

## THE ORIGINAL SERIES *BSJ*: QUINTESSENCE OF IRREGULAR

— PHILIP A. SHREFFLER —

Christopher Morley, Lord High Sheriff of *Bartlett's* and undeniably neither professorial nor a body electric, could conjure an apropos quotation always at just the most timely moment, with a facility known today only to a few academics and to electronic retrieval systems. In the inaugural issue of *The Baker Street Journal*, he wrote: “Rereading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*... I find a good motto for any B.S.I. publication: ‘It is completely unimportant,’ said Poirot. ‘That is why it is so interesting.’”

Of the birth of this “so interesting publication” (as Stoker’s Van Helsing might have had it), we learn from its first editor, Edgar W. Smith, in the April 1952 number of the *Journal*, that “when the possibility of publishing a journal of Sherlockiana was first discussed, back in 1945, there was much argument as to how often, and with what number of pages, such a periodical might be made to appear. Quite a few desirable items had been crowded out of *Profile by Gaslight*, when it came out in 1944, and these, it was felt, could form a nucleus around which an irregular annual, or even semi-annual, could safely be built.”

Published the next year by bookseller Ben Abramson, in January of 1946, the first of the Original Series *Journals* was a visually exciting artifact, comprising 108 pages of text, the signatures stitched to ensure durable longevity, if not immortality, mustard-colored covers (echoing Watson’s yellow-backed novels), and interior department titles decorated with ornate Victorian typography. It was a format that the *Journal* would retain through its Original Series run (in fact, increasing its size later to 132 pages). By the time, in 1949, that the expense of producing so lavish a serial publication overcame the Original Series and forced it out of existence, thirteen issues had appeared before a grateful readership. The three unpublished 1949 issues were referred to by wags as the Missing Three-Quarters, yet perhaps it is more appropriate to note that the O.S. *Journals* comprised a Baker’s (Street) Dozen of first-rate magazines.

But these data are minutiae: the power and the glory of the early *Journals* lay to a great degree in their contents, of which since we have rarely seen the like. But not only in their contents: for the old *Journals* are time machines, rabbit holes into a Wonderland of Sherlockiana that largely no longer exists. Merely holding an Original Series *Journal* gently in one’s hands today imparts a variety of galvanic reverence — as very likely it did then, to men and women many of whom were born in, and could still remember, Victorian times. Leafing, even casually, through its pages is a thrilling reminder that there was once an intellectual Camelot in

Sherlockiana, an age during which devotion to ideas about Sherlock Holmes and the careful crafting of language to express those ideas were equally important. It is clear that the *Journal* was conceived not as a glorified newsletter but almost purely as a literary magazine, a playground for the best cerebral gymnasts within Irregular purlieus.

In our present time, when many refer to illustrators as artists, and composers of doggerel verse as poets – which, in rhyme scheme, usually emphasizes the first syllable of the word “assonance” – one must sit in awe of a writer like the irrepressible Helene Yuhasova, who contributed this verse to the *Journal*’s first number:

A GREETING IN ARDUIS

(To the Baker Street Irregulars,  
on the occasion of their Annual Dinner, 1945)

I hear your footsteps patter in the hall;  
I see you standing eager in the room  
Before great Sherlock; and I heed the call  
To urge a budding poem into bloom;  
In vain! My verse is spatulate and tegular –  
Despite my prayers to Zeus and Great Jehovah  
I’m not, alas, a Baker Street Irregular –  
I’m just

Sincerely yours,  
H. Yuhasova

But it was, of course, also in the pages of the O.S. *Journals* that many of the important early contributions to our literature first saw print. There had been previously Dr. Gray Chandler Briggs’ definitive identification of 221B Baker Street in the ’20s (no. 111, now on its ground floor a post office, but happily restored to its pre-Blitz condition, and worthy of pilgrimage). In the early ’30s, H. W. Bell and Vincent Starrett had published their books, and in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Morley’s “Bowling Green” and “Trade Winds” columns had presented to a broad reading public classic writings about the Writings. And in 1944 the success of Smith’s *Profile by Gaslight* had demonstrated that there was a substantial readership to whom the well-executed Sherlockian game truly mattered. But the birth and early life of the *Journal* argued for even more: Baker Street and its acolytes deserved an on-going repository of wit and wisdom for no greater sake than its own art and the profound love of Sherlock Holmes in the hearts of those into whose hands it would find itself. And Edgar W. Smith was the man who would be its spiritual father, as well as its actual editor.

