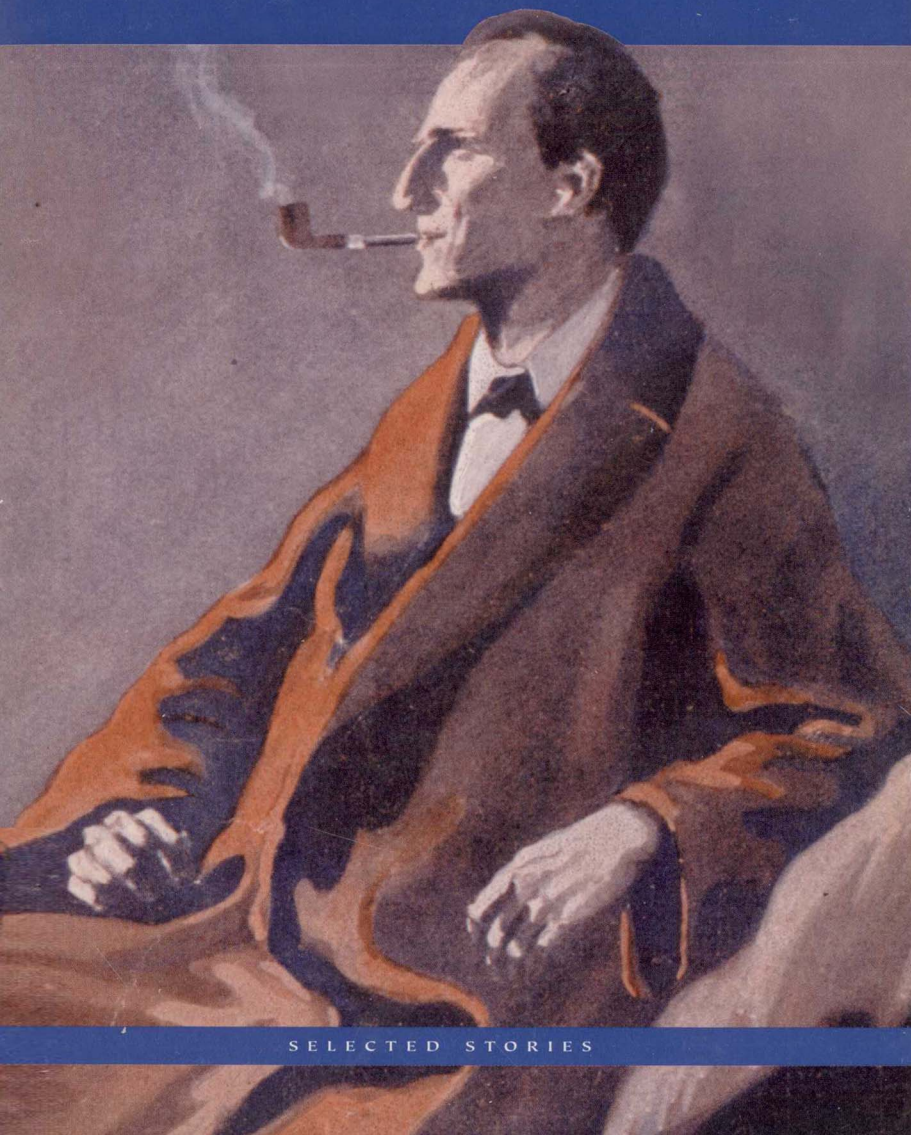


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SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



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MEMOIRS OF  
SHERLOCK HOLMES



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Introduction and Notes by

JULIAN WOLFREYS



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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

*General Adviser*

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*Rutherford College*

*University of Kent at Canterbury*

## INTRODUCTION

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, probably still the most famous of all fictional detectives, was born in Edinburgh on 22 May 1859, of Scots-Irish parentage. His family being Roman Catholic, Conan Doyle was educated at a series of Jesuit schools between 1868–76, culminating with a year in the Jesuit college at Feldkirch, Austria. Subsequently, he became a medical student at Edinburgh University, a training which provided him with a career in medicine as well as fitting him with knowledge which was to prove useful in creating the mind of his famous detective, who displays often formidable forensic knowledge.

