Daniel Patterson’s monograph paints a fascinating picture of Scotch Irish settlers in the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Focusing on the Bingham family of stone carvers who predominantly created tombstones, the author takes us on a wild journey through the aforementioned states, right back to the motherland city of Ulster. Some of the characters encountered through the narrative could be from a Charles Frazier novel, and one wonders if there was something in the water around Asheville/Chapel Hill. Patterson is the Kenan Professor Emeritus of English and Folklore at the University of North Carolina and that might explain his facility with words and the telling of a story. Interesting characters abound. One person who crossed paths with Samuel Bingham, named Andrew Montour, was an interpreter and mediator who spoke several languages, among them Iroquois, Algonquin, English, and French. Descending from European and Native American ancestry, Montour’s full life included two Indian wives, fighting in an Iroquois war party, and attacking Fort Duquesne with General Braddock’s army of British colonists. Another character in the lives of the Binghams was Devil Charlie Polk whose name aptly recalls his deeds.

Using the tombstones themselves as a touch-point, Patterson explores the changes in symbolism regarding carved images, and the expansion of phrasing and word usage through time, to highlight changes in the social milieu of the Scotch Irish settlers in America. The Bingham group was comprised of eight carvers and approximately 1,000 stones can be attributed to them. Only one stone actually bears a signature. Wood was one of the first materials to be used for tombstones in these areas due to cost and availability. Unfortunately, not many examples survived. As stone came to be the material of choice, usage then depended on what type of stone was available in the region. Many types of available stone in the Carolinas were not as durable as the types found in the New England states, thus creating another problem of longevity. Patterson’s monograph is the first study of tombstones for these locations, and whereas research is plentiful for tombstone art in New England states, his book will serve as a great foundation for tombstone art research in these states further south. Indexes, notes, and bibliographic citations are complete and useful, and show the breadth of Patterson’s research, not only in art history, but also in local history and genealogy. The True Image is a valuable addition to libraries whose focus is on the art, history, and genealogy of this region.

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