

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 867th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 10 January 2012. The meeting was chaired by Mary Reardon who introduced Dr Claire Cochrane, Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Worcester and author of two books on the Birmingham Repertory Theatre: *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913-1929* and *Birmingham Rep: A City's Theatre 1962-2002*, and the recently published *Twentieth Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire*. Dr Cochrane drew on her research for her talk 'Shakespeare in Modern Times: Birmingham Rep and the Shock of the New'.

Starting with the Rep's 1928 production of *Macbeth*, set in the First World War, Dr Cochrane claimed this as the dramatic peak of the work of the Rep and its founder Sir Barry Jackson over three decades. Only ten years after the end of the Great War, audiences found its realism 'too close to home' and found uncomfortable anachronisms in the modern dress that distracted from the play. But at least one critic found that the modern-dress treatment of Shakespeare, that Jackson had first introduced to the world with *Cymbeline* in 1923, 'scrubbed [the play] clean of dust and the varnish of ages'.

Dr Cochrane argued that between the wars (1918 to 1940) Birmingham Rep defiantly affiliated itself to the European Modernist movement, not always to the applause of its audiences in its home city and then later in London and on tour. She traced the life and influence of Sir Barry Jackson, the son of a Birmingham family that made its fortune in the dairy business, who founded the Rep in 1913 and the tensions between his claim that 'art has no possible relation to money' and the fact that he kept the theatre afloat for many years from his own pocket. In its choice of repertoire from absurdist drama like Jarry's *Ubu Roi* to new plays by John Drinkwater, its introduction in the 20s of the latest trends in theatre design, using simplified stagings, drapes and tapestries, and the building in Station Street which, with its steeply-raked auditorium, could claim to be most radical theatre in England until the late 50s, Birmingham Rep was at the forefront of British theatre. The work of director H.K Ayliffe and young actors like Olivier, Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Margaret Leighton and Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies secured its reputation in the UK and abroad.

After questions from the audience the meeting finished at 9pm.