

and while "The Creeping Man" does not make reference to other Holmes cases, it is the first story in the canon to inform us that Watson has finally left Baker Street, and it contains one of the most celebrated Holmes expressions, in the message that summons Watson: "Come at once if convenient – if inconvenient come all the same.–SH." The story contains sterling matter for pastiche or parody, in its recording of a renowned academic's attempt to achieve rejuvenation and longevity through self-dosing with monkey serum.

One final quibble, and a celebration: while details of every pastiche and parody are listed in the end notes, and while authors' works can be swiftly located by references to the indexes, inclusion of page numbers of magazines, newspapers and collections in which the versions appeared might have extended the usefulness of the book. This nitpicking aside, scholars and passionate lay readers of the Holmes canon will appreciate the book's wit and scope: no other book so entertainingly and comprehensively discusses the field of alternative Holmesiana.

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Works Cited

Borges, Jorge Luis. "A Poet's Creed." *This Craft of Verse: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1967-1968*. Ed. Calin-Andrei Mihailescu. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000, 103-104.

***Phil May: His Life and Work 1864-1903*, by Simon Houfe. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. 169p, 73 illustrations. ISBN: 1-8401-4652-4. £55.00 (hardback).**

During his three-year stint at the *Sydney Bulletin*, Phil May was once asked by W. H. Traill (who had headhunted the up-and-coming young artist in London) whether he couldn't "finish up" his drawings "a bit" with some of the elaborate lineation favoured by older cartoonists. "When I can leave out half the lines I now use," May responded, "I shall want six times the money!"

The story may well be apocryphal (it first appeared in the *Bulletin* after May's death) and that, perhaps, is why it finds no place in Simon Houfe's new study. But apocryphal stories (as the history of Christian art attests) often encapsulate truths which remain diffused in more soberly authentic sources, and this one seems to me a case in point. May's suppositious reply to Traill perfectly captures the revolution in draftsmanship for which (at least in the English-speaking world) he was very largely responsible, his discovery that less can be more, that a rigorously disciplined economy of line (abetted by the reproductive fidelity of new photomechanical printing technologies) can produce a greater expressive impact than any amount of fussy cross-hatching or redundant detail. His finest black-and-white drawings are

miracles of concision in which a few seemingly nonchalant slashes of the pen can conjure up the flamboyant magnificence of a costerwoman's plumed holiday hat or the pathos of a down-at-heel drunkard's shabby overcoat.

But the *Bulletin* story also spotlights another of May's attributes – his showmanship. As an adolescent, he had played bit parts (including that of Dick Whittington's cat) in a touring company, and towards the end of his short life he dreamt of a new career as a Shakespearean actor; but his most sustained performance was as a prodigal genius, the hard-drinking, cigar-smoking Bohemian who could knock out dazzlingly accomplished cartoons between whiskies and who made a point of dressing like a prosperous bookie in loud checks and rakish billycock hats. This was the May whom Ada Cambridge (in an account which Houfe has overlooked) watched at the Arts Club in Sydney, drawing lightning sketches on a blackboard and dashing down the strokes so that “we could not make head or tail of them” until “the last touch of chalk” completed a perfect caricature of one of the guests.

The principal merit of Houfe's study is that it insists on looking beyond the raffish self-image May assiduously projected (and by which he became increasingly trapped) to the serious artist whose apparently intuitive gift was the product of hard work and incessant self-education. When, for example, a Melbourne patron bankrolled him to study formally at one of the Paris *ateliers*, May spent a few hours sketching in the life class and then went off for a drink and never returned. It's a typically “Bohemian” May story, but Houfe shrewdly notes the sequel: that, having become bored by the stultifying academicism of the *Atelier Cormon*, May instead used his time in Paris to learn more profitable lessons from the radically innovative French illustrators of his own generation – from Forain and Steinlen, Valloton and Toulouse-Lautrec. Again, Houfe rightly emphasises that May's finished drawings were not, as his public performances were intended to suggest, the products of some immediate creative impulse, but were rather the distillation of years of observant annotation in sketchbooks and that his habitual procedure was to complete a design in full detail (the “finish” whose lack Traill had deplored) before painstakingly eliminating every line that he judged not absolutely essential. Clearly his collection of Japanese woodblocks had been assembled for use rather than for fashionable ornament.

Houfe's portrait of May, then, hinges on a stark contrast between the open-handed “good fellow,” tipsily scattering fivers to importunate toadies, and the dedicated artist pursuing minimalist perfection in the privacy of his studio. This at least marks a welcome advance on some of the earlier accounts, crammed with clubroom stories and little else, but such biographical binaries (like Henry James's revelation that there were two Robert Brownings) describe a problem rather than proposing its solution, and Houfe makes little attempt to explain the contradictions in May's career. As sparing with language as he was in his draftsmanship, the artist rarely talked much about himself and clues to his divided personality need to be

sought in obscure corners and between the lines. One senses in his compulsive bids for affection (Elizabeth Pennell remembered nothing of his talk but the endless repetition of “Have a cigar!” “Have a whisky and soda!” “Have a drawing!”) and in his need to adopt a colourful persona for public consumption a driving insecurity which may partly result from his uncertain social position (his family had come down in the world and during his early time in London he had known real destitution) and partly from an anxiety about the permanence of his success (which may help to explain his ambition to get back to the stage and his unrealised late projects for branching out into the illustration of classic novels). Houfe misses an important hint, I think, when he fails to notice May’s remark to his friend and fellow-artist A. S. Hartrick: “My father was a drunkard and I’m a drunkard.” A disposition to alcoholism can be inherited and May’s suicidal recklessness with drink and with money has about it almost a fatalistic appearance, as though he had chosen to court a destiny to which he thought himself inevitably bound.

If *Phil May: His Life and Work* ultimately fails to resolve the enigma it presents, it is also deficient in other, more immediately apparent, ways. Houfe’s grasp of sentence-structure is, to put it kindly, intermittent and he is barely even on nodding terms with the semi-colon. His text is liberally scattered with supererogatory and irritating exclamation marks and he makes careless errors (like confusing May’s early patron W. H. Traill with the writer H. D. Traill). Much of his information is taken (sometimes almost *verbatim*) from earlier writers (notably from James Thorpe’s excellent monographs of 1932 and 1948 and from David Cuppleditch’s 1981 biography) and he is disappointingly cursory on May’s formative Australian experience. His remarks about individual drawings are sometimes misleading (his observation that the deeply poignant “A Curiosity in her Own Country” which depicts a dignified black woman and her baby being gawped at by intrusive Sydneysiders is “making fun of Aborigines” suggests that he hasn’t actually looked at the picture) and his general level of critical comment is at best pedestrian. All of this is partly offset by Houfe’s evident enthusiasm for his subject, but what really redeems the book is its wealth of illustrations – nearly seventy of them. You turn the pages in growing wonder at the panache with which a whole crowded world of city streets and pubs and music halls and markets has been intimately and sympathetically evoked, and you keep remembering Whistler’s verdict: “Black-and-white art is summed up in two words – Phil May.”

Robert Dingley
