

“EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY”: HOW THE BIRMINGHAM SHAKESPEARE MEMORIAL LIBRARY IS GIVING SHAKESPEARE BACK TO THE PEOPLE

Interview with Ewan Fernie

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Litteraria Pragensia (LP) had the pleasure to talk with Ewan Fernie (EF), Chair of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Institute and Director of the pioneering project “Everything to Everybody,” a recent example of positive cultural industry engagement with Shakespeare on a large scale. A collaboration between the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council, “Everything to Everybody” is giving Shakespeare back to the people of Birmingham (and beyond), and Ewan Fernie has spent the last few years uncovering just how the city’s fascinating Shakespeare collection came to be and what potentials it holds. The project team has, since 2019, been working hard on reviving what is in fact the first great Shakespeare library in the world: Birmingham’s nearly-forgotten Shakespeare Memorial Library, housed in the iconic Library of Birmingham.

LP: What is the connection between Shakespeare and the city of Birmingham, now and in the past?

EF: People don’t naturally associate Shakespeare with Birmingham any more, but in the nineteenth century when the Library was founded – it was founded in 1864 and opened in 1868 – Birmingham was the capital of Warwickshire, which was Shakespeare’s county, and it made perfect sense to make a claim on a serious relationship between Warwickshire’s great town and its world-renowned poet. Birmingham’s Shakespeare Library holds the only First Folio in the world acquired for comprehensive (including working-class)

education, and its founders expressly intended the Library to open high culture up for all the people of the city. "Everything to Everybody" seeks to recover this inspiring history. It also seeks to find new ways to remake Shakespeare with people and communities across Birmingham who might not otherwise think that Shakespeare and traditional British culture belongs to them.

Shakespeare was remarkably important to the idea of civic government in Birmingham. In trying to shape a new sense of what metropolitan civilisation could be, Birmingham, as a young, modern city, took Shakespeare's plays as a model: and Birmingham's Shakespeare Library is a testament to that idea – to that Shakespeare-inspired idea of what the modern world could be. It makes good on the promise of a radical, creatively contending pluralism that's perhaps the main meaning of the plays: Shakespeare's plays do not have a narrator, they dramatize lots of different, struggling and cooperating selves, all made vividly alive by Shakespeare's talents. For the city fathers of Birmingham, and for George Dawson in particular, that sense of a popular, exciting, contested and creative world corresponded to their idea of Birmingham and the sort of culture Birmingham might bring to life in modernity. They saw Shakespeare as a great trailblazer for modern liberalism, for the freedom of all people to make their contribution to the great play that we make and play together.

LP: Tell us more about George Dawson, the visionary founder of the Shakespeare Memorial Library and his development of an ethos which became known as the "civic gospel."

EF: George Dawson was much more than a Shakespearean. He came to Birmingham as a young man in 1844 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: an intimation 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 Dawson was no Baptist; he was always, as he later said, "a free lance by myself." And when he started giving communion to all-comers, the Baptists had to get rid of him. His supporters built him his own church, which his detractors called "The Church of the Doubters," and he was happy to call it that himself.

He became a widely celebrated lecturer, the best in the country, according to Charles Kingsley, the Christian socialist and author of *The Water-Babies*; but you never knew what he might say. For instance, his first public speech in Birmingham



**Fig. 1. The bust of George Dawson overlooking the city of Birmingham.
Photo by Ben Gregory-Ring.**

was at the Temperance Society, where he chose to speak up for drinking. Dawson was the champion of social justice in the town, but also of great foreign causes. He spoke in Birmingham's famous Town Hall (the first of the great town halls which would characterise Victorian England) on Saint Simon, the Peasants' Revolt and the meaning of communism; he agitated for reduced working hours for labourers, for Polish independence, and to impeach the government who had fought the Crimean War. He brought the Hungarian freedom fighter, Louis Kossuth, to the town, and between 60,000 and 70,000 men escorted him from Small Heath to a town centre festooned with the Hungarian tricolour. Archival evidence in the Library of Birmingham suggests that as many as 300,000 people from the West Midlands turned up to celebrate Kossuth, which would make it the biggest event in Birmingham's political history, and yet it, too, has been utterly forgotten.

