



Evolution in Baker Street

or

“Holmes! Is it Really You?”

William Hyder

In the last few years I've come to realize that I'm an obsolete Sherlockian.

The Sherlockian world I grew up in is fading away. Time and the Internet and the rise of social media have created a broader and more inclusive Sherlockian world — the one you're living in. But let me give you an idea of the way things used to be, and how all this Sherlockian business got started.

I was born in 1929. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was still alive. He had published his last Sherlock Holmes story, “Shoscombe Old Place,” two years earlier, and in 1930 he died. What we now call the Canon — the sixty Sherlock Holmes adventures — was complete.

Whether it was cause and effect or just coincidence, many people in England who enjoyed the Holmes adventures began to write about them. In 1931 an academic named S. C. Roberts wrote a brief biography of Doctor Watson. A year later there was a book-length study of Holmes and his career by T. S. Blakeney. It was called *Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction?* The same year, 1932, an American archaeologist living in England, H. W. Bell, worked out a chronology of the Sherlock Holmes Canon — determining the actual date of each adventure — and got it published.

These writers were soon followed by others who began to look into the many untold aspects of the Holmes adventures. All we know about Sherlock Holmes is what we're told by Dr. Watson, and there's a lot he doesn't tell us. When was Holmes born? Where was he brought up? Who were his parents? Which university did he go to, Oxford or Cambridge? Which house in Baker Street is the real 221B? People began speculating about questions like these, and attempted to answer them by drawing on internal evidence found in Watson's text.

Also, the adventures are full of discrepancies that need sorting out. After writing about Holmes for a few years, Conan Doyle lost interest in the character. The Sherlock Holmes stories were just

part of his enormous output. His great love was writing historical novels: *The White Company*, *Sir Nigel*, *The Great Shadow*, *The Refugees*, *Rodney Stone* . . . He also wrote dozens of non-Sherlockian short stories, several plays, a few volumes of verse, and a lot more.

Doyle kept turning out the Holmes adventures because they paid well. But he didn't concern himself much about details — he admitted that himself — and Sherlockian scholars seized on the anomalies that Doyle scattered throughout his stories, and wrote papers seeking to justify them or explain them away. In *The Sign of Four*, for example, a day that begins in July morphs into a September evening a few pages later. H. W. Bell, the chronologist, wrestled with that one in a book he called *Baker Street Studies*.

Baker Street Studies was published in 1934. It was a historic event: the first collection of Sherlockian scholarship. It included work by Bell and others who went on to become prominent in the Sherlockian world. S. C. Roberts, who wrote the biography of Dr. Watson that I mentioned earlier, discussed Holmes's attitude toward women. Helen Simpson examined Dr. Watson's medical education and career. Dorothy L. Sayers, the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, looked into Holmes's college career.

The curious thing about this sudden emergence of Sherlockian scholarship is that all of the writers adopted the conceit that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson were real people, and that their adventures really happened. It was a strange phenomenon. They didn't hold a meeting and pass a resolution to do that. Apparently the vividness of Doyle's writing worked on all of them in the same way.

What they were doing was playing a game — exploring the life and character of Sherlock Holmes in the same way scholars might explore the life and character of any other eminent Victorian — Benjamin Disraeli or Alfred, Lord Tennyson, or Cecil Rhodes. Their essays were parodies of academic papers, complete with footnotes.

In 1934, the same year that *Baker Street Studies* was published, a group of British enthusiasts met in London and organized the Sherlock Holmes Society. In New York an American writer named Christopher Morley beat them to the punch. He had already formed a group called the Baker Street Irregulars.

And soon local Sherlock Holmes societies began to spring up in various American cities. They all adopted the practice of speaking of Holmes and Watson as real people. Dr. Watson's narratives

were called adventures, not stories, because stories are fictional. And how did they explain Arthur Conan Doyle? Oh — he was Dr. Watson's literary agent. Then Americans started writing Sherlockian scholarship, led and encouraged by Christopher Morley. They wrote papers and sent them to each other, or published them in periodicals like *The Saturday Review of Literature*.

