

The Queensland Irish Association: Origins and Consolidation, 1898-1908[§]

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In his deft *The Irish in Australia*, Patrick O'Farrell selected the Queensland Irish Association (QIA) as the most fitting organisational illustration 'of the temper of nineteenth-century Irish Australia'. The Association was established on 23 March 1898 at a meeting of over 150 members of Brisbane's Irish community. The gathering was dominated by influential professional and business men, an indication that, by the 1890s, Brisbane's middle and upper classes contained a substantial Irish component that was predominantly Catholic. The Irish had acquired the capacity to sustain an organisation beyond church affiliates and friendly societies.

Some Protestants found the increasing economic and political clout of Irish Catholics unsettling. Their sectarian responses, in turn, influenced the purposes and composition of Irish organisations. The QIA's direct colonial antecedents were the defunct Queensland Hibernian Society (QHS), established in 1871, and the recently disbanded Queensland Irish Volunteers (QIV), founded in 1887. Each of these organisations, and the QIA expressed the aspirations and vulnerabilities of a minority in a society prone to distrust them. The timing is also significant: 1898 was the centenary of the 1798 rebellion against British rule in Ireland. An upsurge of sectarianism in the second half of the decade sparked defensive reactions and underlined the value, particularly for Catholics, of a broad front organisation which could represent the Irish, Catholic and Protestant alike.

The QIA's inaugural gathering was chaired by James Fitzgibbon, a prominent pharmacist who had been in Brisbane since 1863. Acting as secretary was Patrick Stephens, an accountant at Finney Isles and Co., one of the city's earliest department stores. Stephens had been captain and adjutant in the QIV. The volunteers and the Hibernian Australasian Benefit Society (HACBS), had been conspicuous in Brisbane St Patrick's Day celebrations throughout the late 1880s until 1898, when the annual procession was less imposing than in previous years. The usual procession leaders, the Irish volunteers and their band, had vanished. Brisbane historians, such as MER MacGinley and Leo Moloney, have correctly linked the formation of the

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QIA to the 1897 exodus of Stephens, and most other Irish volunteers, from the colonial defence force after the appointment of a regular army officer as their commander. Following their resignation, the Irish volunteers gathered at a banquet in Stephens' honour where the decision to form a new body was made. They then combined with the Hibernians to found a non-sectarian, non-political Irish organisation. It allowed Irishmen and, increasingly, Irish Australians, to come together on the basis of nationality and conviviality.¹

The Queensland Irish Association testified to the success of many Irish and their offspring in colonial Queensland. The composition of the QIA's first executive marked a stage in the evolution of the colony's Irish population from immigrants to Australians with Irish ancestry. Slightly over half were born in Ireland and most of the others were born in Queensland to Irish parents. Their upward mobility was striking; almost without exception they were making their way towards the middling and upper ranks of Queensland society. They included lawyers John Kingsbury, Thomas O'Sullivan and Anthony St Ledger, successful businessmen James Love and Peter Murphy and notable hoteliers Michael Foley, Thomas Lehane and Peter Vallely. Of the 14 men on the first executive, one had already been in the Queensland Legislative Assembly and three others were destined for parliamentary office. Three more became aldermen on Brisbane councils.

Other founding members included John Leahy, Peter McDermott and Frank McDonnell, all Irish Catholics. Leahy, from County Cork, worked his way up from rural labouring in western Queensland to be Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and a leading figure in Brisbane commerce. Peter McDermott, from County Offaly, began his working life at the Warwick State School as a 14-year-old pupil teacher; his appointment as Registrar of Patents in 1898 was another step in his progression to the most senior post in the Queensland public service, Under-Secretary to the Premier. McDonnell arrived in Queensland from County Clare in 1886 and found work as a shop assistant. He became a Labor member of the Legislative Assembly in 1896 and later co-founded McDonnell & East, one of Brisbane's most successful retail stores. Coincidentally, McDonnell, before emigrating, had worked behind the same draper's counter in the west of Ireland with TC (Thomas Charles) Beirne. Beirne migrated to Australia in 1884 and, in 1886, opened a drapery store in South Brisbane. He joined the QIA, became a Legislative Councillor, retail magnate and one of Queensland's earliest millionaires.

