

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES SOCIETY OF LONDON

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no. 318 17 December 2011

In DM 316 I gave an enthusiastic welcome to the AudioGO release of *Hist Last Bow*, read unabridged by **Derek Jacobi**. As a Christmas bonus, AudioGO is offering five copies of the eight-CD set as prizes in a quiz for our readers. Just answer these three questions and send your entry to me, by post or (preferably) e-mail, before 17 January. The winners will be picked at random. And do take a look at the AudioGO website at www.audiogo.co.uk.

1. What does Altamont mean by 'sparkling plugs'?
2. Which institution was 'buzzing like an overturned beehive'?
3. Where did Mortimer Tregennis say his brothers were being taken in a closed black carriage?

It's a delight to know that *A Study in Celluloid: A Producer's Account of Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes* by **Michael Cox** is in print again (Gasogene Books; www.wessexpress.com/html/studyincelluloid.html; \$28.95). It was Michael Cox who proposed the series that became one of British television's most successful productions, in terms of popularity, critical acclaim, and longevity. As a member of Granada's staff he produced the first thirteen films and was executive producer for the next thirteen. As a freelance he was invited to produce the following six, but he had no hand in the remaining nine, and it shows. From 1990, thanks to that year's Broadcasting Act, the accountants rather than the programme-makers were in charge. Even while making *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Michael had to pay £1,000 a day from an already tight budget for the use of the Baker Street set – which had been created and paid for by the Holmes series. By the time of *The Last Vampyre*, *The Eligible Bachelor* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Jeremy Brett's bi-polar disorder and his cardiomyopathy were seriously affecting his performance and his appearance. Either condition would have been controllable on its own, but each affected the other, and as far as Sherlock Holmes was concerned the combination of the leading man's ill-health and Granada's purely profit-driven approach was devastating. Those last unfortunate productions can't overshadow the superb quality of the earlier films, though – the ones that we watch and watch again, and proudly urge younger Sherlockians to watch. There's no single definitive record of the series, but together Michael Cox's excellent book and David Stuart Davies's *Bending the Willow* come pretty close.

Oscar Wilde and the Vatican Murders by **Gyles Brandreth** (John Murray [Publishers]; www.johnmurray.co.uk; £19.99) opens in 1892 in the German spa town of Bad Homburg, where Arthur Conan Doyle is taking a few days' break to catch up with his – and his fictional detective's – correspondence. A chance meeting with Oscar Wilde and the discovery of three unexpected objects among the letters and packages addressed to Sherlock Holmes lead the two to Rome. The objects are a lock of hair, a severed hand and a severed finger, but the bodies they came from must have been long dead – so what do they signify? Who sent them, and why? In Rome, the two must tread very carefully. They may have been summoned by one of the Pope's chaplains. Or by the new Anglican chaplain in Rome. Or by someone at the British Embassy. Or even by the remarkable Swedish doctor, Axel Munthe. Oscar encounters an old enemy and Arthur meets an old schoolfellow, but intrigue and dissimulation abound, murder is committed in the heart of the Holy See, and another murder waits to be discovered. It's Conan Doyle who acts as Wilde's assistant in this, the fifth volume in the series, and it's he who tells the tale, many years later, in the knowledge, which we share, that destruction would soon come upon his friend. Gyles Brandreth's writing is, as always, completely assured. Both portraits have the authentic touch, and Wilde's

conversation is pure gold. The subsidiary characters are splendidly drawn, as is the setting; the mystery baffles, and its solution dazzles. Was Oscar Wilde the inspiration for Mycroft Holmes, as Mr Brandreth suggests? You know, I rather think he was!

