

# SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, SHERLOCK HOLMES AND FREEMASONRY

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*Bro. Robert T. Runciman wrote an article (by the same title) that was published in Vol. /04, Ars Quatuor Corollarum for the Year 1991. This STB was taken from that article.*

In Beeton's Christmas Annual of 1887, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presented to the public A Study in Scarlet, his first Sherlock Holmes story. From this beginning there followed fifty-six short stories and three novels with Sherlock Holmes and his 'Boswell,' John H. Watson, M.D., as the principal characters. From the 'canon', as the short stories and novels are referred to by Sherlockians, there have emerged 'writings upon writings' upon every topic imaginable, including references to Freemasonry.

Arthur Charles Ignatius Conan Doyle was born on 22 May 1859 at Picardy Place, Edinburgh, the son of Charles Doyle and Mary Foley. He was the first in a family which included three sisters and a brother. The father, Charles Doyle, was a civil servant and an artist who was unworldly and impracticable, and his family suffered because of it. His mother was the guiding force in the family and in Conan Doyle's life.

Of his boyhood, Conan Doyle recalls that it was spartan. At the age of 10 he was sent to Hodder, where boys were prepared for entry to Stonyhurst, a prominent public school in Lancashire.

When he was ready to pursue his higher education it was decided that he should enter medical school at Edinburgh University. He entered in 1876 and graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Medicine in 1881. As part of his medical studies, he spent seven months as surgeon on the whaling ship Hope in the Arctic in 1880. After taking his medical degree Doyle sailed to South Africa for four months as ship's doctor on board the Mayumba.

Conan Doyle married Louise Hawkins in 1885. From that union were born two children. His wife, whom he called 'Touie' died of tuberculosis in 1906 after a thirteen-year illness and despite recuperative treatment at several locations. In 1907, he married Jean Leckie and there were three children of that marriage.

Conan Doyle is reported to have been able to write his stories in a variety of situations and circumstances, for example, while riding on a train or in a room full of people, and his handwritten manuscripts indicate that they required very little revision.

Although he is best-known for the Holmes canon, Conan Doyle considered himself to be an historical novelist and that is where his primary interest lay. Among many such works from his pen were Micah Clark, The Firm of Girdlestone, The White Company, and The Refugees. He

also wrote many short stories, including those about Brigadier Gerard and Sir Nigel and others on the themes of mystery and terror. There is a further collection entitled Round the Red Lamp which relates to his medical practice and The Stark Munro Letters which are autobiographical in character. But his real autobiography was Memories and Adventures.

He was quite irritated that his detective stories received more attention than his other work. In 1923 he wrote: 'I believe that if I had never touched Holmes, who tended to obscure my higher work, my position in literature would at the present moment be a more commanding one.'

Indeed Conan Doyle became so disenchanted with Sherlock Holmes that in 'The Final Problem', written in 1893, Holmes was killed in a fall over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland while in deadly combat with Professor Moriarty, the 'Napoleon' of crime and his archenemy. Holmes's death dismayed readers so much that letters of complaint poured in. In one, a lady addressed the author as 'you brute' and even his mother begged him not to kill Holmes. Some men wore black armbands in mourning! In 1903, Holmes was restored to life in 'The Adventure of the Empty House'. From August 1901 to April 1902, The Hound of the Baskervilles appeared in serial form in The Strand Magazine, but Conan Doyle remained adamant that Holmes was dead and this was a previously unchronicled case.

He was also a prolific writer on various topics of current interest and wrote innumerable letters to the Press. He was responsible for introducing downhill skiing into Switzerland, the introduction of metal helmets for combat soldiers and the inflatable life-preserver for sailors. He was also an energetic champion of divorce reform and was one of the first proponents of a tunnel connecting England and France. Although he was too old for active service in World War 1, he was actively engaged in the war effort on the home front and wrote and spoke about the hostilities.

Arthur Conan Doyle was initiated on 26 January 1887 at the age of 27, passed on 23 February 1887 and raised on 23 March 1887 in Phoenix Lodge No. 257, Southsea, Hampshire. He resigned in 1889 and rejoined in 1902 but finally withdrew in 1911 without having made further progress in the Craft. The records of the United Grand Lodge of England contain no indication of his having affiliated with any other lodge.

The October 1901 edition of Masonic Illustrated, page 29, indicates that Conan Doyle attended a lodge at Bloemfontein with Rudyard Kipling during the Boer War. Upon his return home in the same year he was made an honorary member of The Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No. 1 in Edinburgh. This membership was conferred upon him when he accepted an invitation to speak at a Bums' Night Dinner. In this speech he confirmed the many reports which had been received of the value of Freemasonry on the battlefield. Prisoners on both sides, when found to be freemasons, were invariably treated with more courtesy and consideration than would otherwise have been the case.

