Holmes on the Radio

By SOB & Playwright John Longenbaugh

When asked if there was interest in this newsletter for an article about Holmes on the radio, your Editor told SOB John Longenbaugh, “You bet, we’ve got old time radio fans amongst our Members, our subscribers and our e-readers!”

Sherlock Holmes, the World’s First and Most Celebrated Consulting Detective, is older than radio itself by a few years—he first appeared in print in 1887, six years before Nikolai Tesla made the first tentative experiments in wireless communication. Holmes was also at the very beginnings of radio drama, and he’s still being heard across the airwaves, including as a regular character on Jim French’s Imagination Theater on Seattle local station KIXI. (So for the record, that means Holmes has had the longest run of any fictional character in radio—Take that, Lone Ranger!)

Part of the appeal for radio is that when it comes to Holmes, the listener’s imagination is already primed to meet the story more than halfway. The hawk-like visage and deerstalker cap, the gaslight eerily haloed above the fog-enshrouded streets, the cozy hansom cab or a snatch of violin music to evoke it.

But the stories of Sherlock Holmes also fit themselves to radio because The Great Detective was always at his most effective in the form of the short story. With the brilliant exception of The Hound of the Baskervilles, Doyle’s sleuth was always happiest solving a crime in 30 pages or so, or a half-hour of radio listening. That’s not to say that the novels haven’t been successfully adapted to radio—there have been several versions, of the novels, including The Sign of Four and The Valley of Fear. But despite their quality and faithfulness to Doyle’s books, this listener always finds it hard to imagine it taking longer than a half hour’s narrative for Holmes to solve any particular crime before returning to his violin, his newspapers, and the noxious shag tobacco stored in the toe of his Persian slipper.

The first radio play featuring Sherlock Holmes aired in 1930, an adaptation of The Speckled Band starring the most famous stage actor to ever play Holmes, William Gillette, who even at the age of 77 sounds exuberant in the role. Actor Richard Gordon took over after this first broadcast and continued to play Holmes until 1933, when tired of the repeat broadcasts, he left and Louis Hector took over the role of Holmes.

I’ve heard a snippet of the Gillette recordings (apparently all that’s left) and have had no luck finding any recordings featuring Gordon, but have heard several of the episodes with Hector. These shows aren’t the best, and not just because of the poor quality of the recordings. Hector’s performance features a caustic and cold Holmes who is at times downright crotchety.

One important feature of these early shows, however, is that several of the episodes step outside of “the Canon,” or adaptations of those tales that Doyle himself penned. Holmes is simply too fun a character to be bound to the narratives of one writer. The first scriptwriter to pen new adventures for Holmes was surprisingly enough a woman, Edith Meiser, a strikingly attractive actress/playwright who began writing new tales when she ran low on adaptable material. She continued to work as the prime author on several different... Continued on Page 2
One of our Violets, Entangled in Beeches!

The March 8, 2010 Meeting of The Sound of the Baskervilles will begin at 6:00 p.m. at T.S. McHugh’s Public House (21 Mercer Street, Seattle, (206) 282-1910). Come early, order dinner and catch up with other SOBs! Many arrive as early as 5:00.

Our 14th tale in The Canon—based on publication-date order—is this curious case which Jack Tracy says is variously dated as having taken place in 1885, 1889, 1890 and 1891. Says PFL David:

Ms. Violet Hunter is pursued by country gent Jephro Rucastle...not for romance, but as governess to his child. The pay-raise from her prior post is fantastic, so why does Violet question her employer’s requirements and consult Holmes & Watson? Interestingly, this is one of only two Adventures in which a child gives Holmes insight into the true solution to a mysterious situation.

Read The Adventure of the Copper Beeches to see Watson’s failed effort to “fix up” Holmes with the lovely Violet!

Holmes on the Radio

...Sherlock Holmes series throughout the ’30s and mid-’40s, including one featuring the most famous acting duo to take on the roles, Basil Rathbone as Holmes and Nigel Bruce as Watson.