Nicholas Briggs and **Richard Earl** return as Holmes and Watson in the latest audio drama from Big Finish (<http://bigfinish.com/ranges/sherlock-holmes>). *The Reification of Hans Gerber* is an original play by George Mann, best known for his steampunk fiction but clearly at home in Baker Street. The death of Sir Theobald Maugham prompts a frantic search for his will, under which his four relations stand to benefit. But Holmes's investigation indicates that the old man was murdered – and then another claimant shows his hand. Who is the mysterious Hans Gerber? Does he even exist? Well, he does, or rather he did – and you can interpret that statement in two ways. *The Reification of Hans Gerber* is exciting, exceptionally clever, and entirely faithful to Conan Doyle's creations. The production has all the quality we expect from Big Finish, and as usual there are interviews with the cast and crew. Full marks!

On New Year's Day BBC1's *Sherlock*, starring **Benedict Cumberbatch** and **Martin Freeman**, will return to our television screens. You may want to watch again *The Great Game*, the conclusion of Series One, before seeing *A Scandal in Belgravia*, the first film in Series Two. I guarantee that you will gasp at the audacity with which Steven Moffat resolves the perilous situation in which Mark Gatiss had placed the detective and the doctor. The audience at the preview did. They laughed and applauded as well! This case introduces *The Woman*, and she really is an 'adventuress'. We get to see quite a lot of Lara Pulver as Irene Adler, and Sherlock sees even more, but he doesn't feel any emotion akin to love for her. She is, after all, a lesbian dominatrix with a taste for blackmail. She's also capable of defeating him. The plot is elegantly convoluted, desperately exciting, and fiendishly cunning, and it's spiced with some excellent jokes. It also features a Christmas party at 221B – possibly the most hysterically embarrassing you'll ever see. Everyone's on sparkling form too, and it's particularly good that Una Stubbs has a more substantial rôle as Mrs Hudson. Series One was superb. On the evidence of *A Scandal in Belgravia*, Series Two is even better.

I enjoyed Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, with its unlikely but successful pairing of **Robert Downey Jr** and **Jude Law**, though I had reservations about the story, with its numerous holes, some of which you could drive a train through. The sequel *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* was released yesterday, and it's a cracker, not least because the plot is both coherent and gripping. Robert Downey Jr is physically quite wrong for Holmes, but he's a compelling actor and his relationship with Jude Law's Watson is electric. The principal danger this time is from Professor Moriarty, played with urbane menace by Jared Harris as a distinguished public figure, a confidante of the highest in the land – and, of course, a brilliant and ruthless master criminal. Having anonymously taken over the great armaments factories of Europe, he aims to profit by provoking revolution and war. Ranged against him are Holmes, Watson and their unexpected Gypsy ally, the lithe and deadly Madame Simza. Watching anxiously in London are Mycroft Holmes (Stephen Fry, naturally) and Mary Watson (Kelly Reilly). There's action aplenty, the CGI work is astonishing, and it all looks pretty stunning. I definitely want to see this one again.

Back in January **Michael Sims** gave the 2011 Baker Street Irregulars' Distinguished Speaker Lecture. His latest book is *The Dead Witness* (Bloomsbury; www.bloomsbury.com/michaelsims; £18.99) – a satisfying 600 pages. Sir Hugh Greene may have been the first to

compile an anthology of such tales. His *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes* was the first in a series of four, and other editors have followed suit. David Stuart Davies's *The Shadows of Sherlock Holmes* is particularly good, and so is *The Dead Witness*, which takes its title from the first known detective story by a woman, Mary Fortune, who wrote as 'WW'. Ms Fortune was unknown to me, but most of the names here are familiar – George R Sims, Hesketh Prichard, Robert Barr, James McGovan and others – and some are truly famous, including Poe, Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle. This is, as the subtitle says, *A Connoisseur's Collection of Victorian Detective Stories*, and it would be wrong to omit Sherlock Holmes. Few will have read all the stories in this grand doorstep of a book, and even those who have may benefit from Mr Sims's introduction and his foreword to each tale. His website is at www.michaelsimsbooks.com/.

