

A. CONAN DOYLE, NINETEENTH CENTURY MAN

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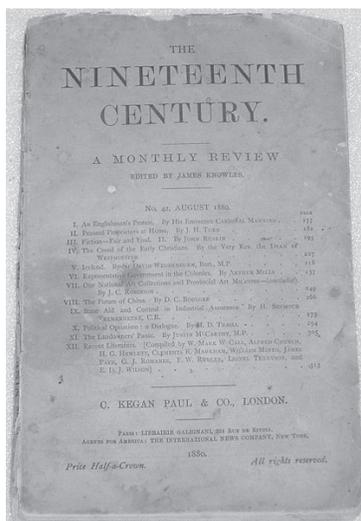
“the little pipe which conveys a tiny rill from
inexhaustible reservoirs of eternal truth.”

— A. Conan Doyle, 1884.

Many a Holmesian revisiting *A Study in Scarlet*, written in March and April of 1886, and published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887, has wondered about Conan Doyle's sources for it. The late Jack Tracy wrote, and published himself, *Conan Doyle and the Latter-Day Saints*, a small book about one aspect, the Mormon element in the novel. He was perforce speculative because the manuscript has never been seen, and the sole page of notes for the novel which does survive is silent about its American content. Many others have weighed in as well. For example, in *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: A Textbook of Friendship* (1944), the first attempt to annotate the Canon, Christopher Morley opined appealingly:

[Robert Louis Stevenson's] *New Arabian Nights* and *The Dynamiter* had a strong influence on the imagination of young Dr. Doyle. There are many curious blood transfusions in literature. The least successful episode in *The Dynamiter* was the Mormon fantasy written by Stevenson's wife: it need not be examined too harshly, since Fanny Stevenson invented it chiefly to amuse her husband while he was ill in bed. But Dr. Doyle was evidently impressed. When he interpolated a Mormon theme into *A Study in Scarlet* he probably thought he was taking a cue from his much admired fellow alumnus of Edinburgh. Actually he was imitating Mrs. Stevenson. . . . But it is well to remember that in the late Eighties no young writer could possibly take up the pen without having Stevenson in mind. Few writers in any age can set their notions down on paper without either imitating or reacting from what is then fashionable in print.

Perish the thought that we're suggesting Stevenson wasn't a factor in Conan Doyle's thinking as he began to write. We believe Stevenson was, and not out on the Great Alkali Plain alone. But based on our annotation of *The Narrative of John Smith*,



The Nineteenth Century

Conan Doyle's long-lost first attempt at a novel in 1883-84,¹ we believe we have a new clue as to the origins of the first Sherlock Holmes tale.

I

John Smith was written in 1883. Its protagonist, a middle-aged Everyman laid up in his boarding-house room for a week by gout, takes this bedridden opportunity to ruminate on many subjects, including religion, medicine and science, literature and the arts, and war and statesmanship. Conan Doyle planned to publish it anonymously, so heterodox did he feel were the views expressed in this novel with a “personal-social-political complexion.” When it was finished, he mailed off the manuscript to a publisher, but it disappeared in the mails, never to be seen again. In spring of 1884 he began rewriting it from memory, but after some 42,000 words he stopped, practically in mid-sentence. He never completed it (nor ever alluded publicly to this rewriting), but he kept the new manuscript close by for years, dipping into it repeatedly for passages that appear in other published work of his.

The manuscript contained, we found, foreshadowings of the Sherlock Holmes tales to come. On page 99 of our edition of *The Narrative of John Smith* is a passage from it that reads:

1. British Library, 2011.

Whatever may happen in this world, I am convinced that in the next, every male soul will have a female one attached to it, or combined with it, to round it off and give it symmetry. So thought the old Mormon who adduced it as an argument in favour of his creed. ‘You cannot,’ said he, ‘take your money, your railway, or your mining stocks into the next world with you; but our marriage is not only for life but for eternity, and we shall have our wives and children with us, and so make a good start in the world to come.’

