

# Sherlock Holmes On The Air

BY ROBERT W. HAHN

Although Sherlock Holmes had already had several years of air time by 1938, there is no better introduction to Holmes on radio than that given by Orson Welles on September 25th of that year, when the Mercury Theatre on the Air presented Mr. Welles' adaptation of the William Gillette play, SHERLOCK HOLMES, on WABC-CBS. He said:

*Good evening. Well, tonight it is back to Baker Street, back to that unlikely London of the 19th Century where high adventure awaits all who would seek it in a handsome cab, or under gas-light in Inverness cape. For tonight we pay tribute to the most wonderful member of that most wonderful world, a gentleman who never lived and who will never die. There are only a few of them, these permanent profiles, everlasting silhouettes on the edge of the world.*

*There is first the little hunchback with his slapstick, whose hook nose is shaped like his cap; there is now, and always will be, the penguin-footed hobo in the derby and the baggy pants; the small boy with the wooden head; the long, rusty knight on horseback; and the fat knight who could only procure a charge on foot; there is also the tall gentleman with the hawk's face, the underslung pipe, the fore-and-aft cap. We would know them anywhere, and easily call them by name; Punch, the Charlies—Chaplin and McCarthy, Quixote, Sir John and . . . Sherlock Holmes.*

*Now, irrelevant as it may seem, we of the Mercury Theatre are very much occupied these days with rehearsals for the revival of a fine old American farce a lot of you remember if only for its lovely title, Too Much Johnson. Its author was William Gillette, which reminded us as it reminds you, of Sherlock Holmes. As everybody*

*knows, that celebrated inventor of under-acting lent his considerable gifts as a playwright to the indestructable legend of the Conan Doyle detective, and produced the play which is as much a part of the Holmes literature as any of Sir Arthur's own romances; and as nobody will ever forget, he gave his face to it. For William Gillette is the aquiline and actual embodiment of Holmes himself. It is too little to say that William Gillette resembled Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes looks exactly like William Gillette . . . sounds like him too, we're afraid, and we hope devoutly that the Mercury Theatre and the radio will take none of the glamour from beloved fable of Baker Street—from the pipe and violin and the hideous purple dressing gown; from the needle and the cigar on the window ledge; from the dry, famous final lines, "Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary!"*

Mr. Welles' hopes were not dashed. From the beginning radio took nothing from the fascinating world of Sherlock Holmes. To the contrary, it added to his popularity, to his stature, and to his longevity. No other radio personality has ever captured an audience and dominated so completely the airwaves as has Sherlock Holmes. His career has been long and illustrious, and is far from over.

The famous detective's radio debut took place on October 20th, 1936, on station WEAf-NBC, New York. Edith Meiser, one time vaudevillian and actress, and her husband, a radio script writer, had always felt that Holmes would be a popular radio character, and by 1927 had completed several scripts based upon the Holmes stories. Unfortunately, at the time, she was unable to interest any producer or sponsor in the project and gave up on it.



**SHERLOCK HOLMES AND DR. WATSON: Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce**

A couple of years later she saw Gillette play Holmes in one of his many 'farewell' appearances, and luckily for us all, it revived her desire to get Holmes on the air. Once again she began the rounds of producers and sponsors and finally met up with Mr. G. Washington, president of the coffee company of the same name. Mr. Washington was personally fond of Sherlock Holmes and easily agreed to have his company sponsor a series of half-hour dramas to be written, produced, and directed by Miss Meiser, herself.

Someone at NBC had noted that Gillette was again on farewell tour as Sherlock Holmes and thought it would be a great idea to have him play the part of Holmes for the initial broadcast. He was duly contacted and quickly agreed to do the broadcast. Then as zero hour approached, some doubts began to set in. Gillette was in his 80's. Would his eyesight be good enough

to read the script? Could he give vitality to the role? Would a sit-down microphone be needed because of his aging legs? As it turned out there was no problem on any count. Not only did he portray the great sleuth as only he could, but since he arrived at the studio on a motorcycle, no one bothered about a table microphone!

The program was aired at 10 p.m. on a Monday night and, oddly enough, the announcer for the program was a Joseph Bell. Holmes fans will recall that Dr. Joseph Bell, one of Doyle's instructors at medical school was a Dr. Joseph Bell, the prototype for Sherlock Holmes.

The program was an instant hit. Fortunately, Miss Meiser had 34 additional scripts ready for broadcast. Since Gillette had been retained for the first program only, it was necessary to find another Holmes. Richard Gordon, a handsome leading man on the stage was selected for

## SHERLOCK HOLMES ON THE AIR

---

the role, and Leigh Lovell, a fine but rather obscure British actor was signed to continue on as Watson, the role he played in the first broadcast. This first series ran from October 20, 1930, to June 15, 1931, growing in popularity with each broadcast. This led to Edith Meiser being commissioned to prepare another 40 scripts, which ran on from September of 1931 through June of 1932.

Gordon and Lovell continued as Holmes and Watson, and the scripts, except for half-a-dozen, all were based upon the Doyle stories. The writer and the stars combined their talents for a third series of programs which ran from September of 1932 to May of 1933. That completed a total of 111 programs, and the public was clamoring for more.

Thus, the series was extended for another 29 broadcasts, but with Louis Hecctor as Sherlock Holmes. Apparently Gordon had become difficult to work with, which necessitated the change. Leigh Lovell continued on as Watson, and Miss Meiser continued to supply the stories.

