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In Memoriam Susan Rice

On September 28, 2020, the world lost an outstanding Sherlockian, Susan Rice. ASH lost one of its dearest members, invested in 1981 as “Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations Upon the Segregation of the Queen.” She leaves behind her loving wife, ASH Mickey Fromkin, as well as uncounted friends.

The product of a loving, intellectual, and humorous family of teachers who gave Susan her first Canon, she initially encountered Sherlockians in Detroit through a chance meeting with R.G. Harris, of the Amateur Mendicant Society. He encouraged her enthusiasm and introduced her to Russell McLaughlin and Bill Rabe and, later, Gene Leeb.

She took up teaching, and formed a Sherlockian students club, The Trifling Monographs. Each member chose a name from one of Holmes’ writings, and Susan claimed for her own title Holmes’ *magnum opus*, which later would become her ASH investiture. Some of those students remained her lifelong friends.

Later, she lived for some time in Greece, which her friends were later reminded of by her ability to chat in Greek with staff in restaurants and shops, and by her ongoing love of antiquity. I remember one group shopping expedition, when we had to bully Susan into treating herself to a little engraved bronze ring from Greek antiquity she somehow didn’t feel entitled to. We knew she was well entitled.

Susan subsequently lived in Chicago, becoming friends with longtime Sherlockians such as Ely Liebow, John Nieminski, Bob Hahn, and Paul and Margaret Smedegaard. Her Sherlockian expertise changed the minds of many but not all the members of one prestigious male-only Chicago society; she passed its test and was made a member of the group, only to have her membership withdrawn after an immediate change in the officers of the club. In a happier vein, it may have been her time in Chicago that sealed her devotion to Sherlockian great Vincent Starrett. Susan was a devoted non-collector (and proud of it!), but made an exception for her shelves of Starrett’s works. Her book [The Somnambulist and the Detective: Vincent Starrett and Sherlock Holmes](#) (2000), a Musgrave Monograph, is an appreciation of Starrett’s many literary works and an invitation to today’s readers to discover and enjoy them.

Susan had glamour – that ability to attract people just to be with her. Her radiant smile, her beautiful flowing red hair, her distinctive use of jewelry, her ability to chat easily with anyone and to put a new acquaintance at ease. She always left us better than she found us

I first met Susan at the famed initial John Bennett Shaw weekend at Notre Dame University in 1977. (Actually, we must have met at that year’s Birthday Weekend but, embarrassingly, I forgot.) It would turn out to be the first of a grand succession of Sherlockian conferences, but none of us (not even Shaw) knew that lay in the future, and for us it seemed to be a magical never-to-be-repeated gathering. Susan, who had just started a new job, couldn’t get time off to

attend the daily sessions but took a train to join us each evening. Her buoyant personality soon made her a welcome part of the company. I was glad to have met her – little did I know how lucky I was and would be. She would attend many more Shaw workshops, and speak at them. In 2013 Susan and Vinnie Brosnan wrote and compiled (and published through his Sherlock in L.A. Press) a booklet titled The Sage of Santa Fe: Adventures and Public Life of John Bennett Shaw, to introduce JBS to a world of Sherlockians who may never have known him but who are the beneficiaries of his Sherlockian prosyletizing.

Susan moved to New York City in 1981 to be with Mickey (they had, inevitably, met at a Sherlockian event), each bringing a beloved black cat to the household. We gradually became aware that they were more than dear friends. Susan and Mickey became entrenched members of all the area Sherlockian societies, and regulars on their programs. Susan in later years confided to me with a blush that she had initially had doubts about the Adventuresses, but she had allowed herself to give us a try, and we won her over just as she won over us all. In the course of the year, she was invested as one of us, as was Mickey.

For forty years she kept ASH lively and edified with a bounty of toasts, talks, verse, and articles. I don't recall that she ever said No to a request for help. Vitally for me, I always knew that she was one of the few people I could call on at the last minute to fill in for a sudden cancellation. Her scholarship, wit, and generosity guaranteed it. You will find ample work by her in The Serpentine Muse from 1981 on, including toasts, verse, book reviews, accounts of Sherlockian events, speculative essays on the Canon, and personal recollections. Outside of ASH, Susan was generous with spoken and/or written contributions to many Sherlockian and Holmesian groups – too many to track down and list here.

One other useful contribution of Susan's to ASH gatherings: she retained her teacherly ability to quiet a room and hold all eyes – invaluable in restarting a meeting after a break. Also memorable, her good-natured acceptance of being known to be tone-dumb (her term: she could hear the right note, but not produce it!). She gamely performed the one-note (if we were lucky) “Doo-doo-doo-doooo” trumpet line for one of our songs.

Another big task that Susan and Mickey handled for ASH for many years was running ASH Wednesday, the very informal (and no program!) after-work gathering in midtown Manhattan on the first Wednesday of every month. The event had been dreamt up years earlier by M.E. Rich and run for a time by me, but when I married and sloped off to Baltimore, Susan and Mickey took on the task. ASH Wednesday is not only an enjoyable gathering for NYC-area Sherlockians apart from proper scion meetings, but it's a low-pressure way for novice Sherlockians to meet old hands and get to feel comfortable about the group, and there was no better welcomer than Susan. Before long, the January edition of ASH Wednesday became part of the Holmes Birthday Weekend, the first event for the earliest arrivers. As Susan's health began to give her trouble, she and Mickey secured a successor for ASH Wednesday, and Ira Matetsky has taken over care of the group.

There's not enough space here to list the many awards that came to Susan over the years, but one of the most gratifying – and best deserved – was the 1991 award of full membership in the Baker Street Irregulars by Thomas L. Stix, Jr. Susan was one of those first six women invested that

day, a highlight of a life filled with Sherlockian good works. She received the investiture “Beeswing” (as suggested by John Bennett Shaw) – a witty tip of the deerstalker to her apian investiture in the Trifling Monographs and ASH.

