Humanist Heritage

BELFAST TOUR

Throughout history, there have been non-religious people who have lived lives guided by reason, compassion, and the belief that this is the one life we have. Today, we call this 'humanism'. Although not everyone included in this tour was a humanist, all have worked to promote the values at the heart of humanism today, including inclusive education, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression.

1 CITY HALL

City Hall stands where the White Linen Hall formerly stood: once at the centre of Belfast's world renowned linen industry. In the 18th century, the money from this trade created a middle class which agitated for free speech and equality. Enlightenment ideals such as human rights, rationalism, and tolerance in the writings of John Locke and Thomas Paine were widely read and the examples of the American and French Revolutions were inspirational, especially for those – like Catholics and Presbyterians – who were excluded by the dominance of the landed aristocracy and Established Church. The City Hall replaced the White Linen Hall in 1906, and over the years has been a gathering place for protest, celebration, and vigil, with humanists and freethinkers well represented across all three.

2 LINEN HALL LIBRARY

Founded in 1788 as the Belfast Reading Society, the Linen Hall library is the city's oldest. The present building was built in 1864 and was originally a linen warehouse. In his history of the library, John Killen described 'a large proportion of the citizenry of Belfast' in the late 18th century as 'enterprising, self-reliant, enlightened, philanthropic and self-improving'. This was certainly true for the founders of the Reading Society, which from 1792 was known as the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge.

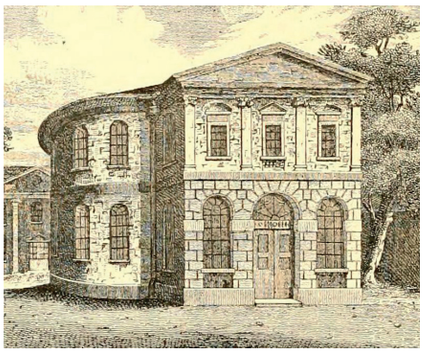
FRANCIS JOY. Numb. 113

The Belfast News-Letter,
And General Advertiser.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1738.

3 JOY'S ENTRY

The Belfast Entries were a hotbed of radical free thinking in the 1790s. Joy's Entry was named for Francis Joy, as well as commemorating other members of this remarkable Belfast family. In 1737, Francis Joy founded the oldest surviving English language newspaper in the world, *The Belfast News-Letter*, which in the 1870s also became one of the earliest newspapers to feature a regular column for women, written by Irish journalist Catherine Drew. In 1776, the *Belfast News-Letter* was the first to publish the American Declaration of Independence outside of the US.



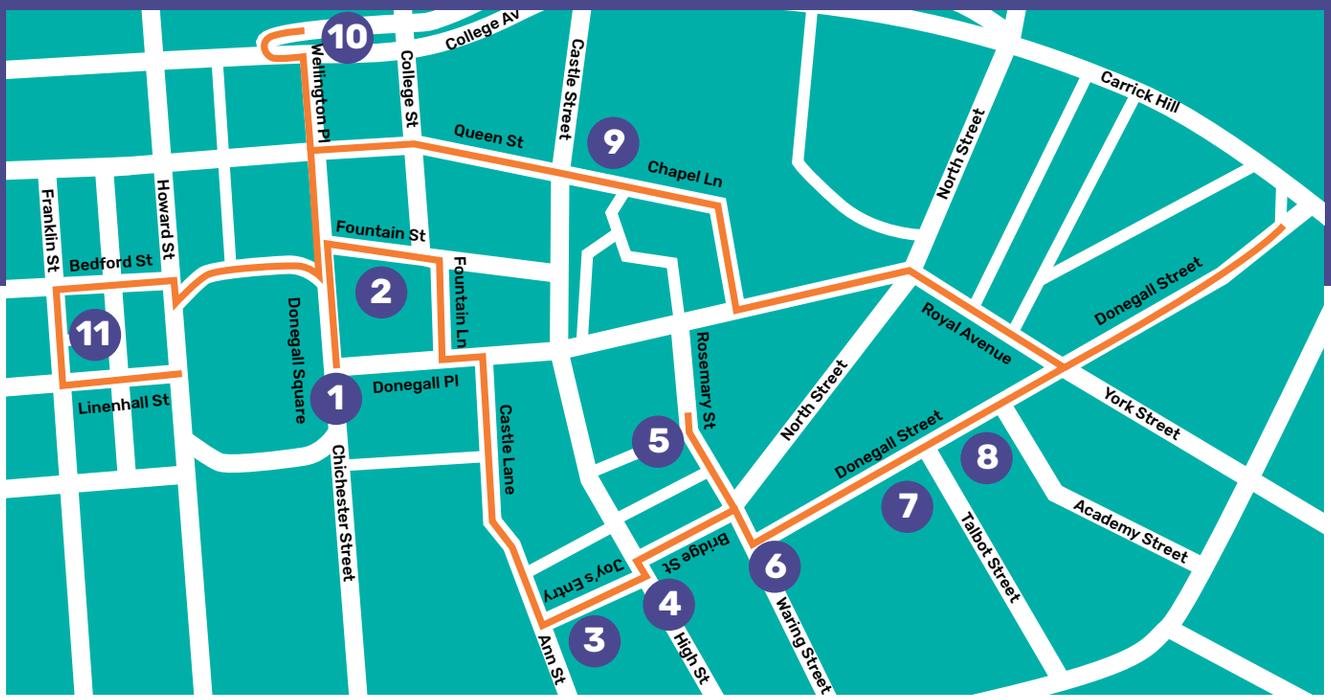
5 FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rosemary Street may be described as the historical epicentre of freethought in Belfast. The First Presbyterian Church was attended by many of the United Irishmen. Founded in the 17th century, it later took up unitarian ideas – associated with an open-minded and undogmatic approach to religion.

