

SHAKESPEARE, NONCONFORMITY AND DIVERSITY

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

“The time has come to give everything to everybody,” said the founder of the world’s first great people’s Shakespeare Library, George Dawson. The founders of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Library were Nonconformists in religion at a time when there were real restrictions on the participation of Nonconformists in establishment culture: they couldn’t, for instance, attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities, which is why Dawson went to University in Scotland. All those behind Birmingham’s great people’s Shakespeare Library are buried in Birmingham’s Nonconformist cemetery, Key Hill. But Birmingham has, throughout its history, encouraged ‘nonconformism’ in many forms; and Dawson himself advocated and worked to achieve an inclusive culture which maximised diversity and freedom.

Dawson came to Birmingham to take up an appointment at Mount Zion Baptist Chapel, one of those cavernous old halls like the splendid though derelict Methodist Central Hall which still stands on Birmingham’s Corporation Street as a reminder of a once immensely popular, now vanished evangelical English culture. Not that anyone was coming to hear the dreary previous incumbent. Dawson filled the hall again. But he was no Baptist. And when he started giving communion to all-comers, the Baptists had to get rid of him. Dawson’s supporters built him his own church, which his detractors called ‘The Church of the Doubters,’ and Dawson was happy to call it that himself.

He has most plausibly been claimed by the Unitarians – and his career does indeed connect with Birmingham’s Unitarian heritage – but, in truth, Dawson was more nonconformist still. He was always what he called ‘a free lance by myself’. Indeed, so Nonconformist was Dawson that the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, wouldn’t stand in the same room as him.

Dawson was a spiritual seeker who drew his congregation round him ‘as students, with a feeling that each has much to learn, and, perchance, much to unlearn’. He addressed them not from a pulpit but from a lecture-stand modelled on those in the University of London, and not as the ‘retained advocate of certain doctrines, and therefore bound to publish and support them, but as one whose duty it is to aid them in their studies’. He insisted that ‘there is no such thing as infidelity of the intellect’; Dawson encouraged the freest possible thinking. No typical Brummie Nonconformist, he abominated what he called the ‘hideous divorce between truth and beauty in Puritanism’; and he thought it ridiculous that ‘it is impossible in these days to be anything like pious and fond of sport’. Dawson fearlessly stated that the Bible was too narrow. ‘All who have any true poetry within them,’ he proposed, ‘must have felt how cold and passionless are the pages of the New Testament’. He welcomed Holman Hunt’s picture of Christ as a semi-naked, sinewy, Jewish carpenter when it was exhibited in



William Holman Hunt, The Shadow of Death

Birmingham as a timely revelation – ‘the first attempt to represent Christ as a working man’; ‘the poor man’s body, the workman’s limbs, the hard-working man’s appearance throughout.’

If such a man could be recognised as the Son of God, then it was clear, Dawson taught, that all men (and women) deserved love and reverence.

Dawson preached a new ‘world-wide religion; the religion, not of the Greek or Jew, the rich, or the poor, or the sage, but the religion for Man; the religion of human nature’. For him, all human lives and all human activity had an ultimate, religious value. Scripture, he believed, had to be supplemented by the whole range of literature, music, art, and science, from all sorts of traditions and epochs. Dawson wrote his own hymn book, which is held in the Library of Birmingham. It sets to music texts by Shelley, Schiller (in Dawson’s translation), Carlyle and Wordsworth. His preaching was similarly fearless. He wasn’t afraid to praise Mohamed to his nineteenth-century Birmingham congregation, nor to preach on evolution – even though Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* had only recently been published. Dawson was not embarrassed by Darwin’s challenge to religious truth; he insisted that the very nature of truth was historical and changing, and consequently was proud to change his mind.

