

Minutes of the Meeting of The Bimetallic Question October 4, 2018

Date of our next meeting: Thursday, December 6, 2018 at 6:30pm at the Westmount Public Library, Westmount Room, 4574 Sherbrooke Street West, Westmount, QC H3Z 1G1

The quiz at the next meeting: *The Red Circle*, prepared and presented by Raf Jans.

Next meeting's toast presenters: The Master: Ronnie Zilman; Dr Watson: Wilfrid de Freitas; The Woman, Irene Adler: Kristin Franseen; Mrs Hudson: Miyako Matsuda-Pelletier; The Society: Bruno Paul Stenson.

Dear toasters, please send your December toasts to me at kristin.franseen@mail.mcgill.ca. Thanks!

Minutes of the meeting of the Bimetallic Question held on Thursday, October 4, 2018.

Present: Carol Abramson, Rachel Alkallay, Paul Billette, Louise Corda, David Dowse, Kristin Franseen, Wilfrid de Freitas, Chris Herten-Greaven, Raf Jans, Miyako Matsuda-Pelletier, Anne Millar, Kathryn Radford, Bruno Paul Stenson, Ronnie Zilman

Regrets: Maureen and Jack Anderson, Vivianne Lewis, Carole Rocklin, Heather Wileman-Brown

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by our Sovereign Raf Jans at 6:33pm.

ITEMS OF BUSINESS AND GENTLE TRANSACTION

1. Thanks!

Hearty thanks go out to several members for service to the Society in the past few months. Thank you to Anne for compiling last meeting's minutes (with secret message) while I was off in the wilds of Utah State University. Thanks also to Carol for hosting a beautiful Victorian tea at her home in August, as well as for the additional treats at this meeting. Further thanks go out to Susan for her ongoing maintenance of our archives!

2. Speaking of the archives...

Those who found items of Sherlockian interest in Patrick's research papers are strongly encouraged to scan them and send them to Susan for inclusion in our archives.

3. Dinner Update

- Paul confirmed that our annual dinner will take place on January 19. More information is forthcoming.
- For our guest speaker, several mystery authors with Montreal connections were proposed, including Christopher Huang (author of *A Gentleman's Murder*), Judith Flanders (historian and author of *The Invention of Murder* and *The Victorian House*), and Catherine McKenzie (lawyer and author of several thrillers).

4. Note from Raf

Raf noted that his term as Sovereign is coming to an end, and encouraged all who might consider taking on this important role to email him at raf.jans@hec.ca

The mention of HEC led to a brief and fascinating introduction to the field of logistics and algorithms inspired by biology (including ants and genetics). Perhaps we will see a future toast or presentation about how Holmes's post-retirement forays into beekeeping might have forecasted these sorts of models?

5. 40th Anniversary Plans (and beyond)!

May 2019 will see the 40th anniversary of the first meeting of the Bimetallic Question! We have already received congratulations from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. Raf, Chris, Rachel, and Bruno have formed a committee to plan suitable celebratory activities. Possibilities discussed at the meeting include:

- A special dinner (perhaps at the Fuchsia)
- A potluck picnic (with a lamb roast by Chris)
- An additional public meeting/day of Sherlockian lectures at the Westmount Public Library
- A commemorative publication of new and archival materials by members (either a brochure put out by us or a special issue of *Canadian Holmes* have been proposed by members)

If you have any additional ideas or would like to join the planning committee, please contact Raf. As we look to the future, please note that the Westmount Public Library has confirmed our regular meeting space for February, April, and June 2019 (with future dates to be confirmed later).

6. Toast to the Master, by Chris Herten-Greaven

Chris presented some thoughts on the possible inspirations that may have inspired Doyle to create Holmes, as well as on the differences between the Literary Agent and his famous creation:

It is hard to imagine what type of a person Conan Doyle was trying to impersonate when he created Sherlock Holmes. We know that he had been greatly impressed by his medical mentor at Edinburgh University, Joseph Bell, which led no doubt to Sherlock's impressive ability to deduce: rarely did Conan Doyle put together two pieces of information which did not "fit," although on occasion he would mention a word such as "How could I have missed that?" and then go on and solve the mystery anyway. Although he might stumble or be misled, he would not be completely flummoxed. Take for example his medical profession, which never really got started, yet his great reserve of seemingly

worldwide knowledge and disparate facts always saw him through, usually unscathed. His knowledge of self-defence strategies was always at hand and rarely was he caught off-guard, yet in real life, Conan Doyle was more adept at other sports, such as football and cricket, where his main claim to fame was to have bowled the great W.G. Grace. But boxing and other self-defence sports—nah! Barely a footnote.

