

Highlights from My First International Conference on Sherlock Holmes

*by David Richards*¹

From Thursday, August 31st to Sunday, September 3rd, 2017, my lovely wife Cindy and I attended our first international Sherlock Holmes conference along with sixty-eight others in the Bernese-Oberland region of Switzerland. The three-day conference was held at the lovely Das Hotel Panorama in Hasilberg-Reuti, Switzerland, which is owned by the gracious Mr. Panos Perreten, perhaps he and Peter Steiler the elder had much in common. The hotel was perched on a mountainside above the village of Meiringen; guests reach the hotel from Meiringen via a five-minute Luftseilbahn ride from the center of Meiringen or a twenty-minute road journey via bus or car.



My wife Cindy and I in the Bernese Oberland.

For much of the conference including the day we arrived, it was raining and the hotel was in the clouds or fog so to speak. The assembled group of Sherlockians and Holmesians understood weather, especially the weather of Victorian England. For the most part, we all relish both good and bad weather and we need the challenge of both to keep our bodies and minds active. The weather did clear on the final

¹ David and his wife Cindy live in Springfield, Virginia. David became enamored with Sherlock Holmes at the age of eight when his older brother spent a few years role-playing Sherlockian characters, primarily Dr. Watson, with his high school friends. In 2008, David retired as an officer in the United States Air Force and is presently working as an aeronautical-astronautical engineer. One day, David hopes to publish a biography of Sherlock Holmes. He and Cindy are active members of the Red Circle Society of Washington and the Diogenes Club.

morning of the conference. With the lifting of the clouds, the Reichenbach Falls was clearly visible across the valley from our hotel. One could clearly hear its roar, when it was quiet while standing on the hotel's large outdoor terrace.

Before arriving in Switzerland, Marcus had sent us the names and e-mail addresses of everyone. After nearly three days together, I discovered that we were a geographical diverse group spread across at least three continents. Some of the larger contingents had traveled from the France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Switzerland, and the United States. Many have lived in multiple countries and fluently spoke multiple languages.

On Thursday afternoon we met with our host from the hotel, Mr. Perreten and boarded a bus to visit both the Sherlock Holmes Museum and the Museum der Landschaft Hasli in Meiringen. The Sherlock Holmes Museum is in the basement of the English Church and includes a splendid re-creation of the sitting room at 221B Baker Street, as it may have looked when Watson and Holmes roomed together. The museum also displayed many other collectables from the period of when Holmes and Watson were in Switzerland. The museum staff provided each of us with a personal audio-device that gave a nice explanation of each of the exhibits in our language of choice. On one wall, was a large map of Switzerland showing the travels of Holmes and Watson from when they entered Switzerland until their arrival at the Reichenbach Falls. At the Museum der Landschaft Hasli, we were presented with the history of the area, which included many artifacts and photographs. There was a large fire in Meiringen in October 1891, which destroyed a large part of the town, including the English Church. We learned that this fire might have been deliberately set with motivation unknown.



Meeting the master himself in Meiringen.

After visiting both of the Meiringen museums and seeing the statue of Sherlock Holmes sitting on a park bench nearby, we were treated to wine / champagne and

hors d'oeuvre at the Parkhotel Du Sauvage next door to the Sherlock Holmes Museum. As we walked toward the outside entrance to the hotel's British style pub, one couldn't help but notice the life-size, action-oriented statue honoring Melchior Anderegg, the king of the Swiss alpine guides. Later at dinner, someone mentioned that there is a plaque on the wall of the Parkhotel Du Sauvage indicating that this was indeed the hotel known as the Englischer Hof, where Holmes and Watson stayed on the night of May 3rd, 1891.

On Friday morning, facilitated by four well thought out presentations by Eva Iggland, Guy Marriott, Brian Stone, and Enrico Solito respectively, we discussed at length how Holmes might have journeyed out of Switzerland from the Reichenbach Falls; we did not reach a consensus. More study and debate is required. After the morning session we boarded a Swiss PostBus for the difficult drive up a narrow, winding road to the hamlet of Rosenlauri and our journey back into the "Belle Époque" period. Once arriving in Rosenlauri, we were off the grid, no television or cell phone service. If you were dressed in Victorian attire, you likely felt like it was 1895. As we arrived, it cleared just enough so we could see the Rosenlauri Glacier hanging on the mountainside just above the hotel. The family that owns the Rosenlauri Hotel hosted us for a delicious and visually stunning luncheon. The hotel first welcomed guests over two hundred years ago. A few days earlier, Cindy and I hiked to the Grosse Scheidegg and we were able to look east into the Rosenlauri Valley (a nearby sign indicated it was a 1 hour 40 minute walk to Rosenlauri) and west towards Grindlewald (a 2 hour 30 minute walk). A few members of our group were friends with the family that owns and operates the hotel and have stayed there many times. During my next visit to the area, I plan to definitely make time for a restful stay at the Rosenlauri Hotel; it opens in the latter half of May. I plan to walk from Meiringen with "strict injunctions, however, on no account to pass the falls of Reichenbach, which are about half-way up the hills, without making a small detour to see them."



