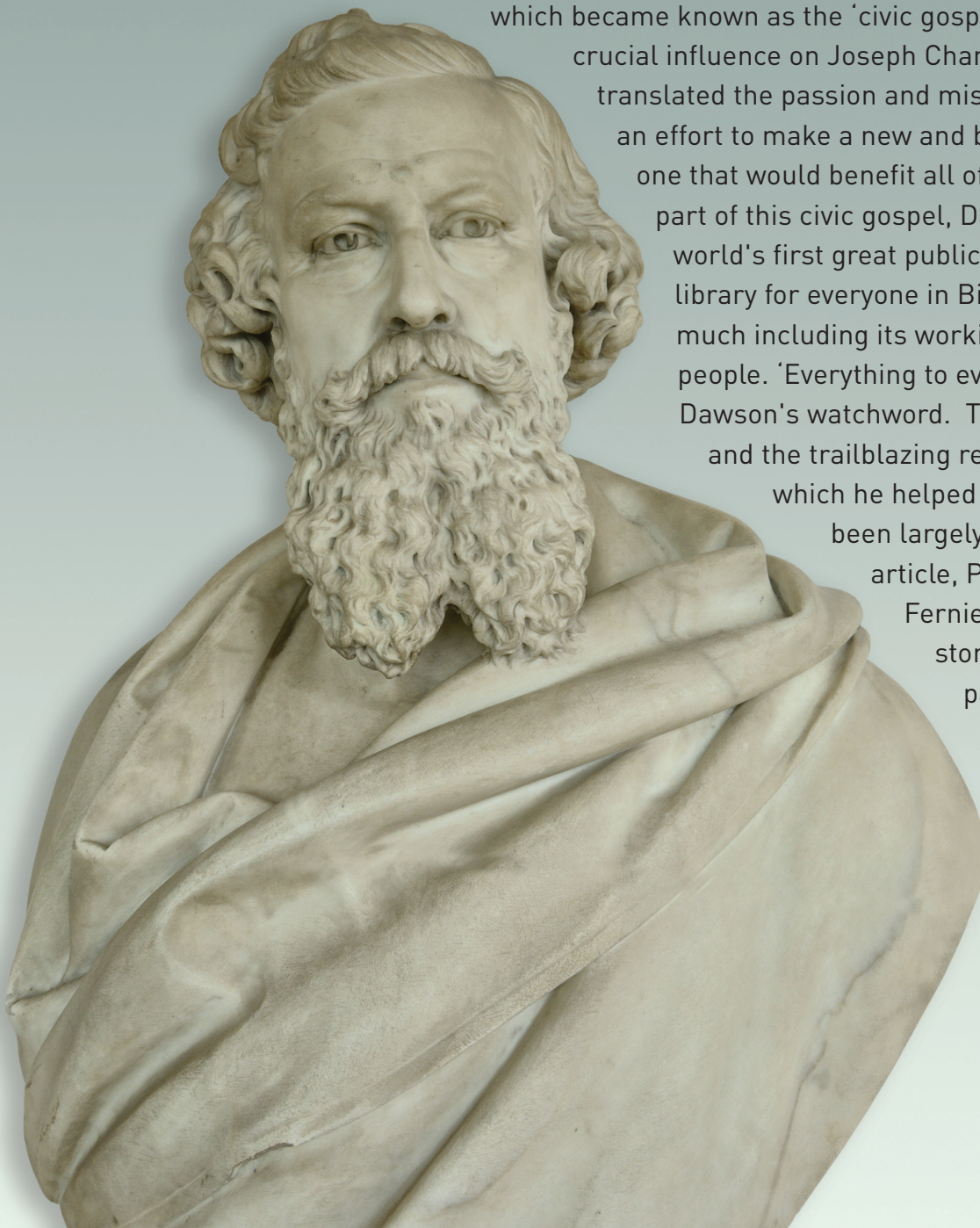


# LOST PROPHET

Ewan Fernie

George Dawson came to Birmingham in 1844. By the time he died in 1876, the town was the envy of the civilised world. A celebrated lecturer, heterodox preacher and political activist, Dawson's greatest achievement was the development of an ethos which became known as the 'civic gospel'. Perhaps the crucial influence on Joseph Chamberlain, this translated the passion and mission of religion into an effort to make a new and better kind of city, one that would benefit all of its citizens. As part of this civic gospel, Dawson founded the world's first great public Shakespeare library for everyone in Birmingham, very much including its working people. 'Everything to everybody', was Dawson's watchword. Today his name – and the trailblazing reputation of the city which he helped to build – have been largely forgotten. In this article, Professor Ewan Fernie recovers that lost story, and makes a passionate case for its relevance today.



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### 'Brummagem Dawson'

**B**rummagem Dawson' Carlyle called him. 'He was a young man,' we are told, 'when he came to Birmingham, and he came with the fire and freshness of youth.' In a sense Dawson WAS Birmingham. In *Emma*, first published in 1816, Jane Austen put the following words in the mouth of Mrs Elton: 'They came from Birmingham, which is not a place to promise much, you know, Mr. Weston. One has not great hopes from Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound.' But within 50 years Dawson was able to speak of Birmingham as 'the chief centre of civilisation, the chief town of democracy, the town from which liberty radiates to all the world'. And yet, Dawson has been utterly forgotten – and the pioneering modern city he inspired has been too much forgotten as well.

Dawson came to Birmingham 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 preached there, in



© Alex Parne/ Courtesy of Library of Birmingham

This statue of George Dawson stood in central Birmingham until 1951.