References to the fair sex are at arm's length or further, and there is not even a suggestion of alternate lifestyles so prevalent nowadays, most of which at the time would have been considered criminal offences, even as late as the 1960s. He sets an example with his wholesome exploits, without resorting to the ghastly bloodthirsty happenings which, in the news media anyway, gave rise to that dreadful expression, "if it bleeds, it leads..."

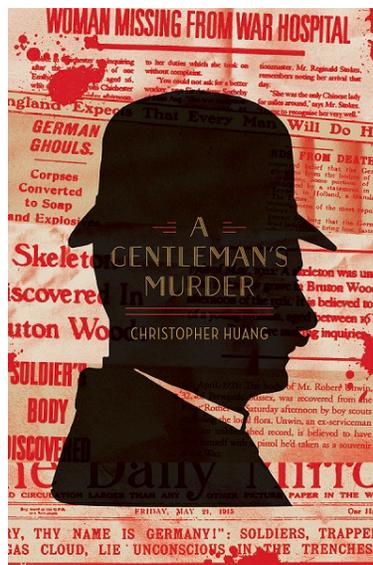
Yet after over one hundred years (in many cases), Sherlock Holmes's mysteries and adventures are still being read by a staunch retinue of followers, while maintaining the clean image he had at the beginning. Many have tried to emulate him, but few have succeeded, even with the advanced techniques of today. Even fewer have surpassed him.

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to raise your classes and toast the everlasting Master!

Show and Tell

7. "On the evening of the crime, he returned from the club..."

David read an enthusiastic report on Montreal author (and McGill alum) Christopher Huang's debut novel, *A Gentleman's Murder*, which follows Lieutenant Eric Peterkin's investigation into a sealed-room murder in a London gentleman's club in 1924. According to Mr. Huang's website (<https://ricordius.wordpress.com/>), he is currently at work on *Cat's Paw*, a horror novel inspired by Poe and Christie. The text of David's review is included in Appendix 1.

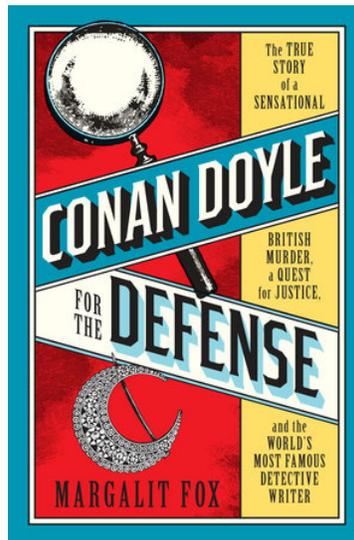


8. "Naturally my first thought was of burglars."

Kristin recommended the academic research of Eloise Moss, a history professor at the University of Manchester who recently gave a talk to the Montreal British History Seminar entitled "For whose Convenience? Consent and the Economy of Welfare in Child Emigration Schemes between North West England and Canada, 1870-1930." Dr. Moss comes to this subject through her interest in the history of British popular depictions of criminality and burglary. She has published articles on the popularity of E.W. Hornung's Raffles, and is currently finishing a book based on her dissertation called *Night Raiders: Burglary and the Making of Modern Urban Life, London 1860-1968*.

9. "It's the damned injustice of the thing..."

Continuing with the book review theme, Miyako brought our attention to a review of Margalit Fox's *Conan Doyle for the Defense* in the August issue of *Totally British*. Fox explores Conan Doyle's role in the Oscar Slater case, including the social context of anti-Semitism in the criminal justice system and Doyle's personal life during the 1900s. More information about the case is included in Appendix II.