The QIA's early leaders were conscious that their lives were strikingly better in Queensland than they would have been in Ireland where the majority of the population were oppressed by an imposed Anglican ascendancy. Thomas O'Sullivan counselled early QIA members that, while they should remember the struggles of their ancestors, their first loyalty belonged to Queensland



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President 1898-1901
and Life Hon. Member.



Hon. THOMAS O'SULLIVAN, K.C.
Past President 1902-1903.



Mr. P. J. STEPHENS,
Past President 1903.

Presidents of the Queensland Irish Association, 1898-1903.
(Queensland Irish Association, Souvenir commemorating the extension of its premises,
December, 1928, Brisbane, Jackson and O'Sullivan, 1928.

where they were spared the harsh restrictions responsible for Ireland's 'racial antagonism'. William Redmond, a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons, visited Queensland in 1905 as a guest of the QIA. He marvelled at the number of successful Irish Catholics, particularly parliamentarians and judges, noting that, had the same men been in Ireland, they would have had difficulty avoiding prison and even qualifying for jury service.²

Queensland had one of the largest Irish minorities in Australia, rising from 18 per cent of the population in the 1860s to a quarter by the 1890s. The vast majority were Catholics, alert to signs that the oppression of their co-religionists in Ireland was following them to Queensland. The British Empire had extended the conflict between Irish and English into the new world. The Irish Catholics who came to Australia as convicts or immigrants encountered a Protestant majority who, in the main, viewed them with hostility and suspicion. Patrick O'Farrell noted the Protestant tendency to link 'adverse images of "Irish" and "Catholic" to their mutual detriment', sparking both defensive and aggressive reactions from those so labelled. The distinctions, that there were Catholics who were not Irish, and Irish who were not Catholics, were often lost. Sectarianism remained a pervasive presence in Australian society until the 1960s. Roman Catholicism offered its Irish adherents in Australia comfort and cohesion; it also added to their isolation and fed Protestant fears that they were a seditious minority. Early Irish organisations in Queensland had to decide whether their criteria for membership included religious affiliation.³

Queensland Hibernian Society (QHS)

One of the earliest to confront this decision was Kevin O'Doherty, a medical practitioner and a leader in the Irish rebellion of 1848. He was convicted and transported to Tasmania. During the 1860s he established himself as a presence in Brisbane, an early president of the Queensland Medical Society and a parliamentarian. Feeling the absence of anything apart from St Patrick's Day 'to mark the existence of the Irish race in the colony', he founded the Queensland Hibernian Society (QHS) in 1871. Sensitive to the inevitable suspicions of Irish Catholic conspiracies, O'Doherty emphasized that the new body was non-sectarian and boasted two prominent Protestant vice-presidents, the parliamentarians Henry King and Robert Atkin. O'Doherty defined Irish identity in terms of nationality in an attempt to spare the colony the murderous religious and racial conflicts which plagued the Irish at home. King succeeded O'Doherty as president and maintained the founding mission of the society as a platform for the Irish-born, without regard to religion or class. The QHS, with its outreach to Irish Protestants disappeared in 1899. It had mutated into a benefit society, and then merged with the exclusively Catholic Hibernian

Australasian Benefit Society (HACBS). The QIA's outward-looking, coalition-building social strategy was very much in the QHS tradition. The two bodies tapped into a secular tradition of Irish nationalism, notably expressed in the United Irishmen, a reform group comprising Protestants and Catholics, which led the rebellion of 1798. Kingsbury, the QIA's inaugural president, and committee member James Love, were liberal Irish Protestants, who, in the tradition of 1798, elevated Irish identity above sectarian squabbles.⁴