A Mormon, even an old one quoted anonymously to support a point of Conan Doyle's, reminded us of course of the American portion of *A Study in Scarlet*. We tracked the quotation to a magazine article of January 1884: “A New View of Mormonism” by John W. Barclay, M.P., in a London monthly called *The Nineteenth Century*. The date meant it could not have appeared in the original version of *The Narrative of John Smith*, written in 1883, and so was recent reading on Conan Doyle's part. In other words, he was interested in and reading about Mormons in 1884. (And this was not the sole reference to them in *The Narrative of John Smith*.)²

Barclay gave *Nineteenth Century's*

2. Nor was Barclay's article the only one in *Nineteenth Century* discussing Mormons. Since Conan Doyle was interested in the American West generally, he likely also read, in March 1882's issue, “The Yellowstone Geysers” by Francis Francis (sic), with much more about Mormons, the alkali plains, and the dialect of the American West. C. F. Gordon Cumming's “Locusts and Farmers of America,” January 1885, also touched upon Mormons at one point. And in general terms re: Americans, Conan Doyle may also have noted an observation in George Jacob Holyoake's “American and Canadian Notes,” August 1885, that “America is a land where human nature, political and social, being at large, some unsolved problems are always on hand there. . . . Devoid alike of king or prelate, without the traditions and authority of throne or mitre, men may do in the United States the thing they will, and, as a rule, they take the opportunity of doing it.” (Especially way out West.)

readers an open-minded account of the Mormon Church's creation, early travails, and migration to Utah, and its settlement there. It also described a regional topography and climate consistent with Conan Doyle's depiction of it in *A Study in Scarlet*. Unlike others of his era, though, Barclay took a sunny view of Utah's Mormons, and their struggles to turn the Salt Lake region into a land of milk and honey. "It is not easy to discover the hostility," he said, "toward the Mormons manifested by Americans in the Eastern states." (By many Britons too, for that matter.) So Barclay's depiction of Utah's Mormons would hardly have suggested the loathsome Enoch Drebber to Conan Doyle, despite Barclay discussing Mormon polygamy at some length, as one reason for the hostility. (Behind it, Barclay suspected Gentile desire to disenfranchise Mormons for their own benefit, where he saw instead a community of model citizens whose one quirk, so to speak, was practiced only by a minority of Mormons, and supported by the women involved.)

Taken by itself, in fact, one might never suspect that the author of *A Study in Scarlet* had ever read Barclay's account of an honest, industrious, sterling community—except that Conan Doyle quoted from it in *The Narrative of John Smith*.

II

He not only quoted from the magazine, he mentioned it by name at another point in this first novel of his, in the passage excerpted at the head of this essay. For young Dr. Conan Doyle, *Nineteenth Century* appears to have been a font of progressive thought suitable for his advanced era (and John Smith's, since the middle-aged Smith was a mouthpiece for Conan Doyle's own 23-year-old opinions about life and the world). The full passage naming the magazine made quite a grandiose claim for it—

There are prophets now as there were prophets then. Our modern prophet wears a broadcloth coat and writes for *The Nineteenth Century*, but he may none the less be the little pipe which conveys a tiny rill from the inexhaustible reservoirs of eternal truth.

—but one actually justified to a surprising extent by the magazine. *Nineteenth Century* was an impressive monthly periodical of public affairs founded in 1877 by architect and editor James (later Sir James) Knowles, who had a particular interest in the conflict between science and religion. Its pages were

filled with articles about the leading issues, questions, and controversies of the day, written by scholars, government officials both civilian and military, journalists, clergymen, scientists, doctors, lawyers and judges, conservatives and reformers, and others. Conan Doyle read it admiringly while practicing medicine,³ and using his free time to establish himself as a writer of fiction, including *A Study in Scarlet*.

To demonstrate further the high regard he had for *Nineteenth Century*, he not only read it, but contributed to it himself once during his Southsea years, an article in August 1888 "On the Geographical Distribution of British Intellect." It was an interesting topic to pursue, at the pivotal age of twenty-nine—perhaps suggestive of a persisting insecurity as a writer, and of being an ambitious Celt striving to make his way in Anglo-Saxon England's professional world. It opened:

Many races have helped in the making of Great Britain, some predominating in one part of the island, and some in another. Amid the conflicting strains of Euskarian, Celt, Pict, Scot, Saxon, Dane, Scandinavian, and Norman, it cannot but be of interest to observe which portions of the country are at the present day most prolific in men of intellect, and what types of mind prevail in the various subdivisions of the United Kingdom.

