



DOERS, DREAMERS, PLACE MAKERS

Humanists who changed the world



 Understanding Humanism

 Humanist Heritage

Thanks to National Lottery players



Doers, Dreamers, Place Makers tells the stories of eight remarkable people who helped change the world for the better: people who were inspired by humanist values. These people are all connected in some way to Conway Hall – a humanist building which you can explore using our virtual tour.

Each of these short stories explores a key theme linked to humanist beliefs and values, as well as suggestions for activities to help you go deeper.

WHAT IS A HUMANIST?

Humanists are non-religious people who do not believe in a god. They believe that the world is a natural place, that human beings have natural origins, and that this is the one life we have. They believe it is possible to lead a good, happy, and meaningful life without religion.

Humanists recognise that we have many different natural capacities and believe we have a responsibility to make the most of them to build a fairer and kinder society. We can ask and answer questions about the world around us. We can use empathy and imagination to consider how other people might feel, and think about how to treat them well. We can make choices about how we want to live and take action to improve our own lives and the lives of others. Humanists believe we should think about the consequences of our actions on other people and animals and try to promote happiness and wellbeing. They celebrate these human capacities and the way different people have used them to make the world a better place.

To thine own self be true

After each of the stories, you'll find a short question or activity designed to help you explore and discuss the key theme. You'll also be encouraged to consider each person in the context of the quote: 'To thine own self be true'.

Above the stage in Conway Hall, you can see the words 'To thine own self be true'. This quote from Shakespeare emphasises the value humanists place on being able to think freely, to make decisions based on individual reason and empathy, and to act according to their own ideals.

How did each of these eight people strive to be true to themselves? In what ways might this have been difficult?



MONCURE CONWAY (1832–1907)

Moncure Conway believed that if you wanted to make the world a better place, it was not enough to just believe that something in society needed to change - you had to take action to show other people there was an injustice in order to put it right.



Moncure was born in 1832 in the southern American state of Virginia, into a well-off family who 'owned' enslaved people. His mother was part of a group of people who wanted to end the slave trade and Moncure came to believe that slavery was a cruel, unfair injustice. He dedicated the rest of his life to finding ways of putting a stop to slavery. He was known as an abolitionist, meaning that he wanted to abolish slavery and the slave trade: to end it.

As a young man, Moncure became a church minister and preached against slavery, often angering the many people at that time who still supported it. Moncure was a freethinker, and over the course of his life he moved away from religion, ultimately becoming a humanist.

A civil war was fought in America from 1861 to 1865 between the southern states who supported slavery and the northern states who were against slavery. Moncure believed so strongly that slavery was wrong, he was willing to fight against his family in the civil war. His two brothers supported the southern army and Moncure supported the northern army, hoping that slavery would be brought to an end.

Moncure wrote for an abolitionist newspaper *The Commonwealth*, as well as writing two books as a way of trying to persuade people that slavery was wrong. As well as writing, he wanted to take action and do something practical and so, in 1862, with his wife Ellen, he led 31 slaves from Virginia in the south to Ohio in the north, where they could be set free.

Moncure also campaigned for more freedom for women, supporting the right of women to vote and allowing them to have access to education. Again, he involved himself in an active, practical way, helping to set up the first College at Oxford University where women could study in the same way as men.



Moncure believed in a common humanity, meaning that all people deserved to be treated with fairness and compassion. His many good works and progressive ideas gained him much respect from many people and when Conway Hall was built – 22 years after he died – it was named after him.

In the foyer of Conway Hall, you can see a statue of Moncure Conway. It reminds us why ethics matter, and why it is so important to stand up for what you believe in to create a more ethical society.

ACTIVITY: STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN

Humanists believe we only have one life, so we have a responsibility to ourselves and to other people to try and make the world a better place while we can.

Moncure Conway was a person who took practical action when he believed things needed to change, and he called on other people to do the same. At the end of his autobiography, he wrote to his readers:

'Do not merely offer the prayer, "Give peace in our time," but do thy part to answer it!'