In 1877 Conan Doyle became surgeon's clerk to Joseph Bell, an Edinburgh surgeon (and the person to whom the author later dedicated *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*), whilst also assuming various other temporary medical assistantships in the next three years throughout the Midlands. In 1880, he served a seven-month contract on a whaling vessel out of Peterhead, graduating from Edinburgh University in the following year.

In the next two years, Conan Doyle held various posts, none of them for very long, including another brief spell as a ship's surgeon, this time sailing to Africa. By 1882 he had begun writing, and his first short story was published in 1883. Entitled 'The Captain of the *Pole-Star*', the story drew on Conan Doyle's experience as a ship's surgeon. Publication of other short pieces followed on a regular basis over the next three years. By 1886 Conan Doyle had begun work on a novel, a mystery which was to introduce the reading public to the consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes. This was called *A Study in Scarlet*, which was completed in a year and published in 1887 in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. This was to be the first of many subsequent adventures, and marked the genesis of what became for Conan Doyle a highly ambivalent relationship with his violin-playing addict of a detective. This novel, which ranged between the streets of London and the deserts of Utah, also introduced the medium through which Holmes became a familiar household name, John H. Watson MD, whose profession was clearly modelled on Conan Doyle's own, at least in part. Holmes in fact is introduced to Watson by a mutual acquaintance, just at the moment when Holmes has discovered, in his own words, 'a re-agent precipitated by haemoglobin and nothing else'. Holmes is then revealed by Conan Doyle to both the reader and Watson through a demonstration of his deductive and forensic powers.

Such an introduction, hyperbolic as it was, proved to be the beginning of a literary phenomenon. The stories were to continue almost until Arthur Conan Doyle's death in 1930. Thus Sherlock Holmes had a professional career of approximately forty years, coming to dominate his author's life, livelihood and literary output. Although Conan Doyle always claimed Holmes was merely a popular money-spinner, to aid with the financing of 'serious' literary production and acceptance (which he always desired), nothing that Conan Doyle wrote was ever to prove as remotely successful – at least in commercial terms – as the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Even the author's other two sustained creations, Professor Challenger and Brigadier Gerard, never came close to rivalling the affection and interest in the general readership caused by Sherlock Holmes.

*A Study in Scarlet* proved popular, and was published in book form in July 1888, just six months after its initial publication. Its popularity was such that, in 1889, Lippincott's publishing house commissioned another Holmes novel, *The Sign of Four* (a work showing minor, if noticeable, influences from Wilkie Collins's *The Moon-*

stone) at the same time that they commissioned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from Oscar Wilde. Holmes's second outing began to appear in serial form in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in March 1890, and was afterwards rapidly published as a single volume in October of the same year by Spencer Blackett. In this story Holmes had developed substantially from the Holmes of the first novel; and with *The Sign of Four*, the nature of Sherlock Holmes's character, with its Dionysian and Apollonian aspects, its wide-ranging scientific knowledge, its indebtedness to German Romanticism, its brief nods towards the Nietzschean *übermensch* (Conan Doyle had read, but disapproved of the German philosopher) and its dandified *éclat* (obviously echoing certain of the fictional characters of those two great literary dandies of the Victorian epoch, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Oscar Wilde), was formed.

In 1891 Conan Doyle established a Harley Street practice as an eye specialist. In the same year, six short stories featuring Holmes appeared. They were published between July and December in the monthly numbers of the *Strand* magazine, the periodical which was to publish the stories exclusively until 1927. The *Strand* had been founded in the same year by Sir George Newnes, the founder of *Tit-Bits* (a decade earlier) and the daily *Westminster Gazette* (1893), and eventually closed in 1950. As well as Arthur Conan Doyle, the *Strand* also published H. G. Wells, Arthur Morrison, P. G. Wodehouse, Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham, and may fairly be said to be amongst the most important and influential literary periodicals of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The six Holmes stories published in Newnes's monthly magazine were the first stories in what was to be *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The other six stories were published in the first six months of 1892. These twelve tales – 'A Scandal in Bohemia'; 'A Case of Identity'; 'The Red-Headed League'; 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery'; 'The Five Orange Pips'; 'The Man with the Twisted Lip'; 'The Blue Carbuncle'; 'The Speckled Band'; 'The Engineer's Thumb'; 'The Noble Bachelor'; 'The Beryl Coronet'; 'The Copper Beeches' – were brought out in a single volume very shortly after the publication of the last of the twelve. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* appeared on 31 October 1892. Newnes, the publisher of the *Strand*, produced this volume. Such was the popularity of Holmes that, in the same year, Newnes also published a second edition of *The Sign of Four*. Sherlock Holmes had arrived.

