

William McIlroy

Foundations of Modern Humanism

SHEFFIELD HUMANIST SOCIETY

Acknowledgements

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**Wm McIlroy
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Introduction

Because they did not proclaim their opinions and “did not threaten the *status quo*”, writes the author of this pamphlet, some of the early atheists were tolerated. Coming out led many of them to prison and the pillory. In his youth, Bill McIlroy discovered the power of this intolerance when, in the religion-riddled Irish village where he was brought up, his freethinking employer explained that they would both lose their livelihoods should his atheism become known. They both kept their mouths shut and carried on working.

Coming to England, Bill could no longer remain silent - and he soon became involved with the National Secular Society, eventually becoming the Society's General Secretary (1963-1970 and 1972-1977) and serving three stints as Editor of *The Freethinker* (1970-1971, 1975-1976, 1981-1992). His column “Down to Earth” is still a regular feature of *The Freethinker*.

Unlike those early atheists, our author refuses to accept the *status quo*. He has played his part in the shift from belief to disbelief which has taken place in Britain over these past few decades. Even as the number of believers diminishes, however, the church clings on to the positions and powers bestowed on it by consecutive ruling classes precisely because, as a generality, it has always upheld the existing state of affairs:

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And order'd their estate.*

Our author rejects both the sentiment and those who propagate it.

This essay started out as a lecture to the Sheffield Humanist Society in February, 1995, following which some of us prevailed on Bill to prepare it for publication because we felt that it would fill a need for a straightforward introduction to Humanism based on the history of the movement. As James Klugmann used to say, “in order to fire a bullet into the future, you have to fire a cannon shell into the past.” Here is another one of the bullets fired by Bill McIlroy.

Barry Johnson
Chairman
Sheffield Humanist Society

Foundations of Modern Humanism

William McIlroy

A lecture delivered at a meeting of Sheffield Humanist Society held at The Three Cranes Hotel, Sheffield, February 1, 1995.

PERHAPS I am stating the obvious by saying that the word “Humanism” has many meanings. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “any system of thought or action which is concerned with merely human interests.” Longman’s Dictionary describes Humanism in similar terms, adding that it rejects the supernatural and belief in God. In a broad sense, it is an attitude to life which means thinking for yourself, rejecting authority in matters of opinion, and working in co-operation with others for the benefit of society as a whole.

Renaissance Humanism of the 14th and 15th Centuries was rooted in a passion for learning and the widening of artistic and cultural horizons. Renaissance Humanists were Christians, not Humanists as we understand the term today. That does not mean that we do not appreciate scholarship, art and culture - far from it. But, in addition, we hold that a moral code based on human associations and personal responsibility is superior to one that is based on a relationship between humans and a supposed superhuman entity.

Up until about 1960, in Britain at any rate, the term “Humanism” was generally taken to imply a rejection of religious belief. But then people started to describe themselves as Christian Humanists and even Catholic Humanists. They may have been adhering to another dictionary definition of Humanism as being “a belief in the mere humanity of Christ.” But I suspect they were motivated by a desire to distance themselves from the more traditional and bizarre claims of Christianity. They were using Humanism as an alternative to established, organised religion.

When I refer to the foundations of modern Humanism, I mean the

modern Humanist *movement*. I use Humanism as an umbrella term for those who, however they may describe themselves, reject religious beliefs.

While the Humanist movement of unbelievers as we know it today has its origins in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, there were individuals who rejected religion long before. In the main, they were too wealthy and powerful to be challenged by religious or secular authorities. More importantly, they did not disseminate sceptical and atheistical views outside their immediate circle. They did not threaten the *status quo*.

This form of closet unbelief ensured that atheism was, as the 17th Century divine Richard Bentley put it, “confined to the private study and select conversation.” And that is how it remained in Britain until the middle of the 18th Century, when Jacob Ilive published a pamphlet criticising the idea of divine revelation. For that crime, he was pilloried and sentenced to three years’ hard labour. Around the same time, a Liverpool schoolmaster named Peter Annet started the *Free Inquirer*. But whereas Jacob Ilive’s pamphlet was a single item, the *Free Inquirer* ran for at least nine issues and is therefore regarded as the first freethought journal. At the age of 68, Annet was also pilloried and jailed.