The first difficulty in such an examination is to draw a hard and fast line as to who shall and who shall not be admitted to be a man of distinguished intellect. Such a division must to a large extent be arbitrary and artificial. For want of a better test, however, it may be taken that the names which we are entitled to use in our calculations are such as could not be excluded from any edition of *Men of the Time* or a good biographical dictionary. This is, of course, but a shifting of the responsibility of selection on to other shoulders, yet it affords a rough test of merit which is exacting enough to serve our purpose.

Then came ten pages of near-stupefying analysis of names, birthplaces, and

3. In "My Start at Southsea," ch. seven of *Memories and Adventures* (1923), Conan Doyle spoke of his drifting into Bohemian habits in the early 1880s, but he liked to exaggerate this quality in himself. *The Nineteenth Century* was not a magazine for devotees of Bohemian life.

residences he had unearthed in order to investigate his curious proposition, finally concluding:

it may be briefly summed up that towns have a higher intellectual activity than the country, and that agricultural districts are usually richer in great men than manufacturing or mining parts. The lowlands of Scotland, Aberdeenshire, Dublin, Hampshire, Suffolk, London, Devonshire, Gloucestershire, and Berkshire, are, in the order named, the divisions of the kingdom which have during the last twenty or thirty years produced the most plentiful crop of distinguished citizens. The eastern and southern counties are in the aggregate superior in intelligence to the northern and midland. These in turn are superior to Cornwall and Wales, while the mental nadir is to be found in the western province of Ireland,

and signing it A. Conan Doyle, M.D. It's unclear where he felt this analysis left *him*—Irish on both parents' sides, born in Scotland, educated there and in northern England, now living in suburban Hampshire; but at any rate, he could take consolation in the fact that his autodidact mother, as ambitious for him as he was himself, came from eastern, not western, Ireland. And presumably he was pleased by his article prompting two Portsmouth newspaper editorials, mentions in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and perhaps other London papers, and, in the light-reading periodical *Chat*, an outright parody of his article called "Hampshire on Stilts by Donan Coyle."⁴

III

What else may Conan Doyle have read in *Nineteenth Century* to inform *A Study in Scarlet*? We found other interesting possibilities, including first of all two articles about the very nature of the literature he was writing at the time, and would write again in his first Sherlock Holmes tale. *Saturday Review of Literature* readers will know that he first submitted *A Study in Scarlet* in 1886 to James Payn, literary adviser to publishers Smith, Elder & Co., and editor of nation's foremost literary periodical, *The Cornhill Magazine*. The two men had enjoyed cordial relations

4. Collected in *My Evening with Sherlock Holmes* (Ferret Fantasy: 1981), John Michael Gibson & Richard Lancelyn Green eds., editors also of their invaluable Conan Doyle bibliography.

ever since Payn had accepted Conan Doyle's breakthrough story "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" for *Cornhill*, where it appeared as the January 1884 issue's lead item.

But Payn turned down *A Study in Scarlet*, calling it a "shilling dreadful." Perhaps that was better than "penny fiction," as Payn scaled literature for the masses, but it also spoke volumes about the fashionability of the day's sundry literature. "Penny Fiction" was the title of an article by Payn in January 1881's *Nineteenth Century*. In the quarter-century since Wilkie Collins had coined the term "the unknown public" for penny fiction's audience, said Payn, it had grown many-fold—archly noting as well that while their discrimination and taste had not increased along with it, penny fiction now "commanded the services of our most eminent novel writers." His own opinion of it was low—not because it resorted to sensation, but almost because it didn't, or not enough for him, anyway. His *Nineteenth Century* article seemed to describe not shilling-shockers, but romance fiction, and of the blandest sort: "crude and ineffective in their pictures of domestic life"—"deficient in dramatic incident"—"vapid," "dull"—"indeed, the total absence of humour, and even of the least attempt at it, is most remarkable."

"And yet it attracts, it is calculated, four millions of readers," marveled Payn: "a fact which makes my mouth water like that of Tantalus." For aspiring-writer A. Conan Doyle, this may have been a good marketing tip, even though Payn recommended penny fiction for "that respectable class who have a horror of 'sensation,'" and Conan Doyle had an undeniable weakness for the latter. In June 1882, for example, settled in Southsea now, he told his mother, in the same paragraph mentioning Payn as an literary exemplar (no less than *facile princeps*⁵) that he'd written "a wonderful story" called "The Winning Shot" "about mesmerism and murder & chemical magnetism and a man's eating his own ears because he was hungry."⁶

"I was quite prepared to have my blood curdled," griped Payn in "Penny Fiction." "My lips were whetted for a full draught of gore; yet, I give you my word, there was nothing in the whole story worse than a

5. *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters* (Penguin Press, 2007), ed. by this essay's authors, p. 165.