Edward Street, in the centre of town, on the Christian gospel, but also on poetry, Darwin and Mohammed; he wanted a theology of evolution, one that was continuously evolving. He was loved, by his friends, for his honesty and energy, his sparkle and commitment; but he was also, for a time, 'the most hated man in England'.

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 was at the Temperance Society, where he chose to speak up for drinking. Dawson was the

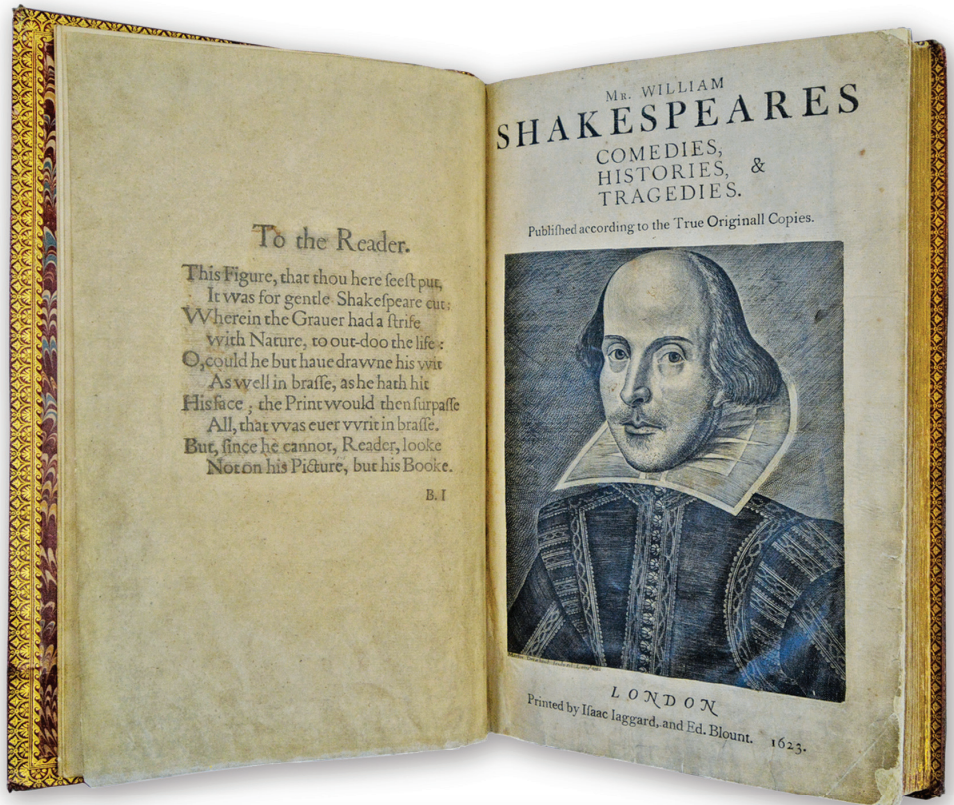
champion of social justice in the town, but also of great foreign causes. He spoke in Birmingham's famous Town Hall (the first of the great town halls which would characterise Victorian England) on Saint Simon, the Peasants' Revolt and the meaning of communism; he agitated for reduced working hours for 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.

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When Dawson died, his statue was erected right in the heart of the town, in what now is Chamberlain Square, where it stood till 1951, still within living memory. It stood under a canopy decorated with medallions of Shakespeare, Carlyle, Bunyan and Cromwell: a pantheon which tilted the establishment Shakespeare towards the edgy, the partisan, and the downright dangerous. And yet, Dawson's more famous successor, Joseph Chamberlain, said that Dawson's name ran through the history of the great Birmingham institutions like a stick of rock. He also said that if Birmingham in its heyday had any special characteristics, they were the characteristics of George Dawson.

Dawson stood, on his plinth, in a relaxed attitude, ready to converse with anyone who happened to be passing through, unlike Prince Albert, in London's Kensington Gardens, who gleams on his throne like a god. He stood just a few paces away from the Town Hall, scene not only of some of his most triumphant speeches, but also where five hundred homeless people had more than once taken breakfast in his memory on Christmas Day.

Dawson also stood in front of the handsome black railings of the Birmingham Reference Library, which included the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, founded at Dawson's behest in 1868. This was the first great public Shakespeare library in the world, and it remains utterly unprecedented in that it belongs to



© Alex Parne/ Courtesy of Library of Birmingham



The Birmingham First Folio, proudly stamped as public property.

all the people of the city. Meant to be comprehensive, it now contains approaching 100,000 items, in 93 languages from Abkhazian to Zulu. One of its greatest prizes is a Shakespeare First Folio: the original collected works, and perhaps the most important and iconic secular book in the world.

And the *Birmingham First Folio* is the only First Folio in the world 'acquired specifically for a public institution as part of a vision of working-class education'.

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George Dawson by Robert White Thrupp © National Portrait Gallery, London

Left: The young George Dawson.

Above: The older George Dawson.

### Victorian Sage

At first, photographs of Dawson suggest a typical Victorian patriarch: well-fed and profusely bearded. But earlier portraits suggest something different: a touch of the lounge-lizard, even rock 'n' roll. The earliest of all Dawson's adult portraits is startlingly gamine: dark, rich and long-haired, he is already bearded, but slender: more Mick Jagger than Mr Darling. And the later pictures do, after a while, start to give up their secrets; a bullish strength and coiled energy are palpable in some, whereas in others there is an unmistakable delicacy, an intelligent remoteness in the gaze. Contemporaries described a remarkable, 'thoroughly unclerical' looking man. In his face they saw charisma, worldliness and suffering,

betokening his solidarity with their own guilt, disappointment and desire. In short, they saw a man who both did and did not resemble a Victorian sage.

