

PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF THE GERMAN RESEARCH MATERIAL HELD IN THE SHAKESPEARE COLLECTION OF BIRMINGHAM PUBLIC LIBRARY

Professor Tobias Döring reports on the German research material held in the Library of Birmingham's Shakespeare Collection



Tobias Döring

Introduction

In February 2019, Professor Tobias Döring of Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, former President of the German Shakespeare Society, visited the Library of Birmingham at the invitation of the 'Everything to Everybody' Project. The foundation of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial 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. Today the Library has thousands of German holdings, including some utterly unique treasures, but these have not been surveyed for many years. In this short article, Professor Döring reports on what he found in the stacks.

From 26 to 28 February, 2019, I visited Birmingham Public Library, on the invitation of Professor Ewan Fernie and Tom Epps, and had the chance to take a good look at the German material held in the Shakespeare Collection. I worked in the actual archive, directly in front of the stacks, and over the three days managed to survey all books and other papers kept there with the shelf mark "SG" (for "Shakespeare, German"). I did not have sufficient time to actually read or study any of them in great depth, but I browsed through quite a few and took extensive notes, so my impressions are, I think, detailed enough to offer the following comments as a first estimation of the range, extent and quality of this German collection.

I can say therefore with confidence and great conviction that this library holds a hidden treasure. Especially with regard to 18th-century and 19th-century material, the German Shakespeare holdings are superb, with all the significant editions, collected works and translations, as well as many relevant volumes of Shakespeare commentary, criticism and appreciation plus related material, with regard both to literary and theatre history, available. The same holds true, to some extent, also for early to mid-20th-century material. Even though the holdings here seem far from comprehensive (due, no doubt, to the enormous increase in German Shakespeare studies at the time), there are quite some significant and highly remarkable books to be found.

For instance, the collectors seem to have taken special interest in the Shakespeare cult of the George circle in the 1910s and 1920s, the highly significant group of young men around the charismatic (and problematic) poet Stefan George in Heidelberg, who cultivated Shakespeare (together with Dante and Goethe) as one of their great idols and produced very significant and beautiful editions, translations and studies. The most important Shakespeare preacher of this group, Friedrich Gundolf, is represented with all editions of his Shakespeare translations and of his epochal study *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (1911 ff), many of them produced in stunning art deco book design by Melchior Lechter (also member of the circle). Another item of equally beautiful design, which seems to share the same cultural and ideological background, is a book I never saw before: an anthology introduced by Rudolf Presber, published in Berlin in 1906, entitled *Also Sprach Shakespeare* [i.e. *Thus Spake Shakespeare* – the title draws an explicit analogy to Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a key book in the George circle and in the wider philosophical climate at the time]. In the manner of a Renaissance commonplace book, it presents Shakespeare quotations (or rather, lines from Shakespearean characters) on all kinds of eternal topics ("Love", "Life", "War" etc) and is explicitly addressed to Shakespeare lovers rather than critics or philologists (Presber's foreword pours scorn on the "poor slaves of philology, gagged by agonizing scholarship"). This book seems to be quite rare. I have not been able to locate a copy in the Bavarian State Library nor in any of the (specialist Shakespeare) libraries of LMU Munich.

The example may suggest that a special focus of the Birmingham Shakespeare collection was placed, not so much on philological and specialist research output, but on books and other materials which bring Shakespeare to readers and appreciators beyond professional or vocational contexts, in accordance with George Dawson's motto "Everything to Everybody". As part of this intentional outreach, the 19th-century German holdings are also marked by clear connections to the German Shakespeare Society (Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, i.e. DSG), which was founded in Weimar in April 1864. As a *literary* society, i.e. gathering not of academic experts but of Shakespeare lovers and enthusiasts from all walks of life, it continues to exist today with the explicit aim to engage with all things Shakespearean, on the stage or elsewhere, as a matter of personal, not necessarily professional, interest. I served as its president from 2011 to 2014 (hosting the 150th Jubilee in Weimar, April 2014), and was intrigued to find in Birmingham so many traces of the active connections which Dawson's work must have inspired. The library holds not only the so-called Deutsche Volksausgabe [i.e. the people's edition] of Shakespeare's collected works in the canonical Schlegel/Tieck translations, which the DSG under its first president Ulrici published in 1867, as part of its