These two cases illustrate that while the authorities turned a blind eye so long as discussion of unbelief was confined to the private study and select conversation, Church and State brought down the mailed fist on anyone spreading it to a wider circle.

During the 50 years between 1780 and 1830, the face of England changed. Two major social upheavals contributed to this. First, there was the agricultural revolution, brought about by land enclosure which forced peasants off common land. Secondly, there was the industrial revolution, resulting from the development of steam power, new inventions and an almost unlimited labour force of men, women and children.

The appalling conditions of work and living in the large centres of population, which grew up around the mills, mines and factories, have been well documented. And when workers tried to improve their standards, it soon became obvious that the Church was on the side of the employers and the magistrates. The historian W. H. Lecky described the Church of England as “the most servile and efficient

agent of tyranny.” And the Methodists were not much better - whatever those of the Pious Tendency in the Labour Party may tell us.

The Church's support for the powers-that-be did not go unrewarded. In 1818, a time of dreadful poverty, illiteracy and disease among working people, the Million Act was passed. Parliament voted one million pounds to the Church of England to build churches in the new towns. Sheffield got four of them: St Philip's; St Mary's, Bramall Lane; Christ Church, Attercliffe; and St George's, Broad Lane.

Irreligion was very much a part of the radical movement which developed during the last quarter of the 18th Century. But it generally took the form of attack on the Established Church, rather than on the tenets of Christianity. The writings of Thomas Paine were extremely influential, and although he became the hero of generations of unbelievers, his irreligion stopped at deism. Certainly he was a formidable enemy of religious and political authority. And although literacy was confined almost exclusively to the middle and upper classes, his works, and even those of Voltaire, were becoming known by those lower down the social scale.

However, the irreligion of the 18th Century gave way to the anti-religion of the 19th. Radicals like Henry Hetherington, Francis Place, Richard Carlile and Jeremy Bentham were open unbelievers.

An extension of knowledge and literacy was a foremost aim of the early freethinkers. They were determined that education should be available to all - and not just to a handful who were required to



● **Thomas Paine**

administer industry, commerce and the church. Needless to say, they endorsed Thomas Paine's dictum: "One good schoolmaster is worth a hundred priests."

Naturally, freethinkers supported Samuel Whitbread's Education Bill of 1807 proposing to set up rate-aided schools at which poor children would receive two years of free education. Not a revolutionary proposal

- but it met with strong opposition on the grounds that a system of free, secular education would enable common people to read publications critical of the Establishment. But it was opposition by the Bench of Bishops that killed Whitbread's Bill. The Archbishop of Canterbury argued that it would remove education from church control. So, largely because of church opposition, the first Education Act was delayed by 63 years from 1807 to 1870.

There were various legal and financial restrictions on the Press at that time. The Stamp Act of 1712 imposed a heavy duty on newspapers and pamphlets, thus increasing the price beyond the means of most people. By 1815, the "taxes on knowledge," as they were called, stood at fourpence on a newspaper, three shillings and sixpence on an advertisement and three shillings on each edition of a pamphlet.

Abolition of the Stamp Duty was one of the most important reforms for which freethinkers agitated during the first half of the last century. Henry Hetherington, a London printer and declared atheist, issued a direct challenge to the Government. He started a journal called *The Poor Man's Guardian*, which was unstamped and sold for a penny. The authorities confiscated his press and supplies of paper. Anyone selling *The Poor Man's Guardian* was prosecuted and Hetherington served two six-month prison sentences.

In addition to financial penalties, freethought writers and editors were constantly under legal threat. Prosecutions for blasphemy were common enough. The first four editors of a freethought paper, *The Oracle of Reason*, all went to prison for blasphemy. Amazingly, the *Oracle* ran for 103 issues. The linking of blasphemy with sedition was assumed by prosecution counsel of the time. Not that it worried freethinkers over-much. They regarded religion not only as superstitious nonsense but also as a bulwark of political authoritarianism.

It was not just journalists and editors who were harassed and prosecuted. Publishers and booksellers were in the front line of the battle for free expression. The works of Thomas Paine were a regular target, not only of the authorities but also of Christian vigilante organisations like the Proclamation Society.

One of the bravest defenders of free expression was Richard Carlile. He published Paine's *Age of Reason* and other writings. Prosecuted in 1819, he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. But because he could not, or would not, pay a fine of £1,000, he was kept in jail for six

years.