But what is a Victorian sage? Thomas Carlyle is one, John Ruskin another, Cardinal Newman a third: all three wrote widely on society and culture, religion and politics during the Victorian period; and each carried what was, in its seriousness about ultimate ends, an essentially religious attitude beyond the limits of religion. Dawson spoke rather than wrote – it says something important about the human contact and impact he was seeking. A great lord of language in his own right, he could have been a major Victorian writer;

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instead, he chose to make the destiny of the modern city his great work, and by means of lectures, sermons and an indefatigable cultural and political activism he helped make Birmingham's reputation as 'the best-governed city in the world' and 'the most artistic town in England'.

Sages usually come from somewhere posher than Birmingham; but Newman was in Birmingham too, for most of his life, after he converted to Catholicism. When a pompous Vatican functionary invited him to preach to the better sort of Christian he would find in the eternal city, Newman declined coldly, observing, 'Birmingham people have souls'. It is part of the general neglect of the rich and varied culture of nineteenth-century Birmingham – 'a powerhouse of moral and material energies', according to one observer – that no-one ever acknowledges that Dawson was active in Birmingham at the same time as Newman. But although in some respects Dawson resembled Carlyle, whom he knew and revered, he was unlike Carlyle, or Ruskin, or Newman, in that he did not drift or move more actively to the right. And if Newman leapt into the arms of the Catholic church, Carlyle's posthumous fate was to be read by Goebbels to Hitler in the Secret Bunker. For his part, Dawson was pursued across Europe as a dangerous progressive; he remained proud of his police mug-shots, and yet he became a respectable city father, mourned across the political spectrum when he died.

A radical liberal who wanted to give the best possible life to everybody, Dawson kept faith with what he called 'the communism of Christianity', even though it had not yet flourished on the earth. 'This holy communism,' he admitted, 'this sweet sanctity of unselfishness, this glorious blossom of love, was nipped, and it fell.' And yet, he insisted, 'it prophesied as it died'. In their different ways, Carlyle, Ruskin and Newman all linked arms against the modern world. But Dawson embraced the present and sought the future, in Birmingham. When Ruskin visited the town in 1877, the year after Dawson's death, he found that Dawson had left behind him not the uncivilised cultural desert he'd expected but a practical group of Birmingham burghers who were

devoted to a real and progressive alternative culture quite different from the quixotic old-world pastoralism of Ruskin's own Guild of St George.

Dawson's 'civic gospel' is the great lost legacy of Birmingham. No Victorian sage in their own lifetime did anything like as much to fashion an actual fairer and more variously and vividly alive social order from the cultural and religious inheritance of the past; Karl Marx certainly didn't.

### 'Civic Gospel'

What was the civic gospel? Well, it's all in the name – Dawson transfused the passion and mission of religion into contemporary civic life, providing a new model for municipal government which was 'soon to be copied', according to Tristram Hunt, '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 – because of its moral commitment to a truly comprehensive flourishing, they even contended that it was *more beautiful* than those glorious precursors. 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'.

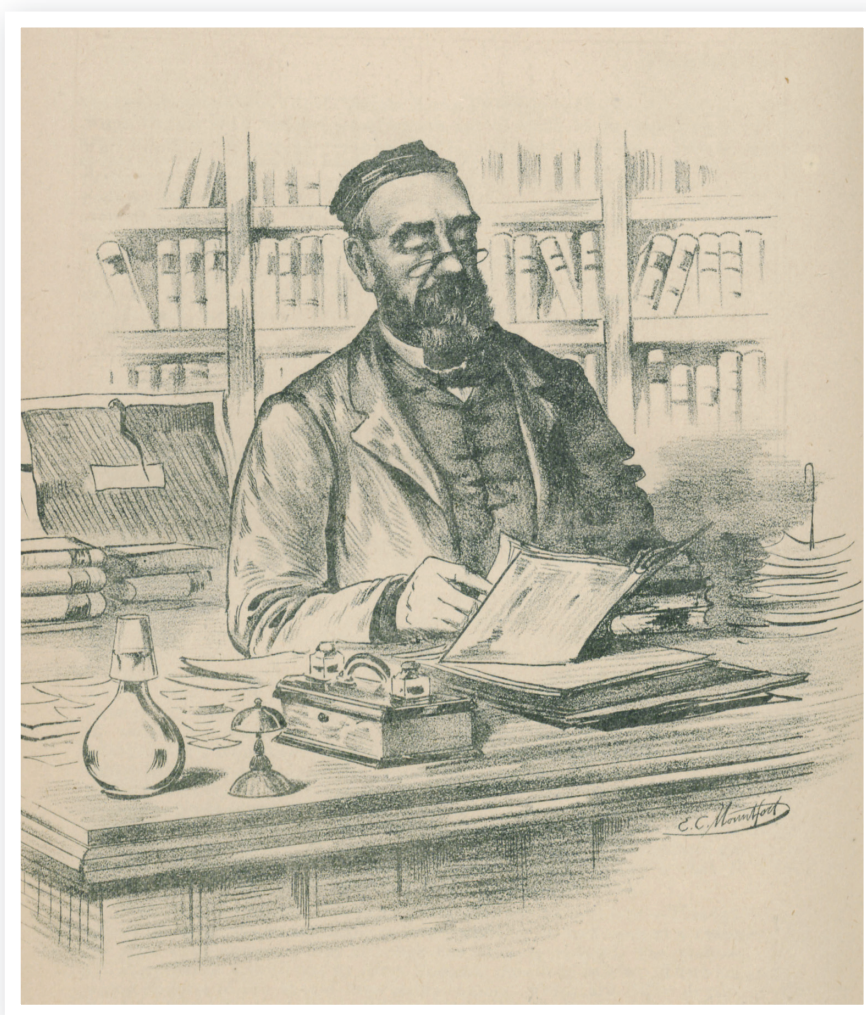
'To him,' explained one disciple, 'a city meant something besides the policeman and the scavenger: it had larger and higher functions than to maintain public order and to provide for the public health.' 'Not by bread alone' was the scriptural rubric. 'A city must have its parks as well as its prisons, 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; it must think of beauty and of dignity no less than of order and of health.'

