

A Brief History of the Sherlock Holmes Collections At the University of Minnesota

“It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize, out of a number of facts, which are incidental and which vital. Otherwise, your energy and attention must be dissipated instead of being concentrated.” – Sherlock Holmes, “The Reigate Squire”

One vital fact that concentrates our attention in the case of the Sherlock Holmes Collections is the curious occurrence of the Norwegian Explorers. It is almost a certainty that nothing which followed would have been possible were it not for a 1947 lunch at the University of Minnesota Campus Club. Here, on an April midday, five prominent faculty members—all with a shared Sherlockian interest—decided to form a scion society of the New York-based Baker Street Irregulars.

Toasts and topics have continued to mark the livelihood of the Norwegian Explorers through the last five decades, as has Sherlockian research and scholarly (or pseudo-scholarly) work. In 1951, historian Theodore C. Blegen, with the assistance of Emerson G. Wulling and his Sumac Press, published *The Crowded Box-Room*. A year later Sumac Press issued Blegen and University Librarian Errett Weir McDiarmid’s *Sherlock Holmes: Master Detective*.

The early activities of the Explorers caught the attention of Dr. Philip S. Hench, Chief Rheumatologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Hench, who received the 1950 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine (along with Dr. Edward Kendall and Dr. Tadeus Reichstein) joined the Explorers in the early 1950s. Over the next few years Hench and other Explorers worked on a Holmesian project of international scope that put them in contact with another important group, The Sherlock Holmes Society of London. On June 25, 1957, members from Minnesota and London gathered at the funicular station at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland to unveil a plaque which read: “Across this dreadful cauldron occurred the culminating event in the career of Sherlock Holmes, the world’s greatest detective, when on May 4, 1891 he vanquished Prof. Moriarty, the Napoleon of crime.” During this same eventful year McDiarmid was invested in the Baker Street Irregulars as “The Bruce-Partington Plans” and the Explorers published their third book, *Exploring Sherlock Holmes*, with Sumac Press.

By the mid-1960s there was some question whether the Explorers would continue their Sherlockian activities. McDiarmid, now Director of the Graduate School Fellowship Office, was on leave in Chile to help the University of Concepcion establish their graduate programs. Hench, who had retired from the Mayo Clinic in 1957, but continued his pursuits with the Explorers, died in 1965. Four years later Blegen was gone. But the early 1970s saw a renewed interest and new members, and it is here that the history of the Holmes Collections intersects with that of the Norwegian Explorers.

The Sherlock Holmes Collection began in 1974 with the purchase of a small but notable collection. On May 2, 1974, members of the Explorers received an announcement of the “acquisition of a distinguished Sherlock Holmes Collection by the University of Minnesota

Library.” Austin McLean, Curator of Special Collections, and the members of the Explorers were instrumental in this first acquisition. The announcement continued:

Through a gift from the McKnight Foundation, the University of Minnesota Library has been able to acquire the interesting collection of Sherlockiana collected by Mr. James C. Iraldi of New York. In addition to early editions of the adventures, the collection includes numerous memorabilia, photographs, clippings, etc. The Collection will be available for display to members of the Norwegian Explorers.

On the same day, Bryce Crawford, faculty member in Chemistry, submitted a resolution to the University of Minnesota with a desire to name the collection, “together with such further acquisitions as may properly accrue to it” after McDiarmid. Although the resolution failed to gain administrative traction, it underscored the scion society’s support for the collection and the desire for its continued growth. As a publication for the fiftieth anniversary of the Explorers noted, “the growth of the resources of the Library and the involvement of the Explorers are so intertwined as to be inseparable.”

Eighteen months later, in the autumn of 1975, John Bennett Shaw of Santa Fe, New Mexico, builder of the largest collection in the world relating to Holmes, was invited to deliver a department-sponsored lecture at the University. Shaw’s address, “The Cult of Sherlock Holmes,” provided an upper-Midwest audience with a panoramic description of the Holmesian landscape. Towards the end of his presentation, Shaw made some library-related observations.

