

A Baker Street Dozen Questions for Roger Johnson and Jean Upton

Jim Hawkins and Dean Richardson, 2 June 2021

Roger, for a lad who “never left home,” you’ve certainly gotten around! Was it Holmes who took you on most of your journeys?

(Roger) I hadn’t really thought about that before, but yes, it’s true. Even my visits to Czechoslovakia and Romania with the Dracula Society in the late 1970s owe more than a little to Sherlock Holmes. The Dracula Society was co-founded by Bernard Davies, who applied the same immense knowledge, scrupulous research, clarity of thought and expression, and love of the subject to Bram Stoker’s novel and gothic literature generally as he did to Sherlock Holmes.

It was the news reports of the first pilgrimage to Switzerland in 1968 that inspired me to join the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, and I eagerly signed up for the second, ten years later. In 1980 I visited the United States for the first time, travelling almost everywhere by bus and staying with friends, nearly all Sherlockians, in Boston; New York; Cherry Hill, NJ; Alexandria, VA; and Santa Fe. My hosts in Santa Fe were, of course, John Bennett Shaw and his wife Dorothy, and in Alexandria it was Jon Lellenberg who gave me a bed at his apartment and took me into Washington to visit Peter Blau. I’d been corresponding with John, Jon, and Peter for nearly fifteen years, but this was the first time I actually met Peter.

Since then, Sherlock Holmes has influenced nearly all my extended journeys.

I (Jim) knew we had something in common, beyond Holmes I mean. Susan and I got married in 1992, as did you and Jean. Is it true you proposed to her at Reichenbach Falls?

(R) That would be just too perfect! No, it didn’t happen quite like that. In 1982 I volunteered to write and distribute an occasional newsletter for the SHSL. In time it became *The District Messenger*, and Jean was one of the first overseas members to subscribe. We began corresponding – by post, of course – and in 1987 Jean came to England for the first time. Michael Cox had arranged a visit to the Baker Street set and a private preview of *The Sign of Four* at the Granada TV Studios in Manchester for a party from the Society. Jean and I were both there – but we didn’t actually meet until the Society’s weekend visit to Cambridge in 1989. It wasn’t until the Swiss Pilgrimage in 1991 that we really got to know each other. In July that same year she came to England to spend a few days with me, and it was then that I proposed to her. And she accepted.

When and how did each of you discover the stories? Do you think there is an ideal age at which to do that?

(R) The first Holmes story I remember reading was *The Hound of the Baskervilles*; I'm sure I must have read some of the short stories before then, but at what age . . . no, I can't remember. I was reading fluently at the age of four, and I seem always to have been aware of Sherlock Holmes, though in 1950s England there were no children's editions of the stories. We didn't get the Rathbone films on television until much later, and the Ronald Howard films have only recently been shown on British TV, so I didn't see a serious dramatised version until *The Speckled Band*, with Douglas Wilmer and Nigel Stock, in 1964, by which time I was seriously hooked on the stories. And throughout the fifties and sixties we did have the classic BBC radio series with Carleton Hobbs and Norman Shelley. (Hobbs's, to me, remains *the* voice of Sherlock Holmes.)

An ideal age to discover the Holmes stories? That must surely depend upon the individual.

(Jean) Like Roger, I was reading at an advanced level by the age of four and devoured books borrowed from the library or those on our shelves at home. The Rathbone/Bruce films were being shown on television, and many animated cartoons featured Holmes, so I certainly had an awareness of the character. Around the age of five or six I progressed through a rapid sequence of measles, mumps, and rubella, which meant being confined to my bedroom for what seemed an eternity. To ease the boredom I ferreted around and discovered the Everyman Edition of *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. Probably influenced by the Hammer Horror films that were in cinemas at the time, the first story I read was "The Engineer's Thumb," because it sounded like it would be good and gory. If one considers that I had been weaned on Little Golden Books and Dr. Seuss, it's a testament to Conan Doyle's writing style that I stuck to reading the entire book despite its lack of illustrations. You can imagine my delight when the local librarian told me there were even more stories available. I was eight when I read *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and my enduring memory was the description of finding the remains of Dr. Mortimer's spaniel in the hound's hiding place. Pretty shocking for a young animal lover!

As for an ideal time to discover Holmes, there's a Buddhist saying: "When the pupil is ready, the teacher appears."

What has been the best Sherlockian experience you two have ever had, if you *can* single out just one? We understand that they may not be the same shared experience.

(R) I don't think I can name one particular experience as the *best*, but there's one that, as far as we know, was unique. Our engagement party was held on the 21st December 1991 at Jean's parents' house in Wyncote, PA, where Jean was then living. Some of the guests – mostly Sherlockians, of course – were old friends of mine, and others quickly became my friends. Among the latter was Bob Thomalen, who brought apologies from Tom and Dorothy Stix – and, to my complete astonishment, presented me with the Irregular Shilling and a certificate declaring that I was now "The Pall Mall Gazette," BSI. (Jean tells me that I actually went white.)

The unique feature of the occasion is the setting. In about 1912-1913, while waiting for work on his own new house to be completed, Christopher Morley rented that house in Woodland Road, Wyncote. So I am, we believe, the only Baker Street Irregular to have received his investiture in a former residence of the BSI's founder. And, as I didn't immediately appreciate, it was – by the narrowest margin – in the same year as the first women to be invested in the BSI *with all rights and privileges*.

The following day we drove up to Norwood, NJ, at Tom and Dorothy's invitation to have dinner with them. (I say, "we drove," but Jean did all the driving, for which I was extremely grateful. Neither of us drives these days, for medical reasons, but Jean was always much better at it than I was.)

(J) There are so many! Receiving my Irregular Shilling at the same time as Douglas Wilmer was pretty special. However, my first visit to UK – and first event with the Sherlock Holmes Society of London – really stands out. The 1987 excursion to Granada Studios was to include a visit to the Baker Street and 221b sets, plus a preview of *The Sign of Four*. None of us anticipated that filming was in progress for *Wisteria Lodge*, so it was a surprise to meet the principal members of the cast as well. An enormous fuss was made over the fact that I had travelled from the United States, and I ended up being escorted to a quiet corner to be photographed and interviewed with Jeremy Brett. It was Peter Blau who informed me about a year later that I had unwittingly become the Poster Child for the new Granada Studios Tour. In any case, the events of the day resulted in enduring friendships with many members of the SHSL, as well as with Michael Cox, Jeremy Brett, Edward Hardwicke, and Rosalie Williams. Although Roger and I didn't actually meet that day, we do appear in a group photograph outside 221b, separated only by Tony Howlett.

Do you lead Sherlock Holmes walks in London? If you did, what route would you take? In addition, do you still recommend Bernard Davies's book, *Holmes and Watson Country: Travels in Search of Solutions* as perhaps the best guide?

(R) I have led Sherlockian friends – and on one occasion a party from the SHSL – along the route plotted by Bernard Davies, working from (very) large-scale period maps, as the only one that fits the deliberately convoluted course taken by Holmes and Watson from Cavendish Square to Camden House. He "reasoned it out beautifully. . . . It is so long a chain, and yet every link rings true."

Long ago, at the time of the Society's "Back to Baker Street" festival in 1994, I devised a walking tour beginning at the Sherlock Holmes pub in Northumberland Street, Charing Cross, and ending at the Café Royal in Regent Street. The idea was that it would be an interesting walk for someone who had visited the pub and fancied a bit of exercise. I've never taken anyone else along that route – not even Jean.

We know three members of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London who specialise in leading Sherlockian walks: Robin Rowles, M. C. Black and Richard Burnip – all good, but

in our opinion Richard is outstanding. He's a guide for the company called simply London Walks.

Bernard Davies's topographical investigations in *Holmes and Watson Country* are, I think, unlikely to be surpassed. However, John E. Weber's *Under the Darkling Sky* applies similar rigorous standards (though with less detail), covers many more of the Holmes chronicles, and is easily portable. But walking tours are not at the heart of either. The best book I know of in *that* line is Arthur M. Alexander's *Hot on the Scent: A Visitor's Guide to the London of Sherlock Holmes*.

(J) Since early childhood it had been my enduring ambition to go to London. A matter of weeks after the death of my father, I finally made it there in December 1987. Considering the time of year, it seemed logical to follow Holmes and Watson's trail from "The Blue Carbuncle." After unceremoniously chucking my luggage into the hotel room at Russell Square, I boarded the Underground to Baker Street where I emerged and promptly burst into tears. A quintessential English Gentleman (Burberry raincoat, bowler hat, exquisitely rolled black broly, *The Times* tucked under his arm) solicitously enquired if I was all right. I gave him a brief explanation of my reaction, to which he barked, "Oh, jolly good!" and shimmered off into the lightly falling mist. It was nearly twilight as I made my way from Baker Street to the area around the British Museum and then on to Covent Garden. The atmosphere could not have been more perfect.

The Sherlock Holmes Miscellany covers quite a bit of territory. I (Jim) plan to gift this book to every new person I know discovering Sherlock Holmes. For me it was the Baring-Gould *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* in which I discovered "The Grand Game" and all the associated social background to the canon. What was your motivation for putting the *Miscellany* together? Was the popularity of the BBC *Sherlock* a factor?

(R) When I took over in 2007 as editor of *The Sherlock Holmes Journal* from Nicholas Utechin – one of the few people who have stepped down from a job to make way for someone *older* – I also agreed to take over as the Sherlock Holmes Society of London's Press and Publicity Officer, a post which our co-editor, Heather Owen, had filled for several years. It's an impressive title, but all it really means is that the contact details on the website and in various directories are mine. Consequently, correspondence for the Society, if it isn't aimed at a specific person, usually comes to me.

In 2011, I received an e-mail that said, in part: "I am a commissioning editor at The History Press, the UK's leading historical publisher, and next year we're publishing a series of literary miscellanies. Our hope is to include a Sherlock Holmes Miscellany among these, and I've been charged with finding someone to write the book." What they wanted was "a 30-40,000 [word] manuscript that details all of the facts, trivia, and quotes that remind us why Sherlock Holmes remains such an important literary creation."

Jean said something like, “We can do that!” And so we did, dividing the topics between us. We deliberately avoided summarising the stories, because so many have already done that; instead we concentrated on the Holmes phenomenon, which is how we interpreted our brief. (I should mention that, despite my name coming first on the cover and the title page, about two thirds of the book is Jean’s work – though each of us contributed to the other’s chapters.)

Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* had been released in 2009, and the first series of *Sherlock* was broadcast in 2010. Their success almost certainly helped motivate The History Press to commission the book, but it wasn’t an essential factor in our decision to write it.

(J) I wanted to write the sort of book that I would have found useful when first entering the world of Sherlockians. There is an enduring myth that when one attends one’s first scion/society meeting, it will be something akin to the Spanish Inquisition. The assumption is that if you don’t pass muster, you will be humiliated in front of the entire assembly, pelted with bread rolls, made to wear a dunce-cap, and must write “Norbury” a thousand times on a blackboard. I think the *Miscellany* is the first book to go into any sort of detail about Sherlockian interest groups and hopefully makes prospective members a bit more relaxed about mingling with the rest of the herd. In practical terms, the book should serve as a glorified crib sheet for newly hatched Sherlockians as well as a handy reference source for anyone who simply wants a quick reminder of a date or detail. We purposely gave the essential information on a number of topics along with a recommended bibliography, so that the reader could find sources of more information on their favourite aspect.

In chapter 11 you mention that Lord Donegall, when he was the editor of the *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, spoke about “a Higher Critic.” What is Higher Criticism?

(R) The term “Higher Criticism” comes from biblical scholarship. Its application to Holmesian/Sherlockian studies is explained on the website of the Ronald Knox Society of America:

The story begins in 1910 when Knox was a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, and preparing for ordination to the Anglican priesthood. In his Spiritual Aenied (the story of his conversion to Catholicism), Knox relates that, as a Fellow, he faced the task of preparing one talk for general college gatherings, and another for theological groups. Moreover, the young Knox was distressed by the fact that his teachers at Oxford had neglected one feature of religion to which he was especially attached: orthodoxy. It was in this situation that Sherlock Holmes came to Knox’s rescue. Knox wrote a talk titled Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes, which he found would fulfill both functions, and simultaneously convey his distress at one feature of his training at Oxford, the attention given to biblical “Higher Criticism.” The Higher Critics were prone to pointing out contradictions in the Bible, and to making claims such as that Isaiah had been written not by one author, but by a proto- and deutero-Isaiah. What Knox did was to treat the then-

published Sherlock Holmes stories as a sort of Canon composed, not by Arthur Conan Doyle, but by a proto- and deuterio-Watson.

(J) Damn. All this time I thought it meant toking on some really good s*** and discussing the new Grateful Dead album.

Among many other things, your *Miscellany* gives an excellent overview of film, radio, and television treatments of the characters of the Canon. What are your views of more recent (i.e., post 2012) versions, such as *Elementary*, the newer Russian *Sherlock Holmes* series (2013), *Miss Sherlock*, *Enola Holmes*, and *The Irregulars*?

(R) I haven't seen enough of *Elementary* to form a final opinion. In the Winter 2012 *SHJ*, I wrote:

In this re-imagining, the successful young consulting detective Sherlock Holmes (Jonny Lee Miller) has been sent by his wealthy father from London to New York in an attempt to cure his drug addiction, and Dr Joan Watson (Lucy Liu), a former surgeon with a troubled past, is engaged as his "sober companion." So far, so different from Conan Doyle — and, because, obviously, the producers don't want people to think they're copying the excellent BBC series, different from Sherlock too.

So different, in fact, that it's hard to recognise these two as Holmes and Watson. Don't get me wrong: I've no objection to a female Watson. The people at Elementary proudly proclaimed Lucy Liu's character as the first female sidekick in a Holmes film, but, er, she isn't. She isn't even the first female Watson. No, the problem is that pretty much every reference to Holmes and Watson is on an entirely superficial level. Conan Doyle had the detective take up beekeeping in his retirement, so in Elementary the young Holmes has an apiary on the top of the Manhattan apartment block owned by his unfeasibly wealthy father. And that's about the level of it, to judge by the couple of early episodes I've seen.

There's a sort of television sub-genre now of "damaged detective" dramas, represented at its best by Monk, Cracker, and even House. Elementary is deliberately designed for that category, and if you changed the names of the leading characters, few viewers would consider it special in any way. If the characters in Sherlock had different names, anyone watching would think, "Hang on! This is Sherlock Holmes." Might that happen if the characters in Elementary had different names? Sorry, but no.

I can't be certain that those views would still hold if I'd seen more of *Elementary*.

The 2013 Russian TV series again takes a revisionist stance, with a bespectacled, geeky young Holmes and a wholly believable older Watson, who is very much the former soldier. The characters are interesting, it all looks good, and elements from the Canon are intelligently woven into very entertaining stories.

I like stories about detectives who openly take their inspiration from Sherlock Holmes. *Miss Sherlock* doesn't pretend to be about Holmes and Watson, but the exploits of Sara

Shelly “Sherlock” Futaba and Wato-san Tachibana are full of Sherlockian touches. A very impressive series, I think – and the death of Yuko Takeuchi, who played “Miss Sherlock,” is a sad loss.

Enola Holmes is great fun. I’d like to have seen a Sherlock and Mycroft who looked like the characters described in the Canon, but I’ll accept Henry Cavill and Sam Claflin, because the rest of it is so good – especially Millie Bobby Brown and Helena Bonham Carter.

I’ve only seen the first episode of *The Irregulars* – which I enjoyed, once I’d realised that the whole thing is fantasy, not just the supernatural elements. The characters aren’t Conan Doyle’s; the setting isn’t the London I know, from my own experience or from the history books; and the chronology is seriously out of joint.

(J) One needs to consider the social history of time in which Holmes first appeared. The Ripper murders and other serious crimes made the general public extremely worried and nervous, so the concept of a heroic figure who could seemingly solve anyone’s problems was embraced with great enthusiasm. The world will always be a dangerous place and heroes – whether real or mythical – never lose popularity. My personal preference, however, is the no-gimmick version of Holmes. Think about the Victorian era; the majority of homes had no electricity, no telephones, no radio, and most transportation relied on hard-working horses. It was purely Holmes’s personal abilities that enabled him to solve crimes so efficiently.

Although a modern Holmes would most certainly make use of any available innovations, recent interpretations seem to play down the concept of the reasoning mind and prefer to concentrate on the sorts of things that would grab readers in the tabloid press. I’m sick to death of the ‘drug addict’ angle, get very weary of CGI effects and stunt doubles, and have absolutely no interest in Holmes’s sexual preferences. However, I can appreciate that everyone has their own personal interpretation of how they view Holmes and what they find entertaining.

Do you have a favorite SH film or radio or TV series?

(R) I don’t have one favourite. On film, I particularly love the Rathbone-Bruce *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (very slightly superior to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, I think); *A Study in Terror*; *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*; *They Might Be Giants*; and *Murder by Decree*.

On radio: the American series from the late 1930s and early 1940s with Rathbone and Bruce, and then Tom Conway and Bruce; the BBC series from the 1950s and 1960s with Carleton Hobbs and Norman Shelley; the BBC Complete Canon with Clive Merrison and Michael Williams; and the Imagination Theatre *Classic Adventures* with John Patrick Lowrie and Larry Albert, and written by our friend M. J. Elliott.

On TV: the 1964-65 BBC series with Douglas Wilmer and Nigel Stock; *The Blue Carbuncle* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (which I'm not alone in thinking is the best screen version of *The Hound*) from the uneven 1968 BBC series with Peter Cushing and Nigel Stock; the Soviet series of the 1980s with Vasily Livanov and Vitaly Solomin; most of the Granada TV series with Jeremy Brett and David Burke/Edward Hardwicke (there were a few regrettable lapses, not all attributable to Brett's health problems, but *The Sign of Four* remains the best screen version of any of the long stories); and the BBC's *Sherlock*, with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman – even the occasionally dubious fourth season.

(J) I grew up with the Rathbone/Bruce films, and although they are not necessarily *great* films, there is a satisfying nostalgia about them. In the 1970s there was a revival of old films being shown in cinemas. One near me was presenting a restored version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which I attended with a group of friends. To my eternal shame, when Nigel Bruce spoke the line, "Put it all together and what have you got?," I automatically responded, "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo!" The entire audience collapsed in a fit of uncontrollable giggles. My cinema-buff friend was mortified.

To what do you attribute the recent resurgence of interest in the character of SH if not in the Canon?

(R) A major factor must surely be the commercial success of *Sherlock* and *Elementary* on television, and Guy Richie's two blockbuster movies starring Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law. There's also the fact that all of Conan Doyle's stories are now out of copyright pretty much everywhere in the world, with the notable exception of the USA, where just a handful remain protected for a few years longer. And for better or worse, modern technology has made it possible for almost anyone to publish almost anything, without going through the tedious business of getting a manuscript accepted, edited, proofread, printed, distributed, and all the rest of it. Even thirty years ago, the number of Holmes pastiches available was not unmanageable; today there are probably more than it's possible to count.

