

THE HISTORY OF OUR SHAKESPEARE CLUB

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The History of Our Shakespeare Club by William Harris

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Our Shakespeare Club.

THE history of Our Shakespeare Club will be interesting to its members in proportion to their remembrance of the ideas which led to its foundation and the extent to which those ideas have been realised. In the life of a great and a growing town where the fortunes not only of individuals but of the community were being formed, and the claim of practical business made constant demands upon the thought and energy of its people, there was an increasing necessity that special provision should be made for the cultivation of their intellectual and artistic faculties. In a great capital, which attracts the active and aspiring minds from every part of the nation, opportunities of the kind are more readily available, but fifty years ago this was by no means the case in smaller places like Birmingham. There had not been wanting even in earlier times very earnest efforts to accomplish the objects in view. The Philosophical Institution, established in 1800 and continued for many years, did much to promote intellectual and especially scientific culture. The Polytechnic Institution was founded on a more popular basis, its aim being to extend the area over which such educational effort should operate. These societies no doubt did a great amount of good, but they failed to secure a permanent existence. It is not necessary to record to

what extent their objects have been more effectually attained by the Midland Institute. Such associations, whatever the amount of their success, did not provide that intimate individual intercourse which is so essential to the freedom, as well as the enjoyment, of the intellectual life.

There was another social condition which existed then to a degree which it is not easy now to fully realise. In a community which might be said to be developing from the village to the city, all the members of any social class were known to each other, and their opinions, or at least the expressions of them, were more or less subject to the criticism or even the control of certain schools of philosophical, or, rather, of theological thought, and their acknowledged leaders. It is difficult now to realise how far and with what persistence this influence prevailed, not only in Birmingham, but generally throughout the country. There can be no doubt that these two subjects—the defence of freedom of thought and speech, and the promotion of intellectual intercourse in the town—were more or less consciously the actuating impulses in the minds of the two men who may fairly be called the founders of the Club.

George Dawson throughout the whole of his active and strenuous life was an acknowledged leader in the movement on behalf of complete freedom of thought and speech. He pursued this object as a popular lecturer, not in Birmingham only, but in all parts of the country. The subjects of his addresses varied; they were at times literary, social, or political, but whatever the theme there was always the strain of a desire not only to enlarge the intellectual outlook of his hearers but to encourage their desire for unrestricted enquiry. Without entering upon any discussion of the basis which he proposed for a

Christian Church, and the principles which should form the bond of union of its members, it may at least be said that his protest against the dominance of any theological creed or ecclesiastical formulary was in keeping with the whole tenour of his teaching. The principles which he professed he carried out in his own conduct. Although regarded by many of his friends and associates with an admiration amounting to reverence, no one met with any difficulty in expressing opinions whether in agreement with or in opposition to his own. This true catholicity of spirit was manifested in all his relations with our Shakespeare Club alike in the part he took in its foundation and in his conduct of the proceedings as its President. The oldest members will be the best qualified to affirm that there has never been the least impediment to, or restriction of, that absolute frankness and truthfulness of expression which is the quality which alone can give real value to human intercourse.

Samuel Timmins was an example of the manner in which originality of character and persistence of purpose can rise superior to what might well be regarded as unfavourable circumstances. The son of a Birmingham manufacturer at a time when industrial enterprises were carried on in far more moderate proportions than those with which we have more recently become acquainted, he began life amid surroundings in which the idea that there could be any relation between business occupations and literary culture was not recognised. It was thought that time given to such studies was diverted from its proper channels. It was almost by stealth that he made himself acquainted with the treasures of that literature of which he ultimately became so complete a master, and in some branches so competent a critic. In Shakespearean studies, especially, his capacity was acknowledged beyond

even the boundaries of his own country. Students and critics from Germany and America, visiting England, found in a small warehouse in a back street in Birmingham a man whom they recognised as their equal in exegesis as well as in store of information. It was not only with the difficulties in pursuing his studies that he had to contend. This mental progress, accompanied, as of course it was, by the desire for free development, was checked by the restrictions to which allusion has been made. Brought up in the strictest sect of Orthodox Nonconformists, and under one of the most dogmatic and peremptory of its leaders, it was not without long and painful efforts that he overcame the obstructions which he had to encounter. It may be readily understood how much he was attracted by the teaching of George Dawson with whom as a pupil and a friend he formed a life-long association.

In speaking of the founders of Our Shakespeare Club, it is not to be understood that its formation was altogether unprecedented. It had indeed been preceded, and it may be said prepared for, by a society similar in character and aims, though perhaps less formal and regular in its organisation, called "The Crown Club." Indeed, so many of the members of the older club were on the roll of the new one that the latter might be regarded as an extension rather than as a new creation. Another antecedent of our Club, to which it owes perhaps its name, and certainly something of its character, was a series of meetings held to celebrate the anniversaries of Shakespeare's birthday. These for several years had been called, without any regular authorisation, by Dawson, Timmins, and some other friends, and had served to bring together the lovers of literature in the town. Almost invariably the chair was taken by Dawson, who

delivered a series of addresses on various aspects and manifestations of the genius of Shakespeare, which were exceedingly interesting and valuable. After the formation of the Club these anniversaries were called and arranged in its name. They were continued for many years with varying success. The culminating celebration was that at the Tercentenary in 1864, of which an account will be given in its place. The interest thus excited continued for some time, but gradually it relaxed, and the meetings ceased to be held.

On the formation of the Club Dawson became President, and Timmins Honorary Secretary. If any other formal business was transacted, no record of it remains. It seems probable, indeed, that for some time no minutes were regularly kept;—for if they were they have not been preserved—and that nothing was done except to fix from time to time the place of meeting, and to commence a long and mirthful discussion as to the name of the Club. There is something like the haze of pre-historic tradition about these very earliest proceedings, in which even the very date of the establishment of the Club is shrouded, but there is a general, if vague, idea that the year 1860 was the important period. The mist rises somewhat, though not completely, in 1862, when it was known that five meetings were held, and it is supposed that fifteen members attended. There is a doubt, however, as to the strict historical accuracy of this account, for the number of members was then twenty-two, and it is not likely that so many as seven were absent from every meeting. At the meeting in November it was resolved that "Twenty-five carte-de-visite portraits of himself should be sent by each member to the Honorary Secretary to be made up by him into sets and a set sent to each member." This was done, and the collections

that exist are exceedingly interesting, containing, as they do, early portraits of men, some of whom have made their mark not only in local but in national affairs, and some who, alas, are no longer with us. At a later period another series of portraits was taken, this time of a cabinet size, and these, too, form a group of almost a family character since they are the presentments of companions of whom it may be said that their mutual friendship closely resembles personal affection.

The proceedings of the year 1863 were exceedingly interesting, not only to the Club but to the town, for they included the formulation of a scheme for the establishment of the Shakespeare Library, an institution of which either from a literary or municipal point of view it is impossible to speak too highly. Public attention was first called to the subject by letter from the President of the Club, which was dated April 15th, 1861, and was published in the *Birmingham Gazette*.

PROPOSALS FOR A SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY.

The near approach of the anniversary of Shakespeare's birthday reminds me to claim from you the fulfilment of a promise to give me space enough to propose a favourite plan of mine, and to ask the help in carrying it out of those who may agree with me in its desirableness. I want to see founded in Birmingham a Shakespeare Library, which should contain (as far as practicable) every edition and every translation of Shakespeare; all the commentators, good, bad, and indifferent; in short, every book connected with the life or works of our great poet. I would add portraits of Shakespeare, and all