Showsaku Mashimo has kindly sent me a copy of the latest volume in the Japanese *Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*, covering a charmingly eclectic range of topics, including Cox & Co., the Lowther Arcade, disguise, Bradshaw, the Baritsu Chapter, and the figures of Holmes and Moriarty in the sculpted frieze on the Odeon, Covent Garden, which I showed to Mr Mashimo and other distinguished Japanese Holmesians when they visited London last year. I regret that I can't really say much about the book as it is, of course, in Japanese, but I am delighted to have it. Copies are, I think, available from Mr Saburoh Hiraga (3-6-24 Uenohigashi, Toyonaka-shi, Osaka, 560-0013, Japan; JZB04100@nifty.ne.jp).

Kieran McMullen has once more combined his expertise as a military historian and former soldier with his devotion to Sherlock Holmes, and he's added a third element – his own heritage – in *Sherlock Holmes and the Irish Rebels* (MX Publishing; www.mxpublishing.co.uk; £10.99/\$18.99/€12.99). Two years into the Great War, Dr Watson is called away from his post with the Royal Army Medical Corps and instructed to join Holmes in Dublin, where, under the alias of Liam Altamont, he has infiltrated the Irish Volunteers, who believe that 'England's extremity is Ireland's opportunity' and are preparing a rebellion against British rule. As we know, the Easter Rising was crushed, saving Britain from war in the west as well as the east, but disgust at the speedy execution of the leading rebels only intensified the desire for Irish independence. It's a powerful subject, and Mr McMullen handles it well. How would Arthur Conan Doyle have tackled it, I wonder?

Something I'm looking forward to with keen anticipation is *Sherlock Holmes on the Air* by **Matthew J Elliott** (MX; due 2 January; £14.99). This is our own M J Elliott, with eleven of his scripts for the Imagination Theatre series *The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

On the Wings of Paradise by **Mary Ann Warner** and **Linda Pritchard** is a sometimes touching, but tritely written, account of Linda's friendship with Jeremy Brett in his last years. First published in 1998, it was reissued last month by Blurb at £14.95 paperback or £24.95 hardback (www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/2697506). Linda Pritchard has also assembled her photos of the actor, mostly in colour, as a 120-page book *A Photographic guide to Jeremy Brett's Sherlock Holmes*, priced at £29.95 paperback or £38.95 hardback. The pictures cover every episode in the series (www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/2677178). You can preview the whole book on the website.

Back in the 1980s **Kelvin I Jones** had a dozen or more books and booklets of Holmesian scholarship published. Now two of them, *The Sherlock Holmes Murder File* and *The Sherlock Holmes Smoking Companion*, are obtainable again – and very welcome too – this time as Kindle e-books, from Amazon.co.uk at £1.84 each and Amazon.com at \$2.88 each. The publisher is Cunning Crime Books (<http://cunningcrimes.blogspot.com/2011/07/cunning-crime-books.html>).

Also new as a Kindle e-book is *The Mystery of Lenin's Watch (More Sherlock's Missing Files)* by **Stan Graham** (£1.14 or \$1.78), comprising five unusual stories: 'The Mystery of Lenin's Pocket Watch', 'A Sherlock Holmes Fairy Tale', 'Sherlock and the Stones', 'The Bowden House Affair' and 'The Sinister Man'. Mr Graham says, 'Over 10,000 Words. For that long lunch hour.'

Forthcoming on Kindle is *Sherlock Holmes and the Cattle Mutilations* by **Phillip K Duke**, a follow-up to *Sherlock Holmes and the Alien Abduction*, which is available now.

In the last DM I recommended *On Sherlock Holmes* by **Michael Dirda**. At <http://thebrowser.com/interviews/michael-dirda-on-sherlock-holmes> you'll find an interview with Mr Dirda, in which he discusses his choice of five outstanding books by or about Arthur Conan Doyle. The website *The Browser* at <http://thebrowser.com/> is worth a look anyway.

