

Shakespeare Memorial Library Subscribers' Committee - a Source of Inspiration?

In 1863, the Shakespeare Memorial Library Subscribers' Committee was formed. They aimed to create a library containing every edition and translation of Shakespeare's works. In the following year, on the three-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, they inaugurated their new library.

| SHAKESPEARE MEMORIAL LIBRARY. | |
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THE SHAKESPEARE MEMORIAL LIBRARY
 is intended to celebrate the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth by the formation of a complete collection of books relating to the Poet and his works. It will be placed in a room granted by the Town Council in the New Reference Library, and will be open free to the public and to students, under proper regulations for the safe custody of the books. The room will be so decorated as to be an artistic as well as literary memorial—worthy alike of the Poet and the chief town of the county in which he was born. The Committee, encouraged by the liberal response already made to their appeal, believe that the proposed Memorial Library will ultimately become one of the most interesting and valuable of the literary institutions of the town, and will be constantly enriched not only by donations and books, but also by works of art relating to the Poet and his times, which may be presented or bequeathed. Donations will be received by the Secretaries, or the Committee, or may be paid to the credit of John Jaffray, Esq., the Honorary Treasurer, at the Midland Bank, Union Street.

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Committee Members of the Shakespeare Memorial Library in July 1863. Shakespeare Memorial Library Committee Minute Book

Committee members came from all corners of Birmingham life and its numerous Protestant creeds. Some members were lawyers, others were academics, bankers, journalists, manufacturers, photographers and physicians. Some attended public school, others finished school aged ten to find work. Some were Liberals, some were Conservatives, and some were in between. They did not agree with each other on all the issues of the day and even ran against each other in local elections.

However, they all shared an interest in trying to improve their town. The creation of the Shakespeare Memorial Library within a year of the committee's formation was a staggering accomplishment. For the next fourteen years, its collection grew by around one-thousand volumes each year. A study of the initial committee members also reveals the breadth of activities they often collaborated on elsewhere across Birmingham. Committee members, for example, created and ran hospitals, schools, colleges, libraries and a vast array of educational societies.

My research of the committee coincided with the murder of Sir David Amess MP. During the ensuing period of reflection, I could not help but think of my work in relation to Amess, as well as Jo Cox. While studying the committee's achievements, the idea that 'there is more that unites us than divides us' was frequently on my mind. Does their achievement show a way forward in the twenty-first-century?

Putting historical figures on a lofty pedestal, both literally and figuratively, is problematic. In terms of ethnicity and gender, they were not diverse. Similarly, many of its members' views on race and gender are today regarded as abhorrent. Consequently, the committee members are not universal role-models.

Nevertheless, perhaps we can still learn from them. The committee featured toleration, collaborations and friendships across lines that were not always common in the mid-nineteenth-century. At similar periods, even in Birmingham, religious tension could be high. Institutions were divided along religious lines, while sectarian and anti-Irish attitudes combined in the 1867 Murphy Riots just three years later.

George David Boyle, a committee member and Anglican preacher recalled a conversation he had with George Dawson, a fellow member and a Nonconformist, where they collectively acknowledged that 'on most of the great questions' they were 'at one.' The quote struck a chord with me in its similarity to sentiments now being reflected on in media.

I am not suggesting that we should abandon all our principles or that collaborating with everyone is possible. But if we too acknowledged that 'there is more that unites us than divides us' and tried to work together on contemporary issues which we are 'at one' on, perhaps we too could improve the world around us through similarly unlikely collaborations.

Samuel Taylor

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador

References

Library of Birmingham, Archives and Collections, *Shakespeare Memorial Library Minute Book*, vol. 1, 1863-1903

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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