His wife and sister carried on the work and in due course they went to prison for two years. A succession of volunteers kept the bookshop open, and some of them followed the Carliles into jail.

It is interesting to note that the persecution of Richard Carlile resulted in the first organised freethought movement in Britain. Local support groups were formed, and some of them became permanent societies.

The influence of freethought journals and of publishers like Hetherington and Carlile was far greater than might be supposed. Thus, in 1834, a manufacturer from Bolton told a Government Select Committee that among hand-loom weavers in the town "the writings of Carlile and other infidels are more read than the Bible or any other book." And at the other end of the country, in 1847, a Brighton clergyman, the Rev. F. W. Robertson, reported of a workers' meeting at which he had spoken: "The operatives whom I addressed were my brother men, but probably not my brother Christians, for a large proportion of them were infidels."

It was in the early years of the 19th century that the freethought press, which was to exercise a profound influence on radical thought and action, put down its roots. The first three decades of the 1800s were punctuated by riots, demonstrations and agitation for reform. The law was despised, its officers corrupted and the military hated. Pressure for change resulted in the Reform Act of 1832. This was a modest measure but, even so, only two bishops voted in its favour. The Reform Act was largely a move to placate the growing middle classes, who alone were enfranchised.

The Chartist movement spearheaded the campaign throughout the 1840s. But weak leadership, infiltration by Government agents and confusion over tactics plagued the movement. It went into a decline and was a spent force by 1850.

During the 30 years between the collapse of Chartism and the rise of the trade unions, it was the freethought movement that kept the radical flame alight. Its journals provided a forum for debate and an outlet for exponents of advanced ideas. There were many such publications, some lasting a few issues. The main ones were *The Northern Star*, *Voice of the West Riding*, *The Investigator*, *The Reasoner*, *Lancashire Beacon*, *Secular Miscellany* and *The National Reformer*. *The National*

The Northern Star, AND LEEDS GENERAL ADVERTISER.

Vol. 1. No. 5.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 5, 1866.

PRICE FOURPENCE HALFPENNY,
Or FIVE BULLION PEN QUARTER.

Reformer was launched in 1860 and for its first two years was Sheffield-based. It moved to London and continued publication until 1893.

Freethought, scepticism and unbelief were no longer confined to an educated elite as they had been a hundred years previously. But these ideas had been married to social and political reform. The new philosophy was known as secularism, described as “the practical side of scepticism.” A secularist manifesto was issued, which proclaimed science as the true guide of mankind, and morality as secular, not religious, in origin.

Alongside the journals and bookshops, a network of societies was developing. There were at least five London groups in the 1850s, but it was in Lancashire and Yorkshire that organised secularism took hold. Between the years 1837 and 1866, there were 74 such groups in England. Of these, 12 were in Yorkshire. Even a small town like Holmfirth had its secular society, which was part of the West Yorkshire Secular Alliance.

Sheffield has a freethought history going back to the 18th Century. At that time, groups operated under various guises and names like “debating society,” “corresponding society” and “constitutional society.” In 1795, for instance, the Sheffield Constitutional Society published a sixpenny pamphlet edition of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. It was read at public meetings, a common practice before the age of literacy.

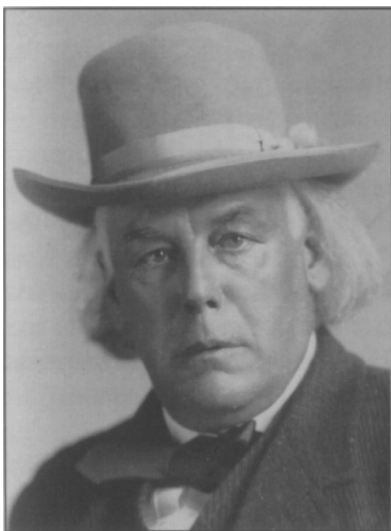
In 1822 a collection was taken up in Sheffield on behalf of Richard Carlile and the following year a support club was formed.

In 1841 the Hall of Science was opened in Rockingham Street, with George Jacob Holyoake in charge. It was the town’s main centre for debate and radical activity, operating as a school and lecture hall. Holyoake’s stay at Rockingham Street was curtailed when he was sentenced to 12 months’ imprisonment for blasphemy.