The decision, in 1886, by British Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, to support self-government in Ireland, against entrenched conservative and Protestant opposition, boosted the self-confidence of Queensland's Irish minority. They expressed their new assertiveness by joining in the clamour of the great majority of the Irish at home for land reform and Home Rule; the latter meant self-government within the British Empire, such as was enjoyed in Queensland. The risk inherent in such activism was provocation of the Anglo-Protestant majority and the arousal of latent sectarianism. After the House of Lord's rejection of Home Rule legislation in 1893 there was heated debate on the measure in Brisbane. The *Brisbane Courier* was moved to warn against the 'intemperate' prosecution in Queensland of old country conflicts. The second half of the 1890s was punctuated with anti-Catholic, anti-Irish sectarianism and continuing Catholic-Protestant wrangling over education and other issues. In the 1896 general election in Brisbane, held four days after St Patrick's Day, on 21 March, all government Catholic candidates contesting Brisbane seats for the Legislative Assembly were defeated. Irish Catholics were left markedly under-represented amid suspicion 'of an organised endeavour to exclude Roman Catholics'. Brisbane's Loyal Orange Institution was a source of vehement anti-Catholic propaganda, with the principal speaker at its 1897 commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne relishing 'his intense enjoyment that God was gradually and unfailingly bringing down and driving out Roman Catholicism'. Barely months after the QIA's formation in 1898, the Premier, James Dickson, appointed the Catholic Legislative Councillor and businessman, George Gray, to cabinet as minister without portfolio. The promotion was ridiculed by the member for Dalby, Joshua Bell, as pandering to Irish Catholics. The Albion Baptist pastor, William Higlett, declared that the under-representation of Catholics in the legislatures was their own fault: Catholic politicians could not be trusted to serve the whole community; moreover their fellow-religionists were not only responsible for producing a disproportionate number of orphans but also mismanaging the orphanages which housed them.⁵

Queensland Irish Volunteers (QIV)

The QIV was the QIA's immediate precursor. Under the *Defence Act of 1884* volunteers were a part of Queensland's land forces. At the top was

the Brigade Office headed in the late nineteenth century by a succession of senior British army officers. Amid intermittent war scares and the declining global hegemony of Britain, citizen soldiers were recruited from localities, occupations and two ethnic groups, the Scots and the Irish. As with other colonial institutions, sectarian undercurrents were never far below the surface. Irishmen, bearing arms under the command of fellow countrymen, could be unsettling in a British colony where their loyalty was periodically questioned. On the other hand, Irish volunteers had no qualms about contributing to the defence of a colony which, unlike their homeland, had won majority rule and self-governing institutions. The QIV was founded in 1887 under the leadership of the formidable Andrew Thynne, an Irish Catholic, leading lawyer and cabinet minister. Patrick O'Sullivan, his Ipswich compatriot, fellow parliamentarian, and father of Thomas, aided recruitment by provocatively asking, 'The day may come when we in Queensland may have to defend this our country, and if the Irishmen in it are not going to do it, then who are?' Subsequently, recruitment from among the colony's majority population was sometimes solicited with the question, 'Are you willing to leave the defence of the colony... to the Irishmen and their descendants?' The Irish recruits, according to Spencer Browne, a journalist, volunteer officer, and tolerant Anglican, were mainly athletic young clerks and shop assistants, who excelled at drill and 'whose uniforms with green facings held some of the most magnificent specimens of manhood in the world'.⁶

The QIV advertised Irish integration into Queensland society. At the same time, it catered for separatist tendencies by maintaining social, and for Irish Catholics, religious bonds. It also fostered continuing connections with Ireland among its fraternity. Present and past officers nurtured their relationships at regular dinner gatherings in city hotels. Toasts were drunk to 'The Past Irish Officers' and 'The Irish Corps'. Thynne presided over a QIV company's annual reunion in 1892. The gathering, in the Foresters' Hall, Fortitude Valley, was one of the largest and most fashionable of the year, featuring Irish songs and dance, a dramatic scene from Hamlet and dancing until early morning. In late 1896 Denis Lyons, an Irish-born, Gaelic-speaking state school head teacher and popular major in the QIV, was chosen by the Queensland Government to spend a year in Britain recruiting immigrants for the colony. Lyons's itinerary included Ireland, which he had left 25 years before. He was taking the opportunity, he told the men under his command, 'to travel over every sod of Ireland' delivering the family messages they had entrusted to him. He was given an emotional farewell. Captain Patrick Stephens, careful of his priorities, described Lyons as 'an excellent Irishman and successful commanding officer'. Stephens dwelt on the respect and reverence Lyons had earned from his troops and their expectation that he would resume a senior rank on his return.⁷