We will use two examples of references to Freemasonry in Conan Doyle's work:

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MUSGRAVE RITUAL (The Strand, 1893)

Reginald Musgrave, an acquaintance of Holmes, asked him to apply 'those powers with which you used to amaze us' to something strange and inexplicable in his ancestral home in Sussex. The butler who had been given his notice of dismissal for prying into family affairs had disappeared without a trace and Holmes was retained to find him. During the investigation Holmes took possession of a ritual which had been in the Musgrave family for generations. He used it to locate both the missing butler and an ancient crown of the King of England (Charles I).

The document which Holmes took into his possession was described by its owner as 'the strange catechism to which each Musgrave had to submit when he came to man's estate'. He read out the questions and answers:

Whose was it? His who is gone.

Who shall have it? He who will come. Where was the sun? Over the oak.

Where was the shadow? Under the elm. How was it stepped?

North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two and by two, west by one and by one, and so under. What shall we give for it? All that is ours.

Why should we give it? For the sake of the trust.

Professor Jay MacPherson of the University of Toronto is of the opinion that this catechism had its origins in Freemasonry. Barrett G. Potter, in his 'Sherlock Holmes and the Masonic Connection' also believes that the ritual had its roots in masonic catechisms used for the instruction of the brethren.

#### THE VALLEY OF FEAR (The Strand, 1914)

This full-length novel was written by Conan Doyle three years after he resigned his membership of Phoenix Lodge. In it Holmes was called in to investigate the death of John Douglas and his wife at Birlstone Manor, Sussex. Among the clues were a card with the symbol V.V.341 scrawled upon it and a brand mark on the deceased's arm. The V.V.341 referred to the Ancient Order of Freemen, the 'Scowrers' of Vemmissa Lodge No. 341. In the course of the story lodge proceedings are discussed and the following ensues with reference to Birdy Edwards (alias John McMurdo):

'John McMurdo', said the voice, 'are you already a member of the Ancient Order of Freemen?'

He bowed in assent.

'Is your lodge No. 29, Chicago?'

He bowed again.

"Dark nights are unpleasant", said the voice.

'Yes, for strangers to travel', he answered.

'The clouds are heavy.'

'Yes, a storm is approaching.'

'Are the brethren satisfied?' asked the Bodymaster.

There was a general murmur of assent.

'We know, Brother, by your sign and by your countersign that you are indeed one of us', said McGinty. 'We would have you know, however, that in this country and in other countries of these parts we have certain rites, and also certain duties of our own which call for good men. Are you ready to be tested?'

This is a catechism somewhat similar to that in

'The Musgrave Ritual'.

Other stories with Masonic references are:

A STUDY IN SCARLET ( 1887) A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA (The Strand, 1891) THE ADVENTURES OF THE REDHEADED LEAGUE (The Strand, 1891 ) THE STOCKBROKERS CLERK (The Strand, 1893)

THE ADVENTURE OF THE YELLOW FACE (The Strand, 1893)

THE ADVENTURE OF THE NORWOOD BUILDER (The Strand, 1903)

THE ADVENTURE OF THE RETIRED COLOURMAN (The Strand, 1927)

The name Sherlock Holmes conjures up images of Victorian England, swirling fog and a tall thin detective with a deerstalker hat, magnifying glass and a pipe with a curved stem. For Sherlockians he lives and their writings have produced voluminous comments upon the man. Vincent Starrett, a leading Sherlockian, in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, observed that 'The existence of Sherlock Holmes is, however, something more than a matter of mere faith. That he emerged from the pages of a book may be a concern for scholarly regard, but it can hardly be denied that he has taken his place in the living world.'

It is reported that the French General Humbert, famous in World War 1, asked of Conan Doyle: 'Sherlock Holmes, est-ce qu'il est un soldat dans l'armée anglaise?' [Is Sherlock Holmes a soldier in the English army?] There was an embarrassing moment and then Doyle replied: 'Mais, mon général, il est trop vieux pour le service' [But, General, he is too old for active service].

Conan Doyle died on 7 July 1930 at Crowborough in Sussex and was buried in the garden of the family home at Windlesham in Surrey. The headstone was of British oak and is inscribed only

with his name, his date of birth and the four words 'Steel True, Blade Straight.' Eighteen years earlier, without realizing it, he had written his own epitaph: 'I have wrought my simple plan, if I give one hour of joy to the boy who's half a man or the man who's half a boy.'