10. Toast to Dr Watson, by Paul Billette

Paul recited a whimsically poetic toast on Dr. Watson's enduring appeal:

Dr. Watson, what do we like about Dr. John Watson?

He's an everyman, a simple man, a complex man. But who is the man?

Is he a doctor, a soldier, a husband, an author, a detective---something less something more? Let's explore.

He has a medical degree from the grand U of E (or is it Bart's school of dentistry?). He heals the sick when the game's afoot; he looks the other way when his friend is on the coke. He sometimes keeps clinical hours where he longs to use deductive powers.

He also has a gun, and walks with a limp and has PTSD from his days across the sea where he served in the 66th and took a fall in Maiwand resulting in a pension of which he is quite fond.

And there are the ladies he seems to like the ladies. But Mary took him away, but what can you say? Orphans attract. And when she had a heart attack, it was get back to 221B.

As for his writing, it seems to be so inviting to the Victorian soul. But what does he know as he fails to observe and misses the point. But he is astute, and sorts it all out.

He is no detective of that I am sure. Out of the hundreds of cases he's only introduced two -- one on Warburton's madness and the other of Hatherly's thumb. But he ain't all that dumb even if he's brown as a nut and built like a pug. He is a friend to a fault. Without our dear Watson Holmes likely would have been shot.

So raise a glass to Dr. Watson
He never lost his special touch
As a friend, and as an author –
As a detective, not so much.

11. ***“He had some spy in the office...”***

Chris shared research on William Forbes-Sempill and Frederick Joseph Rutland, whose work for the Japanese government during the 1920s was considered by some “the worst British betrayal.” Their case intersects with numerous points in the history of naval warfare and international relations, including the development of aircraft carriers, the repercussions of the Spanish American War, and the shifting nature of imperial power and alliances following World War I. Those interested in reading further may wish to consult the 2012 BBC2 documentary *The Fall of Singapore: The Great Betrayal*.



William Forbes-Sempill and Frederick Joseph Rutland

12. “You have the photograph?”

Wilfrid brought his framed photograph of Conan Doyle, with an original signature.

13. Toast to the Woman, by Carol Abramson

Carol regaled us with a humorous sonnet by Greg Ruby:

Hopefully, tonight I will not become a babbler
As I stand here making my first toast to Irene Adler.
I apologize in advance for this sonnet
About the daintiest thing under a bonnet.
It will become apparent in no time
That this toast will struggle to keep up the rhyme.

At the opera in Warsaw she was admired
After performing at La Scala she retired.
Her relationship with the future King of Bohemia
Would have made headlines in today's news media.
While trying to become married
Things for the future Mrs. Norton were somewhat harried.
Confused at first by Holmes dressed as a Pastor,
In the end she got the best of the Master.

So I ask that you please raise your glass
As I finish the toast to this lass.
No matter how you say it
She is always The Woman.
To Irene Adler!

14. Toast to Mrs Hudson, by David Dowse

Turning again to espionage, David proposed an alternative backstory for the ever-present but mysterious Mrs H:

Conspiracy theories, alternative realities, wishful thinking—who of us has not dabbled in them when considering the life and times of Sherlock Holmes?

I do not know if what I am about to propose has been suggested by others, but I hope I will bring some entertainment to our gathering with my slant on the topic. Mrs Hudson—landlady to Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson at 221 Baker Street. At the heart of London, the most powerful city, financially and politically, in the world. The house, a prime location, but with just 2 lodgers; one a recently discharged Army doctor with a small pension to scrape by on, and the other a hare-brained, eccentric, self-made consulting detective with nothing to write home about but one or two quaint puzzles which he has managed to solve. Only these two struggling lodgers; how could they afford the rent?

My take on the situation connects Mrs. Hudson to Mycroft Holmes. As I see it, Mycroft, the senior government official in charge of Canada, the Navy, India, and the bimetallic question and, most probably, information gathering and espionage, set up Mrs. Hudson at 221 Baker Street and funneled Holmes and Watson to this location.

Mycroft was activating a super sleuth in his brother, channeling cases and clients to him to develop the master agent which he planned to use in the European theatre. Mrs. Hudson was thus Holmes's controller, his liaison between the secret government spy program and the emerging consulting detective.

