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Essentially English: Sherlock Holmes at the BBC

Richard Hewett

Introduction

There can be few literary characters more strongly associated with London than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Though he often made investigative sojourns into the English countryside, it is with the smog-filled, gas-lit streets of the Victorian and Edwardian capital that Holmes is most frequently associated; even today, when Holmes has been updated to the twenty-first century via Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-), London remains almost fetishistically associated with the detective, although the programme's iconography leans towards its more modern aspects such as the London Eye or the Swiss Re 'Gherkin'. As Elizabeth Evans has highlighted, the DVD blurb for the first series, while claiming Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock as 'a new sleuth for the 21st century' (2012: 111), also referred to the world's favourite detective emerging from the fog, thus reviving a peculiarly traditional image for the modern age.

Holmes' associations with London and his essential 'Englishness' are so deeply ingrained that even when the programme has been repurposed for American audiences, the detective has been portrayed almost exclusively as an English character played by a British actor. Those who have essayed the role for US television include Ronald Howard, Roger Moore, Geoffrey Whitehead, Ian Richardson, Michael Pennington, Edward Woodward, Patrick Macnee and Anthony Higgins. Holmes has also been played several times on American screens by Canadian Christopher Plummer and Canadian American Matt Frewer, making Larry Hagman and Charlton Heston the only

purely American incumbents; perhaps significantly, neither appeared more than once in the role on television.¹ Even the current US incarnation, CBS's *Elementary* (2012-), takes pains to emphasise the fact that Johnny Lee Miller's Holmes is an English eccentric who has relocated to America, though Watson (Lucy Liu) at least is now a native of New York.

Such casting and narrative decisions would seem to indicate an interest in maintaining Holmes' UK nationality as a unique selling proposition in the majority of screen adaptations. Despite this superficial concern with 'Englishness', however, over the years a number of British television productions have from the outset borne American sales firmly in mind, some even being specifically tailored to US audiences in terms of the versions aired. The various Granada productions mounted between 1984 and 1994, starring Jeremy Brett, went to great lengths to ensure period accuracy and (initially) fidelity to the source texts.² However, co-creator and producer Michael Cox's account of his work on the series, *A Study in Celluloid* (2011), reveals that a US pre-sale was a key factor with regard to funding (3), casting (Brett being an actor with a reasonably high profile on both sides of the Atlantic) and the selection of material for adaptation, with early series utilising only those stories which were in the public domain in both Britain and the US (8).³ More recently, Lynette Porter has highlighted the fact that screenings of *Sherlock* on America's Public Broadcasting System (PBS) have required not only edits to accommodate running length, but also the recording of alternate dialogue, 'specific cultural references [having] been filmed differently instead of overdubbed' (2013: 123).⁴ Citing resistance on the part of *Sherlock*'s creators to CBS's proposed US version, Porter points out that 'the decisions of multiple networks about two television series indicate the popularity of Sherlock Holmes but also

introduce questions about how “British” Sherlock Holmes must be in order to be accepted or understood by American audiences’ (ibid.: 127).

As shown by Elizabeth Evans, *Sherlock* brings together two traditions of modern ‘quality television’: ‘the US tradition of the glossy, psychological deep and complex drama and the UK tradition of “prestige” through heritage and literary adaptation. This combination in turn reflects the BBC’s attempts to maintain its public service purposes while competing in a global television market’ (Evans 2012: 111). Such considerations, however, have not always been so close to the hearts of British television producers, for whereas *Sherlock*’s creators ‘anticipated an international audience of newcomers as well as a homegrown Holmes fanbase’ (Porter 2013; 114), previous BBC versions took little account of US tastes. Between 1965 and 1968 the Corporation produced two series of Holmes adaptations, the first starring Douglas Wilmer, and the latter Peter Cushing, each co-starring Nigel Stock as Doctor Watson. As the original files at the BBC’s Written Archives Centre reveal, these series were at pains to remain faithful to Conan Doyle’s original stories, due largely to contractual stipulations on the part of the Doyle estate (Hewett 2015), and were desirous of overseas sales. However, despite the exhortations of the estate’s representatives, they actively resisted any form of American input at the creative level. Though little remembered today outside the circles of Holmes aficionados, these productions offer a fascinating case study of the BBC’s approach and attitude to overseas sale in the pre-globalisation era. Whereas today the Corporation has its own digital and satellite channel, BBC America, funded by advertising and aimed specifically at an American audience, in the 1960s the attention paid to the United States was relatively negligible. Compared with the later Granada Television productions, the 1960s Holmes series failed to make a significant impact overseas, not

being shown in the US despite high ratings and a generally positive audience reaction in Britain. This was at a time when independent television productions such as *The Saint* (ITV, 1962-9) and *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961-9) were making significant inroads abroad, providing a stark contrast with the BBC's inability – or unwillingness – to market successfully a property with such potential international appeal. Based on original archive research, this article examines the various causes and effects relating to the BBC's resistance to American input into their Sherlock Holmes series, and the extent to which this reflected broader attitudes towards the US television market.

