



Hugh Frazer (1793-1880)

Belfast's first landscape painter of note and early arts campaigner

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UNTIL RECENTLY, MYSTERY HAS SURROUNDED THE DATES OF BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE painter Hugh Frazer. W.G. Strickland, in *A dictionary of Irish artists* (1913), recorded him working from 1813, the year in which he first exhibited, until 1861, when he resigned from membership of the Royal Hibernian Academy, 'owing to future absence from Dublin and perhaps from Ireland'.¹ Art UK, the online site for details of public collections in the United Kingdom, gives his dates as 1795-1865.² Recent research, however, has established that he died in Dublin on 22nd February 1880, aged 87.³

Born in Dromore, county Down, Frazer was the son of Hugh Frazer and Agnes Dickson.⁴ The family's background was reasonably prosperous and educated, Frazer being the great-grandson, on his mother's side, of Revd Alexander Colville MD (1699-1777), Non-Subscribing Presbyterian minister of Dromore and grandson, also on his mother's side, of a wealthy Dromore attorney, Joseph Dickson.⁵ Nothing is known of Frazer's education; nevertheless, the fact that his writings (of which more later) reveal him to be well read and cultured, would indicate that his schooling was of above average standard.⁶

Information on Frazer's art training dates from 1812, when he entered the Dublin Society's Drawing Schools.⁷ The length of time he studied there remains unknown; however, the experience clearly filled him with confidence, as the following year he made his exhibiting debut, showing a sketch at the Society of Artists exhibition at the Dublin Society's premises in Hawkins Street.⁸ Though there is no record of him exhibiting again until 1826, when he first showed at the RHA, by 1821 he was gaining a reputation as a landscape and portrait painter, certainly around Dromore. A poem by an anonymous author (in fact, Thomas Stott of Dromore) in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* of 17th November 1821, 'Episode to Painting. Inscribed to Mr. H. Frazer, Dromore', praises his work in both genres:

1 – *THE PRIORY CHURCH, HOLYWOOD, COUNTY DOWN*
n.d., oil on canvas, 45 x 60.5 cm (courtesy Belfast Harbour Commissioners)

2 – *THE RIVER LAGAN AT STRANMILLIS*
1834, oil on canvas, 70.6 x 91.2 cm (courtesy Belfast Harbour Commissioners)

Delightful art! that to our raptured eyes
 Nature's reflected images supplies;
 That on the breathing canvas can display
 Fair favourite scenes and seasons pass'd away –
 That, by the power of blended tints, can bring
 Before us all the beauteous tribes of Spring;
 To thy surprising efforts, too, we owe
 A boon no other science can bestow –
 A boon that language, though her skill she strain,
 Tries to confer with letter'd pomp, in vain;
 The forms of dear, departed friends, now laid
 In the dark mansions of oblivion's shade –
 To these new being thou alone canst give,
 And bid their figures, looks, and features live.⁹

Of the two genres, it was as a landscape painter that Frazer was to become best known. His portraits, on the other hand, are few; indeed, the author has not seen any. Six are listed as having been being shown at the RHA between 1826 and 1837, two of which are of named sitters.¹⁰ He also exhibited three at the Belfast Association of Artists shows between 1836 and 1838, of which one sitter is named.¹¹ Though there may be many portraits extant, all remain lost at present.

Mention has been made of Frazer's writings. His first foray into print took place in 1825, when he published *Essay on painting* in Belfast and Dublin.¹² Dedicated to the architect Francis Johnston, president of the RHA 1824-29, the *Essay* was Frazer's tribute to Johnston for his generosity in designing and erecting premises for the Academy in Lower Abbey Street, Dublin at his own expense. Frazer saw his publication as 'the attempt of an unpractised pen to assist in diffusing a taste for the higher branches of art in Ireland'.¹³ Though his pen may have been 'unpractised', Frazer exuded confidence throughout the *Essay*. In the work, which he described as a 'feeble effort to forward the culture of the fine arts in my native country', he stated:

To the student of painting, the works of the Masters are invaluable, as it is in them he can view select nature, and the embodied conceptions of highly gifted and highly cultivated minds; and by the aid of these he may train and invigorate his own powers, and discipline his own taste. The inspection or copying of the works of the Masters will, however, be of little use in the education of an artist; except it is accompanied with the study of the intellectual powers and peculiarities of taste, from which these works have sprung.¹⁴