On the outside, Mrs Hudson was the motherly custodian of the house, providing meals, cleaning, overseeing the arrival and departure of clients, and generally fussing over these two gentlemen. But on the inside, she, through Mycroft, fed Sherlock a steady diet of cases and clients specifically designed to grow a master crime solver and spy seeker. With the help of the Baker Street Irregulars, she kept the flow of information streaming to Whitehall.

Mrs Hudson was a government employee whose purpose was to groom Sherlock Holmes into the agent Mycroft envisioned. Perhaps Mycroft had used the Mrs Hudson-Holmes template to grow a secret agent network. Was Holmes's identification number 221? Was he Holmes, Sherlock Holmes? Was Mrs Hudson "M," or was that Mycroft?

Have I stripped away the disguise, the mask that Mrs Hudson wore? I give you Mrs Hudson, the woman behind the man.

15. Toast to the Society, by Kathryn Radford

Kathryn mused on the various meanings of the term "society":

We hear or utter the word "society" so much that it becomes banal. With the article, it becomes a term, sociological, archaeological, or political—for example, a "coffee society," the civil society, **a distinct society...for local colour.**

As a translator, I have a love-hate relationship with dictionaries and the tradition of quoting them, but I also get a laugh out of the biases and relics of usage. Obviously, we recognize a Websterian definition, as in one of the following:

1. An organization or club formed for a particular purpose or activity.
"the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals"
Synonyms: association, club, group, band, circle, fellowship, body, guild

And then this lovely Southern Gothic example that sounds like A Streetcar Named Desire:

2. The situation of being in the company of other people
"she shunned the society of others"
Synonyms: company, companionship, fellowship, friendship, comradeship

Yet even a more specialized legal dictionary (Black's) adds only one nuance:

An association or company of persons (generally not Incorporated) united together for any mutual or common purpose.

Historically, society applied to groups formed with a mission and members. Again, local colour: the Jesuits were a society, the Society of Jesus. A union/guild was incorporated. Here, the nuance serves to remind us when a society had a legal function, still one possible meaning of the word.

This is more obvious in the French usage, which corresponds often to company, e.g., société anonyme, Sarl, and its variations. Etymologically, in Spanish, the word socio means member. Rather like associé in French, it can mean business **partner** or (at times) merely colleague/fellow member. Del latín socius, **socio** es el individuo que se une a otro para desarrollar algo en conjunto.

In terms of admiring Sherlock Holmes or Arthur Conan Doyle, we all become members of an **admiration society**, albeit not a mutual one. Nonetheless, we are not anti-social, but civil, so a **civil society**, loosely speaking. Now, as civil members of the Bimetallic, I say “**vive la société!**”

Quiz and Story Discussion

16. Quiz on “The Creeping Man” prepared and presented by Anne Millar

Results:	1 st Raf	64	Magic Potion tea and pressed flowers
	2 nd Carol	52	Earl Grey tea and pressed flowers
	3 rd Rachel and Kristin	49	Monster Mash tea and pressed flowers

[Our tiebreaker itself resulted in another tie; thus the inclusion of two third-place recipients.]

17. Discussion of the Story

Before the meeting began, a few members proposed similarities between this story and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published in 1888. During the quiz, Anne raised the question of whether or not Prof. Presbury’s transformation could be considered a werewolf story. Miyako and David also submitted additional reflections on the story and Holmes’s reaction to Presbury’s serum, included below.

In addition, your humble scribe recommends some additional resources on this sort of early twentieth-century medical quackery. Pope Brock’s book *Charlatan: America’s Most Dangerous Huckster, the Man who Pursued Him, and the Age of Flimflam*, follows the con artist John Romulus Brinkley, who became rich in the 1920s via a supposed impotence cure made from “goat serum,” and his nemesis, American Medical Association editor (and actual doctor) Morris Fishbein. Brock’s book and a satirical documentary by filmmaker and art historian Penny Lane (entitled *Nuts!* after the source of Brinkley’s “treatment,” far more overtly scandalous than in Doyle’s story!) were the inspiration for an episode of the podcast *Reply All* entitled “Man of the People,” examining Brinkley’s forays into populist politics and some of the early instances of US voters seeking a “man of the people” promising miracle cures and using popular media and appeals to bigotry to gain attention. This in turn has been optioned as a film to be directed by Richard Linklater and starring Robert Downey, Jr. as Brinkley.



