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The Detective Annex: Where Is 221B Baker Street?

ALISON BOOTH

IN APRIL 2014, I visited the University of Minnesota to give a talk to the Nineteenth-Century Area Study Group about author countries and literary geography. The talk was an annex to *Homes and Haunts*, the book that I was finishing on literary homes and tourism—a work long delayed because I had become an immigrant in Digital Humanities Country, a lotus land where projects take forever. I am not now, nor have I ever been, a Sherlock Holmes aficionada, but in 2014, I had become a Sherlock fan, catching up with the BBC series that, since 2010, has nicely linked neo-Victorianism and digital media. In Minneapolis, after a visit to Longfellow Park, where I saw Minnehaha Falls (named after the heroine of *Hiawatha*) and a scale replica of Longfellow's colonial-era house in Cambridge, Massachusetts,¹ I picked my way through melting snow to visit the university's splendid library. And there I came upon a fragment of the kind of museums that I write about in my book: a replica of Sherlock Holmes's study in his lodgings at 221B Baker Street, London. Why here? I thought. Brightly lit, the scant bits of Victoriana stiffly arranged in a too-wide windowless space, it seemed amateur but also emblematic of professional collections: a literary museum embedded in a library. I knew that other libraries housed rooms dedicated to real writers—even replicas of their studies. The genre of the reconstructed sanctum of genius ranges from the museum-like contents of Freud's study in Vienna, transferred to and now exhibited at his house in Hampstead (Goldhill 103–22), to replicas of L. Ron Hubbard's study in every Scientology church around the world (University of Minnesota 9). But there never was a 221B Baker Street.

My first thought was of the Sherlock Holmes Museum in Baker Street, London, which I mention in my book. I own a Holmesian matchbox and a pseudo blue plaque for Holmes's residence, souvenirs that someone might suppose I collected in earnest from the museum (fig. 1).² For this forum, I want to question assumptions about the motives of Holmesian fans and point out the historical ties between exhibits of literary interiors and academic literary scholarship. Theorists and scholars often take a censorious stance toward collecting and museums, as well as the most commercialized adaptations and fandom, as if participants delude themselves about the objects of their desire and collude in systems of social oppression.³ Delusion and collusion, of course, seem embedded in any widely invested practice, but we can be more observant detectives or historians of these practices. Libraries, whether in special collections or DH centres such as the one I run, are like detective annexes, circumventing the incompetent police or tenured academics even as they serve the same cause. Libraries often mount temporary or permanent exhibits. Similarly, literary museums

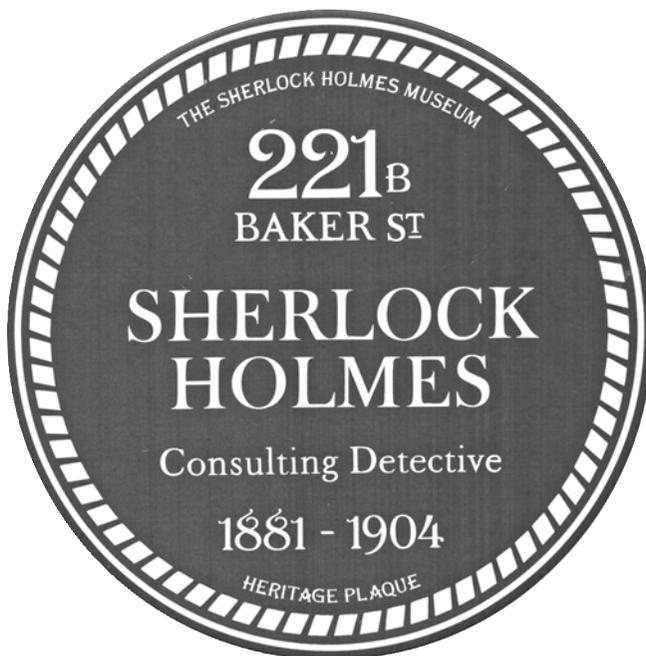


FIG. 1: Imitation blue plaque for 221B Baker St.
Photo courtesy of the author.

mirror academia's collecting of virtual knowledge about writers and works but with emphatic attachment to physical settings of author and text. Just as I appreciate house museums as imaginative collective biographies, I have gained respect for, as I learned more about, the library's version of 221B, in which each object is a silent, slightly playful commentary on the Holmes canon. Among the Holmesians or Sherlockians, the artifact is a clue, but it is a ludic make-believe, extrapolating from Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, which are designed as entertainments to tickle the knowledge bone.