In his opinion, art must be an intellectual process; the artist's mind must be trained to think as well as to visualise and record. Students should study literature and the history of art; in addition, he recommended that Irish students look to the English school of painting for inspiration, in particular to Reynolds, Lawrence, Turner and Constable. Students should copy from approved models but view nature with their own eyes and follow their own instincts and imagination.¹⁵ In his opinion:



3 – VIEW OF BELFAST

1820, oil on cardboard, 59.7 x 87 cm (courtesy Belfast Harbour Commissioners)

Drawing should be made a part of general education, not only as the means of improving the moral tastes and an elegant amusement, but also that the systematic practice of the lighter branches of design must, in some degree, co-operate with the mathematical sciences in training and strengthening the reasoning faculties. But the ultimate importance of the culture of the imitative arts, are their tendency to open clearer and more impressive views of the beneficence and infinite perfection of the SUPREME AUTHOR of NATURE, in clothing the visible world with a raiment of inconceivable variety, and of inimitable grandeur, harmony and beauty.¹⁶

As regards art in Ireland, he stressed that painting was an important branch of culture and that the advantage of having a national academy (by which he meant the RHA) was the fact that it created an improved standard of taste. To those who had little time for the fine arts, he pointed out that the arts had a civilising influence on the morals and sentiments of society.

He ended by suggesting that the mechanic arts would benefit if operatives were educated in the science of design and colour, which would aid the commerce and wealth of the country. In this, he was being particularly forward looking, anticipating the establishment of the Schools of Design between 1837 and 1852, the aim of which was the application of art to industry, namely manufactured goods.¹⁷ Whether the *Essay* – somewhat rambling and repetitive, in the flowery prose style of the nineteenth century – was well received or had any influence on public sentiment, remains unknown. John Turpin, in his history of the RHA, maintains that the *Essay*'s emphasis on intellectual achievement and learning – so important to Frazer – was never adopted by the Academy schools.¹⁸ Despite this, the *Essay*'s value to the art history of Ireland and of Ulster is considerable, being





the only work of the kind known to have been published by a Belfast artist in the nineteenth century.

Greater knowledge of Frazer's career dates from 1826, when he began exhibiting at the RHA. He was to continue showing there until 1861, becoming an associate member in 1830 and an academician in 1837. He also held two positions within the Academy, that of honorary professor of painting between 1838 and 1854 and librarian from 1845 to 1850.¹⁹ Though primarily a landscape painter, he also executed historical subjects and rural genre scenes. However, as with his portraits mentioned above, no examples of either genre are known to the author, with the exception of the *Battle of Clontarf*, a massive work depicting the battle on 23rd April 1014 between the Irish king Brian Boru and the Vikings.²⁰ Fortunately, there are numerous examples of his northern landscapes in Belfast, in the collections of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and National Museums Northern Ireland.²¹

Many of these are straightforwardly topographical (Plates 1-4) – scenes around Belfast or further afield, almost always dotted with figures going about their daily business. The impact of industry upon the landscape, which Frazer would have seen, appears to have fascinated him. By the mid-1830s, Belfast had undergone a remarkable industrial and commercial expansion through developments in the cotton and linen industries and the growth of trade. In the view of Belfast from the Old

4 – WARINGSTOWN, COUNTY DOWN

1849, oil on canvas, 63 x 76 cm

(courtesy National Museums Northern Ireland / collection Ulster Museum)



5 – VIEW OF BELFAST FROM THE OLD PARK HILL
 1855, oil on board, 48 x 60.8 cm (courtesy Belfast Harbour Commissioners)

Park Hill (Plate 5), the contrast between fertile countryside in the foreground and the tall chimneys of advancing industrialisation in the background is striking; also with the image of Jennymount Mill (Plate 6), where the spinning factory stands alone amidst the woody scenery at the foot of the Cave Hill. The standard of Frazer's paintings varies considerably, with most being marred to some extent by weak draughtsmanship and a lack of atmosphere and light; also sometimes a hardness in the greens. This can be seen in his small oil-on-panel potboilers in the history collection of the Ulster Museum. The occasional crudeness in his paintings, especially those on a small scale, is somewhat reminiscent of the work of the topographical artist William Sadler II (1782-1839). Often, Frazer seems more interested in the topographical content of the landscape before him than in conveying the atmosphere and feeling of the scene. Nevertheless, despite such traits, his works remain valuable records of Belfast, its environs and other parts of Ireland in days long gone. The best of his known landscapes, the view of Waringstown (Plate 4), with its uncharacteristic depiction of sunlight, atmosphere and lively use of colour, shows him to have been more talented than generally supposed.