agenda to bring Shakespeare's work to a new and broader readership; the holdings also contain several other volumes which testify to this special connection. The first five volumes of the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* [yearbook], 1865 to 1870, which the DSG publishes to this day, are present on the shelves (presumably a gift from Weimar). I also found a number of books by Hermann Freiherr von Friesen, a writer from Dresden and personal friend of Ludwig Tieck's, who evidently sent and dedicated his works to the Birmingham Library as personal gifts: both his two-volume memoir of Ludwig Tieck (Wien 1872, signature SG 871.01) and his three-volume literary history of early modern England (Wien 1874 – the title page has a printed dedication to the “honourable gentlemen on the board” of the DSG) hold handwritten dedications by the author, which read: “An die Bibliothek zu Birmingham von dem Verfasser, Dresden, 19. Februar 1879, Hermann Freiherr von Friesen” [i.e. “To the Library in Birmingham presented by the author”, etc] – presumably sent after a personal visit to Birmingham from Dresden: tribute to a strong and living cultural connection (incidentally, and movingly, 66 years to the day before Dresden was devastatingly bombed by the RAF). The same connection is uniquely demonstrated through the enormously precious and impressive album of German Shakespeare lovers, sumptuously presented in the huge and lavish volume, with metal work on the front cover, which the Birmingham library received in 1878 from Dr. Leo (and which features in the short film we produced during my visit).

The further 20th-century holdings are not so extensive, seem somewhat more randomly acquired, and for the later decades discontinue altogether; the youngest books I found were published in 1990. Even so, some of the material of the 1960s is still quite extraordinary and of very high historical interest, because it would never have been available in bookshops or through publishers. In particular, this pertains to papers regarding the 1964 Shakespeare Jubilee. In German Shakespeare culture, this date also marks the break-up of the DSG with the secession of a new Western branch of the society, which broke off from the Weimar home (then perceived as communist and tyrannical, three years after the Wall was built) and hibernated until 1991 in Bochum. Interestingly, the Birmingham Library seems to have kept an open and productive channel to the East German (traditional) DSG: the holdings contain a copy of the official Festschrift, edited by president Anselm Schlösser (Weimar: Böhlau 1964); a brochure of the 1964 Weimar Shakespeare Festival, together with a personal letter by Kurt Kann of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft of the GDR, inviting British Shakespeareans to join the Weimar celebrations; and, most strikingly, a book-length communication by the GDR Kulturbund, an official cultural body offering information and advice on how to celebrate Shakespeare in the proper humanist-socialist tradition, which the GDR claimed to continue. This item is utterly fascinating and important – it would never have circulated through commercial channels and cannot be found in any other library I know.

In addition to the extensive book holdings, the Shakespeare collection also holds a large number of scrap books, containing newspaper cuttings, leaflets, brochures and other unbound material. In the German collection, I found seven such scrap books (in folio format), containing material from the late 19th century to the late 1980s, especially newspaper cuttings, many of which are really quite noteworthy. They testify to

a long, sustained and highly competent interest in German Shakespeare culture and remarkable efforts in getting hold of the relevant newspapers, where reviews of Shakespeare productions and related events were published. The earliest scrap book (until the 1930s) contains a lot of material from papers in places like Danzig (Gdansk) and Königsberg (Kalinigrad); the most recent scrap book contains mainly Swiss material, so the range is very broad. A most remarkable feature of these cuttings is the varied background and location of their sources, many of them quite obscure. As a consequence of its checkered and fragmented political history, German culture to this day remains decentred and uncentralized; for this reason, all newspapers retain a strong regional focus – even the nearest equivalents we have to national papers like *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* are clearly focussed on their Munich or Frankfurt base. In the Birmingham scrap books, remarkably, these two prominent German papers are not at all prominently represented. Instead, many cuttings come from very small, provincial and regional papers, like *Der Schwarzwälder Bote*, which would have no circulation outside their communal base. The scrap books therefore document the living Shakespeare culture even in some small and internationally unknown German places. Also, it seems truly remarkable that Birmingham Public Library, until the late 1980s, must have had expert librarians who were not just competent readers of German but also found the ways and means to lay their hands on such small newspapers (or else must have had correspondents in many provincial German towns, who made and sent these cuttings). Personally, I do not know of any other place in the world where I would find such material.

As for future developments, what seems most urgent is to integrate the full bibliographic details of all these resources (not just the German collection) into an online searchable catalogue. In addition, it would be ideal to set up Shakespeare grants for international researchers to come to Birmingham for a few weeks to work in the collection. Its outstanding holdings are a sleeping beauty waiting to be kissed awake.



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