Sherlock Holmes and BBC Television

The first televised series of Sherlock Holmes in Great Britain (and, indeed, the world)⁵ arrived in 1951 in the shape of six live episodes starring Alan Wheatley and produced by the BBC between October and December. These were, however, never intended for international consumption, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's son Adrian having only reluctantly granted permission for the programmes to be made, and then only on the understanding that all content be confined to Great Britain.⁶ Introduced in 1947, the process of telerecording (making 35mm filmed transcripts by pointing a camera at a transmitting monitor during broadcast) was still primitive, and these programmes were almost certainly not recorded or retained in any form.

In 1964, following a well-received production of 'The Speckled Band' as part of the BBC's anthology series *Detective* (1964; 1968-9), plans for a series of twelve Holmes adventures went ahead, with Douglas Wilmer and Nigel Stock retained as Holmes and Watson. Rights to an initial five episodes had already been purchased and the Corporation now took up their option on a further eight stories.⁷ Whereas 'The Speckled Band' had been recorded on videotape at the BBC's Gosta Green studios in

Birmingham,⁸ the series would be produced at the state of the art Television Centre in Wood Lane. Though still a multi-camera production, episodes were to be recorded directly onto 35mm film rather than videotape for domestic transmission, and to 16mm film for overseas sale, a method earlier utilised by series producer David Goddard on *Kipling* (BBC, 1964).⁹

The decision to record directly onto film would seem to indicate that the Corporation already had overseas sales in mind. While 16mm was not regarded as suitable for domestic transmission (McNaughton 2014: 392), this was the format usually employed for overseas export, since the UK's 405 line PAL videotape¹⁰ was incompatible with the 525 line NTSC system used in the US. The fact that the BBC was experimenting around this time with this 'videofilm' or 'Video Film Recording' system (ibid.: 395) demonstrates a growing awareness of the potential of sales to the overseas market, offering a better quality picture than telerecording or even the 35mm film recording favoured by independent companies such as ITC. Options on the contract signed in January 1964 with Henry E. Lester, Adrian Conan Doyle's legal representative, included the television rights to Canada and the US (something that the estate would later attempt to reverse) and, given the international popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories, the BBC would have been remiss to ignore such a sizeable market. Mindful of this, Lester was quick to suggest all-film (that is single camera) production, as opposed to the proposed electronic recording, and he strongly urged BBC Head of Copyright, R.G. Walford, to investigate the possibility of co-production with a US company.¹¹ Walford reported to Elwyn Jones, Head of Television Series Drama, that Lester had also offered the BBC the twelve Sherlock Holmes films made in the 1940s by Universal Studios and starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, for television

screening.¹² According to Walford, Lester claimed that he was on the verge of leasing the Rathbone films to Granada Television, but had held back so as not to interfere with their programming.¹³ Lester also pointedly claimed that ‘a number of enquiries for rights to a Sherlock Holmes series’ had been received from the United States: a possible attempt to force the BBC’s hand in the matter of co-production. On 3 March Dennis Scuse, General Manager of BBC Television Enterprises, wrote to Walford:

It would be interesting to know whence came the enquiries in the United States concerning the series. If this were a network or a reputable film company then we might consider a co-production. I should, however, say that we would require a 90% guarantee that the series had been sold to a network. Frankly ... I am extremely doubtful about a network sale; the previous television film series made by a British company were very bad. I saw them – and I still doubt that a series based on Sherlock Holmes would be strong enough to hold a network in the current American television atmosphere.¹⁴

It is not clear which productions Scuse is referring to here, although possibly he has in mind *Fabian of the Yard* (BBC, 1954-56), which was made entirely on 35mm film and had been screened by CBS in America as *Patrol Car*. More recently, *The Third Man* (1959-65) was a single camera collaboration with National Telefilm Associates and Prestige Productions. Despite the modest success this programme had enjoyed, few other such productions had been mounted: a possible indication of the BBC’s reluctance to appeal directly to an American market. A few days after Scuse’s memo David Goddard wrote to Jones, strongly objecting to the idea of the BBC screening the Universal films:

