

THE BIMETALLIC QUESTION

P.O. Box 232, Westmount Station
Westmount, QC, Canada H3Z 2T2

Founded 1979

Minutes of the Meeting of The Bimetallic Question April 4, 2019

Date of our next meeting: Thursday, June 6, 2019 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 Crooked Man*, prepared and presented by Chris Herten-Greaven.

Next meeting's toast presenters: The Master: Elliott Newman; Dr Watson: David Dowse; *The Woman*, Irene Adler: Rachel Alkallay; Mrs Hudson: Carol Abramson; The Society: Paul Billette
Dear toasters, please send your June toasts to me at kristin.franseen@mail.mcgill.ca. Thanks!

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

Board: Sovereign: Bruno Paul Stenson, Treasurer: Paul Billette, Scribe: Kristin Franseen, Mrs. Hudson: Chris Herten-Greaven, Archivist: Susan Fitch, Telegraph Operator: Wilfrid de Freitas

Present: Carol Abramson, Paul Billette, Richard Buche, David Cameron, Kevin Chappell, Louise Corda, David Dowse, Kristin Franseen, Wilfrid de Freitas, Chris Herten-Greaven, Tom Holmes, Raf Jans, Vivianne Lewis, Miyako Matsuda-Pelletier, Anne Millar, Elliott Newman, Kathryn Radford, Karl Raudsepp, David Reich, Lawrence Reich, Bruno Paul Stenson, James Turner, Ronnie Zilman

Regrets: Rachel Alkallay, Mark Altosaar, Jack Anderson, Maureen Anderson

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by our Sovereign Bruno Paul Stenson at 6:31pm.

ITEMS OF BUSINESS AND GENTLE TRANSACTION

1. Welcome to New and Old Friends!

Welcome to new/future members David Cameron and David Reich! We were also joined at this meeting by past Sovereigns Kevin Chappell and Richard Buche.

2. 40th Anniversary Plans (and beyond)!

- Karl is putting together a 40th anniversary book of toasts. Members are asked to submit their favorite toasts by the end of June to raudsepp@sympatico.ca (.doc files, ideally no more than one page)
- Our 40th anniversary brunch was held on Sunday, May 5, at the Terrasse St Ambroise. We enjoyed beautiful weather, shared memories from David and Wilfrid about the Society's founding, and a series of improvised toasts. Photos from this event can be found in Appendix I.
- Chris proposed a summer barbecue/lamb roast somewhere in Montréal. Discussion followed on potential parks that are accessible, had parking available, and allowed outdoor cooking. We await an update on potential dates and locations in June.
- Raf will be giving a presentation at the Film Society later this year, accompanied by a screening of one of first Holmes films. The date, time, and location are TBD.

We are also holding a series of special events to take place throughout the year at meetings and our 2020 dinner. Our February meeting included a talk by Bruno on Sherlockian organizations prior to the establishment of our society (see Appendix 1). Upcoming presentations will include:

- June: Kristin on Moriarty and Victorian astronomical quarrels
- August (or October): Raf on the *Hound of the Baskervilles*
- October (or August): Anne on Holmes in film
- December: Karl on a surprise topic

Chris also brought in samples of possible items for Bimetallic Question-branded merchandise. Possibilities include lights, pens, notebooks, screwdrivers, and pins. If you are interested in any of the above, please email Chris (chris@hertengreaven.com) after the costs are determined. BQ posters with art by Donald Williams are also still available (\$3 for posters signed by the artist; unsigned posters are free).

3. New Business

Bruno drew our attention to the fact that the by-laws give titles to the established executive council permission:

Sovereign: president
Half-Sovereign: secretary
Sixpence: lackey
Half-Crown: Mrs. Hudson

Bruno proposed additional names for the email correspondent ("telegraph operator") and archivist, but suggested we consider officially renaming the executive council positions at our next meeting.

