



HEC RAMSEY

An American Sherlock

David Hayes (Nashville Scholars of the 3 Pipe Problem)

British literature has many characteristics which we can follow from one story to another. None is more obvious than the character of the Knight Errant. We find him - and sometimes her - as far back as there are stories. Perhaps the best-known are the Knights of the Round Table. Some of you may recall the paper I wrote several years back which dealt with Holmes as a Knight Errant in that tradition. However, the tradition crossed over to the colonies and settled in America about the same time. The perfect place to find it is in the Wild West (though more likely in fiction than in fact).

American television loved the Wild West. Though many of its characters resolved their conflicts with gunplay, a strong second vein existed where the lead character thought his way out of a problem, only resorting to “less civilized methods” when all else failed. One of these was Hec Ramsey which ran in 1972-74. Produced by Jack Webb’s Mark VII Limited and described as “more Sherlock Holmes than Matt Dillon”, the main character stood in the gap between an older period where the important people were educated property owners with titles and the new important people who were property owners with little education and no title other than “gun owner”. As was the case in London, it was a time of transition when society must somehow negotiate what will remain from the previous period and what new things will be permitted. At times like those, it is up to the individual to decide who the “right man” is to help them make that decision.

Enter Hec Ramsey, a gunslinger turned lawman who traded in his six-gun for a single-action Army revolver. (It still fired a bullet but required a moment’s more thought.) He came to New Prospect (I’m serious), Oklahoma in 1905. Although some people applied the “Gould standard” (which had no real Baring on the plot), people did not know from where he came. He was like them but somehow better, able to move between the past and the future, between landed gentry and the regular guy. He knew the old criminal and the old crime, but also the new criminal and how he would be caught, not by targeted violence but by scientific method. He would have to understand the criminal psyche and the reasons behind the crime.

To this world, he brought fingerprinting equipment, magnifying lenses, scales, and other tools of the search. He also brought Harry Morgan to play Doc Amos Coogan.