6. "I have half a mind to try Blackwoods again" for it, he continued, but settled instead for the far less lofty *Bow Bells*, self-described "magazine of literature and art, for family reading."

bankruptcy." This may even have been one example of penny fiction he'd taken for a thriller because of "a Private Inquiry Office, with a detective in it." Yet when Payn had the chance five years later to publish Conan Doyle's detective tale, he sent it back. "Verily," muttered Conan Doyle, "literature is a difficult oyster to open." Perhaps Payn was happy to read shilling dreadfuls, but not to be seen publishing them. His editorial work, he'd implied in *Nineteenth Century*, was for:

the few thousands of persons who had hitherto imagined themselves to be the public—so far, at least, as their being the arbiters of popularity in respect to writers of fiction were concerned—

but who, along with him, were discovering that they were in fact "nothing of the kind." And the majority of penny fiction's fans, he concluded dolefully, were female domestic servants.

Two years later, however, in February 1883, Thomas Wright, the author of studies of London's poor and working-classes (e.g., *The Great Unwashed*, 1868), contradicted Payn "Concerning the Unknown Public." Wright (estimating penny fiction's audience not at four millions, but five) denied the female domestic servant canard:

The bulk of this great body of readers comes from classes that, in their own estimation at any rate, are several 'cuts' above the domestic class. They belong to the 'young lady' classes—the young ladies of the counters, of the more genteel female handicrafts generally, and the dressmaking and millinery professions in particular. To these are added a numerous section of young ladies unattached—young ladies whose parents consider them, or who consider themselves, too genteel to go out to work. They live at home in such ease as the family struggle to maintain a 'real genteel' appearance upon an insufficient income will permit. . . . As the young ladies carry their tastes into married life, the unknown public also includes numbers of wives of clerks, shop-keepers, and well-to-do artisans. Many youths of the classes here spoken of read the penny journals, and they are not without men readers in the same grades of society. . . . [And] penny fiction journals are no uncommon sight in the workshop world, especially among hands who stay in the shop to their meals.

Penny fiction's products, he declared, "cater not for the domestic-servant class, but for the lower, middle, or let-us-be-genteel-or-die classes."⁷ Nor did readers of penny fiction read that alone, but better literature as well, he insisted; particularly given the spread of public education since the 1870 Act creating England's board schools—the "beacons of the future" extolled by Sherlock Holmes in "The Naval Treaty."

Conan Doyle would have loved to see *A Study in Scarlet* serialized in *The Cornhill*, or published by Smith, Elder, but after several more rejections, he resigned himself to the shilling-shocker's fate: "As Ward, Lock & Co. made a specialty of cheap and often sensational literature, I sent it to them," he wrote in *Memories and Adventures*. For most aesthetes and highbrow critics, of course, Sherlock Holmes would *always* be shilling dreadfuls (if eventually priced too high to be penny fiction). In 1896, when Conan Doyle had quite a range of work to his credit, he along with several other popular writers were savaged by Henry Harland, editor of the avant-garde *Yellow Book*, as "the very Dogs of Bookland," charged with "violation of the decencies of art, low truckling to the tastes of the purchaser, commonness, vulgarity, total lack of suppleness and distinction." All that Conan Doyle had produced, alleged the self-described "Yellow Dwarf," was "a litter of assorted Mongrels, going cheap—*regardez moi leurs pattes!*" And while other critics of the day might be less caustic, like Arthur William À Beckett in his essay "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle" in May 1904's *English Illustrated Magazine*, there was often still a touch of smug condescension in comments like: "Although equal to work of all kinds, Conan Doyle is best known to the multitude as the author whose books are the highest in popularity in the reading room of Scotland Yard."

Thomas Wright in 1883 had known better. In his *Nineteenth Century* article he had prophesied progress in taste that James Payn had not foreseen in his article on the same subject. "The demand for and appreciation of a better class of fiction than is at present furnished to them by their serials already exists among the unknown public, and is steadily increasing," Wright claimed. As far as we're concerned, and we daresay our own readers as well, this would come less than ten years later, in 1891 with the launch of *The Strand Magazine*, where

7. Discriminating there, which Payn had not, between penny, two-penny, and three-penny fiction.

Sherlock Holmes in short-story form would grip “known” and “unknown” reading publics alike.

