

## **The Legacy of a Friendship** **George Dawson in the words of Samuel Timmins**

We must not omit a suggestion which was made by Mr. Timmins, and which, we think, deserves the most earnest consideration of all students and lovers of Shakespeare. It was that the Midland Institute, should, at as early a period as possible, set apart a room to be devoted exclusively to Shakespearean literature. No place could be so appropriate for this as Birmingham, the virtual metropolis of Warwickshire, and no Institute so fitting as the Midland. We commend this subject to the serious consideration of the Council. (Report on the Shakespeare Club dinner, Birmingham Daily Post, 26 April 1858)

The Shakespeare Memorial Library was born from a deep and loving friendship. In 1858 Samuel Timmins first suggested the building of a collection; in 1861 George Dawson, president of Birmingham's Shakespeare Club, publicly proposed what was to become a reality:

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 of the commentators, good, bad and indifferent; in short, every book connected with the life and works of our great poet. (Aris's Birmingham Gazette, 16 April 1861)

As friends and leading members of the Shakespeare Club, Dawson and Timmins undoubtedly developed the idea of a library to mark the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth together. The passion and efficiency with which this task was carried out reflects a great deal of pre-planning, discussion and preparation. Whilst Timmins worked assiduously to pull together the collection with purchases and donations from around the world, Dawson spread the word and was public spokesperson for what was to become the world's largest publicly owned collection of one author's work.



Portrait of Samuel Timmins by William Thomas Roden, 1880, Birmingham Museums Trust

My work as Heritage Ambassador on the transcription of the letters by Timmins to his friend and the Shakespeare Club's American correspondent, J. Parker Norris, has provided further evidence of the admiration and friendship Timmins had for Dawson. The correspondence which starts formally as requests for donations and purchases becomes infiltrated with personal revelations as their relationship develops. The letters, held in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, cover a period spanning ten years, during which Timmins makes multiple references to Dawson's character and their friendship. In the letters from 1874 alone we read:

I hope you have read Dawson's Library Address? It was perfect in its way - far beyond any idea you can form from the litera scripta. He is expected to visit U.S. this fall & you will be charmed with him - not at all to strong a word as you will feel & will tell one hereafter. I shall give him a very hearty introduction to Mr Furness & yourself.

If I were to list you half his merits - intellectual, social, public - you would 'think 'I had gone cracked but after you have seen & heard him you would call me a fool for having said so little in his praise. Please remember this little prophecy

24 January 1874

My friend Dawson sailed on 18<sup>th</sup> on board "China". You will probably not hear of him before October but I have "drawn upon you" in the way of an introduction & I am sure you will "honour" the draft. You will be charmed with him all ways – publicly & privately too.

22 August 1874

Dawson will probably have seen you before you get this or about the time you do, as he began lecturing in Boston on 29<sup>th</sup> & is to be in yr. city sometime this month. He will probably write to you before he arrives but if not, oblige me by looking him. The ice (if any) is very thin, & once broken you will be the best friends in the world & sorry to let him go. I am half glad I could not come, for I should have been wholly extinguished or at least eclipsed in his presence.

3 October 1874

A thousand thanks for all yr. courtesies to Dawson: didn't I tell you how you would like him?

13 December 1874

Timmins's esteem for Dawson is clearly reflected in the choice of name for his one and only child, George Dawson Timmins. The adoption of Dawson's name into Timmins's own family is a significant act of union and legacy born of honour and love. George was to be the Timmins' only child. He sadly died aged three. In 1874, when writing to Norris whose daughter was ill at the time, Timmins recalled:

I can sympathise you more fully than you think for a little lad of three – an only child - was lost to us, some years ago & even now the wound is open & will never heal. (15 June 1874)

## The loss of Dawson

Only two years after writing this letter Timmins was also to face the devastating blow of Dawson's own death. From this period we can read two documents, one public, the other private, which express Timmins's grief in formal and informal terms. In the minutes to the 1877 annual Shakespeare Club meeting Timmins reported:

Since the last annual meeting of its subscribers the Shakespeare Memorial Library has been deprived by death of its founder and constant friend, Mr. George Dawson, M.A. It is not possible to exaggerate the extent of this loss... Mr Dawson's devotion to Shakespeare was not based upon literary reasons alone, nor did it only rest upon his admiration and his marvel at the wondrous gifts bestowed upon this greatest of men, but it was founded upon his love for one who loves so much. His heart, which knows no inhumanity, rejoiced in one

who was so greatly human, and the basis of his reverence for Shakespeare was his own reverence for man... The contents of this library were to Mr. Dawson a great and convincing proof that the greatest of all English authors hadn't lived fruitlessly, and that the widest human heart the world has known had not poured out its treasure in vain.

Dawson's death at the age of 55 was sudden and unexpected. In his letter to Norris dated 2 December 1876, Timmins explained how a 'fit of coughing broke an aneurism in the aorta & he died in a few minutes with no one near him.'

Written two days after Dawson's death, Timmins's personal distress at his friend's loss is painfully evident:

You may have heard the crushing news that our dear friend Dawson died suddenly on 29<sup>th</sup> at 9 o'clock...

I am utterly stricken down by this sudden blow & am writing only wildly now. We had been fast friends for more than 30 years & you know what a friend he was.

All I have or am, all I have ever been able to do, came solely from his counsel, teaching & example.

His death leaves an awful blank not only in local but in national life. He was known & honoured in every nook & corner of our islands & has left such a memory as no man had before or can have again.

