

American Chemical Society (ACS), Sacramento Section – FALL SPEAKER

Chemistry in the Sherlock Holmes Stories

Nov. 2, Tuesday at 7:15 pm , Lillard Hall Room 201
Sacramento City College

Presenter: Dr. James O'Brien

Missouri State University



"Madam, you must stop painting your child's crib." These were the first words spoken by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to a woman who had brought her listless infant daughter to the Edinburgh Medical School in 1912. Doyle, like his creation Sherlock Holmes, had acute deductive powers. His diagnosis of lead poisoning proved to be correct.

Conan Doyle's first published medical article, in the British Medical Journal in 1879, dealt with poisons. His interest in Chemistry is apparent in his fictional writings as well. Poisons, for example, are mentioned in 22 of the 60 Holmes tales. Numerous other chemicals are mentioned as well. Sherlock Holmes had a chemical "table" in his Baker Street quarters. Here he would relax by doing chemical analyses or syntheses much as today's students relax !). **There is, in fact, so much Chemistry in the Sherlock Holmes stories that practically every story has some, whether it be poisons, gems, brandy, acids, or even the famous 7% solution of cocaine.** This lecture will discuss the scientific Holmes with quotes from the Master himself and will illustrate that Asimov's assessment of Holmes as a "blundering chemist" is incorrect.

Jim O'Brien was born in Philadelphia on the 4th of July. He received a BS in Chemistry from Villanova University and a Ph.D. in Chemistry from the University of Minnesota. Following postdoctoral work at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in New Mexico, he joined the faculty at Southwest Missouri State University, recently renamed Missouri State University. While at MSU, Dr. O'Brien received three research awards and three teaching awards.



For further questions contact Dr. Marisa Agnew (alviarm@scc.losrios.edu)