

Sheila Mitchell's moving biography of her husband, H.R.F. Keating: A Life of Crime, has recently been published by Level Best Books.^[1] Here she looks at her late husband's writings about crime fiction.

The Non-Fiction of H.R.F. Keating

Sheila Mitchell

In many ways more can be learnt about H.R.F. (Harry) Keating, both as a writer and as a man, by reading his ten non-fiction books about crime writing and crime writers as well as in countless articles, than by analyzing his fiction output. That is, of course a sweeping statement and many may disagree. But what is undeniable is that he was above all an ambassador at large for crime fiction. Over and over again, when speaking of the art of writing in this form, he would reiterate his belief that crime fiction was in many ways superior to what is categorized as main-stream fiction.

After Harry's death in 2011 the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, of which he was an honorary member, presented me with a beautifully produced hard-backed collection entitled **The Keating Papers**. There are five entries. Three are papers which he had delivered to the Society over the years at their conferences and two were articles he had written for the D.L.S. Society publications. The editor of my collection, Geraldine Perriam, commissioned an introduction by Simon Brett — an introduction which absolutely encapsulates Harry's achievements and personality. He wrote that all of his works were imbued by the same qualities: "a strong moral sense and a compassion for humankind", which would suggest that the Keating

books were pretty serious but Simon added another quality which acts as a counter-balance: "a subversive undercurrent of mischief".

It is that quality that appears over and over again in his non-fiction books and is evident in one of the first titles, **Murder Must Appetize**. The idea for this book originated with Alan Syngé, a fellow alumni from Trinity College Dublin, who owned a small printing house called — endearingly to my mind — The Lemon Tree Press. By then, 1975, Harry was firmly established not only as one of Great Britain's top crime writers but also one of its leading critics — he was crime books critic for *The Times* for fifteen years. The book was republished in 1981, this time in a revised edition in partnership with the American publisher, Otto Penzler, and his Mysterious Press. It is an exceedingly slim volume with a mere forty-two pages explaining what he calls the quintessential detective story and an additional fourteen pages devoted to potted biographies of twenty-seven authors who wrote within the decade leading up to World War 2. Nowadays, with an expansion of years and the inclusion of many more authors, that period is called The Golden Age — a phrase actually used by Harry in this book. His first paragraph starts off with the much quoted sentence, "Is there anything, when life gets a little much, as

H.R.F Keating Non-Fiction Crime List

Murder Must Appetize

(Lemon Tree Press, 1975; revised edition: Lemon Tree Press/Mysterious Press, 1981)

Blood on my Mind (Macmillan, 1972): edited by H.R.F. (true crime)

Agatha Christie, First Lady of Crime (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977; US: Holt, 1977): edited by H.R.F.

Crime Writers, Reflections on Crime Fiction (BBC, 1978): edited by H.R.F.

Sherlock Holmes, The Man and His World (Thames & Hudson, 1979; US: Scribners, 1979)

Great Crimes (St. Michael Press, 1982; US: Harmony Books, 1992) (true crime)

Writing Crime Fiction

(A. and C. Black, 1986; US: St. Martin's, 1987; revised edition: A. and C. Black, 1994)

Crime and Mystery: The 100 Best Books (Xanadu, 1987; US: Carroll & Graf, 1987)

Whodunit?, A Guide to Crime Suspense, and Spy Fiction

(Windward, 1982; US: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982): edited by H.R.F.

The Bedside Companion to Crime (O'Mara, 1989; US: Mysterious Press, 1989)

The Keating Papers (Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2011)

comforting as a detective story? Well yes, of course there is. Drink. The love of a good woman. The attentions of a bad woman.” A typical, self-mocking statement which also signals that although this is to be a factual book it will attempt not to bore you with too much gravity. The first forty-two pages seem almost to have been written in one breathless sweep but they contain many nuggets of astute analysis of the genre as it then was. It is, to my mind, in itself, an appetizer for the non-fiction books that were to follow.