My own feeling on this film series was one of outrage. It was a war-time ‘flying the flag’ type of series with Holmes and Watson playing the leading parts in Hollywood’s impression of ‘bomb happy’ Britain. Therefore in my opinion it would be a grave mistake for either BBC1 or BBC2 to transmit any of these films while we are considering adaptations of the authentic stories.¹⁵

Goddard's reluctance to place his production in competition with the Rathbone films, which he clearly regarded as being unsuitable because they were geared to American tastes, was shared by R.G. Walford, who explained to Henry Lester: 'These films were ... portraying to some extent Hollywood's impression of war-time Britain which is rather different from what we aim at in our series.'¹⁶ It should be borne in mind here that, although the Rathbone film series had ended eighteen years before, it had made a significant impact on audiences in Britain and America. Indeed, despite his best efforts, Rathbone had been unable to shake off the mantle of the great detective, only reluctantly returning to the role for 'The Adventure of the Black Baronet' (CBS, 1953) on American television. Around the time that the 1965 series was going into production, the BBC was also considering an anthology of adaptations of Doyle's non-Holmes stories, and Lester's suggestion that they be hosted by 'the ageing Basil Rathbone,' which was indicative of the extent to which the actor was still associated with Holmes, was not well received by Jones.¹⁷ Goddard and Walford's negative reaction to the Rathbone films could, therefore, also be read as a straightforward case of branding: a desire to distinguish their new product from a popular series which still lingered in the public's memory. Regarding the possibility of American co-production, however, Walford's statement to Lester was more equivocal: 'The cost of making film versions would be, as you know, considerably greater and we would not want to incur it unless we were quite certain of a major United States sale.'¹⁸ This would seem to indicate that the BBC was not averse in principle to the idea of making a single camera film production, but was only prepared (perhaps naturally) only to pay the increased costs of such a production if assured in advance of US revenue via a network sale.

Despite this not entirely encouraging note, Lester moved ahead with his efforts to secure a US deal, arranging for two representatives of Screen Gems, a subsidiary of Columbia Pictures, to visit Scuse. Screen Gems were no strangers to British television, having previously collaborated with Sydney Box Productions on *Ivanhoe* (ITV, 1958), which had launched Roger Moore as a major television star. On 12 June 1964 Scuse reported to Walford that:

they expressed some interest in a possible film series but appeared to be luke warm [*sic*] if the project was to be taped electronically. I have a feeling that ... they would want a fair amount of say in casting, production and, more importantly perhaps the slant which would of necessity, in their view, need to be towards the American market, rather than towards British domestic.¹⁹

At Lester's request, Scuse sent a copy of *Detective's* 'The Speckled Band' to Screen Gems for a New York screening. However, Scuse stressed to Walford that he was anxious to avoid 'a situation where the Domestic Service find themselves committed to a film series which they don't want, rather than an electronic series which they would prefer.'²⁰ This attitude is natural enough on the part of a public service broadcaster such as the BBC, whose primary concern would be its home audience. In addition, the American demand for single-camera film drama did not chime with the Corporation's modus operandi. Opened only four years earlier, Television Centre was equipped primarily for multi-camera, electronic production, the filming which took place at its Ealing Studios usually providing only brief inserts for studio productions which were otherwise entirely videotaped.

On 16 June Walford wrote to Jones, protesting Lester's continuing insistence on US co-production: 'Surely you would not want an American company having a say in casting, production and slanting of the programme towards the American market,

particularly in view of the immense success of the first programme due largely to its having been so quintessentially English?’²¹ The following day, *Sherlock Holmes* story editor John Gould supported Walford’s stance:

Any series in which an American company had a say ... would inevitably mean that Mr Lester would have such a say, and I believe that this could be disastrous. I am also convinced from what Mr Lester has said to us that he wishes to be involved in these matters, but that any interference from him would be totally unnecessary. As you say, the success of the programme will depend very largely on it being essentially English. We can always ask Mr Lester’s opinion, just so long as we are not bound to act on it.²²

Ultimately, Elwyn Jones adopted a ‘wait and see’ approach:

There is no doubt in my mind that we should have to hold complete control on this project, on the other hand I have no theoretical objection to making it a filmed series if there should suddenly be lots of money about. It would be amusing if we were for once able to insist upon our own terms with the Americans. After all, our rights in this project are unassailable.²³