On Monday his body will be buried. His own wishes & his wife's are for an absolutely private funeral but thousands will be present as a last mark of reverent regard.

The newspapers will give you details but I cannot now. Strangely, so stunned have I been that in the Post memoir I forgot our work together for several years with the first popular Literature lectures & talks here at our Institute! I can settle to nothing & do nothing. All seems a painful dream from which I want to wake, but alas! the loving heart is still forever & the busy brain at rest.

Ever faithfully but sadly yrs

Sam: Timmins

A few days later, Timmins started to prepare a biography on his friend. Again he wrote to Norris:

I have undertaken to prepare a memoir of him but what form & size it may take are quite unsettled yet. He has left no correspondence & his lectures & sermons can only be partially preserved. You have no idea what a blank his death has left in our public as well as our private social life. (7 December 1876)

He worked on this for many years, pulling together material and a manuscript. Devastatingly, his manuscript was destroyed in a fire at the printers, after which 'all the eagerness with which he undertook the task had oozed away.' The materials for Dawson's biography were passed to Wright Wilson who finished the work after Timmins's death in 1902. Fire, it seemed, was to thwart Timmins in his loving tributes to his friend.

## Celebrating Dawson

Timmins became instrumental in raising funds for a memorial to Dawson within the city. On 3 January 1877, soon after Dawson's death, a George Dawson Memorial Committee was formed. With over £2000 accumulated a statue was duly commissioned in the 'hope to have a good & permanent memorial of one who has done so much for all of our best life here' (Timmins to Norris, 6 March 1877). J. H. Chamberlain was asked to devise a canopy for the statue similar to the Scott Memorial in Edinburgh; Thomas Woolner sculpted Dawson in a pose of delivering one of his lectures. However, when the final sculpture of Dawson was unveiled in November 1881 it was not entirely appreciated by many. Complaints revolved around the fact that the sculpture did not look like him and there were disparaging remarks about the statue's squat demeanor. In his letter to Norris on the subject, Timmins attempted to advocate for Woolner's work:

The Dawson Statue has excited intense disgust. Letters have been written by the score. Public meetings bring out all sorts of extravagant statements. The statue is declared to be like fifty different people – all different from each other & not like Dawson! This is, of course, absurd. No two people are alike. Everybody expected to see the "good grey head which all men knew", the pleasant smile, the velvet waistcoat etc etc & when they see a pure white marble figure they do not recognise it! If Dawson had stood there powdered white all over, nobody would have known him.

(19 November 1881)

Eventually, in light of the public outcry, a new statue was commissioned from F. J. Williamson. Completed in 1885, it stood in central Birmingham until 1951.



Another massive blow for Timmins came in January 1879 when a fire swept through the Central Library and took with it the majority of the Shakespeare collection with it. There were reports of Samuel Timmins standing by the library remains sobbing at its destruction. The collection which he so ardently and meticulously worked on with collaborators around the globe was lost. One can also assume that Timmins wept for what was the culmination and legacy of the most profound friendship.

Immediately afterwards Timmins determinedly started to rebuild. On the 13 February 1879 he sent a letter of appeal to Norris for distribution in the US. On the fire itself he wrote:

Our loss is awful & really I cannot find anybody who deserves the whole blame. Every possible piece of ill-luck occurred & a quarter of an hour after alarm all was hopeless.

His personal pain at losing the Shakespeare collection comes across when on the 29 March he writes:

Our library loss seems to me like a horrible dream: I cannot fully realise the fact: every day I think of some book which I want to see and then – the sad truth comes – never again!

By the 8th of May it was clear that national and international response to the destruction of the Shakespeare Memorial Library would ensure the restoration of the collection.

We are getting to work now in earnest to restore our lost libraries & as the book-buying will be practically in the hands of three of the best book-lovers here we shall do very well. We have put all our insurance money & nearly £15,000 donations so we hope in 2 or 3 years to have even greater libraries than we have lost. Alas! very much can never be restored but we shall do our best. (Timmins to Norris, 8 May 1879)

For the next decade Timmins worked diligently in restoring the contents of Shakespeare Memorial Library, laying the foundation for its development and survival.



On 28 February 2023, Blue Plaques were unveiled in the Shakespeare Memorial Room, a space which stands as a legacy to Dawson, Timmins and the other members of the Shakespeare Club who believed that everyone should have access and a right to benefit from the great works of mankind. It seemed particularly fitting that these two men, these two friends, should have their Blue Plaques celebrated together in the room which symbolises the collection created with their

vision. This acknowledgement of their legacy is a public memorial to the cultural enfranchisement of a city but also one which speaks of the power and force of a deep personal connection. Dawson may have died with 'no one near him' but on a grey February evening, at the top of the largest public library building in Europe, both he and Timmins stood cheek-by-jowl, honoured for their impact on a city and a unique collection which has endured for over 150 years.

28 Feb 2023

My Dear Norris,

In haste, many thanks for yr. excellent Flickr on Shks portraiture. You will be most gratified to learn that Dawson, our SML, and myself (in modesty) have been honoured by Birmingham's Civic Society. Vain old Furnivall, our 'Sir Oracle', is literally turning in his grave! It appears that I am now 'heritage'. I enclose a photographic image of my Blue Plaque which will be fixed to my Edgbaston residence. If you do have access to that equally vain and roguish Musk's Twitter platform there are moving images of the ceremony!  
@E2EShakespeare

Ever faithfully yrs.

Sam:Timmins

Karin Thomson

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador

M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award FT (Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham)



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future  
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

