gaining blood rights to the latter as they left bloody footprints across the continent.¹⁷

During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, first- and second-generation Scots-Irish continued to pour westward into the Ohio Valley region, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. They were the largest ethnic group in the westward migration, and they maintained many of their Scots-Irish ways. They tended to move three or four times, acquiring and losing land before settling at least somewhat permanently. Scots-Irish settlers were overwhelmingly farmers rather than explorers or fur traders. They cleared forests, built log cabins, and killed Indians, forming a human wall of colonization for the new United States and, in wartime, employing their fighting skills effectively. Historian Carl Degler writes that “these hardy, God-fearing Calvinists made themselves into a veritable human shield of colonial civilization.”¹⁸ The next chapter explores the kind of counterinsurgent warfare they perfected, which formed the basis of US militarism into the twenty-first century.

The Calvinist religion of the Scots-Irish, Presbyterianism, was in numbers of faithful soon second only to those of New England's Congregationalist Church. But on the frontier, Scots-Irish devotion to the formal Presbyterian Church waned. New evangelical offshoots refashioned Calvinist doctrines to decentralize and do away with the Presbyterian hierarchy. Although they continued to regard themselves as chosen people of the covenant, commanded by God to go into the wilderness to build the new Israel, the Scots-Irish also saw themselves, as their descendants see themselves, as the true and authentic patriots, entitled to the land through their blood sacrifice.

SACRED LAND BECOMES REAL ESTATE

The land won through North American bloodshed was not necessarily conceived in terms of particular parcels for a farm that would be passed down through generations. Most of the settlers who fought for it kept moving on nearly every generation. In the South many lost their holdings to land companies that then sold it to planters seeking to increase the size of their slave-worked plantations. Without the unpaid forced labor of enslaved Africans, a farmer growing cash crops could not compete on the market. Once in the hands of settlers, the land itself was no longer sacred, as it had been for the Indigenous. Rather, it was private property, a commodity to be acquired and sold—every man a possible king, or at least wealthy. Later, when Anglo-Americans had occupied the continent and urbanized much of it, this quest for land and the sanctity of private property were reduced to a lot with a house on it, and “the land” came to mean the country, the flag, the military, as in “the land of the free” of the national anthem, or Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land.” Those who died fighting in foreign wars were said to have sacrificed their lives to protect “this land” that the old settlers had spilled blood to acquire. The blood spilled was largely Indigenous.

These then were the settlers upon which the national myths are based, the ultimately dispensable cannon fodder for the taking of the land and the continent, the foot soldiers of empire, the “yeoman farmers” romanticized by Thomas Jefferson. They were not of the ruling class, although a few slipped through and later were drawn in by the ruling class as elected officials and military officers, thereby maintaining the facade of a classless society and a democratic empire. The founders were English patricians, slave owners, large land barons, or otherwise successful businessmen dependent on the slave trade and exports produced by enslaved Africans and on property sales. When descendants of the settler class, overwhelmingly Presbyterian or otherwise Calvinist Protestant, were accepted into the ruling class, they usually became Episcopalians, members of an elite church linked to the state Church of England. As we look at the bloody deeds of the settlers in acquiring and maintaining land, the social class context is an essential element.