I should mention the collections. You have here in your University Library the McDiarmid collection of Holmes material, which is quite good. There’s a remarkable collection at the Metropolitan Central Library in Toronto. Originally, most of it belonged to Judge S. Tupper Bigelow, a Baker Street Irregular. I have what is probably the largest of all research collections, with ten or twelve thousand Holmes items. I have a room that was built just to house my collection, and I must report that it’s almost full and I don’t know what I’m going to do.

One might imagine the number of bibliographic ears that perked up on hearing this last remark. It is not too difficult to believe that this sparked an idea in more than a few minds to bring Shaw’s collection to Minnesota.

Meanwhile, the remarkable Philip H. Hench collection was given to the university in 1978. In the late summer and early fall of 1979, the University Libraries celebrated the acquisition by means of an exhibit. In the exhibit catalog, written by Andrew Malec, there is a description of the Hench Collection and the impetus behind its development that dates to the doctor’s activities in Switzerland. The description is worth quoting at length.

Dr. Hench’s interest in the Reichenbach project stimulated his collecting enterprise. Though he had assembled Doyle publications through the years, the bulk of the collection was acquired in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It consists of approximately eighteen hundred books, fifteen hundred issues of various periodicals, photographs, illustrations, manuscripts, and various sorts of memorabilia—all relating to Arthur Conan Doyle. The collection relates

preponderantly to Sherlock Holmes, but Doyle's other works, particularly his non-Sherlockian fiction, are also well represented.

Among the unique Holmesian items in the collection there are two pages from the original manuscript of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Mounted and framed with the pages is an original drawing by Frederic Dorr Steele (1874-1944) illustrating the scene described by Doyle. Steele is generally recognized as the best of the early American illustrators of the Sherlock Holmes tales. The collection holds eleven other original illustrations by Steele, as well as a great quantity of his correspondence relating to his Sherlockian artwork.

The career of William Gillette, especially his portrayal of the great detective, is well documented in the Hench collection, which includes letters, Gillette's own scrapbooks and his photograph album containing notable theatrical personalities of his day.

The chief strength of the collection is its numerous editions of the Sherlock Holmes stories. The first British appearances of most of the tales are present in a complete run of *The Strand*, and many of the initial American publications are represented by such periodicals as *Harper's Weekly*, *Lippincott's*, and *Collier's*.

Nearly a thousand books in the collection are first and other editions of the Holmes stories, including all British first editions and all but two of the American firsts. There are four copies of the very rare *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, 1887, containing the initial publication of *A Study in Scarlet*. Also, there are a great number of translations of the adventures, in such languages as Czech, Dutch, French, Gaelic, Danish, Greek, Italian, Turkish, and Japanese, showing that Holmes and Watson are truly international figures.... It was a notable achievement for Dr. Hench to assemble such a distinguished collection in such a short time, but he did not build it alone. Mrs. Hench was an active participant, and she gave her husband many of the most important items in the collection as gifts.

The Hench Collection drew numerous other gifts to the university. Or, to use a cosmic image, it was the "Big Bang" which created a Sherlockian universe in Minnesota.

In July 1983, John Bennett Shaw was invited back to the University as part of a two-day conference focused on the dramatic side of Holmes. The event was co-sponsored by the University and the Norwegian Explorers. In a pre-conference press release the Sante Fe collector was described as "a witty and popular lecturer who owns what is thought to be the world's largest collection of Sherlock Holmes books, articles and artifacts." Shaw's wit and popularity were evident in his lecture on the various theatrical and cinematic portrayals of the world's most famous consulting detective. A "live" portrayal—in the form of a simulated radio drama—was offered by Dave Moore and Don Shelby, both from the local CBS affiliate WCCO.

