

“From Gillette to Brett V” and Back Again **by Dean Richardson (11/4/18)**

Since 2003 when the first was held, the “From Gillette to Brett” conference has become an eagerly anticipated event every four years or so for those who enjoy Sherlock Holmes on stage, screen, and radio. Attendees have come to expect a rich variety of speakers and topics along with special screenings of films featuring the Great Detective, and this year did not disappoint. Bill Mason, Jim Hawkins, and I can bear witness to that.

For the third consecutive time, the venue for the conference was the Biddle Hotel on the beautiful Indiana University campus in Bloomington. The opening event once again was a special exhibit on Friday afternoon, October 5, at the Lilly Library on the campus. The library has a remarkable collection of rare books, manuscripts, and related materials, including a Shakespeare folio, first editions of Poe, Hawthorne, et al., letters by Jefferson and Lincoln, John Ford’s Oscar for *How Green Was My Valley*, original scripts for *Citizen Kane* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939), film stills, and a wide variety of other items. In celebration of the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Frankenstein*, the library has a special display of original and early editions of that seminal work and others by Mary Shelly and her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as rare Victorian works of Gothic horror and the supernatural, and 20th-century landmarks in the field such as issues of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* and books by H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, and others. Surprisingly (at least, to me), there is a letter to Vincent Starrett (“221B,” *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*) from Lovecraft in the 1920s praising his mystery and supernatural stories.

Friday evening the IU Cinema on campus showed the delightful comedy *Without a Clue* (1988). Although the print suffered a bit from wear, the audience obviously enjoyed the perfect comic timing and affectionate send-up of the iconic duo, with Watson the true brains of the operation and Holmes actually an actor hired to impersonate the doctor’s fictional creation (the conceit of this film). On its thirtieth anniversary the film holds up very well and only makes me dread even more the impending ~~escape~~ release of Will Ferrell’s *Holmes and Watson*.

A reception for attendees followed the screening, but I did not make it to that.

Saturday morning began with registration and mobbing of the dealers’ room, where many collectibles (books, magazines, comics, posters, jewelry and crafts, but strangely almost no videos) were available, as well as a display of costumes and other items from Sherlockian theatre and film productions, including *Without a Clue* and the Rathbone series. An autographed program from William Gillette’s *Sherlock Holmes* was especially notable.

After opening remarks by Steven Doyle and Mark Gagan, organizers of the conference and operators of Wessex Press, the day’s program began with a presentation by Nicholas Utechin on the art of Sidney Paget and his influence on stage and screen portrayals of the Great Detective. This was in conjunction with release of Utechin’s book collecting all of Paget’s art for the Canon, some of it reproduced from the original art. *The Complete Paget Portfolio*, published by Wessex Press, debuted and sold out in the dealers’ room before I was even aware of its existence. I hope copies are available again soon.

Ashley Polasek, who “holds a doctorate in the study of Sherlock Holmes on screen” (!), spoke on the ways technology affects adaptation of a literary source. She examined three versions of “The Six Napoleons” (the BBC/Douglas Wilmer [1965], the ITC/Jeremy Brett [1986], and the BBC/Benedict Cumberbatch [2017; retitled “The Six Thatchers”]) and demonstrated how advances in technology progressively expanded the range of portrayal. The large, cumbersome video cameras of the 1960s limited shooting to primarily indoors long takes and the feeling of a stage production. The film cameras used in 1986 liberated shooting setups and locations and increased angles and editing options. The digital cameras and range of CGI effects of 2017 distracted from the story. She concluded that the earliest version in many ways was the most faithful because the limitations of technology forced it to rely more heavily on the text.

Next came a real coup: the second showing (after its premier in San Francisco last summer) of the restored (and once thought lost) German silent film *Der Hund von Baskerville* (1929). Steeped in the Expressionism of the time (deep shadows, looming sets, stylized acting), it really brings out the Gothic elements of the source. While not completely intact (a few missing scenes are covered by stills and explanatory intertitles) and changing some character details, it still tells the story well and faithfully. I, for one, was enthralled. The presenter, Glen Miranker, told me that it will be released by Flicker Alley (which also released Gillette’s *Sherlock Holmes*) towards the end of this year.

After a lunch break, the program resumed with a video interview by Leslie Klinger with Robert Doherty, creator of and producer and writer for *Elementary*. Over the course of an hour they discussed the origins of the show and Doherty’s involvement, the reimagining of the source material, the casting, the story arcs, and the canonical references planted in each episode. A fascinating hour.

Terrance Faherty, a mystery novelist whose latest book is *The True Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, discussed the long partnership of Rathbone and Bruce as Holmes and Watson on the radio throughout the ’40s. Then Charles Prepolec recounted the production of and Peter Cushing’s portrayal in the 1959 Hammer *Hound*.

David Stuart Davies played portions of audio interviews he conducted with Cushing in 1973 and Jeremy Brett in 1994 in which each talked about his feelings about the stories and his approach to interpreting the Great Detective on screen. Unfortunately, the audiocassette quality was poor and portions of each interview were distorted and difficult to understand. Still, it was good to hear what we could.

The final speaker of the day, Jeffrey Hatcher, wrote the screenplay for *Mr. Holmes* (2015). He discussed that, his experiences in theatre, and his newest play, *Holmes and Watson* (unrelated to the looming Will Farrell film), which was being performed in Indianapolis that week. In fact, a special Sunday matinee was offered for attendees as a postscript to the conference. Unfortunately, I could not stay for that.

The conference concluded Saturday night with a showing of the restored Hammer *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959). The packed audience had a rousing good time. It was a fitting end to a weekend of entertainment and enlightenment. I hope there will be another in four years or less. And if it happens, you really should consider attending.