Meeting Marcus Geisser in front of the Hotel Rosenlauri.

On our return journey to the Panorama Hotel, we made the pilgrimage to the Reichenbach Falls whose “torrent, swollen by the melting snow, plunges into a tremendous abyss, from which the spray rolls up like the smoke from a burning house.” The three days of rain had greatly increased the flow of water. We took photographs as “We stood near the edge peering down into the gleam of breaking water far below us against the black rocks, and listening to the half-human shout, which came booming up with spray out of the abyss.”

On Saturday, we had planned to take a mint-condition Swiss Postal Coach (circa 1951) tour of three of mountain passes that Holmes may have crossed on his way to Florence, Italy. Unfortunately, snow and low visibility on all three passes meant that it was both unsafe and there was nothing to truly see, except clouds. So Michael Meer planned the Swiss Postal Coach trip to Schloss Hünegg in Hilterfingen on the shores of Lake Thun. This fairytale-like castle was built in the 1860s; it’s probably always 1895 at this castle too. After touring Schloss Hünegg, we had a charming lunch at Restaurant Dampfschiff on the Aare River in Thun.

During our field trip on Saturday, I had several in depth discussions with one British gentleman and two Swiss gentlemen about the weather and snow conditions in April and May of 1891 and how these might have affected Holmes and Watson’s travels. Based on what they knew about the weather, we tried to quantify the level of support Holmes and Watson might have needed or not needed during their travels. Another gentleman mentioned that he wanted to add another 750 feet of linear bookshelf space in his home for his ever-expanding Sherlockian book collection.

At lunch in Thun, Cindy and I sat with four enthusiastic members of the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club. Our conversation ranged from their annual conferences in Japan, Baedeker guides, the Granada series, to travel on the Japanese “Shinkansen” bullet trains. One of the club members had been to every conference (forty years worth) of the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club and another member had proudly acquired a 1891 Baedeker Guide to Switzerland. After lunch, I knew I was going to a Sherlock Holmes conference in Japan one day and that I would start looking for the 1891 Baedeker Guide to Switzerland and perhaps even a circa 1880s Baedeker guide to Great Britain.

On the final morning of the conference, Sunday morning, the presentations covered a wide range of topics, including one by Catherine Cooke on why Holmes journeyed “Towards a Forbidden Land of Holy Books” during the Great Hiatus and the routes

he might have taken to get there. Marcus Geisser wrapped the conference up with one final presentation, “From the Final Problem to The Final Return”. My first international Sherlock Holmes conference was over.

Cindy and I said our farewells and we hoped that we would cross paths with all the interesting people we had met again in the near future. Soon we would return to the United States and our life there; Marcus and Michael brighten the day considerably when they said the Reichenbach Irregulars would be hosting another conference in 2019 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of their founding. I have already marked my calendar.

Cindy and I had one lasting treat; we rode down in the Luftseilbahn to Meiringen with two Frenchmen that had attended the conference and we had fifteen minutes together while waiting and for the ride down. One of the gentlemen showed me some skillful illustrations of conference participants he had done, including one of myself. We talked about our local scions and shared Google maps of where our scions meet and we invited each other to attend our scion meetings. They walked off to explore Meiringen and Cindy and I headed to the train station and the trip home, pulling our suitcases. The following weekend, the Sherlock Holmes Society of Italy was hosting a continuation of discussions in Florence, Italy, and many of people I had met were traveling to this as well. Why wasn't I going too?

After reflecting, I came away with two key thoughts from my trip to Switzerland. Firstly, I was taken aback by the quality of the speakers and the complexity and depth of the scholarship I had encountered. I believe one could find an immense number of friends and colleagues to share a lifetime of scholarship just trying to answer questions flowing from Watson's accounts in “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House”. I would like to make an in depth study of the scholarship that has been done thus far in these areas, so I might know where I can help fill in the holes with scholarship of my own. Additionally, I think it would be an amazing experience to develop several working hypotheses of how Holmes and Watson traveled from London to Florence and then set out to test each hypothesis in the most accurate way possible and then share this experience with others.

Finally, my second and final key take-away from the conference is about the “universal” nature of Sherlockians and Holmesians that revere the canon. I would like to point out that I have never met a Sherlockian or Holmesian that doesn't have deep respect and love for the canon. In the United States, I have met and have gotten to know many Sherlockians and the nature of this relationship can best be described as “family”. To a person, I found them to have the following traits, inter

alia, in common: they are quite interesting, trustful, kind, genuine, and giving. Furthermore, to a person, I found all the non-U.S. Sherlockians and Holmesians that I met at the conference to have these same traits as well. I asked myself why this is. The best answer I can presently give is that all Sherlockians and Holmesians hold sacred the friendship between Holmes and Watson, which I believe is built on the same traits that are listed above. If a Sherlockian were to violate these traits, or perhaps better identified as principles, they would in effect be contributing to harming or minimizing the friendship between Holmes and Watson as described in the canon and friendship they have with their fellow Sherlockians and Holmesians who revere the canon as much as they do. This is something they could never knowingly do, even if Professor Moriarty was patiently awaiting their convenience for the final discussion of those questions that lie between them.