Radio presentations were an important aspect of this conference, and to accentuate that importance Edith Meiser was also invited to attend. From 1930 to 1943 Meiser had written, adapted (and in some instances augmented) Sherlockian cases for radio. Her broadcast scripts were acted out by the likes of Richard Gordon, Louis Hector, Reginald Fortune, Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, John Stanley, Alfred Shirley, and William Gillette. Meiser, along with John Bennett

Shaw, discussed “Adventures on the Air” as part of the proceedings.

It seems clear that the invitations to Shaw and Meiser to participate in the conference were part of an ongoing desire to help them keep Minnesota in mind as each contemplated the disposition of their collections. This sense is confirmed in a March 1983 letter sent by Austin McLean of Special Collections and E. W. McDiarmid to Dr. Willard Thompson, director of Summer Session at the University. McLean and McDiarmid wrote:

Your support...of the visit here by John Bennett Shaw, the eminent lecturer on Sherlock Holmes, has fostered a remarkable turn of events. He was very pleased with the large and appreciative audience for his public lecture in the Mayo Auditorium. He also had an opportunity to examine the Hench Collection of Sherlock Holmes in Special Collections of Wilson Library, which impressed him considerably, even though he holds the largest Sherlock Holmes collection in the world. Later he expressed interest in the possibility of Minnesota acquiring his collection after his death. We have nearly completed negotiations with him, and are seeking outside funding to be able eventually to obtain his collection.

For this important reason, and to strengthen our good relations with him, we would like to invite him here again, for a public lecture, probably in July. At this time the Sherlock Holmes traveling exhibit, drawn from the Hench Collection and being designed and mounted by the University Gallery, will have here its first showing. We believe that Mr. Shaw would be a significant and popular attraction for the Summer Session . . .

We would like to invite Ms. Meiser here also this summer, in July, to speak about the writing and broadcasting of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

John Bennett Shaw agreed to a joint purchase and gift agreement with the University in 1983.

Conferences, exhibits, and publications continued as the main vehicles for promoting the growing Sherlockian collection at Minnesota and in attracting new donors. September 1984 saw another conference, this one under the guise “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes in Minnesota.” Sponsored by the Norwegian Explorers, the Minneapolis Public Library, the St. Paul Public Library, the University of Minnesota, and the Libraries’ Department of Special Collections and Rare Books, the conference featured over two dozen speakers. Once again, John Bennett Shaw was a participant and was joined by his wife, Dorothy. Her work—a miniature reproduction of Holmes’ dwelling at 221B Baker Street—was on display during the conference.

Australian architect Derham Groves, working to a much larger scale, offered his rendition and dreams for a future home for the collections—the Sherlock Holmes Centre. The ever-resourceful Andrew Malec produced another exhibit and accompanying catalog entitled “The Other Master: Frederic Dorr Steele” as a part of the conference. Malec noted that many of the exhibition items came from the Mary Kahler and Philip S. Hench Arthur Conan Doyle Collection, but he also noted a gratefulness “to the Steele family for the loan of a number of other valuable materials.” Additional thanks were provided to other individuals and institutions for items donated or loaned for the exhibit. The ground was being laid for the next acquisition.

1985 saw Holmes traveling through the upper-Midwest on another adventure. Curator of

Special Collections Austin McLean, along with Malec and E. W. McDiarmid, helped plan, prepare, and promote a traveling exhibit of Sherlockian material. The enterprise, *Investigating Sherlock Holmes*, was organized by the Touring Exhibitions Program of the University of Minnesota's Art Museum and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Lyndel King, director of the Art Museum (now the Weisman Museum) and members of her staff were instrumental in making the exhibit a reality. According to the final report sent to the N.E.H., *Investigating Sherlock Holmes* toured from May 1985 through December 1988 to a total of 18 sites throughout Minnesota and to 2 sites in neighboring states (Aberdeen, South Dakota and LaCrosse, Wisconsin), reaching a total of 63,785 viewers during that period. The final report also noted some significant gains for the Collections:

Investigating Sherlock Holmes has contributed to the growth and fortification of Holmes materials held by Special Collections. The son and daughter of illustrator Frederick Dorr Steele, who attended a Holmes conference at the University in 1984, subsequently donated their father's artwork to the collection because they were impressed with the visibility the materials would receive here. John Bennett Shaw, who holds the largest private collection of Holmes materials, has chosen Special Collections and Rare Books as the repository for his collection, a gift that will greatly expand the depth and scope of these materials. He is periodically sending materials now, with the remainder to come here after his death. And another major collection, the holdings of the late Vincent Starrett, the pre-eminent American Sherlockian scholar, have [sic] been donated to the collection.