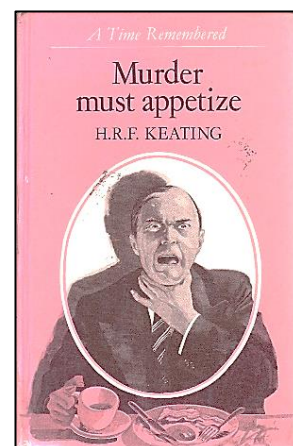
From a very early age Harry had read the crime books his mother borrowed from one of the then popular circulating libraries and over the years he continued reading them so that when he started reviewing for *The Times* his knowledge was extensive. Returning to Simon Brett’s introduction to the Sayers papers he refers to Harry’s “encyclopaedic knowledge”, something that was helped by having a heaven-sent ability to retain more or less everything he read. For quite a period during the latter half of the 20th century he would be the expert that producers on TV and radio automatically turned to either for a quote or on many occasions to be part of crime writing programmes.

The first of the D.L.S. talks has the title: “Is Inspector Ghote Lord Peter Wimsey?” It was delivered in 1983 to the Seminar of the Dorothy L. Sayers Literary Society in Dorothy’s home town of Witham in Essex. Almost at once he asks himself and his audience the question posed in the title and makes the reply in a light-hearted manner: “I could keep you hanging on for the answer to those last words like the true detective story writer that I am. But instead I am going to answer them fairly and squarely straight away. Yes and no.” He then goes on to explain this prevarication by saying that Ghote would probably not have existed if Lord Peter had not earlier been invented, saying, modestly enough, “He takes his place in that chain of great detectives, dare I say it, that started long ago with Le Chevalier Auguste Dupin and in which Lord Peter is a massy link.” He then goes on to examine many of the other links which include Sherlock Holmes and Poirot, of course, but also many names possibly unknown to the average crime story reader of today such as Arthur Morrison who wrote **The Child of Jago** (recommended as a good read) and created the detective Martin Hewitt — in every way the antithesis of Holmes. Included in the list, was Ernest Bramah and his blind detective Max Carrados; Baroness Orczy with her old man of a detective who sat in a corner of an ABC tearoom and by sheer thinking-power solved the mysterious puzzles brought to him; Austin Freeman and his scientific detective Doctor Thorndyke; and Father Brown, GK Chesterton’s mystical detective.

As Simon Brett says “Harry’s wide reading put him in the rare position of having an overview of the history of crime fiction ... which he saw as a

continuum” and points out that “he had the perception and modesty to realize his debt to the past.” This debt he both repaid and also chose to ignore. The repayment can be found in some ten very different volumes concerning the history of the genre; the differing approaches to this genre of writing and the writers themselves. That he ignored the debt is not strictly true because, having read those who had gone before, he then analysed the legacy left by distinguished individual writers and incorporated what he saw as their golden rules in his own books but then produced books that did not wholly conform and were never conventional.

In many of his non-fiction titles he was, strictly speaking, the Editor, but in all these he always wrote as one of his own contributors. The very first, which appeared in 1972, centred on an idea he had that most writers of crime fiction probably nurtured in the recesses of their minds: an obsession with some true life crime from the past. **Blood on My Mind** is a collection of musings from a selected few who were at the time members of the Crime Writers’ Association. He had not originally intended to contribute himself but the publisher — Macmillan — persuaded him it would only be right and proper. The crime he settled on was that of Eugene Aram from 1759. The murder Aram committed remained unsolved for fourteen years during which time he worked as a schoolmaster leading an exemplary, upright life. Over the years many other people have been drawn to write about him. Almost a hundred years after the event Thomas Hood produced his poem “The Dream of Eugene Aram”. One Charley Peace, ‘gentleman’ and, as it turned out criminal, would read from this remarkably overwritten but nevertheless popular poem to his friends at his respectable home in Peckham. And then, a hundred years later, Harry relished including extracts from the same poem in a programme of crime verse which he and I used to perform from time to time — in many ways he was an actor manqué.



H.R.F. Keating: **Murder Must Appetize**
(Lemon Tree Press, 1971)

But **Blood on My Mind** did not contain critical material not even a proper Editorial. There was just an editorial note explaining what had made him suggest putting it together. The rest of the non-fiction volumes were different. In every case they were intended to offer the reader a glimpse of the delights to be found within the covers of his fellow crime writers. Some were written entirely by himself others had contributions from eminent colleagues. Most aimed to cover a multiplicity not only of authors but would also give an overall picture of the differing sorts of crime novel.