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‘The time has come to give everything to everybody’, Dawson announced. ‘The day would come when a man would be ashamed to shut up a picture by Raphael or a statue by any great master in a private house.’ The ‘gifts of genius’ should be like ‘sunshine, open to all, for all, to be reached by all, and ultimately to be understood and enjoyed by all’.

Dawson taught there is no civic beauty without social welfare, for the simple reason that injustice is unlovely and repellent; he taught, equally, there is no social welfare without civic beauty, which betokens and is a spur to the vigour and public estimation of our common life. R. W. Dale, the Congregational church leader, who took the civic gospel up from Dawson, recalled: ‘It now became the ambition of young men, and cultivated men, and men of high social position, to represent a ward and to become aldermen and mayors.’ The movement came to its full political fruition when Chamberlain became mayor of Birmingham (1873-6), enabling what J. T. Bunce called ‘a municipal life nobler, fuller, richer than any the world has ever seen’.

Though Dawson was something of a firebrand, what he ultimately wanted and espoused was the kind of revolution which the leader of the German student movement, Rudi Dutschke, called ‘the long march through institutions’. The new organs of local government were his Trojan horse for a quiet revolution without bloodshed.



J. D. Mullins, first librarian of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library.

### The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library

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 forgermen’.

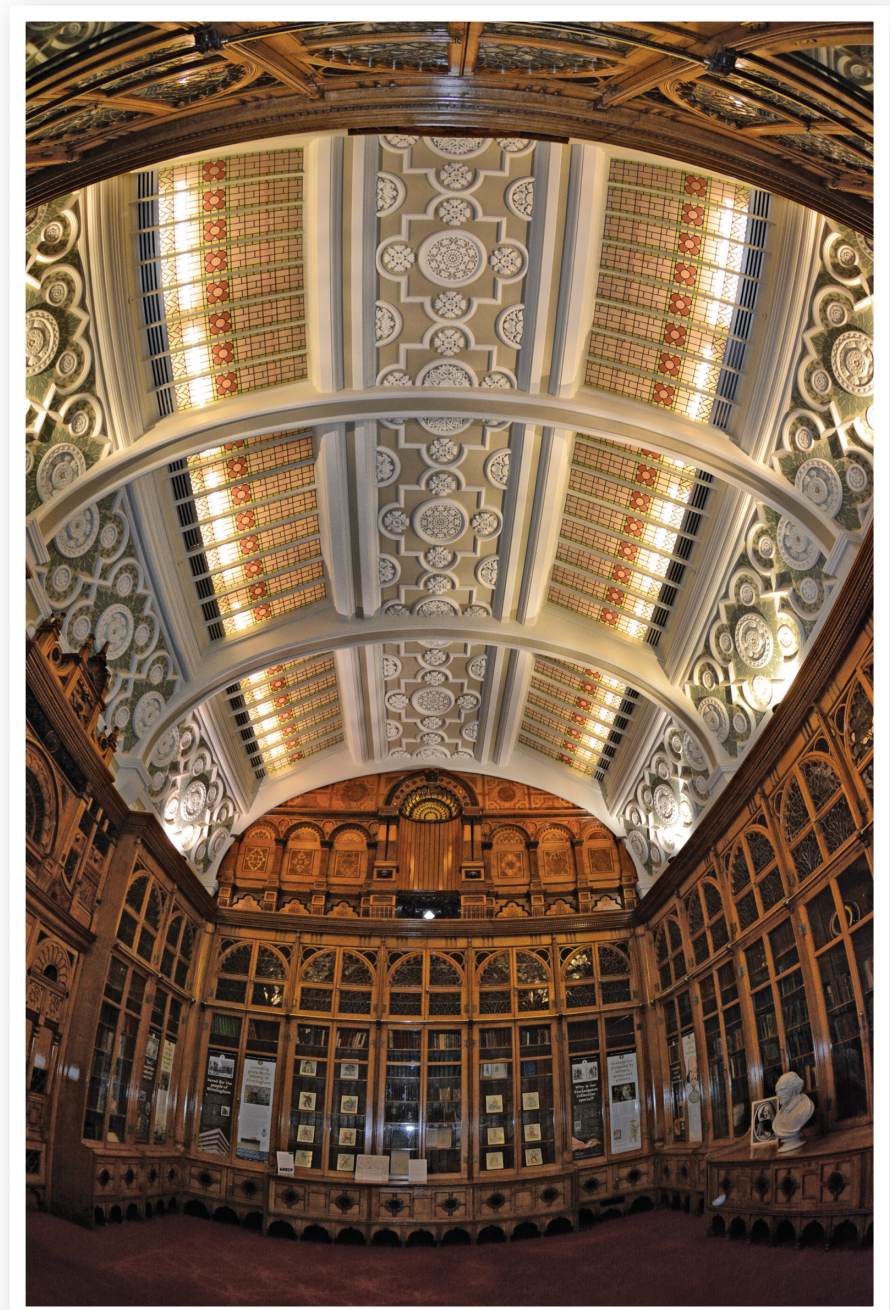
‘To Birmingham belongs the credit of having reared the noblest monument to the memory of England’s greatest poet,’ as one local historian put it; ‘the largest and most varied collection of Shakespeare’s works, and the English and foreign literature illustrating them, which has