This correspondence indicates two clear attitudes on the Corporation’s part: a firm belief that Holmes’ much-prized ‘Englishness’ would automatically be compromised by any US input; and an acknowledgement that such involvement would be required (on a financial level, at least) in order to facilitate the expense of single camera film production. Jones’ comments reveal an implicit resentment of American influence, despite a tacit acknowledgement of the need for investment and the desirability of sales abroad. This consideration was clearly still in the minds of the production team in early September when John Gould informed writer Giles Cooper that ‘the sales potential overseas, particularly in America, is high. Could you therefore incorporate the usual number of commercial breaks, at the usual places?’²⁴

In November Lester reported to Walford that his attempts to interest Screen Gems had proved unsuccessful, though he had taken up negotiations elsewhere. It would seem, however, these came to nought, and *Sherlock Holmes* ultimately became a multi-camera electronic production, recording directly to film for most episodes.²⁵ As Lester predicted, the resulting programme failed to find a US audience, although its faithful interpretations of Conan Doyle's tales proved popular enough in the UK to warrant a repeat screening and, after a hiatus of three years, a second series.

The extent to which the BBC was justified in its resistance to Henry Lester's exhortations is debatable. The 1965 *Sherlock Holmes* series' fidelity to Conan Doyle's original stories is considerable, a result both of the creative impulses of its producer and stars and the contractual limitations imposed by the Conan Doyle estate (Hewett 2015). What form the series might have taken had Lester's exhortations borne fruit is perhaps best hinted at by the feature film *A Study in Terror* (1966), produced by Lester's company, Sir Nigel Films, a year after the BBC series aired. While it borrows lines of dialogue from various Conan Doyle stories (it also includes the infamous 'Elementary, my dear Watson!', which in fact was never used in the originals), the film is most definitely non-canonical, the attempts by John Neville's Holmes to bring Jack the Ripper to justice owing more to the contemporaneous Hammer horror films. By comparison, the BBC series was the height of textual fidelity. Despite this – and the occasional visual innovation²⁶ – the 1965 television series' multi-camera set-up was unlikely to compete with the 35mm single camera film employed by contemporaries such as *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961-69), at this point still in black and white but poised to secure a lucrative deal with ABC.

Sensing that the BBC was either unable or unwilling to mount a production that would prove palatable to US tastes, Lester now began working to revise the 1964 contract which had granted the Corporation series rights in America. On 11 June 1965, Walford reported to Scuse that Lester ‘would very much like the BBC to renounce its rights to sell the programme in America and to let him start afresh and make a new contract for the disposal of American television rights quite independently of our series.’²⁷ Walford counselled that, if the only prospect of sales in the US was ‘confined to small stations’, Scuse would be wise to accede to Lester’s request: ‘In other words I think we should only refuse it if we are fairly certain of substantial financial reward coming to us from sales in America.’²⁸ The issue came to a head in a meeting at Threshold House between Lester, Scuse and Walford in September 1965, for which the latter took the minutes. As reported by Walford, Lester’s case was that 20th Century Fox and ABC ‘had recently announced that they would make a television film series about Sherlock Holmes next year for which the scripts had apparently been written.’²⁹ Lester also revealed that the Mirisch film company intended to make a film, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, to be directed by Billy Wilder in 1966 (though this only came to fruition five years later). Scuse countered that ‘the syndication market in America was not negligible and he also foresaw the possibility of selling BBC telerecordings to the networks for late night showing or for summer replacements.’³⁰ From these comments it is clear that Scuse was not aiming particularly high in terms of his intended US market, and his subsequent statement that ‘he himself had already expended money ... in connection with overseas sales’ would, in the light of Walford’s earlier advice, seem designed purely to obtain ‘some “recompense” in this respect.’³¹ In the event, the BBC ultimately agreed in principle to

to release its rights for the USA and Canada (apart possibly from rights in French for French-speaking Canada) in consideration of Henry Lester undertaking in general terms that when the new American television series of 39 50-minute films was made the BBC should have first refusal of rights in respect of the United Kingdom.

Although the proposed Fox/ABC series never in fact materialised, it seems possible that this renunciation of rights went ahead, although no further paperwork relating to the subject remains in the files. When the series returned in 1968, its new producer requested an 'extension' of rights to the US and Canada,³² which could indicate either that the BBC had indeed renounced its control in these countries or that the rights had been retained for certain territories and were now to be enlarged.