Lyons never led the QIV. Thynne had tired of his long war of attrition against the British regular army officers heading the Queensland Defence Force. In 1896 he relinquished his position as lieutenant-colonel commanding the volunteer corps in the southern military districts. The professional officers disliked the Volunteer Branch because it was manned by part-time soldiers whose local attachments made them less amenable to army discipline. Their strongest distaste was reserved for the Irish units whose members they suspected of disloyalty and political plotting. In 1891 Colonel George French, the Sandhurst-trained Commandant of the Queensland Defence Force, recommended the abolition of the volunteer system, singling out the ethnic corps as particular failures and noting, somewhat disdainfully, that the Irish and Scottish units were mainly recruited from the working classes. The recommendations were not immediately implemented because of Thynne's political influence. His departure as commander of the volunteer corps created a vacancy which, his Irish subordinates expected, would be filled by one of them. Denis Lyons was the favoured candidate with another Irish Catholic Volunteer officer, William Cahill, an acceptable option. Then came what the former volunteer Frank (Francis) McDonnell, called the 'death-blow to the Volunteer Corps'. Kenneth Hutchison, a regular army officer, was appointed lieutenant-colonel commanding the Volunteer Branch on 13 March 1897, four days before St Patrick's Day. For McDonnell, this was the Queensland Defence Force's 'No Irish need apply' sign.

The *Worker* subsequently interpreted the appointment as the culmination of ethnic units being 'snubbed and spat upon by the Government and Brigade Office'. Though born in Australia and a former volunteer, Hutchison, a 'Scotch colonial', had become a professional soldier, serving with the British army in India and undertaking advanced military training in England. Appeals to Thynne proved fruitless. The Irish, led by Stephens, were adamant that the appointment of such an 'outsider' was a 'slur' and resigned en masse. After 11 years the QIV was no more, though as Craig Wilson wrote, it proclaimed its Irish identity, and more particularly, its Irish Catholic identity, to the very end. In his history of Queensland's colonial defence force DH Johnson described the 1897 upheaval as an 'outburst of Volunteer democracy'. It was more a terminal expression of volunteer frustration which was channelled into the foundation of the QIA.⁸

Queensland Irish Association (QIA)

It is significant that the Queensland Irish Association was founded in 1898, the centenary of the 1798 rebellion, one of the most violent episodes in Ireland's history. It also had long term consequences for Australia and its Irish communities. Over 400 rebels were transported or exiled to the distant colonies where many of them eventually prospered, acquiring respectability

and preferment in their new societies which would have been impossible at home. The approaching centenary heightened Irish communalism and historical awareness. In Brisbane, John O'Keefe, a prominent builder and one of the QIA's founders, wrote to the Brisbane Catholic newspaper *The Age* calling on his compatriots to commemorate 1798 because 'no race under heaven have suffered like the Irish, and after 700 years persecution and war they are unconquered yet'. Moves were already under way to erect a monument in Waverley Cemetery, Sydney, over the re-located remains of Michael Dwyer; 'a dynamic rebel leader', who did not surrender until 1803 and was subsequently deported to New South Wales, where he died in 1826. As their first community project, the founders of the QIA solicited Queensland contributions to the Waverley memorial. The appeal of the tradition of 1798 to the Association's founders lay partly in its duality: heroic Irish rebels at home, successful, law-abiding colonists in Australia. As O'Farrell pointed out, the tradition gave Irish Australians 'the best of both worlds – the proud and fearsome reputation for rebellion, heroism and devotion to principles of freedom: and a quiet profitable stake in the new country'. QIA members, wary of sectarian responses, stressed the inclusiveness of 1798 and downplayed its warning not to push the Irish too far. They insisted that the rebellion was a joint Protestant, particularly Presbyterian, and Catholic challenge to English and Anglican hegemony in Ireland. Its liberal non-sectarian values met the needs of Queensland's Irish minority, not least its upwardly mobile leadership. The tradition of 1798, with its emphasis on Irish nationality rather than religious affiliation, became the bedrock ideology of the QIA. It promoted cohesion among the Irish, both Catholic and Protestant, and, in so doing, eased the further integration of Irish Catholics into the wider Queensland society.

