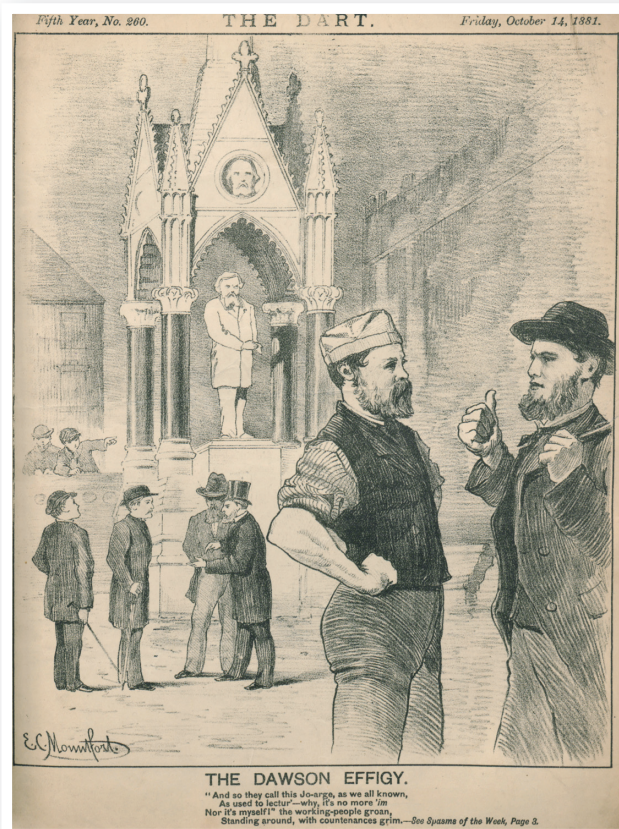


SHAKESPEARE, INCLUSION AND WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITIES

Professor Ewan Fernie, 'Everything to Everybody' Project Director, introduces the first project theme

Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham. MS358/1



Working men discuss the town's first memorial to Dawson and Shakespeare in this cartoon from *The Dart*.

‘The time has come to give everything to everybody,’ said the founder of the world’s first great people’s Shakespeare Library, George Dawson. This centrally included working people. Dawson’s biographer, Wright Wilson, concluded, ‘He was essentially a fighting leader of the people’; and Dawson intended the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library above all as a gift which would emancipate the working people of the town. ‘The day would come when a man would be ashamed to shut up a picture by Raphael or a statue by any great master in a private house.’ The ‘gifts of genius’ should be like ‘sunshine, open to all, for all, to be reached by all, and ultimately to be understood and enjoyed by all’.

In 1849, Dawson offered evidence before the parliamentary committee scoping out the possibilities for public libraries, saying that “‘The higher class of poetry’ ... was “very much read by the working people ... Shakespeare is known by heart, almost””. Charles Dickens gave his first ever public reading in Birmingham in 1853 in aid of the foundation of the Birmingham and Midland Institute devoted to the ‘Diffusion and Advancement of Science, Literature and Art amongst all Classes of Persons resident in Birmingham and Midland Counties’. He declared, ‘I believe there are in Birmingham at this moment many working men *infinitely better versed in Shakespeare and in Milton than the average of fine gentlemen.*’ When Birmingham’s Central Lending Library was opened, Dawson denounced the prejudice against working men reading literature as ‘old patronising twaddle of the last generation’. ‘That day was gone,’ he said. ‘The building of this library would put an end to all such twaddle for the future.’

As the 1864 tercentenary of Shakespeare’s birth approached, Dawson and Birmingham decided that they didn’t want a statue. ‘Let Stratford endow their own boys,’ Dawson growled. What fuelled the foundation of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library was the certainty that ‘if the gentle poet could himself appear amongst them, that he would wish for no nobler monument than that of being enshrined in the memories and hearts of hard-working men in this town’. Shakespeare would savour the fact that ‘the conceptions of his mind and his noble expressions were clearing and illuminating the path of the hard-working artisan’ and ‘that the leaves of his divine works were being turned over by the hardy hands of our own forge-men’. Dawson and co. knew that this ‘would be greater pleasure to him than any sculptured marble, or star pointing pyramid.’ And so they established the most open and inclusive Shakespeare library in the world.