There were two books however where there was just one central character. The first centred on Agatha Christie when Weidenfeld and Nicholson asked him to edit what they hoped would be the first tribute to appear after her death in 1976. This was triumphantly achieved in 1977. It was left to Harry to decide on the format and he chose to put together what was in effect a biography but one compiled from the viewpoint of a dozen people all of whom were experts in their own field. The result was a rounded picture of a shy, highly gifted woman who while living her personal and private life to the full was, at the same time, writing best-selling crime novels and sell-out plays. Harry's own prefacing introduction is too long to reproduce here but should you come across a copy of the book it is worth a few minutes of your time because it succinctly analyses why she became so famous, shows us the simple reasons why the books are page turners, why she was rightly made a Dame of the British Empire. In short why she became **Agatha Christie First Lady of Crime**.

The other central character to which a whole book was dedicated was Sherlock Holmes and came about because Thames and Hudson — better known for the publication of Art books — was running a series under the overall title "The Man and His World". The earlier books had as their subject real people whose lives had been in some way extraordinary. However, Harry was asked to write not about the renowned writer Conan Doyle, but about Doyle's main character, Sherlock Holmes. Not being inclined to write some fanciful account trying to convince the reader that he was actually a flesh and blood human being, Harry cleverly hit on the notion of using the real facts of life in those Victorian days and dropping in what was known about Holmes from Dr Watson's accounts of the cases the character solved. Harry was always an admirer of Conan Doyle's work and many of the reviews picked on the strange fact that he is only referred to once in this book but no-one points out that it would have been absurd to refer to him as the creator of Sherlock Holmes when the purpose of the book was to imply that Holmes was not a figment of the imagination but someone who really existed. By merging history with fiction he did indeed make it seem that Holmes was actually living without ever

having to say so. While Harry produced the text, Thames and Hudson inserted 136 amazing illustrations which authenticate the facts and locations mentioned in the fictional accounts of Holmes's cases as written up by Watson. Harry had by this time written his straight novel **The Underside**, his exploration of the seamier side of Victorian life and the pull this had on his central character, as well as the crime novel **A Remarkable Case of Burglary** set in the upstairs/downstairs Victorian world. Both of them had required extensive research so, in every way, writing about Sherlock Holmes must have seemed like the icing on the cake and been an unadulterated delight. That is more than can be said about a title produced some three years later in 1982.

As the blurb to that book, **Great Crimes**, tells us, it is a collection of "legendary tales and true stories of fifty of history's most notorious criminals and their crimes". It is a large format, lavishly illustrated publication — an offering from Harmony Books who we are told is a division of Crown Publishers of New York with Weidenfeld and Nicholson producing it in this country, and it seems Marks and Spencer were involved because it appeared on their shelves. But Harry had no desire to write about real crime — his world was that of the imagination. Apart from **Blood on My Mind** and his contribution on Eugene Aram it was only in this book that he devoted much time to anything other than fellow crime writers and their fictional creations. Nevertheless, he meticulously did his homework and for those anxious to keep abreast of the villainy and ingenuity of our fellow human beings there is abundant material within these pages. There are eight broad headings, Classic Cases; Superb Swindlers; Crimes into Art; The Great Robberies; The Poisoners; The Gangsters; The Mass Murderers and The Unsolved. As an anecdotal footnote some thirty-seven years later one of our grandchildren was visiting a friend in Australia when she was amazed to see a copy of the book — of which she had no knowledge — on their shelves.

Great Crimes was written as one of ten non-fiction titles published within a twelve year period, 1977 to 1989, during which time he also wrote nine fiction books. These included a straight novel although with a strong element of adventure, **A Long Walk to Wimbledon**, which many, including P.D. James, regarded as his best work. This productivity can only partly be explained by the fact that he had ceased reviewing books for *The Times* which, of course, did free up quite a few hours each week. It was not his choice to give up *The Times* but the Editor had ordered the Literary editor to sack "his columnist" for refusing to review what was actually rather a mediocre book but which turned out to have been written by the Editor's secretary's husband. It was, of course, a blow at the time but ultimately an excellent thing to have happened.

There are four books that can be described as attempts to present an overall picture of the crime writing world and of those only one where the entries are all written by himself — **Crime and Mystery: The 100 Best Books** published by Xanadu in Great Britain and Carroll and Graf in America in 1987.^[2] It has a foreword by Patricia Highsmith and she concludes it with these words: “One can open **The 100 Best** anywhere and be entertained by its contents, learn something new, or reinforce what is already in one’s head. Keating modestly states in his Introduction that he may have left out some fine writers, for which he anticipates reproach. But who in our time could have done it better?”