The 1798 commemorations, however, had limited appeal to Protestants. Their notions of Irish history rarely coincided with Catholic versions. The executive of the Brisbane 1798 committee, established in April 1898, to commemorate the centenary, were all Irish Catholics and foundation members of the QIA: Thomas O'Sullivan, Peter Murphy, James Carroll, Patrick Stephens and Anthony St Ledger. Frank McDonnell, one of the QIA's more militant Irish Catholics, attended the unveiling of Waverley memorial in 1900. He made a short speech in which the spectre of violent Irish reaction to oppression remained subliminal: he dwelt on the unity the Irish achieved in 1798 and their aspirations, a century on, for Australian-style political autonomy.⁹

In October, 1898, the QIA, with more than 200 members, had moved into its own club rooms in James Love's premises, the Isles Love and Co. building, opposite the Post Office in Queen Street. Members were preoccupied with the untimely death in the previous month of Thomas Joseph Byrnes, Queensland's

first native born and Irish Catholic premier. Byrnes, a brilliant barrister and former QIV captain, exemplified the opportunities Queensland offered to a clever boy from a poor Irish Catholic family. He had attended Brisbane Grammar School on a scholarship and graduated in law from the University of Sydney. Though Byrnes's biographer has emphasised his exceptionality, QIA members revered him as an exemplar. At their October meeting, Kingsbury delivered a eulogy, a large portrait of the late premier was unveiled and James Love, an old school friend from Brisbane Grammar, read some lines he had composed immediately after hearing of Byrnes's death. In his annual report early the next year, Patrick Stephens dwelt on the loss of Byrnes at 37, and the sense of personal bereavement his death had occasioned. He was, according to Stephens not only 'our champion and glory' but also the ideal model for present and future Irish Queenslanders.¹⁰

Despite the hard economic conditions of 1899-1902, the Association survived and extended its activities. Additions to the QIA's suite of rooms included a library containing newspapers, magazines, and a collection of books predominantly on Irish subjects. Adorning its walls were eye-catching portraits mirroring the QIA's Irish origins, Queensland location and British context. John Kingsbury was sandwiched between Irish patriots Charles Parnell and Michael Davitt. Keeping Thomas Byrnes company was William Gladstone, the British Prime Minister most identified with the Irish cause. At its first annual general meeting the Association launched a literary and debating program focused on literature, Irish history and current affairs. One of the first participants was Peter McDermott, Under Secretary of Agriculture, and a future QIA president. McDermott read a paper on Wolf Tone, like Robert Emmet, a Protestant hero of the 1798 rebellion. The Association's early cultural activities also benefitted from the contribution of another Irish-born public servant with literary talent, Philip MacMahon, Director of Brisbane's Botanic Gardens. In July 1900, with over 400 members, the organisation had the capacity and confidence to stage an inaugural annual ball, organised by a committee of women, chiefly wives of prominent members. The ball, 'one of the most successful functions of the season', boasted the attendance of the governor, premier and mayor. The Irish flag and the harp of Erin were prominently displayed against a background of other diverse national flags. Some 400 dancers crowded the Centennial Hall floor, the left gallery was packed with spectators while the right catered for those in formal attire including official guests, QIA officials and their partners. Profits from the ball provided the Association with its first billiard table.¹¹