4. Toast to the Master, by Raf Jans

Raf built on David's toast from our February meeting about the notion of Holmes as "the Master":

We refer to Sherlock Holmes as the Master. In a previous toast, David Dowse mentioned that Sherlock Holmes would be embarrassed by this title. This is an interesting suggestion, but it deserves some more research. More specifically, what does the Canon say?

First of all, in no less than six stories, Holmes is described as 'masterful' (Dancing Men, Solitary Cyclist, Hound of the Baskervilles, Bruce-Partington Plans, Dying Detective, Thor Bridge) Furthermore, it seems that Holmes was a master with respect to many specific skills.

*In the Missing Three-Quarter, Sherlock Holmes is described as 'a past **master** in the art of putting a humble witness at his ease'.*

*In the Mazarin Stone, Holmes looked thoughtfully at Count Negretto Silvius, 'like a **master** chessplayer who meditates his crowning move'.*

*In the Empty House, Holmes is described as a **master** huntsman, and in the Priory School as a **master** workman.*

*In the Six Napoleons, Dr. Watson and Lestrade start clapping in admiration when Sherlock Holmes reveals the solution. Watson writes the following: 'A flush of colour sprang to Holmes's pale cheeks, and he bowed to us like the **master** dramatist who receives the homage of his audience'.*

Also Watson recognizes Holmes as his master on several occasions.

*In the Dying Detective, Watson says 'Let him be my **master** elsewhere, I at least was his in a sick-room.' In the same story, Watson writes: 'His appearance had changed for the worse during the few hours that I had been with him. Those hectic spots were more pronounced, the eyes shone more brightly out of darker hollows, and a cold sweat glimmered upon his brow. He still retained, however, the jaunty gallantry of his speech. To the last gasp he would always be the **master**.'*

*In The Hound of the Baskervilles, when Watson is hunting down the mysterious stranger, he remarks the following: 'It would indeed be a triumph for me if I could run him to earth, where **my master** had failed.'*

When it comes to detective work, it seems that also many police officials recognize Holmes as their superior.

*In the Sign of the Four, when Holmes receives a letter full of admiration from Francois Le Villard, a member of the French detective service, Watson remarks: 'He speaks as a pupil to his **master**.'*

*Lestrade used this title to address Sherlock Holmes in the Adventure of the Noble Bachelor: 'There is a little nut for you to crack, **Master** Holmes.'*

*Maybe no one has better expressed it than Stanley Hopkins in Black Peter: "It seems to me that I have been making a fool of myself from the beginning. I understand now, what I should never have forgotten, that I am the pupil and you are the **master**.'*

I propose a toast to Sherlock Holmes, who will always be the master.

5. Special Presentation by David and Wilfrid

David and Wilfrid gave a stirring presentation on the formation and history of the Bimetallic Question, with video of events from throughout the society's history, including the recreation of the final conflict between Holmes and Moriarty (with Dorwin Falls helpfully standing in for the Reichenbach Falls), video and CBC coverage of the 1990 colloquium, several garden parties, and dramatic readings from Holmesian plays. David's account of his first encounter with the "writings about the writings," first meeting with Wilfrid, and the founding of the Bimetallic Question is included in Appendix II.

6. Toast to Dr Watson, by Ronnie Zilman

Ron shared some crowdsourced popular knowledge about Dr. Watson:

John H. Watson, known as Dr Watson, is a fictional character in the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Watson is Sherlock Holmes's friend, assistant and sometime flatmate, and the first person narrator of all but four of these stories. He is described as the typical Victorian-era gentleman, unlike the more eccentric Holmes. He is astute, although he can never match his friend's deductive skills.

Whilst retaining his role as Holmes's friend and confidant, Watson has been adapted in various films, television series, video games, comics and radio programmes.

In Conan Doyle's early rough plot outlines, Sherlock Holmes's associate was named "Ormond Sacker" before Conan Doyle finally settled on "John Watson". He was probably inspired by one of Doyle's colleagues, Dr James Watson. William L. DeAndrea wrote that "Watson also serves the important function of catalyst for Holmes's mental processes... From the writer's point of view, Doyle knew the importance of having someone to whom the detective can make enigmatic remarks, a consciousness that's privy to facts in the case without being in on the conclusions drawn from them until the proper time. Any character who performs these functions in a mystery story has come to be known as a 'Watson'.