Perhaps buoyed by the publication of his *Essay* on painting of 1825 or by having works accepted for the RHA in 1826, the following year he advertised that he was planning a series of lithographic views of the scenery of Ireland at a price 'so moderate as to be within the reach of all classes; which, indeed, is the peculiar object, and advantage of



6 – VIEW OF JENNYMOUNT MILL, BELFAST

after 1856, oil on canvas, 47 x 58.8 cm (courtesy NMNI / collection Ulster Museum)

the work'.²² Envisaged as a series of monthly numbers, the project was to comprise views of the principal towns, ancient buildings and landscapes of the country, which, when completed, would form a picture of 'our richly diversified and picturesque island'.²³ Unfortunately, it is not known if the series ever materialised, as the lithographs remain untraced. Irrespective of this, the plan reveals Frazer still full of missionary zeal for forwarding the culture of the fine arts in Ireland.

Frazer moved between Belfast, Dromore and Dublin throughout his career, but appears to have spent most of the 1830s and early 1840s in Belfast. In May 1834, he advertised his services as a teacher of portraiture, historical subjects and landscape in the Belfast press.²⁴ He is also known to have painted at least one religious work; according to *The Vindicator* of 5th October 1839, he designed and executed an altar piece, a *Descent from the Cross*, for the Catholic chapel in Dromore in that year. Described as a 'splendid specimen of painting', the work provided 'a rich treat to all admirers of the fine arts'.²⁵ Unfortunately, its whereabouts remains unknown. By mid-July 1842, he had a book almost ready for publication: *Elementary drawing for the masses*.²⁶ However, this appears not to have materialised, like his lithographic views of Ireland mentioned above. That he was having problems selling his work is evident from the fact that he resorted to holding subscription sales (mini-lotteries of a small number of paintings) in Belfast in 1840, 1842 and 1848.²⁷ By 1845 he is known to have been in dire financial straits, according to com-

ments made by the Belfast art collector Francis McCracken to the artist and Royal Hibernian Academician George Petrie. Writing to Petrie in Dublin on 11th March of that year, McCracken suggested that Frazer be appointed to the vacant post of librarian of the Academy. According to McCracken, Frazer was:

“steeped in poverty to the very lips”, at this moment confined to bed without *one shilling*, and worse still without the prospect of any sales before art union time [presumably the Royal Irish Art Union], *if even then!* Many a time have I heard him say he would think himself *rich* in the possession of [one shilling] a day!!!! This from a *gentleman*, in the highest sense of the word, is most deplorable ... Believe me my dear Sir nothing would induce me to interference in any case of the sort except the conviction that without some such aid a member of your academy [RHA] may *die* of starvation.²⁸

McCracken also reported that Frazer was being tended free of charge by the Belfast doctor and amateur watercolour painter James Moore, who declared that ‘nothing could be more wretched than the *hole* in which he [Frazer] is just now lying’.²⁹ Luckily, Frazer recovered from his illness and was indeed appointed librarian of the RHA, which necessitated him moving back to Dublin. By 1850 he was also acting as agent for McCracken in his picture-buying ventures.³⁰

Though Belfast-born portraitist Thomas Clement Thompson (1780-1857) had exhibited two fine landscapes in Belfast in 1804, *Belfast from Cromac Water Mill* and *Belfast from the Banks of the Lagan* (whereabouts unknown), Frazer was actually the first local painter to specialise in landscape. His chief competitor in landscape painting in Belfast was the watercolour painter Andrew Nicholl (1804-1886). Born in Belfast of humble origins and probably self taught, Nicholl was apprenticed as a compositor to the Belfast printer Francis Dalzell Finlay (1793-1857) and worked for Finlay’s newspaper, the *Northern Whig*, from 1824 to c.1830.³¹ Despite the demands of his trade, he painted in his spare time and in 1828 produced his earliest known series of watercolours, ‘101 views of the Antrim Coast’. By this time, Frazer was already well established and thus fully deserving of the author’s description of him as ‘Belfast’s first landscape painter of note’. Finlay was to promote both Nicholl and Frazer through the columns of his newspaper. The rise of landscape painting in Belfast in these early decades of the nineteenth century, particularly with views of Ulster, was almost certainly related to the increasing wealth of the town’s middle ranks, who sought attractive scenes to decorate their homes.