- When you believe something needs to be changed, what practical action can you take?

For example: I believe that we should look after the environment and protect nature for future generations. I can take practical action by taking part in litter picking and recycling in my local community.

- *To thine own self be true:* in what ways was Moncure Conway true to himself?



ESLANDA ROBESON (1895–1965)

Eslanda Goode Robeson, known as Essie, was a remarkable person, an author, anthropologist and civil rights activist. She was born in America in 1895 at a time when there was widespread racial discrimination against people, like her, of African heritage.



Despite these challenges, Essie worked very hard, studying chemistry, anthropology, and politics. A talented author, she found that writing was a freeing way to express herself, her thoughts and ideas. Because of her education, and her husband's fame as an actor and singer, Essie was able to travel the world. She knew she had advantages in life that other people did not. Essie recognised her freedoms and wanted other people to have those freedoms too.

She wrote: 'I know I cannot have any real freedom all by myself. I can't have it unless everybody has it'.

Essie came to the belief that however much *she* became the best person she could be, it was not enough for her to work alone. She saw the problems of the world, and believed that these could only be overcome by communities coming together to fight for the same cause.

Determined to fight for racial equality and social justice, Essie dedicated her life to setting up and taking part in organisations working for change. Many of these brought people together to focus on the problems faced by African nations in a time of colonialism.

Colonialism happened when one nation conquered and controlled another nation through force. This often involved oppressing the people within the nation, often through violence. Essie believed that colonialism was wrong and inhumane because people were being oppressed and treated in a way that stopped them from having human rights, freedom, and peace. She saw the struggles of people living in these countries as connected to the racism experienced by non-white people in America, so the organisations she was part of tried to bring them together, to make their voices heard around the world.

That's what brought her to Conway Hall in 1963. She took part in an event which brought people of African, Asian, and Caribbean descent together to show their support for the



struggle of African Americans in the USA. Essie, and the people who campaigned beside her, wanted to create a world where everyone is equal, and their human rights are respected.

Essie thought it was especially important to bring issues of injustices to the attention of the world, writing many books and articles, and making speeches so that her voice could be heard by as many people as possible.

In all of her life and work, Essie helped people to understand that their shared humanity was the way forward for a better life for everyone. Her dedication had a positive impact on people who remembered Essie after she died.

Essie's friend, Alice Childress, wrote about Essie in a magazine called *Freedomways*, 'the world is a better place because Eslanda Goode Robeson lived in it. I'm glad I knew her.'

Essie was agnostic. Being agnostic means that you cannot know for certain whether a god exists. Her actions were therefore motivated by the needs of other people. Her humanism was at the heart of her fight for racial equality, believing that all humans should be treated with fairness and compassion. Her work in fighting against racism shows the power of community, when people come together to fight for what is right.

ACTIVITY: CREATING COMMUNITY

Essie Robeson dedicated her life to the fight for racial equality. She did this by bringing people together to work for the same cause.

Think of a cause that you feel strongly about. Imagine that you are going to set up an organisation to bring people together for this cause. Write down three actions that people within your organisation can take to help the cause.

Example: I feel strongly that we need to do more to take better care of the environment. I will set up an organisation to help people take better care of the environment and spread the message of why this is important.

Group activities where we will take action:

- Litter picking in the park on Sunday.
- Giving talks in schools about how to look after wildlife in your local area.
- Attending group meetings once a month to share ideas and progress.

- What is the benefit of bringing people together for a cause?

- *To thine own self be true.* In what ways was Essie Robeson true to herself?



THOMAS PAINE (1737–1809)

Thomas Paine was an ordinary boy from Thetford, Norfolk, who grew up to write two extraordinary books. These books played a big part in forever changing the old ideas about how people should be treated by their government. Thomas was a deist, which means that although he believed there was a god, he didn't think this god would get involved in human life. This meant that human beings had a responsibility to make changes in the world themselves.



So how did Thomas Paine change the world?