But by this time there had been a number of changes, not the least of which was the series title: *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes*. More immediately noticeable, however, was the departure of lead actor Douglas Wilmer, who refused the BBC's request for a reduced episode turnaround of just ten days (Wilmer, cited in Weller 1990: 4). After initial approaches to *A Study in Terror's* John Neville and then Eric Porter, the role eventually went to Peter Cushing, who had previously played Holmes in Hammer Studios' *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959). In terms of US sales, this could be seen as something of a coup; Cushing's regular appearances in the Hammer and Amicus series, then enjoying reasonable success Stateside, made him a more familiar face to US viewers, although the switch in actors would doubtless prove confusing. However, personnel changes were not limited to the cast alone. Although former story editors John Gould and Anthony Read returned to pen several episodes, script editing (as the job was now known) was handled by John Barber before Donald Tosh took over for the majority of the run. In addition, due to original series producer David Goddard having left the BBC in 1965, Australian émigré William Sterling now

took the helm. Arguably the most important of the behind-the-scenes changes, this appointment signified a sea change in style, Sterling instructing his directors to watch the Easter Monday television screening of *Psycho* (1960), ‘as it is a starting point for my production approach to *Sherlock Holmes*.’³³

Sterling’s more macabre re-conceptualisation of the series also included an intended switch to colour recording and a host of international guest stars: a memo from his assistant to Head of Television Series Drama Andrew Osborn in April 1968 mentions, among others, such luminaries as George Sanders, Orson Welles, Joseph Cotton, Hayley Mills, Curt Jurgens, Honor Blackman and Hume Cronyn, adding that ‘Susannah York, Anne Baxter and Ruth Roman are all interested.’³⁴ The same missive also expressed the hope that Osborn had obtained permission from the estate to repeat the episodes in 1970. This was due to the fact that BBC1 was not scheduled to begin colour transmission until January of that year, meaning that, even if made in colour, the series would initially be transmitted in black and white in the UK. In the event, the go-ahead for colour recording was given in May 1968,³⁵ and twelve of the sixteen episodes would indeed be repeated in colour between July and September 1970.³⁶ Sterling’s ambitious casting plans were, however, largely unrealised, although one at least of his chosen actors, Daniel Massey, appeared in the series opener, ‘The Second Stain’. This diminution in the scale of Sterling’s production would seem to have been due primarily to a vastly reduced budget, the series already having an overspend of £130,000 by the time the first two episodes were completed (Barnes 2011: 246). Sterling had begun operations on the understanding that a far greater amount of filming was to be allocated than on the 1965 series, and Donald Tosh subsequently claimed he had to significantly re-work scripts which had been commissioned on the understanding that they would

comprise 90 per cent film (cited in Barnes 2011: 247) in order to make them suitable for studio recording. In the event, the use of film on the 1968 series is easily outweighed by videotape, the closing episode 'The Blue Carbuncle' notably recreating a Victorian street market within the cramped confines of the studio as opposed to going out onto location.

Little information is provided in the BBC's files regarding what would seem to have been a seriously reduced budget for *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes*, yet William Sterling's initial plans for the series – an all-colour, largely film production, featuring names known on either side of the Atlantic – indicate a clear interest in making it attractive to US broadcasters. In the event, while the series was sold to South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, it was deemed 'too violent' for American tastes (Barnes 2011: 249); conversely, in the UK it was roundly criticised by *The Daily Mail* for its attempts 'to crash the international market' (ibid.).

Though less information is contained in the BBC files with regard to plans for overseas sale, it is possible that the initial intention was to produce something that could compete with US programming on its own terms. The decision to option a further fifteen stories ('The Hound of the Baskervilles' being split into two episodes) is an interesting one, the original contract having specified that, following the batches of five and eight stories which the BBC had already purchased, additional stories would be made available in a third batch of thirteen, and a final group of 26.³⁷ It is possible that the addition of two stories to the thirteen already agreed took into account the fact that 'A Scandal in Bohemia' and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* were also included in the package, neither of which had been available at the time the original contract was signed. At this time it was common practice at the BBC to ensure that the total number

of instalments per series could be used to provide a season of broadcasting in the US, where 26 episodes were the norm.³⁸ Hence, the twelve episodes which made up 1965's *Sherlock Holmes*, when combined with *Detective's* 'The Speckled Band', could have provided half a season's worth of episodes in America. Had a second series been made with Douglas Wilmer in the lead role, a total of 26 episodes might conceivably have made *Sherlock Holmes* more marketable in the US, but the re-casting of the lead actor, combined with a switch to colour production and the change in tone for the second series, would have made the 1965 and 1968 productions more difficult to sell as a package, Nigel Stock's Doctor Watson being the only clear link.³⁹ Perhaps with this in mind, Osborn and Walford later began enquiries with Adrian Conan Doyle about the possibility of producing a further series of thirteen episodes, this time making use of his own tales from *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* (1954), which Doyle had co-authored with John Dickson Carr.⁴⁰ Ultimately, however, these came to nothing, and apart from various one-off productions and repeat screenings of the Rathbone films,⁴¹ Sherlock Holmes disappeared from British television until the launch of the Granada series in 1984.

