



FROM SHAKESPEARE TO TOLKIEN

WRITERS OF THE REGION

Mark Curthoys

There are many illustrious authors with roots in the West Midlands. Some wrote about the places they grew up in, others left and never looked back. Some places make much of their literary connections, while others choose to ignore them.



Cobbe Portrait of William Shakespeare, unknown artist, 1610, Cobbe Collection. Courtesy of The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

Events are planned around the world in 2014 to mark the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, which took place in Stratford-upon-Avon on about (but not indisputably) 23 April 1564. He wrote (again not indisputably) 37 plays, five long (narrative) poems and 154 sonnets, which may or may not have made reference to the locality of his birth. He is currently lauded in his home town and historic county, although this was not always the case.

Stratford first held a festival in honour of Shakespeare in 1769 (see Chris Upton's article on page 22). Birmingham, as 'the chief town of Shakespeare's county', marked the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth in April 1864 by founding the Shakespeare Memorial Library, one of the finest collections of editions of Shakespeare's works in the world. This was placed in the newly-opened Birmingham Reference Library in April 1868. After the disastrous fire of 1879, the collection was housed in a panelled room with carved bookcases designed by J H Chamberlain, a leading architect of Victorian Birmingham. This room has been reinstated in the new Library of Birmingham (see *History West Midlands* special supplement online at www.historywm.com).

In 1847 Shakespeare's birthplace, in Henley Street, Stratford, was purchased for the nation by a mainly London-based committee and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was formed. At the time of the sale, however, it was remarked that Warwickshire's residents appeared relatively apathetic towards its fate.

In 1862, the Trust purchased Shakespeare's New Place estate, the site of Shakespeare's final home and Nash's House (the home of Thomas Nash and Shakespeare's grand-daughter Elizabeth). Anne Hathaway's Cottage, the girlhood home of Shakespeare's wife, was purchased in 1892, followed in 1930 by Mary Arden's House, the girlhood home of his mother. The last house to be acquired, in 1949, was Hall's Croft, the home of Shakespeare's daughter Susanna and her husband, physician Dr John Hall.

To celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, in 1964, the Trust opened the doors of its new headquarters and study facility, the Shakespeare Centre.

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), Izaak Walton (1593–1683) and Jerome K Jerome (1859–1927)

In the early twentieth century other places in the region preserved buildings connected with literary figures. In May 1900 Dr Johnson's birthplace was presented to the city of Lichfield by a former mayor, who had purchased it in 1887. Izaak Walton's Cottage at Shallowford was acquired by a local committee after the First World War and renovated as a museum which opened in 1924.

Early in 1927 the humourist Jerome K Jerome was made a freeman of Walsall, where a tablet was unveiled on Belsize House, an event recorded on newsreel. This in spite of the fact that Jerome's family had moved to London when he was a child and he was brought up and spent most of his life in the capital. His most celebrated work *Three Men in a Boat* was set on the Thames.

George Eliot (1819–1880), Francis Brett Young (1884–1954) and Mary Webb (1881–1927)

George Eliot enjoyed literary success with novels which drew heavily on the people and places with which she was familiar. Born Mary Ann Evans on the Arbury estate in 1819, she spent the first thirty years of her life in the vicinity of Nuneaton and Coventry before, at mid-century, moving to London. Shunned by her family for her religious heterodoxy and unconventional domestic life with the writer Lewes, she never returned to the scenes which she depicted in her fiction.

Courtesy Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council



Thomas Traherne is commemorated in Tom Denny's stained glass at Hereford Cathedral.

Reproduced by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Hereford Cathedral.

Francis Brett Young, who wrote a series of novels set in rural Worcestershire (see Michael Hall's article on page 42), was enabled by their success to settle in his native county. Born in Halesowen in 1884, Brett Young followed his father into the medical profession, qualifying at the University of Birmingham before entering general practice in Devon. Invalided from war service in East Africa, he convalesced on Capri and then lived in the Lake District before acquiring a country house near Pershore, in 1932. By then he had become a best-selling author, following the appearance of his *Portrait of Clare* (1927).