The subject of Doyle's ubiquitous invention is vast. Rather than follow the scholarship on the author, the stories, and the countless adaptations, I consider the strange case of the 221B Baker Street study, or sitting room, as a straight-faced, extra-academic entertainment. For a century, groups of devotees of the Holmes canon have played the Grand Game: briefly, the founding rules of the Game are that players regard Doyle as the literary agent and Watson as the author of the stories; Watson and Holmes were real people (some claim they have never died). Charles J. Rzepka has shown that at least since 1930, when Christopher Morley, in "In Memoriam: Sherlock Holmes," declared "the supremacy of art over life," quasi-scholarly British

and American societies and journals have been dedicated to reconciling inconsistencies in the Canon like any Biblical exegetes (296–97). To be brief, by 1952, the Baker Street Irregulars (New York) and the Sherlock Holmes Society (London) had journals, in clear emulation of societies dedicated to real authors. In 1945, Vincent Starrett wrote to a fellow Baker Street Irregular regretting that “we do not have a quarterly journal, such as the Dickensians have” (Lellenberg 25).⁴ One revealing difference from the Browning, Brontë, or Dickens societies was that the Baker Street Irregulars were all-male until 1991; it was “a boy’s world” (Rzepka 295, 308). Not incidentally, a number of these boys had served in World War II; the societies might help turn back the clock by half a century or more. Some not only fleshed out the world of Holmes but produced what now would be called fan fiction, narrating cases merely mentioned by Watson.

If it was a world, could it not have the author’s home for pilgrims to visit? Among earlier mappings of the story world, Ernest H. Short delineated a floor plan for Watson and Holmes’s lodgings that was published in *The Strand* in 1950 (University of Minnesota 6). For the Festival of Britain in 1951, the firm that occupied Abbey House, the site of the fictitious address 221B, created a replica of the sitting room (Eyles 99–100); in 1952, this replica travelled to New York and Toronto, as if annexing Anglophilia, at the very time that the *Sherlock Holmes Journal* joined North America’s *Baker Street Journal* as regular venues for publications of the Grand Game. This early British exhibit is now part of the collection on display at the Sherlock Holmes Public House, 10 Northumberland Street (Eyles 100). The British Film Museum features an exhibit on Sherlock Holmes stories and their many adaptations, including one of “many similar recreations across London of the sitting room at 221B Baker Street” (Porter 6–7). Impressive as the home turf may be, in this and other instances, Americans have grabbed custody of British properties, claiming “the largest Sherlock Holmes archive in the world” (Mumford). At the University of Minnesota, the detective annex is the culmination of a sequence of plays in the Game, especially some fortunate collecting. In 1947, a group of faculty at the university formed the Norwegian Explorers, a scion of the New York-based Baker Street Irregulars. It followed that some of its members and a network of Holmesians assembled collections (denoted by the names Iraldi, Meiser, Hench, Shaw, Starrett, and so on) narrated by the current curator, Timothy Johnson; often the donations were induced or followed by strategic conferences with appropriate keynote speeches (Johnson). The Shaw miniature of the room, acquired in 1993, was joined by Allen Mackler’s full-sized model in 2006, leading to an exhibit in 2007 at the University of Minnesota Library, “Victorian Secrets and Edwardian Enigmas.” The Allen Mackler Room was assembled in its namesake’s own home before it was moved to the library; Johnson recalls the sense of awe at the threshold of the room in Mackler’s house “when one stood outside the door, awaiting invitation to enter this special space. Each item was

meticulously placed—there for a reason” (University of Minnesota 13). The simulacrum (a copy without an original) is a sacred gift between initiates. Now, with a low-cost brochure on offer, the room is behind velvet ropes. But each object invokes all the other virtual-reality performances of descriptions of objects in the stories. An Irregular would never look at the room and see a pawnshop or random Victoriana; he or she (now that women can join) would never object that another version of 221B is superfluous. Rather, the initiates might decide to annotate the concrete annotations in the exhibit with further textual evidence or speculation—as academic critics will do.

Much more could be said about the proliferating models of the site. Here, I briefly point out some directions for an interpretation of displacements of time and space. As an instance of transatlantic literary passion, Rzepka notes the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon. Sherlock, like Peter Pan, never grows up; he and Watson live in “off-campus university housing,” their sexuality much questioned but actually moot (Rzepka 308–09). Like a dollhouse, and like institutional collections generally, according to Susan Stewart, these rooms remodel “the boundaries of time and space” (Stewart 63) to rework property and power relations. The invention of a room that is then made accessible in space works especially well for detective fiction’s evidentiary framing of things and mobility (who is allowed where). Further, there is a special allure to “places of imagination” in urban settings associated with crime-detective fiction (van Es and Reijnders 114). Crime-fiction tourism appeals to a desire to access the social “underbelly” and past times submerged by the contemporary no-place of the city (van Es and Reijnders 123).

