

# MacNeice House



11 Malone Road, Belfast



*The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was  
Spanning snow and pink roses against it  
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:  
World is sadder than we fancy it.*

Excerpt from 'Snow' - Louis MacNeice



MacNeice House - the current home of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland at 77 Malone Road - is an imposing double-fronted Victorian merchant's villa dating from 1889.

Designed by the Belfast architect Samuel Stevenson for James Johnston, a successful tea merchant who owned much of the surrounding area, in many ways it is typical of the substantial late-nineteenth-century houses which were built for the wealthy industrialists and entrepreneurs of Belfast who, from the 1850s, began to favour the airy Malone ridge over the crowded centre of the burgeoning industrial town. Sean O'Reilly has said, "Belfast triumphed in the Victorian era ... no other Irish town or city can boast Belfast's authoritative array of the architecture of capitalism", and MacNeice House represents a good example of this 'architecture of capitalism' in the domestic, suburban sphere.

Set back from the road in lawned grounds, behind a low boundary wall and big hexagonal gate piers, the cream-stuccoed house is in lively Italianate style. The front of the house displays two large ground-floor bay windows and a projecting gabled central section sporting a grand portico. This porch of coupled Corinthian polished granite columns (two square, two cylindrical) sits on a base of three







shallow steps and frames the large main door with its semicircular stained glass light and decorative wood carving (the doorway itself is framed by coupled Corinthian pilasters). Above the porch entablature sits a group of three tall round-headed windows on the first floor, and above that sits a pair of round-headed attic windows set within a semicircular-headed frame. The roof is enlivened with a vigorous eaves-line string of console brackets which continues around the house, and by tall, decorated chimney stacks (the roofline is, however, somewhat marred by the modern dormer windows to the front). Elsewhere, window mouldings and a two-storey rounded bay on the south side of the house, along with emphatic quoins at each projecting corner, add to the decorative effect and also establish a sense of solidity and definition to the whole building.

The interior of the house boasts considerable craftsmanship in both plaster and wood of excellent quality, which has been sensitively restored. The warmth of the contrasting woods - mahogany, walnut, teak and pine are all used - is immediately apparent in the elegant part-panelled hall (with its impressive fireplace), pedimented door frames, fine wide cantilevered staircase and inlaid floors. The decorative plasterwork of the coves, cornices, panels and ceilings - especially in the hallway and the two ground-floor reception rooms - is notable for its richness and variety of motifs.



The house has been known by several different names and performed various functions over the years. As James Johnston's home it was known as 'Dunarnon', and interestingly Johnston was the grandfather of the playwright Denis Johnston, so it is likely that the writer knew the house well as a child. After Johnston, it functioned for a period as a Church of Ireland bishop's palace. In the 1940s it became Aquinas Hall, a Dominican convent school and residential accommodation for female students at nearby Queen's University. It was during this period that an assembly hall (1944) and chapel (1955) were added to the north-side and foreground of the house, both by the architects Kilpatrick and Bready; when the Dominican sisters vacated the premises these buildings were remodelled as office spaces for the businesses which now occupy the site along with the Arts Council. When the Arts Council vacated Riddel Hall in Stranmillis and took up residence of the house in 2001, the building's fortuitous links with the famous Belfast-born poet Louis MacNeice were noted: the poet's father, John Frederick MacNeice, lived in the house as Church of Ireland Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore, and the Council re-named it MacNeice House. Indeed, it is reputed that the poet wrote the poem 'Snow' in one of the ground floor rooms. The house also enjoys further literary connections with the poet Paul Muldoon who recalled clandestine visits to it - and the link with MacNeice - in his poem 'History'.

Further Belfast examples of the architect Samuel Stevenson's work can be seen at the redbrick former Kirker, Greer and Company Warehouse - now the headquarters of the Belfast Education and Library Board - in Academy Street (1899-1901); the bombastic (and woefully sited) College of Technology (now BIFHE) in College Square East of 1900-1907 (based heavily on WM Young's War Office in London); and also an attractive Dutch/Flemish gabled bow-windowed shop at 51 Donegall Place of 1907.

<sup>1</sup> O'Reilly, Sean, 'Architecture in Ireland prior to 1900' in 20th-Century Architecture, Ireland, Prestel Verlag 1997



Louis MacNeice





Untitled - Lynne Connolly, containing references to the poem 'Snow' by Louis MacNeice



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