Smith's great Editor's Gas-Lamp editorials were paradigms of what the Sherlockian essay was in the late '40s, indeed what they should be today; and one can do no better in comprehending, or at least appreciating, the craft of the writings about the Writings than to study them diligently, analytically, and often. For those uninitiated into Smithian prose style, however, consider just one typical sentence, in reference to the admiration of T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden for Sherlock Holmes: "There can be no such praise of an individual as this unless there is knowledge of him, too; and it goes without saying, where Sherlock Holmes is concerned, that there can be no knowledge without praise." Today's Sherlockian prose tends to be better than its verse, but Smith's prose was often poetry itself.

Education was very likely the keystone of the edifice Smith constructed in the *O.S. Journals*. The early Irregulars were classically schooled during the age of Victoria and Edward VII in some of America's best institutions of higher learning. In those days academic grades were not inflated, and students did not shy away from sophisticated literature courses with the excuse that they couldn't understand what Hardy, Wordsworth or, perhaps especially, what Chaucer or Malory were saying. Latin or Greek or both were common courses of study, and fine scholars in such fields, such as Morris Rosenblum, brought their intellectual back-grounds to bear on the subject of the Master.

Immersion in the *O.S. Journals* is quite often a journey into an American past that we may covet and over the loss of which we may grieve. But above all, it is a living testament to men and women with learning such as we see only sparsely scattered through our culture today.

Given what we have observed here, it may come as something of a surprise to encounter Christopher Morley's odd "Clinical Notes from a Resident Patient" in these *Journals*, with their fragmentary sentences, idiosyncratic abbreviations, and ambient chaotic tone. Yet it must be recalled that these columns were assembled by Edgar W. Smith from letters that Morley had written to him – and that within each of them there is such a pyrotechnic display of erudition, such a wide range of literary allusion and discussion, such a sheer volume of knowledge, that it is probably safe to say that no Sherlockian before him or since has ever possessed a hundredth of what the man had crammed into his cortex.

There was gentility in the old *Journals* as well. Where argumentation was at issue the tone was as formally argumentative as that of Sir Francis Bacon. Where there was humor, it was wry and dry, limned with a thin nib rather than a housepainter's brush, never coarse, crude, or inappropriate. And where it was within the author's power – which was often – phrases were turned with cunning and surgical precision.

One is tempted to think – in what is just an aside – that there was something about the age in which these men and women traveled no more rapidly than by railroad and steamship that permitted more time for

celebration. After all, was it not on a transatlantic crossing that Frank V. Morley devised the celebrated puzzle that became the BSI's first entrance examination? Perhaps this is yet another lesson to be extracted from the old BSJs: Sherlockian scholarship takes time; it ought not be dashed off like a vaguely-considered, ill-punctuated, and appallingly-spelled communication by email. There is still something to be said for the typewriter (or the word processor as typewriter) and the stinging investment in an envelope and a couple of 32-cent stamps, which, perhaps, makes one a bit more considerate of what is sent. This variety of writing encourages us to be more aware of the act of composition, slows us down – down to the civil pace of those who preceded us so grandly, who produced some of the greatest Sherlockiana ever written, enshrined in the Original Series of *The Baker Street Journal*.