Finlay, a close friend, paved the way for Frazer’s subsequent work as an arts campaigner, in a newspaper editorial of 12th January 1826. In the piece, he praised a forthcoming venture for Belfast: the erection of a building for a local music society (the Anacreontic Society), which was to contain meeting rooms and a ballroom. However, he urged the inclusion of another amenity within it, overlooked in the town thus far – a gallery for the encouragement, improvement and exhibition of the works of Belfast’s artists. By now, art was on a sound footing in the locality, not only with the spread of drawing schools but with the emergence of a number of other artists besides Frazer, such as James Atkins, Gaetano Fabbrini, Samuel Hawksett and Joseph Molloy. Had Belfast a gallery where copies and casts of famous works could be seen and where students could

study and exhibit, the result would be the fostering of talent in the north of Ireland. Furthermore, the gallery's location in Belfast would allow those unable to afford to study in Dublin or London, to pursue artistic training at home. The idea was wishful thinking on Finlay's part; when the Music Hall (as the building was known) opened in March 1840, there was no gallery included.

Shortly after Finlay's editorial, Frazer began his crusade on behalf of art in Ulster. Writing from Dublin to the *Northern Whig* of 26th March 1826, he praised the newspaper for its support of the fine arts and offered his advice on the establishment of an art institution (a step beyond Finlay's proposed gallery). The main aim was to improve public taste through lectures on the theory and principles of the fine arts. The secondary object was to train future generations of artists, by including a teaching department within the institution. A building should be fitted up to include a gallery, teaching area, a drawing and painting room and an apartment for an assistant teacher. The gallery should contain copies and casts of famous works and be open to the public. Annual exhibitions of local artists' works could be held and profits raised could be used to buy copies and models for the students. A committee of managers and visitors would run the establishment. The first step in the founding of this 'Belfast Institute of Fine Arts' – Frazer's term – was the appointment of a professor of painting. It seems likely he saw himself in the role, having given so much thought to the plan. Belfast needed a fine art institution, he believed, for although the town had flourished commercially, such success did not breed culture and refinement – only support of the arts could bring this about. It is possible Frazer was inspired by the example of Francis Johnston; what Johnston had done for Dublin in erecting Academy House, thereby promoting the arts, Frazer may have seen himself doing for Belfast.

Frazer was to return to the idea of a fine art institute for Belfast a number of times over the next ten years or so. In 1828, a lengthy article in the *Northern Whig* of 18th December – though signed only by 'H' – certainly bears his stamp. The piece may have been inspired by a series of lectures on art history, given by the journalist and art critic William Paulet Carey in Belfast the previous September. The talks focused on the utility and progress of the fine arts from earliest times to the Renaissance and were intended to awaken a taste for art in the north of Ireland. 'H' began his article by stating that whilst a taste for the fine arts had been gradually growing in Belfast, the level of patronage accorded them was much less than in British towns of a similar size. Furthermore, that Dublin, Liverpool, Glasgow and Cork had institutes to promote the arts and Belfast had not, seemed inexplicable. He blamed the town's resident artists for this; it was up to them to establish an art institution. Belfast's artistic community should form a properly organised body to mount annual exhibitions. Such efforts would surely be assisted 'by the rank, wealth and liberal spirit' of the north.

Frazer's concern for art in Ulster took a practical turn on 13th May 1830, when he applied for the vacant post of drawing master at the Belfast Academical Institution, the city's foremost school. Though living in Dublin at the time, a return to his native province clearly appealed to him. Perhaps he felt he could bring about a Belfast Institute of Fine Arts more speedily by being on the spot, rather than by sending articles to the *Northern Whig*. In his application, he detailed the method of instruction for the teaching of art. There were two goals to be aimed for: to render nature accurately and to develop in pupils

a sense of artistic taste. With becoming modesty, he declared:

If I may be allowed the liberty of offering suggestions on a subject in which I have had considerable practical experience both in London and Dublin; I may be permitted to add, that independent of all personal interest I feel anxious to lend all aid in my power to forward any object which may tend to diffuse sound and discriminating principles of taste among the intelligent youth of the north of Ireland. Distinguished in every other branch of intellectual culture, it must be admitted that in respect to the elegant refinements which a proper cultivation of taste for the Fine Arts brings in its train, the Metropolis of the north is still very backward.³²

He suggested that the school acquire a small collection of casts from the Antique and engravings after the Old Masters and proposed that the new drawing master give a course of lectures on the history of art, to be open to the public. As proof of his suitability for the post, he referred to his election as ARHA a few days earlier. Amongst his referees he named Francis Dalzell Finlay and the Belfast shipbuilder William Ritchie. Unfortunately for Frazer, the position was given to Joseph Molloy, who remained in post for forty years.

