

A. Conan Doyle  
Physician and Creator of a Legend

Sherlock Holmes is probably the most credible figure that fiction has ever produced. His name has inspired a hotel, a restaurant, a pub, a dozen societies, a very successful play, and an average of sixty letters a month from fans of the great detective to the Abbey National Building Society (whose address in Baker Street is the same as Holmes' fictional one).

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's immortal detective made so strong an impact on early readers that fiction over-ruled fact and the character assumed a cynical identity of its own. The author in some curious way became almost jealous of the adulation given to this colossus of his imagination. He really wanted to write serious novels, such as "The White Company", a tale of knightly honor from the age of King Edward III. To understand Doyle's true inner character, one must only read these phrases from the book: "Fearless to the strong; humble to the weak." "Chivalry towards all women, of high or low degree." "Help to the helpless, whosoever shall ask for it." "And to this I pledge my knightly word." Sounds almost like a Knight Templar, doesn't he?

It may have been more than chance that turned Conan Doyle into the writer he became. Conditions and a natural aptitude toward assimilating almost microscopic detail had much to do with it. He was born in Edinburgh in 1859, educated at Stonyhurst, and then for a year at Feldkirch in Austria (where he learned German very quickly, edited the school paper, and used to lecture German boys on the glories of Britain!). He returned home to Edinburgh stimulated by Alpine air and flushed with a sense of his own powers. The Medical Faculty of the University of Edinburgh awarded his degree in 1881, and, after a year assisting a general practitioner in Plymouth, he opened his medical practice at No. 1 Bush Villas, Elm Grove, Southsea (a suburb of Portsmouth).

General practice was not a financial success, and for several years he nourished the idea of specializing in ophthalmology, eventually dashing off first to Berlin and then Vienna for advanced study. His return to Southsea as a qualified eye surgeon still did not result in the world beating a path to his door.

Perhaps because of this, and perhaps because he had been deeply impressed by the remarkable powers of observation of his former tutor at Edinburgh, a certain Dr. Joseph Bell, to unveil character and background in a patient by the process of deduction, he created the detection team of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson.

Fortune came uneasily to begin with. After many rejections, "A Study in Scarlet" was published in Beeton's Christmas Annual for 1887. It aroused little interest, and probably the sum of £25 for the outright sale failed initially to inspire its author to any further writings based on criminal investigation. But Holmes had left the cocoon, and was soon to demand his rightful place in the hierarchy of detective fiction.

"The Sign of Four" (called in this country "The Sign of the Four") was written in 1891

at the behest of an American publication, Lippincott's Monthly Magazine. Here the action is over-shadowed by past events in India, and Dr. Watson even acquires a wife! By now, Conan Doyle has decided to give up medicine and become a full-time writer in Norwood. The first of the "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" short stories appeared in the Strand that year. These were altogether different from anything the public had encountered before .... offering a new kind of hero, a new kind of setting, and not a flicker of emotional entanglement.

Despite his Catholic upbringing, Conan Doyle rejected rigid dogma in matters of religion. He professed belief in a universal and beneficent God who revealed himself to man through nature rather than through any particular denomination. He became a member of the Masonic fraternity in 1893 at Phoenix Lodge No. 257 in Portsmouth, and we are able to note several Masonic references in his works (called "The Canon" by loyal Holmes fans!).

These Masonic references were briefly mentioned in an article by Illustrious C. DeForrest Trexler, 33°, of Allentown, Pennsylvania, which appeared in "The Northern Light" for August, 1991. This is the same article which successfully criticized an unfortunate motion picture (1978) entitled "Murder by Decree", an attempt to explain the grisly murder of five prostitutes by "Jack the Ripper". Why three such notable actors as James Mason, Christopher Plummer and Anthony Quale agreed to star in such a farce is beyond me! But what really disturbed all true Holmesians was the fact that this movie pretended to be another of the "Canons", and had our favorite detective investigating a member of the Royal Family (presumably the Prince of Wales' elder son, Prince Albert Victor). Furthermore, in the movie, the royal "killer", as a Freemason, was protected by other Masons at the highest level of government. We all know that Conan Doyle would never have written anything like that!

I would like to expand a bit on Brother Trexler's Masonic references in the "Canon" by quoting directly:

1. From "A study in Scarlet" — "We have it all here," said Gregson, pointing to a litter of objects upon one of the bottom steps of the stairs. "A gold watch, No. 97163 by Barraud of London. Gold Albert chain, very heavy and solid. Gold ring with masonic device. Gold pin .. bulldog's head, with rubies as eyes. Russian leather card-case with cards of Enoch J. Drebber of Cleveland, corresponding with the E. J. D. upon the linen. No purse, bit loose money to the extent of seven pounds thirteen."

2. From "The Red-Headed League" - Sherlock Holmes quick eye took in my occupation and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

3. From "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder" - "Have a cigarette, Mr. McFarlane," said Holmes, pushing his case across. "I am sure that with your symptoms my friend Dr.

Watson here would prescribe a sedative. The weather has been so very warm these last few days. Now if you would feel a little more composed, I would be glad if you would sit down in that chair and tell us very slowly and quietly who you are and what it is you want. You mentioned your name as if I should recognize it, but I assure you that, beyond obvious facts that you are a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic, I know nothing whatever about you.”

4. From “The Adventure of the Retired Colourman” - “But I am convinced that he followed me.”

“No doubt! No doubt!” said Holmes. “A tall, dark, heavily- moustached man, you say, with grey-tinted sun glasses?”

“Holmes you are a wizard. I did not say so, but he had grey-tinted sun glasses.”

“And a Masonic tie-pin?”

“Holmes!”

“Quite simple, my dear Watson.”

It was only natural that broadcasts, films and stage performances would follow the publication of Conan Doyle’s stories. One play of 1889, simply called “Sherlock Holmes” written by and featuring the American actor, William Gillette, ran for years in New York, and has intermittently been revived at the Aldwych Theatre in London. My wife and I attended a performance of this play, starring Basil Rathbone and Jarmila Novotna, at the Majestic Theatre in Boston in 1946.

Today, at the Sherlock Holmes tavern in Northumberland Street, London, all the furnishings, fittings and related miscellanies assembled for the 1951 Festival of Britain are convincingly set out in a full-size reconstruction of the sitting-room of 221b Baker Street. A bust of Holmes, in his deerstalker and cloak, presides over a realistic display of probably every single item mentioned in the stories or added by the artists who depicted them. Holmes’ violin and case, his curved pipe, skeleton keys, magnifying glasses, masks, and chemical apparatus (including his “Gasogene”), Watson’s top hat, coat and stethoscope. Everything is there. What makes it all so meaningful is the fact that this very building was the Northumberland Hotel back in the 1890 ‘s, the very place where young Sir Henry Baskerville stayed before journeying on to his ancestral home where he would meet “the Hound”!

Between Sherlock Holmes and his author existed an indisputable similarity of character. Both were great criminologists; both possessed highly analytical minds, and both were fierce defenders of the innocent against any form of injustice. It is little wonder that confusion of identity arose. Conan Doyle, knighted by King Edward VII in 1902, was already endowed by nature with all the virtues of chivalry. His law was the code of

honour, an article of faith which strengthened and sustained him as powerfully as any religion. Upon his death at Crowborough, Sussex, on July 7, 1930, a simple cross was erected over his grave; the words inscribed on the base are simply: "Steel True, Blade Straight".

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Past Celebrant  
Delaware College, S.R.I.C.F.  
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