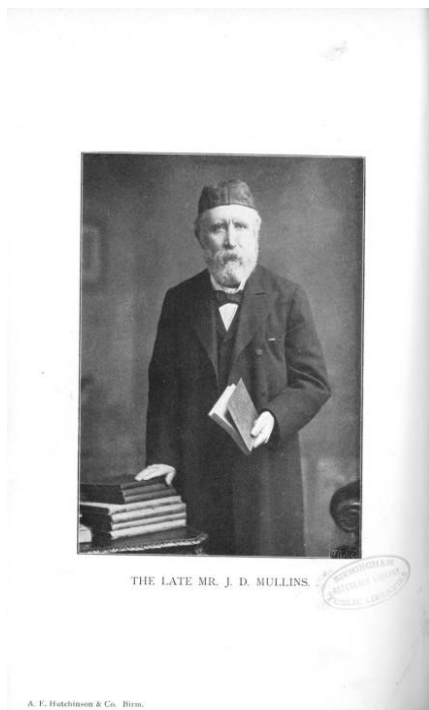


## **'For Heaven's sake, no Clerk!'**

### **John Davies Mullins: from tailor to Birmingham's first Chief Librarian**

Whilst discussing who should be appointed to the post of Librarian at the London Library, Thomas Carlyle makes it clear the kind of person who should not be appointed! However, in the nineteenth century librarianship was not a profession and appointments to even senior posts within the embryonic public library service, sometimes went to clerks! Liverpool's first librarian was a schoolmaster; Sheffield's a 20-year-old silver plater's apprentice!

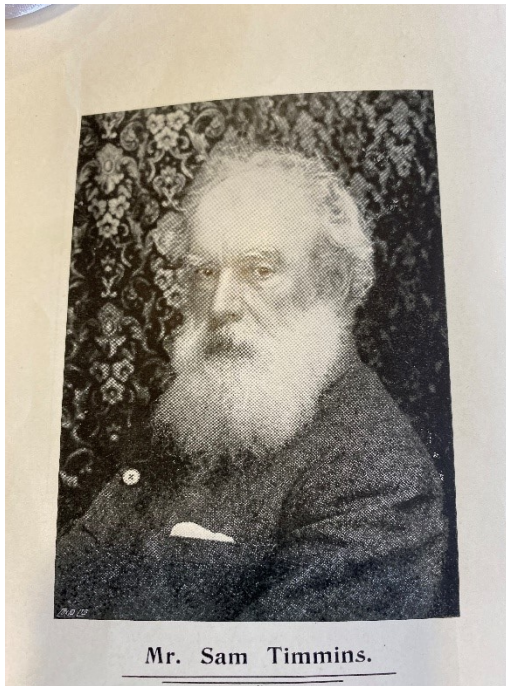


John Davies Mullins was born in London in 1833. Little is known of his early life except that it appears to have been quite humble. It is unclear when, or under what circumstances, he came to Birmingham, but in 1854, parish records show that, on 26 November 1854, he married a local widow, Harriet Godridge Friend, two years his senior, at Edgbaston's parish church of St. Bartholomew's. His occupation was recorded as tailor, but he clearly wanted to improve his lot in life for, by 1858, he was working as a schoolmaster at 95, Upper Trinity Street in Deritend.

In 1858 he was one of 126 applicants for the post of librarian at Birmingham's proprietary subscription library, known as 'the Birmingham Library' situated at 24 Union Street. He was successful and Mullins' career as a librarian had begun. At the Birmingham Library he would have become known to George Dawson and Dawson's great friend Samuel Timmins, both members of the Birmingham Library. They were also keen supporters of the free public library the first of which opened in Birmingham in 1861 on Constitution Hill. When the Central Lending and Reference Libraries opened, in 1865 and 1866 respectively, Mullins applied for and was accepted as Birmingham's first Chief Librarian. His growing professional reputation, but especially his acquaintance with Timmins, would have helped his application.

Mullins was duly appointed in May 1865 'to act under the instructions of the Free Libraries Committee and [to] conform to such Regulations and Conditions as the said Committee may from time to time deem it advisable to impose'. With no national pay scales for senior librarians to guide them, the Town Council settled on a salary of £200, including 'house, coal and gas'.

