

Book Reviews

The Moor by Laurie R King

When first I heard about this novel the notion of Sherlock Holmes having married the much younger woman who has replaced an elderly Watson as his assistant seemed unlikely. I could almost hear the sound of the Sherlockians revolving gently in their comfy chairs. To have Baring-Gould introduced as Sherlock's Godfather and life-long friend seemed likewise destined to cause heart murmurs among the readership of this magazine. Relax Ladies and Gentlemen - it works!

The Moor is a harsh mistress and a fickle friend - but she can be a delightful companion. Like Sabine Baring-Gould I fell in love with her as a teenager and, during school holidays, explored her alone and on foot. She was the reason I went to work in Devon and, now I've moved away, I return to her as often as possible. Dartmoor is, without doubt, one of the most strongly drawn characters in this book. It is a great achievement that Laurie King has captured her brooding personality as successfully as Baring-Gould did in his writing and to a degree that Conan Doyle never managed in 'Hound of the Baskervilles'.

In 'The Moor' Laurie King has achieved a dynamic balance between three leading characters. Firstly her heroine, Mary Russell, young wife of Sherlock Holmes, a tall, bespectacled Oxford academic in her twenties. Secondly the character of Dartmoor herself and finally Sabine Baring-Gould. I omit Sherlock Holmes from this list because he never quite comes to life as the others do and does not grow far beyond the constraints that Conan Doyle placed on him.

The plot is simple and well constructed. Sherlock has been called to Devon by Baring-Gould to investigate a haunting and suspicious death involving the appearance of Lady Howard and a spectral hound. This was the story of the song 'My Lady's Coach', that Sabine's nurse, Mary Bickell sang to him and which can be found in 'Songs of the West'. Mary Russell is summoned by Holmes to help and to enable him to disappear from the narrative for long periods on an errand for Mycroft. Russell is thus freed to get to grips with the mystery while finding out at the same time about Baring-Gould and about Dartmoor and learning to appreciate both. Needless to say there is a crime involved and unexpected links to the earlier dog mystery. The climax brings the forces of good to a satisfying confrontation with the villains and Russell, of course, saves Holmes' life. An interesting mechanic of the storytelling is the use of Baring-Gould's own books as a way to introduce key elements of the plot, as well as for the chapter headings.

For me the plot was secondary to my interest in the characterisation. The picture of Baring-Gould that emerges is well drawn. King has done her homework and, like her heroine, has taken the time to soak up the atmosphere of Lewtrenchard and of Dartmoor. The novel is set in the closing months of 1923, a few weeks before Baring-Gould's death. The picture of the man that emerges is very credible and fits both with my knowledge and preconceptions. The descriptions of Lew Manor and its surroundings are good and, of course, one of the corpses makes its debut in the Quarry - It would have been a struggle to resist its appeal as a location for dark deeds.

The thanks given at the beginning of the book record that Laurie King sought the help of a number of members of the Society and its friends, including our President. It is obvious that she visited the area and took the time to read a number of the appropriate books written by Baring-Gould and to talk to people about him. This is obvious from the level of detail that emerges and I would have to say that I felt that, having read the book, I had got a better understanding of the man. There were a number of anecdotes that were new to me. There is also the underlying apocryphal belief that

Conan Doyle visited Baring-Gould at Lewtrenchard and conceived 'Hound of the Baskervilles' during that visit.

So! Did I enjoy the book? Yes, though the second reading was necessary to overcome the basic unease that I started with. Would I read another book by Laurie King? Yes, I would like, some time, to try the other books in this series, 'A Letter to Mary', 'A Monstrous Regiment of Women' and 'The Beekeeper's Apprentice'. Would I recommend members of the Society to read them? Yes! Beg, borrow or buy a copy. Is it great literature? No, but then neither was most of what SBG wrote and like his books in their time it's excellent entertainment. Now, how about that legend of Baring-Gould, George Bernard Shaw and 'Pygmalion' - but that's another story!

Martin Graebe

'The Moor' by Laurie R King is published by St Martin's Press, New York at \$23.95. It is not anticipated that it will be published in the UK for some time but you can buy it on the Internet through Amazon Books(www.amazon.com) at a discounted price that will trade off the cost of having it sent by air from the USA. For those who do not have Internet access you might try 'Murder One' on Charing Cross Road who have imported some copies for sale to discerning readers. I learnt this from an Internet site devoted to Mary Russell - 'The Beekeeper's Holmes Page' which can be found at www.goldennet/~rebeccaj/beekeepr.html

Through Flood & Flame

Very readable. Some superb caricatures. Of particular interest to members of the DA (Devonshire Association) as it is to a large extent autobiographical. I read it at one (long) sitting. Strongly recommended.

David Pugsley