Some devotees of proto-Irregularity are too young to have known Smith, Morley, and so many of those stellar others, but old enough to have become curmudgeonly about the direction in which our beloved avocation (and the culture at large) has traveled in recent years – and have, quite frankly, mythologized the BSI of the '30s and '40s. Perhaps it is a bit like believing that the Depression is historically represented in *My Man Godfrey*, or that in those days one spent one's time in deluxe trains or ocean-going liners like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, William Powell and Myrna Loy. The vision is a fond one of gentlemen in three-piece tweed suits, as quick with a terse and sparkling comment as today's film heroes are with automatic weapons. This is a fantasy, of course, at least to some degree. Still, we have seen such folk often in our imagination at Christ Cella's or the Murray Hill Hotel or the Racquet and Tennis Club, gunning each other down verbally with an enthusiasm and an alacrity that suggests the Algonquin Round-Table. Truth or fable, however, there can be no doubt that the O.S. *Journals* represent the Cunard liners, railroad club cars, and intimate Manhattan clubrooms of Sherlockiana, and that they genuinely reflect the reality of what the heyday of the Irregulars was all about.

It was, as far as Sherlockiana was concerned (we choose to overlook the A-bomb, the Red Scare, the devastation of postwar Europe, and more, even if they did not), a better time, a more innocent time, a time when some of the incunabular discoveries about the Canon were first being propounded in a flush of enthusiasm. And we know – we *know* – that the learned, gregarious, and fraternal clubroom atmosphere of the Baker Street Irregulars is no fable. We have seen it in the Original Series *Baker Street Journal*.

Photographs, as full-page plates, began to appear in the *Journal* with its third issue, that number's in particular capturing forever rare glimpses of the BSI's 1946 annual dinner (at which H. Yuhasova's wit, grit, and intelligence undoubtedly would have been a valuable addition, if she had

been allowed to proceed from Parlor G, where she was *The Woman* that year, into Parlor H for dinner). In the shabby-genteel surroundings of an ageing Murray Hill Hotel private dining room, we see the three-piece suits, the outrageous neckties, and the utter mesmeric devotion to the world of the Master with which some of us, at least, most associate the true spirit of Baker Street Irregularity. In the photographs alone, the roster of those pictured suggests the illustrious nature of the club and of its journal of record: Christopher Morley, Edgar W. Smith, Fletcher Pratt, Anthony Boucher, Rolfe Boswell, Richard Horace Hoffman. Robert Keith Leavitt brandishes an airgun. Morley puts himself down as a charter subscriber to the *Journal*. And in one almost sacred image, Harvey Officer, his back to the camera, plays an upright piano (a tantalus tantalizingly apparent at the right) while James Montgomery, his face raised beatifically, the universally-loved Sherlockian saint that he authentically was, croons “An Irregular Song.” There is magic in these yellow-backed (and now yellow-paged!) vaults of a by-gone era. And one wonders at what point in history were the Baker Street Irregulars ever again so wise or so innocent?

Typically, it was Edgar W. Smith, perhaps all unwittingly, who had the final, sublimely articulate word. In the October 1946 issue of the Original Series, his Editor’s Gas-Lamp was devoted to the tearing-down of the Murray Hill Hotel, considered by Irregulars of the ’40s to have been not just desirable venue but their veritable home:

It has been given to us, in this fifth decade of the Twentieth Century, to be present at the ending of an age. Our eyes are witness to the crumbling in the dust of the elemental matter from which the fabric of our civilization has been wrought. Our minds perceive, but do not understand. Our hearts are fraught with strange forebodings. There is not one among us who is wise or bold enough to say what fears and hopes and clamorous alarms the future holds. We only know the atom has been riven – and with it, in its sundering burst, has gone the solid substance of our familiar cosmos.

When he wrote those words, Smith had little idea that the Original Series *Journal* would itself crumble little more than a scant two years later. Yet had these graceful, dignified, and adoring sentences appeared in the January 1949 issue, they would have shone ever as a tearful epitaph for a truly great publication. Even the column’s title was remarkable and profound in its prophetic simplicity: “An Age Passes.”

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Philip A. Shreffler is a former editor of *The Baker Street Journal*. Reprinted from *Irregular Crises of the Late 'Forties* (vol. 5 of the BSI Archival History Series), edited by Jon L. Lellenberg (New York: The Baker Street Irregulars, 1999).