

BEAUTIFUL BIRMINGHAM: ART AND WELFARE

Professor Ewan Fernie, 'Everything to Everybody' Project Director, introduces the fifth 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. Dawson transfused the passion and mission of religion into contemporary civic life, providing a new model for municipal government, one which was 'soon to be copied', according to Tristram Hunt, 'in London, Glasgow, and Manchester'. He always insisted that culture was key to welfare. 'Not by bread alone' was his scriptural rubric: 'a city must have its parks as well as its prisons, its art gallery as well as its asylum, its books and its libraries as well as its baths and washhouses, its schools as well as its sewers,' as a contemporary writer declared; 'it must think of beauty and of dignity no less than of order and of health'.

Dawson's address at the opening of the opening of the Birmingham Reference Library in 1866 is the most famous statement of his 'Civic Gospel'. Dawson insisted that Birmingham's commitment to culture proved 'that a great town is a solemn organism through which should flow, and in which should be shaped, all the highest, loftiest, and truest ends of man's intellectual and moral nature'.

On the occasion of the opening of the new Children's Hospital on Steelhouse Lane in 1862, Dawson said 'he was delighted' to applaud a building which bore witness to the fact 'that a little beauty cost a little money, but gave great joy'. He insisted that the new hospital was 'a great work, and the sick child would be none the worse for letting his little eyes rest upon the pleasant figures in the stained-glass window or the beautiful forms the architects had given to be gazed upon'.

For Dawson, civic beauty was completely integral to social well-being, an indicator of the health and value of our common life. He was an eminently practical man, with little patience for unworldliness in religion, art or morals. And yet, he passionately argued for a Beauty Society for Birmingham:

My views may sound like a romance; but to me their accomplishment is a possibility, and I hope to achieve it before I die. We could soon form a Society, of men devoted to one object, of men whose desire is to make the town clean, orderly, pure in air, healthy, lovely; to fill it with objects that can lift people, by degrees, from glory to glory; to fill people with a taste for the beautiful, until at last one can go down the streets with pleasure, and Birmingham men can say, with the

passion of the Jews of old, 'I will go round Jerusalem and tell the towers thereof, I will stand on the bulwarks and look at the beauty of the city.

It was substantially as a result of this 'civic gospel' that the journalist and art critic, Alfred St Johnston, was able to write in 1887: 'the Birmingham of today is perhaps the most artistic town in England.' This gave nineteenth-century Birmingham a claim to being the world's most exciting city, its citizens seriously contending that it was a new Venice, a new Florence— and even proposing that because of its moral commitment to a truly comprehensive flourishing that it was *more beautiful* than those glorious precursors.

The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library is the best surviving monument in the city to a specifically Birmingham ethos of linking culture and welfare. It is easy to think of a Shakespeare library as a less than visually enthralling assemblage of dusty old books, but the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library in fact is an archive of a great range of arts and crafts, including a number of beautifully illustrated editions from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the books in the Collection represent superb examples of the craft of the printer and bookbinder. They include a copy of *The Poems of William Shakespeare* published in 1893 by the Kelmscott Press, whose founders were the Arts & Crafts pioneer William Morris, President of the Birmingham Society of Arts, and the Birmingham-born artist Edward Burne-Jones. The collection also includes original art by Dalí, Kokoschka, Picasso and Wyndham Lewis, and costume designs for *Romeo and Juliet* by Jean Cocteau. In other words, there is art in the Collection to suit all aesthetic tastes.

It also includes a splendid and extensive range of Shakespeare related photographs. And there are around 200 music scores ranging from incidental music to opera. The oldest is a 1676 copy of a score written by Robert Johnson in around 1613; Johnson knew Shakespeare personally, and worked with him on music for *The Tempest* and other plays. An original score for the 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford is also held in the Library; it was composed by Thomas Arne, who wrote the music for 'Rule Britannia'.

'Everything to everybody.' It was important to Dawson that the great treasure trove of culture should be equally open to all citizens. He announced, 'The day will come when a man will be ashamed to shut up a picture by Raphael or a statue by any great master in a private house. These gifts of genius should be like the gift of God's sunshine, open to all, for all, to be reached by all, and ultimately to be understood and enjoyed by all'. Over one hundred and fifty years later, it remains a profound and inspiring challenge.



Restoration of the Shakespeare Memorial Room atop the new Library of Birmingham.

Confirmation of the centrality of the Shakespeare Library to Dawson's wider 'Civic Gospel' comes from the great architect who was also a prominent member of the Birmingham Our Shakespeare Club of which Dawson was life president, and a subscriber to the Shakespeare Memorial Library: J. H. (no relation to Joseph) Chamberlain. Chamberlain was the architect of of the Library's handsome Shakespeare Memorial Room. He said 'he should like *the Shakespeare idea* to grow in the same proportion as the accumulation of their Shakespeare property', and (even more revealingly) that 'the Shakespeare Library ought to be the very best room in town, *not excepting the Council Chamber of the new municipal buildings*':

The splendid room which Chamberlain built to house the Shakespeare Library is a miracle of panelling and plasterwork with delightfully scrolling patterns of flowers and leaves. It implies the historic significance but also the natural vitality of Shakespeare's work. The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library was never meant to be about dusty scholarship; it was meant to enhance and enable life.

Dawson came to Birmingham as a young firebrand but he ultimately rejected revolutionary violence as the way to reform society in favour of Shakespeare's openness and tolerance. He 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'. Dawson's Birmingham claimed for Shakespeare 'a higher morality than had perhaps ever been claimed before'.

'Everything to Everybody' will recover this unique heritage for a city which has often been unfairly maligned as a place without significant architectural or cultural heritage. It will also explore and pose important questions about the relationship between heritage and welfare in Birmingham now.

A leading question relating to this project-theme is: What contribution can culture make to civic life in Birmingham and beyond 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



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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