When considering the extent to which the BBC's inability to capitalise on the US sales potential of their Sherlock Holmes series represented a failure of imagination or a lack of understanding of the international television market, it is necessary to place the programmes in historical context. While the US had become an increasingly important market from the late 1950s onwards, the BBC's forays into co-production were extremely rare when compared with those of ITV companies. Although the BBC anticipated ITV's importation of US programming in 1954 with its first US acquisition, *I'm the Law* (syndicated, 1953), it was shows such as *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951-59) and *I*

Love Lucy (CBS, 1951-7), screened by ITV from 1955, which helped to make American programming a British broadcasting staple. It was also ITV which pioneered the export of British television product to America, via *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (ITV, 1955-9) and *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot* (ITV, 1956-7), the latter becoming the first UK series to be produced in colour after finding success on NBC. However, despite the stream of ITC productions made throughout the 1960s and early 1970s with an eye to overseas sale, comparatively few were long-running network successes, many lasting just one season, and some being shown only in syndication,⁴² factors which may well have influenced BBC thinking at the time. As noted by Jeanette Steemers, ‘American investment in British programming has always been cyclical and fleeting’ (2011: 3), and UK espionage thrillers such as *The Prisoner* (ITV, 1967-8), which chimed with Cold War US audiences in the 1960s, began to lose their audience by the end of the decade as home-grown product like *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (NBC, 1964-68) and *Mission Impossible* (CBC, 1966-73) took their place (ibid.: 4). From this perspective, the BBC’s reluctance to become involved with American producers might better be read as justifiable caution. It should also be remembered that, unlike ITV, the BBC was not primarily a commercial enterprise, and thus overseas sales could not be an over-riding priority, no matter how desirable.

The difficulty in finding a US audience was also one of timing. From January 1971, a ready market would be provided in the States for BBC (and later ITV and Channel 4) productions via the PBS series *Masterpiece Theatre* (1971-2008),⁴³ which provided a home primarily for period television adaptations and biographies. Programmes transmitted on this strand included *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (BBC, 1970), *Elizabeth R* (BBC, 1971) and *I, Claudius* (BBC, 1976), while today it provides a

home for *Silk* (BBC, 2011-14) and *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-). It was the involvement of *Masterpiece Theatre* which helped to make Granada's Sherlock Holmes productions a success in America, its then producer, Joan Wilson, also being the wife of star Jeremy Brett. More recently, it was on *Masterpiece Mystery!* that *Sherlock* found its initial US audience, network transmission proving elusive for a programme with such an atypical format (three 90-minute episodes per series, produced on average every eighteen months). Established as a result of the success enjoyed by *The Forsyte Saga* (BBC, 1967) on National Educational Television (NET) (Comstock 1991: 33-35), *Masterpiece Theatre* arrived slightly too late for the BBC's Holmes output; had the timing been different, the series might have found a US audience which could have inspired further production. However, while giving US audiences 'a glimpse of British video drama at its best' (Head and Sterling 1987: 319), *Masterpiece* in no way competes with the various offerings of network television in terms of viewership, being a 'minority outlet' (Stemmers 2011: 1). Historically, the majority of Britain's US television successes have been via the sale of formats 'targeted at mass audiences' (ibid.), as opposed to the quality (yet niche, in US terms) literary and crime dramas which feature on PBS.

Another factor is the pervading attitude of the time at home in Britain. In the modern era of globalisation, when the thoughts of executives behind programmes such as *Sherlock* and the relaunched *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2005-) almost inevitably turn to overseas marketability (*Doctor Who*'s 2010 US publicity junket having been followed by a 'world tour' series launch in the summer of 2014), it is easy to forget that Britain in the 1960s was enjoying an almost unprecedented economic boom. Prime Minister Harold McMillan's 1957 declaration that 'Britons have never had it so good' was still

being borne out: in the period between 1951 and 1973, real output and output per worker increased at a faster pace than at any time since the Industrial Revolution and unemployment was low. The fact that Britain's main economic competitors at the time – prime among whom were the United States – were making 'even greater progress' (Feinstein 1994: 95-96) was barely heeded. The pervading attitude of the time was one, if not of complacency, then certainly an abiding satisfaction with the economic status quo.

