Ethnic associations remain a central characteristic of expatriate community life throughout the world to this day. First carried overseas in the ‘cultural baggage’ of migrants, a rich panoply of ethnic societies and clubs can be traced in the new worlds in which they settled, making them a defining characteristic of life in settler societies, as well as in trade entrepots and informal empire. Yet despite their global importance, ethnic associations in the wider British World have not been subject to a detailed historical study.

Building on prior research on Scottish and English associational culture in New Zealand, North America and Southeast Asia, my project offers the first comparative analysis of the role ethnic associations played in civic life, focusing in particular on how these associations contributed to the making of urban worlds in diverse settlements.

Recent studies of ethnic associations have provided important advances in the way we understand immigrant community culture and ethnicity, moving beyond traditional scholarship that has identified ethnic associations primarily as harbourers of nostalgia for an urban middle class elite out of ‘touch with the larger immigrant community’ (cf. Erickson 1980). These revisions have led to the recognition that ethnic associations are a unique means to capture the experiences of migrants, while also helping to unravel how they shaped host societies and cultures more broadly. While founded on principles of ethnicity, migrant associations served more diverse purposes, providing not only sociability but also civility (Kumar 1993). Like the St Andrew’s Society for the Scots, the St George’s Society for the English, or the Sons of Hermann for the Germans, many ethnic associations were established as wide-ranging friendly and benevolent societies. Based on principles of patrician benevolence, ethnicity overseas was also one established on the fundamental belief that brotherly charity was necessary to solve prevailing social problems that were not sufficiently addressed by governments in the new places of settlement.

In Australia, however, this type of benevolence was largely absent from the Scots’ ethnic associational endeavours. With that in mind, this paper will explore the development, evolution and activities of Scottish ethnic associations in Australia in comparative perspective to shed light on the reasons for this divergence. Other important questions to be addressed relate to the role played by leaders of ethnic associations; how these organizations shaped policies, particularly those concerned with immigration; and how the activities of Scottish ethnic associations in Australia advance our understanding of developments in the wider British World.

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