Additional goodwill came to the Libraries with the purchase of the Edith Meiser Collection in 1987. Four years earlier, while Special Collections was working with Shaw on the details for his collection, McLean and McDiarmid reported the following to Thompson:

Our negotiations for the Shaw collection have been agreeably complicated by the prospect of acquiring yet another important Sherlock Holmes collection. Edith Meiser, though known mainly for her acting career, also wrote the radio scripts for the Sherlock Holmes stories that began to be broadcast in the 1930s. Her collection of original scripts, tapes, and other material is unique. The Meiser collection is being sought by private collectors and institutions, but Ms. Meiser insists that her collection shall go to the institution that acquires the Shaw collection.

The following year, 1988, saw the arrival of Vincent Starrett's collection to Minnesota. The relationship between Starrett and Minnesota goes back to at least the founding of the Norwegian Explorers in 1948. In April 1948, Starrett wrote to Dr. Stanley Pargellis at the Newberry Library:

Last February you wrote me about a Minneapolis chapter of the B.S.I. (The Norwegian Explorers) who wanted us to visit them and speak to them. I didn't reply because (a) I was busy, and (b) didn't see how under the sun I could get up to Minneapolis anyway. This is still my fix, but your letter has been lying around reproaching me for weeks. Please thank McDiarmid and express my regrets, if you will.

As with Starrett himself, there was some question on whether his collection would ever come to the Twin Cities. More than a little convincing and argument was applied to library

administrators before the purchase was approved. And, as with the Meiser Collection, John Bennett Shaw took an active role.

In the Spring of 1986, McLean wrote to Michael Murphy, the literary executor of the Starrett estate.

Yesterday I was talking with John Bennett Shaw and he suggested that I write you about Sherlockian activities at the University of Minnesota, and send you several of our recent publications, including the one on the proposed Sherlock Holmes Centre. Last week Zulma Steele Grey offered to donate her large collection of letters, drawings, etc. of her father, Frederick Dorr Steele. And as you probably know, the great library of John Bennett Shaw eventually will come to Minnesota. I believe that you are looking for a home for the Vincent Starrett Collection. Please consider the University of Minnesota as a possible institution.

Unfortunately, Murphy died before the transaction could be consummated, but his widow was still keen on keeping the collection intact and selling it to an institution. McLean, as part of his lobbying the library administration, informed the head of the Collections Division that a Boston dealer was acting as agent in the sale and was "...offering it to us first, because we have the leading Sherlockian resources in America. I don't know whether people in Chicago know about the availability of the Starrett collection, but I expect that Newberry, U. of Chicago, or some other place would snap it up.... This is an extremely important collection for Minnesot[a]. We must get it, somehow."

Administrative responses were not encouraging. "It is fair to say that none of us is enthusiastic about it. I have several basic problems with the proposal. There is the purely tactical matter of paying for such a collection. More fundamentally than these tactical issues, however, I simply do not see the importance of this collection for the University Libraries. I would encourage you, instead, to turn your collection development attention to other, more programmatically central areas."

McLean fought on. He followed with a second memo to the head of collections that outlined the acquisitions history of the Holmes collections, beginning with the Hench Collection. "The Hench Collection has drawn to it a number of notable gifts, and some purchases have been made." After describing the importance and wealth of the Hench Collection, he moved to Shaw. "The main reason he [Shaw] was interested in Minnesota was the Hench Collection—it holding extremely rare books or unique material that he could never possess." From Shaw he moved to Steele and Meiser, the heat of his argument affecting his typing skills. "This year were [sic] have acquired to [sic] very important collections. The family of Frederic Dorr Steele—the famous American illustrator—gave their material here. The other collection is on its way here from NYC. It is the scripts and broadcast recordings made by Edith Meiser."

