

Adventures of a Paper Sleuth. HUGH P. MACMILLAN. Ottawa: Penumbra Press, 2004. 343 p. ISBN 1-894131-62-2.

Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" is one of only two stories in the canon of Sherlock Holmes that is narrated by Holmes rather than his faithful friend Dr. Watson. In it, Holmes describes his disdain

for the superficiality of Watson's accounts, accusing him of "pandering to popular taste."¹ Instead, Holmes relies on expository passages of dialogue interjected with brief observations to guide the reader toward the case's logical conclusion, revealed dispassionately by Holmes in the story's final scene. Although "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" is an enjoyable read, Holmes's tale lacks the sense of excitement created by Watson, "for whom each development comes as a perpetual surprise."² Hugh P. MacMillan, author of the recently published memoir, *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth*, suffers from a similar limitation in presenting his own archival adventures to a wider audience.

From 1964 to 1989, MacMillan served as Archives Liaison Officer for the Archives of Ontario, responsible for actively searching out and securing historically valuable papers from Ontario's past. *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* recounts highlights from his twenty-five years of exploits in this now-obsolete position. Unfortunately, for a man whose life and career was so full of adventure, MacMillan, like Holmes, is oddly unable to convey the excitement of the hunt or the thrill of discovery. Instead, he focuses on what must undoubtedly be of greater interest to him – the papers themselves. Much of *Paper Sleuth* is devoted to the stories behind the documents, expansive and admittedly engaging anecdotes that chronicle little-known individuals and events, such as consummate con artist Herbert ("Holy Herb") Wilson, impresario Tom Barnett, and Canada's last fatal duel. MacMillan's gregarious narrative style, with its loose rhythms and repetitive structure reminiscent of oral storytelling, often enlivens these fragments of history; however, MacMillan did not title his memoir *Adventures in Canadian History*. As an archivist, I had hoped to read more about the mechanics of paper sleuthing or about the author's working relationship with the Archives of Ontario, and was disappointed to discover that the only substantive discussion of his process is relegated to a single-page summary in Appendix 1 ("The MacMillan Method for Saving Canadian History"), which was written by David G. Anderson.

MacMillan's decision to separate the stories of the hunt from the details of the find is a significant flaw in the book's structure. It is also an odd choice for a book that presents itself as a bit of a detective story – a genre in which the narrative is as much about the act of investigation as it is about the solution. In only a few instances does MacMillan show his hand and describe his working methods. The story of French-Canadian entrepreneur and would-be canal builder Narcisse Cantin, is one example. Following up on a lead received from the head of Harvard University's School of Celtic Studies, MacMillan learned of Cantin's story and tracked down the owner of his

1 Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories Vol. II* (New York, 2003), p. 538.

2 Ibid., p. 539.

papers – Cantin’s grandson, Napoleon, a resident of Michigan. After making contact with Napoleon, MacMillan struggled for nearly five years to physically acquire the papers, faced with the donor’s indecision, busy schedule, illness, desire to sort through the records, and decision to lend out material from the collection to a researcher in another state. Even after finally meeting with the donor and loading his station wagon with as many boxes as it could hold, MacMillan was challenged by Canada Customs about the nature of the material he was bringing into the country, a challenge he successfully navigated after a two-hour debate. A story such as this rewards the reader with real insight into the keen research skills, knowledge of history, salesmanship, intuition, diplomacy, and bravado required of a successful paper sleuth. The book would have benefited from more of this kind of detail.

If MacMillan seems uninterested in revealing his sleuthing techniques, he is more enthusiastic about sharing the details of his own life and ancestry. *Paper Sleuth* opens with two chapters of autobiographical information: the first, a catalogue of work experiences and life events that was adapted from previously published material; the second, an accounting of MacMillan’s experiences as a crew member on a West Coast towboat, and as a canoeist recreating the voyages of the North West Company fur traders. Although these chapters provide insight into the makings of a successful paper sleuth, they feel disconnected from the rest of the book. Snippets of MacMillan’s family history are more successfully woven into the book’s thematically arranged chapters, primarily because his genealogical research was often intertwined with his paper-sleuthing activities. Nevertheless, even these stories can feel like digressions, included only because of the author’s belief that they “are worth committing to paper to keep them safe so people yet unborn can better understand why people in the past acted as they did” (p. 32).

Despite his struggles to develop a strong narrative thread from so many disparate strands, MacMillan succeeds in inspiring his readers to consider the value of an active acquisition strategy. He does not address the issue directly in the body of his memoir, but Appendix 4 of *Paper Sleuth* contains a selected list of the author’s acquisitions for the Archives of Ontario, including such noteworthy examples as the records of Samuel Peters Jarvis; surveyor, civil engineer, and politician Simon Dawson; the Bytown Road Company; and the Sudbury Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers Union Local 598. The number and quality of MacMillan’s finds underscore the value of actively seeking out, and if necessary, purchasing significant records to fill in gaps in archival holdings. The list also raises the question of what material is now being lost to obscurity or obliteration because of the inability of most archival institutions to fund and staff a dedicated acquisitions program. If it seems unlikely that the Canadian archival community will ever see a proliferation of Archival Liaison Officers in the tradition of Hugh P. MacMillan, we can at the very least celebrate his legacy and strive to emulate his passionate brand of archival

outreach to ensure that succeeding generations of Canadians remain, according to MacMillan's own mission statement, "vigilant in seeing to the preservation of written and pictorial records" (p. 329).

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