The first collection of American Sherlockiana came out in 1940. It was called *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes* and edited by Vincent Starrett. He was a newspaperman in Chicago, born in Canada. He had written one of the papers that were published six years earlier in *Baker Street Studies*.

221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes contained groundbreaking works of scholarship by some of the founders of the American Sherlockian movement. Elmer Davis probed into Holmes's emotional life and his relations with women. Robert Keith Leavitt looked at Holmes's financial situation. H. W. Bell was back, this time tracking down the actual London locations of three crimes described in the Canon. Christopher Morley, who was always a little extravagant in his Sherlockian writings, suggested that Holmes was an American, and pointed out things in the Canon that suggested that idea.

I found *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes* in my neighborhood library a few years after it came out. I was in my early teens then, and I was hooked. Sherlockian scholarship — reading it, and later on writing it — became one of my passions.

Soon after I discovered Starrett's book, another collection of American Sherlockian scholarship appeared. *Profile by Gaslight* was published in 1944, and I made sure to get a copy. It was edited by Edgar W. Smith, who at that time was becoming the moving spirit of the Baker Street Irregulars. He contributed an essay arguing that the so-called "King of Bohemia," who tangled with Irene Adler, was Dr. Watson's cover name for Queen Victoria's playboy son, Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales.

Robert Keith Leavitt showed up again, examining Holmes's expertise with firearms — or actually his lack of it. Howard Collins speculated on the books Holmes would have had on his shelves; Dorothy L. Sayers wondered why, if Watson's name was John, his wife called him James; and Anthony Boucher suggested that the man who returned from the Great Hiatus was not the original Sherlock Holmes.

All this was fascinating to me and to a lot of other Holmes fans.

And the stream of Sherlockian writings flowed on and on. In the early 1950s quarterly magazines were launched on both sides of the Atlantic — *The Baker Street Journal* over here, *The Sherlock Holmes Journal* in Britain. There was always plenty of material to fill them. And to handle the overflow, dozens of other journals sprang up here, in Britain, and in other countries.

I mentioned earlier that T. S. Blakeney wrote what he called a biography of Holmes in 1932. In 1962 a new one appeared — *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street. A Biography of the World's First Consulting Detective*, by William S. Baring-Gould. It was published in both the United States and the United Kingdom. As the first biography in thirty years, it caused a great stir and became immensely influential in the Sherlockian world.

And after Baring-Gould's book appeared, the floodgates opened. More Sherlockian biographies came gushing out — at least seven more, by my count, including one that I wrote myself a few years ago. Two of them were written in the form of an autobiography — Sherlock Holmes telling his own story.

Baring-Gould's biography has remained the most prominent one, but I never cared for it. Anybody who wants to write a biography of Sherlock Holmes needs to fill in a lot of details and cover periods in Holmes's life that Dr. Watson doesn't mention, so they have to rely heavily on their own imagination. I think Baring-Gould's imagination was far too lively.

For my money, the best of the biographies was written by June Thomson. She's an English schoolteacher who became a successful mystery writer. The book is called *Holmes and Watson. A Study in Friendship*, and it came out in 1995. As the title indicates, it's a biography of both men.

Thomson sticks closely to the Canon. When she has to rely on invention to fill in the many gaps, she doesn't let her imagination run away with her, as Baring-Gould did. All of her speculations are plausible and firmly grounded in Canonical fact. I recommend it highly.

Now let's go back to the 1930s again, when all this started. In addition to all the Sherlockian writings I've been discussing, which after all were produced by a relatively small group of enthusiasts, Sherlock Holmes became a heavy presence in the popular media. In those days that meant the movies and the radio.

In the eight years between 1929 and 1937 ten Sherlock Holmes films were produced, seven by British studios and three out of Hollywood. They were “Sherlock Holmes” movies in that they featured a character who bore that name, but they all placed Holmes in the 1930s, and the adventures they depicted resembled Doyle’s stories only in spots. One of them gave Holmes “an untramodern office with dictaphones, a typing pool of busy secretaries and an intercom,” as David Stuart Davies wrote in *Starring Sherlock Holmes* (2001). In another film he’s the inventor of an electric ray that can immobilize automobiles.