The two Holmes novels had been a success, but the format most suited to Watson's narratives and Conan Doyle's style was the short

story. This form allowed complete tales to be told, while affording the author the luxury of making connections and allusions across tales. In developing this style across the *Adventures*, Conan Doyle considered himself to be something of a literary 'revolutionist', to use his own word. Whatever the reason for developing Holmes through the short story rather than the novel, however, the shorter narrative certainly proved a convenient medium for transmitting the narratives through periodical publication. Those who might have missed an issue would not be excluded from following the adventures in other issues (this would certainly maximise sales).

Another consideration was Conan Doyle's own ability as a writer. The short-story format meant that the author was not constrained to carrying narrative developments across several issues. The Holmes novels occasionally demonstrate in their structuring Conan Doyle's problems in working with such a form. In the novels narrative development is subject to abrupt and often quite arbitrary changes, for which the writer has to account in a somewhat artificial fashion. The short story, however, allowed Conan Doyle to focus on one particular narrative, whilst also providing a showcase for his attention to detail so necessary to his detective's method of detection. In the development of Holmes's career it was the short story, then, that was to prove the most enduring.

Arthur Conan Doyle had returned to London in March 1891 to look for premises for his medical practice, following a visit to Vienna, where he had been studying the most advanced techniques in the treatment of eye conditions. By April of that year he had found suitable professional premises. At the same time he had been planning the first Holmes short story. On 3 April, the first of the adventures 'A Scandal in Bohemia' was completed. Another three tales were finished by the end of the month. His work on the stories was halted at the beginning of May when he suffered a near-fatal bout of flu. However, by the middle of the month he was back at work on the next Holmes adventure. By August 1891 the first half-dozen stories were completed.

Conan Doyle drew inspiration for Holmes and his adventures from many sources, some of which have already been mentioned. Edgar Allan Poe's detective, Dupin (of 'The Purloined Letter'), is one such source. Joseph Bell, Conan Doyle's teacher in Edinburgh, is another. Correspondence between the two men (who remained lifelong friends) shows that Bell deprecated his own contribution to and influence on the shaping of the detective. However great or small the influence, it is certain that it is from Bell that the author

learnt much, if not all, he knew about forensic medicine. At the same time other literary figures such as Oscar Wilde and Robert Louis Stevenson informed the character of Sherlock Holmes. For other details and curious cultural minutiae which subsequently became reworked as crucial detail in the plots and fleshing-out of many of the stories, Conan Doyle drew on magazines such as *Tit-Bits*.

There was a gap during the late summer of 1891, when no Holmes stories were written. Conan Doyle did not begin again until October, at which point the *Strand* was being persistent with its requests that more of the tremendously popular mysteries be written. There is evidence from November of that year that Conan Doyle was already fed up with his star-turn. For the early stories he was paid between £25–£35 per story. After several exchanges of correspondence, Conan Doyle reluctantly agreed to write more, but for the increased fee of £50 per adventure. However, in a letter from November to Mary Doyle, his mother, Conan Doyle comments that he is already thinking of ‘slaying Holmes’ because the detective took the author’s ‘mind from better things’.\* However, Mary convinced her son not to put Holmes to death, whilst providing him with material for a plot.