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ever yet been made, and the greatest literary memorial which any author has ever yet received.' Confirmation of the centrality of the Shakespeare Library to the civic gospel comes in the form of architect and subscriber J. H. (not Joseph) Chamberlain's arresting avowal that 'he should like the Shakespeare idea to grow in the same proportion as the accumulation of their Shakespeare property'. Chamberlain would ultimately design the splendid Shakespeare Memorial Room that housed the Library, which quickly outgrew it, according to his firm conviction that 'the Shakespeare Library ought to be the very best room in town, not *excepting the Council Chamber of the new municipal buildings*'.

In Birmingham they not only claimed for Shakespeare 'a higher morality than had perhaps ever been claimed before'; they really did believe that this teaching could show the way to modern municipal government. Thus the members of Dawson's 'Our Shakespeare Club' rushed to take up public office: eleven sat on the Town Council, of whom five were Mayor; eight held seats on those Committees which had charge of the literary, artistic and scientific life of Birmingham; and five had seats in Parliament, three of whom were in the Government.

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



The Shakespeare Memorial Room, now proudly re-sited at the top of the Library of Birmingham.

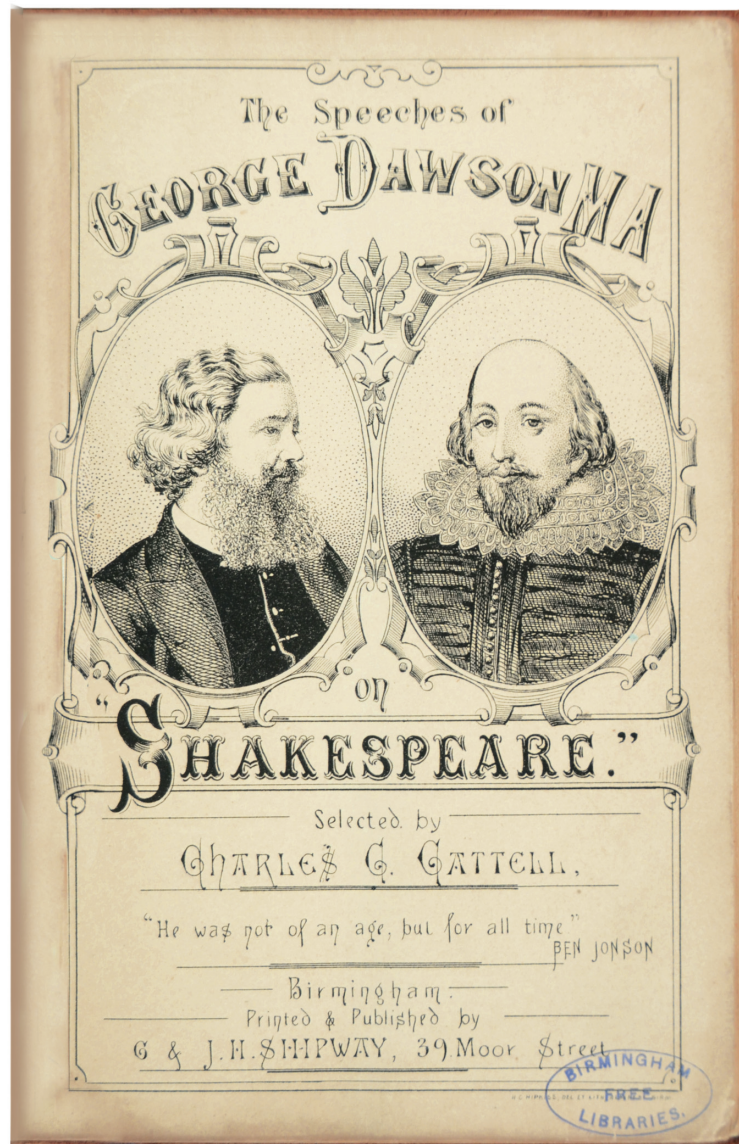
reading Shakespeare as a course in tolerance: 'The watching of everything that was going on, as the wise man watched it, with large, loving, tolerant eyes, led to toleration becoming a temper instead of a principle.' Dawson 'rejoiced to see the growth of toleration on the part of men towards one another, 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

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principle of one particular party, portending a higher, richer and more varied form of social solidarity. This was his specifically Shakespearean civic gospel. 'Hear, hear,' they said in response.