After their premiere in 1939’s film The Hound of the Baskervilles, Rathbone and Bruce had reprised the roles through the forties in a handful of movies and dozens of radio shows. For many people Rathbone remains a definitive Holmes, and radio highlights his gifts of quick intelligence and classically-clipped diction. Bruce’s Watson, on the other hand, is the same blustering nincompoop of the films, if not more so—his repeated failure to grasp the obvious is at best a triumph of comedy over subtlety. Eventually Rathbone grew tired of the role both on film and radio, though Bruce continued on with a new Holmes, Tom Conway, doing a serviceable Rathbone impersonation. When the show moved to the East Coast in 1947, Bruce and Conway both dropped the roles and were themselves replaced first by John Stanley as Holmes and Alfred Shirley as Watson, then two years later Ben Wright as Holmes and Eric Snowden as Watson took us to the close of the golden age of American Radio Drama.

Tune in next month for another exciting episode of “Holmes on the Radio”, when Longenbaugh tells us, “My own favorite radio incarnation is a 1954-55 collection of twelve episodes featuring John Gielgud as Holmes...”.

Librarian’s Corner “It is a great thing to start life with a small number of really good books which are your very own.” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

⇒NEW TO THE SOB LENDING LIBRARY ARE...
★ Sam Fry’s paper, “The Influence of Mr. Sherlock Holmes on Twentieth Century Arctic Exploration”, which was summarized in our 2009 Beaten’s Christmas Annual; it came to us from Sam’s estate through a donation from his widow Louise.
★ A full-color, stunning reproduction of the 10-page feature “Sherlock Holmes’ London” from the January 2010 Smithsonian Magazine, donated to us by SOB Pat Connelly.
⇒OF INTEREST TO OUR OLD-TIME RADIO BUFFS...
⇒AND, WHAT WOULD A LENDING LIBRARY BE WITHOUT MISSING BOOKS! Please return the following titles—no questions asked—at your earliest opportunity: ★ The Nine Wrong Answers, John Dickson Carr; ★ The Greatest Cases of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle; ★ The Original Illustrated Strand Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle; ★ Out of the Shadows: The Untold Story of Arthur Conan Doyle’s First Family, Georgina Doyle; ★ The Malabar Rose, Davies Martin; and ★ The American Detective: An Illustrated History, Jeff Siegel.

For more about Sherlock Holmes on the radio, we refer you to Beaten’s Christmas Annual for 2000 (PP. 28-31), wherein PFL David’s presentation “Sherlockian Radio Plays”—a history of radio broadcasts in the U.S.—given at Bouchercon 2000 in Denver appeared. Sharing that panel with David was SOB Bill Seil, who provided input on radio broadcasts in the U.K.

Miss Violet Hunter is pursued by country gent Jephro Rucastle...not for romance, but as governess to his child. The pay-raise from her prior post is fantastic, so why does Violet question her employer’s requirements and consult Holmes & Watson? Interestingly, this is one of only two Adventures in which a child gives Holmes insight into the true solution to a mysterious situation.

Read The Adventure of the Copper Beeches to see Watson’s failed effort to “fix up” Holmes with the lovely Violet!
Things to See, Buy, Do & Know

- **From Roger Johnson:**  
  A two more plays recorded by The Old Court Radio Theatre Company can now be heard or downloaded free on the London Society's website, www.sherlock-holmes.org.uk. M.J. Elliott's scripts venture into apocryphal territory in "The Man with the Watches" and "The Lost Special". The two plays are available from me on CD for £5.00, £9.00 or $12.00, postpaid (US dollar checks to Jean Upton).
  
  At www.guardian.co.uk/sherlock-holmes-themovie/the-real-sherlock-holmes, you can download a four-part "Sherlock Holmes Audiowalk", taking in the Whitehall-Northumberland Avenue area and ending appropriately at the Sherlock Holmes pub.

- **From SOB Karen Murdock:**  
  Saw the obit on Edward Woodward in "The Australian" for 18 November 2009, under the headline "Screen's legendary hard man falls silent". While there's no mention of it in this obit, Sherlockians will remember Woodward playing Sherlock Holmes in "Hands of a Murderer" (1990).