An organisation known as the Sheffield Rationalists opened a reading room in 1846 and formed a local branch of the National Association for Secular Education.

The Sheffield Secular Society came into existence in the early 1850s and met regularly at Heald’s Temperance Hotel on Arundel Street.

By the middle of the century, secular societies were active all over the country. There was a loose circuit of halls, with lecture tours by leaders of the movement, made easier by the growing rail network. But there was no central, national organisation. On the initiative of Charles Bradlaugh, local societies were invited to join what became the National Secular Society. It was founded in 1866, with Bradlaugh as president. Its strong following in the North is indicated by the fact that the first four national conferences were held in Leeds, Nottingham, Sheffield and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The NSS branches were extremely active, holding hundreds of meetings a year. Many of these were held out of doors, either because the branch could not afford to hire a hall or, quite often, because hall owners refused to rent their buildings for such gatherings. Some of the branches held Sunday schools at which young people, and in some cases adults, were taught to read and write. Thus they provided a rudimentary system of education.



● **Charles Bradlaugh**

Like most of its leaders, the majority of those who came into the movement had a religious upbringing and some had been active in the church. Charles Bradlaugh is an example. He was born into a poor East London family, the eldest of 11 children. He attended an Anglican school until he was 11 years old. Four years later he was an earnest young Sunday school teacher, but finding discrepancies in the 39 Articles, wrote to the vicar for clarification.

Fortunately, the vicar snubbed him, suspended him from Sunday school and denounced the young Charles as an atheist. His father turned him out of the house and he took lodgings in the home of Richard Carlile's widow. The rest is history. He became the undisputed leader of the freethought movement and one of the century's most distinguished Parliamentarians.

As the social life of many newcomers to the movement had been centred on church and chapel, it became necessary to provide an alternative. So there were secular choirs, concert parties and dramatic

societies. There were social functions like dances, picnics and excursions. As often as possible, these were held on a Sunday, partly because it was the one day of the week when people were free from work, and partly in defiance of rigid Victorian sabbatarianism.

Alongside the social life, it was necessary to provide alternative ceremonies connected with life and death. Civil marriage became legal with the Marriage Act of 1836, but secular burial services were not legalised until 1880. Of course, they took place, but sometimes a clergyman intruded and read the Anglican burial service as well. The demand for non-religious ceremonies at funerals and the naming of infants had grown, so that as far back as 1868, ceremonies were devised by Austin Holyoake and Charles Watts. A guide for the assistance of funeral officiants was issued in 1883. The following year, an agnostic surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson, founded the Cremation Society.

There were many injustices in church-dominated 19th Century England. Possibly the most hated of these were the compulsory church rates and tithe payments. These rates, which were legally enforceable and were often enforced, were a serious burden on the poor and were bitterly resented by Non-conformists of all classes who had to pay for upkeep of the parish church which they did not use. The seizure of goods, items of furniture, or farm implements from non-payers, alienated large numbers from the Church of England.

Secularists mounted a sustained campaign against church rates, but on this matter they were not alone, with many allies among Non-conformists and Dissenters. In 1860, Sheffield Secular Society organised a rally against church rates at Park Gate, near Rotherham. Charles Bradlaugh was the main speaker on that occasion.

After many battles with vicars and bailiffs, church rates were abolished in 1868. And, as this campaign showed, secularists were not the exclusive brethren of radicalism, as we are sometimes led to believe. They attracted allies on specific issues, but they did not water down their principles or suck up to the Establishment.

Debating biblical truths may seem rather *passé* now that Gladstone's "impregnable rock of holy scripture" is a pile of rubble. But church leaders of the last century stood by the Bible from the first letter of Genesis to the last dot of Revelation. Secularists were constantly being challenged to debate the Bible and they did not shirk the challenge.

Some of these debates were marathon affairs, spread over two and even three evenings. Secularists directed their fire at the hell-fire and damnation teachings. Much of this lurid and terrifying rubbish was reproduced as penny tracts for young children.

I have referred to some of the many issues that concerned the movement. Although Whitbread's Education Bill was quashed by the Bishops, freethinkers continued the struggle for a free secular education system. They had their own secular Sunday schools and in many areas were influential in mechanics' institutes, workers' libraries and the developing Co-operative movement.