Despite this setback, Frazer's dream of a Belfast Institute of Fine Arts remained as strong as ever and on 12th September 1833 – by which point his addresses were Dromore and 12 Capel Street, Dublin – he despatched another missive to the *Northern Whig*.³³ Writing from Belfast, he stated that he had spent some years preparing to run such an institution and outlined his plan, which was both businesslike and practical. A house or suite of rooms should be rented for a trial period of two years for teaching drawing, painting and modelling and the history and theory of the fine arts. Annual courses of lectures on composition and the philosophy of taste, at a popular level and open to the public, would be part of the curriculum. There should be fifty shareholders, with shares of £5 each; the £250 raised would be used to fit up rooms and purchase book and art materials for the students. Frazer would provide oil paintings for the use of pupils in that department and elementary books, compiled by himself, for the juvenile class. The principal (obviously Frazer) was to be employed on a two-year contract and was to be paid out of the students' fees. Fine details, such as opening hours, were also included in the plan.

He ended the piece on an optimistic note. Were a building 'worthy of the liberal spirit of Belfast' to be erected, its gallery for sculpture and casts could be adapted for annual displays and sales of the works of British artists. The profits from these events could then be used to promote local talent. When he had obtained his fifty shareholders, he would organise a meeting to discuss the project. However, no record of the meeting has been found nor did the institute materialise. The reason for this is unknown; one can only surmise that lack of support by Belfast's art lovers was the cause.

By 15th May 1834, Frazer had settled in Belfast, where he advertised his services as a teacher of portraiture, historical subjects and landscape in the *Northern Whig*, as stated earlier.³⁴ To promote his return to the north, he exhibited a *View of Belfast from the Botanical Gardens* in the Commercial Buildings, which work was raffled on 19th June.³⁵ (The work is unlocated, as are the coloured lithographs of it he planned to give to subscribers to the raffle.)³⁶ He also resumed his continued championship of art by publishing a series of articles in the *Northern Whig* between May and October, entitled 'Retrospect,

Present Condition, and Prospects of Irish Art'.³⁷ Rambling and somewhat flowery, as were all his writings, the aim of the essays was to help the public reach a better appreciation of Irish art. The first two articles dealt with, respectively, the monastic art of early Christian Ireland and the emergence of Irish artists in the eighteenth century, whilst the fourth focused upon painting in Ireland and discussed the work and influence of the RHA.

The third article, the most interesting for the light it sheds on Frazer himself, dealt with the unhappy social position of the Irish artist, who was considered 'an unproductive member of the social hive' by the 'artificer and trader' and intellectually inferior by the learned professions. Whilst there may have been instances of artists being extravagant or wayward, the piece concluded that painters and sculptors were generally of a temperate and studious disposition and that 'a considerable degree of mental cultivation' was necessary for their calling. In this boosting of the artistic profession, one is tempted to see Frazer keen to portray himself as cultivated and learned, a fitting leader of culture and the arts in Belfast.

The first properly organised body of Belfast's artists finally came about in 1836 in the shape of the Belfast Association of Artists.³⁸ Founded on 23rd April at a meeting of the town's resident artists, the idea for the Association undoubtedly came from Frazer, who was in the chair. Chief amongst the resolutions passed was the holding of an exhibition the following August. Frazer was elected president, Nicholas Joseph Crowley secretary and Samuel Hawksett treasurer.³⁹ The Association's main objectives were the promotion of the fine arts in the north of Ireland and the founding of an Institution of Fine Arts in Belfast. The exhibition, held in the museum of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, ran from early September to mid-October and contained 218 works, of which twenty-five were by Frazer. Other contributors included Hawksett, Joseph Molloy, Andrew Nicholl and James Arthur O'Connor, who sent eleven works from London. One of the most interesting exhibits was a drawing of part of the interior of 'the proposed Ulster Gallery of Fine Art' – Frazer's much desired Belfast Institute of Fine Arts – by local architect John Miller. (This and related drawings by Miller remain untraced.)