Juvenile grey langur

Miyako:

This story is one of Holmes's last cases before he retired. Published in the Strand Magazine in March 1923, it takes place in 1903. Many of Holmes's fans think that it's quite bizarre and rather silly, perhaps heavily influenced by the story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, by Doyle's fellow Scotsman and writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). Also, since Charles Darwin published "On the Origin of Species" in 1859, formulating the theory of evolution by natural selection, the Victorian and Edwardian eras were, in a way, a "post-Darwinian society. Maybe Doyle thought that man and monkey are not so far apart, and created this story with a dash of science fiction in it!

Of course, we can laugh at this silly Prof. Presbury, who started treating himself with a serum of monkey and undergoes a startling transformation to become a beast himself! He's in his early 60s and is engaged to Miss Alice Morphy, the young daughter of a colleague. He wants to be young and sexy again to satisfy his future bride, but he needed help (or so he thought) and became desperate. Meanwhile, there are many species of monkey, and Doyle chose the "langur" for this story, so I checked a bit.

What is a langur? It's one of the Old World monkey families in South and Southeast Asia, having a slender body with a long tail in hands. "Langur" is a Hindi word, which means "tailed," perhaps related to the Sanskrit word "langula." Langurs usually have long hair surrounding the face, and is also called the leaf-monkey group. As Mr Bennett in this story read, "the great black-faced monkey of the Himalayan slopes, biggest and most human of climbing monkeys." But I think that Doyle wanted to make a point through Holmes's words "when one tries to rise above Nature, one is liable to fall below it... Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives... What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?" When Doyle wrote this story, he was 64 years old, about the same age as Presbury. Was he feeling his age as well? I'm almost certain that writing Holmes's stories had become a big strain for him.

Incidentally, my family kept a Japanese wolfhound back in the 1960s! His name was "Mr Black," and was half-wolf and half-dog, with shiny black fur—just like Roy in the story!

David:

OH THE HUMANITY!! , OH THE HYPOCRISY!!

Commentary on the Creeping Man

An educated man, mature in age, well respected in his field, decides to experiment on himself with a foreign substance. No one is harmed. No crime has been committed. The substance alters the physiology and behaviour but does not have a lasting effect. There were some positive and some negative consequences to the subject BUT he is labelled by family and friends as a deviant and a part of the Cesspool of the Poor World.

Why is SHERLOCK HOLMES the object of this vicious attack!! Just because he chooses to legally purchase and in the privacy of his home, inject himself with a 7% solution of cocaine should he have this stigma painted on him? The drug has certainly helped him through some dark times. His superior constitution and intellect permit him to turn off his need for cocaine as soon as a case of suitable importance arrives at his doorstep. He has harmed on one and the drug has helped him.

Is this not the same story for Professor Presbury? Of his own volition , with no one coercing him, in the privacy of his home and with his own funds, he decides to purchase and experiment on himself with the serum of the black-faced Langur. He harms no one. There are some positive affects to his physiology as are there some negative ones. Further research is needed...

Given Sherlock Holmes choice of cocaine as his behavioural altering substance, how can he possibly pass judgement on Professor Presbury without exposing himself as a total HYPOCRITE!!!

18. Close of the Meeting

Raf adjourned the meeting at 8:55pm.

Appendix 1. David's Book Report on *A Gentleman's Murder*

Foggy London, 1924

A sealed room mystery with a limited but highly detailed list of suspects.

Christopher Huang paints pictures of the exclusive gentleman's club, the pea-souper fog, the East London opium den (although in reality this had largely disappeared by 1924, and most drug consumption was done legally and at home), the endemic racist attitudes, the residential hospitals set up in rich country estates to treat the War-wounded, and, most vividly, the human tale of trench shell-shock and its treatment.

Upon devouring this first book by Mr. Huang, I had glimpses of Downton Abbey life and of the exploits of one of my favourite literary detectives, Lord Peter Wimsey. It was a real page-turner as the protagonist, Lt. Eric Peterkin, a soldier of mixed Chinese/English lineage, peels back the many skins of the onion to eventually reveal the truth.