From a young age, Thomas was a freethinker. He began to question why it was that many people, although they worked hard, remained poor and owned very little or nothing, whilst a few people did little or no work at all but were rich, owning big houses and land.

Thomas thought this was unfair and decided to write a book setting out his ideas on how to change the way the country was governed so there was more equality. In this book, *The Rights of Man*, Thomas put forward his main idea, that everyone had 'natural rights': certain things which every human being should be entitled to. This meant that people should have an equal right to say what they thought about society, and that instead of just a few rich and powerful people making the laws, all men should have a vote so that laws would be made in a way that was fair for everyone. The idea that everyone had a right to vote became known as democracy.

However, although many working people liked Thomas's ideas, the Government thought his views were dangerous and would lead to a revolution in which the poor would take everything from the rich by force. To avoid being put in prison Thomas fled to America, where laws were still being figured out. The laws they made were based on republicanism, meaning that there would be no King or Queen, and everyone would be equal in law with a written set of 'rights' known as The American Constitution. Thomas helped to inspire The American Constitution and it is still the basis of American government and society today.



Thomas then wrote another book called *The Age of Reason* in which he said that people should be free to think for themselves about whether or not they believed in God, and if they did they should be able to do so without any sort of church. This also angered many people, who had the old fashioned idea that if you did not go to church you were a bad and dangerous person, so Thomas remained in danger of being punished by the government. He went to live in France where they had also just had a revolution based on ideas similar to his own. Thomas' idea that people should be free to decide whether to follow a religion, and should use their own reason to make this decision, is what humanists believe today.

Although Thomas' ideas were mainly about fairness and equality in the way people were governed, he also believed in humane causes and supported the abolition of slavery and reforms for improving the lives of working people. He believed that all human beings, whatever their background or beliefs, had the same natural right to live freely and equally in the world. He said: 'my country is the world, and my religion is to do good'.

Thomas Paine had a big influence on many of the people associated with Conway Hall. In the library, there are two portraits and a bust of him.

ACTIVITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FAIR?

At the time when Thomas Paine was alive, it was still dangerous to say you didn't believe in a god, and Thomas didn't say this. He was a deist, who believed that God didn't get involved in human life, so people had to act to make change happen. Because Thomas argued that everyone should be able to make up their own mind about religion, he was very important for humanists who lived after him.

Thomas Paine wanted a society in which everyone was treated in an equal and fair way. He felt so strongly about this that he wrote two books, and his ideas inspired many other people.

- Have you ever wanted a situation to be more fair? Write down your ideas of how this could have happened.
- *To thine own self be true*: in what ways was Thomas Paine true to himself?



ELIZA FLOWER (1803–1846)

Eliza Flower was born in 1803 – over 200 years ago. Back then, many people thought in the same way about society: that people should behave a certain way and ‘know their place’. People living in poverty were not considered equal to people who were wealthy. Women were not considered equal to men. Society was patriarchal, meaning that it was controlled by men. Lots of people believed that a woman could not come up with her own ideas and should not disagree with a man.



However, Eliza’s parents were ‘freethinkers.’ This means they believed that everyone should be able to think for themselves, come up with ideas, and make up their own minds about how society should be. These freethinkers were known as ‘progressives’, because they wanted to progress new ideas to make society more kind and fair.

In a progressive society, everyone would be equal. People in poverty would be equal to wealthy people and women would be equal to men. Eliza grew up to be a freethinker, too. As a woman, it was difficult for her to be a freethinker and go against the crowd. This would have taken courage and tenacity.

Free thinkers often formed themselves in groups, to share ideas and socialise with others who shared their values. Eliza and her sister, Sarah, were part of a group who met at the South Place Chapel in London. The freethinkers who met at South Place campaigned through meetings, pamphlets, and books to spread their ideas. Eventually, this group would become humanist.

Something else that was very important at South Place was music and singing. Eliza used her love of music to express her beliefs and ideas. She wrote political songs, which gave a voice to people who wanted progressive changes in society like she did. ‘Gathering of the Unions March’ is a powerful political song about the importance of liberty: being free in society. You can perhaps hear Eliza’s passion and determination shining through.