### In Memoriam

George Dawson died on Thursday 30 November, 1876. He had lectured in Handsworth on the Tuesday, but with some difficulty, owing to a heavy cold. When he returned home, he admitted to Mrs. Dunn (a visiting family friend who was keeping house for Dawson during his wife Susan's temporary absence on a visit) that he felt extremely unwell. The following day Dawson had a further lecturing engagement in Walsall, but Mrs. Dunn persuaded him to cancel, and instead he retired to bed, dosing up with the usual remedies. Dawson rose early the next morning; and when Mrs. Dunn brought a cup of tea up to his bedroom, he brightly told her that he felt so much better he had resolved to go out for a long walk. Mrs. Dunn went downstairs. She heard Dawson cross his room, raise the blind at his window, and tap sharply on the floor. Rushing back up, she found him leaning over a basin with blood pouring copiously from his mouth. He pointed at the door, and she ran for a doctor. She returned almost immediately but Dawson



George Dawson on Shakespeare.

was already lying at rest against the wall.

It is said that Dawson was mourned in Birmingham by every man, woman and child. 'When on that sad, dull 30th of November, 1876, he was suddenly struck down by death, the whole town wailed as though each had lost a brother; and Birmingham wept as she had never wept before – wept the loss of the most loved and honoured of her people.' They coveted portrait medallions of Dawson; they wore cufflinks that commemorated him; and they wrote letters to the press demanding a public tribute. 'I do not think the people of Birmingham will be satisfied,' reads one, 'if

some permanent memorial is not devised. George Dawson was in every way a man of the people, prophet, guide and friend.'

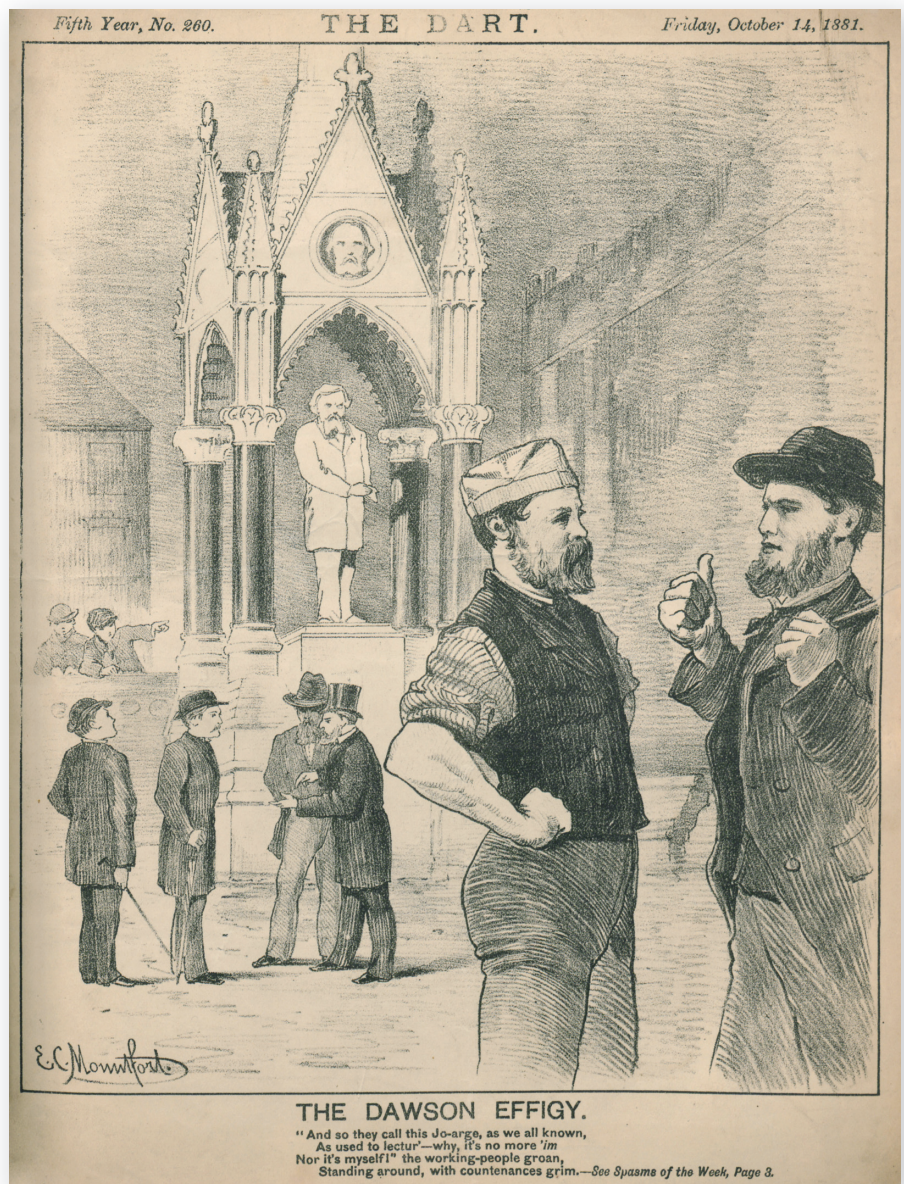
Contributions flooded in to the fund established for a Dawson statue from across the social spectrum; the Sub-Committee of Working Men contributed nearly as much as Joseph Chamberlain. The original statue was made by Thomas Woolner, with a canopy by J. H. Chamberlain. To install a statue of Dawson speaking in the main square of the town from the midst of four great figures representing Religion (Bunyan), Letters (Carlyle), Government (Cromwell) and Poetry



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(Shakespeare) was meant as a tribute to the fact that he had re-constellated traditional English culture in Birmingham as a progressive, future-oriented force, placing the town in the vanguard of the world. At the unveiling ceremony, it was solemnly announced that 'the gathering that day was not merely a town's gathering, not merely a Birmingham meeting. The name of George Dawson was famous, and his friends abounded far down in the South, beneath the bright beams of the Southern Cross, and far away amid the golden homes of the setting sun on the Pacific coast.'