Shakespeare had a special place in the uniquely nonconformist religion which Dawson developed in Birmingham. Thomas Carlyle had proposed that the great dramatist from the West Midlands was the harbinger of a new epoch, the 'priest of a *true* Catholicism, the "Universal Church" of the future and of all times', and in Birmingham Dawson put this dictum into practice. 'Outside the church,' he said, 'there is the great work of life to be accomplished'; and, he preached, Shakespeare is 'a guide who shall lead us safely through the intricacies of the city'. Dawson, in short, defined a new, now forgotten religious mission 'to mix with the great world of men and women which William Shakespeare has formed'.

For Dawson, Shakespeare himself was a nonconformist. 'There are things in Shakespeare,' he proclaimed, 'that he would have been burned for, if he had not been a player. There is heresy enough to have carried him to endless stakes, political liberty enough to have made him a glorious Jacobin in evil days, and carried him to destruction and doom. If he had appeared as a divine, they would have burned him; as a politician, they would have beheaded him.'

The canopy under which the Dawson statue stood till 1951, in Birmingham's central civic square, was decorated with a medallions of Shakespeare, Carlyle, Bunyan and Cromwell, acknowledging that in Birmingham the establishment Shakespeare had tilted towards the Nonconformist, edgy, partisan, and even downright dangerous.

Dawson was as independent in politics as he was in religion. This statue was placed just a few paces from the Town Hall, where Dawson made memorable speeches agitating, for instance, for Polish independence or to impeach the government who had fought the Crimean War. Over the course of two Tuesdays in December 1849 he gave lectures on the subject of 'Social Reformation, Its Apostles and Systems', from the medieval German Peasants' Revolt of the Middle Ages to the rationale for present-day Communism. For Dawson, Revolution was never out of the question. When he went to Germany with Thomas Carlyle, he was pursued across Europe as a dangerous progressive, and he remained proud of his police mug-shots. He strode the barricades of Paris in 1848 with the famous American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Back in Birmingham, Dawson recalled with shame the reactionary violence of the Priestly Riots, which had interrupted a dinner in Birmingham to celebrate the Revolution in the city on the 14th of July 1791. Dawson insisted in his lectures that 'the French Revolution has yet to be completed'. He called for those with 'falcon gaze sufficient to pierce through that haze of bloodshed' to see the better world beyond.

But though he was always something of a firebrand, what Dawson wanted and espoused in the end was the kind of revolution which the leader of the twentieth-century German student movement, Rudi Dutschke, called 'the long march through institutions'. The new organs of local government were Dawson's Trojan horse for a quiet revolution without bloodshed. He ultimately rejected revolutionary violence as the way to reform society in favour of Shakespeare's openness and tolerance. Dawson taught that the sheer diversity of Shakespeare's characters afforded an image of a more progressive and tolerant world, and he insisted, in his lectures and as President of Birmingham's 'Our Shakespeare Club', that Shakespeare was 'the very water of life'.

In founding the Shakespeare Memorial Library for all the people of Birmingham, then, Dawson was giving them what he really considered to be the very best thing of all.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project seeks to connect the Bard with Birmingham's Nonconformist history, but also with forms of nonconformism and freedom of expression across the contemporary city. It will draw on pertinent materials from the designated George Dawson and Birmingham collections and from elements of the Shakespeare collection which present Shakespeare as nonconformist in a variety of senses. For instance, the collections include an historic Shakespearean *Temperance Kalendar*, which fuses Shakespeare and Nonconformism.

They also feature a powerful lecture on Shakespeare and religion by Dawson's more orthodox follower, R. W. Dale, the Congregationalist minister of Carr's Lane Chapel; but they equally include an archive of the very differently nonconformist gender-bending experiments of the great mid-twentieth-century Shakespearean critic, G. Wilson Knight. This part of the project will link up with Key Hill Nonconformist cemetery in the Jewellery Quarter, and with Nonconformist churches in present-day Birmingham, as well as with contemporary proponents of alternative values and life-styles beyond the church in order to re-establish links between Shakespeare, nonconformity and diversity in Birmingham today.

One leading question relating to this second project theme is: What scope is there for Birmingham – as England's second, traditionally Nonconformist city – to champion an alternative version of Shakespeare and other establishment culture 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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**HERITAGE
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**WEST MIDLANDS
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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