In addition to the authorities, Christian vigilante groups were at war with freedom of expression, except their own, of course. Freethinkers were opposed to censorship, and blasphemy law was the form of censorship that was their main target. In 1811, Shelley's tract *The Necessity of Atheism* resulted in his expulsion from Oxford University. As late as 1812, Daniel Eaton was pilloried for blasphemy. But attitudes were changing, and instead of pelting Eaton with rotten fruit, the crowd cheered him. In 1822, Susannah Wright was fined and imprisoned for blasphemy.

And so it went on - the forces of religious and political authoritarianism suppressing free expression; the freethinkers endeavouring to extend it.

At long last we are seeing the death throes of Sunday observance laws and restrictions. But the battle for Sunday freedom started well over a hundred years ago. The Sabbatarians had had it all their own way since the Society for the Suppression of Vice and Encouragement of Religion and Virtue was set up in 1802. Its targets included tea-parties, travelling, pleasure boats and, in Derbyshire, cheese-making!

Charles Bradlaugh and others formed the National Sunday League in 1855 and from then on there was a running battle between freethinkers and Sabbatarians. It was centred on the question of Sunday opening of art galleries and museums. The Secretary of the Lord's Day Observance Society did not want art galleries to be open at any time because he felt that the nude statuary and paintings were likely to inflame the passions. Eventually, in 1896, the Government agreed to the opening of the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and the South Kensington museums on Sunday afternoon.

Sir Rowland Hill, a Unitarian turned agnostic, is best remembered for introducing a cheap postal service. But for two years he was chairman of The London, Brighton and South Coast Railway, and in that capacity introduced cheap Sunday excursions which enabled people to escape the slums of London to enjoy the sea air for a day. That brought the wrath of the godly down on him. But at a time when life was so grim for most people, the ability to enjoy themselves on the one day they were free was extremely important. And the Sunday freedom we enjoy is largely due to those who campaigned for the right to spend the day as we choose.

Our predecessors are often portrayed as raucous, God-hating, Bible-bashing fanatics. Actually they were as a rule more tolerant towards Christians than squabbling Christian churches and sects were towards each other. It should be emphasised that the chief aim of the secularists was promotion of human happiness and welfare. They concentrated on the problems facing people in this life. And one of the greatest problems in this life, particularly for the poor, was an inability to control their fertility. About the only checks on the size of families were killer diseases which resulted from ignorance, malnutrition, lack of hygiene and appalling living conditions.

Thomas Malthus advocated late marriage and sexual abstinence as a means of family limitation. The more realistic secularists argued that a physical check on conception was necessary. And that meant knowledge about methods of preventing conception, even though they were somewhat basic.

The idea of reducing the size of families horrified not only the Church, which regarded people as pew-fodder, but also the employing class, which regarded them as machine fodder, and the State, which regarded them – or at least the men - as cannon fodder. In addition, there was the Christian abhorrence of sex as a pleasurable activity.

The first (clandestine) propagandist for birth control was Francis Place, who was also an active campaigner against the Stamp Duty on newspapers. He wrote several leaflets and was assisted in their distribution by the teenage John Stuart Mill.

The pioneer birth controllers were denounced as thwarters of God's plan and as enemies of the State. Dr. Thomas Short, a Sheffield

physician, complained of “nefarious practices used by wicked wretches to prevent conception from their carnal desires.” He called for manufacturers of contraceptive appliances to be hanged.

Dr. Short was not the only advocate of such extreme measures. Dr Halliday Sutherland, a convert to Roman Catholicism, advocated the death penalty for manufacturers of condoms. And that was in 1947 - not 1847!

The infant mortality rate in 19th Century Britain was horrendous. Here is a local example. There is a gravestone in Sheffield General Cemetery to Margaret Green. Before she died in 1869 at the age of 45, Margaret Green had buried ten of her children, aged between six days and seven years. But at least that family could afford a gravestone. Poor people often disposed of infants’ bodies in rivers and sewers, even after the Registration Act of 1874.

IT was against that background that secularists pioneered the birth control movement. And when Henry Cook, a Bristol bookseller, was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for selling Charles Knowlton’s booklet on birth control entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy*, the Freethought Publishing Company, which was run by Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, decided on a reprint. The Bradlaugh-Besant trial for publishing *The Fruits of Philosophy* opened at London’s Guildhall in June, 1877, and with appeals carried on until February, 1878. They were each sentenced to six months’ imprisonment, but the sentence was quashed on appeal.