Dawson transfused the passion and mission of religion into contemporary civic life, providing a new model for municipal government which, according to Tristram Hunt, was soon copied in London, Glasgow and Manchester. 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. In the

speech typically regarded as the touchstone of the civic gospel, Dawson explained that the opening of Birmingham's Corporation Library announced "a conviction" to the world "that a town like this exists for moral and intellectual purposes," and "that a great community like this is not to be looked upon as a fortuitous concourse of human atoms, or as a miserable knot of vipers struggling in a pot each aiming to get his head above the other in the fierce struggle of competition."

The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library was central to the civic gospel. It is also its most important surviving monument. When 1864 and the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth were approaching, Dawson and Birmingham decided they didn't want a statue, certain that "if the gentle poet could himself appear amongst them, that he would wish for no nobler monument than that of being enshrined in the memories and hearts of hard-working men in this town, and the feeling that the conceptions of his mind and his noble expressions were clearing and illuminating the path of the hard-working artisan – that the leaves of his divine works were being turned over by the hardy hands of our own foremen." As one local historian put it, "To Birmingham belongs the credit of having reared the noblest monument to the memory of England's greatest poet, the largest and most varied collection of Shakespeare's works, and the English and foreign literature illustrating them, which has ever yet been made, and the greatest literary memorial which any author has ever yet received."

But what was "the Shakespeare idea" which fed into the civic gospel and underpinned the foundation of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library? In his last annual lecture to the Birmingham "Our Shakespeare Club," Dawson presented reading Shakespeare as a course in tolerance: "The watching of everything that was going on, as the wise man watched it, with large, loving, tolerant eyes, led to toleration becoming a temper instead of a principle." Dawson "rejoiced to see the growth of toleration on the part of men towards one another, and amongst the causes that had made that larger spirit of to-day more a temper of men's minds than a principle of their politics he counted the increased study of Shakespeare."

The radical Dawson found a spirit of tolerance in Shakespeare that transcended tolerance as a predicate and principle of one particular party, portending a higher, richer and more varied form of social solidarity. This was his specifically Shakespearean civic gospel. Dawson's vision extends well beyond welfare. It is a vision of cultural, political and spiritual solidarity which involves and makes the most of all the individuals who make up the modern city. It is as practical as it is idealistic, cutting across party lines, and calling intellectuals out of their ivory towers to participate in the great work of renewing the world, even as it calls working men and women out to make an intellectual contribution.

Dawson’s Birmingham set the pattern and a new standard for contemporary life. And, as I’ve said already, it doesn’t rule out tension and contention. It’s actually about creative struggle. It needs updating for our own changed times, but it can help and inspire us to make the most of life today.

LP: What is the specifically Dawsonian type of nonconformist religion and what exactly does it draw from Shakespeare?

EF: 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 the Prophet 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,” Dawson 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.”

LP: In researching Dawson's political and cultural activities and his legacy, were there any issues you encountered and how did you come to terms with those?

EF: In the mid-nineteenth century, Birmingham was an alternative centre in England. In formulating a new conception of what a great town could become, Dawson broke into the blue skies of the future. "The dreamers of society," he recognized, "are the men from whom the greatest truth comes." His efforts not just to theorize but actually to put into practice a new and more inclusive kind of culture – his efforts, that is, to give "everything to everybody" – have been too much forgotten, as has the definitively public nature of the first great Shakespeare Library in the world. What has also been overlooked is the importance of this for the development of democratic culture beyond Birmingham. In 1870s America, George Dawson embodied the connection between Shakespeare and the drive for a new and better culture. His visit encouraged a mutual commitment to social improvement and to Shakespeare then underway on both sides of the Atlantic. But, sadly, it also revealed serious limitations in both American democracy and Dawson's "everything to everybody" ethos itself.