Thomas O'Sullivan, a leader of Brisbane's 1798 commemoration and Irish Home Rule movement, succeeded Kingsbury as QIA president in 1902. By 1903 the Association was challenging the Hibernians for the mantle of

Queensland's leading Irish organisation. Mary Sweeney's pioneering study of the HACBS in Brisbane shows the interconnectedness of the two organisations; it also reveals the Hibernians were faltering in 1903 and deferred to the QIA in commemorating the centenary of the execution, on 20 September 1803, of the revered nationalist Robert Emmet, an Irish Protestant who rejected British rule in favour of an Irish republic. The Association sponsored a public lecture on his life and career on 19 September. The lecturer was Frank McDonnell, whose fervour for his subject 'drew forth rounds of spontaneous applause'.

In the same month O'Sullivan was made a Legislative Councillor and Minister, an honour conferred he believed, because his QIA presidency led the Premier, Arthur Morgan, to select him 'as a representative of the Irish community'. O'Sullivan's acceptance of political office terminated his tenure as president because of the Association rule, for which he himself was largely responsible, barring serving politicians from executive roles. To mark his retirement from office, the QIA presented O'Sullivan with a richly decorated bound address. It represented his hybrid Irish-Australian identity by featuring traditional Irish emblems – the Celtic cross, the harp and the round tower – next to the Australian coat of arms. In his farewell address O'Sullivan explained that the rule barring parliamentarians was crafted to allay any suspicion that the Association could be used as a 'political machine'. He also observed that the QIA had become the voice of southern Queensland's Irish community. He urged members to continue the mission central to his presidency: the pursuit of the 'union and brotherhood of Irishmen and their descendants, irrespective of creed or party...'¹²

After O'Sullivan's departure, and the interim presidency of Patrick Stephens, Timothy O'Shea assumed the role in January 1904. Recently returned from an extended visit to Ireland, he had first come to Queensland from County Kerry as a boy and attended Nudgee Christian Brothers' College in Brisbane. A solicitor, shrewd businessman and turf aficionado, O'Shea led the Association until 1910, steering it out of a serious financial predicament in 1904-05. He presided over the inauguration of an annual St Patricks' eve banquet in 1905 and continued the QIA's push for majority rule and self-government in Ireland. Under his stewardship the QIA supported the Irish Parliamentary Party in British elections and hosted Irish envoys seeking to raise funds from the diaspora for the Home Rule cause. The first envoy, in 1905, was William Redmond, the nationalist member for East Clare in the Commons, followed by another two Irish politicians, Joseph Devlin and JT Donovan in the following year. The receptions given to the Irish envoys indicated that support for Home Rule was intense among Brisbane's Irish community and shared by many outside it. Redmond attracted an estimated audience of 3000 to a campaign meeting in the Exhibition Building chaired



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Presidents of the Queensland Irish Association, 1903-1922.

(Queensland Irish Association, *Souvenir commemorating the extension of its premises, December, 1928*, Brisbane, Jackson and O'Sullivan, 1928.)

by Thomas O'Sullivan, with O'Shea moving the vote of thanks. Frank McDonnell noted that the 'cause of Irish nationality' had brought together those who otherwise had little else in common. Among those joining QIA notables on the platform were William Kidston, the Scottish Presbyterian state treasurer and future premier, and George Kerr, born in England, a Methodist, and leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party. Kidston spoke briefly in support of Redmond, drawing applause when he posed the question: 'If the people of Ireland had not the right to manage the affairs of Ireland, then in Heaven's name who had that right?' Joseph Devlin spoke to a QIA reception in 1906, acknowledging the debt the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Home Rule cause owed to the Irish overseas, singling out Timothy O'Shea and the QIA as particularly valued allies. He outlined an optimistic interpretation of the history of Ireland since the Fenian insurrection of 1867. It was a story of progress under a progressive British administration. 'Agrarian darkness' had lifted, landlordism was in retreat and 80 000 Irish peasants had won land rights. Home Rule appeared inevitable, the culmination of Irish history.¹³