Harry chose authors from Edgar Alan Poe in 1845 to PD James in 1986 — the year before publication — and devotes two pages to evaluating a book by her, **A Taste for Death**. In most cases each author is represented by only one book but in seven cases — Conan Doyle; Dashiell Hammett; Josephine Tey; Patricia Highsmith; Julian Symons; Peter Dickinson and PD James — two of their books qualify while Simenon gets three. Some of the reviewers took exception to this because they pointed out that a further eight authors could have been represented if Harry had restricted the choice to one book per author. But the title is after all Best Books not Best Authors. But there was a very favourable reaction to the book particularly in America where it was in many cases regarded as a *vade mecum*.

The entries were not just critical studies of that one particular book but extended to a general overview of the writer’s approach to crime writing. For instance in the piece about Nicholas Blake’s **The Beast Must Die** (a title which he tells us is a paraphrase from the text of Brahms’s *Four Serious Songs* which in turn is a paraphrase of The Book of Ecclesiastes), he claims that “under the outward show of being a straightforward detective story **The Beast Must Die** is a good deal more. Which considering the author, who was of course Cecil Day Lewis who went on to become Poet Laureate, and that his hero, Nigel Strangeways, was based on his friend and fellow poet W.H. Auden, is not surprising. Somehow room was found within the two-page per entry format to introduce these nuggets of general information.

Or in the Margery Allingham entry for **More Work for the Undertaker** we find: “Her earliest books were simply detective yarns, swingeingly told. But with the years she began to see that this sort of thing could be used — cried out to be used — to convey her deepest thoughts about the world and the people in it. World War II, during which her crime muse fell silent, advanced this belief by a great bound ...”

The book is, in short, a triumphant critical study in the same succinct form he used for his *Times*

reviews, coupled with facts connected to each author. It was short-listed for the 1988 Best Critical/Biographical Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America.

Earlier, in 1978, there had been a book simply entitled **Crime Writers**. That it exists at all is down to the creative imagination of Bernard Adams, who at the time was a producer for BBC Television’s Further Education department and writer Mike Pavett, who created a six part series about crime fiction. They then decided to make it into a BBC book and asked Harry, who had been part of the programme, to edit it. A lot of what he says in his Editor’s Foreword is worth reproducing if only for the light it throws on the difference between writing for print and that required by TV. He explained that the contributors to the book were asked “to approach their various subjects in at the least a slightly different way. Not only have they been in a position to lay down more facts than the television programmes in their necessarily short length, but they have too, almost inevitably, taken somewhat different views of their subjects, because they could treat them in a wider and more subtle way. Yet the general aim has been the same. We have not set out to produce primarily a history of Crime Writing, chronicling how one writer influenced another, how some rebelled against the dictates of their predecessors ... Instead we have tried to look at crime and the writer. We have asked ourselves how at various periods the writers of the day tackled their subject. We have asked what readers, and later viewers, wanted from them. Our approach has been more social commentary than literary history.”

The book is a page turner largely due not only to the linking passages provided by Mike Pavett but also to some wonderful illustrations that he found to accompany the articles. Some of the contributors had also written for and appeared in the TV series but of these only eight, including Harry, wrote for the book. One can only hope that, whatever moves there are to change the BBC, their archive material both visual and in print will survive.

In the same year, 1982, that the true crimes book, **Great Crimes**, appeared, there was an offering from what used to be called a packaging publisher, in this case, Shuckburg Reynolds under the imprint Windward. The blurb states “**Whodunit?** is both a celebration of a popular genre and a uniquely accessible reference volume which will lead readers of crime, suspense and spy fiction to new writers and new books. H.R.F. Keating has drawn together 22 leading novelists and critics.” It is also interesting to note that in that same year the fourth of Harry’s straight novels, **The Lucky Alphonse**, was published. It is hardly surprising that between 1981 (**Go West Inspector Ghote**) and 1984 (**The Sheriff of Bombay**) there were no crime novels from his pen.

In fact the continuation of the blurb is both informative and accurate so once again I will reproduce it.

At the heart of **Whodunit?** is a lengthy section entitled “Writers and Their Books: A Consumers’ Guide”. Here the works of more than 500 novelists are described and their best books recommended.

