

The 2014 Birthday Weekend BSI 80th Anniversary

by MATT LAFFEY

ASH Wednesday Dinner

The sight of a friendly face in the great wilderness of life is a pleasant thing indeed, but within microseconds of entering O’Casey’s on the evening of 15 January 2014, the Game—as the kids these days are fond of saying—is on. Even the seasoned pros in attendance must admit to sensing a subtle shift in the natural order of things. ASH Wednesday, the semi-official kickoff of BSI Weekend, is awash in friendly faces, and the conspiratorial glee of planning for the days ahead is intoxicating. Our experienced hosts, Evelyn Herzog (“The Daintiest Thing under a Bonnet”), Susan Rice (“Beeswing”), and the entire sprightly lot of Adventuresses, have once again created the perfect Sherlockian social cocktail: one part travel-weary bright-eyed/bushy-tailed Sherlockians and one part travel-weary been-there/done-that Sherlockians; liberal amounts of tristate-area Sherlockians; garnished to perfection with monthly ASH Wednesday regulars—a smooth and satisfying experience for first-timers and old-timers alike. (I make the mental note that if Lyndsay Faye (“Kitty Winter”) or Mattias Boström (“The Swedish Pathological Society”) had been here this year, either might have talked me out of employing cocktail metaphors at such a juncture. Both were missed, personally and publicly, all the same.)

With noticeable relief, the hardworking staff of O’Casey’s announce last call as the less adventurous Adventuresses and friends say their farewells and journey back to their respective lodgings. For those dedicated to keeping the memory green for just a little longer, Monica Schmidt and Chris Zordan lead a cadre of enthusiastic Sherlockians to O’Lunney’s. For the purposes of research I make the short walk to O’Lunney’s, a friendly and spacious bar destined to serve as the *de facto* Sherlockian after-hours spot every night of BSI Weekend. I manage to escape the conviviality a little after midnight, but I’m told the Holmes-centric discussion continued, as would be expected, in solemnity appropriate to a county cricket match at Lord’s, until closing time at 4 a.m.

The Morley–Montgomery Memorial Award 2013

In celebration of “prodigious profusion,” the **BSJ** holds an elegant invitation-only *soirée* on the first floor of the Midtown Executive Club for the year’s contributors. The Irregular Quarterly of Sherlockiana—in which you are currently engrossed—is just as relevant today as it was in 1946 when Sherlockian legend Edgar W. Smith was at the helm. Under the deft and dedicated stewardship of current editor Steven Rothman (“*The Valley of Fear*”), the **BSJ** has managed to survive, and even thrive, in the so-called post-print age. Surveying a room of what essentially amounts to the living embodiments of Rothman’s 2013 editorial choices, I have no doubt whatsoever that in a week overflowing with gatherings, I am standing at the epicenter of the most concentrated convergence of Sherlockian brainiacs, Watsonian wordsmiths, and Starrett-level scholars possible. I command my brain to remember this moment—“docket it,” as Holmes might implore—for this is the stuff that Sherlockian dreams are made of.

Without warning, my fugue state is interrupted by the voice of our dapper editor. Flanked by “Wiggins” Michael Whelan (“Vincent Spaulding”), the leader of the BSI, Rothman delivers a few concise remarks of thanks and praise, and after a brief pause makes the announcement that everyone has been waiting for: the winner of this year’s Morley–Montgomery Memorial Award. A list of winners from years past reads like a who’s who of the Sherlockian cerebral elite—mostly established Holmes and Conan Doyle scholars, venerated and celebrated elder statespersons in some cases. So it is understandable that, immediately following Rothman’s naming of the 2013 winner, a brief yet complete silence envelops the room as all in attendance



Steven Rothman (L) and Michael Whelan (R) present Anastasia Klimchynskaya with the Morley–Montgomery Memorial Award.

attempt to place the name of first-time **BSJ** contributor, first-time BSI Weekend attendee, and 22-year-old graduate student Anastasia Klimchynskaya. Within moments, the bemused silence is replaced with thunderous, sincere applause in recognition of the young author of “Sherlock

Holmes and Pope’s *Essay on Man*” (Fall 2013), an erudite, scholarly, and discipline-hopping essay. Accompanying her certificate and check are the less tangible but infinitely heavier bestowment of great expectations; the Sherlockian world will be watching and rooting for one of its newest and youngest members.

