

DAVID E. COTE: What is the history of Rex Stout and the BSI?

Rex Stout was well-known for his Nero Wolfe mysteries when in early January 1941 Irregular Lawrence Williams suggested to Edgar W. Smith that Stout would be a good person to attend the up-coming 1941 annual dinner (held the 31st) and respond to some awful things Somerset Maugham had said about the Sherlock Holmes stories in a recent Saturday Evening Post article. Stout accepted Smith's commission, but did not carry it out. Instead he agitated the Irregulars that night with his soon notorious talk "Watson Was a Woman" (which included an acrostic in which titles of Watson's tales spelled out the name Irene Watson).

But in not too much time, the Irregulars decided Stout's heart was in the right place (after all, Archie Goodwin in at least one Nero Wolfe book had mentioned a picture of Sherlock Holmes hanging on the wall of their West 35th Street office), and he became a regular at the dinners: soon with a place at the head table, and the investiture "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" (conferred in 1949).

In 1954, the Higher Criticism of the Wolfe Canon got underway with an article in Harper's Magazine (July) by editor Bernard DeVoto. He had already turned down an invitation from favorite-contributor Elmer Davis to join the Baker Street Irregulars, on grounds of silliness. But DeVoto did not feel Irregularity was silly in the case of his favorite detective stories, and in "Alias Nero Wolfe" (in his editorial "The Easy Chair" column in that month's issue), he was even a bit harsh in the way he went about it:

According to a friend of mine who belongs to the Baker Street Irregulars [DeVoto began], a paper by one of his colleagues suggests that Nero Wolfe may be the son of Sherlock Holmes's brother Mycroft. I cannot find the treatise that contains this absurdity and mention it only as an example of the frivolous speculation tricked out to look like scholarship with which the Holmes cult defrauds the reading public. In stating here the insoluble problem which will always frustrate biographers of Nero Wolfe I confine myself, as a member of the American Historical Association in good standing, to examining the source documents according to the approved methods of historical research. I construct only one hypothesis and I make no test of that one, leaving it for other scholars to test and apply as they may see fit.

DeVoto proceeded to spread frivolous speculation tricked out to look like scholarship across half a dozen pages in that month's Harper's, all for the purpose of confounding Irregular speculation about Nero Wolfe's parentage. (DeVoto could be very dogmatic: see BSI Michael Dirda's retrospective review of DeVoto's enjoyable but dogmatic '48 book of interest to Irregulars, *The Hour: A Cocktail Manifesto*.)

DeVoto's volley only encouraged Irregular speculation, and the principal word on the subject, "Some Notes Relating to a Preliminary Investigation into the Paternity of Nero Wolfe," was published in the Baker Street Journal in 1956 by John D. Clark, later "The Politician, the Lighthouse, and the Trained Cormorant," BSI. (Included also in Philip Shreffler's landmark anthology of BSI scholarship, *Sherlock Holmes by Gas-Lamp*, 1989.) It answered DeVoto's objections and deflections, and strengthened the case. The canny Stout refused to confirm or deny, but certainly abetted Clark's case with the note he sent Clark about his investigations, printed in the article in facsimile.

DeVoto might as well have been King Canute commanding the tide not to come in. In 1969 William S. Baring-Gould, already the author of *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* and editor of *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, made the idea a foundation-stone of another book, *Nero Wolfe of West 35th Street*. And Nicholas Meyer ("A Fine Morocco Case," BSI) made use of the idea as well in his novels.

Back in 1942, at that January's BSI dinner, Julian Wolff had responded to Stout's "Watson Was a Woman" with a talk of his own entitled "Nuts to Rex Stout." Stout was not in attendance to hear it. A strident anti-isolationist before Pearl Harbor, he was off creating the Writers War Board to support the U.S. war effort. But when Edgar Smith sent him a copy of Julian's paper, Stout was not chastened.

"I smile sardonically at Dr. Wolff's involuntary (and pathetic) self-betrayal," Stout replied to Smith on March 8, 1942: "I respect him for his loyalty to a lost cause, but what ineptitude! The poor chap! He labors for weeks to produce an acrostic which proclaims NUTS TO REX STOUT, and follows it with some observations upon a certain wound conclusively demonstrating that what the situation really demands is NUTS FOR DR. WATSON."

But Julian Wolff was a big man in a small body. In 1961, when he became the BSI's Commissionaire, he created the honor known as the Two-Shilling Award "for extraordinary devotion to the cause beyond the call of duty," and the first one went that January to Rex Stout.

Besides Baring-Gould, well known to Irregulars is John McAleer's biography *Rex Stout* in 1977. Less known, but worthy of attention, is David R. Anderson's elegant study of the Nero Wolfe tales and their author, also titled *Rex Stout* (1984), in Frederick Ungar's series of detective/suspense fiction studies. Anderson, a valued contributor to *Baker Street Miscellanea* when he was a professor of English at Texas A&M and Denison Universities, is now president of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.

[September 6, 2010]

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