At the same time, the *Strand* helped fix in the minds of the reading public what has since become the most enduring visual image of Holmes. Illustrator Sidney Paget had been commissioned to provide a pictorial accompaniment; it was he who created the image of the tall, gaunt aesthete; it was also Paget who was responsible for providing the various accoutrements which have become virtual synecdoches for Holmes himself: the meerschaum pipe, the cape and, of course, the now ubiquitous deerstalker, all of which carried over into subsequent film and television versions of Holmes – most notably Basil Rathbone’s version of the sardonic sleuth – until the 1980s when the image of Holmes was reinvented definitively by Jeremy Brett for television. It is Brett’s Holmes, with his waspish irony, high-camp mannerisms and melodramatic *brio* – as one anonymous critic put it, here was a Holmes whose very soul wore mascara! – which comes closest to Conan Doyle’s original

\* Letter from Arthur Conan Doyle to Mary Doyle, in *The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* by John Dickson Carr, cited in the Introduction by Roger Lancelyn Green to *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993), p. xxv. Green’s is the most comprehensive and authoritative account of the genesis of the *Adventures*, and I gratefully acknowledge its usefulness in writing this present introduction.



intentions. But for a century the popular vision of Sherlock Holmes was indissociable from Paget's original illustration for the *Strand*. However, despite the differences between the version imagined by the author, and the vision engendered by the artist, Conan Doyle pronounced himself very pleased with Paget's creation.

The first edition of the single-volume *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* sold very well, and was critically well received also. Published at the end of October 1892, approximately 8,000 copies had sold by Christmas. One of the first reviewers was, ironically, Joseph Bell.\* The review was published in the *Bookman* in December (subsequently reprinted as an introduction to *A Study in Scarlet*). Of the work and its author, Bell said that,

Dr Conan Doyle has made a well-deserved success for his detective stories, and made the name of his hero beloved by the boys of this country by the marvellous cleverness of his method . . . Trained as he has been to notice and appreciate minute details, Dr Doyle saw how he could interest his intelligent readers by taking them into his confidence . . . He created a shrewd, quick-sighted, inquisitive man, half doctor, half virtuoso . . . †

Half doctor, half virtuoso. Perhaps more than any other definition, these words sum up both Holmes and the reasons for his almost immediate popularity. The combination of science and panache was irresistible to the reading public, and not just the boys of Britain, as Bell's review suggests. Not only had the great detective arrived, he had found a place in both the mind and heart of the popular imagination, unrivalled by almost any other fictional creation, certainly any fictional detective. Not even Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple came close to embracing the all-round characteristics of the persona defined succinctly by Joseph Bell.

A second series of Holmes's adventures began in the *Strand* in 1893. These were then published by George Newnes in a second collection under the title *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. One of the stories from the *Strand* originally intended for this collection – 'The Cardboard Box' – was dropped. However, the collection did contain what was the most shocking Holmes case so far published: 'The Final Problem'. In this story Sherlock Holmes plunges to his

\* Bell's review can be found in *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, compiled by Richard Lancelyn Green (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 361–7.

† Bell's review, pp. 362, 364

death at the Reichenbach Falls, engaged in unarmed combat with his arch-rival Moriarty. The only witness to this scene is John Watson, for whom Holmes had been 'the best and the wisest man' he had ever known. Conan Doyle had killed off his detective in order to be able to concentrate on 'serious' writing. But he also felt, with justification perhaps, that the public can have too much of a good thing, as he revealed in an article published in 1900 in *Tit-Bits*. Conan Doyle was keen to avoid being labelled as capable of only one trick. As he put it in the interview, '... why should a man be driven into a groove and not write about what interest him? ... when I had written twenty-six stories ... I felt that it was irksome, this searching for plots – and if it must be getting irksome for me, most certainly, I argued, it must be losing its freshness for others. I knew I had done better work in other fields of literature.'\* Whatever Conan Doyle's reasons, Holmes was summarily disposed of, while, in the same year, 'serious literature' from the author was represented by a disastrous musical-comedy drama, co-authored with J. M. Barrie (a close friend of Conan Doyle, who wrote the Holmes parody "The Adventures of the Two Collaborators").

Holmes life appeared, then, to be limited to a brief five-year span. The detective 'died' in the same year as Charles Altamont Doyle, the author's father. There was to be an eight-year hiatus in the Holmes 'industry', despite numerous enquiries, requests and despairing entreaties on the part of the 'fans' of the great detective. This absence of Holmes did not mean that Conan Doyle was idle, however. During this time, he wrote and published many short stories and several novels, often working in difference genres.