Though the exhibition was well received, only one painting had been sold by the end of September, a situation which Finlay railed against in an editorial in the *Northern Whig* of 29th September:

we would ask, and ask seriously, can the people of Belfast expect another exhibition, unless some of the present works meet with purchasers? We say, decidedly, they never ought ... Is this honourable to the taste and the liberality of the town? ... Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Dublin, and Cork, have their annual exhibitions. – Will Belfast, rising, wealthy Belfast, be behind these places in encouraging the arts?

This impassioned plea pricked a few consciences, for two days later a group of local gentlemen arranged a lottery of ten of the choicest works in the show – four landscapes by Frazer, four by Nicholl and a subject picture each by Crowley and Arthur Joy. Of the 260 lottery tickets at 10s 6d each, most were sold before the draw on 10th October, though no results of the ballot are known.

Despite the poor sales, the Association held another exhibition in the autumn of 1837, again in the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society museum and again with Frazer as president. In his foreword to the catalogue of this second exhibition, Frazer made an important announcement: as no profits had been raised from the first exhibition and none could be anticipated from future shows, the Association was abandoning its aim of founding an Institution of Fine Arts in the town (a sad climbdown for Frazer, one suspects). The exhibition contained 182 works, with the usual panoply of local artists well represented; also, well-known non-resident Irish artists such as Martin Cregan, president of the RHA, who sent two portraits and Richard Rothwell three. A new tack taken this year was the inclusion of works from local collections, probably to add variety to the display. Lenders included Sir Robert Bateson, the Marchioness of Donegall and Finlay and Francis McCracken. Shortly after opening, the Association determined on another lottery, a wise move as sales were to be almost non-existent yet again. The lottery, which had to be delayed due to poor ticket sales, comprised 480 tickets at 10s 6d each and contained twenty-three works, all of which were won.

Seemingly undaunted by the lack of success of its first two shows, the Association held a third in 1838, again in the museum, with Frazer again in the president's chair. Opened in late September, the exhibition contained 208 works and comprised the usual local contributors – Frazer, Hawksett and Nicholl, amongst others – whilst non-resident Irish artists included Bernard Mulrenin and James Arthur O'Connor. David Cox and Samuel Prout were amongst the English contingent. The general consensus from press reports was damning: not only was the exhibition not as good as in previous years, there were too many portraits (about a third of the total display). The show closed earlier than planned, with a number of paintings auctioned off after closure. After this sad end to its third exhibition, the Association folded, for nothing more is heard of it. This also saw the end to Frazer's crusade to improve the arts in the north. His role as an arts campaigner was over. He made clear his thoughts on the situation in a letter to the committee of the Royal Irish Art Union, an association set up for the purchase of pictures, bought out of subscribers' fees and balloted for.⁴⁰ In his address, placed before the Union's committee in Dublin in June 1839, he explained:

This Society [the Association] ... succeeded in getting up three annual exhibitions ... But there were found only a few zealous non-professional lovers of art ... the consequence was that last year's exhibition was closed without any sales being effected. The only just conclusion to be drawn from the experiment ... is, that Belfast is not yet prepared for maintaining a local art union [by this, he meant an art society] for the encouragement of native art, that nothing else, but the centralization of the patronage of the rank, wealth, and enlightened taste of the kingdom in a metropolitan institution such as the Royal [Irish] Art Union of Dublin, seem to realise, can raise Irish art from its present low and depressed condition.⁴¹

As is clear from these remarks, Frazer turned his back on local effort and left it to societies in Dublin to effect an improvement in the art of the country, including the north. Though other exhibiting societies were established in Belfast during the 1840s and 1850s, such as the Northern Irish Art Union, the Belfast Fine Arts Association and the Belfast Fine

Arts Society, all were short lived. All were founded and run by members of the gentry and professional and business classes; there were no artists involved. Frazer took part in their exhibitions, as did contemporaries like James Howard Burgess, Edwin Hayes, Andrew Nicholl and Richard Rothwell.

Although Frazer's dream of a Belfast Institute of Fine Arts never materialised, elements of it were incorporated into later bodies and institutions: firstly, into the School of Design of 1849-58 and School of Art of 1870-1900, which provided artistic training for the masses and were the forerunners of the present School of Art; secondly, into the Belfast Ramblers' Sketching Club, established in 1879, the first art society founded by artists which actually flourished, being the precursor of the Belfast Art Society, eventually the Royal Ulster Academy of Arts; and thirdly, into the Belfast Art Gallery and Museum, opened in 1890 in the Free Public Library, the first official venue for the display of art in town. All became important components of the art world of Belfast in the nineteenth century. It seems no exaggeration to say that Frazer was a prophet ahead of his time. Sadly, however, he was also a voice crying in the artistic wilderness that was Belfast in the 1820s and 1830s, as this article has shown.