In 1868, the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library threw Shakespeare open to all Birmingham citizens, according to Dawson’s precept that ‘one of the highest offices of civilization is to determine how to give access to the masterpieces of art and of literature to the whole people’, and that it was a ‘great mistake’ to suppose that ‘art, science, and knowledge’ require to be ‘preached down’ to them.

Dawson derived this vision of cultural inclusion from Shakespeare himself. In defiance of traditional conventions, Shakespeare’s plays mingled kings and clowns. The French critic and philosopher Voltaire was disgusted by the broad comedy with which the gravediggers handled mortal remains in *Hamlet*, but Dawson stood up for them. ‘When *your* grave comes to be dug,’ he asked his listeners, ‘will the diggers weep?’

Do any of you think that the grave-diggers will not joke and jest when they are digging your graves, although the rest of the universe may be in profound sorrow? Grave-diggers get accustomed to digging graves, and become hardened to it. If every grave-digger broke his heart over digging a grave, who should we have to dig them? What did they care for Ophelia? They understood it was a 'young woman who had drowned herself.' Afterwards they went to dinner. What would become of us if grave-diggers could not eat? Where do you think the under-takers men will be when the parson is saying, 'Dust to dust; ashes to ashes' over your corpse? Why, at the 'King's Head,' or the 'Five Bells,' taking their beer!

Though Dawson insisted that high culture should be opened up to working men, he did not want to turn them all into identical 'fine gentlemen'. He insisted on the value of each individual experience and perspective. He called all men and women in Birmingham to join in the great collective labour of making a shared culture.

The great democratic dawn which Dawson envisaged has yet to arrive; but Dawson and the founders of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library did all that they could to bring it on. In an early lecture on the collection, Dawson's co-founder of the Shakespeare Library, Samuel Timmins, emphasised just as much as the world-class complement of rare books a 'series of keys which open all the rest' to 'general readers', to 'any ordinary intelligent reader'. This included lexicons, concordances, the Chief Librarian Mr Mullins' ground-breaking, comprehensive catalogue of all Shakespearean literature. The lists of occupations of readers given in the general annual reports for the Birmingham Reference Libraries suggests that all sorts of people did indeed use the Library—the record for 1872, for instance, includes hairdressers, electroplaters, grocers, japanners and enamellers, gun makers, steel toy makers, and one pearl worker. It was natural that Birmingham should quickly become the birth-place of the National Education League. Dawson said at its first meeting, on the 12th of October, 1869, 'We all wish to lay the foundation of a national education system. It must be laid with great simplicity and great breadth.'

In July 1994, the radical theatre director Michael Bogdanov filmed a project for the BBC in Birmingham housing projects, *Shakespeare On The Estate*. The documentary explored the impact of Shakespeare on working-class people and attempted to determine 'to what extent this myth of Shakespeare, the popular writer of and for the people, is true'. As part of the project, Bogdanov staged parts of *Macbeth* on a council estate in Ladywood. As he recalled, 'I worked on ideas and extracts with a group of Asian youths, various representatives of the large black community, drunks, homeless, unemployed—the majority'.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project will revive, test, and extend Birmingham's distinctively inclusive Shakespeare heritage. It will research and publish on its website a new 'Mullins list' of contemporary Birmingham occupations, and across the course of the project it will attempt to engage these working communities with the distinctive heritage of working-class Shakespeare. This part of the project will draw on pertinent materials from the designated George Dawson and Birmingham collections and also from the wealth of self-curated scrapbooks and documentation of non-professional and amateur productions in the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library. It will take a bearing from Dawson's satirical lectures on academics, editors and interpreters who act as expert 'improvers of Shakespeare', preferring as Dawson did to help new communities find their own ways into Shakespeare's works via their extraordinary ownership of one of the greatest Shakespeare collections in the world.

A leading question relating to this first project theme is: What scope is there for communities in Birmingham who might not think that 'high culture' belongs to them to enjoy and profit from Shakespeare now?

EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY

Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future:

Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all



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WEST MIDLANDS
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The 'Everything to Everybody' Project is a collaborative product of the **University of Birmingham** and the **Birmingham city council**

The project is made possible thanks to the generous support from the **National Lottery Heritage Fund** and **History West Midlands**

For more information about the 'Everything to Everybody' Project please see the project website

<https://everythingtoeverybody.bham.ac.uk/> or email shakespeare@birmingham.gov.uk