Thus began the great tradition of non-Canonical, non-Doylean Holmes adventures — made-up stories, in other words — which is still going strong today. While the Sherlockian scholars I mentioned earlier were trying to discover the real Sherlock Holmes, the movie industry was busily inventing imitation Holmeses. It’s not too much to say that the general public’s conception of Sherlock Holmes, in this country and probably in Britain, owes far more to movie script writers — and now, TV script writers — than it does to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

It wasn’t until 1939 that moviegoers saw a proper Victorian Holmes, played by Basil Rathbone, in a reasonably accurate version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Nigel Bruce, of course, contributed a lovable but not very admirable Dr. Watson. Later in the same year Rathbone and Bruce starred in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. It wasn’t a Canonical film, but at least it remained in the Victorian era.

Unfortunately that didn’t last. The Sherlock Holmes franchise moved from 20th Century-Fox to Universal Studios, and Rathbone and Bruce turned out twelve films that set Holmes and Watson firmly in the 1940s and showed Holmes doing his bit to win the Second World War.

Sherlock Holmes, or at least a character bearing that name, was also a conspicuous presence on American radio. A weekly series began in 1930 and continued, with occasional lapses, until 1950. Various actors played Holmes and Watson, with Rathbone and Bruce coming on board in 1939, after the success of their *Hound of the Baskervilles* film.

For many years the scripts were written by Edith Meiser. She based the first season on Canonical adventures, but then they ran out and she began to make up her own. So the radio audience heard Sherlock Holmes investigating cases like “The Walking Corpse,” and “The Missing Black Bag,” and “The Hindoo in the Wicker Basket.” And the radio writers who came after Edith Meiser were equally inventive.

In addition to the movies and the radio dramas, Sherlockian pastiches began appearing. A pastiche is a serious attempt to imitate a writing style or a literary genre. A few of the early Sherlockians wrote pastiches of the Holmes stories for their own enjoyment, as a *tour de force*. Later on, Holmes enthusiasts started turning them out in quantity — not just short stories but full-length novels, published in hard covers.

All Sherlockians, I'm sure, feel that sixty Holmes adventures are not enough. But it appears that a lot of Sherlockians also feel that imitation Holmes is better than no Holmes. So when the flood of pastiches began, the people who wrote them found an enthusiastic audience.

I'm sure all of these pastiche writers have a genuine love of Sherlock Holmes, but some of them have come up with pretty wild ideas. There's a pastiche that sends Sherlock Holmes out into space, and another one that takes him to Dallas, Texas, to look into the assassination of President Kennedy.

Pastiche writers love to show Holmes hobnobbing with prominent historical figures, like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. The most famous pastiche, I would suppose, is *The Seven-Per Cent Solution*, by Nicholas Meyer. That one brings Holmes together with Sigmund Freud, no less. It had a tremendous success when it came out in 1974, and it went on to become a major motion picture. And the pastiches have kept coming — hundreds or even thousands of them by now. The most successful one in recent years has been *Dust and Shadow*, by Lyndsay Faye.

Old-school Sherlockians welcomed all these Non-Canonical things — the pastiches, the movies, the radio dramas — and we more or less enjoyed them. But we kept them separate from the Canon. They weren't really Sherlock Holmes adventures. We may have marginalized Arthur Conan Doyle, calling him "Watson's literary agent," but that was just in fun. We knew perfectly well how great and unique his work was.

I was one of the more extreme Holmes fans. I was never able to embrace any of the movies or TV shows or pastiches in the way I embraced the Canon. To me they didn't have the magic that I found in Doyle's work. They created artificial Sherlock Holmeses who lived in some parallel universe. The thing that came closest, I thought, was the Jeremy Brett TV series. That was a splendid attempt to give an accurate depiction of Sherlock Holmes and his time. Unfortunately its later seasons were undermined by Brett's bad health and the producers' bad decisions.

