

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The Shakespeare Club's 961st meeting was held on Tuesday 12 March 2024, when Nick Birch from the Marie Corelli Society spoke about *Stratford upon Avon's 'Great Little Lady': The Life, Literature and Legacy of Marie Corelli* who died 100 years ago in April 1924.

Born Minnie Mackay in 1855, and with a family background she never revealed, she reinvented herself as Marie Corelli, which she believed to be her real persona. She was a talented musician but concentrated on becoming an author and maintained this identity for the rest of her life. Her first novel, *The Romance of Two Worlds*, was published in 1886. At the time, novels were expensively published in three volumes, accessed by most people through circulating subscription libraries. Prices were kept high and the number published was low. As one of the most successful of authors by 1895 Marie Corelli helped to revolutionise the publication of fiction, insisting, by the time *The Sorrows of Satan* was published, that they come out in a cheaper single volume, vastly increasing the number of sales.

By the time she was writing most of the population of the UK received a basic education and there was huge potential for entertaining reading matter. Her books captivated this new readership, with characters they could identify with and gripping plots. Each book contained a high-minded message. She understood the concerns of her readers and believed herself to be giving them a voice.

Moving to "sleepy Stratford" in 1899 after a serious illness, Her career as a successful writer continued to blossom: she was paid an advance of the equivalent of £500,000 for the first book written in Stratford, *Temporal Power*, which sold 120,000 copies.

She became a local Lady Bountiful, generously giving money to worthy causes, handing out prizes at local events, and took up the cause of protecting the town's architectural and Shakespearean heritage. She became an excellent public speaker, persuasive and passionate with a bright and expressive speaking voice.

Her eccentricities including her pony-drawn trap and the gondola imported from Italy in which she could often be seen on the Avon sometimes made her the cause of amusement. Her strong beliefs caused her to clash with the town's male hierarchy, particularly relating to the town's buildings and environment. In 1902 she stirred up controversy over the memorial to actress Helen Faucit in Holy Trinity Church, and opposed the building of a Carnegie Free Library in Henley Street which would replace four cottages that had been there since Shakespeare's day. These campaigns made her enemies who never ceased trying to belittle her in spite of her celebrity status. More positively, she saved Harvard House. Using her own money she removed the rendering from the Tudor House in the High Street, and bought The Firs, giving the land to the town where it is still a public park.

After World War 1 her books started to drop out of fashion though she remained famous and after her death crowds gathered at her house, Mason's Croft. In his obituary, Shakespearean Sir Sidney Lee, wrote that she had a genuine zeal for good causes.

Eccentric, both kind and abrasive, over-sensitive herself but lacking in sensitivity towards others, she was a woman of paradoxes but one whose extraordinary life and career is now receiving serious attention.