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The Belfast Benevolent Society of St Andrew played a key role for Scots at both ends of the social spectrum in nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Belfast. Established in 1867, the Society was a philanthropic organisation committed to assisting needy Scottish migrants. It provided weekly relief payments to Scots-born widows and pensioners, distributed casual relief in the form of food vouchers and clothing, and, most discernible during periods of economic downturn, paid the steamship passage to return unemployed Scottish migrant workers to Glasgow. The assistance provided by the St Andrew’s Society spared many of the least fortunate members of Belfast’s Scottish community the indignity of the workhouse. In undertaking such work among the underprivileged the Society also served another important function: as a network of contact for higher-status Scots. The Society was particularly well patronised, and its membership included many of the most successful members of the Scottish community. It also proved popular among the native-born civic elite. The extent of its popularity became apparent each year on 30 November when its St Andrew’s Day dinner annually attracted an elite clientele of expatriate Scots and assorted non-Scottish dignitaries. The regular attendance of members of parliament, lord mayors and, on occasion, members of the aristocracy lent prestige to the Society and attracted the favourable attentions of the local press. An obvious contrast existed between the private world of its charitable provision and the high-profile nature of its public associationalism; yet the St Andrew’s Society successfully combined the two functions. This article charts the activities of the Society between its formation in 1867 and its jubilee year of 1917, examining four key themes. First, it considers how the St Andrew’s Society fits into our existing understanding of clubs and societies formed by the Scottish diaspora, and of immigrant associationalism more generally. Second, it introduces the Society and examines its origins, its organisation and the structure and character of its membership. Third, it details the Society’s charitable provision, demonstrating its importance to the overall Scottish community, and shows how careful self-regulation and prudent financial management placed it on a sound financial footing. Finally, its ongoing attraction for Belfast’s civic leaders is examined. The Society was one of late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Belfast’s most popular and admired voluntary associations and the factors discussed here combined to ensure its success and longevity.
The St Andrew’s Society had its origins in a meeting of prominent Scots-born businessmen held in the Athenaeum, Castle Place, on 14 November 1867. Local linen merchant Alexander Gibb occupied the chair. Merchant Robert Jameson, stockbroker William B. Lowson and whiskey distiller William C. Mitchell were among those appointed to an eight-strong interim committee. James McGregor, senior partner in McGregor Brothers Merchant Steamship Company, moved the initial proposal: ‘That the Society be established on same principles and managed by similar Rules and Bye-Laws as adopted by the Dublin Scottish Benevolent Society of St Andrew.’

Inspired by their cousins in the south, the Belfast Scots drafted a comprehensive list of rules for the governance of the new society. Rule II outlined its primary objectives:

The objects of this Society shall be to alleviate distress, to further such charities as may be deemed worthy of support, and to afford opportunities for the promotion of friendly feeling amongst its members.


20 These themes are considered in greater detail in Kyle Hughes, ‘The Scottish Migrant Community of Victorian and Edwardian Belfast’ (Ph.D. thesis, Northumbria University, 2010).

21 Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), D2385/1/1, Minute book of the Belfast Benevolent Society of St Andrew (hereafter Minutes), 14 November 1867.

22 Minutes, 21 November 1867.
Rule III laid down the ethnic boundaries of membership: ‘That all members of the Society be Scotchmen or the sons of Scotchmen.’ This requirement seems to have been adhered to in the Society’s formative years. However, the rules were relaxed in 1873 when an additional by-law was adopted extending the membership to include ‘gentlemen not otherwise eligible for membership under the title of Honorary Member’. A further alteration of the ethnic make-up was incorporated in 1886 when rule III was altered to read:

The Society shall consist of Members, Life Members, and Non-Resident Life Members, all of whom shall be sons of a parent or grand-parent born in Scotland; also of Honorary Members and Life Members who may be of any nationality, but shall have no vote nor hold any office.

The structure of the Society closely accords with R. J. Morris’s description of the subscriber democracy. A subscription fee of one guinea was collected from members and an elected committee distributed the funds to deserving cases. The office bearers were usually the Society’s higher-status members, with the president often a well known industrialist, professional or business leader. To add to the hierarchical arrangement there were a number of vice-presidents and trustees, who again often hailed from the ‘upper’ regions of the middle class. The patron occupied the apex of the structure, and this non-active ceremonial role was usually held by a local lord or member of the aristocracy. The day-to-day running of the Society fell to a select number of committed members, and it is notable that a core group of individuals, often relatively small in number, took the keenest interest in the Society’s affairs. For Morris this hierarchical configuration within nineteenth-century voluntary associations reflected the ‘massive inequalities of wealth and power, even within the middle classes’.

The inaugural public meeting took place in the Ulster Hall on 30 November 1867. Perthshire native and sitting Mayor of Belfast David Taylor was appointed president. Linen merchants James Aitken and John Moore Calder were among those elected as vice-presidents. Former Belfast resident and Fife-born Sir John Arnott, three times Lord Mayor of Cork, MP for Kinsale, proprietor of the Irish Times and Northern Whig and founder of Arnott’s department stores, was the Society’s first patron. Despite a Scots-born population somewhere in the region of 4,000 at the time, the Society maintained a relatively rarefied social status, with an initial membership of just seventy-nine. Membership was open to men only. Whilst philanthropy was not confined solely to the middle classes during the Victorian era, the St Andrew’s Society’s subscription fee ensured that in this case it was. The Society’s elite structure was ensured by the sizeable one guinea per annum membership fee. If the prohibitive annual contribution ensured the middle-class composition of the Society, it also shaped the potential of its charitable provision, for the annual income was healthy throughout.

Many of Belfast’s leading Scottish capitalists were members of the St Andrew’s Society. Members came overwhelmingly from the Scots-born residents of Belfast, and the Society attracted the higher-status members of the city’s Scottish community. Table 2 lists the names and occupations of Society presidents. Forty-one people filled the role during the first fifty years, several of the presidents also fulfilled positions of importance within wider Belfast society. Sir David Taylor, Sir Robert Boag and Sir James Henderson all served as Mayor of Belfast. George S. Clark was MP for North Belfast between 1907 and 1910. J. M. Calder, Robert Carswell and William Weir were town councillors. George S. Clark, James Crawford and David C. Kemp were Harbour Commissioners. Scots from the textile industry featured heavily in the early years, reflecting the primacy of that industry during the 1860s and 1870s. Shipbuilders featured in later years, most notably George S. Clark of Workman Clark & Co. (1891 and 1892) and two of his senior managers, William Campbell (1897) and John Connel (1915 and 1916). The printing and stationery industry was also important to the economy of Belfast. It, perhaps more than any other, had a disproportional Scottish presence. A total of five Scottish printers and stationers fulfilled the role of president. The majority of presidents were born in Scotland.

23 Ibid.

24 PRONI, D2385/2, Bound copies of Annual Reports of the Belfast Benevolent Society of St Andrew (hereafter Annual Report), 1873.

25 Annual Report, 1886.

or were the sons of Scottish parents, but occasionally a Scottish grandparent qualified the incumbent for the position, as with Sir James Henderson in 1903. The role was a prestigious one, and some of nineteenth-century Belfast’s most identifiable names held the position.