‘Brisbane’s most brilliant club’?
The Queensland Irish Association, 1898–1928

Abstract
The Queensland Irish Association (QIA), approaching its 120th anniversary and with over 4000 members, is one of Queensland’s more remarkable ethnic organisations. The Association was founded in Brisbane in 1898, amidst a spike in sectarianism and the growing confidence of an emerging Irish middle class. The QIA soon became the most influential secular Irish organisation in Queensland, its standing confirmed when its president, Thomas O’Sullivan, was appointed to the Legislative Council in 1903. By 1910, the QIA was judged ‘the foremost institution of its kind in any of the States’, a tribute to its retiring president, Timothy O’Shea.

This paper focusses on the first three decades of the QIA’s existence. It examines the organisation’s ends and means as it adapted to changing local and Irish circumstances. The QIA’s ends included the veneration of Irish history, traditions and culture; however, the Association was emphatically secular and politically non-partisan. It strove mightily to bridge the Catholic-Protestant divide both within the Association and in the wider community. The role of John Kingsbury, a Protestant, foundation president and life member, was testimony to this priority.

The Association’s means included literary, debating, social and recreational programs. Ireland remained a priority until 1922. The QIA hosted Irish envoys and its notables visited Ireland. The Association was crucial in fund raising throughout Queensland, whether for Home Rule, other Irish causes, or monuments to Irish-Australian heroes. Its resilience was severely tested by events in Ireland and the resurgence of Australian sectarianism between 1916 and 1922. That it survived owed much to its inclusiveness and the leadership of its gifted president, Peter McDermott. After the early 1920s, while Ireland remained a concern, priorities shifted. The acquisition of its own city premises preoccupied members for much of the remainder of the decade.