And yet, the passion with which the people of Birmingham subsequently rejected the statue is an even more remarkable tribute to Dawson. There were grumbles from the first, with one detractor complaining about the neo-Gothic canopy that 'no man fought more strongly against old-world notions than Dawson did, and yet we find him, in the town that understood him and loved him best, represented as addressing his audience from the interior of a medieval niche!' The statue was felt to be too stolid, its situation too respectable, to do justice to so maverick and rebellious a spirit. A cartoon of it with a bag over its head appeared in the local press, and an impulse of carnival subversion built up into a popular protest. In the *Daily Gazette*, a self-doubting letter purportedly from the statue itself appeared; the Committee responsible for it were



Working men complain about the original statue in this cartoon from *The Dart*.

ambushed at a town-centre hotel. Dawson would surely have been delighted by such sheer creative naughtiness. Eventually somebody said in print: 'The greatest tribute Birmingham could pay to the memory of George Dawson would be to sledge hammer the abortion called a statue.'

E. J. Williamson supplied a more lively substitute to stand under the canopy but by the time both were removed for the Festival of Britain in 1951 – part of a general consolidation and tidying-up of what had by then become Chamberlain Square – Britain had forgotten the radical, alternative Englishness which Dawson had pioneered in Birmingham. It may also have been embarrassed to accommodate an orator apparently inspired by (among others) an historic regicide in the main square of its second city.

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In any case, it was true that no statue would have been adequate to Dawson's legacy. 'They had erected this memorial,' said Dawson's right-hand man, Samuel Timmins, 'but there was another memorial which it was their duty to erect, and preserve—a monument more enduring than marble, and more life-like than the senseless stone.' George St Clair, who succeeded to Dawson's ministry, insisted he was 'a luminary fitted to be a permanent life-giving centre'. The way to keep his flame alive was to '*perpetuate his work*'. And since he was a revolutionary, such work would have to remain continuously creative, responsive, unforeseen. 'The question is not what our Leader did in the last thirty years,' as St. Clair said, 'but what he would have done *in the next thirty*.'

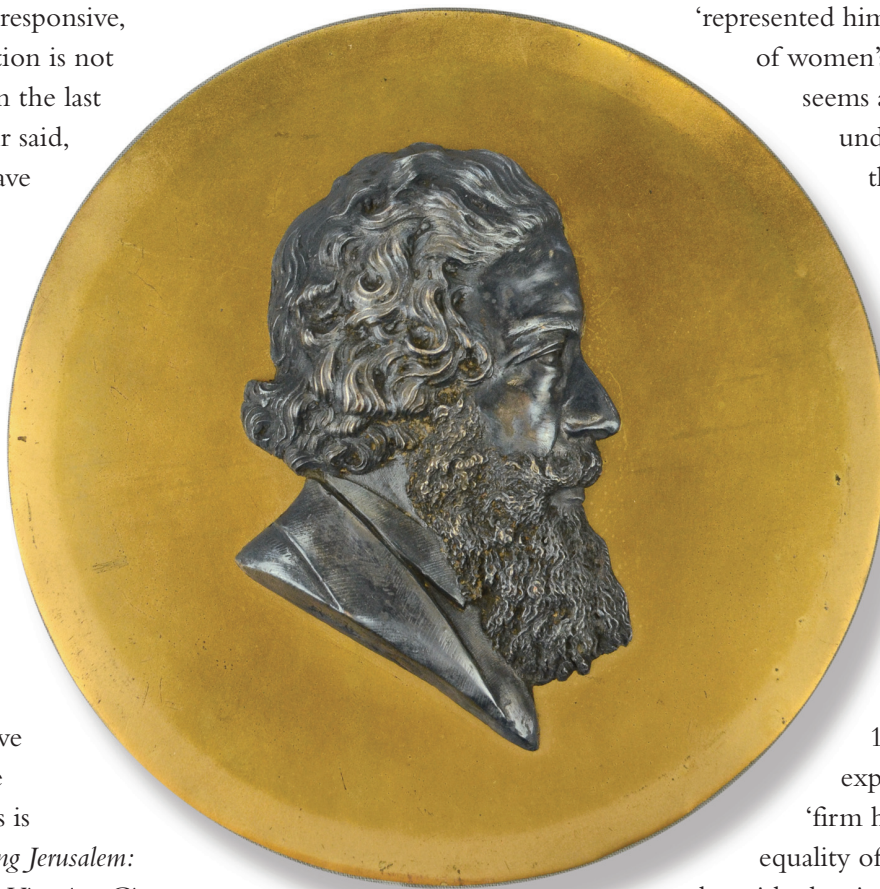
### Resurrection Game

I propose that we need Dawson back – that he is, as it were, alive in the archives, ready to chivvy, inspire and shame us into, at last, making good on the dream of a truly progressive and inclusive civic culture now. One positive augury for this is Tristram Hunt's *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City* (2004), which recovers Dawson's power as the prophet of what Hunt calls 'the municipal gospel', also evinced across Stephen Roberts' impressive series of *Birmingham Biographies*. In *Civilizing Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830 - 1867* (2002), Catherine Hall had been more sceptical. She admits Dawson 'was a stalwart of the working man and parliamentary reform'; but she doubts he was a good thing for women.