As well as political songs, Eliza wrote beautiful songs about the months of the year and the four seasons. The variation of her work really shows how talented she was and the wide range of her creativity and imagination. You can perhaps hear this in 'Spring' inspired by the season. The song sounds light and playful to bring the season alive.

Eliza often worked together with her sister Sarah Flower to create music. Sarah was a poet who shared Eliza's progressive ideas. She wrote the lyrics to some of the songs. Together, these two progressive women, through their poetry and music, paved the way for more feminist freethought to make society a more equal place.

Today, Eliza's sheet music can be found in the collection at Conway Hall. When you look at a sheet of music stored in a library it may seem like it's just a piece of paper with some notes written on it, quite an ordinary item. But to Conway Hall it is so much more than this. The memory of the person behind the music and her progressive values continue to make us think in new and different ways about society, and how we can make the world a better place. That's why it can be important to keep items like sheet music and look at them today, because the past can influence the present. For humanists, who don't believe in another life after we die, this is a way that people can live on: as we listen to their music, read their words, or remember their lives after they're gone.

Pictures of Eliza and Sarah Flower can be seen in the library of Conway Hall. They remind us how powerful music and poetry can help to make social progress.

ACTIVITY: SHARING A MESSAGE THROUGH MUSIC

Eliza used music to express her thoughts and spread a message of equality and liberty.

Here are some of the values that Eliza had: equality, fairness, inclusion, kindness. Many people share these values, regardless of whether or not they are religious.

- Humanists believe that people should be able to think for themselves and express their thoughts and ideas freely so that other people can consider them too. How did Eliza express her thoughts and ideas in a free way?
- *To thine own self be true.* In what ways was Eliza Flower true to herself?



BERTRAND RUSSELL (1872–1970)

Bertrand Russell was fortunate in being born into a wealthy, educated family, which gave him many advantages. He appreciated this and wanted a society which provided a chance for everyone to have the same opportunities that he had experienced. He became a very famous philosopher and humanist.



Bertrand said that 'the good life must be lived in a good society'. He thought that to make a good society it was important for people to have education, good health and interesting, fairly paid jobs. It was equally important for people to have a loving family and friends in their community. At the heart of Bertrand's ideas was his strong sense of compassion for people. When he saw people hurting, or experiencing unfairness, he felt for them and wanted to help. He described this as having 'an unbearable pity for the sufferings of mankind'. Feeling compassion towards people means that he could empathise with their situations and wanted them to be treated with kindness.

Bertrand used his good education to write and talk about his ideas. Many of Bertrand's thoughts on society were idealistic, meaning his ambition was to build a better society for everyone. However, he realised that life can be complicated and sometimes you need to think about all sides of an issue.

For example, Bertrand was a pacifist, meaning that he believed in working for peace. He was opposed to war. To oppose something means that you are against it. Bertrand opposed the First World War and believed so strongly that war was wrong, he was prepared to go to prison or be fined for expressing his beliefs. When conscription was introduced (meaning that men of a certain age had to join the military), he supported conscientious objectors: people who refused to join because of their beliefs.

However, Bertrand accepted that the Second World War needed to be fought in order to defeat the cruelty of the Nazis and Adolf Hitler. He looked at all sides of the issue and changed his mind about war always being wrong, because he realised that every situation is different.



Bertrand was a great believer in the ability of people to create a better world if they based society on kindness, knowledge, love, and dignity, which they could do without religion as long as they believed in the goodness of humankind.

A picture of Bertrand Russell can be seen in the library at Conway Hall to remind us of the importance of kindness and thinking for ourselves.

ACTIVITY: THE FREEDOM TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

Humanists believe in looking at the evidence, and using reason and compassion to make decisions. If situations change or new evidence comes to light, it is always OK to change your mind.

Bertrand Russell was a pacifist who did not agree with the First World War but, later, agreed with the need to fight in the Second World War. Realising that all situations are different, he looked at all the sides of the argument for and against war, and changed his mind.

