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The Annotated Sherlock Holmes

Henry Woods

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BOOK REVIEW

The Annotated Sherlock Holmes. Edited by William S. Baring-Gould. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. 1977. 2 vols. \$29.95.

Henry Woods*

This handsome, beautifully illustrated reprinting of the fifty-six short stories and four novels which constitute the Holmes canon would doubtless be the final word in most literary testaments. The incredibly detailed annotations to almost every other sentence might seem to defy further literary mining of this particular lode. With the devotees of Sherlock Holmes, such is not to be expected. Instead, the flood of pastiches, simulacra, parodies, burlesques, and even science-fiction will continue unabated. New impetus will probably be given to the "writings about the writings"—the criticisms, commentaries, glossaries, and chronologies, whose titles presently occupy fifty-one columns and seventeen oversized pages at the end of Volume II.

These are mostly the works of "players of the game" and include many by the greatest literary lights of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Dorothy Sayers, the great English medievalist and herself a superb detective story writer, expressed it in *Unpopular Opinions*, "The rule of the game is that it must be played as solemnly as a county cricket match at Lord's; the slightest touch of extravagance or burlesque ruins the atmosphere." Literary journals in this country and in England are filled with serious and painstakingly researched controversies over whether Holmes went to Oxford or Cambridge, his date of birth, his parentage, and other details of his life, ad infinitum. Franklin Roosevelt, a player of the game, postulated that the great detective was a foundling, a proposition that drew spirited retorts from other players. A great deal of serious literary effort and research has been expended in tracing the identity of Dr. Watson's service with the Army Medical Corps in India and ascertaining on which ship he was invalided home.

The players are a disparate lot, including the great Catholic theologian and translator of the modern *Catholic Bible*, Monsignor Ronald Knox, and such show-biz characters as Arthur Godfrey and ZaZu Pitts. Many of the players are, of course, active in the Baker Street Irregulars, whose chapters circle the globe. One of the most

* Member of the Little Rock law firm of McMath, Leatherman & Woods; A.B., J.D., University of Arkansas at Fayetteville; President of the Arkansas Bar Association, 1972-73.

active is in Tokyo. Chapter leaders have included such literati as the late Christopher Morley and such public figures as Gene Tunney and the late Elmer Davis.

What is it that we love in Sherlock Holmes? One of the greatest of all the players, Edgar Smith, has answered, "We love the times in which he lived, of course, the half-remembered, half-forgotten times of snug Victorian illusion, the gaslit comfort and contentment of perfect dignity and grace He is Galahad and Socrates, bringing high adventure to our dull existences and calm, judicial logic to our biased minds." Small wonder that these stories have always been a favorite of men and women of the law. We learn that Sir Arthur chose one of our preeminent legal names for his central figure, albeit the inspiration came from Oliver Wendell Holmes *pere*. Are not we lawyers constantly engaged in what Holmes continually refers to as "the science of deduction"? (In one of the incomparable footnotes, the editor points out that Holmes' reasoning was really inductive, making brilliant inferences from minute detail, *i.e.*, from the particular to the general.) The favorite axiom of Mr. Sherlock Holmes has great application to the practice of law: "It is one of the elementary principles of practical reasoning that when the impossible has been eliminated, the residuum, *however improbable*, must contain the truth." Though it may be humbling to lawyers, the great detective was actually based on Dr. Joseph Bell, one of Dr. Doyle's medical professors at the University of Edinburgh, who "would sit in his receiving room with a face like a Red Indian and diagnose the people as they came in, before they even opened their mouths. He would tell them their symptoms and give them details of their past life." The doctor's powers were so famous that he did not go unremarked. After Robert Louis Stevenson read one of the stories in far away Samoa, he wrote Conan Doyle, "Can this be *our old friend Joe Bell?*"

Nevertheless, both Dr. Bell and Sherlock Holmes thought like lawyers, which is supposed to be the principal end of modern legal education. He often spoke in legal terms using such words of art as "compounding a felony" ("Adventure of the Three Gables"). After all, Holmes' concerns were the law's major concerns—crime, detection, and punishment. Crime is personified in these stories by its Napoleon, Professor James Moriarity, a criminal so brilliant that at twenty-one he wrote a treatise on the binomial theorem, a problem that had vexed mathematicians for many centuries. He may even have anticipated Einstein in the construction of the formula $E=MC^2$ by his magnum opus on *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*. Only a Moriarity could have been a worthy foe of the great Victorian,

whose character has not only challenged some of the greatest writers of this age—Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Sir James Barrie—but some of its greatest actors—John Barrymore, Raymond Massey, and the one most familiar to my generation, Basil Rathbone. As aptly said by Vincent Starrett, that master of the pastiche on Holmes and Watson, “[T]hey still live for all that love them well; in a romantic chamber of the heart; in a nostalgic country of the mind; where it is always 1895.”

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