Knowledge of the last thirty years of Frazer's life is sketchy. The 1850s saw the end of his involvement with the RHA, with him showing in only three exhibitions during the decade, in 1851, 1856 and 1858. Between 1851 and 1853, he is known to have been living at 28 Philipsburgh Avenue, Clontarf, according to Thom's directories; however, Turpin, in his history of the RHA, states that he was residing out of the country in 1853 and had done so for some years.⁴² As for his addresses in 1856 and 1858, the RHA exhibitors' index notes his residence in the former year as 39 Summer Street and in the latter, as 2 Bachelor's Walk.⁴³ There is no record in Thom's directories of him living at either house; perhaps he was merely lodging or using the premises as convenience addresses. Interestingly, 2 Bachelor's Walk was the home and business premises of an old friend of Frazer's, the Dublin portrait painter and picture restorer William Charles Nixon, who had resided in Belfast during the 1830s and had exhibited in the Belfast Association of Artists exhibitions between 1836 and 1838.

Where Frazer spent his life after his resignation from the RHA in 1861 remains a mystery. The only known fact is that he died at 48 Charleville Avenue, North Strand, Dublin, on 22nd February 1880, aged eighty-seven. The death register recorded a cause of death as 'senile decay, 2 months certified'. His niece, Alice Colville Welsh, was present at his passing.⁴⁴ It seemed he was a widower. The house, a small, two-storeyed terrace property, was occupied by a Miss A. Frazer, possibly his sister Anne.⁴⁵ Given the lack of information regarding his personal circumstances, it is good – and somewhat comforting – to know that he was cared for by family at the end of his life.

Though much about Frazer remains unknown, it is possible to build a profile of him through the traits his writings reveal: an articulate and well-read individual, with a theoretical turn of mind and a fondness for flowery prose; a man idealistic about the role of the artist in society and passionate about the state of art in Ireland, especially in his native Ulster; a person deeply desirous of change. Whilst his efforts have not been fully acknowledged by posterity, it is hoped that this article will bring this most worthy of artists some well-deserved and long-overdue recognition.

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ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

NMNI National Museums Northern Ireland
 NW *Northern Whig*
 PRONI Public Record Office Northern Ireland

- ¹ Walter G. Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists*, 2 vols (Dublin and London, 1913, republished Shannon, 1969) I, 384.
- ² Art UK was previously known as the Public Catalogue Foundation (PCF). The years 1795-1865 are used in the PCF of 2013, *Oil paintings in public ownership in the National Museums Northern Ireland*. The PCF obtained the dates from Wikipedia (communication from Jade King, Art UK, 20th Apr 2022). The author has been unable to trace the source of the Wikipedia dates.
- ³ General Register Office, Dublin, Ireland: Civil Registration Death Index 1864-1958, vol. 2, p.537, no.335.
- ⁴ J.M. Dickson, 'Dickson Family Notes', PRONI, T1765/1-9. See also Gilbert Watson, 'Hugh Frazer (fl.1813-61) landscape and portrait painter', in lisburn.com.
- ⁵ Dickson had a house and offices in Dromore Square and erected a substantial residence, Lisnaward House, a few miles outside the town. He subsequently lost his fortune and left his family badly provided for. See 'Dickson family notes', no. 4.
- ⁶ It is not known how many siblings Frazer had. However, 'Dickson family notes' states that he had a brother who was an attorney. It is possible that Frazer and his brother had a tutor.
- ⁷ Gitta Willemson, compiler, *The Dublin Society Drawing Schools: students and award winners 1746-1876* (Dublin, 2000).
- ⁸ Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists*, I, 384.
- ⁹ The author's identity is revealed in a later ver-

sion of the poem, published in the *Morning Post*, 9th May 1822. Entitled 'Episode to painting. Inscribed to an excellent young artist', the work is signed as by Hafiz, Stott's pseudonym. Stott, a linen bleacher and poet, was part of the literary circle around Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore (1729-1811). See Gilbert Watson, *Thomas Stott 1755-1829: the poet of Dromore* (Lisburn, 2021). My thanks to Gilbert Watson for information on this later version.