- Have you ever changed your mind? Think about a situation where you thought about all of the different sides of a situation.
- *To thine own self be true.* In what ways was Bertrand Russell true to himself?



ERNESTINE ROSE (1810–1892)

Ernestine Rose was a remarkable woman, who believed that what made people alike was much more important than what separated them. Even though she was born in Poland and English was not her first language, she became one of the first women in America to stand up on a public platform and speak out against slavery. She also campaigned for women to be allowed to vote, and to have the same rights as men.



Ernestine was born into a Jewish family, but when she was still young she decided that she did not believe in any god. She became an atheist. She was honest about this, and it sometimes made things more difficult for her. For example, some other people who shared her views on slavery and women's rights refused to stand alongside her to speak, because she wasn't Christian like they were.

But Ernestine refused to pretend to be anything she wasn't. She believed it was our duty to 'investigate everything', and to challenge things that did not seem reasonable or fair – like people 'owning' slaves, or women not being able to vote. She believed that silence only led to people losing their liberty.

Ernestine gave lectures all over England and America, based on her belief that every human being, no matter their race, gender, religion or belief, is equal. 'We belong to the same human family', she said. Ernestine believed in the power of words to deliver this important message.

Ernestine was very brave to speak about her ideas as boldly as she did. At the time she lived in, women were not supposed to have these rebellious ideas that went against the views of the many men in power who did not believe in equality. Society was patriarchal, meaning that it was controlled by men, many of whom did not believe in giving women the vote. Not only were men in control but especially men who were wealthy, many of whom did not believe in putting a stop to slavery. It would have been very difficult for Ernestine to go



against the crowd and speak out for equality. All the more reason to remember her efforts and to speak out for what we believe is right.

Women didn't get the right to vote in England until more than 25 years after Ernestine had died, but she had spent her life working to change people's minds, so she played a part in winning this victory.

Today, a small portrait of Ernestine in the library at Conway Hall helps remind us of her influence.

ACTIVITY: THE POWER OF WORDS

Words are what help us to communicate our ideas to other people, and sometimes to convince them of what we believe. We can use them to explain why we think the way we do, and give evidence for our beliefs. This helps us to join together with other people, like Ernestine Rose did, to call for change in the world. Ernestine Rose was a humanist: she didn't believe in God, but she loved her fellow human beings and wanted to make a better world for them.

Ernestine Rose believed that it was important to speak up for what you believe in and that words are a powerful way to make change.

- Think about something you believe would make society a better place. Write a speech and use words to make people want to make these changes. Imagine that you are going to give this speech to an audience on the main stage at Conway Hall.
- *To thine own self be true.* In what ways was Ernestine Rose true to herself?



E.M. FORSTER (1879–1970)

Edward Morgan Forster was born in the late Victorian period. He grew up to become a respected writer and well-known humanist, as well as a campaigner for freedom and equality.



Forster was born to well-off parents in a comfortable home and he had a good education, so that when he grew up he could become a writer without worrying about money, and had the ability to express his ideas clearly.

Forster travelled to many different countries, especially to India where he made many life-long friends and where many of his novels were set. Forster loved India and his experiences there gave him a strong sense of how differences in the way people lived in different countries were to be respected, as well as enjoyed, because all humans were equal in their thoughts and feelings.

Forster's novels were read as enjoyable stories, but at the heart of these stories was a serious purpose. Forster believed that society, at that time of the early 1900s, continued to keep to the old Victorian ideas of how people should behave. He thought that these strict ideas held people back from behaving in the way they really wanted to. He believed that every individual should be free to be true to themselves as long as they were not hurting anyone.

In particular Forster believed that people of the same sex should be free to love each other and be in a relationship, if they wanted to be together. At the time, and until 1967, this was illegal and so many men and women were unhappily forced to keep their love for someone of the same sex a secret. Anyone who was discovered to be in a same-sex relationship could be punished and sent to prison.