IV

But that spoke to the 1880s-90s writing market, for people like A. Conan Doyle. What *we* wondered about most, after discovering Barclay’s Mormons article, and Francis’s related one about the American West, were others that may have informed *A Study in Scarlet*. And there were, we found, other possibilities in the early/mid 1880s *Nineteenth Century*.

For Conan Doyle was not very familiar with London in 1886 when he wrote his first Sherlock Holmes tale. He had not lived there so far, and his principal exposures to it had been brief youthful visits to his Doyle relatives who lived principally in quite respectable Maida Vale. The first was in 1874, when he was fifteen years old, and the second in 1878 when he was in medical school. He saw many popular sights on those occasions,⁸ but not London’s seamy side, unless one counts the Chamber of Horrors at Mme. Tussaud’s wax museum, visited by him at the impressionable age of fifteen when it was in Baker Street.

For would-be novelists needing to describe early-1880s London, some possibilities of interest in *Nineteenth Century* were:

☞ March 1883, “Our Hospitals” by Henry C. Burdett, including St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, where Watson meets Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*. Bart’s was a very crowded and busy place, we learn from Burdett who, though later knighted for philanthropic work as a financier, had direct experience of hospitals in Birmingham and in London, where he’d studied medicine at Guy’s Hospital.

☞ August 1882, “Home of the Poor in London,” by Richard Assheton Cross, a previous and future Home Secretary. His concern was how public health was menaced by the way huge numbers of London’s populace were forced to live. “There are houses, courts, and alleys, within certain well-known and well-defined areas, which are unfit for human habitation,” he wrote, where a prevalence of ill health could be attributed:

to the closeness, narrowness, and bad arrangement or bad condition of the streets and houses, or groups of houses, within such areas, and to

8. For his contemporary descriptions of those visits to London, see *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, pp. 63-67 and pp. 101-07.

the want of light, air, ventilation, or proper conveniences, and to other sanitary defects. These courts and alleys are built close together, have often very small, and almost as often no yards. They are frequently approached by a narrow passage, it may be from thirty to forty feet long and only some three feet broad, under a house at either end, and in many cases without any thoroughfare at all.

While Cross was under no illusions about the character of districts like Whitechapel, he realized that in others were “respectable and hard-working of the labouring class living there against their will, but compelled to live there because they can find no other place wherein to live.” So it should not surprise us to find that Conan Doyle had the lowly Police Constable John Rance’s home reached by Holmes’ cab “threading its way through a long succession of dingy streets and dreary byways.”

In the dingiest and dreariest of them our driver suddenly came to a stand. “That’s Audley Court in there,” he said, pointing to a narrow slit in the line of dead-coloured brick. . . . The narrow passage led us into a quadrangle paved with flags and lined by sordid dwellings. We picked our way among groups of dirty children and through lines of discoloured linen, until we came to Number 46, the door of which was decorated with a small slip of brass on which the name of Rance was engraved.

Or that No. 3, Lauriston Gardens, off the Brixton Road,

wore an ill-omened and minatory look. It was one of four which stood back some little way from the street, two being occupied and two empty. The latter looked out with three tiers of vacant melancholy windows, which were blank and dreary, save that here and there a ‘To Let’ card had developed like a cataract upon the bleared panes. A small garden sprinkled over with a scattered eruption of sickly plants separated each of these houses from the street, and was traversed by a narrow pathway, yellowish in colour, and consisting apparently of a mixture of clay and of gravel. The whole place was very sloppy from the rain which had fallen through the night.

☞ November 1882, “Public Works in London,” by G. Shaw Lefevre, the First Commissioner of Works and Public Buildings in Gladstone’s government, describing the growth of London and its population over the two previous decades, and exploring the contrasts between its affluent districts and its “vast districts of unredeemed ugliness, lowness and poverty,” with human life and behavior to match.

☞ January 1884, “Statues and Monuments of London,” by Lefevre again, this time detailing how London honored Britain’s monarchs, statesmen, naval and military heroes and their victories, and great men of arts and letters.

