

BIRMINGHAM AND EUROPE

Professor Ewan Fernie, 'Everything to Everybody' Project Director, introduces the third 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 ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project themes each bring together an aspect of the Shakespeare Collection and Birmingham’s wider history which connects or resonates with an important issue in Birmingham today. The third theme is Birmingham and Europe. Shortly after he came to Birmingham, George Dawson gave a popular series of lectures on ‘The Present State of Europe’, and this resonates almost uncannily with the question of Britain’s relations with the wider continent in the midst of Brexit. ‘Brummagem Dawson’ was unusually devoted to his adopted city, and he was equally dedicated to the nation and culture of England; but in our own era of resurgent Right-wing nationalism, Brexit and President Trump, it is important to note that Dawson exemplified an adventurously international and broad-minded version of England and its second city. He accompanied Thomas Carlyle on his first trip to Germany. After the French revolution of 1848, he strode the barricades of Paris with Emerson, eager to see what the new world would look like. He identified freedom as a great European ideal, and he established a fund for European freedom movements across the continent.

For Dawson, Shakespeare was a European as well as an English author. And the foundation of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Library was immediately hailed by the German Shakespeare Society – the oldest national Shakespeare society in the world – as a major landmark in European culture. The great German Shakespeare scholar, Delius, visited the Library in 1873. It has always included significant European holdings and as the earliest records reveal, its first readers took their Shakespeare in a variety of European languages, including for instance, according to the statistics for 1890-1, English, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish Swedish and Welsh. So famous as a great European cultural collection was Birmingham’s Shakespeare Library that a Russian deputation from behind the Iron Curtain thought it worth their while to deposit three hundred gifts from Soviet territories in the very depths of the Cold War.

Dawson thought of the people of England, and of Birmingham in particular, as a free people who felicitate in the freedom of others, and he sought to exemplify such generous and outward-looking patriotism in his own life. He was a personal friend to the Italian rebel, Mazzini, and also to the Hungarian rebel, Kossuth. Dawson was at Southampton to greet the exiled Kossuth when his ship docked there in 1851. He presented the Hungarian with an enthusiastic address from the men of Birmingham, later securing Kossuth’s historic visit to the city. When Kossuth arrived at Small Heath between sixty and seventy thousand men had gathered to escort him to a city centre festooned with the Hungarian tricolour. Groups of men wearing the insignia of different Orders marched with music and banners through the city streets. Prominent among them was the venerable

banner of the Birmingham Political Union, which had done so much to secure the historic parliamentary reforms of 1832. Then came a processions of Birmingham's various trades, each bearing emblems of their respective crafts. In the vanguard were the glassmakers, many of whom wore glass helmets, and bore in their hands rods of spiral crystal, surmounted with streamers in Hungarian colours. They were followed by gun makers, brassfounders, jewelers, brush makers, saddlers, tailors, shoemakers, bricklayers, stonemasons, and japanners. Bringing up the rear were the men of Coventry, Leicester, Wolverhampton, Walsall, and other local towns. Documents in the Library of Birmingham suggest up to three hundred thousand people 'must have taken part in the day's proceedings', not far short of the then total population of the city and like a million people showing up to honour an Eastern European politician in Birmingham today. In terms of the sheer numbers involved, it was the biggest event ever in the political history of Birmingham, and yet it has been completely forgotten. What has also been forgotten is that Birmingham under Dawson's influence had the moral confidence not only to conceive of itself but to behave as an alternative centre for English culture on the international stage.

Naturally, Shakespeare was part of the story. Dawson welcomed Kossuth to Birmingham as a Shakespearean hero. Accounts of the occasion suggest that he very much lived up to the billing: 'dressed in a tight fitting, braided, blue military surtout closely buttoned to the throat', and wearing 'a low crowned dark green felt hat with a drooping ostrich feather'. He wept at the reception which the city had given him when he rose to speak in the Town Hall. Kossuth claimed to have learned his politics of freedom from the generous and inclusive vision exemplified by Shakespeare's plays, which he had read in the original English in a Hungarian prison. Dawson agreed that a liberal politics for everyone could be derived from the great English dramatist. As a token of the now forgotten relationship between Birmingham, Shakespeare and Europe, one Emma Tyndale of Edgbaston presented the Hungarian with a gorgeously bound and illuminated volume of *Sentiments and Similes of W. Shakespeare, selected from His Plays and Poems*. This is now held along with in honour of 'the great statesman' by the National Széchényi Library in Budapest.