Having outlined the collections, McLean shifted his argument to those who used the collections, in essence bringing up the heavy artillery of well-known researchers and published authors to pound home the point. He capped off this portion of the lobbying campaign by mentioning the successful traveling exhibition and his proposed means of purchasing the collection. Still, the head of collections was not convinced. "Even if we wanted his collection—

and I am not sure we do—it seems to me beyond our means.” But there were two signs of hope.

First, Shaw was willing to defer payment on his collection. Second, the director of the Humanities/Social Science Libraries at the University would be consulted. His response, given certain conditions on price and fund-raising, was that “we may be able to do it.” By April McLean had convinced library administrators of the importance and value of the collection; the purchase was approved. The library and papers of the late Vincent Starrett were purchased in 1988, with the help of the John E. Andrus III Charitable Trust. Starrett was a prolific author and journalist, a notable bibliophile, and the celebrated Sherlockian who wrote the famous sonnet “221B” and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

The acquisition of the Howard Haycraft Collection in 1992 encompasses nearly the entire history and development of the Sherlock Holmes Collections and predates—in terms of the relationship between Haycraft and the University—the purchase of the Iraldi Collection which marked the formal beginning of the collections. Haycraft, a 1928 graduate of the University of Minnesota and author of the classics *Murder for Pleasure* and *The Art of the Detective Story*—the first comprehensive histories and analyses of the detective story—informed University Librarian E. B. Stanford in early 1971 of his “interest in exploring arrangements to place my collection of mystery and detective fiction in a university library where it would be properly housed and used for study and research in the future.” Stanford, who was soon to be on leave, turned the matter over to McLean in Special Collections.

McLean corresponded with Haycraft within weeks and suggested a visit to Haycraft in New York. By March, McLean was thanking Haycraft for the wonderful visit, lunch at the Players Club, and a chance to view the collection. At the same time, McLean offered several helpful suggestions to Haycraft on how a will or other formal agreement might be written as it pertained to the donation of the collection. Mention was also made that “because of the strength of our holdings in related fields encompassed by the Hess Collection, we are very much interested in developing an equally important collection in mystery literature.” Within another two weeks, Haycraft responded with “many thanks for your prompt and helpful letter...a copy of which I have sent to our attorney for guidance in drawing my new will.” Haycraft also provided the name and address of his legal firm, along with that of the attorney handling his will “for your files.” Howard Haycraft died on November 12, 1991. The following August the University’s office of general counsel communicated the terms of the will to McLean and the Libraries. Besides books, periodicals, and papers, the bequest included \$2,000 for the preservation and maintenance of the collection.

The activities and interests of John Bennett Shaw and his world-famous collection are interwoven into this entire narrative, and it is appropriate that we end with a few additional anecdotes of a Shavian nature.

In 1982, Professor Bryce Crawford, using the letterhead of the Molecular Spectroscopy Laboratory at Minnesota, wrote to McDiarmid about the future of the Shaw collection. The letter is a wonderful testament to the ongoing relationship between the University and the Norwegian Explorers (Crawford was a founding member).

The points raised by John Bennett Shaw do indeed catch my interest, and perhaps even excitement. I believe that our follow-up should be reasonably prompt. By that I don't mean we should fall all over ourselves, but that we should proceed to indicate to John that the possible ultimate marriage of his collection with ours is very appealing to us: and that we would like to explore this possibility further. To this end I think it is rather important that someone toddle down to New Mexico to spend a day with John and to discuss possibilities and potential and appropriate provision of a program which would lead comfortably to this end. If you yourself cannot go down this fall, I would urge you and Austin to use some of our funds to send Austin down to New Mexico on this mission of developing further understanding with John Bennett Shaw.