The Shropshire author Mary Webb spent most of her life at Much Wenlock, Meole Brace, Pontesbury, and Lyth Hill, near Shrewsbury. She began publishing her novels, set in the Shropshire border countryside, in 1916, when *The Golden Arrow* appeared, culminating in 1924 with her prize-winning *Precious Bane*, satirised in Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Webb's books did not sell well and it was only after her death that they gained wider popularity.

Thomas Traherne (c1637–1674)

Some West Midlands writers have taken many centuries to be rediscovered. Most remarkable, perhaps, was the Herefordshire clergyman and poet Thomas Traherne. He was born in the city of Hereford in about 1637, the son of a master shoemaker. After study at Oxford, he was presented to the rectory of Credenhill, Herefordshire, where he remained until shortly before his death in 1674. During his Herefordshire ministry he spent most of his time writing, to communicate to others his perception that 'all things were Gods Treasures in their proper places'. Up to his death, however, he had published just one religious polemic.

This statue of George Eliot, made by John Lettis in 1986, stands in Newdigate Square, Nuneaton.



Two works appeared shortly afterwards, one anonymously, but neither was much read. Only with the rediscovery of a large quantity of manuscripts of his devotional poetry, in the late 1890s, and the identification of him as author in the early twentieth century, did Traherne's significance as a poet become apparent. Further discoveries continued throughout the twentieth century – including the rescue of one of his manuscripts, scorched, from a burning rubbish tip in Lancashire, in 1967. Stained glass now commemorates him in the Audley Chapel of Hereford Cathedral.



Sarehole Mill, Birmingham, one of the sites to have inspired Tolkien's fictional world of the Shire.

Courtesy Birmingham Museums Trust

The daughter of a bookseller in Wellington, Sarah Smith, who was born there in 1832, gained much of her education from reading books in her father's shop. Although she moved to Manchester in 1863, she retained her Shropshire identity, alluding to a family connection with the village of All Stretton in the pseudonym under which she wrote a succession of popular children's stories published by the Religious Tract Society. Hesba Stretton's children's story *Jessica's First Prayer* (1866) sold two million copies, was

translated into several languages including Russian (Tsar Alexander II ordered it to be placed in all Russian schools) and excerpts were even depicted on slides for magic lantern presentations.

Edith Maude Hull (1880–1947)

In complete contrast, a romantic fantasy written at The Knowle, a country estate in Hazelwood, Derbyshire, turned on the encounter between a young British woman trekking across the Sahara desert, and her Arab captor. *The Sheik* (1919) raced through 108 impressions in Britain alone in the first four years after its publication. Its author, Edith Maude Hull, the daughter of a shipowner, had visited Algeria as a young woman before marrying into the family of the Knowle estate's owners. She wrote her racy desert romance while her husband – a noted pig breeder – was away during the First World War. Hollywood moguls spotted the book's cinematic potential and based the popular 1921 film of the same name, starring Rudolph Valentino, on Hull's novel.

Alison Uttley (1880–1976), Mary Martha Sherwood (1775–1851), and Sarah Smith (1832–1911)

A childhood on a Derbyshire farm informed the writings of Alison Uttley, born near Matlock in 1880. Although she left the area when she went to university and became a schoolteacher, her Little Grey Rabbit books drew on what she described as the Derbyshire 'country ways' which she had known.

Another children's writer, Mary Martha Sherwood, began writing in her teens. She went into print with her first story in 1794, aged nineteen. Christian principles and family life were the dominant themes of her work, whose scope embraced stories of conversions to Christianity written during a ten-year stay in India as the wife of an army officer stationed there. Her *Little Henry and his Bearer* (1815), the story of an eight-year-old British orphan who converted his Hindu bearer, went into over one hundred editions and was translated into many languages. On her return to Britain, where she and her husband settled at Wick, near Worcester, she continued her prodigious output well into her seventies.

J R R Tolkien (1892–1973)

Hesba Stretton's sales were vastly exceeded in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by the 'heroic fantasy' fiction of J R R Tolkien, whose childhood and youth were spent in Birmingham.

By the time of the appearance of *The Hobbit*, in 1937, Tolkien was an established Oxford professor. As with Shakespeare and Stratford, the Birmingham influence on Tolkien's work has been increasingly emphasised. The importance of the sites which triggered his imagination in childhood – Sarehole Mill, Moseley Bog, Perrott's Folly – is now widely recognised, not least through the Birmingham Tolkien Trail. ●

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