With the great success of this first mystery, I sincerely hope that Christopher Huang will continue writing and provide us with the New Adventures of Lieutenant Eric Peterkin. It is said that the character has been optioned for development into an American-produced TV series. And yes, there are also references to the Master, Doyle, and Poirot.

[Personal note to Anne Millar: Eric Peterkin's sister, Penny, connects up with an up-and-coming police inspector named Horatio Parker, and it looks like it could lead somewhere. Similarly, Lord Peter's sister Mary is pursued by police inspector Charles Parker, and it certainly does lead somewhere.]

Appendix 2. Miyako's report on *Conan Doyle for the Defense*.

In August 2018, *Totally British* magazine informs us of a new book, *Conan Doyle for the Defense* (published by Random House in 2018 in the US, and by Profile Books in the UK)! This is the third book by American writer and New York Times journalist Margalit Fox. This is the story of a sensational British murder, the strange case of the murder of a wealthy lady in Glasgow, and a quest for justice by Doyle. Oscar Slater, a German Jewish immigrant, was prosecuted for the crime, convicted, and sent to prison. Doyle wanted to try and prove Slater's innocence. Fox introduces this case to readers through her detailed writing about the murder, the police investigation, and Doyle's own analysis of the saga. She presents the case in the context of Victorian sensibilities: the anti-Semitic environment, the social change of the shift from an agriculture-based economy to the industrial revolution in the cities, and the crime rates and social inequalities as people flocked to cities for work. When things get tough, the authorities try to create scapegoats. This conflicted with Doyle's sense of justice, also seen in his defence of George Edalji (the basis for the book and TV series *Arthur and George*).

There was also another reason for Doyle to get involved. In 1906, his beloved wife Touie passed away, and he became seriously depressed, despite his marriage to Jean Leckie in 1907. One way out of depression for him was to involve himself in "good causes" to help others.

So, what is this Oscar Slater case?? This was a very long-running case from 1909-1927, and became a very famous case, as Doyle's involvement was publicized openly. Slater was convicted in 1909 of the very brutal murder of a wealthy 82-year-old widow, Mrs. Marion Gilchrist, in Glasgow, Scotland. She was almost certainly murdered by a member of her own family (maybe due to a dispute over money). But this wealthy family was highly respectable, and sought a scapegoat to protect Scotland's social elite from scandal. Slater, by contrast, led a disreputable life as a gambler and pimp, and so was framed for this crime. Mrs Gilchrist was bludgeoned to death, and her diamond brooch was stolen. Slater had pawned a diamond brooch (and went to the US under a false name). But the pawned brooch didn't match the stolen one, and Slater had a strong alibi for the time of the murder on 21 December 1908. Doyle, himself a Scotsman, studied this case thoroughly, and published a report, *The*

Case of Oscar Slater, in 1912, investigating the cover-up and corruption, which stretched into the very highest levels of the Scottish legal system. Doyle vigorously campaigned to free Slater. After 18 years, Doyle succeeded in presenting the evidence, and Slater was released in 1927, receiving £6000 in compensation (but the legal authority refused to clear his name!). Slater had endured hard labour for many years and was enormously grateful to Doyle, without whose help he probably would have died in prison. The guilty parties were never brought to justice.

I heard an anecdote that Dr Joseph Bell once told Doyle, "You are yourself Sherlock Holmes, and well you know it." Bell was right! This case led to the establishment of the new law in Britain, the Court of Criminal Appeal, which was designed to correct other miscarriages of justice. Writing crime fiction is one thing, but the true-crime writing genre should bring more interest for detective story fans.

Contributions? Corrections? Blatant Americanisms? Contact your humble scribe at: kristin.franseen@mail.mcgill.ca. Those who plan on contributing toasts, original fiction, and/or lengthier reports are especially encouraged to email their texts as soon as possible to be included in the minutes. I welcome creativity and contributions from old and new members alike! Longer reports may be edited and/or condensed slightly for space, as space is limited to 10 pages (5 sheets of paper).