- ¹⁰ Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: index of exhibitors and their works 1826-1979* (Dublin, 1985). Mrs J.D. Finlay, whose portrait was exhibited in 1831 (81) may be the wife of Francis Dalzell Finlay, proprietor of the NW newspaper and a friend and patron of Frazer.
- ¹¹ Eileen Black, *Window to an age: a chronicle of art in Belfast 1760-1888* (Belfast, 2016).
- ¹² Hugh Frazer, *Essay on painting* (Belfast and Dublin, 1825). John Turpin, *History of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts, 1823-1916*, 2 vols (Dublin, 2018) I, 78-80 contains a useful précis of the *Essay*.
- ¹³ *Essay on painting*, 'Dedication'.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, 12, 13.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, 13, 14, 24, 25.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, 29.
- ¹⁷ The Central School of Design in Somerset House, London, opened in 1837. Twenty-one branch schools were subsequently established between 1842 and 1852, including three in Ireland in 1849, in Belfast, Cork and Dublin. See Quentin Bell, *The Schools of Design* (London, 1963).
- ¹⁸ Turpin, *History of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts*, I, 80.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, 49. Strickland gives the dates of Frazer's professorship as 1839 to 1853 and omits to mention him being librarian.
- ²⁰ *The Battle of Clontarf*, 1826, oil on canvas, approx. 6½ x 10 feet (2 x 3 metres), property of private equity firm Kildare Partners UK (2014). Exhibited at the Casino, Marino, Dublin, in April 2014 as part of the 'Clontarf 2014' millennium celebrations.
- ²¹ See Eileen Black, *Paintings, sculptures and bronzes in the collection of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners* (Belfast, 1983); also PCF catalogue, NMNI, 2013 (see no. 2).
- ²² NW, 13th Sept 1827.
- ²³ *ibid.*
- ²⁴ *ibid.*, 15th May 1834.
- ²⁵ *The Vindicator*, 5th Oct 1839.

- ²⁶ NW, 21st July 1842.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, 26th Nov 1840, 26th Apr 1842, 16th Sept 1848.
- ²⁸ National Library of Ireland, Petrie papers, MSS 791, nos 290, 291. I am indebted to Martyn Anglesea, whose article, 'Francis McCracken: Pre-Raphaelite patron or speculator?' (1984, unpublished) is the source of these details.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, no. 290.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, nos 298, 300. McCracken (1802-1863), manager of a Belfast cotton mill and art collector from the mid-1830s, began to acquire Pre-Raphaelite paintings from 1851. He was forced to sell them in 1854 and 1855. See Eileen Black, *Art in Belfast 1760-1888: art lovers or philistines?* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 2006).
- ³¹ A portrait of an unknown man, NMNI History Department, U4497, has been identified by the author as Francis Dalzell Finlay. The artist is unknown.
- ³² PRONI, SCH524/7B/24/13, Hugh Frazer's application to Drawing School, Belfast Academical Institution, 13th May 1830.
- ³³ NW, 23rd Sept 1833.
- ³⁴ Frazer may have lived in Belfast during the early 1820s, though nothing has been found in street directories or the local press.
- ³⁵ NW, 22nd May, 9th June 1834.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*, 23rd June 1834.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*, 26th May, 5th June, 26th June, 16th Oct 1834. A fifth article has not been located.
- ³⁸ Full details of the three Belfast Association of Artists exhibitions can be found in Black, *Art in Belfast 1760-1888*, 41-47, and Black, *Window to an age*, 33-46, 48-54.
- ³⁹ For a useful article on Hawksett, see Eileen Black, 'Hard times: an episode in the life of the Belfast portrait painter Samuel Hawksett', *Irish Architectural & Decorative Studies*, XI, 2008, 56-73.
- ⁴⁰ Regarded as an ideal way of spreading a love of art amongst the population, art unions were set up in cities across Britain and Ireland after the founding of the premier body, the London Art Union, in 1837. The Royal Irish Art Union was established in Dublin in 1839. See Eileen Black 'Practical patriots and true Irishmen: the Royal Art Irish Union 1839-59', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, no. 14, 1998, 140-46.
- ⁴¹ *Belfast News-Letter*, 18th June, 1839.
- ⁴² Turpin, *History of the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts*, I, 123.
- ⁴³ Stewart, *Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts: index*.
- ⁴⁴ Alice Colville Welsh (later Watson) was the great-grandmother of Gilbert Watson; see acknowledgements and no. 4.
- ⁴⁵ According to Thom's directories, Miss A. Frazer occupied the property from 1871 to 1880.