



Some personal recollections of the adventure of the Reichenplaque

By Wilfrid de Freitas and Markus Geisser

No, the weather wasn't perfect on that Saturday morning, the 2nd May 1992, when a lonely cab with German license plate – a rare find then and still so 30 years later in Swiss mountains - with five gentlemen in it climbed the steep road - that sometimes resembled more a foot path - from Meiringen to Zwirgi, a popular inn just above the Reichenbach Falls. The wintery weather conditions could not stop this small, but international gathering of Sherlockians from Canada, Germany and Switzerland from venturing to that very “path (that) has been cut half-way around the fall to afford a complete view” of that “indeed fearful place”.

The mission was a straightforward one: to unveil the memorial plaque that since 2nd May 1992 has commemorated the fateful struggle between Holmes and Moriarty exactly at that very spot where it had taken place on 4th May 1891.

The journey to get the plaque to its final destination was not as straightforward as its actual unveiling. It was indeed an adventure and we, those behind this project, think that the 30th anniversary of the unveiling is the perfect moment to recall the people behind this remarkable achievement of two Sherlockian societies.

The making of what we like to call the ‘Reichenplaque’ was a truly transatlantic joint venture between The Bimetallic Question of Montreal and The Reichenbach Irregulars of Switzerland. Wilfrid de Freitas tells “the Canadian part” of this tale, the moment the idea was born and the making of the plaque in Canada. Markus Geisser picks up the second part of this story, on the other side of the Atlantic if you like, when the plaque arrived at Zurich airport and then travelled the Reichenbach Falls.

The Idea is Born!

by Wilfrid de Freitas

Way back in the last century, in early 1991 to be precise, Markus Geisser was visiting Montreal. As is customary worldwide, Sherlockians visiting another city provide an excuse (if one were needed) for getting together to talk shop, compare notes and for drinks &/or dinner, or in our particular case, tea. My memory is hazy about exactly who was present, but in addition to Markus and me, sitting in my living room in Westmount, a downtown suburb of Montreal, were Patrick Campbell (of whom more later) and Bruce Holmes, both of whom were active members of The Bimetallic Question but are now no longer with us.

I was telling them the story of my visit to the Reichenbach Falls in the late 1980s. I'd decided to make the pilgrimage to the actual spot and was disappointed to find, instead of a commemorative marker, a large, plain, white-painted metal star driven into the cliff face, without any sort of indication of its significance. While standing there, images from *The Final Problem* coursing through my fertile imagination, there was a series of almighty roars and rumblings which I swear – please allow some poetic licence here – I could feel in the ground beneath my feet. My immediate reaction was that these were the initial sounds of an earthquake and that the steep mountainside surrounding the cliff ledge was about to start a landslide.

Now I've never been accused of being in the slightest way athletic, but I challenge anyone who claims they could have run down the mountainside as quickly as I did, at the same time looking over my shoulder for a fast-approaching rockslide. Now completely out of breath, I reached the inn at the base of the mountain where everyone was calmly enjoying their refreshment. Once I'd regained my composure, I casually ordered a beer and enquired what was that loud noise only to be told, in English, that it was the sonic boom of the Swiss Airforce jets hurtling through the valley (in which Meiringen is situated), going through its exercises of breaking the sound barrier. Hmm ... 'nuff said.

But I digress ... back in my living room in spring 1991 the subject arose of installing a proper brass plaque in the cliff face, explaining the significance of the spot. 1991 was the year of the centenary of *The Final Problem* and the Reichenbach Falls must have been on all our minds. Markus says it was my idea, but I just don't remember. All of a sudden, we were collectively gripped with the plan to remedy this appalling oversight.

Incidentally, for those who think we're carrying things a little too far, I would draw your attention to the 1928 Baedeker guide for Switzerland. In the section on Meiringen, the following sentence appears: "*It will be remembered that Sherlock Holmes disappeared at the Reichenbach Falls.*" Since Baedeker is renowned for its accuracy, who are we to question this.¹ It should also be noted that back in 1957 The Norwegian Explorers of Minnesota had installed a commemorative plaque at the base station of the funicular which ran up the *opposite* side of the Falls, but we felt something ought to be done at the actual spot.²

Now, where would one go to commission a brass plaque? My immediate thought was the local cemetery. They're used to having such plaques made and, indeed, they gave us a couple of company names and we chose a specialist company in Milton, Ontario. In consultation with Markus and The Reichenbach Irregulars, we came up with a suitable wording, in three languages, English, German and French.

In due course the plaque was ready, but it was (and probably still is) extremely heavy, so how were we to get it over to Switzerland. As you probably know, the Swiss are justifiably proud of their Sherlockian connection and, when approached, Swissair were only too pleased to offer to transport the plaque to Switzerland free of charge. In due course, the plaque arrived in Switzerland and Markus and The Reichenbach Irregulars took over the Swiss part of this venture.

¹ The earliest available source that tourists visited the location of the epic battle dates back to 1901, when a reporter of the daily called Oamaru Mail took a guide to reach the place. See also *Serious and less serious musings!*, 2021, available via the publisher Books on Demand, [Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle and Switzerland \(bod.de\)](#).

