

*The Wolfe Pack*  
*The Nero Wolfe*  
*Literary Society*

# Time Magazine

## The American Holmes

Friday, March 21, 1969

***NERO WOLFE OF WEST THIRTY-FIFTH STREET***  
by William S. Baring-Gould. 203 pages. Viking. \$5.50.

If there is anybody in detective fiction remotely comparable to England's Sherlock Holmes, it is Rex Stout's corpulent genius, Nero Wolfe. Like Holmes, Wolfe is coolly intellectual, fanatically thorough and precise, brilliantly epigrammatic; he is also a crotchety bachelor, gastronome, flower fancier and born actor. There is even a family resemblance between the two, considering Wolfe's physical likeness to Holmes' brother Mycroft.

Wolfe's hints about his origin place his birth in the early 1890s, and allude obscurely to the old Balkan kingdom of Montenegro. Holmes, after his final encounter with Professor Moriarty in Switzerland in 1891, is believed to have traveled through Italy. Is it possible that he ended up in Montenegro and solaced himself by having an affair—perhaps with his old flame, Opera Singer Irene Adler, who happened to be touring the Balkans? Egad! Do you suppose . . . ?

Circle for Fury. This farfetched theory of Wolfe's paternity is one of several learned but lighthearted speculations passed on by the late William S. Baring-Gould, who was creative director of TIME'S circulation and corporate education departments as well as a detective-novel buff. In his earlier Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street, Baring-Gould successfully employed the whimsical technique of treating a fictional character as a real person. The technique works as well in Nero Wolfe, largely because the character is such a rich one.

Baring-Gould lovingly dwells on Wolfe's eccentricities: abhorrence of physical activity (especially any prospect of having to leave his Manhattan brownstone on a case), relish for properly chilled beer (12 bottles a day), reliance on significant small gestures ( a tiny circle traced on a desk top with one finger indicates speechless fury). Wolfe's associates are brightly sketched, notably his slangy, hard-boiled legman Archie Goodwin, whose active role in and narration of Wolfe's Holmesian episodes ties them also to the U.S. tough-guy school of Hammett and Chandler. Even such quirks as Wolfe's penchant for recondite words like "gibbosity" and "usufructs" and for scrupulous vocabularies of all kinds are minutely documented.

Money Witness. Baring-Gould's literary detective work is clearly intended for confirmed Nero Wolfe fans. Since Wolfe books have sold an average of 20,000 copies each in hard-cover and there are 12 million of them in print in paperback, that makes for quite a sizable group. Still, not everybody can be interested in such minutiae as the diameter of the globe in Wolfe's office and the derivation of his special breed of albino orchids (from *Paphiopedilum lawrenceanum hyanum*).