

A Sherlockian Toast (posted 2023-6-18)

A toast to The Criterion Bar  
by Ann Caddell  
before a meeting of the Crew of the Barque Lone Star  
on November 6, 2022

We Sherlockians are eternally grateful for the fateful meeting between Dr. Watson and young Stamford, who introduces Watson to Holmes. In the good Doctor's words, "I was standing at the Criterion Bar, when someone tapped me on the shoulder, and turning round I recognized young Stamford, who had been a dresser under me at Barts." Stamford takes Watson to St. Bart's to meet another gentleman who is looking to share lodgings in London, and the rest is literary history. But after the Holmes-Watson introduction takes place, both young Stamford and the Criterion Bar vanish from the canon, never to be seen again. (Although the bar itself, recognizing its own importance, installed a plaque in 1953 commemorating the event.) So why did Conan Doyle, who was so good at descriptions of interior settings, give us no picture at all of the spot where Watson and Stamford crossed paths – one of the most important chance meetings in all literature? Probably because his audience already knew the place.

The Criterion Restaurant in Piccadilly, in the heart of London, was an opulent restaurant/bar/ballroom/theatre complex that opened in 1873. By 1887, when Watson described his meeting with Stamford in Beeton's Christmas Annual, the establishment was highly popular and a true London institution. Most Englishmen would have gotten a pretty good picture of the environs from the name alone.

Over the years, plenty of prominent Brits patronized the Criterion. H.G. Wells was a regular, and once addressed a meeting of the Royal College of Science there. The women's suffrage movement favored the place for afternoon tea and strategy meetings, and in 1919 Winston Churchill made a speech there advocating a coalition government to continue the wartime spirit of national unity.

The Criterion makes cameo appearances in more works of fiction as well. Both G.K. Chesterton and W. Somerset Maugham mention the place in their stories. And one of my favorite authors, P.G. Wodehouse, immortalized another meeting in the Jeeves and Wooster story, "Indian Summer of an Uncle," in which Bertie's Uncle George, assisted of course by the indispensable Jeeves, is reunited with an old flame who he met when she worked as a waitress at the Criterion. Even television has gotten into the act. In season four of Downton Abbey, Lady Edith is shown dining at the Criterion and remarking on how she could not have gone to a public restaurant before the war.

Social change, scientific knowledge, political action, literature – the Criterion has witnessed and contributed to them all. Facilitating the meeting of Holmes and Watson was only the beginning. So let's raise a glass to the place where so many of the great and the famous, both real and fictional, have raised their glasses – to the Criterion Bar!

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