☞ January 1883, “On Taste in Dress” by painter and sculptor G. F. Watts, opining on what London women wore—followed in March by Lady Paget, intimate of the Queen, setting his male viewpoint straight in her retort “Common Sense in Dress and Fashion.” (Though Conan Doyle, if necessary, had plenty of sisters for that.)

☞ Occasional articles along the lines of January 1883’s “The Procedure of the High Court of Justice,” and May 1883’s “The Law a Respector of Persons,” offering informal education in British criminal and civil law no doubt useful to emerging detective-story writers.

☞ And while Conan Doyle himself was unmusical (said he, more than once), for Holmes’ “plays the violin well” pastime, there was a lengthy article about “Violins,” particularly Stradivarius, by astronomer Sir William Huggins in August 1885’s issue.

V

These examples and others we can cite would be as nothing did we not know that Conan Doyle was reading *Nineteenth Century* in the 1880s. So we turn to the article “Detective Police” in May 1883’s issue. “There can hardly be a doubt but that certain recent events, both in England and Ireland,” it began, “should teach us that we ought in this country to take a new departure as regards the detection of crime,” continuing:

it is a curious fact that as regards a detective force we are very little if at all better off than our grandfathers were half a century ago, when they had to reply upon Townsend, the famous Bow Street runner, as the only man in England who could hunt out thieves or murderers, and bring them to justice.

The writer, Malcolm Ronald Laing Meason, was born in Edinburgh in 1824 (says *Men and Women of the Time: a Dictionary of Contemporaries*, 1899); educated in France and England; served as an army officer until 1851 (and in the First Afghan War, 1841-42); and thereafter worked as a journalist in India, Paris, and England.

(Meason also wrote for *Colburn's United Service Magazine*; e.g., "Besieged in Candahar," July 1882. We started wondering—Portsmouth being an important naval and military base, and Southsea an officers' retirement community—if Conan Doyle read *Colburn's* as well. During 1882-83, it ran an unsigned "Recollections of an Army Surgeon" series, and also a fiction serial called *Captain Kinks*. In May 1881's installment, Kinks meets a young woman: "She was good-looking, had finely-formed features, and a face, softer, and more pointed toward its lower part than is common with English women. To evident health her appearance added the grace that certainly betokens good, and gentle education." And the first words out of her mouth? "My name is Morsten." As Dr. Gray Chandler Briggs once remarked, there's something positively spooky about Conan Doyle.)

Meason's "Detective Police" went on to explore the lamentable differences between the uniformed British police's efficiency at maintaining public order, and its plainclothes detective force's pathetic inability to solve crimes:

When once a crime is committed in London, when once the thieves get fairly off with the property they have taken, or if the unknown murderer manages to keep out of the way for a few hours after he has killed his victim, the detection of crime seems to be a problem which our so-called detectives have not the capacity in most cases to solve.

He contrasted England's approach unfavorably to France's very different one, giving examples of it from the several years he'd lived in Paris, which stressed the French detective corps' avoidance of publicity, exploitation of informers, skilful use of disguises, and clandestine penetration of the French underworld.⁹

But more than such techniques was required, he insisted: deeper knowledge of crime, and the application of science. "In France," he said (emphasis in the original), "the art—for it certainly merits being so

9. Meason had previously published an article about "The French Detective Police" in February 1881's *Macmillan's Magazine*.

DETECTIVE POLICE.

THERE can hardly be a doubt but that certain recent events, both in England and Ireland, should teach us that we ought in this country to take a new departure as regards the detection of crime. With the most efficient police in Europe, so far as the maintenance of public order is concerned, it is a curious fact that as regards a detective force we are very little if at all better off than our grandfathers were half a century ago, when they had to rely upon Townsend, the famous Bow Street runner, as the one only man in England who could hunt out thieves or murderers, and bring them to justice. It is very true that we have, both in London and the provinces, a considerable number of what are called detective officers; but except that these individuals wear plain clothes instead of uniform, they differ little or nothing from the ordinary constables of the force. Not only to the dangerous classes, but to the Londoner of any experience, our 'plain clothes officers,' as they are called, are as well known as if they were clad in blue tunics and helmets. In fact they don't pretend to be what they certainly are not, a secret body of public servants, whose mission it is to detect crime, to spot down criminals, and, without making themselves known to those they are always fighting against, to put the authorities on the right track as to how and where criminals are to be found, and the crimes they have committed brought to light.