- **From SOB Steve Duke:**  
  The only person I'm in love with at the moment is our Aussie friend Steve Duke: "I've been rung up twice by a newspaper on the Gold Coast (Queensland) and asked what the feeling amid Sherlockians was in regards "The Film". It seems they were one of the first places to premiere it. Having now seen the film, let me warn you that strong stomachs might be needed."

- **From SOB Manson Polley:**  
  Here's what the Tri-City Herald (WA) said about the new movie on opening day..."Sherlock Holmes' is a mess. Physically and literally. Start with five screenwriters and director Guy Ritchie stuck with how to make the legendary and cerebral sleuth palatable to today's technology-addicted, text messaging, everything's-gotta-go-fast moviegoer. Their answer: throw Indiana Jones and Harry Potter themes at the screen and see what sticks."

- **From SOB David Smith:**  
  Here's an excerpt from the NY Times Book section on January 5..."Doyle grew so to hate his greatest creation that in 1893 he tried to kill him off...Had Doyle been able to consult with the writers of 'Sherlock Holmes,' the movie, he might have devised, as they did, more vengeful and imaginative perils, like having Holmes almost bisected by a buzz saw or crushed by a runaway hull in a shipyard...Holmes is now unkillable—though purists will doubtless argue that Robert Downey Jr.'s rendition of him, which at times resembles a Victorian version of 'Fight Club,' is a fate worse than death...Would Doyle have disapproved of the new movie? Of course."

More on the New Holmes Film

**From our Aussie Friend Steve Duke:**  
From Roger Penzler’s estimate “more than half of recent published works put Holmes in conflict with vampires, werewolves, supervillains, and in futuristic settings. There's also been an increase in Holmes comics...Perhaps the most significant trend has been books that, as Holmes expert Peter Blau puts it, 'enter the world of Sherlock Holmes through different doors, such as works by David Pirie that are not imitations of Doyle but are inspired by his characters and his imaginative storytelling.'

- **SOBs Kay Chelemodos & Bill Seil** found an interesting article in the NY Times discussing the problems of Doyle’s heirs here in the U.S. If it appears that Holmes is copyrighted here through 2023. It's a complex situation since Dame Jean Conan Doyle died. Bill followed that with a January 23 editorial from the Times (www.nytimes.com/2010/01/24/opinion/24sun4.html?emc=tnt&tntemail1=y) that said there have been enough extensions of the copyright laws and that Holmes should belong to everyone.

- **SOBs Bill Seil:**  
  Saw the latest PFL David to a fascinating article (Associated Press, December 20) that discussed just how the world's largest Sherlock Holmes collection ended up at the University of Minnesota—85 feet below ground. Happily, numerous of our Beaten's are part of the collection!

- **From Stu Shiffman:**  
  Stu Shiffman wrote: "It seems Warner Bros. was so certain the new SH film would be a hit (cost $90 million, current take $300 million worldwide) that they hired a new set of writers last September to start on a sequel. The start date for the new movie will be in June."

- **Adds PFL David:**  
  "It certainly doesn't hurt that 'Sherlock Holmes' has been nominated for two Oscars—for Best Art Direction and Best Original Score."
I ineffable Twaddle
A monthly publication of The Sound of the Baskervilles
A Scion Society of the Baker Street Irregulars since March 31, 1980
Serving the Greater Puget Sound Region of Western Washington

President: David Haugen, PFL, SOB, PSC
Treasurer: Allen Nelson
Secretary/Editor: Terri Haugen (terri@soundofthebaskervilles.com)
Webmaster & Historian: Lloyd Hedberg, WFL
(lloyd@soundofthebaskervilles.com)
Website: www.soundofthebaskervilles.com

Direct correspondence to:
3606 Harborscrest Court N.W.
Gig Harbor, WA 98332-8981 USA
Phone: 253-853-5187  Fax: 253-853-5187
Email: david@soundofthebaskervilles.com

Member News & Updates

Those attending the February 8 SOB Meeting, presided over by PFL David Haugen, were:

Al Nelson  Margaret Nelson  John Nelson
Barbara Nelson  Terri Haugen  Joyce Funk
Ed Funk  David Smith  Carol Smith
Lauran Stevens  Sheila Holtgrieve  Margie Deck
Hank Deck  Ann McElvaney  Bryan Romnes
Michael McElvaney  Peter Chelemados  Ginie Romnes