But the general public happily consumed all of these imitation Holmeses on the screen, the radio, and the page. Meanwhile the small army of Sherlockians kept busily turning out their scholarly papers and books.

In 1980 a great Baltimore Sherlockian, Philip Sherman, created the Weekend with Sherlock Holmes at the Enoch Pratt Central Library. That's an annual program of Sherlockian talks, and it's still going on.

I attended the first one in 1980, and liked it so much that, when the time came for the second one, I went to Phil Sherman and asked, Could I please be on the program? That's how I got started writing Sherlockian scholarship. I took to submitting my writings to *The Baker Street Journal* and a couple of Sherlockian journals in England, and I went on to write and edit a few Sherlockian books.

But as I was happily playing the Great Game — that's what Sherlockians were calling it, the Great Game — some problems were beginning to crop up. When the Sherlockian movement started, back in the 1930s, assuming that Sherlock Holmes was a living person had been plausible enough. If Holmes had been born in 1854, as a lot of scholars believe, he would have been 80 in 1934. That was believable. People did live that long.

But as the years passed, it became harder and harder to justify the notion that Sherlock Holmes still walked the earth. You'd get writers bravely stating that Holmes was still living in retirement on his Sussex bee farm at the age of 124. One imaginative soul wrote that Holmes's experiments in beekeeping made him aware of royal jelly, which had the power to lengthen the human life span. It was getting silly.

And Sherlockians realized that. As early as 1998, in a British journal called *The Ritual*, a writer named Paul M. Chapman made this ominous statement: ". . . there is something faintly odd in treating Holmes and Watson as historical personages. . . ." Other prominent Sherlockians made similar pronouncements, including Barbara Roden, writing in *Canadian Holmes*, and Steve Rothman, the editor of *The Baker Street Journal*.

That attitude, of course, threatened the whole structure of Sherlockian scholarship. I couldn't blame these younger people for not being able to believe that Holmes is still living in his cottage on the South Downs. But as I said at one of the Baker Street Irregulars dinners, yes, Sherlock Holmes must be long dead by now. But we're free to assume that he did really live, and that the

adventures chronicled by Dr. Watson did really happen.

Of course that would bring up the question of when Sherlock Holmes died. And that would be one more fascinating topic for Sherlockians to argue about.

Anyway, as I kept writing Sherlockian papers and having a wonderful time doing it, something else came up. People were starting to claim that Sherlockian scholarship was exhausted — that everything had been said, every topic covered. Favorite subjects like the actual location of 221B, Baker Street, and whether Holmes went to Oxford or Cambridge — it had all been done and done again. We'd reached the bottom of the barrel, they said.

I thought that was nonsense. I could think of plenty of new topics to write about. And I felt that the changing times would bring new perspectives to all the tired old topics.

Well, the times changed, but not in the way I expected. In 1997 the head of the Baker Street Irregulars, Tom Stix Jr., stepped down and turned the job over to Michael Whelan. And Mike has taken the group in a new direction. He began referring to the BSI as "a literary society." Think about the implications of that term: if the Sherlock Holmes adventures are literature, we're admitting that they're fiction and that Conan Doyle was their author. That contradicts everything that Sherlockian scholars have believed — or agreed to believe — since the 1930s.

I'm not criticizing Mike for taking that path. As I mentioned, more and more Sherlockians have been finding it impossible to assume that Holmes and Watson were real people, let alone that they're still alive. It's a historical trend, and you can't fight a historical trend. Mike Whelan is, very sensibly, going along with the course of history.

But in one way his decision has made a difference that I think is unfortunate. Ever since the Sherlockian movement started in the early 1930s, and for more than sixty years afterward, this small group of supposedly intelligent people stoutly maintained that Sherlock Holmes was not only a real person, but still alive at some impossible age. People looked at us strangely and considered us — at best — harmless eccentrics. Okay, we were. It was part of the fun. The great literary critic Edmund Pearson labeled us "infantile." We could live with that. The hell with Edmund Pearson.