I don't know quite how they get away with it, but Rifftrax produces humorous commentaries for movies, long and short. **Matthew J Elliott** has been a writer and contributor for some time, and now he's pooled his creative expertise and his specialist knowledge in *Rifftrax Presents Sherlock Holmes*, his own take on Guy Ritchie's 2009 film. You can buy the commentary as an MP3 download at www.rifftrax.com/rifftrax-presents/sherlock-holmes, where you can also watch and hear a clip.

From 11 to 14 January, at the Barn Theatre, Southwick Street, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4TE, **Wick Theatre Company** will stage *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, adapted and directed by Tony Brownings. You can book on-line at www.wicktheatre.co.uk/ or phone the box office on 01273 597094.

News from Mensa ('The High IQ Society'). Members are welcome to join the recently formed **Sherlock Holmes Special Interest Group**. The person to contact is Neil Matthews, SIGSec & Editor, 17 Peters Close, Prestwood, Great Missenden HP16 9ET (phone 01494 890494; e-mail sigsofficer@bopenworld.com). The second issue of the newsletter, *The Baker Street Times*, is out now.

David Ian Davies reminds me that besides his prolific recordings of the Canon and of Sherlockian pastiches he offers a striking Sherlock Holmes pen, designed by the *Mad Magazine* cartoonist Tom Richmond. See David's website at www.onevoicerecordings.com.

Willis Frick's very useful website Sherlocktron has relocated to <http://sherlocktron.hostoi.com/Sherlocktron.html>. Consequently, **Peter Blau's** invaluable Sherlockian newsletter *Scuttlebutt from the Spermaceti Press*, hosted by Sherlocktron, also has a new home on the web, at <http://sherlocktron.hostoi.com/scuttle.htm>.

Gilbert Adair, highly intelligent and individual author and critic, strayed just once, as far as I know, into Holmesian territory, in his 2008 novel *And Then There Was No One*. He died on 8 December, aged sixty-eight.

Periodicals received. *The Baker Street Journal*, Autumn 2011 (Steven Rothman, 220, West Rittenhouse Square, #15-D, Philadelphia, PA 19103, USA; subscriptions, PO Box 583, Zionsville, IN 46077, USA). *Baker Street Times*, December 2011 (**British Mensa's Sherlock Holmes Special Interest Group**, Neil Matthews, SIGSec & Editor, 17 Peters Close, Prestwood, Great Missenden HP16 9ET). *The Cri Bar Crier*, December 2011 (**The Criterion Bar Association**, Susan Z Diamond, 16W603 3rd Avenue, Bensenville, IL 60106-2327, USA). *The Illustrious Clients News*, December 2011 (**The Illustrious Clients**, Steven T Doyle, 9 Calumet Court, Zionsville, IN 46077, USA).

Ineffable Twaddle, December 2011 (**The Sound of the Baskervilles**, Terri Haugen, 3606 Harborcrest Court NW, Gig Harbor, WA 9832-8981, USA). *Mayday Mayday*, November 2011 & December 2011 (**The Crew of the SS May Day**, Oscar Ross, 19 Ardcaran Way, Belfast BT5 7RP). *The School Report*, Winter 2011 (**The Priory Scholars**, Horace L Coates, 21 Butcombe Road, Leicester LE4 0FY). *Sherlockiana*, Nr 3/4 2011 (**Sherlock Holmes Klubben i Danmark**, Bjarne Rother Jensen, Højbovangen 24, 9200 Aalborg SV, Denmark). *The Torr*, Christmas 2011 (**The Poor Folk Upon The Moors**, Reggie Musgrave, Drummond Cottage, Old Tavern Yard, Westbourne, Chichester, West Sussex PO10 8TA). *West End Journal*, November 2011 & December 2011 (**Japan Sherlock Holmes Club**, Saburoh Hiraga, 3-6-24 Uenohigashi, Toyonaka-shi, Osaka, 560-0013, Japan).

And *Scuttlebutt from the Spermaceti Press*, October 2011 (Peter E Blau, 7103 Endicott Court, Bethesda, MD 20817-4401, USA; blau7103@comcast.net).

The Compliments of the Season

Roger Johnson