As the featured speaker on James Redpath's "Star Lecture Course" in 1874, Dawson was the star turn on a progressive roster which also featured the pioneering campaigner for women's suffrage, Susan B. Anthony, and the abolitionist, activist and editor of the pro-women's-suffrage journal, *The Agitator*, Mary Livermore. In adverts for the tour, Dawson's name appears alongside that of the black American social reformer, abolitionist and statesman, Frederick Douglass, whom Dawson had perhaps heard speak at the start of his own career as a reforming lecturer, preacher and activist in Birmingham in the 1840s.

And yet, viewed through the lens of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the fierce urgency of now," Dawson's visit to the United States raises some uncomfortable questions. His promotion of English culture on the frontier facilitated the American displacement of Indigenous culture. And he reportedly made racist remarks after visiting black schools. It is true that such sentiments were not unusual, even among abolitionists, but by expressing them Dawson betrayed his own "everything to everybody" ideal, as well as what he elsewhere imagined as the multicultural American "romance of the future."

There are positive and negative lessons to be learned from the past. The "Everything to Everybody" Project has begun to recover the inspiring story of Birmingham's great Shakespeare library. But it is vital to repudiate any racist or otherwise prejudiced aspects of this heritage in favour of a more enlightened world where black lives matter and we can try to give everything to everybody again.

The original project plan for “Everything to Everybody” included funding for restoration work on a statue of George Dawson with an accompanying series of events exploring Dawson’s ideas. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement this no longer felt like the right thing to do. After taking time as a team to explore and consider the issues and to hold extensive consultations with our Advisory Board and other project supporters, we came to the decision to use the funding that was allocated for the statue restoration for another purpose.

In late 2020 we commissioned the artist Mohammed Ali to produce two artworks in collaboration with pupils from Montgomery and Percy Shurmer schools in Sparkbrook: a multicultural, inner-city district of the city. Created through a five-week project with the pupils with a permanent mural appearing at each school, the project encouraged these young people to “Tell Your OWN Story,” remaking Birmingham’s uniquely democratic Shakespeare heritage but also addressing issues of social exclusion and inequality in the process via video, poetry, manga, and mural painting in a series of dynamic workshops run by Mohammed and his organisation Soul City Arts. The new murals tell the stories of the vibrant and diverse communities of Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath, featuring their unique narratives and local industrial history and allowing them to claim “a place i’ th’ story” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xiii.45) of Birmingham’s pioneering Shakespeare heritage.

LP: Inclusion has been a guiding principle since the very foundation of the Memorial Library, specifically targeting working-class communities. Could you tell us something about that?

EF: In 1868, the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library threw Shakespeare open to all Birmingham citizens, according to Dawson’s precept that “one of the highest offices of civilization is to determine how to give access to the masterpieces of art and of literature to the whole people,” and that it was a “great mistake” to suppose that “art, science, and knowledge” require to be “preached down” to them. Dawson derived this vision of cultural inclusion from Shakespeare himself. In defiance of traditional conventions, Shakespeare’s plays mingled kings and clowns. Voltaire was disgusted by the broad comedy with which the gravediggers handled mortal remains in *Hamlet*, but Dawson stood up for them. Though Dawson insisted that high culture should be opened up to working men, he did not want to turn them all into identical “fine gentlemen.” He insisted on the value of each individual experience and perspective. He called all men and women in Birmingham to join in the great collective labour of making a shared culture.

The great democratic dawn which Dawson envisaged has yet to arrive; but Dawson and the founders of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library did all that they could to bring it on. In an early lecture on the collection, Dawson's co-founder of the Shakespeare Library, Samuel Timmins, emphasised just as much as the world-class complement of rare books a "series of keys which open all the rest" to "general readers," to "any ordinary intelligent reader." This included lexicons, concordances and the Chief Librarian Mr Mullins's ground-breaking, comprehensive catalogue of all Shakespearean literature. The lists of occupations of readers given in the general annual reports for the Birmingham Reference Libraries suggests that all sorts of people did indeed use the Library – the record for 1872, for instance, includes hairdressers, electroplaters, grocers, japanners and enamellers, gun makers, steel toy makers, and one pearl worker. It was natural that Birmingham should quickly become the birth-place of the National Education League.