² The history behind The Norwegian Explorers' plaque has similar transatlantic characteristics. Julie McKuras's essay "A Fixed Point" published in The Reichenbach Irregulars *Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle and Switzerland - Serious and less serious musings!*, 2021, offers the complete history of this amazing project. It is available via the publisher Books on Demand, [Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle and Switzerland \(bod.de\)](#), or contact the authors: reichenbachirregulars@gmail.com

How the Reichenplaque reached the Reichenbach Falls

by Markus Geisser

Back from Montreal in spring 1991, I mobilised the small but active circle of Reichenbach Irregulars to support this project. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming. Our task was to organise the pick-up of the plaque, obtain the necessary approval for the installation and pay for the actual fitting of the plaque. Our Society was barely two years old and it was, there is little doubt, its biggest adventure yet.

The fact that the Society's Secretary, Roland Wyss, was also the Director of Meiringen Tourism, helped a great deal to sort out the administrative approval process and get the necessary local buy-in. By 5th June 1991, a little over two months after we had plotted the idea for the Reichenplaque in Wilfrid's sitting room in Montreal, the Community of Schattenhalb, under whose jurisdiction the Reichenbach Falls actually comes, gave their consent. I suppose there are not many planning permissions in Switzerland that have been given in such record time.

As the actual plot is privately owned, then by Adolf Mätzener, from the nearby tiny hamlet of Schwendi, we also needed his consent. Which we received together with the letter from the Community of Schattenhalb. Both parties simply requested that they "assume that the local conditions are taken into account when choosing the size, material and colour of the plaque." On 23rd October 1991, the Community of Schattenhalb and the owner Adolf Mätzener accepted the proposal for the design and wording of the plaque submitted by The Bimetallic Question and The Reichenbach Irregulars.

In February 1992, the plaque was ready to be shipped from Montreal to Zurich by Swissair. The Community of Schattenhalb requested the Swiss customs authorities, in a letter dated 12th February 1992, to keep any customs fees as low as possible, explaining that this memorial plaque is a "cultural asset that is going to be open to the public" to "commemorate the famous Sherlock Holmes".



In March, on a short leave from my compulsory military service, I drove to Zurich airport, picked up the heavy parcel containing the Reichenplaque and brought it back to my home at Lake Constance. I don't want to get too carried away, but when unwrapping the parcel, it felt a bit like opening the Agra treasure! Several days later, I made my way to Meiringen where I met with our Society's secretary Roland Wyss. We both ascended to the final destination of the Reichenplaque at the Reichenbach Falls, accompanied by the owner of a local construction firm, who was contracted to install the plaque.

It needed to resist permanent dampness. Snow. Rain. Heat. And, probably most importantly, it needed to be protected from souvenir hunters; we Sherlockians know our weaknesses when we are determined to "just fill that gap on that second shelf" ... Solid concrete and four 12-inch bolts should make this possible, or rather, impossible!

The last chapter of this remarkable story was the unveiling on 2nd May 1992. As Wilfrid points out, "our indefatigable Patrick Campbell decided to fly over and be the Bimetallic Question representative there on the day. He brought back many photographs of the event, as well as two miniature bottles of Reichenbach Falls water, both carefully sealed and tagged, one of which was later awarded to the winner of one of our bimonthly meeting quizzes."



Saturday, 2nd May 1992, at the Reichenbach Falls -
from left to right - Michael Meer, Markus Geisser, Artur Ott, Patrick Campbell

Other members of the small gathering attending to witness this historic moment were Michael Meer, from Eriswil, Switzerland, one of the (then ...) youngest Reichenbach Irregulars. The late Klaus Wörner from Bad Mergentheim, Germany (and provider not of a Hansom Cab, but a German taxi to drive us around that weekend). The late Artur Ott from Berlin whose first ever meeting (of many more to follow) this unveiling ceremony in fact was. And myself, then President of The Reichenbach Irregulars.

Patrick Campbell wrote a most amusing article about this weekend for *Canadian Holmes*, the magazine of The Bootmakers of Toronto, for the Michaelmas 1992 edition. Not everything went according to plan. The opening of the champagne bottle turned out to be a struggle. One participant could not descend to the actual path at the Reichenbach Falls due to fear of heights. The unveiling celebration was, rather fittingly I would say, interrupted by the surprise visit not of a Young Swiss Messenger but a young Japanese nuclear energy specialist, who was also a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast. The unveiling was followed by the obligatory visit to then new Sherlock Holmes Museum which celebrated its own 30th anniversary last year. And we of course paid respects to the other three Sherlock Holmes memorial plaques that Meiringen has, the one from The Norwegian Explorers, the one of the Old Soldiers of Baker Street in the Pizzeria Rössli and the plaque at the Parkhotel Du Sauvage, commemorating its *rôle* as Peter Steiler's Englischer Hof.

30 years on

The Reichenplaque remains a remarkable achievement of which our two small Sherlock Holmes societies are immensely proud. Without wanting to appear boastful, we regard it as one of our most important contributions to keeping the memory of Sherlock Holmes alive. A brief Google search confirms that during the past three decades our Reichenplaque has delighted Sherlockians from across the globe. Little did we know what to expect when our small group of Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts in that sitting room in Westmount, Montreal, decided one evening to start this truly transatlantic joint adventure.