News & Notes:

• At this Meeting we also welcomed Peter’s
grandnephew Adam, and Bill Mosteller—a Sher-
lockian from back east—and his friend Sarah
Fleming! When polled on the new SH film,
two “thumbs up” for Downey Jr. as
Holmes; others only for Downey as an actor. But
there were loads of “thumbs up” for Law as Wat-
son! David S. felt the film didn’t feel authentic, as
it “glamorized filth”! There were a 4-way tie
for 1st place on our quiz for BERYL: John, Sheila,
Bryan and Ginie. And guest Adam came in 2nd!

• Your contributions of food (cakes, cookies and sa-
vories) to our 30th Anniversary Tea & Auction on
March 27 will be most appreciated!!!

• Picnic Chair Paul Williams tells us that Sea-
hurst Park is booked for our Dr. John H. Watson
Picnic on Saturday, July 24 for noon to 4:00 p.m.!

• In the December issue of the London Society’s
District Messenger, Roger Johnson offered two
copies of a recording of a play by David Stuart
Davies, if you could name the story where Wat-
son’s wife calls him “James”. The winners would
then be drawn from a hat. One of those winners is
our very own Geoff Jeffrey!

• That’s SOB & Marine John Geis at
right. He’s got his assignment (two
years of studying Chinese). Please write
him at: PFC John Geis, 431 Rifle Range
Road—1392, Monterey, CA 93944.

• Joann & Bill McCall from Tigard,
OR, sent good wishes with their dues
renewal. Said Joann: “We hope to come back
someday for a meeting. We really enjoy Ineffable Twaddle.”

• With only a one-word comment—“Sad”—Paul
Williams sent the AP release excerpted here: “A
mysterious visitor who each year leaves roses and cognac
at the grave of Edgar Allan Poe on the writer’s birthday
failed to show (on January 19), breaking with a ritual that
began more than 60 years ago. The tradition dates back to
at least 1949, according to newspaper accounts from the
era, said Jeff Jerome, curator of the Poe House and Mu-
seum. Since then, an unidentified person has come every
year to leave three roses and a half-bottle of cognac at
Poe’s grave in a church cemetery in downtown Baltimore.
About three dozen stood huddled in blankets during the
overnight cold, peering through the churchyard’s iron
gates hoping to catch a glimpse of the figure known only as
the “Poe toaster.” At 5:30 a.m. Jerome emerged from
the church and announced that the visitor never arrived. He
allowed an AP reporter inside the gates to view both of
Poe’s grave sites, the original one and a newer site where
the body was moved in 1875. There was no sign of roses or
cognac at either tombstone.”
Puget Sound’s
Sherlock Holmes Society:
The Sound of the Baskervilles

Mail your check for $20 ($30 for families)—payable to “The Sound of the Baskervilles”—by March 31, 2010 to:  
Allen Nelson
32904 – 4th Avenue S.W.
Federal Way, WA  98023

Keep valuable, informative, insightful and fun-filled “Ineffable Twaddle” coming to your home each and every month!!

Ensure that you never miss a single issue of Beaten’s, our Christmas Annual, which is jam-packed with finely-researched historical articles, puzzles, pastiches and scholarly features!!

Get preferred pricing on future Club offerings, which in the past have included mugs, lapel pins, silver paperweights and books.

All this, plus exciting monthly meetings and not-to-be-missed Club get-togethers—picnics, parties and other weekend events!!

Renew your membership now with The Sound of the Baskervilles!!!

$20 for individuals, $30 for families (U.S. funds only) brings you all these benefits and more!!

Return this portion by March 31, 2010 with your check to:  
Allen Nelson * 32904 – 4th Avenue S.W. * Federal Way, WA  98023

Your Name: ____________________________________ Phone Number: (____) __________

Your Address: _________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
City         State/Province              Zip/Postal Code

I have added an additional $_____ as a cash donation. Thank you!

Check here if this is an address changes:       Your E-mail: ______________

Your Canonical Name: _____________________ From which story? _____________________
(Note: Canonical Names must be registered with the Club Historian, Lloyd Hedberg)