1991 also saw the publication of her book A Compound of Excelsior, a fascinating study of the beekeeping that fascinated Holmes in his retirement. With two bee-themed investitures and now a book on Canonical beekeeping, Susan should not have been surprised when well-wishers soon filled her and Mickey’s apartment with jars of exotic honey and bee-themed decorations and Susan’s jewelry box with bee jewelry (which in later years she distributed freely back to the Sherlockian world – I treasure mine).

As a member of the BSI, in addition to contributions to the yearly dinner program, she best helped the organization flourish by accepting the job of hosting the William Gillette Memorial Luncheon when Lisa McGaw, in ill health, gave it up in the late 1980s. The Gillette luncheon, founded in 1945, had under Lisa McGaw’s guidance become a yearly gathering simply for Sherlockians, male and female, BSI and not. It was a wonderful responsibility, and Susan – with Mickey – managed the wearying work of arrangements behind the scenes and the graceful job of welcoming their guests into the group. As with ASH Wednesday, as her health began to give her trouble, Susan looked for a successor, and just this year turned the Gillette luncheon over to an excellent new *doyenne*, Jenn Eaker.

In 2002 Susan was awarded the BSI Two-Shilling award for services to the Baker Street Irregulars (and got to write “2s” after her name in correspondence, which she rather enjoyed).

Both the BSI and ASH were beneficiaries of another special project of Susan’s, the writing of The BSJ Christmas Annual 2004 titled Dubious and Questionable Memories: A History of the Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes. Working from several banker’s boxes worth of papers of all sorts from a Principal Unprincipled Adventuress who never threw anything away, Susan compiled a detailed and appreciative history of the group, from the college girls encouraged by Irregular correspondents, through some lean and undirected years, to an unexpected evening with other longtime Sherlockian women, to the re-creation and prospering of a special sisterhood (the decision to admit men still lay in the future). Susan was at pains to show the contributions of scores of members to every aspect of the group, and did us proud.

A lesser but also quirky publication which Susan, Mickey, Roberta Pearson, and I collaborated on in 1982 is U is for Uffa, “An Alphabet of Women in the Canon,” a collection of short verses on Canonical subjects running from A to Z. It was composed as an entry in a competition run by The Scowrers and Molly Maguires and was lucky enough to see print.

Susan was a devotee of Shakespeare and as a young woman had frequently traveled from Detroit to the Stratford, Ontario Shakespeare festival. It was there that she developed a devotion to actor Christopher Plummer. Some of us were lucky enough to hear her recount the embarrassing but hilarious details of her encounter with him at one of the Julian Wolff Grolier Club cocktail parties. Many will remember Susan as an excellent raconteur. In all her best anecdotes, she made herself the butt of the joke, yet everyone, while laughing, ended up appreciating her the more for having navigated whatever ludicrous situation she’d encountered.

An opportunity to be actors themselves opened up for Susan and Mickey with a group of friends (many of them Sherlockians) at ZPPR Productions. They took many parts in stories recorded for radio broadcast in such series as Visit New Grimstead, Anyway and Little Chills. Some of the ZPPR members (Andrew Joffe, Sarah Montague, and Paul Singleton) have regularly entertained the Gillette Luncheon-goers - as the troupe The Friends of Bogie's on Baker Street - with brilliant Canonical skits.

Susan worked in the travel industry and her time at Chandris – later, Celebrity – Cruises gave her a rare opportunity to arrange for a series of Sherlockian cruising vacations. With the support of Mickey (of course), Dorothy Stix, M.E. Rich, and others) Susan made it possible for groups of Sherlockians to travel together and share talks and special onboard activities en route three times to Bermuda and once around the Western Caribbean. While ASH did not sponsor these cruises, many of us took advantage of these unique vacations. We Sherlockian travelers eagerly volunteered for the programs, which included participation for all. All the cruises were well-attended and overflowed with opportunities for acquaintances to become friends, for the shy to strut their stuff, for the overburdened to truly relax, and for all to make treasured memories.

This essay omits much, for Susan held a special place in the Sherlockian world. Utterly familiar with the Canon and able to tackle any topic. Welcoming to newcomers and quick to guide them to Sherlockian enjoyment. Hardworking and responsible. A sharp observer but a kind anecdotalist. Generous and good at friendship. No wonder we all flocked around.

Mickey and Susan had privately pledged their troth in 1981 and their union was known to all as one of the great Sherlockian marriages. In 2011 the laws of New York State changed to permit them to marry legally. They did so on November 19, 2011, at the Players Club on Gramercy Park, officiated by BSI Al Rosenblatt, surrounded by a rainbow-clad array of male and female attendants (many of whom still preserve our floral wreaths) and witnessed by a ballroom full of well-wishers. Their partnership continued to be an exemplar of Sherlockian generosity, hard work, and fun. Over the years their home was shared by three feline pairs: the initial two black cats, big gentle Baskerville & elegant Lucretia; siblings Victoria & Albert (with their little grey crowns); gentle grey Violet & and big orange Pips.

Only in the last few years did age begin to touch their lives, with a series of medical challenges that Susan and Mickey fought indomitably and lovingly. Until finally....

By chance Susan's birthday fell in early November, between those of Doré Nash and myself. The fact that Doré and I were five years younger than Susan led to some joint "round number" celebrations: Susan and Doré celebrating "Always '95" (45 + 50) in 1992, or the three of us celebrating 200 years (65 + 65 + 70) in 2012. We had hoped to host a gala "221" celebration during the 2019/2020 birthday year (72 + 72 + 77) but, alas, it was not to be, except in our imaginations, where now Susan will grow no older.