It is only fair to state that a great deal of the crime committed in London meets with the punishment it deserves. But, with a few rare exceptions, the criminals are invariably laid hands on by the ordinary police, in the everyday way of duty. Considering the immense districts of outlying houses the force has to watch over, more particularly in many of the suburbs, and taking into consideration how easy of access all our habitations are, it is marvellous to note how wonderfully well the Metropolitan Police must do its duty. When we remember the almost interminable streets and roads, many of them composed of detached and semi-detached houses, that the police have to watch over in those ever-extending western suburbs of London, and when we recollect how easy of access nearly all these buildings are, it seems little short of a miracle that cases of burglary are not

called—of criminal detection *has kept pace with the system of crime itself*, whereas in England such has not been the case." For "crime, like everything else," declared Meason, "is becoming more and more scientific and clever in the way it works; and those who have to find out where it exists, and where its authors are to be found, must improve their manner of working in the same ratio."

Unfortunately, he acknowledged, "the establishment of a Detective Police, such as I have endeavoured to describe, would meet with opposition in England." He pointed out a halfway alternative: "a form of the detective system, of which those who have any object in making certain inquiries seldom scruple to avail themselves."

I allude to the 'Private Inquiry' Offices which exist in considerable numbers in London, as well as in most of the large provincial towns. Those who are not acquainted with certain phases of London life, would hardly believe the immense amount of business done by the offices throughout the year, and for every class of society. It is very seldom they fail in the work they take in hand, and the chief reason of their success

is, no doubt, the secrecy with which they conduct their work."

"I'm a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is," Sherlock Holmes tells Watson in *A Study in Scarlet*: "Here in London we have lots of Government detectives and lots of private ones. When these fellows are at fault, they come to me, and I manage to put them on the right scent." "And these other people?" asks Watson, referring to Holmes's other visitors at Baker Street: "They are mostly sent on by the private inquiry offices," is the reply.

Dr. Conan Doyle, better than most readers, was able to grasp the fundamental point of Meason's article: "Neither crime nor criminals are the same as they were a quarter of a century ago. Both have kept pace with the age, and have brought to their assistance knowledge, science, and practical experience of men and things." Conan Doyle was able, as he read Meason's article, thanks to his own scientific education, not only to nod sagely in agreement, but start thinking through how science and scientific method could be applied to crime detection.

This is not to deny the literary influence of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin

detective stories, greatly admired by Conan Doyle, nor the practical example in observation and deduction afforded by Dr. Joseph Bell when Conan Doyle was a medical student. But if young Dr. Conan Doyle needed convincing that the official force's Lestrades and Gregsons weren't up to snuff, this article was surely the goods. And here, in a single article of a magazine he read avidly, were themes implicit in the Sherlock Holmes tales he would write: most crime not immediately apprehended went unsolved; the uniformed police performed their duties well,¹⁰ but not the official detective force; crime's methods and practitioners were becoming more advanced, and detection's methods and practitioners must follow suit. Something different was called for, something more knowledgeable and scientific.

VI

Students of Conan Doyle, now knowing how important *The Nineteenth Century* was for him as reading matter in the 1880s, will find other material in it that may have informed other early work of his as well. He wrote supernatural tales: in *Nineteenth Century* were "Apparitions" by the Society for Psychical Research's Edmund Gurney & Frederic W. H. Myers, May 1884, and in April 1885, "The Comparative Study of Ghost Stories" by another editorial hero of Conan Doyle's, Andrew Lang. Conan Doyle became a strong proponent of a Channel tunnel: February 1882 had Admiral Lord Dunsany's "The Proposed Channel Tunnel," followed in consecutive issues by commentaries pro and con by others. Conan Doyle turned to historical fiction later in the 1880s, beginning with *Micah Clarke*,¹¹ and by the decade's end *The White*

10. Meason had previously analyzed this in depth in "The London Police," *Macmillan's Magazine*, July 1882, including the recent improvements instituted by C. E. Howard Vincent, Director of Criminal Investigations for London's Metropolitan Police, and compiled in Vincent's 1881 book *A Police Code, and Manual of Criminal Law*.