Hall suggests 'Dawson's household was a classic family enterprise, with his wife and sister-in-law editing his sermons and publishing books for children'; but this leaves out of account the fact that his chosen amanuensis was Marie Bethell Beauclerc, the first female reporter, who also pioneered and taught Pitman's shorthand and typing in Birmingham, and was the first woman to teach at a boys' public school (Thomas and Matthew Arnold's Rugby). Beauclerc was devoted to Dawson, and is buried near him in Birmingham's Key Hill (Nonconformist) Cemetery. Hall acknowledges Dawson 'represented himself as a supporter of women's rights'; but this seems a serious

understatement. From the very beginning, Dawson publicly and repeatedly affirmed that 'wheresoever prejudice of sectarianism did not put the sexes on an equality, there remained a vestige of social slavery to be abolished'. In 1847, Dawson explained that, as a 'firm holder of the equality of women with men', he wished to join the feminist campaign against the legal bar to married women's property. A great

advocate of women's education, he argued for and taught women's classes in literature at the Birmingham and Midland Institute; he also promoted women's education at his church. A favourite theme was the centrality to Christian culture of Mary Magdalene's passionate love. Dawson loved to speak of Mary laving Christ's feet in her precious ointment and wiping it away with her hair;



Memorial medallion of George Dawson.

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‘My heart, like her house,’ he said, ‘is filled with the odour of her spikenard.’ In his lectures, he championed the sheer heroism and active sexuality of Shakespeare’s Juliet. Hall says, ‘there was nothing more disturbing, he believed, than an effeminate man or a masculine woman’; but Dawson spoke expressly in favour of both men cultivating their feminine sides, and women developing their masculine qualities and inclinations, celebrating Elizabeth I in an inimitable speech as ‘that most illustrious of English monarchs, that greatest, bravest, pluckiest, quaintest, and queerest king they had ever had – King Elizabeth’. He could certainly be bluff and bullish, but he could equally be gentle and tender; he inhabited gender roles and conventions as we all do, and sometimes with gusto, but he could also move gracefully between them.

Hall more tellingly suggests that Dawson falls short on racial grounds. She damns him with Carlyle, drawing attention to the latter’s splenetic ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’, first published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1849, and then reprinted as a pamphlet under the still more shameless heading ‘Occasional

Discourse on the Nigger Question’. 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. As we have seen, he was a great advocate of European freedom movements, arranging Kossuth’s historic visit to Birmingham. 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. ‘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 admired Mohammed (as, to be fair, Carlyle did also). 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.

But it may be that Dawson himself offers the best indication as to how we should judge him. ‘Take this,’ he 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

Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, University of Birmingham. Birmingham Faces and Places Vol.5, September 1882, r f DA690.66



**MISS MARIE BETHELL BEAUCLERC.**

*(From a Photograph by A. Marlow, Handsworth.)*

Dawson’s devoted amanuensis, the pioneering Marie Bethell Beauclerc.

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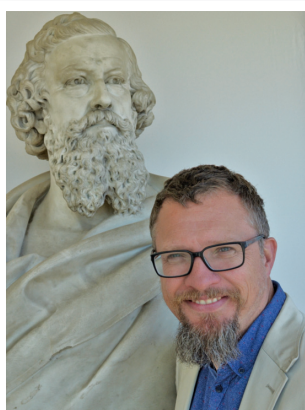
history, then must he consent to be tried by his superiors; because it is to be settled what place that man must take in the great gathering and church of the blessed ones of all time, and he must be tried by an abstract, absolute law, by his superiors, by the old and eternal law of right and wrong, as embodied in the best transcript of it that can be found for us.' According to that stricter standard, Dawson would, I believe, willingly bow his head under Hall's judgements and the judgements of a time that had transcended him in important respects.

But in some respects only. Dawson was a visionary, a visionary who in certain crucial ways, it's true, failed to live up to his own vision. But his vision can be disinterred from those failures. In fact, I would contend it must be, because it's a vision that in other ways remains far ahead of us.

'The time has come to give everything to everybody.' Were he alive today, Dawson would join vigorously in the fight for the rights and potential of every member of the modern city, especially those he had wrongfully underestimated. Tom Crewe has recently written in the *London Review of Books* that Britain today is 'the most centralised country in the Western world', its political

system weighted 'overwhelmingly towards Westminster'. Against this Crewe quotes Joseph Chamberlain and R. W. Dale's restatements of the Birmingham-based civic gospel they avowedly derived from Dawson, but Crewe doesn't name Dawson at all. We need him back. It will help us make new and more confident claims for the cultural dignity, traditions and potential of places beyond the London metropolitan area; it will help us to forge a more richly varied, liberal and democratic England that is as much in the interest of London as of the rest of the country. And 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. It needs updating for our own changed times, but it can help and inspire us to make the most of life today. ●

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Ewan Fernie with the Library of Birmingham's bust of George Dawson.

Ewan Fernie is Chair, Professor and Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham and author of *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter* (Cambridge University Press).



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

Together with Tom Epps (Cultural Partnerships Manager, Birmingham City Council), he is developing a major new Heritage Lottery Fund project which will revive and respond to the challenge of George Dawson by opening up the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library in collaboration with people and communities across the contemporary city.

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Listen to Ewan Fernie's audio podcasts telling the fascinating story of George Dawson and the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library at [www.historywm.com/podcasts](http://www.historywm.com/podcasts).



**REVOLUTIONARY  
PLAYERS**



**WEST MIDLANDS  
HISTORY**  
PEOPLE OF IDEAS, INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE