

BREAKING NEWS!

Warner Brothers say that they'll be inviting members of our Society to the Montreal Special Preview of Sherlock Holmes, which is planned for December 16th or 17th. We'll keep you posted; meanwhile, dust off those Sherlockian and Victorian duds and get ready for a fun evening!

And, if that isn't enough, the world-renowned forensic art specialist Peter Paul Biro has accepted our invitation to be the guest speaker at our annual dinner on January 23rd. You may have heard of his recent involvement in identifying a portrait of a young woman as the hitherto unknown work of Leonardo da Vinci. More details will follow with the formal dinner notice which you'll receive in early January.

**Minutes
of the meeting
of
The Bimetallic Question
October 1st, 2009**

Date of the next meeting

Thursday, December 3rd, at 6:30 p.m. at:
The Westmount Public Library
(Westmount Room)
4574 Sherbrooke Street West
Westmount, Quebec

The Quiz at the next meeting

"The Boscombe Valley Mystery"
prepared by Roger Burrows

Minutes of the MEETING of the BIMETALLIC QUESTION held on Thursday, October 1st, 2009 at the Westmount Library (Westmount Room), 4574 Sherbrooke Street West, Westmount, Quebec.

Present: Carol Abramson, Jack Anderson, Maureen Anderson, Mac Belfer, Paul Billette, Marie Burrows, Roger Burrows, Patrick Campbell, Wilfrid de Freitas, Geoff Dowd, Sarah Dowd (guest), David Dowse, David Kellett, Elliott Newman, Lawrence Reich, Bernard Robaire, Arlene Scher, Ron Zilman

Regrets: Rachel Alkallay, Chris Herten-Greaven, Carole Rocklin

CALL TO ORDER:

Wilfrid de Freitas called the meeting to order promptly at 6:30.

ITEMS OF BUSINESS AND GENTLE TRANSACTION

(Incorporating Rinty and Lassie, Cain and Abel, and Salt and Pepper)

1. Sherlock Holmes and the Silver Screen

Ronnie Zilman saw previews of the upcoming Sherlock Holmes movie on the Internet. This is the one where Robert Downey (still sporting the “Jr.” after his name even though he’s got to be in his forties) goes flying out of a window and arcs downward into the Thames like a Holmesian faerie that’s run out of helium. Ronnie informed us that this film is going to be the flagship of some kind of franchise involving TWMFCD. The questions now are: can Holmes survive superhero status? How many indignities, and how much profit can be milked from the bones (of course, he’s still alive: this is but a metaphor) of the Master before the Propriety Police go after the Media Miscreants and those who would ride roughshod over the things we hold most dear? Can the Bimetallic Question weather this assault on our *bona fide* Victorian legend? Can we sit still for this immortalisation of irreverence? Who among us would attend the Montreal preview of the film (your Lowly Scribe volunteers – it’s a dirty job, but someone’s got to do it) if, as Wilfrid is going to request, our society be invited en masse? (For an update, see Breaking News on front page – ed). These are serious questions and inquiring minds want to know. Sure, we might accept the apotheosis of Holmes into some kind of proto-neo packaged, animated, chromium, sweaty crime fighter with above average intelligence and a brooding, paranormal vision, but there are some among us who will deny he has ever broken a sweat and the worst he has ever had to do in the form of exertion (notwithstanding his reputation as a pugilist) was to don a disguise, lift a violin bow, and battle Moriarty by those refreshing falls in the land of Ludmilla and the Alpenhorn. Nay, nay, dear friends, sullen though we may be in these trying times, pray that we lift our heads (keeping them attached to our bodies, of course), keep our spirits high, attend the film with firm resolution of will, and make a deal with the movie makers that for every travesty of The Master they will have to create a good film. Is Hollywood great, or what?

2. Feeding the animal

In preparation for Montreal’s, and possibly the world’s, first Pan-Sherlockian quiz, David Kellett challenged us with four tricky animal questions.

3. **First Toast – To the Master**

By Marie Burrows

What is it that we love in Sherlock Holmes?

In preparing my toast to the Master, I tried to answer this question, but I seemed to run around in circles as I attempted to put my thoughts into words. Eventually, I pulled out *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes* by Baring-Gould. I found my answer in Volume I on page 103, an essay written by Edgar W. Smith and published in the second issue of the Baker Street Journal. I would like to quote a few lines from that essay:

“We love the times in which he lived, of course, the half-remembered, half-forgotten times of snug Victorian illusion ...

And we love the place in which the Master moved and had his being: the England of those times ...

But there is more than time and space and the yearning for things gone by to account for what we feel toward Sherlock Holmes. He stands before us as a symbol ... of all that we are not, but ever would be. He is the success of all our failures; the bold escape from our imprisonment.

It is not Sherlock Holmes who sits in Baker Street ... it is ourselves who are there ... it is we who hear the pounding on the stairs and the knock upon the door.

That is the Sherlock Holmes we love – the Holmes implicit and eternal in ourselves.”

Please raise your glasses to the Master.

4. **Everything You Always Wanted to Know About ...**

David Kellett told us about *The Good Old Index*, a quick-find resource for Sherlockian information, with page number references to the familiar two-volume Doubleday version.

5. **bookfinder.com**

We at the BmQ tend to be bibliophiles. At the mere mention of a new read, or a good deal on an old one, or some esoteric publication that we never, in a previous life, would have considered glancing at, our ears perk up, we salivate in varying degrees, and our pulse spikes to an astronomical altitude as we look down on our tiny planet and see only books. There is no known cure for this affliction short of moving into a one-room apartment with windows all around so there is nowhere to lean a bookcase. You would have to ensure that there is but one cabinet in the kitchen, for food and dishes, and none in the W.C. – all this to safeguard against the stashing of books, because like any addiction, once you begin collecting, there is no stopping. This is the monkey on your back, the horse in your veins. But even the most austere of living conditions is no guarantee of permanent recovery. If we were to control our environment at 450° F, one little degree below Ray Bradbury’s magic number for those fiends who would quash our penchant for hoarding books, perhaps the threat of imminent immolation would restrain us. But long before that would happen, every day would be a bad hair day, and our eyeballs would shrivel into miniscule peas with the consistency of diamonds.

It is not every society that has a genuine book doctor on the premises, but we are fortunate in this regard. Wilfrid, along with his wife Susan, have been running a bookselling business for a very long time, and get to rub shoulders with colleagues on several continents. There is not much about the technical side of books – the making,

the identification, and the selling – that they do not know. So when Wilfrid offers a piece of advice on the subject, it behooves us to listen.

And so it was on Thursday, October 1, 2009, that Wilfrid referred us to the definitive source of all books, the godhead, if you will, that answers questions on pricing and availability of books around the world. It is www.bookfinder.com. Use it at your peril. And remember: people in glass apartments shouldn't accumulate books.

6. **Prowling with Rowling**

How these things get started, no one knows. Someone around our table might be thinking about having a coffee, someone else about babies, and pretty soon, we're talking about how the Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling was writing with her baby beside her in a coffee house in Edinburgh (The Second Dram?). We shared other well-informed anecdotes about her, including how she signed a first edition of her book for a friend who then sold it for £10,000 and bought a heating system, known throughout the literary world as "The Rowling Heating System" which is fuelled most economically by dragon's breath.

7. **Book Sale?**

Patrick Campbell suggested that at our December meeting, we bring books we don't want, and sell them to each other. We need to phrase this differently. Do you see us being interested in a book that comes with a "I am not the least interested in this book any more, so you should pay me money for it" sign? Hardly. On the contrary, we should create little tent cards and placards for each book, indicating soul-felt messages such as, "Between these covers is a highly prized part of my life. The price I am asking is infinitesimal in relation to its value and potential positive influence in your life." This will not only reinforce the addictions to book buying among our members, but it will also cause them to thank you as you receive their payment.

8. **Second Toast – To Doctor Watson**

By Carol Abramson

Your Lowly Scribe cannot multi-task. He was sidetracked, as usual, as Carol was about to deliver her toast. The more she read of her presentation, the more he was entranced. "This is brilliant," he said to himself, "so typically tongue-in-cheek as Carol is wont to be from time to time, but beyond that, brilliant as a polished diadem." Where did she come up with this idea? What a profound literary sensibility we have in our midst! When did she have time to do the research? The power behind the prose was undeniable: here was a true writer delivering the cogent elaboration of a premise that was not easy to manipulate: the idea that Doctor Watson Was a Woman! Gadzooks! Goodness knows, we can say anything around our table, and we often do. But *here* was a silly premise suddenly turned brilliant and irrefutable! Here is a taste of what Carol told us:

The reader may set me down as a hopeless busybody, when I confess how much this man stimulated my curiosity, and how often I endeavoured to break through the reticence which he showed on all that concerned himself.

(Note the "stimulated." Could things be more suggestive? – L.S.)

With evidence mounting to support her thesis, Carol concludes that Watson may well be Watson, but we have not examined all the evidence. What comes next is the incontrovertible, final, non-negotiable indication that Watson *is a woman!* She says, "... I

regarded the question of the Watson person's sex as settled for good. Indubitably she was female, but wife or mistress? I went on. Two pages later I found:"

... his powers upon the violin ... at my request he has played me some of Mendelssohn's Lieder ...

"Imagine a man asking another man to play him some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder* on a violin!" (On a flute, perhaps; a zither, even more likely, a kazoo most of all, but a *violin*? Unthinkable – L.S.)

While Carol throws us one plum after another, brevity constrains us to offer one last tidbit that tilts the scales forever in favour of her thesis. Here she quotes Watson:

... I rose somewhat earlier than usual, and found that Sherlock Holmes had not yet finished his breakfast. ... my place had not been laid nor my coffee prepared. With ... unreasonable petulance ... I rang the bell and gave a curt intimation that I was ready. Then I picked up a magazine from the table and attempted to while away the time with it, while my companion munched silently at his toast.

("petulance" ... "curt." Has anyone noticed how much sexual tension there can be over toast? – L.S.)

As Carol eased her presentation onto the landing pad of a shocking conclusion (too *outré* to repeat here), it became apparent that a powerful literary mind had been at work in crafting the idea, and a passionately crafty mind had taken up the slack in rendering the idea into a literary plausibility. For Carol had edited, abridged, and presented to us a "what-if" scenario played with by none other than the creator of Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout. Bravo, Carol. This was a treat!

9. Mycroft Was a Bi

Arlene Scher raised the issue of Mycroft Holmes and the bimetallic question, the latter being the source of the name of our society.

This involves four questions:

- a. What is bi-metallism?
- b. How was Canada involved?
- c. What is the connection to Mycroft Holmes?
- d. In which stories does Mycroft appear?

The answers are courtesy of Jack Tracy's *The Ultimate Sherlock Holmes Encyclopedia* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1977):

a, c. (p. 35) "**Bi-metallism**, the system of money in which coins of both silver and gold are legal tender to any amount; that is, the concurrent use of coins of two metals as a circulating medium, the ratio of the two being arbitrarily fixed by law. It is contended by advocates of the system that by fixing a legal ratio between the value of gold and silver, and using both as legal tender, fluctuations in the value of the metals are in part avoided, and the prices of commodities are therefore rendered more stable. Mono-metallists reply that the cheaper metal will always drive the dearer from use, whatever the legal ratio. The bi-metallic question was one of **Mycroft Holmes's** specialisms (BRUC)."

b. (p. 159) "We will suppose that a Minister needs information as to a point which involves the Navy, India, **Canada** and the bi-metallic question; he could

get his separate advices from various departments upon each, but only Mycroft can focus them all, and say off-hand how each factor would affect the other.”

d. (p. 159) The Bruce-Partington Plans, The Empty House, The Final Problem, The Greek Interpreter.

10. The Stamp of Approval

Marie Burrows announced that the UK would be releasing a set of commemoratives of famous Britons on October 8. Included would be a stamp dedicated to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Marie graciously offered to take orders for the stamps and first day covers, if anyone was interested.

11. The Stamp of Disapproval

Postal rates are going up. The cost of mailing a first-class envelope in Canada will be hiked by three cents in January 2010. The society agreed to buy a large quantity of “forever” stamps at the current rate in order to save on future mailings of our minutes.

12. Our Annual Dinner

Wilfrid requested that we set the date for our annual dinner on January 23, 2010, since he will be away at book shows on either side of that weekend. Rachel Alkallay has made the booking at the Montefiore Club on Guy Street, the same venue as in previous years, and at the same price. Regarding a guest speaker, Wilfrid tried to engage Josh Freed from *The Gazette*, but there had been no response to his e-mail. He then delivered a wax-sealed letter by hand. Still no answer. We hoped that, at the very least, Mr. Freed would use the wax on his cross-country skis, schuss over to Guy Street, and join us for the dinner. Mr. Freed later responded, saying that *The Gazette* does not forward his correspondence because they are short-handed, and he does not use the e-mail address that Wilfrid used. In any case, he said he would be wrapping up a film for the CBC in St. John’s, would be unavailable for the meeting, and wished us luck. (For an update, see Breaking News on front page – ed).

13. The Play’s the Thing

According to Patrick Campbell, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote 19 plays, only one of which involved Sherlock Holmes. We have already read one, *The Stoner Case*, which became the story, “The Speckled Band.” Several were one-act plays. Patrick has the script for *Angels of Darkness*, which he says is racist, and should not be performed. Patrick wrote a Sherlock Holmes play, *The Tides of the Wight*, in which the crime is “piratry”, or piracy. We lent our voices to the roles, and did a round-table reading. Your Lowly Scribe got caught up in the drama of the thing, and couldn’t dislodge the phrase: “something fishy this way swims.” Was Stephen King listening?

14. The Good Old Days

Roger Burrows introduced us to a book about the most recent series of Sherlock Holmes radio plays on BBC, starring Clive Merrison and Michael Williams. The book is entitled *221 BBC*.

15. Third Toast – To the Woman

By Sarah Dowd

She can be found sandwiched between a Hebrew Rabbi and a monographer of deep-sea fishes. But Irene Adler – with the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men – deserves a filing cabinet all to herself. While the King of Bohemia describes her as “What a woman!”, to Sherlock Holmes she is *the* woman: the epitome of her sex. And this is not a sex that is confining to her. Whether dressed as the daintiest thing under a bonnet, or a slim youth in an ulster, she still has the wit to best Sherlock Holmes, and the brazenness to tell him so. Indeed, with such a combination of looks and mind, Watson could hardly have had a better trigger word than, “Fire!” for a scenario with Irene Adler. Sherlock Holmes gives her “the honourable title of the woman.” It’s quite something that she can make Sherlock Holmes put ‘honourable’ and ‘woman’ in the same decoration; seeing as how he’s one to “make merry over the cleverness of women.” We can only hope that Irene Adler has broadened the mind of Sherlock Holmes even more, proving that her gender can be a match for his wits. It might seem more appropriate and modern to focus on her mind power, rather than her sex, but Irene Adler deserves to have her femininity focused on: for no one but the very quintessence of her sex can address Sherlock Holmes in the guise of a man, and still remain in his eyes, *the* woman.

16. Fourth Toast – To Mrs. Hudson

By Ronnie Zilman

(taken from www.mrs-hudson.com)

I have often been called the “long suffering” landlady of 221B Baker Street. Nothing could be further from the truth, my dears!

Certainly there was confusion with the master’s odd schedule, his incredible untidiness frustrated me beyond belief, the house has been invaded at all hours by “throngs of singular and undesirable characters,” however there was much joy in the life serving Mr. Holmes.

My primary role during the years when Mr. Holmes lived at 221B was to provide lodgings, prepare and deliver meals, send out the laundry, accept packages, announce visitors, and generally manage the domestic details of quarters in which my lodger lives.

My reward in all of this was not just the ever-increasing rent Mr. Holmes paid. We shared a very warm camaraderie and understanding.

Let us raise our glasses to Mrs. Hudson!

17. Quiz – Results

“A Pan Sherlockian Quiz” by David Kellett was based on the entire canon.

Before beginning, David explained he wanted “just the facts” (echoing the spirit of Jack Webb who had had to pick up a variant of the phrase when it was written into a spoof of the *Dragnet* radio and television series, from the 1940s and 1950s).

In going over the results of the quiz, we became involved in a discussion over the middle name of Dr. Watson. (In light of Carol Abramson’s toast, your Lowly Scribe votes for “Henrietta.”)

Since it was “H,” David Kellett always believed that it represented Hamish, as a variant of James, which Watson’s wife used. Roger Burrows parried that “Hamish” does not appear in the canon, and David agreed that he could not find any actual reference to support his theory. Therefore, we left the meeting sadder and no wiser because we didn’t know what the H we were going to do with this conundrum.

Possible total: 100

Winners were:

Rank	Name	Score	Prize
1.	Roger Burrows	67	Book
2.	Geoff Dowd	49	Book
3.	Wilfrid de Freitas	41	Book

There was a bonus prize for the lowest score. Elliott Newman received a first edition hardback of *Barney’s Version* by Mordecai Richler. His score was 6/100. To the vanquished go the spoils. Is this justice? You bet your sweet Boscombe bippy it is!

18. **Fifth Toast – to the Society**

By Roger Burrows

Marie and I were introduced to the Society by your “hated rivals upon the Surrey shore,” the Bootmakers of Toronto, which I had joined principally to receive *Canadian Holmes*. Meetings in Toronto were offered, but it’s a long trip from Ottawa, and the meetings we did attend were rather more formal than we liked.

When we saw a notice in *Canadian Holmes* about the Bimetallic Question, it seemed worth exploring. On finally making the trip to Montreal, we were delighted to find a very open and friendly group of people, and a chance to participate fully from day one. Meeting in this beautiful wood-paneled room is a much-appreciated bonus (it might almost be in a Victorian London club).

The Society flourishes because of the friendliness and openness of everyone involved. We’re proud to be associated with it; long may it continue.

Please raise your glasses to the Society!

19. **Future Toasts**

To The Master	-	Geoff Dowd
To Dr. Watson	-	Roger Burrows
To The Woman	-	Elliott Newman
To Mrs. Hudson	-	Jack Anderson
To The Society	-	David Dowse

Our dear friends, you would confer a great favour upon us by joining us at the next meeting of "THE BIMETALLIC QUESTION" which is being held on Thursday, December 3rd, 2009, at 6:30 p.m. Bring a friend.

For the latest society news or updates on our history, please go to:

<http://www.bimetallicquestion.org>