

A SHAKESPEAREAN COMMONWEALTH

Professor Ewan Fernie, 'Everything to Everybody' Project Director, introduces the fourth 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. Birmingham's Shakespeare Library was a multi-cultural and multi-lingual affair from the first, to an extent that stretches well beyond Europe. It is a repository of truly global interpretation and creative response to the world's great dramatist from the West Midlands. Thanks to the generosity of international private collectors and libraries, it includes materials in no fewer than 93 languages from Abkhazian to Zulu.



Professor Ewan Fernie (Project Director) and Tom Epps (Operations Manager) with posters from the Shakespeare Collection.

In 1864 – the year of the foundation of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Library, and the tercentenary of Shakespeare’s birth – the minister of Carr’s Lane Church and disciple of Dawson’s ‘civic gospel’, R. W. Dale, announced in a lecture at Stratford that Shakespeare ‘belongs now not to one country but to the human race’. It is in keeping with this vision that the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library grew to encompass so many international languages from Abkhazian to Zulu, and including South Korean, Punjabi, Tamil and Hebrew.

Dawson wanted to establish a ‘cultural commonwealth’ in Birmingham, actively involving everyone in the city in the enjoyment and recreation of world culture. The British Empire, and the Commonwealth which grew out of it, cultivated an extraordinarily rich world-wide Shakespearean tradition. ‘Everything to Everybody’ aims to bring out the intrinsic diversity of the world’s only great people’s Shakespeare Library; but it equally aims to identify historic links to empire and any other barriers to cultural equality and inclusion. It will attempt to improvise ways of transcending those barriers in an effort to transform traditional British culture into a genuinely open, honest and equal conversation now. By these means, the project hopes to make an important contribution to Birmingham culture which will resonate with and beyond the coming to Birmingham of the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

Dawson was a committed internationalist, who travelled beyond continental Europe to Egypt, where he admitted to entertaining erotic reveries of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. The year after his daughter, Rachel Ann Dawson, died in 1873, from a long, epileptic illness caused by the arrested development of her skull, her stricken father embarked on a high-profile tour of America. Birmingham made much of this, throwing a dinner which did double-duty as a send-off for John Lawrence Toole, the comedian who would shortly become the first ever actor to have a West-End theatre named after him. Toole was due to follow Dawson on his own American tour later that same year. In the after-dinner speech he gave in Birmingham, he said that by the time he arrived there he fully expected George Dawson to be President. He also said he had an ambition to play the principal Gravedigger in Hamlet, but only if Dawson would take the title role, perhaps as a fundraiser for a Birmingham hospital. Toole’s speech intimates that, as Joseph Chamberlain said at a second farewell dinner, Dawson was going to cross the Atlantic as in effect ‘the ambassador of the people of Birmingham to the people of America’; it intimates the truth that Dawson embodied Birmingham as a world-power in its own right. This expresses a further truth embodied by the great Shakespeare Collection which Dawson had established: Birmingham represented a great alternative centre for English establishment culture. As such, it had a special relationship to the decentred Englishness of former colonies or colonies like America and Australia.

The ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project has discovered that, as well as owning ‘the only First Folio in the world bought for comprehensive (including working-class) education’, Birmingham gave Australia the

only First Folio it possesses. Brother industrialists Richard and George Tangye, inheritors of Dawson's 'civic gospel' and founding benefactors of Birmingham's Museum and Art Gallery in 1885, made several visits to Australia in the mid-nineteenth-century, in order to sell their hydraulic pumps and jacks. The Birmingham Daily Post of the 21st of November 1884 tells how they presented to Sydney Public Library 'a remarkably fine copy' of the First Folio in an arts-and-crafts-style, Birmingham-made casket purportedly fashioned from oak from the forest of Arden. This treasure is still held, in its original casket, in Sydney, and 'Everything to Everybody' is negotiating a partnership with the Universities of Sydney, Queensland and Melbourne that will celebrate this Shakespearean connection with Australia in the year of the four-hundredth anniversary of the First Folio's first publication in 1623.

In *Civilizing Subjects* (2002), Catherine Hall points out that Dawson's attitudes weren't as internationalist as they should have been, pointing particularly to his association with Carlyle. But Dawson did not lurch rightwards, as Carlyle did; nor did he side with him in favour of Governor Eyre's brutal suppression of the Jamaican revolt, as did Ruskin, Dickens and Tennyson. He was a member of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, always speaking against slavery as an atrocity. He was a great advocate of European freedom movements, arranging the Hungarian freedom fighter Kossuth's historic visit to Birmingham. And he praised Defoe for having 'completely knocked the bottom out of the "true-born Englishman," and showed how nice a mixture we were—Picts and Scots, and aboriginal people, who dyed the last pattern into our skins; Saxons and Normans, Huguenot refugees and Vaudois exiles'. He laughed at those who were unable to accept Christ's Jewishness as revealed on canvas by Holman Hunt in the 'Shadow of Death'. 'The colouring of Christ displeases some of you,' he observed. 'What do you want? A white skin under an Eastern sun? Do you suppose that the toiler under the burning suns of the Holy Land would be anything other than the colour he is in the picture? The colouring is to the life; it is the truth. "But," you say, "I don't like it." That proves nothing.'

Dawson was also interested in world religion. He offered to lecture on Buddhism at the Birmingham and Midland Institute; and just as he was happy to honour Mohamed with a sermon at his church on Edward Street, he was unfazed when, as the only Gentile present, he was invited to propose the toast at a Jewish wedding. With his customary agility (of body and mind), he sprang to his feet, smiled on the happy couple, and said without hesitating, 'In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I bless ye, my children.' 'Needless to say,' the commentator observes, 'the effect was electrical.'

To this extent, Dawson was ahead of his time and a great proponent of equality and inclusion. It is nevertheless true that he was doubtful about the potential of black people, even when visiting black schools in America, as well as on occasion saying things that, though they were unexceptional in his day, we have rightly learned to abominate. 'Everything to Everybody' will face this lapse in judgement

squarely, and in the name of all those it excludes from Dawson's best, progressive vision. 'Take this,' Dawson says, 'as a rule in all historic judgement: when you wish to understand what blame is due to a man, try him by the Shaster, the Avesta, or the Spirit he worshipped, and not by your times, morality, Scripture, or laws.' Judged thus, Dawson did very well. But, to quote him against himself: 'if the question be what place he shall take in the great Valhalla of the world, what niche he shall occupy among the true spirits, what place he shall take in the heaven of history, then must he consent to be tried by his superiors; because it is to be settled what place that man must take in the great gathering and church of the blessed ones of all time, and he must be tried by an abstract, absolute law, by his superiors, by the old and eternal law of right and wrong, as embodied in the best transcript of it that can be found for us.' According to that stricter standard, Dawson would have to bow his head under Hall's judgement and the judgment of a time that has transcended him in important respects.

'The time has come to give everything to *everybody*': the 'Everything to Everybody' Project will revive the inspiring spirit of Dawson's mission, which his historic achievement fell short of. It will invite the active involvement of all communities across the contemporary city, very much including those whom he wrongfully underestimated.

A leading question relating to this project theme is: How can Birmingham's international Shakespearean heritage be 'decolonised' and celebrated 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



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ARTS AND LAW



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City Council



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