To me the object now is to present to Shaw the idea—as persuasively and convincingly as possible—that his valuable and beloved collection would indeed be well placed with us; that it would be looked after by a responsible institution with knowledgeable and responsible officers in charge of such special collections; and that the net result would be the formation of the unquestioned first and greatest collection of its kind, in an institution where it would receive proper care, with appropriate access provided for scholarly work. Austin is the university library officer in charge of special collections, and a very impressive individual in that capacity, clearly knowledgeable about book matters and special collection matters, and by no means a neophyte with regard to the peculiarities of Holmesiana....

So, I urge that this be done. I don't think an airplane ticket for Austin would be too expensive... In fact I'd rather like to go along and join him myself; as you know I love that southwest country. But I don't think I would add anything in terms of the purpose of such a visit.

McLean made the trip towards the end of the year and it paid dividends. In a post-Christmas note Shaw said that "I lean even more to Minnesota for eventual depository for the collection but am boggled at how to do it—appraisal, terms, and so on." By the time of the Holmesian birthday festivities in January, Shaw was busy talking to anyone with the expertise on how to make the thing happen. On his return from New York, Shaw reported that

I have spent much time thinking and talking about the possible future at Minnesota for my beloved library. I have talked about the matter some with Mr. Hollyer at the Toronto Library, with my long-time friend and [t]ax [a]dvisor, and with my lawyer. Before I go on with thoughts about this let me recount a most interesting talk I had. I lunched with Edith Meiser who has the wonderful bunch of things she did for Radio—scripts, discs and so on. She ran into a problem with giving it (to an isolated Western University) as a tax break. I suggested that she sell it to Minnesota. Then she stunned me by saying she felt her collection should go when mine went, and to the same place.

So I am serious about the matter. What I want and you must help formalize this idea, is that after my death [the] University of Minnesota takes possession of the entire Holmes collection."

The correspondence and the visits between New Mexico and Minnesota continued. A decade

later, in the fall of 1993, Shaw wrote to University Librarian Thomas Shaughnessy about the state of affairs.

As you know I have been collaborating with the Library's Special Collections and Mr. Austin McLean for more than a decade on The Sherlock Holmes–A. Conan Doyle Collection. And as I am certain that you know I entered into an agreement with The University, dated 14 February 1983, that my Holmes-Doyle library would be transferred to the University upon the occasion of my death.

However, due to the fact that on 10 October this year I will become 80 and as my wife and I plan to move into a small house/apartment I would like assent from you that I transfer my library to The University according to the terms of the 1983 agreement but while I am living.

Shaughnessy agreed to the change and the transfer occurred. On an early November morning library personnel unloaded the moving van with its ten tons of books, periodicals, memorabilia, puzzles, pipes, and memories. A year later, on October 2, 1994, Shaw died. The University of Minnesota Libraries formally dedicated the collection the following autumn.

This, in essence, is still a bare-bones account of the acquisition history of the Sherlock Holmes Collections at the University of Minnesota Libraries. The adventure of the unopened box did not end with the arrival of the Shaw materials. Newer collections large and small add to the depth and breadth of the Collections.

A very supportive Friends group formed in the early 1990s, and its quarterly newsletter highlights items from the collections and trumpets new arrivals. In December 2002, the Library completed a three-year cataloging project funded in part by a generous gift from the Hubbs family. Over 15,000 book and serial titles are now available through the University's online catalog. A successful development campaign endowed the curatorship, named in honor of McDiarmid, in 2010. Other newly-developed discovery tools such as UMedia and ArchivesSpace allow researchers opportunities to explore digital resources and archival collection guides. The box has been opened. But mysteries remain.

Holmes himself would be pleased with the collection's growth and its increased access and use. But he would also urge us on. As he remarked in the case of "The Illustrious Client,"—

"I am accustomed to have mystery at one end of my cases,
but to have it at both ends is too confusing."

Timothy J. Johnson
E. W. McDiarmid Curator of the Sherlock Holmes Collections

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