And on that historic note, a thoughtful crowd parts ways, making their way into the early evening twilight . . . and then mostly reunited two minutes later on the stairs walking up to the Distinguished Speaker Lecture, also held at the Midtown Executive Club. James O’Brien addresses an SRO crowd on “Reassessing Holmes the Scientist.” His well-received talk can be found elsewhere in this issue.

The Baker Street Irregulars Dinner—17 January 2014

In the interest of full disclosure, the 2014 BSI Dinner, held in the palatial yet tastefully adorned, academic-chic Yale Club in midtown Manhattan, is the very first time I attended what can best be described as Christopher Morley’s finest and most enduring legacy. I can’t promise prose free of hyperbole and starry-eyed exaltation; on the other hand, I can promise to refrain from using insipid sports metaphors (e.g., “the Super Bowl of scions”). But how does one articulate what it means to receive an invitation to participate in something lovingly steeped in Sherlockian legend and lore, built on a foundation of principles that are just as relevant in 2014 as they were in 1938? (Principles held by Morley, Smith, Wolff, and contemporaries that have a greater association with “apotheosis” rather than “walked the earth.”) Receiving an invitation and attending the Dinner links me to an unbroken chain of venerable traditions—a continuum whose strength is derived, not from the rigidity of unchanging dogma, but from an elegant flexibility that allowed it to co-exist with the times while continuing to maintain its essential



The Baker Street Irregulars and their guests enjoy cocktails before dinner.

shape. The ultimate gauge of its success is the mere fact (and the incredible reality) that the BSI Dinner still exists.

The pre-Dinner cocktail reception, held in the Yale Club's voluminous library, was a heavenly blur of greetings and handshakes and congratulations on my first dinner invite . . . actually, what I remember most clearly was emerging from the elevator into an epic Wodehousean party scene: gentlemen in tuxes, ladies in sartorial finery—I'm spotted almost immediately by one of my primary Sherlockian mentors, John Baesch ("State and Merton County Railroad"), who pulls me aside and helpfully points out my lack of shirt studs and cufflinks (I'm now sure I'm stuck in the plot of a Wodehouse novel, instead of the preferable 1895). After I locate them in my back pocket John provides emotional support and I quickly and literally put myself together, only to be handed off to Mickey Fromkin ("The Missing Three-Quarter"), whose nimble fingers save my first-time-tied bowtie from oblivion. But before I can continue, I must find my other primary Sherlockian mentor, and formally thank her for welcoming me into this mad, mad world four years prior. I locate Susan Rice holding court and present myself, replacing the formal speech I wrote in my head with a more meaningful "I'm here—and thank you."

I now feel absolutely ready for whatever comes next, which turns out to be drinking scotch out of champagne glasses with Bob Katz ("Dr. Ainstree"), Peter Crupe ("The Noble Bachelor"), Ray Betzner ("The Agony Column"), and others until Wiggins calls the barely contained chaos to order. The formerly anarchic crowd settles into rapt attention as Marilyn Nathan is asked to come forward as *The Woman* for 2014. The momentary lapse into good behavior ends with the call to dinner, and rounds of hearty greetings continue as we all perform an odd collective walk-shuffle to the elevators. Kristina Manente and Jenn Eaker appear like a mirage among the black and white desert of tuxedoed gentlemen,



(L to R) Mary Ann Bradley, Hartley Nathan, Marilyn Nathan, John Linsenmeyer, and Michael Whelan.

and I look forward to giving each an indecorous high five because, "Hey, look at us being born on the Internet around the same time, and now here we are!" Sadly, it's not meant to be, and I'm shuffled into what I suppose will be the defining feature of

the weekend for those BSI personalities a bit more on the jaded side: BSI Weekend 2014, the one where only a single elevator worked.