John Watson is intelligent, if lacking in Holmes's insight, and serves as a perfect foil for Holmes: the archetypal late Victorian / Edwardian gentleman against the brilliant, emotionally detached analytical machine. Furthermore, he is considered an excellent doctor and surgeon, especially by Holmes. For instance, in "The Adventure of the Dying Detective," Holmes creates a ruse that he is deathly ill to lure a suspect to his presence, which must fool Watson as well during its enactment. To that effect in addition to elaborate makeup and starving himself for a few days for the necessary appearance, Holmes firmly claims to Watson that he is highly contagious to the touch, knowing full well that the doctor would immediately deduce his true medical condition upon examination.

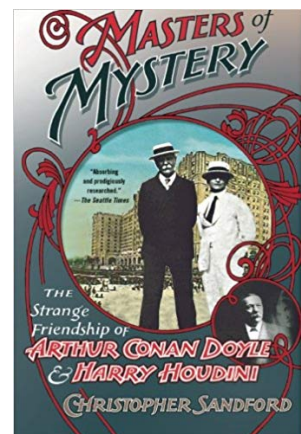
Watson never masters Holmes's deductive methods, but he can be astute enough to follow his friend's reasoning after the fact. In "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder," Holmes notes that John Hector McFarlane is "a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic". Watson comments as narrator: "Familiar as I was with my friend's methods, it was not difficult for me to follow his deductions, and to observe the untidiness of attire, the sheaf of legal papers, the watch-charm, and the breathing which had prompted them." Similar episodes occur in "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist," and "The Adventure of the Resident Patient." In "The Adventure of the Red Circle", we find a rare instance in which Watson rather than Holmes correctly deduces a fact of value. In The Hound of the Baskervilles, Watson shows that he has picked up some of Holmes's skills at dealing with people from whom information is desired. (As he observes to the reader, "I have not lived for years with Sherlock Holmes for nothing.") In popular culture, Microsoft named the debugger in Microsoft Windows "Doctor Watson". To Dr. Watson!

Show and Tell

7. "one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence."

Bruno shared the book *Masters of Mystery: The Strange Friendship of Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini*, by Christopher Sandford.

Masters of Mystery, by Christopher Sandford



8. "...information as to a point which involves the Navy..."

Chris presented some of his reading on the 2nd Special Squadron of the Japanese Navy, and their defence of Allied shipping in the Mediterranean during World War I.

9. "But he merely drew out a memorandum-book..."

Richard and Kevin brought photo albums and memories from the history of the Bimetallic Question.

10. "What a lovely thing a rose is!"

Miyako recommended the book *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, a Holmesian pastiche set in a 14th-century monastery. She also drew our attention to the 1986 film and the 2019 television adaptation.



John Turturro as William of Baskerville and Damian Hardung as Adso of Melk in the 2019 miniseries adaptation of Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

11. Toast to the Woman, by Rachel Alkallay

Kathryn presented Rachel's musings on Irene's place of reverence and power in the Canon:

She was "The Woman."

Not "The Other Woman," but "The Woman."

The one, the only.

A rarity, for she was a woman of few words. Six, to be exact.

To Holmes, a master of precision and brevity, those six words held dear in his heart. Her actions, more so, as she bested him in "A Scandal in Bohemia." She also bested the King of Bohemia, a powerful man who feared for his forthcoming marriage because of what she knew about him. And what a scandal she could cause if she chose to use her power. Wisely, and for reasons of her own heart, she chose not to wield that power.

Imagine Holmes, the world's first consulting detective, at the height of his powers, living in London, the capital of the British Empire, at the heights of its considerable powers, bested by an actress! And an American, at that!

Yet her charm, her intelligence, the fleeting sound of her voice as she stage-whispered “Good night, Mr. Sherlock Holmes” captured Holmes’s—dare we say it—heart for all time. He revered her; he respected her, a rare sentiment granted by the Master to anyone.

