

The Shakespeare Memorial Library and Germany

Whilst researching the history of the disastrous fire of January 1879 which destroyed the central reference library, I found myself consulting a Stock Book, begun only days after the fire (Library of Birmingham, Archives and Collections, *Birmingham Free Libraries Reference Dept. Stock book vol. 1, 1879-80*, BCC/1/DM/D/2/2/1/2/1/2).

I was intrigued that of the 576 titles recorded as rescued from the Shakespeare Memorial Library, 394 (68%) were German publications! Was it simply a coincidence that so many German titles were saved from the flames or was Germany a major contributor to the collection?

Consulting the Shakespeare Library archives confirmed that, during the early decades, Germany was indeed a big supporter of the library. In one year alone, 1881-1882, 1,375 German publications were acquired, many of them as gifts.

By the 1870s Germany was a big fan of all things Shakespeare. The Bard had been absorbed into German culture and placed alongside Goethe and Schiller as the 'third German classic'. The publishing output of German Shakespeareans was increasing rapidly. 'Our Shakespeare was never thoroughly understood in this country', declared George Dawson, 'till we received him back illustrated and explained, from Germany.'

One of the most impressive German gifts to be found in the collection is a Shakespeare Album, presented to Samuel Timmins, Hon. Sec. of the committee of subscribers, by Friedrich August Leo of Berlin in May 1878. Furnished with a specially commissioned and elaborately decorated cover, the album contains portraits and biographies of Germans who had contributed to raising Shakespeare's profile, including scholars, actors, composers, painters and sculptors.



A digital facsimile of the Shakespeare Memorial Album can be viewed at:
<https://www.shakespearealbum.de/en/facsimile.html#book/>

The Album could well have been lost because it was only received a few months before the Reference Library, including the majority of the 7,000 volumes in the Shakespeare Memorial Library, was destroyed by the fire. The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that the Mayor, Jesse Collings, raced across from the Council House and rescued the Album, placing it under the entrance porch way of nearby Mason College until the fire had been brought under control. Thus one of the collections most valuable treasures was saved for posterity, although many were lost!

Nil desperandum! Work on re-building the library went on apace. Donations were received from all over the world including 120 volumes from the Shakespeare Society of Weimar. George Dawson had died three years earlier but his son Bernard provided more books from his late father's collection.

When the library re-opened in 1882, one-fifth of the stock of 4,000 volumes were donations. Included in the new collection were copies of each of the early folios and a set of the quartos (48 volumes) facsimiled by E. W. Ashbee. By 1885, Timmins could report to the annual subscribers' meeting that, with 6,782 volumes in twenty-six languages, 'the collection was now fully equal to that destroyed by the fire of 1879.' The largest overseas contributor was still Germany with German publications forming 28% of the collection at this point in time.

Notes

'Disastrous fire in Birmingham', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13th January 1879.

Library of Birmingham, Shakespeare Collection, S993.2. *Shakespeare Memorial Library Minute Book*, vol. 1, 1863-1903.

Waveney R. N. Payne, 'The Shakespeare Memorial Library', *The Library World*, Vol. 65, 1964, pp. 255-259.

Werner Habicht, *The Birmingham Shakespeare Album: A Visual Record of Germany's Shakespeare Reception*. www.shakespearealbum.de/en/history-of-the-album.html

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