I blink once and I'm sitting at my assigned table, overjoyed to find that one of my favorite Sherlockians, Marina Stajic ("Curare"), the poisons expert, has been seated next to me. I blink again and I find myself, for the very first time ever, *facing* the semi-mythical old-fashioned camera, as opposed to poring over photos of BSI dinners past. A flash discharges (please let my eyes be open), and the 80th Birthday Weekend dinner is in session. After introductory remarks by master of ceremonies Wiggins, I realize that I've just won the bet I made with myself about whether Leslie Klinger ("The Abbey Grange") would win an award of some sort just a notch below knighthood: The Edgar W. Smith Intrepid Irregular Award is bestowed upon Klinger for his role on behalf of the public domain status of Sherlock Holmes *qua* literary character and all other canonical characters and events that currently exist in the public domain in the United States (i.e., #FreeSherlock). In the midst of Klinger's standing ovation my thoughts take a momentarily morose turn, pondering the all but forgotten victim in this case. Of course, I mean Langdale Pike, condemned to sit in the bow window of his St. James's Street club for another decade. Stay strong, Pike!

A well-cultivated line-up of traditional toasts is sporadically unleashed on an attentive audience: the virtues of Mrs. Hudson are toasted by Mike Berdan ("Henri Murger"), Teddie Niver ("Carina") commemorates brother Mycroft, a toast speculating on Watson's second wife (and Watson as husband) is professed by Glen Miranker ("*The Origins of Tree Worship*"), and finally a toast to Holmes himself is given by Mark Levy ("Don Juan Murillo"). Waiters appear and bring more plates of well-regarded food, but I'm not paying attention because Sonia Fetherston is giving a last, grand toast to a grand old Irregular, a personal favorite of mine, Bliss Austin ("The Engineer's Thumb").

To celebrate the 80th birthday of the BSI, a trifecta-of-cupcakery is unleashed on a crowd eager to sample the familiar color scheme of blue, purple, and mouse delights. Eighty years is a very long time, so along with sweets, a slightly more grownup—and Watson-approved—celebratory glass of after-dinner brandy is also handed out to everyone in attendance. With bodies fed, Jan Burke ("The Most Winning Woman") feeds the mind with a paper delving into the forensic nature of Holmes's work. And then comes a break in all the revelry with a short but meaningful reflection on mortality, as Francine Kitts ("Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope") remembers Sherlockians who died in the previous year.

Eventually it's back to business, which, much to the surprise of all, consists of a shocking proposal to amend the sacred, or at the very least timeless, Constitution and Buy-Laws of the BSI—created by one of the



Judge Al Rosenblatt (L) prepares to let Lou Lewis lay down the law.

original Irregulars, Elmer Davis (“A Case of Identity”). The BSI, being a civilized (mostly) body of enlightened thinkers, decide to formally debate the issue instead of allowing the dinner to erupt in an Irregular rumble. Two sides (“to amend or not to amend” is

the question), made up of the finest legal minds the Irregulars have to offer, both present their case with aplomb and zeal. To make a final decision, who better than Wiggins himself? Unsurprisingly, the sacred decrees of Davis will be left unchanged, saving the still mostly applicable Constitution and Buy-Laws for future generations.

At long last, it’s that magical time that until now I’ve only read about: the announcement of new investitures. The drama and theater of the moment are rather remarkable, and at the end there are seven brand new Irregulars, awash in the glory of their moment:

Peter McIntyre
S. J. Rozan
Christopher Music
Sonia Fetherston
Mark Alberstadt
Jacquelynn Morris
Harrison Hunt

“Arthur Cadogan West”
“The Imperial Palace of Peking”
“Wagner Night at Covent Garden”
“The Solitary Cyclist”
“Halifax”
“The Lion’s Mane”
“The Something Hunt”

What’s the only thing better than receiving your investiture along with one Irregular Shilling? Being a recipient of the Two-Shilling Award, which this year goes to Randall Stock (“South African Securities”) for his dedication to all things BSI and Sherlockian. With so many announcements and displays of erudition, how does a brain manage? How about ending with a relaxing and always inspiring reciting of Vincent Starrett’s (“*A Study in Scarlet*”) “221B” by the lovely and sonorous Evelyn Herzog. With Starrett’s immortal words dancing through my head, I make one final survey of my first BSI Dinner, attempting to freeze what is destined to be one of the great moments in my life, whatever the future brings.

