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The Annotated Sherlock Holmes

Henry Woods

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BOOK REVIEW


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

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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 contin-
ually refers to as "the science of deduction"? (In one of the incompa-
rable 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 Edin-
burgh, 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
gem 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, detec-
tion, 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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