



Portrait of Arthur Conan Doyle (Edinburgh, 1859 - Crowborough, 1930). Oil on canvas by Henry Gates. Detail.

# Sir Arthur Conan Doyle:

## The physician behind Sherlock Holmes

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**S**herlock Holmes is one of history's most famous and beloved literary figures. For more than a century, readers have been enthralled by tales of the brilliant detective as he strides along the fog and shadow-laden streets of Victorian London, unraveling mysteries with his remarkable powers of observation.

Holmes is often accompanied by Dr. John Watson, the retired army surgeon, who was Holmes' dearest friend and the chronicler of their adventures (with a flair for drama that Holmes sometimes bemoans). The 56 short stories and four novels composing the Sherlock Holmes canon have been translated into dozens of languages, and inspired countless movies, television shows, and pastiches.

As Watson walks beside Holmes in their myriad incarnations, another physician stands behind both men—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, their creator, who became one of the most celebrated authors of his time.

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, in 1859, when Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire.

He was the first-born son in an Irish Catholic family. His father, Charles, was an artist who struggled with alcoholism, and could not provide a steady income. Charles eventually became institutionalized and died in an asylum.

Conan Doyle's mother, Mary, with whom he had a close relationship, enchanted her children with tales of history and adventure. She sparked her son's imagination and life-long love of books. "My real love for letters, my instinct for storytelling, springs from my mother,"<sup>1</sup> said Conan Doyle.

At the age of eight years, Conan Doyle left home to obtain an education at a series of boarding schools. During these years, he founded and wrote for a school magazine, and later a school newspaper. He continued to indulge his love of literature and history by reading voraciously, and was also a talented athlete.

When he returned home, Conan Doyle decided to pursue a medical education at Edinburgh University, which was held in high regard as one of the Victorian world's best medical schools. He became a medical student there in 1876, and met Joseph Lister, MD, the father of antiseptic surgery, and William Rutherford, MD, who served as the model for Professor Challenger from Conan Doyle's science fiction novel *The Lost World*.

The most important person he met at medical school was Joseph Bell, MD, the professor who was the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes. Bell used the same logical methods that Holmes would later be known for, often correctly deducing the occupations or medical histories of his patients



Joseph Bell FRCSE (1837–1911) was a Scottish surgeon and lecturer at the medical school of the University of Edinburgh in the 19th century. He is best known as an inspiration for the literary character Sherlock Holmes.

to the awe and delight of his students. Bell taught his pupils to do the same.

Conan Doyle acknowledged his mentor's role by dedicating *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* to him, and writing, "It is most certainly to you that I owe Sherlock Holmes."<sup>2</sup> Bell later said, "Conan Doyle was one of the best students I ever had."<sup>1</sup>

While in medical school, Conan Doyle was well regarded for his compassion. One of his classmates said that he had a "very kind and considerate manner toward poor people."<sup>2</sup>

Conan Doyle was cognizant of his family's strained finances, and tried to make money for his educational and day-to-day expenses by condensing his medical education and using the extra time to work as a physician's assistant. While still a medical student in 1880, he joined the crew of a whaling ship as a surgeon, and sailed to the Arctic.

He graduated from Edinburgh University in 1881 with Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery degrees.

After a rather disappointing trip to Africa as a ship medical officer, and a failed attempt at sharing a medical practice with a friend, Conan Doyle moved to Portsmouth in 1882, and opened his own practice as a general practitioner.



Edinburgh University, circa 1880.



Conan Doyle's wife, Louisa Hawkins.

New to the professional world of medicine, and lacking patients as well as personal funds, Conan Doyle was unable to afford staff and new furniture for his practice, and sometimes even food. In his free time, he wrote short stories and

novels, submitting some of them to maga-

zines in the hopes of getting them published and earning some money. During this time, he also wrote his medical thesis on *tabes dorsalis* (a complication of untreated syphilis involving the spinal cord).

In 1885, Conan Doyle married Louisa Hawkins, his first wife. The following year, he wrote *A Study in Scarlet*, the first story featuring Sherlock Holmes. It was published in 1887 to favorable reviews.

Despite receiving many rejection letters regarding his other works, Conan Doyle continued to write, and in 1889 was invited to dinner with Oscar Wilde and a publisher. The two authors were asked to each write a story for publication. Conan Doyle produced *The Sign of Four* (the second Sherlock Holmes novel), and Wilde submitted *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Literature consumed increasing amounts of Conan Doyle's time, but he was still practicing medicine, and decided to specialize rather than continue as a general



practitioner. He and his wife traveled to Vienna in 1891 so that he could train in ophthalmology. Upon their return to Britain a few weeks later, Conan Doyle opened a practice in London, but was disappointed by the lack of patients.