As nearly always happens, the attempt at censorship rebounded on the perpetrators. The Bradlaugh-Besant trial got massive Press coverage. Within a period of just over three years, 185,000 copies of *The Fruits of Philosophy* were sold. In addition, another birth control pamphlet, *The Law of Population*, written by Annie Besant, sold 175,000 copies over the next decade.

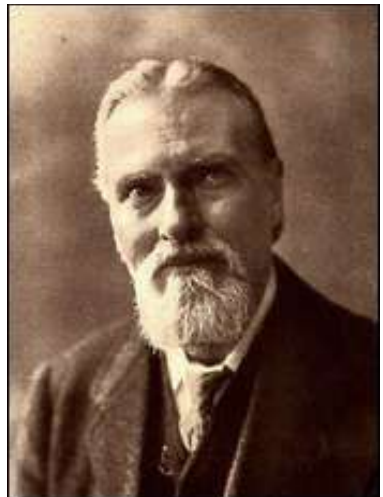
●Annie Besant

The marked and permanent decline in the size of families from 1880 onwards is attributed by medical historians to the debate which resulted from the Bradlaugh-Besant trial. And if the secularist movement had never done anything other than promote and popularise birth control, that alone would have justified its existence. Clean water and control of fertility have done more to enhance the quality of life in just over a century than Christianity has done in nearly two thousand years. Children are no longer dreaded as a threat to the mother's life or as yet another mouth to feed.

To conclude, I would refer to two important developments for the movement which occurred at the beginning of the 1880s and at the end of the 1890s. In 1881, *The Freethinker* was launched - the last and longest lived of such publications. True to form, its founder and first Editor, G.W. Foote, was prosecuted for blasphemy and served a 12-month prison sentence. But *The Freethinker* survived and is still going strong, its continued existence for nearly 114 years one of the movement's positive achievements. It provides us with relevant news reports, carefully researched articles and is a valuable record for future historians of the movement.

At the very end of the century, in 1899, the Rationalist Press Association was founded. As the name implies, it was chiefly concerned with publishing, although it also organised a number of prestigious conferences.

The RPA's greatest achievement was its series of Cheap Reprints and then the Thinker's Library. Around 200 titles were published on subjects like science, history, sociology and biblical criticism. Authors included Ernst Haeckel, H.G. Wells, Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, J.B.S. Haldane, T.H. Huxley and Julian Huxley. About eight million copies were sold during the first half of the present century. It really was an education for many people.



• G.W. Foote

In the time available, I have been unable to even scratch the surface of my subject. Omissions include the impact of Darwinism. There has been little or no reference to issues that concerned the movement, like republicanism, anti-colonialism, women's rights, temperance, pacifism and vegetarianism. But I hope to have shown that by the end of the last century, the foundations of modern Humanism were firmly in place.

Humanist organisations

British Humanist Association

One Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms>

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA)

34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB

<http://www.galha.org/index.html>

The Humanist Association of Northern Ireland (Humani)

Alan Watson, 34 The Cutts, Derriaghy, Belfast BT17 9HN

<http://nireland.humanists.net>

The Humanist Society of Scotland

17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk>

International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)

IHEU, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD

<http://www.iheu.org/modules/wfsection>

National Secular Society

25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

<http://www.secularism.org.uk>

Rationalist Press Association (RPA)

One Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD

<http://www.rationalist.org.uk/about/contact.shtml>

South Place Ethical Society

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

<http://www.ethicalsoc.org.uk>

Humanist journals

Ethical Record

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

<http://www.ethicalsoc.org.uk/record/record.htm>

The Freethinker

The Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

<http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Gay and Lesbian Humanist

GALHA, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB

<http://www.galha.org/glh>

Humani

25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn, BT27 4HE, Northern Ireland

<http://nireland.humanists.net/publicat.html>

Humanism Scotland

17 Howburn Place, Aberdeen AB1 2XT

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk>

International Humanist News

IHEU, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD

<http://www.iheu.org/modules/wfsection>

New Humanist

RPA, One Gower Street London WC1E 6HD

<http://www.newhumanist.org.uk>

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