The last program in the series was aired on May 26, 1935, and Holmes disappeared from the airways until September of that year. During the summer of 1935 NBC noted that Gillette had finally retired to his castle in Connecticut. (Gillette Castle, incidentally, is one of the really fabulous structures in the U.S. Overlooking the Connecticut river, the castle was designed by Gillette, who also supervised the construction of the edifice. The Flemish-style castle is now a state park and is well worth a visit by any Holmes fan, Gillette fan, or anyone who loves the unusual and spectacular.)

Gillette was asked to make one more foray into Victorian London and he lost no time in agreeing. The program was sponsored by Lux Soap, and was heard on the Lux Radio Theatre on November 19, 1935. Reginald Mason was Gillette's Wat-

son, and the script was an adaptation of the Gillette play by, of course, Edith Meiser.

Holmes was back on the air on a regular basis on February 1, 1936 with the first of 48 more broadcasts. For unknown reasons, Richard Gordon was back as Holmes, but Leigh Lovell, who had died in the interim, was replaced as Watson by Harry West. Edith Meiser again struggled with the plots. The last program of the series was broadcast on December 24, 1936, and there were no more Sherlock Holmes broadcasts until the Welles special in 1938.

Another year passed without Holmes on the air, and then the Saga of Baker Street received its greatest boost since the publication of the stories, the advent of the real (or reel) Sherlock Holmes . . . Basil Rathbone. Much like radio, Hollywood had ignored Holmes since 1933. Then, as legend has it, during one of the much publicized Hollywood cocktail parties, Darryl F. Zanuck turned to Rathbone and said, "You know, you would make a perfect Sherlock Holmes." True or not, the end result was the same . . . the definitive Sherlock Holmes had been found. The first film with Rathbone as Holmes and Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson was *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*, released in 1939. The film and Rathbone and Bruce were so well received that a second production, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, was rushed into production and released later that same year.

It was inevitable that the popular pair would be called upon to portray Holmes and Watson on radio. The first program, *The Sussex Vampire*, was broadcast over WJZ-NBC, on October 2, 1939. It was, almost as inevitably, scripted by Edith Meiser, and it signalled the beginning of 218 programs that ran through May of 1946. Ninety-three of the scripts were written by Miss Meiser, and then Leslie Charteris (of *The Saint* fame), Dennis Green, and Anthony Boucher assumed the writing job. G. Washington Coffee had

sponsored the show for the first three years, and then Household Finance, Clipper Craft Clothes, Kreml, Bromo Seltzer, and others took over in turn.

By 1946 Hollywood and Rathbone had grown disinterested in Holmes and Basil left both the movie and radio series. Public interest was still strong, however, and the radio series continued on for another 39 programs with Tom Conway taking over as Holmes, and Nigel Bruce still in his familiar role of Watson. In September of 1947 Bruce also left the radio series, as did Conway, and John Stanley (as Holmes) and Alfred Shirley (as Watson) replaced them. The series, with Edith Meiser again doing the scripts, ran for 39 broadcasts over station WOR-MBS. John Stanley stayed on as Holmes for the next series (September 1948 through June 1949) but had to cope with a new Watson, Ian Martin. The scripts were written by Howard Merrill and "others." The final Holmes-Watson series was aired on station WJZ-ABC, September 29, 1949 through June 14, 1950. Ben Wright starred as Holmes, and the Watsonian bumbings were provided by Eric Snowden. Dennis Green was back as script writer.

Holmes also enjoyed a goodly measure of popularity on British radio, although the first Holmes program was not broadcast until July, 1943. It was an adaptation of *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, with Arthur Wontner (who played Holmes in five British films in the 1930's, and whom many consider to be on a par with Rathbone) as Holmes and Carleton Hobbes as Dr. Watson. In that same month BBC aired a "biography" of Dr. John H. Watson, M.D., with Ralph Truman as the doctor and John Cheate as Holmes. Several more single programs were broadcast by the BBC in 1944 and 1945, the most notable being a John Dickson Carr adaptation of *The Speckled Band*, starring Cedric Hardwicke as Holmes and Finlay Currie as Watson. It was introduced by Arthur Conan Doyle's son Adrian.

The first series on BBC began on

October 15, 1952, with Hobbes as Holmes and Shelly as the good doctor. It was carried on *The Children's Hour* and included five broadcasts. The first adult series on the BBC made its debut on October 5, 1954, twelve stories with John Gielgud (not yet a Sir) as the Great Detective, and Ralph Richardson (also untitled at the time) in the role of Watson. Orson Welles was a properly evil Professor Moriarty on the last program. Michael Hardwick, a fine writer and noted Sherlockian, wrote eight scripts for the team of Hobbes and Shelley, which were broadcast February to May, 1960; and provided fourteen more that covered the period November 1961 to September 1962. In between these two series there was a special six-part broadcast of *The Hound Of The Baskervilles* with Carleton Hobbes as Sherlock and Nigel Bruce supporting him in the role of Watson. Hobbes and Shelley then teamed up for another twenty-seven broadcasts from 1962 to 1969.

It should be mentioned here that many years after the event it was revealed that Mr. Shelley delivered the famous "blood, sweat, and tears" speech for a then ailing Winston Churchill. No one ever suspected it was not Churchill's voice rallying the British people.

All of the BBC programs were eventually broadcast in the United States. There also is evidence of a number of Holmes programs on Swedish and German radio, although no detailed lists are available.

The demise of Sherlock Holmes on radio was probably due more to the advent of television as an entertainment medium than to any lack of interest on the part of the public. Case in point, the twelve Universal films with Rathbone and Bruce have been staple TV programming for over twenty years.

It seems doubtful that radio drama will ever again attract enough fans to make dramatic productions feasible. If, however, that time does come around you can be sure that one of the features will be the further adventures of Sherlock Holmes.