From the 19th century, Belfast was home to a number of non-religious and reformist societies, including the Belfast Secular Society, Belfast Radical Association, and a Fabian group. The Belfast Ethical Society was formed in 1896 and held its meetings in Rosemary Street Minor Hall, adjoining the Second Congregation Church, which was opened in 1708, rebuilt in 1789, and demolished during the 1960s. It was there that the Belfast Ethical Society met during the last years of the 19th century, its object being: 'the promotion of right conduct on a purely natural and human basis.' Ethical societies like Belfast's were the direct ancestors of today's humanist groups.

4 HENRY JOY MCCRACKEN

Also in Joy's Entry is a statue of Henry Joy McCracken, unveiled in 2019. Henry was Francis Joy's grandson, and a founding member of the United Irishmen: a revolutionary society founded in 1791, aiming to unite Irish Catholics, Protestants, and Presbyterians for democratic reform and independence from Britain, inspired by the American and French Revolutions. Oppression by the authorities led some, like Henry, to become increasingly radical. Following his execution in 1798, Henry's sister, Mary Ann, continued this legacy of seeking equality under the law for all. Her extensive social work was deliberately non-denominational, looking instead towards a more secular future for Northern Ireland.



6 ASSEMBLY ROOMS & NORTHERN WHIG

At the corner of North and Waring Street is the former home of the Assembly and Exchange Rooms. Following the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen, Henry Joy McCracken was tried here before being hanged at the Market House in High Street. Opposite is The Northern Whig, built in 1820. Here, in January 1846, a farewell breakfast was held for the formerly enslaved abolitionist Frederick Douglass. A freethinker, Douglass was unafraid to criticise those Churches and professed Christians who supported, or failed to condemn, slavery.

Nearby Waring Street was a meeting place for the Belfast Humanist Group, who met in the War Memorial Building (9-13 Waring Street) from the mid-1960s. The group were active in calling for a variety of social and political reforms, especially in the area of civil rights.

7 THE JOHN HEWITT

John Hewitt was a librarian, writer, and socialist, who sought to bring together the traditions and belief identities in Northern Ireland through mutual understanding and progressive politics. Hewitt stressed he had no religion and advocated tolerance, mutual respect, and openness to marginalised cultural traditions. He was a founding member of the Belfast Peace League, and advocated the idea of 'regionalism' (rather than religion or politics) as a means of exploring and establishing a sense of identity.

8 WRITER'S SQUARE

Northern Ireland Civil Rights ASSOCIATION
A CIVIL RIGHTS MARCH
WILL BE HELD IN DERRY
ON SATURDAY, 5TH OCT.
COMMENCING AT 3·30 p.m.
ASSEMBLY POINT: WATERSIDE RAILWAY STATION
MARCH TO THE DIAMOND
Where a PUBLIC METTING will take place

Writer's Square celebrates the city's rich literary and cultural heritage. A number of Belfast's leading literary figures were freethinkers, like the humanist writer and teacher John Boyd, and novelist Forrest Reid.

To the north is the LGBTQ district, and Love Equality marches commenced at Writers' Square, building to the successful introduction of the Marriage Equality Act in 2019.

9 ST MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

St Mary's Church was the first Catholic church established in the city in 1784. Funds were donated by the Presbyterians of Rosemary Street, and this act of solidarity was echoed in the 1960s when the cross-community Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) held their meetings in the Church Hall. NICRA was founded in 1967: a non-party, non-denominational group to defend civil liberties, including those of free speech and free assembly. A public meeting held in the War Memorial Building in November 1966 had been chaired by humanist writer John D. Stewart, to highlight the issue of civil liberties in Northern Ireland. The key speakers at the meeting were Ciaran Mac An Ali and anti-apartheid campaigner Kader Asmal. Asmal and Stewart went on to play leading roles in the First Conference of Humanists in Ireland, held in 1969.

10 ROYAL BELFAST ACADEMICAL INSTITUTION

Created as the Belfast Academical Institution, and funded by public subscription, the RBAI was founded as a non-denominational college for secondary and higher education. It opened on 1 February 1814 by the physician William Drennan — a founder of the United Irishmen, and a radical social reformer. This was the first secular school in Britain and Ireland and the model for both University College London (the first secular university) and Queen's University Belfast. Efforts for inclusive, non-segregated education have been a keystone of humanist efforts in Northern Ireland for decades.

11 ULSTER HALL

It was here, in 1874, that Irish physicist and professed agnostic John Tyndall spoke to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and incited a rigorous debate about the relative places of science and religion in Victorian society. Tyndall argued for absolute freedom of thought and discussion in science. Like his friend T.H. Huxley, Tyndall was a passionate communicator of science, and an agnostic – a term which Huxley had coined in 1869 to describe someone who 'shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe'. 'There is in the true man of science,' Tyndall said, 'a wish stronger than the wish to have his beliefs upheld… the wish to have them true.'