(J) Well, from a very cynical point of view, everyone knows that Sherlock Holmes is a money-maker. However, we've seen that interest in a number of characters seems to run in cycles. Consider the glut of Robin Hood films that sprang up in recent years and the (not always satisfactory) reinterpretations of Hercule Poirot. Somebody will always come along who thinks they can do it better than their predecessors.

What do you read outside the Canon?

(R) If we're talking about Sherlock Holmes, my interest is in the Higher (and Lower, and Medium) Scholarship, with a particular leaning towards the topography of the stories, and dramatic interpretations, on stage, screen and audio. I don't read very much pastiche these

days, though I love a good parody, such as Picklock Holes and Schlock Homes, and I am a long-time devotee of August Derleth's tales of Solar Pons.

(J) Biographies of people whose lives tie in with other interests of mine. Jenny Uglow's recent biography of Edward Lear (a distant relative of mine) is excellent and provided some background details on a Lear watercolour that I obtained a few years ago. Jack Kerouac is an author that I revisit frequently, as he describes places and people familiar to me and I love the rhythm of his language. Growing up in the 1950s, I must have been the world's youngest beatnik – my hero at the time was Maynard G. Krebs, and I was fanatical about Dave Brubeck. Later, I was briefly acquainted with Allen Ginsberg, met Neil Cassady and The Merry Pranksters, and was introduced to Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Sadly, I never had the chance to meet Kerouac.

What is your most treasured ACD item?

(R) For me personally, it might be my collection of autographs of actors who have portrayed Holmes, Watson, or other significant characters. Although we had a few already, the impetus for a collection came when Jean and I took part in the BBC TV programme *Bargain Hunt* in 2000. After the initial recording at an antiques fair at Epsom Racecourse, we had some time free to look at some of the stalls we hadn't already seen – and in the remotest corner of the grandstand was an autograph dealer. Jean is a very good haggler, which I'm not, and we came away with the signatures of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, mounted with a publicity still from one of the Universal movies. It was our anniversary present to each other that year.

But there's a single item that may even top the autograph collection. In 2012 we sent Michael Cox, who was a good friend of ours, a copy of *The Sherlock Holmes Miscellany*. He responded with a charming note and a prop created for Granada's version of "Lady Frances Carfax," which he produced: it's Lord Rufton's folio of watercolours, showing the design of Lady Frances's jewellery.

(J) In terms of a specific ACD item, it's a small notebook with the hand-lettered title "*A Synopsis of Geology by A.B.U. Syman for the use of J.*" It was intended to educate his wife, Jean, and was very probably written around the time he was working on *The Lost World*. The little booklet includes an amusing cartoon of dinosaurs as well as a poem to Jean:

There where fairy J has walked
Beside the ocean blue.
In former days the Mammoth stalked
Or Pterodactyl flew.
The monsters of the Miocene
Could play the deuce with man,
But since they say the same of J

We end where we began.

My favourite Sherlockian item is Jeremy Brett's magnifying lens. On the visit to Granada Studios it was picked up from a table in 221b and handed to me for use in photographs. Afterwards, not wanting it to get lost, I put it in the (very deep) pocket of my skirt, intending to hand it over to someone on the production team. However, having been plied with a bottomless glass of wine and very little food, it was forgotten until, on the train back to London, I reached into my pocket for a Kleenex. I was horrified, especially at the concept that I might have ruined continuity on the set, and seriously considered whether I should immediately get on a train back to Manchester to return it. Enormously embarrassed, I later wrote to Michael Cox who, I am told, roared with laughter. He had been treated very badly by Granada and loved the idea that I had simply spirited away a valuable trophy.

Do you plan another ACD related book?

(R) I'd like to compile a book of my better Holmesian essays and articles. I think there are enough good ones, but I need to make the time to select and edit. We shall see. Or, as Holmes remarked to Lestrade in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," *Nous verrons*. (I'm not sure whether he was being pretentious or subtly indicating that he knew Lestrade understood French – which was, presumably, the language of his ancestors.)

(J) I have an idea for a book about Dr. Watson but need some time to develop it a bit further before I can elaborate on details.