In 1900, Arthur Conan Doyle stood unsuccessfully as the Liberal Unionist candidate for Parliament in Edinburgh Central. This was his only foray into politics. More successful was the return of Sherlock Holmes in 1901 (once more in the *Strand*), in the serial version of perhaps the most famous Holmes story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Conan Doyle had finally bowed to public pressure (and perhaps economic considerations), and the novel was published as a single volume in 1902, the year he was awarded his knighthood, an award he accepted only reluctantly.

\* 'Conan Doyle Tells the True Story of Sherlock Holmes', *Tit-Bits* (15 December 1900), quoted in *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, p. 349. Interestingly enough, in the same article, Conan Doyle cited the influence of Edgar Allan Poe's detective M. Dupin, from 'The Purloined Letter' and 'The Murders on the Rue Morgue', on the creation of Holmes.

*The Hound* did not mark the *return* of the detective, strictly speaking, however, for it was represented as merely one more tale from Holmes's earlier life and Watson's notebooks. There was no indication in the story that the report of the death at the Falls had been incorrectly reported by John Watson. Indeed Watson had faithfully reported what he believed he had seen, what he had believed to be the facts of the untimely demise of his friend and colleague. He was to be proved wrong, though. In October 1903 the *Strand* began publishing a series of stories known as *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. The first of these stories was 'The Empty House', in which Watson is revealed to be innocent of all duplicity with regard to his reading public, as a strange old book-collector reveals himself to be none other than Holmes, much to the good doctor's surprise. The series continued throughout 1904, and was published collectively under the title *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* in 1905 (once again by George Newnes). Conan Doyle had been, as ever, reluctant to write any more stories, and had tried to call the *Strand's* bluff by asking for an advance for new stories of £1000. To his surprise, this price was agreed.

Conan Doyle never wrote Holmes stories in so concerted a fashion again as had been the case for the first three volumes. Occasional adventures continued to appear in the *Strand* until 1927, which was the year of the detective's final disappearance. *The Valley of Fear*, the final novel, appeared between 1914-15, with the collection *His Last Bow* being published by John Murray in 1917, and *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* being published (again by John Murray) in 1927, three years before Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's death.

DR JULIAN WOLFREYS  
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## FURTHER READING

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*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892

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## CONTENTS

### THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

1	<i>A Scandal in Bohemia</i>	3
2	<i>The Red-Headed League</i>	26
3	<i>A Case of Identity</i>	49
4	<i>The Boscombe Valley Mystery</i>	66
5	<i>The Five Orange Pips</i>	91
6	<i>The Man with the Twisted Lip</i>	110
7	<i>The Blue Carbuncle</i>	134
8	<i>The Speckled Band</i>	154
9	<i>The Engineer's Thumb</i>	180
10	<i>The Noble Bachelor</i>	201
11	<i>The Beryl Coronet</i>	224
12	<i>The Copper Beeches</i>	248

### THE MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

1	<i>Silver Blaze</i>	277
2	<i>The Yellow Face</i>	302
3	<i>The Stockbroker's Clerk</i>	321
4	<i>The Gloria Scott</i>	339
5	<i>The Musgrave Ritual</i>	358
6	<i>The Reigate Squires</i>	377

7	<i>The Crooked Man</i>	396
8	<i>The Resident Patient</i>	413
9	<i>The Greek Interpreter</i>	430
10	<i>The Naval Treaty</i>	449
11	<i>The Final Problem</i>	484

THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES





*A Scandal in Bohemia*

TO SHERLOCK HOLMES she is always *the* woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer – excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory.

I had seen little of Holmes lately. My marriage had drifted us away from each other. My own complete happiness, and the home-centred interests which rise up around the man who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient to absorb all my attention, while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug and the fierce energy of his own keen nature. He was still, as ever, deeply attracted by the study of crime, and occupied his immense faculties and extraordinary powers of observation in following out those clues and clearing up those mysteries which had been abandoned as hopeless by the official police. From time to time I heard some vague account of his doings: of his summons to Odessa in the case of the Trepoff murder, of his clearing up of the singular tragedy of the Atkinson brothers at Trincomalee and, finally, of the mission which he had accomplished so delicately and successfully for the reigning family of Holland. Beyond these signs of his activity, however, which I merely