But — reinventing the Baker Street Irregulars as a "literary society" makes being a Sherlockian RESPECTABLE. And there's no fun in that.

People are now studying Arthur Conan Doyle and his work as they would any other writer, and they're even debating whether the Sherlock Holmes stories can be dignified with the title of literature. (Believe it or not, some people say they *can't* be considered literature.)

I occasionally go to meetings of Watson's Tin Box, a scion society in Columbia, Md., and I hear the Gasogene ask, "Well, what did you think of tonight's story?" And the members — all younger than I am by thirty or forty or fifty years — say things like, "I thought the plot was pretty weak," or, "Holmes's deductions aren't very convincing." And I sit there horrified, thinking to myself, "There's no plot. It's not a story, it's a report by Dr. Watson. These things really happened, people!"

Imitation Sherlock Holmeses are with us in full force these days. On television we have Benedict Cumberbatch as an up-to-date, 21st century *Sherlock*. And there's CBS's *Elementary*, equally up to date, with Lucy Liu playing a female Dr. Watson who acts as Holmes's personal psychiatrist. On the big screen we have Robert Downey Jr. as a scruffy, unshaven Holmes, who seems to live in a junk-filled warehouse and operates in a Victorian London straight out of the comic books. And with the old-fashioned Sherlockian scholarship becoming irrelevant and fading away, the more recent Sherlockians are accepting these imitation Holmeses as the real thing.

I agree that they're entertaining shows, with clever scripts and good acting, but for all the kinship they have with Conan Doyle's work and with the atmosphere of the Canonical stories, the writers might as well have named the main characters McManus and Peabody instead of Holmes and Watson.

And now, of course, we have the Internet and the ever-multiplying "social media." In the *Baker Street Journal* a few years ago, Steve Rothman wrote, "A Google search for 'Sherlock Holmes' produces over 41 million results," among them "thousands of blogs devoted to Holmes. . . . There are also thousands of *people* on Twitter every day broad-casting 140 characters of Holmesian interest, and endless Facebook pages devoted to . . . Sherlockian doings." So we're all swimming in a huge electronic ocean, in which everything is equal.

Sherlock Holmes originated in the 19th century, and he was a formidable presence throughout the 20th. But in the 21st century the original Holmes has been marginalized. The podcasts, the fan fiction, the TV series, the big-screen movies, the pastiche novels — all these things are overwhelming the sixty Canonical adventures. Imitations rule.

I saw a good example of this in the latest newsletter from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. Some students at King's College, London, have started a Holmes society, and they issued this announcement:

"The . . . Society, although based on the BBC series, is not limited to this adaptation. We explore all the different adaptations and interpretations of Sir Conan Doyle's works, as well as the various portrayals of his characters."

Leaving aside the fact that these British college students don't know the correct way of referring to *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, they're apparently showing no interest in the stories he wrote — the basic material. They're starting with Benedict Cumberbatch and going on from there.

Actually I've met a good number of present-day Sherlockians who know the Canonical adventures as well as we old-timers do. But they think of them as just one version of Holmes among many. And I feel sorry about that. As I keep insisting, I think the writings of Arthur Conan Doyle have a magic that no film or TV show or pastiche has ever come close to. Even the weakest Canonical adventure has some passage or conversation or description that gleams with Doyle's wonderful gift.

I'm also sorry to see old-fashioned Sherlockian scholarship ebbing away. A few people still engage in it, and *The Baker Street Journal* and *The Sherlock Holmes Journal* in England still publish it, but it's getting rare. I still get ideas for papers, but with a dwindling audience I don't see much point in writing them.

I'm sad about all this, but I'm not all bitter and twisted. Nothing lasts forever, I know. The world moves on.

So let me salute the younger generations of Sherlockians. I hope your love for Sherlock Holmes will give *you* as much pleasure as it gave *me*, and I hope it will continue to give you pleasure for decades to come.

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