With such motivations, the specialists’ focus on a fictional detective at an imaginary site also suggests a form of historical adaptation. Perhaps, like the recreation of lodgings and city in *Sherlock*, the detached rooms are part of a tent-pole transmediation in popular culture. Linda Hutcheon insists that adaptations have a life of their own without being “vampiric” (176). Adaptations offer “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise,” the pleasure of “recognition and remembrance” (Hutcheon 4). Like Hutcheon, we can welcome adjustments of scale. Scholars should certainly license obsessive collecting and outpourings of expert criticism, even for fictitious matters. Collectors, after all, behave much as literature professors do. From my first impression, I was delighted by the Minnesota shrine as a research find. In “A Singular Set of People,” Barbara Rusch, one of the Baker Street Irregulars, details the sinister collectors in the Canon, many of whom exemplify “barely repressed misogyny” (42) but are devotees of a kind of religion (4). Rusch confesses to having three rooms to hold her own Holmesian relics and says, “you are what you collect” (40–41), very much in accord with Baudrillard. Evil men may be good collectors. But Sherlock himself collects, as do contributors to or readers of a journal—*Victorian Review*? A collection is an anachronistic heterotopia, striving to freeze time and fix metonymies in a new set of spatial relations. As relics of a fictional person,

the objects in the library's Sherlockian annex realize the words of Doyle's texts, while collectors and librarians curate valuable artifacts. The Holmes stories and the players of the Grand Game may signal a retreat from heterosexual adulthood and an obsession with clues. I suggest we not trouble to diagnose it or to weigh the middling aesthetic merit of 221B assemblages. Instead, the shrine in the University of Minnesota Library could be enjoyed as a parody of author-worship and of library as well as museum exhibits. In lieu of the high seriousness of a monograph of literary scholarship, you can visit and browse a detective annex that is the result of years of dedicated team play. Read closely the clues in this curated stage set, where players may re-enact the Holmes Canon.

Notes

- 1 On these sites, see Booth 176–78.
- 2 On London plaques, see Booth 44–49.
- 3 Examples of the critique influenced by Walter Benjamin include Baudrillard and Stewart. Mathur synthesizes the association of museums and global capital. Jenkins leads a turn toward participatory as opposed to consumer culture.
- 4 The University of Minnesota Library purchased Starrett's collection in 1988 (Johnson 122).

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Carlyle Resartus? No. 24 Cheyne Row

SARAH OLWEN JONES

AT THE time of his death in 1881, Thomas Carlyle was at the height of his influence and among the most revered writers in Britain. A social critic, biographer, and historian, known in his later years as the "Sage of Chelsea," Carlyle was admired by many as a moral guide, steering his readers through the tumultuous nineteenth century. Leigh Hunt had idealized Carlyle as the next Percy Bysshe Shelley (CL 153), and, in 1855, George Eliot observed, "there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived" (qtd. in Seigel 409–10). For decades, Carlyle was a figure around whom luminaries, celebrities, and aristocrats gathered, and he was considered a voice of and for the times, even if his works were not universally admired. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Carlyle's reputation was in ruins. James Anthony Froude's publication of Carlyle's *Reminiscences* and biographies of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle exposed Carlyle's vulnerabilities and kindled a storm of allegations (among other criticisms) regarding Carlyle's perceived lack of manliness and social class, raising questions about Carlyle's capacity to serve as a model of Britishness.¹

In the midst of the controversy, in 1883, Mary Aitken Carlyle (commonly known as Mrs. Alexander Carlyle), Carlyle's niece, former amanuensis, and housekeeper, with great foresight secured and opened to visitors the house in which Carlyle was born (and lived for the first three years of life) and also initiated the collection of memorabilia and artifacts connected to her uncle and aunt. While the "Arched House" in Ecclefechan became an early site of pilgrimage for those seeking the origins of the "Sage of Chelsea," back in London the Carlyles' Cheyne Row residence was dirty, run down, and neglected, the home's condition being "the fitting accompaniment of all the malevolent abuse that has been heaped on Carlyle since his death" (qtd. in *Carlyle's House Catalogue* 2).

More than a decade after Carlyle's death, in 1894, the Manchester merchant George Lumsden visited the "holy ground" of No. 24 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, to pay homage to "the man whose influence upon my own life