In this light, the BBC's attitude towards US sales is perhaps easier to understand. The Corporation's resistance to any form of American 'interference', while effectively relegating the programme to the second rank abroad in terms of production values, was clearly based on the view that this would not prove an insurmountable barrier to overseas sales, and the fact that the 1968 episodes found an audience on other continents to some extent supports this. What would today seem like a short-sighted approach to the exploitation of a valuable property in fact reflects more general attitudes during a time of domestic prosperity.

Conclusion

The BBC's determination to preserve the 'Englishness' of its 1960s Sherlock Holmes stories, while on the surface a somewhat defensive resistance to potentially profitable collaboration with American television, becomes more understandable when viewed in historical perspective. Britain at this time was enjoying an extended period of economic growth and self-sufficiency, and was largely indifferent to the even more impressive expansion taking place abroad. In addition, the success then being enjoyed by the BBC's commercial rivals, while impressive, ultimately proved short-lived. However, from a modern perspective the long-term negative effects of such thinking cannot be

denied. Aside of the loss of any potential US audience (unthinkable in the era of BBC America), the greatest impact of the Corporation's decision not to co-produce has been on archive preservation and – arguably correspondingly – these productions' place in the television canon. Today, most of even the poorest-performing ITC productions remain intact in the archives. Many have been released on VHS and DVD (in some cases on more than one occasion), and have also enjoyed occasional repeat screenings in the UK.⁴⁴ By contrast, only six of the sixteen Peter Cushing episodes are known still to exist, and while these have received DVD release at home in Britain, the Douglas Wilmer series (from which only two episodes are wholly or partly missing) was, ironically, available to purchase only in America until the BFI's March 2015 release. Compared to the later, all-film Granada series, which has been retained in its entirety and even received a pristine BluRay release, the BBC's productions are neglected relics of a bygone era, doomed to obscurity by their insistence on producing an English Holmes for a domestic English audience. Although the Wilmer and Cushing series feature many of the stories later adapted for the Jeremy Brett episodes, offering a fascinating opportunity to compare the vicissitudes of multi-camera video and single camera film production, it is the latter which remain a fixed point in the minds of television viewers, much as the earlier Rathbone films continue to do (Leitch 2007). Despite the fact that the opening episode of the Cushing series was the highest rated BBC programme up to that point (Earnshaw 2001: 60), today the 1960s productions are largely ignored, even by television historians.⁴⁵ That is a historical gap which this article attempts in some small way to redress, yet the question remains of whether, had the BBC entered into American co-production as the Conan Doyle estate desired, the longevity of the series might have been ensured – albeit at the perceived cost of Holmes' 'essential Englishness'.

Notes

¹ Hagman starred in the parodic TV movie *The Return of the World's Greatest Detective* (NBC, 1976), playing a deluded modern day motorcycle cop who believes himself to be the fictional sleuth; Charlton Heston took the lead in *The Crucifer of Blood* (TNT, 1991), reprising his earlier stage performance on Broadway (1978) and in London (1979) and Los Angeles (1980).

² As highlighted by Thomas Leitch (2009), Michel Cox (2011) and Tom Steward (2012), some later stories, such as *The Master Blackmailer* (ITV, 1992), *The Eligible Bachelor* (ITV, 1993) and *The Last Vampyr* (ITV, 1993), included a substantial amount of material not deriving from Doyle's texts, and early adaptation 'The Greek Interpreter' (ITV, 1985) added an entirely new last act.

³ The copyright system in the US, by which rights extended 75 years after publication, meant that the post-1906 stories were not available (Cox 2012: 8). Until 1987 the production team limited themselves to material published before 1906, but an agreement reached with the Doyle estate meant that eventually they were also able to adapt the later books (ibid: 118). It was at this point that Granada switched to 35mm film production, 16mm not being acceptable to the major American TV networks (ibid: 108-9).

⁴ For example, in 'The Blind Banker', the line 'They gave me an ASBO, Sherlock!' is replaced with 'They gave me community service, Sherlock!' (Porter 2013: 122-3).

⁵ Single drama *The Three Garridebs* had been broadcast by NBC in November 1937, while 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band' was later transmitted as part of CBS's *Your Show Time* in March 1949.

⁶ Memo from M.T. Candler, BBC Head of Copyright, 20 September 1951, BBC WAC/T5/460/1.