*The Strand* magazine, founded in 1891, offered him a contract for more stories featuring Sherlock Holmes. After suffering a severe bout of influenza, Conan Doyle

decided to close his medical practice and devote himself to his literary career.

The British public responded enthusiastically to the tales of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Published every month in *The Strand*, Conan Doyle's stories were eagerly awaited and ravenously devoured by readers, many of whom believed Holmes and Watson were real people.

While he was surprised and amused by the popularity of his creations, Conan Doyle grew worried that his other works, both fiction and non-fiction, would not be taken seriously. He grew tired of his most famous character, and in 1893 wrote *The Final Problem*, the story in which Holmes apparently dies at Reichenbach Falls while battling the nefarious Professor Moriarty.

The reading public was as devastated at Holmes' death as was Watson. In the streets, people wore black bands on their arms as a sign of mourning. One upset female reader wrote Conan Doyle a letter, addressing him as "You brute."<sup>3</sup>

### Beyond Sherlock Holmes

Conan Doyle wrote a play about the Napoleonic Wars that he sent to actor Henry Irving and his friend Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula*. He also struck up a friendship with J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*.

His family life was tainted by tragedy when his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which at the time was incurable, and considered a death sentence. Between trips to Switzerland for his wife's health and a literary tour of the United States and Canada where readers embraced Sherlock Holmes with as much warmth as the British, Conan Doyle exchanged letters with Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*).

An ardent patriot, Conan Doyle was eager to serve the

British Empire. In 1895, while visiting Egypt with his wife, he volunteered as a British war correspondent during the Mahdist War.

In 1900, he joined the British war effort in the Boer War in South Africa as a physician in a privately funded medical unit. "I rather felt it was a duty," he wrote to his mother.<sup>1</sup> He encountered appalling conditions at the hospital in Blomfontein, where a typhoid epidemic ravaged the city. Hospital staff risked their lives to save as many patients as possible with limited supplies and the specter of war. More than a few physicians, nurses, and orderlies succumbed to the disease. "We lived in the midst of death—and death in its vilest, filthiest form,"<sup>1</sup> Conan Doyle said.

Even though it had been years since he practiced medicine, a war artist visiting the hospital said of Conan Doyle, "He was a doctor pure and simple...I never saw a man throw himself into duty so thoroughly, heart-and-soul."<sup>1</sup>

Conan Doyle used the influence of his pen on behalf of patients, writing to the *British Medical Journal* in support of vaccines that could prevent the death of thousands of British troops.<sup>2</sup>

Conan Doyle returned home several months later and began writing again, this time producing *The Great Boer War* in which he provided his thoughts on the British military and the need for reforms. He also wrote the pamphlet *The War in South Africa*, which defended the British cause in the Boer War.



In 1902, the year after Queen Victoria died, King Edward VII knighted Conan Doyle for his actions during the Boer War—not for his literary works, although the king was a fan of Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle was determined to decline this great honor as he believed he did nothing more than his duty. "All my work for the State would seem tainted if I took a so-called reward," he said.<sup>1</sup> However, he accepted when his mother pointed out that to decline was disrespectful to the King.

In 1901, he wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which takes place before Holmes' apparent death in *The Final Problem*. The story was so popular that Conan Doyle was persuaded to bring Holmes back to life in the 1903 short story *The Adventure of the Empty House*.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his family, April 1922.

Photo by Topical Press Agency/Getty Images

His wife died of tuberculosis in 1906, after years of travel in an attempt to delay the inevitable. The following year, he married Jean Leckie, a woman whom he had known for years.

### A champion for social justice and human rights

Conan Doyle continued to champion causes he believed in, and took up the case of George Edalji, a man who had been imprisoned for mutilating livestock. The evidence in the case was questionable, and many believed Edalji had been wrongfully charged with the crime because he was of Indian heritage. When Edalji reached out to Conan Doyle for help, the author conducted his own investigation, and raised public awareness about the possible injustice of the case. Edalji was released from prison.



George Edalji on the day of his release from prison.

Several years later, Conan Doyle took up the case of Oscar Slater, who had been charged with the murder of an elderly woman with what some believed

to be insufficient evidence. Due to the tireless efforts of Conan Doyle, Slater was also released from prison.