The Merchants Room (Covent Garden West)

Whether or not you suffer from the acute mania of a collector, it is always advisable to rise early enough on Saturday morning to peruse (or, depending on the previous night's level of imbibing, painfully hobble around) the impressively eclectic tables of Sherlockiana. In the bland but agreeably functional Vanderbilt Room of the Roosevelt Hotel, the enterprising band of book slingers, antiquarian dealers, and random Sherlockian tchotchke merchants never fail to impress me with their ability to collectively turn a boring conference room into a proverbial Aladdin's Cave, packed with new, used, and rare books, exotic ephemera, and (sometimes thankfully) singular *objets d'Holmes*. Highlights include a visit to the Wessex Press table, where Steve Doyle (*"The Western Morning News"*) is hocking a collection of essays by newer Sherlockians called *The One Fixed Point in a Changing Age: A New Generation on Sherlock Holmes* edited by Kristina Manente and friends. The most handsome and exciting new release resides at the BSI Books table, where editors Bob Katz and Andy Solberg (*"Professor Coram"*) sign copies of *Irregular Stain*.



New books being signed in the Merchants Room.

In my four years of attending the Merchants Room I've noticed that around 11 a.m., many of the room's denizens, exhausted from concentrating on books, spontaneously transform into a freewheeling monster gossip machine. My theory is that Saturday morning is the first time

compatriots have a chance to compare notes on their respective Friday evenings. Part and parcel with exchanging various BSI-related information is the inevitable, though generally good-natured, gossip, like who vociferously refused to leave in either the first or second cab, opting instead, so they slurred, for the third—and other glimpses into spirits-inspired Irregular behavior.

The Baker Street Irregulars Annual Cocktail Reception

It's been less than 20 hours since I've stumbled out of the Yale Club, but by 1:30 p.m. I'm back for my first BSI cocktail reception. I'm really not sure what to expect, other than an open bar and a live auction captained by Peter Blau (*"Black Peter"*). After about 20 min-



The BSI Cocktail Reception.

utes, it's obvious I've been missing out on a real highlight of BSI Weekend. The reception allows BSI Weekend-wearied Sherlockians to socialize in a relaxed environment with an entertaining though minimal formal program as a backdrop. It's the chance to chat with all those friends and soon-to-be-friends you've yet to cross paths with. Much of the time is spent chatting in either of the two gargantuan lines, one for the open bar and one for the buffet.

Eventually, the roaming gangs of Sherlockians are coaxed back to their tables by the voice of Wiggins, who recaps the award and investiture highlights of the weekend, calling out individual names of those previously honored to the delight and thunderous applause of a



(L to R): Ray Betzner, Steve Doyle, and Matt Laffey.

room packed to the rafters with proud Sherlockians. Next comes the traditional, gut-busting, pun-tastic Sherlockian Year in Verse by father-daughter team Al Rosenblatt ("Inspector Bradstreet") and Betsy Rosenblatt ("Lucy Ferrier"), printed in this issue.

At long last Peter Blau takes the stage, microphone in hand, energizing the crowd for an auction to benefit the Dr. John H. Watson Fund. Objects for auction include multiple bottles of 221B Cellars wine, a "deluxe set" of BSI cupcakes from the previous evening, an adorable set of six handmade Baker Street IrRAGular dolls that fetch \$260, and, ending the auction on a spectacular note, an original, one-of-a-kind banner, featuring one of the late Bill Hall's ("The Blue Carbuncle") Sherlock Holmes coat of arms designs, selling for \$375. Following this windfall for the Watson Fund is the announcement of the raffle winners. A special treat unique to this year's reception is a full-blown live Sherlock Holmes radio play with Paul Singleton ("Covent Garden"),

Nick Martorelli, and Mary Ellen Rich (“Lady Frances Carfax”).

And just like that, four delightful hours have passed, with the BSI Reception concluding just as it started, with lively discussion and laughter, though tinged in sunset hues as twilight descends, and with the realization that another BSI Weekend—successful, memorable, historic in its own way—is nearing its end. Many head to O’Lunney’s (some for the fourth night in a row), for the annual Lost in NYC with a Bunch of Sherlockians, while others reflect on the weekend in small knots of Sherlockian camaraderie in quiet, forgotten corners of the city. For those hardy and intrepid souls looking to bask one more time in the glory of the weekend, Sunday’s ASH Brunch hosted by Melinda Caric is the perfect place to say farewell and, most importantly, plan for the future. BSI Weekend 2014 may be over, but 2014 is just beginning, and a new Sherlockian year is dawning.

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