⁷ Letter from R.G. Walford, Head of Copyright, 28 July 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

⁸ Memo from Programming Services Assistant, Midland Region, 24 March 1964, BBC WAC/T5/2359/1.

⁹ Memo from John Gould, 6 July 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1. Other programmes which employed this technique included *Maigret* (BBC, 1960-63), and later *Adam Adamant Lives!* (BBC, 1966-67).

¹⁰ The 405 line system was gradually being superseded around this time by 625 line PAL, which was used for the new BBC2 channel in Ultra High Frequency (UHF) from 1964.

¹¹ As reported in a memo from R.G. Walford, 3 February 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

¹² The first two films in which Rathbone played Holmes, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939) and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939), had been made by 20th Century Fox, and differed from the Universal series in that they were period adaptations, whereas Universal opted to update Holmes and Watson to the WWII era.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Memo from Dennis Scuse, General Manager, Television Enterprises, 3 March 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

¹⁵ Memo from David Goddard, 6 March 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

¹⁶ Letter from R.G. Walford, 19 March 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

¹⁷ Letter from Elwyn Jones, dictated to Elena Patrick, 24 August 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.

- ¹⁸ Letter from R.G. Walford, 19 March 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ¹⁹ Memo from Dennis Scuse, 12 June 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Memo from R.G. Walford, 16 June 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ²² Memo from John Gould, 17 June 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ²³ Memo from Elwyn Jones, Head of Television Series Drama, 17 June 1964, BBC WAC/T5/2359/1.
- ²⁴ Memo from John Gould, 4 September 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ²⁵ The production was forced to record on videotape in Weeks 49 and 51 of 1964 for 'The Illustrious Client' and 'The Beryl Coronet'; memo from Brian Batchelor, 23 October 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1915/1. No information is provided about why this change was necessary, although Batchelor's recording request forms show that it was only the 35mm domestic recording that was affected for these episodes; the 16mm overseas film transcript went ahead as usual.
- ²⁶ The episode 'The Red-Headed League' features some particularly innovative set-ups to create a filmic impression of temporal ellipses and compressions within the limitations of the multi-camera studio.
- ²⁷ Memo from R.G. Walford, 11 June 1965, BBC WAC/T5/1907/2.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Minutes by R.G. Walford, 24 September 1965, BBC WAC/T5/1907/2.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Memo from William Sterling's assistant, 22 April 1968, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ³³ Memo from William Sterling, 9 April 1968, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ³⁴ Memo from William Sterling's assistant, 22 April 1968, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ³⁵ Memo from Brian Batchelor, Organiser Television Series Drama, 13 May 1968, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ³⁶ The episodes not repeated, and therefore only ever transmitted in black and white, were: 'The Second Stain'; 'The Greek Interpreter'; 'Black Peter'; and 'The Blue Carbuncle', although the latter has since been released on DVD in the UK in its colour version.
- ³⁷ Memo from R.G. Walford, 15 January 1964, BBC WAC/T5/1907/1.
- ³⁸ Memo from Andrew Osborn, 4 August 1969, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ³⁹ To add to the confusion, supporting characters such as Inspector Lestrade were also re-cast in the 1968 series, Peter Madden being replaced by William Lucas. However, Madden reappeared playing an entirely different character in the 1968 episode 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery'.
- ⁴⁰ Memo from R.G. Walford, 19 June 1969, BBC WAC/T5/1907/3.
- ⁴¹ *Classics Dark and Dangerous: Silver Blaze* (ITV, 1977), and a four-part serialisation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (BBC, 1982).
- ⁴² *The Baron* (ITV, 1966-67) and *The Persuaders!* (ITV, 1971-72) were either pulled mid-run due to poor US ratings or switched to syndication, while *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (ITV, 1967-68) and *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* (ITV 1969-70) were syndication only, the latter being re-titled *My Partner the Ghost*.
- ⁴³ Since 2008, the series has been re-branded as *Masterpiece* and divided into three strands: *Masterpiece Classic*, *Masterpiece Mystery!* and *Masterpiece Contemporary*.
- ⁴⁴ By way of illustration, both US success *The Saint* and syndication flop *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)* have been released on VHS (by Polygram) and twice on DVD (first

by Carlton, as separate discs, and subsequently as box sets by Network). Each has been repeated on ITV4 as recently as 2013 and 2010, respectively.

⁴⁵ Scant attention has been paid in the various edited collections which have emerged in the wake of *Sherlock*, aside of Tom Steward's brief assertion that the 1960s series 'were criticized by fans (who were often cast members) for producers' lack of detailed knowledge of the Conan Doyle stories' (2012: 141).

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