

M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award- 'Everything to Everybody'?: A Critical History of the World's Premier Public Shakespeare Library

Project Title				
'Everything to Everybody'?: A Critical History of the World's Premier Public Shakespeare Library				
LEAD INSTITUTION				
Name of HEI institution	University of Birmingham			
Lead regional city	Birmingham <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Coventry <input type="checkbox"/>	Leicester <input type="checkbox"/>	Nottingham <input type="checkbox"/>
PARTNER ORGANISATION				
Name of organisation	Library of Birmingham			
Website URL	https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraries			
THE RESEARCH PROJECT				
<p>The proposed research will test and refine the case the 'Everything to Everybody' Project is making for Birmingham's uniquely democratic Shakespeare heritage. Its particular contribution will be to provide a full-length scholarly analysis of the one-hundred-and-fifty-year history of the first great Shakespeare library in the world. This will: (1) fill a significant gap in Shakespeare Studies and (2) bring cutting-edge archival research to bear on the central question of the project: what <i>good</i> is Shakespeare, in history and to Birmingham now?</p> <p>The studentship will look in depth at how the identity and purpose of Birmingham's public Shakespeare collection changed over time, studying hitherto unexamined library records and documents. It will, equally, involve analysing in detail the shifting cultural paradigms which have influenced its history.</p> <p>Birmingham's collection was intended to comprise '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'. But, as Shakespeare publishing boomed, it focused on collecting fine and limited editions. With other libraries such as the Folger and British libraries acting as global repositories for published material from the middle part of the 20th century, it prioritised production-related ephemera. From the 1960s, it connected more deliberately with Birmingham communities, publishing a seven-volume catalogue in 1971. With the opening of the John Madin Central Library in 1974, the use of the imposing Shakespeare Memorial Room was discontinued and the collection repurposed as part of a wider, more accessible offering. By the closing decades of the 20th century, Birmingham Library Services had targeted its tightening resources on more community-facing services and by 2013 there was no dedicated Shakespeare librarian. The studentship will conduct a PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental) analysis of this history in order to understand how this collection, and Shakespeare's perceived public value in the UK, have altered over a period that is more extensive than the history of English Studies itself.</p> <p>This analysis will be guided by the following research questions:</p>				

- How did Birmingham’s Shakespeare collection maintain its position as one of the foremost collections in the world for more than one hundred and fifty years even while it steadily lost global, national and even local visibility and influence?
- Why did the collection’s founding democratic mission tail into cloistered academic specialism, and what does this tell us about Shakespeare’s popular purchase and value in the modern era?
- How is ‘Shakespeare’ constituted in Birmingham during the Library’s history?
- To what extent is this dictated by national and local politics, and to what effects?

And:

- To what extent is the history of Birmingham’s Shakespeare collection determined by the politics of the British empire and commonwealth?

But the focus of this studentship will be more than historical. In light of the historical analysis conducted, it will engage critically with the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project’s current efforts to revive and reinvent the collection’s original democratic mission in the changed circumstances of today. A special emphasis will be on decolonising the collection for a multicultural modern city.

In addition to the expert supervisory team, the award-holder will be supported by the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project’s Librarian and Archivist. The project involves its own lively and dedicated research community, via its Heritage Ambassadors scheme, postgraduate internships and ‘citizen researchers’. It is enviably located in its own project office in the Library of Birmingham; and the proposed student would also enjoy access to a ‘second academic home’ in Stratford, and all the facilities of the renowned Shakespeare Institute. The contacts of M4C, the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project and the supervisory team will afford opportunities for comparative analysis of other world-significant Shakespeare collections such as the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. If the project is not extended because of Covid-19, as seems likely, the student will be additionally supported in his / her final year by a dedicated UoB / BCC Collection Librarian.

Timetable for Research:

2021-2022: Review minute books and records of the collection; review secondary literature on Shakespeare collecting and the history of public libraries; review ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project documentation; write introductory chapter

2022-2023: Compare with SBT and other relevant UK archives; write detailed chapters on the collection’s early history and its cultural and political determinants

2023-2024: Compare with Folger and international archives; write detailed chapters on collection’s recent history and its cultural and political contexts

2024-2025: Complete chapters, including historically-informed analysis of E2E Project and Conclusion

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

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