If Sherlock Holmes held her in such reverence, who are we to question the workings of Irene Adler (the Dawn Eagle in translation)? To Irene Adler! To The Woman!

12. Toast to Mrs Hudson, by Anne Millar

Challenging conventional notions of Dr. Watson as audience surrogate, Anne examined the cipher of Mrs. Hudson as audience stand-in:

There's a lot to be unpacked from Mrs Hudson-- even as, or perhaps more particularly as she is such a cipher of a character that even her first name is in doubt. I could write something along the lines of 'they also serve who stand and wait,' but it would be A Bit Much, and I dislike Milton at the best of times.

She can serve as a symbol of all the invisible work that goes into running a household, the erasure and silencing of women's historical and fictive presences because of the devaluation of domestic work-- but I don't have the energy to make speeches of martyrdom.

As a role to be played, Mrs Hudson is strangely challenging-- in small roles, every moment counts, with no endless backstory, despairing wailing, or fascinating costuming. At her simplest portrayal, she is the epitome of the long-suffering elder female relative most of us have faced, authoritative on the subject of food and repressive when it came to unorthodox furniture use-- she becomes the symbol of the domestic sphere to which our adventuring duo return.

But perhaps Mrs. Hudson is best as an audience substitute-- we perhaps are not most comfortable holding the lives of other in our hands, or facing certain death with one small revolver, getting cold and wet and singed and hurt. We're reading these stories after all, not living them. Occasionally defeating international spies or assassins in the parlour is a different matter, but what we really want is to hear another tale, have a bit more tea, and sit by the fire. So, raise your 'tea', and give a toast to Mrs. Hudson!

13. Toast to the Society, by Kristin Franseen

Kristin considered the kinds of societies Holmes's mother might have involved herself with during Sherlock's and Mycroft's formative years:

We often speak of “the society” as singular—referring, of course, to the Bimetallic Question. I recently read a book, however, that made me ponder the sheer number of societies that one might encounter in Holmes's day. Tessa Boase's *Mrs Pankhurst's Purple Feather* examines the motives, formation, successes, and failures of the women behind two very different societies. Contradictory, hyper-focused, and (to their politically opposed leaders) frustratingly overlapping in membership and tactics, the Women's Social and Political Union and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds utilized dramatic tales similar to those found in the Holmes stories—intrigue and violence in colonial outposts, individual pride and vanity in the latest fashions, marriages of varying levels of happiness and collegiality, and the private and public lives of people from different social contexts. Holmes and Watson are, of course, more preoccupied with the masculine world of clubs. But perhaps this other world was not completely unknown to them. The kinds of meetings Boase describes largely took place over tea in stately homes, perhaps one not too different from wherever young Sherlock and Mycroft grew up. As the wife of a county squire, Mrs Holmes (née, perhaps, something like Violet Vernet or Verner) would have known something of the birding, local politics, and changes to aristocratic fashion common among the rural gentry. Perhaps, like Etta Lemon and Emmeline Pankhurst, whatever her politics, she found common causes alongside her husband's political career or through changing

attitudes towards women's education. Did Mrs Holmes belong to any such societies, or form her own? Was she "unclubbable" like her sons? We may never know.

To society, in all its many forms!

Quiz and Story Discussion

14. Quiz on "The Veiled Lodger" prepared and presented by Paul Billette

Results:	1 st	Raf Jans	55	Max Mallowan's memoirs
	2 nd	Kathryn Radford	46	<i>The Language of Bees</i>
	3 rd	Karl Raudsepp	44	<i>The Devil's Cave</i>

Thank you to Miyako for providing pressed flower bookmarks for all winners!

15. Discussion of the Story

Members brought up several questions and curious features of this month's story. These included:

How successfully does Watson actually disguise his clients' anonymity?

Many of us were struck by Holmes's empathy with Mrs. Ronder. Is the depiction of Mrs. Ronder's guilt and wanting to clear her conscience before her death linked at all to Doyle's belief in spiritualism?