Amongst his achievements Mullins compiled a Reference Library catalogue (in 1869) followed by the production of the first catalogue to the holdings of the Shakespeare Memorial Library, published in 1872. In the latter, Mullins was careful to include not only the library's holdings but its 'wants' – a move designed to encourage donations. Copies were sent to major libraries around the world, including those in the United States, where interest in all things related to Shakespeare was increasing. The value of the catalogue was acknowledged by Mullins who, in the Preface to the second section, published in 1873, stated that it had 'brought in a considerable number of gifts and materially forwarded the completion of the [Shakespeare] Library'.



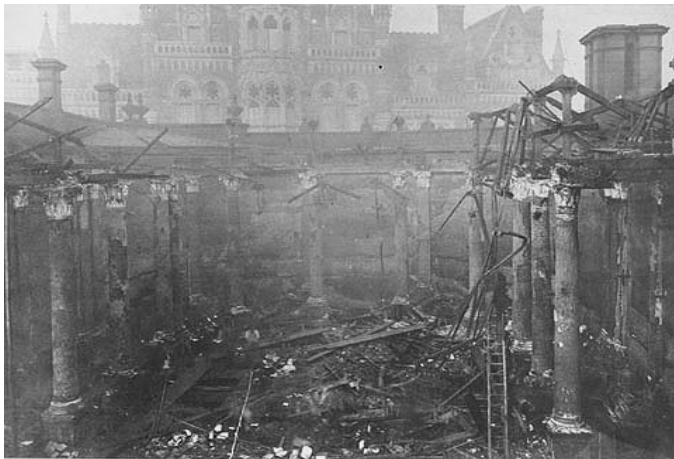
Mullins would remain as Chief Librarian until his retirement in 1898. However, his career hit a crisis in 1878 when a number of his staff complained that rules were too harsh and were being enforced by Mullins 'in a manner that caused general dissatisfaction among the staff'. Amongst the complaints was Mullins' habit of maintaining a register known as the 'Blunder Book' in which staff were required to write up any errors they had made and to which Mullins was said to add derogatory remarks.

A small committee of enquiry, chaired by the Mayor, was set up to 'enquire into the management of the staff'. (It is interesting and perhaps significant, that Timmins was not a member of this committee). They interviewed a number of staff and found that there was indeed 'constant grit in the machinery' of library management affecting the smooth running of the library service.

The staff complaints were upheld. In a damning statement, the committee of enquiry felt that, whilst acknowledging the zeal and industriousness of his work on behalf of the libraries, Mullins had 'failed to temper his zeal with courtesy and good feeling towards his subordinates, and has therefore caused a general dissatisfaction which is likely to continue as long as he remains Chief Librarian'. An unrepentant Mullins submitted his letter of resignation which was accepted.

Whilst Mullins worked his period of notice, his post was advertised with a deadline for applications set at 14 January 1879.

Three days before that date, a disastrous fire destroyed the Reference Library and the Shakespeare Memorial Library. Mullins was immediately instructed by the library committee to begin work compiling registers of books saved from the fire and of those known to have been destroyed. No more was said about his resignation. The fire had saved Mullins' career! Whether there were any disappointed applicants for his job is unknown!



During his long career as Chief Librarian, Mullins developed a wealth of bibliographic and administrative experience which made him a valuable public servant. However, he was never, as some historians believe, a member of that civic elite that formed part of Dawson's circle of liberal 'improvers'. He became a first-class administrator, a skilful cataloguer and, together with Sam Timmins, a judicious book buyer, helping to build, and then re-build the reference library's collections. But as a salaried municipal officer, he was not expected, nor ever invited, to be a member of the library committee. As he once remarked: 'His is a very limited monarchy so far as power goes, though his responsibility is unlimited'.

However, within the fledgling library profession, he became an important figure. He served as a member of the Library Association Council for many years where he, together with H. R. Tedder, another founder member of the Library Association, established a programme of professional study, with examinations, which began the process of improving the status of the earliest generation of Victorian librarians.

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