

December 2011

What was Sherlock Holmes' Alma Mater? Elementary: St. John Fisher College

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Recommended Citation

Madigan, Tim (2011) "What was Sherlock Holmes' Alma Mater? Elementary: St. John Fisher College," *Verbum*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol9/iss1/16>

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"As the recent Robert Downey, Jr. movie has clearly demonstrated, interest in all things relating to Sherlock Holmes remains strong. This is just as true at St. John Fisher College as anywhere else, where the immortal detective stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are taught in literature courses by Lisa Jadwin of the Department of English, and where Holmes' skills at deduction are discussed in philosopher David White's Basic Logic classes. Several other professors, including Donald Muench and Gerry Wildenberg in Mathematics, and Charles Natoli and yours truly in Philosophy, as well as alums such as Ray Ruff, also have an avid interest in the Great Detective. Indeed, we belong to the local Baker Street Irregulars chapter, Rochester Row, ably overseen by its leader, or —Gasogene II, Lewis Neisner, who guides us through our bimonthly gatherings."



Tim Madigan

WHAT WAS SHERLOCK HOLMES' ALMA MATER? ELEMENTARY: ST. JOHN FISHER COLLEGE

"How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?" - Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of the Four*

As the recent Robert Downey, Jr. movie has clearly demonstrated, interest in all things relating to Sherlock Holmes remains strong. This is just as true at St. John Fisher College as anywhere else, where the immortal detective stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are taught in literature courses by Lisa Jadwin of the Department of English, and where Holmes' skills at deduction are discussed in philosopher David White's Basic Logic classes. Several other professors, including Donald Muench and Gerry Wildenberg in Mathematics, and Charles Natoli and yours truly in Philosophy, as well as alums such as Ray Ruff, also have an avid interest in the Great Detective. Indeed, we belong to the local Baker Street Irregulars chapter, Rochester Row, ably overseen by its leader, or "Gasogene", Lewis Neisner, who guides us through our bimonthly gatherings.

One of the prevailing mysteries often discussed by aficionados of "the Great Game" (the conceit that Sherlock Holmes was not an imaginary figure but rather a genuine person) is the question of where did he attend college? Quite a few of the stories in the canon make mention of his higher learning, but there is no attribution of a specific alma mater. Still, over the years there have been many attempts to solve the conundrum, with such places as Cambridge University, Oxford University or University College, London being offered as likely possibilities.

While researching this topic, I came across a reference to a rather obscure article in the September 1976 "Baker Street Miscellanea", which gave as the answer "Fisher College (imaginary)". My interest was immediately piqued, and—thanks to the intrepid staff at the Lavery Library here—I was able to get a copy of the article through interlibrary loan. Entitled "The Education of Sherlock Holmes – a Footnote" by William T. Thurban, it points out

that in 1945 a book was published by Cambridge lecturer in Archaeology Glyn Daniel, entitled *The Cambridge Murders: A Story of Murder at High Table, of Death and Detection amid Good Living and Scholarship*. Daniel set the mystery in the fictitious Fisher College, situated between Trinity and St. John's. While our own college's namesake John Fisher (1469-1535) had been both a student at and later Chancellor of Cambridge University (where he helped to found two of its schools), there is no college there named after him—as Daniel well knew. Thurban thus states: “A wholly literary College in a firmly placed literary setting—and one that cannot be identified with any existing College. . . . Gentlemen, I reveal to you for the first time—Sherlock Holmes was a member of Fisher College, Cambridge. And so we link three famous names: St. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, virtual founder of Christ's and St. John's Colleges; Dr. Glyn Daniel, world-renowned archeologist; and Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”

A very ingenious chain of logic. But, taking this one step further, while there may not be a St. John Fisher College in Cambridge, there most certainly *is* one in Rochester, New York. Since, as all introductory philosophy courses will attest, an actual institution beats out an imaginary one, it stands to reason that Sherlock Holmes' alma mater is none other than our own beloved college.

Skeptics might point out that the Holmes' stories were written between 1887 and 1927, and that St. John Fisher College was not opened until 1951. However, this does not present a problem to my argument, as it is well known that Sherlock Holmes has the rare ability to transcend time. Fans of the beloved Basil Rathbone/Nigel Bruce film series, for instance, will recall that the time period for their Holmes/Watson adventures was, for the most part, not the Victorian/Edwardian era but rather World War II. And the recent popular television show *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, places Holmes and Watson in the year 2010, with further up-to-the-minute cases yet to come in promised future sequels. Therefore, if Sherlock Holmes can, like all immortal beings, break the bounds of temporality, he could just as easily have attended St. John Fisher College in the early 1950s as he could have the fictitious Fisher College, Cambridge in the 1880s. In fact, he may well have been a classmate of his own admirer Donald Muench, who was a student here from 1951-1955, and who has kept this knowledge a secret all these years.

So, all St. John Fisher College alumni should welcome to their ranks another noted member, the Baker Street crime solver himself. In his honor, we've named the student organization of our Philosophy and Classical

Studies Department the Diogenes Club, after his brother Mycroft's private society. As Sherlock puts it in "The Greek Interpreter":

"There are many men in London, you know, who, some from shyness, some from misanthropy, have no wish for the company of their fellows. Yet they are not averse to comfortable chairs and the latest periodicals. It is for the convenience of these that the Diogenes Club was started, and it now contains the most unsociable and unclubable men in town. No member is permitted to take the least notice of any other one. Save in the Stranger's Room, no talking is, under any circumstances, allowed, and three offences, if brought to the notice of the committee, render the talker liable to expulsion. My brother was one of the founders, and I have myself found it a very soothing atmosphere."

Thus, to respect his wish for privacy, we promise Sherlock Holmes that, should he ever return to visit his alma mater, we will maintain his confidentiality. But he will always have a place of honor here at St. John Fisher College.

Tim Madigan teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Classical Studies and, with David White, is the co-founder of Rochester Row. He is also the proud possessor of a deerstalker hat.