Conan Doyle also spoke out for social justice and human rights. He called for reforming divorce laws so that they were more fair to women, as Victorian and Edwardian divorce rights significantly favored husbands over wives. He was outraged by the horrific violation of human rights occurring in the Congo, at the time under Belgian control, and wrote the pamphlet *The Crime in the Congo*.<sup>2</sup>

His feelings on such injustices are echoed by one of the characters in his novel *The Lost World*, "There are times... when every one of us must make a stand for human rights and justice."<sup>4</sup>

Although he no longer practiced medicine, Conan Doyle retained a deep and abiding respect for the medical profession. In 1910, he gave the speech "The Romance

of Medicine" at London's St. Mary's Hospital, in which he conveyed to the medical students the "noble and humane" nature of the medical profession:<sup>1</sup>

I can testify how great a privilege and how valuable a possession it is to be a medical man. The moral training to keep a confidence inviolate, to act promptly on a sudden call, to keep your head in critical moments, to be kind and yet strong—where can you, outside medicine, get such a training as that? To the man who has mastered *Grey's Anatomy*, life holds no further terrors.<sup>1</sup>

When World War I erupted in 1914, Conan Doyle tried to enlist in the British military but was rejected because he was 55-years-old. Undeterred, he wrote war pamphlets and called for the use of life rings on military ships to prevent sailors from drowning in the event of the ship sinking. The life rings became standard issue, and years later, a sailor wrote to him saying, "How thankful we were to receive them."<sup>2</sup>

Conan Doyle toured France, Flanders, and Italy to collect material to chronicle the war for posterity.

After World War I, much of Conan Doyle's time and literary efforts were devoted to spiritualism, which made him a controversial figure. Spiritualism, the belief that the dead can communicate with the living, was particularly influential at a time when the world was still reeling from the horrors of the war. Most could not remember a war of such carnage and barbarity, and there were few people who had not lost a family member, friend, or neighbor in battle.

The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 swept across much of the globe, and between the war and the flu, millions of people died, many of them healthy young adults. Conan Doyle lost a son and a brother in the flu pandemic.

The war served as a trigger for Conan Doyle to share his spirituality beliefs with the world. He felt it would bring comfort to those grieving, and that it was his duty to open the eyes of others to the possibility of existence beyond death. He wrote about, and gave lectures on, spiritualist topics such as ghosts, and held séances in his home.

He became embroiled in the Cottingley Fairies affair, in which two girls produced photographs of fairies and started a worldwide controversy over whether the photographs were real. Conan Doyle believed the photographs were genuine, and championed that side of the debate. His friends and readers had difficulty believing that the creator of a character as devoted to logic as Holmes could believe in fairies. However bewildering his beliefs regarding the supernatural, he stood by them. It was not until decades after his death that one of the girls admitted the photographs had been faked.

In the later years of his life, the indefatigable author and spiritualist advocate continued to tour. He became friends



Alice and leaping fairy, August 1920.

with Harry Houdini. They disagreed over spiritualism, but respected each other's point of view.

Conan Doyle continued to write Sherlock Holmes stories, although some critics remarked that his later stories are not written with the same enthusiasm and attention to detail as the earlier ones.

He toured Africa, and despite having increasingly severe chest pains which he must have known likely indicated advanced coronary artery disease, returned home and traveled around Britain to give speeches and lectures. Conan Doyle died at home, surrounded by his family, in 1930 at the age of 71 years.

Despite his reputation being marred in his later years by his devotion to spiritualism, his friends, colleagues, literary fans, and countless others whose lives he had touched did not forget his character. Barrie, who remained Conan Doyle's friend to the end, wrote that he was "one of the best men I have ever known. There can never have been a more honourable."<sup>2</sup> Those who knew him well thought of him as more than the creator of Sherlock Holmes. His colleague wrote, "It is of him as a man, even above all his triumphs of the pen, that we feel his going most," and "he will be remembered no less as a defender of the defenceless."<sup>2</sup> His funeral was held at his home, where family and friends gathered to celebrate his life, more than to mourn his death.

Conan Doyle wrote of himself, "I have had a life which, for variety and romance, could, I think, hardly be exceeded."<sup>3</sup> His life was full of adventure and travel. He interacted with many of the luminaries of medicine, literature, theater, and politics of the Victorian and Edwardian worlds.

Born into poverty and obscurity, he rose to the heights of literary fame; a fame that lasted not only during his own lifetime but lives on well into the present day. His writing resonates with readers from a variety of ages, cultures, and backgrounds, a hallmark of a gifted author.

Conan Doyle ceaselessly used his influence to serve his country, champion justice, and defend human rights. He spoke for those who could not speak for themselves, and strove to right wrongs when he encountered them. When he believed in someone or something he did so with passion and determination. His life was not merely one of thrill and success, it was also one rich with purpose.

It is only right to acknowledge that Conan Doyle was more than the creator of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson; his legacy should not only be a literary one. He made no lasting contributions to the field of medicine, but he believed that being a physician was an honor, and "a precious heritage for life."<sup>1</sup> He understood the tremendous responsibility, and potential for harm, that accompany that honor. "When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge,"<sup>5</sup> Conan Doyle said.

He dedicated his life to medicine, partly in practice and entirely in spirit. And to those who have the privilege of following in his footsteps as members of the medical profession, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle left these words:

Unselfishness, fearlessness, humanity, self-effacement, professional honor—these are the proud qualities which medicine has ever demanded...it is for you...to see that they shall not decline during the generation to come.<sup>1</sup>

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