LP: The reach of the Library was never meant to be concentrated solely on Birmingham – there was a specifically European aspect to the whole project from its very beginning, is that correct?

EF: 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, Nikolaus 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 1890-1891, 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.

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.”

LP: This European perspective is also not the final boundary of the project, it is very much global in scope, so much so that it is possible to talk about a ‘Shakespearean Commonwealth’ in connection to it. And this was also something that was present from its inception?

EF: 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.

The “Everything to Everybody” Project has discovered that, as well as owning one, 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 21 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 major Universities in Australia 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.

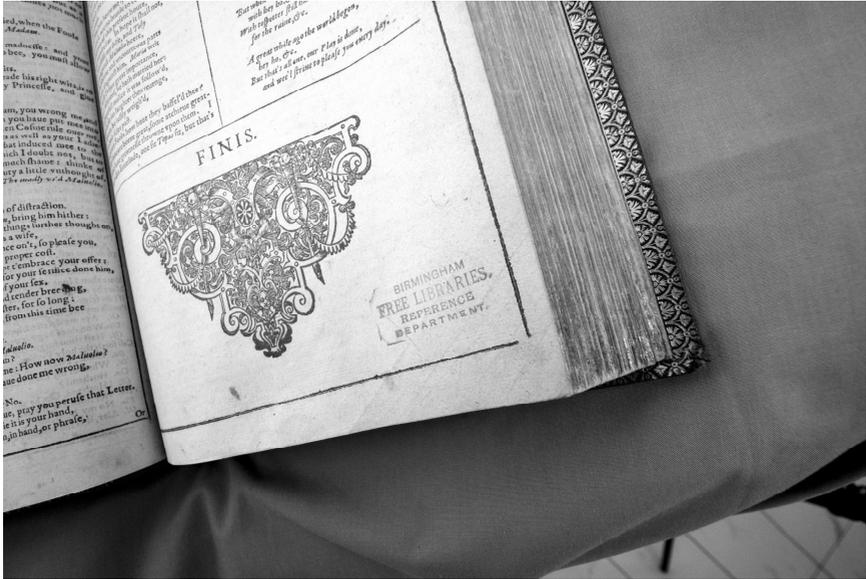


Fig. 2. The People’s Folio. Courtesy of the Library of Birmingham. Photo by Alex Parré.

LP: And, finally, would you tell us a bit more about the collection itself, what items it holds, and about the uniqueness of its own First Folio?

EF: One of the greatest treasures in Birmingham’s Shakespeare collection is of course our copy of the First Folio – the first printed collection of Shakespeare’s work and one of the most influential books ever published: perhaps the most important and iconic secular book in the world. Bought for the town in 1881, it is stamped “free libraries of Birmingham” and was part of the Council’s aim to provide accessible education for all citizens, not just those from wealthy backgrounds. It’s the People’s Folio, as we have discussed already, the only First Folio in the world “acquired specifically for a public institution as part of a vision of working-class education.” The Collection also includes a Second, Third and Fourth Folio, as well as around 70 further rare and early editions. Materials come

in 93 different languages, including an 1880s complete edition in Braille. The Collection also includes scrapbooks, annotated scripts, promptbooks, television and radio adaptations, and newspaper cuttings, in addition to unique material relating to the greatest Shakespeareans from Ellen Terry to Lawrence Olivier.



Fig. 3. Shakespeare Memorial Room ceiling. Courtesy of the Library of Birmingham.

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 nineteenth and early twentieth 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 and 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.”

This was the first great public Shakespeare library in the world, and it remains utterly unprecedented in that it belongs to all the people of the city. Meant to be comprehensive, it now contains more than 100,000 items and is housed in the iconic Library of Birmingham, one of the UK’s most exciting new public buildings, and located at the heart of the city, in Centenary Square.

For updates on all the activities at the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library and news about the “Everything to Everybody” Project, follow <https://twitter.com/E2EShakespeare> and <https://everythingtoeverybody.bham.ac.uk/>.

Ewan Fernie was interviewed by Martina Pranić.