Whodunit? begins with eleven illuminating chapters analyzing the categories of crime fiction (The Classical Detective Story, The American Police Procedural, Gothics, Suspense etc.) Taken as a whole these comprise a fascinating history of the entire genre. In another section ten novelists contribute witty and informative answers under the heading: “How I Write My Books”. A further, imaginatively illustrated chapter, “The People of Crime Fiction”, contains interesting profiles of the 90 most celebrated characters that the genre has produced. At the end of the volume a psychiatrist gives his explanation of “Why People Read Crime Fiction”.

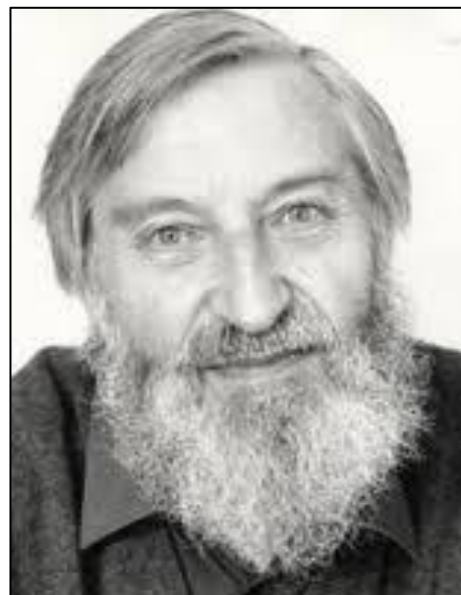
What Harry brought to this book were his skills as an editor, from knowing who to approach as a contributor to a shrewd sense of what would most interest the crime book reader. But he does also contribute himself the fifty page section called “The People of Crime Fiction” which must have taken many hours to compile but unquestionably well worth it because they end up by being pithy pen portraits — a style in which he excelled.

The last of the non-fiction titles bearing the Keating name, either as editor or sole contributor, **The Bedside Companion to Crime**, was published by Michael O’Mara books in 1989 and picked up by Otto Penzler’s Mysterious Press in America in the same year. From the miscellany of clippings and letters stuffed into the flap of the dust jacket of the first edition it must be judged a popular book. Perhaps the claim that it is the fun factor that makes crime literature so popular was what attracted readers. The preface itself has a jokey title: “A WORD BEFORE YOU NOD OFF” and opens: “Why do we read crime fiction? Short answer for fun.” It continues: “I have long maintained, in fact, that it is the entertainment factor that differentiates crime fiction from novels that have a crime or a murder or a whole string of murders in them but are not crime fiction. The pure novelists write in order to tell us dumb readers something and sometimes it’s convenient for them to do so by means of a story or a situation that encompasses murder. Whereas a crime novelist writes first simply to hold the reader, to entertain the reader.”

This was, of course, not a new thought because, given any opportunity, Harry would declare that the crime novel was superior to the average straight novel in not only its ability to hold the reader’s attention but also for the possibility it had of imparting serious content — provided it never interfered with telling the story. Take this reasoning

a step further and it seems to me that what attracted readers to Harry’s writing was the undercurrent of humour not least to be found in the Ghote books. And although he claims that it is the fun factor which is one of the most compelling features of the best crime novels, in his own books, both fiction and non-fiction, it is only ever there in a subtle fashion. But a wry smile is a wonderfully refreshing thing for a reader who will then often return to the text with renewed enthusiasm.

As the **Bedside Companion** was not a collection of articles by other writers, all the sections were written by himself, it is a good example of Harry’s ability to impart a lot of information in an easily digestible form. One of the sections, number 7, is an exception in that it is a collection of poems written by eminent authors, W.H. Auden for example, all reflecting on the art of writing the detective story. Incidentally many of these were included in the poetry programmes, referred to earlier, that he and I performed. I can remember the audiences’ enjoyment of one of them called “Denouement” by that wonderful crime writer Reg Hill which, as its title implies, gives the picture of a crime through the tersely pithy responses to an interrogation of three of the characters involved. Then there was the blackly satiric contribution, “Send for Lord Timothy”, from the formidable blind poet John Heath Stubbs as well as offerings from Ogden Nash, Julian Symons — one perhaps forgets that Julian was a prolific poet as well as a crime writer — or Roger Woddis’s tribute to Raymond Chandler, with Gavin Ewart managing forty-one lines supposedly written by an owl and all ending in a rhyme for “coo” including the ingenious last line: “But who? But who? Who, who, who, who, who?” Seven irresistible poems.



