

The Greatest Detective Who Never Lived

adapted from Smithsonian's Fred Strebeigh



In the winter of 1887, a London magazine called Beeton's Christmas Annual published a tale of murder entitled "A Study in Scarlet." Written by a struggling provincial doctor, the story had suffered multiple rejections before arriving at Beeton's, which considered it "cheap fiction" and paid the poor doctor wretchedly. But Beeton's had launched one of the most successful literary characters of all time - Sherlock Holmes.

That first tale finds the great detective in full stride. Holmes, smoking a pipe and wielding a magnifying glass, arrogantly mocks the London police and treats his friend and chronicler, Dr. John H. Watson, like a dummy. He boasts that he can deduce a man's profession from his expression and trouser knees. And, of course, he gets his man and watches Scotland Yard steal the credit.

Today, the works of Holmes's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, can be read in 57 languages, including Icelandic, Azerbaijani and Urdu. Though Holmes himself rarely left London, his image has circled the globe on stage, screen, radio and television, personified by such actors as Basil Rathbone and, more recently, Jeremy Brett.

But no land gives the British sleuth the reverence he receives in the United States. Holmes's fans pay homage to "The Master" in peculiar ways:

- ◆ The Persian Slipper Club of San Francisco gathers in America's best replica of Holmes's sitting room in an otherwise ordinary Holiday Inn. Bullet holes in the wall spell out Queen Victoria's initials. A Persian slipper near the hearth stands ready to hold tobacco.
- ◆ The Baker Street Journal, edited by an English professor in St. Louis, runs essays in what it calls "Higher Criticism," which

typically ponders where Holmes lived in London or why Dr. Watson's wife once called him James.

- ◆ The Men on the Tor of Connecticut met last year at the castle built in that state by William Gillette, the American who wrote and starred in the play Sherlock Holmes. (Gillette first popularized the image of Holmes wearing a deerstalker and Inverness cape.) Members considered how to obtain an old brick from an office building that encompasses 221B Baker Street in London, Holmes's supposed address. Anticipating the brick, one member left a hole in his new fireplace.

- ◆ Ronald De Waal, a librarian at Colorado State University, has readied more than 8,000 entries for the next volume of his prize-winning bibliography of Holmesiana. Listing only publications from 1979 to 1985, his work lends support to the claim that more is written about Holmes than any other literary subject except Shakespeare or the Bible.

- ◆ More than 190 members and guests of The Bakers Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian society, last year held their 53rd annual dinner in New York City, at which they celebrated Holmes's birthday (January 6, 1854) and toasted him as "our best friend."



To understand American enthusiasm for Holmes, I spent three months traveling across the country to meet his admirers. I first had to learn a new language. Fans became Sherlockians. The 60 original Holmes stories

became The Sacred Writings or the Canon. Doyle became merely the Literary Agent. As such, he represented Dr. Watson, who became not Holmes's fictional chronicler, but the true author.

When a male Sherlockian achieves the pinnacle of Canonical knowledge (he knows everything about Sherlock's stories), he becomes a Baker Street Irregular. Women become Adventuresses. Each then receives a name - an Investiture - from a Holmes case. I met, for example, a geologist named "Black Peter" and a consulting engineer named "The Giant Rat of Sumatra."

Most American Sherlockians join an offshoot or scion of the Irregulars. Some scions take their names directly from Canonical adventures: "The Speckled Band" of Boston or "The Six Napoleons" of Baltimore. Others either make adjustments - "The Hounds of the Baskervilles" of Chicago - or play loose: "The Giant Alkali Plainsmen" of Kansas City or "The Bering Straits Irregulars" of Alaska. More than 80 scions hold meetings in at least 39 states.

In New Mexico, on the Thursday after Halloween, "The Brothers Three of Moriarty" gather at the Frontier Saloon in the town of Moriarty. They come to curse the memory of Holmes's archenemy, the villainous Professor Moriarty. They present scholarly papers and take quizzes on the stories from the Canon. Around 11 P.M., they pick up a shovel. Wearing deerstalkers and singing anti-Moriarty verses, they walk to a vacant lot to renew the "Moriarty Manure Memorial." Over the years the memorial has received contributions from a Texas Longhorn, an Australian kangaroo and a Saudi Arabian camel.

The scion's "Big Brother," 73-year old John Bennett Shaw, who has worked as a bookstore owner, an oil driller and a funeral director, now serves informally as librarian to all Sherlockians. His 12,000 volumes, removed from their little room in his Santa Fe home, would stretch the length of London's Charing Cross Station. Into other rooms, he tucks Sherlockian chess sets, alarm clocks, pillowcases, knee socks and 20,00 press clippings. In a freezer he keeps his Sherlockian chocolate rabbits (they wear deerstalkers).



Although British scholars produced the first Higher Criticism, Shaw told me, an American doctor from St. Louis, Gray Chandler Briggs, made a breakthrough in the 1920s: studying Holmes as a real person. Briggs tracked down Holmes's house, which he decided must have stood at 111 Baker Street (221 did not yet exist). In 1930,

Christopher Morley, columnist for the Saturday Review of Literature, wrote an introduction to the first complete American collection of Doyle's stories, popularizing Holmes as a subject for careful study. In 1934, Morley created The Baker Street Irregulars, named for the urchins Holmes used to ferret out information. The Irregulars soon included President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who contributed to the Higher Criticism a series of letters arguing that Holmes was an American.

Why does Sherlock Holmes have such strong appeal? Isaac Asimov, the well-known science fiction writer (invested by the Irregulars as "The Remarkable Worm Unknown to Science"), suggests it is because Holmes represents the triumph of the "gifted amateur who could see clearly into the fog." Dr. David Musto ("Dr. Anstruther"), of Yale University School of Medicine, says it is because Holmes's world is "exciting, but also peaceful - a world of modified danger."

These answers ring true enough, but something more basic may lie beneath them. Sherlockian America links artist and Army officer, secretary and judge, stockbroker and music-store owner. In a country that seems large and fragmented at times, Sherlockians have forged a nation of neighbors. That nation depends on one great game with a few basic rules: that Watson wrote the stories, the Holmes lived. These rules stand no more open to challenge than the rule that a baseball hit left of third base is a foul.

Sherlockians grow more numerous because in America, as Holmes would say, the game is afoot. And any of them, traveling in almost any part of the country, know they can find a kindred spirit ready to play.