The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library is a treasure-trove of many different languages, but those most numerous presented are French and German. The Library has a particularly close relationship with German Shakespeare scholarship. Dawson was a great advocate of German literature, and he lectured on German texts as well as on Shakespeare. He taught that we could learn from the German attitude to Shakespeare's plays, suggesting that where English scholarship was shallow, critical and pedantic, German interpretations made Shakespeare relevant to people's actual lives. 'There was no very sound criticism on Shakespeare in England,' Dawson maintained, 'till we imported it from the Germans, and since then we begin to understand the poet better than before.' Thanks to the Germans, it was possible to discard 'the mere verbal criticism once in vogue' in favour of a much richer and more profound kind of 'spiritual criticism': 'understanding what Shakespeare means, and seeing what is involved in his writings, and bringing out the deep and hidden meaning'.

When the Library first opened in 1868, the Secretary of the German Shakespeare Society deposited there the

first three volumes of the first ever journal devoted to Shakespeare: the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*. It is a nice symbol of the renewed relationship between Birmingham's Shakespeare Library and Europe that the Director of the 'Everything to Everybody' Project is currently the only British representative on the editorial board of the *Jahrbuch*. When the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library burnt down in 1879, German scholars were enthusiastically to the fore in lavishly replenishing and, as it turned out, quickly exceeding its original holdings. The following is from the Library's minute book for 1879: 'The news of the calamity soon brought offers of help from Germany, and Dr Leo was one of the first to assist by sending another copy of his Shakespeare's Plutarch, and joining with Professor Delius, Herr Oëchelhäuser and other German Shakespeare scholars in an appeal to replace the lost German works'.

Dr Leo had in fact already been a generous benefactor to the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, furnishing the collection with one of its most splendid international treasures: a series of mostly photographic portraits of 'German Shakespeareans in Science, Literature and Art', which Leo presented in an extraordinary binding 'to the Shakespeare Memorial Library as a token of gratitude' for the 'kind hospitality' he had enjoyed on an earlier visit to Birmingham's Shakespeare centre.

This amazing volume – 'an album wherein all things German standing in a distinguished relationship to Shakespeare in any sphere of activity whatever have their place' – weighs no less than 16 kilogrammes. As well as likenesses of historic figures such as Beethoven and Schiller, it features a large number of autographed, high-



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Album of German Shakespeares presented as a 'Thank You' to Birmingham's Shakespeare Library

quality early photographic portraits of the major figures of the of the mid-nineteenth-century Shakespeare world in Germany. In the middle of its richly ornamented binding is a metal bust of Shakespeare modelled after that on Shakespeare's tomb by the Berlin sculptor H. Bauch and produced in the electro-metallurgical workshop of L. Wolter. The German Shakespeare album is a tribute of one great European Shakespeare tradition to that which was established in Birmingham in 1864. Thankfully, this token of international fellow-feeling based in Birmingham and based on Shakespeare was rescued from the 1879 fire.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project will explore, celebrate and seek to renew Birmingham's Shakespearean connections with Europe. It enjoys the enthusiastic backing of one of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library's original and most stalwart supporters, the German Shakespeare Society. As part of the development phase of the project, its extensive German-language holdings have been surveyed by one of the leading current German Shakespeare scholars, former President of the German Shakespeare Society, Professor Tobias Döring. The project enjoys a range of European partnerships with other organisations such as the French Shakespeare Society and the University of Basel. But it seeks to bring such international connections, and the renewed international prestige of Birmingham's unique Shakespeare tradition, into contact with the European demographic of Birmingham itself. Contemporary Birmingham has a substantial Polish population, and in the mid-nineteenth-century Dawson spoke passionately in the Town Hall in favour of Polish independence.

A leading question relating to this project theme is: How can Birmingham's Shakespearean heritage help to stimulate and deepen a more positive and progressive relationship between Birmingham and Europe today?

EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY

Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future:

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



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

COLLEGE OF
ARTS AND LAW



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City Council



WEST MIDLANDS
HISTORY
PEOPLE OF RIGOR, INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE

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

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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