H.R.F. Keating

That section was by way of being a diversion among a wealth of facts and assessments of the crime writing world, all presented with just enough underlying humour to keep them from becoming indigestible. As it says in the blurb “In **The Bedside Companion to Crime** Keating succeeds in entertaining the mystery buff by gathering together hundreds of facts and foibles from the world of crime writing and presenting them in the most amusing fashion” and, after mentioning the dozens of unusual illustrations, concludes with the words: “Although it is a book meant for dipping into, few mystery lovers will be able to avoid consuming it all in one go.”

Consuming in one go would not be difficult with the 10th of Harry’s non-fiction titles **Writing Crime Fiction** published in 1986 (second revised edition in 1994) of a mere 108 pages (also picked up in America). This slim volume has never been out of print and is still selling today as well as progressing — if that is the right word — from print to eBook. It is a book that was welcomed even by some of the most formidable of established writers of crime novels. There is a quote from Ruth Rendell on the cover “a private godsend”. Patricia Highsmith and Joan Aiken admit to finding help in its pages, Margaret Yorke described it as “magisterial” and P.D. James recommended it to those attending an Arvon Foundation course which was being tutored by herself and Harry.

It is not, as its title might imply, simply a manual on how to write crime fiction but, as one reviewer (unnamed on the cutting) said, “Brimful of Harry Keating’s legendary enthusiasm, it is a celebration and good-humoured analysis of crime fiction, a concise foundation course for aspiring authors.” The Introduction starts with the question “What is crime fiction?” and goes on to state that it is “a branch of literature that is by no means easy to define”. Having claimed that it is “a many-headed monster” he continues, riding his hobby-horse, “that it is fiction that is written primarily for its entertainment value which has as its subject some form of crime. Crime writing is fiction that puts the reader first, not its writer. Pure novels are written because their authors believe or feel that they have something to say. Crime writers have to take a decision that, even though they may feel they have something to say, they will subordinate the saying of it where necessary to the simple task of keeping their reader’s noses stuck in the pages.”

The book itself goes on to explore the main categories of crime fiction which he breaks down into The Classical Blueprint; The Modern Variations and Transatlantic Cousins and Others. There’s a fourth section entitled, On the Periphery, devoted to Comic crime; Romantic suspense; Mystery and history; Looking-back books; Real crime in fiction and The crime short story. Having analysed what is meant by each type the next section of the book

gives the reader helpful advice on How to Begin, Go On and Finish with a final short section on the practicalities of finding a publisher. It is truly astonishing how much ground is covered by such a short book and makes it totally understandable not only that it got endorsement from colleagues but that there is still a market for it today.

I began by saying that we can learn more about Harry the man as well as Harry the writer from his non-fiction works than from his fiction something that came to me when I returned to the former before writing this article and I wonder if I have previously explored hypothesis sufficiently. So perhaps I can be allowed the indulgence of a post-script, telling you of a recent publication. This is a biography entitled **H.R.F. Keating: A Life of Crime** which I, Sheila Mitchell, his wife, wrote and which has just been published by Level Best Books an American publisher who has world-wide rights. In this I decided to tell his own life story as a background to the books he published — I now fear I did not give sufficient prominence to his non-fiction.

Editor’s Notes

1. I can heartily recommend this book. A review can be found on page 62 of this issue.
2. Harry Keating kindly sent an early version of his 100 best list for publication in CADS 5 (February 1987) while he was preparing the book. He added a footnote to the list which said that “I may change my mind more than once before I finish the book.” He was right, the list in the book does have several changes to that in CADS.

And a personal reminiscence:

I’m sure that I have said some of what is to follow in previous issues of CADS, but it seems appropriate to mention it again. When I was thinking of starting CADS, I wrote to lots of people outlining my plans and inviting articles. The first person to respond was Philip Asdell, an American, who in 1976 had started *The Thorndyke File* devoted to the work of R. Austin Freeman and was then producing *The Bony Bulletin*, covering the work of Arthur Upfield. Philip sent the first article I received, which I used symbolically as the first article in the first issue of CADS. But he also sent a list of four people who he thought might also be interested, together with their addresses. I immediately wrote to each of them outlining the plans. By return post an article arrived from Harry Keating about Dorothy L. Sayers’s **The Documents in the Case**. Harry remained a loyal CADS reader and, over the years, contributed many more articles and reviews. □