Just how much smoking goes on at 221B?

We had a long conversation about the nature of Victorian circus accidents and the real-life circus impresarios mentioned in the story (particularly George Wombwell), as well as the unusual behaviour of the lion in the story.

Miyako noted that Eugenia's story connects to late nineteenth-century concerns for women's independence and rights within abusive marriages. She also did some research on prussic acid, observing that cyanides were more widely available in the 1890s, and used for mining, pest control, and whaling.



George Wombwell's tomb in Highgate Cemetery



The taxidermied Lions of Tsavo, Kenya (famous man-eaters and a longtime display at the Field Museum in Chicago)

16. Close of the Meeting

Bruno adjourned the meeting at 8:55pm. Congratulations to Kristin for winning this month's prize of the Holmes and Watson movie T-shirt!

Appendix I: Photos from the May Luncheon



Appendix II: David's Historical Notes on the Founding of the Society

*The story begins in the early '70s. I had just started a new job at the Beauharnois Finishing Plant in Valleyfield, P.Q. On a business trip to the American South, I was cooling my heels in the Atlanta airport and I stopped into a bookstore to find reading material to pass the time. Lo and behold, there it was in my hand, a book by Samuel Rosenberg entitled *Naked is the Best Disguise*. And right next to it was Michael and Mollie Hardwick's *The Sherlock Holmes Companion*. I had never seen the likes of these books before. My first "writings on the writings." They offered me answers to questions about Sherlock Holmes, his times, his city, his culture. But more importantly, at the end of one was a listing of Sherlock Holmes societies around the globe. I quickly scanned the pages for Canada, and out popped *The Bootmakers of Toronto* with the name of Cameron Hollyer and his address.*

Now, you must remember that this was before the age of computers, web searches, and email, at least for me. I got out my Mont Blanc fountain pen, my favourite bottle of blue/black ink, nice bonded paper, and envelope and stamp and sent off a missive as soon as I got home. I now was a Bootmaker of Toronto.

I then made determined plans to attend the next meeting of the Bootmakers. It was some drive down the 401 in the dead of winter for their annual meeting. My memory is not too precise on the exact details, but I remember that we all gathered in a grand hall with the bigwigs at the front on a stage. It was too formal for my tastes. I needed to interact with fellow Sherlockians more intimately.

*When I got home, I wrote to Cameron Hollyer asking if there were other members of the Bootmakers who resided in Montreal. He replied with the name of Wilfrid de Freitas and his phone number. I was nervous—what was I getting myself into? I took the plunge and called this stranger who had an affinity for Sherlock Holmes like my own. I was not even sure how to pronounce his name. After a brief discussion, it was agreed that we would meet at my parents' house in Dorval. That fateful day arrived, and Wilfrid pulled into the driveway. I borrowed my dad's hat and a couple of his pipes, and taped up to the wall a poster from the recent film *Murder by Decree*.*



The scene was set for that "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive" moment.

As they say, the seeds were planted, and the first advert sending out inquiries for fellow Sherlockians to unite in Montreal was bought. And the next 40 years is our history!

Wilfrid and I soon set ourselves the task of scanning the Canon for references connecting Canada to Holmes. We found several, including the CPR, the stormy petrels, and others, but at last settled on the reference to Mycroft Holmes's expertise on "the Navy, India, Canada, and the bi-metallic question," as found in the Bruce-Partington Plans.

On first meeting Wilfrid there in my parents' dining room, I stopped to think. What if I tried to use the

Master's methods of observation and deductive reasoning to glean from Wilfrid what he was like? I observed and listened. The well-trimmed beard and moustache, stylish cut of his jacket, the very articulate manner of his speech—here was a man of serious standing, a man willing to take a chance on a single phone conversation, a man who showed a passion for all things Sherlockian and was ready to take risks, but above all someone who was a “doer” who did not wait for others, but forged ahead. I think I nailed it!!

It was only several months later that I was able to connect the distinct red/orange stains on his shirt front with his addiction to Tabasco sauce, to which fortunately I too fell victim.

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.