The QIA-Ireland links were reciprocal. The Irish emissaries to Queensland were matched by QIA envoys visiting or returning to Ireland. O'Shea spent some months in Ireland in 1904 and, two years later, Andrew Thynne

visited England and Ireland with an Association message of encouragement to members of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The observations of the Queenslanders who went to Ireland tended to confirm beliefs on their homeland's past and future shared by the majority of the QIA leadership group in its first decade. They also corresponded with the optimistic outlook of the Irish nationalist politicians close to the QIA. That orthodoxy dominated the speeches of Thomas O'Sullivan, John Leahy, Peter McDermott, and his former Warwick mentor and head teacher, Joseph Canny, at the inaugural St Patrick's eve banquet in 1905. Their main themes were that the great Irish battles against the English were in the past, that the Irish had emerged from them victorious, insofar as they had preserved their racial and religious identities, and that they were now an integral and constructive component of the Empire. The Empire enjoined Ireland and Australia, the latter offering its Irish citizens and their descendants greater opportunities and the privilege of self-government. The one discordant note was Ireland's lack of Home Rule, but even that was muted in its anticipated imminence. In 1906, O'Shea reported that, after spending some months in Ireland, he was confident that 'Irishmen were not secessionists', their loyalty to the British monarch King Edward VII, then in his sixties, was unmatched and they expected Home Rule to be conferred during his reign.¹⁴

The QIA celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1908 with 800 financial members. They looked back with satisfaction on the past year's highlights, which included presentations by Thynne on 'Journeys in the Homeland' and Canny on 'The Songs of Ireland'. The recently-purchased Irish flag, which flew from its premises on important occasions, testified to the Association's confidence. New accessions to the library brought it closer to its goal of a collection 'replete with standard works on Ireland and its history'. Because of increased attendance, the St Patrick's eve banquet had to be moved to a commodious city café. Its status was confirmed by the presence of a dozen parliamentarians including the Premier, William Kidston. After 'The King', the major toast was 'The Day We Celebrate'. This was proposed by Frank McDonnell, who had four sons and three daughters. He noted the growing proportion of descendants of Irish people at the celebration and revealed the personal dimension of his deep commitment to Home Rule. He reflected that if his children had been born and remained in Ireland 'they would have been treated as an inferior race-incapable of governing themselves'.¹⁵

In *For Hearths and Homes*, Craig Wilcox described male Catholic Irish immigrants in the late nineteenth century as 'the most discontented of Australia's white men'. This could not be said of the group who founded and nurtured the QIA through its first decade. Their unhappiness about Ireland's past and present was more than balanced by their optimism about their

homeland's future and their embrace of the opportunities and freedom they encountered in Queensland. Wary of underlying sectarianism, they celebrated Protestant Irish rebels and emphasised their loyalty to Empire and monarchy; at the same time they relentlessly campaigned for Irish Home Rule. They aligned themselves with the Irish Parliamentary Party, sensing that the continuing subjugation of Ireland within the Empire posed a potential threat to their own claims and enjoyment of full equality in Australia.

Patrick O'Farrell correctly emphasised the respectability and upward mobility of QIA's founders though he was on less sure ground when he claimed its library consisted predominantly of Australian books. He depicted the orientation of Irish organisations in Australia at this time towards their homeland as 'general, cultural, and past-directed', a judgement which understates the keen interest of QIA members in contemporary Irish affairs, especially politics and the sensitive question of Ireland's status with the Empire. Perhaps O'Farrell made his greatest contribution to an understanding of the QIA when he illuminated its preoccupation with Home Rule by posing the question: 'if the Empire had no room for a free Ireland...would it have room for Irish identity in Australia?' The query had continuing relevance. Within a decade from 1908, the Irish Association in Brisbane was confronted with an upsurge in virulent sectarianism associated with the conscription issue in Australia, and a spiral of rebellion, repression and war in Ireland.¹⁶

Endnotes

The author thanks Todd Barr, Lyndon Megarrity and Robin Sullivan for helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this article.

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