Forster was gay himself and so experienced how it felt when he could not be true to himself: the unfairness, unhappiness, and frustration of having to hold back your true feelings. He hoped to create more compassion and greater understanding of how people have their differences, but are all human. Through the characters in his stories, he put across the message that people could be happier if they could be true to themselves and follow their own way of loving and living.



Forster wrote a novel called Maurice about a man falling in love with another man at that time. However, there were such strong views as well as laws about being gay that Forster felt he could not publish his novel. This book was not published until a year after his death in 1971.

Forster believed that the power of imagination, especially if linked to nature, could help show the importance of truthfulness and kindness in society so that people could live more freely.

ACTIVITY: THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

Humanists believe that using our imagination is one way we can understand other people better, for example by thinking about how we would feel in another person's situation. Stories are a great way of doing this, helping us to imagine very different lives from our own.

E.M. Forster drew on his imagination to write stories about people that we can empathise with and care about. This was a good way to spread his message that people should be free to love whoever they chose.

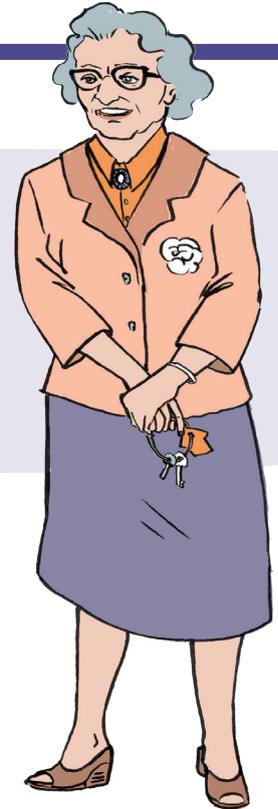
Here are some of the values that E.M. Forster had: equality, fairness, inclusion, kindness, tolerance. Many people share these values, regardless of whether or not they are religious.

- Do you share any of these values? Choose one. Write a poem, song or story, or draw a picture that expresses your value.
- *To thine own self be true.* In what ways was E.M. Forster true to himself? In what ways was it hard for him to be?



ROSE BUSH (1898–1978)

A lovely name for a lovely person, as everyone who knew her agreed that she was a warm-hearted, kind, caring and honest person who dedicated her life to helping other people.



Rose was born in 1898, so as a young woman she experienced the horrible effects that the First World War had on everyone. In 1916 she joined the South Place Ethical Society (which would later become the Conway Hall Ethical Society), determined to find a way to improve society. Rose strongly believed that the best way to do this was through practical help, and in particular that small acts of kindness could make a big difference in people's lives.

Rose showed this during both world wars; in World War 1 (1914-1918) she met the tired and wounded troops at railway stations with tea and sandwiches; in World War 2 (1939-1945) she drove fire and ambulance rescue vehicles after bombing raids.

After the war when many houses had been destroyed by bombs and fire, especially in London, Rose thought that the most practical form of help was to provide housing for people - and she meant all people, no matter their religious or political beliefs. At the time, many of the groups providing housing for elderly and vulnerable people were religious, and left out non-religious people.

In 1955, she helped set up the Humanist Housing Association, and Rose kept up an active interest in this for the rest of her life. She worked hard to make sure that there was always good understanding and communication between the people who lived in the houses, the tenants, and the Housing Committee.

Rose's determination to help people, and her good nature, had such a positive impact on people's lives that a housing block in Hampstead, London, is named after her - Rose Bush Court.

Rose's painting hangs in the library of Conway Hall as a reminder of the big difference she made to people's lives because of her acts of kindness.



ACTIVITY: SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS

Rose Bush's story shows us that one small act of kindness can make a big difference in a person's life.

- Draw a picture of a small act of kindness that you can do to help someone.
- *To thine own self be true.* How was Rose Bush true to herself?

Stories by **Isabelle King**

Illustrations by **Tonka Uzu**

Design by **Laura Reid**

© 2024

understandinghumanism.org.uk

heritage.humanists.uk



Thanks to National Lottery players