11. The redoubtable R. E. Prothero gave it a glowing review in *Nineteenth Century*, August 1889, one Conan Doyle remembered thirty-four years later in *Memories and Adventures*. Prothero acknowledged public prejudice against historical fiction—"Their composition resembles the acrobatic accomplishment of riding two horses at once, and the evident difficulty of the author's feat renders the task of the reader equally difficult"—but praised Conan Doyle's highly: "there are exceptions to every rule, and *Micah Clarke* is the exception which proves the general truth. Throw aside prejudice, and read *Micah Clarke*." He provided two

Company, which opens with the bells of Beaulieu Abbey ringing: July 1883 had "The Coming of the Friars" by Augustus Jessopp, January 1884's issue the same writer's "Daily Life in a Medieval Monastery."

(And while it didn't come until December 1889, after he'd finished writing *The Sign of the Four*, we smiled to see "In Praise of London Fog," by M. H. Dziewicki.)

Nor do these exhaust the list of possibilities in the 1880s, let alone 1890s issues we haven't examined. How long Conan Doyle faithfully read *The Nineteenth Century* we can't say. He didn't write for it again until March 1901 (the year it renamed itself *The Nineteenth Century and After*): "Sham versus Real Home Defence," replying to one the previous month by Colonel Lonsdale Hale, a War Office critic of Conan Doyle's military reform ideas. The magazine ran beyond Conan Doyle's lifetime, renaming itself once again (*The Twentieth Century*) in 1951, before coming to an end in our own era, in 1972.

But we do know Conan Doyle read it avidly in the 1880s; and two more articles prior to *A Study in Scarlet* strike a Holmesian chord. First, commentators as far back as 1907, in Julian Hawthorne's notes for *Library of the World's Best Mystery and Detective Stories*, have marked the similarities between the deductive reasoning of Voltaire's *Zadig* and of Sherlock Holmes. Eye-catching, then, in June 1880's *Nineteenth Century*, is "On the Method of Zadig," by the great scientist T. H. Huxley, known as Darwin's Bulldog, whom Conan Doyle in *Memories and Adventures* called one of the "pilots" of his early years. Sub-titled "Retrospective Prophecy as a Function of Science," Huxley described how Voltaire's Babylonian-philosopher character used uncommon powers of observation and deduction to astound and mystify those around him, in order to demonstrate how this reasoning process should be employed in investigative science by Huxley's contemporaries. "From freshly broken twigs, crushed leaves, disturbed pebbles, and imprints hardly discernible

enthusiastic pages of reasons why, ending: "I end as I began. Forget your prejudices against historical fiction, and read *Micah Clarke*." That month, at J. M. Stoddard's historic Langham Hotel dinner at which Conan Doyle was commissioned to write a second Sherlock Holmes novel, the still-obscure young author was delighted to find that his famous table-mate Oscar Wilde had read *Micah Clarke*. He agreed to write the tale which became *The Sign of the Four* for Stoddard, but his heart was with the new historical novel he had been writing, *The White Company*.

by the untrained eye," he wrote, in tones Sherlock Holmes himself might have used in his own magazine article "The Book of Life," in chapter two of *A Study in Scarlet*,

such graduates in the University of Nature will divine, not only the fact that a party has passed that way, but its strength, its composition, the course it took, and the number of hours or days which have elapsed since it passed. But they are able to do this because, like Zadig, they perceive endless minute differences where untrained eyes discern nothing; and because the unconscious logic of common sense compels them to account for these effects by the causes they know to be competent to produce them.¹²

But we particularly heard the sound of sleigh bells when we saw in August 1884's issue "A Tangled Skein Unravelled," its author analyzing various authorship theories in order to solve "the Mystery of Shakespeare's Sonnets." In 1886, *A Tangled Skein* was what Conan Doyle originally intended to call his first Sherlock Holmes tale. Of course, the phrase was coined neither by him nor the article's author, Charles Mackay, a Scottish writer and father of the late-Victorian bestselling writer Marie Corelli, whose first novel appeared in 1886; the OED cites 1797 as its first instance in print.

By this point, though, Conan Doyle had us believing that it was *The Nineteenth Century* where "The Book of Life" appeared, Holmes's unsigned article Watson dismissed as ineffable twaddle before realizing his new flat-mate was its author. It was exactly the sort of article *Nineteenth Century* liked to publish, and Conan Doyle would have seen it there.



12. One U. of N. graduate discussed at length by Huxley was the French scientist Georges Cuvier, whom Holmes praises similarly in "The Five Orange Pips."