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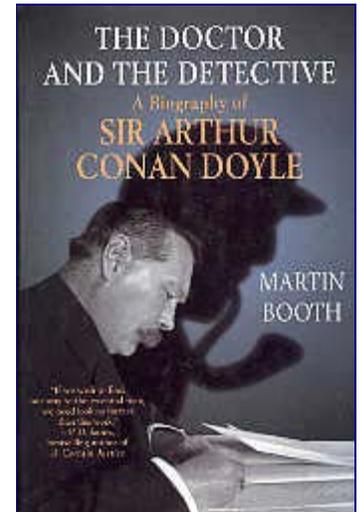
A READER'S JOURNAL

The Doctor and the Detective A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle by Martin Booth

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2009

Steel True — Blade Straight

*Epitaph carved into an oak board at Doyle's
Windlesham Gravesite*



The title is tantalizingly ambiguous: Arthur Conan Doyle was a doctor and he wrote detective stories, maybe the first of the genre. Does the title refer to Dr. Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, his most famous detective? One would think so, but reading this book brings up another doctor, the one from which Conan Doyle received his first tutelage as a forensic thinker, Dr. Joseph Bell. The title could also refer to Dr. Bell and Sherlock Holmes because without Dr. Bell's inspiration and guidance, Sherlock Holmes might never have come into existence. Dr. Bell gave Conan Doyle so much of the inspiration for his early characterization of Sherlock Holmes, so the good doctor provided the prototype for the detective.

A recent movie brings this back story of Dr. Bell into the foreground, "Dr. Bell and Mr. Doyle" (2000)[\(1\)](#). Here the attribution is clear as to who the doctor is, as Conan Doyle is not yet a doctor as he receives personal instruction from Dr. Bell, even becoming his clerk for a time, which provided him with detailed instruction by Dr. Bell outside of the classroom as well as inside the classroom. And it was Dr. Bell's activities outside the classroom where Conan Doyle learned about forensic science and detective work because Joe Bell was helping the police with their investigations into various crimes, mostly gruesome murders which were unsolvable. The case of the Locked Room Murder, the Bloody Room, were two of those cases described in the movie. From the beginning of the movie, one immediately gets the feeling that one is rummaging through old Sherlock Holmes cases, and that feeling is as eerie as it is correct, only one is actually walking through the Joe Bell experiences which were later incorporated into Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan Doyle.

Charles Doyle met Conan Doyle's mother, Mary, when he rented a room from her mother, Catherine, in Edinburgh, Scotland. Thus, it will not be unusual to find that Mary would later rent a room to a long-term tenant when she needs help as Charles becomes more and more an alcoholic and is drinking up his earnings.

It is thought that Conan Doyle's namesake, his godfather, Michael Conan, actually gave him the two Christian names Arthur Ignatius to go with Conan Doyle.

[page 7] The choice of names was not fortuitous. Ignatius was selected because it was common practice for Catholic families to include a saint in a child's given names[\(2\)](#), and it may also be the case that the Doyles were being sentimental, for they were wed on St

Ignatius' Day. The other two Christian names appear to have been picked to please the child's great-uncle and godfather, Michael Conan, who had moved to Paris in 1854 and was now Paris correspondent of the *Art Journal*. It is even possible that Arthur was decided upon by Michael Conan himself who, being keen on genealogy and heraldry, fascinated with the Arthurian legend and conscious of the family's Breton roots, may have wanted to give the child a certain romantic individuality and carry on a family tradition. As Michael Conan and his wife, Susan, apparently had no issue, the matter of keeping the family name alive may have been important to him.

Like Conan Doyle, I was born as the first son, within months of my mother losing her first child. That my mother doted on me, I cannot attest, because by the time I reached five, I had two younger brothers and one more shortly thereafter, but it seemed likely she treated me special as her first living child. She read to me a lot from books now lost in the caverns of time, developing my love of books, and like Conan Doyle, I soon was bouncing against the limits of our local library in my quest for reading fare. The limit for one day's books was five and I was often at that number. The librarian found it hard to believe I could read that many books at the same time.

Conan Doyle's mother read to him a lot and told him stories.

[page 14] She not only told him stories of knights rescuing maidens from dragons but single-mindedly set about shaping his intellect. Not only had she taught him to read and write but, when he was eight, she started to tutor him in French, of which she had a good command. Arthur did not take to mathematics but he became an avid, quick and retentive reader. After devouring the contents of the family bookcase in the house, he started borrowing books from a nearby public library at such a rate that a special by-law was ratified prohibiting readers from exchanging books more than once a day. Arthur was known to visit the library twice, occasionally thrice, in a day.

What makes a great educator? I have become convinced it's people who perceive themselves not as sculptors working on raw material as they see fit, but rather as enablers who encourage the great hidden potential in their charges to emerge into the light. This was certainly the case for the young Jesuit master of Conan Doyle.

[page 20, 21] In general, Arthur's time at Hodder was happy. His masters were mostly younger Jesuit brothers who were kind and tolerant towards their pupils: his form master, Francis Cassidy, was only in his mid-twenties. A gentle, saintly and affectionate figure whom the boys greatly respected, and whom Arthur regarded as being 'more human than Jesuits usually are', he tempered the strict religious criteria of a Catholic education with a sense of humor verging upon fun. For Cassidy, boys were not implements of the Catholic faith nor frail willows to be bent to the religious wind but creatures of great human potential which he saw it his responsibility to nurture, encourage and, where possible, develop to its utmost. Ahead of his time, he was also a man who believed in the importance of intellectual creativity beyond the bounds of academic discipline. In particular, he encouraged the writing of poetry and stories and was himself a very effective storyteller. For Arthur, this latter skill was more than welcome: Cassidy took over where his mother had left off. In later years, Conan Doyle was to write to his former teacher, 'How well I remember the stories which you used to read to us and which I used to suck in like a sponge absorbs water until I was so saturated with them that I could still repeat them.'

Conan Doyle led a graced life in many ways, and growing up in the streets of Edinburgh to a poor family was one of them. This is an aspect of being poor which is mostly neglected today. I have grandchildren who refuse to eat anything that doesn't come hermetically sealed from a grocery store, such blackberries from my own garden. They look upon them as though the berries might full of germs, I suppose. As part

of a rich family, they can look askance as naturally growing fruit, something that we never could as children. We picked blackberries and ate them wherever we could find, knowing that our mom couldn't afford to buy any fruit from the store. We ate cooking pears because it was the only fruit available at times and we stuffed our bellies with loquats which were mostly left unpicked on many trees in the neighborhood. We crawled under houses during our play, ran wild in the woods, dug holes for our games, and mostly roamed streets perhaps as filthy as those of Edinburgh in Conan Doyle's youth. What did he get from this filth? Likely a lifelong immunity to various diseases which were killing the rich at the time, diphtheria and tuberculosis, e.g.

[page 21] During the winter of 1869, Stonyhurst was hit by an epidemic of diphtheria. In the days before antibiotics, this was a much-feared disease from which the chances of survival were less than good: one in three sufferers died of it and survivors could be brain-damaged. Starting with the common symptom of a sore throat, within twenty-four hours a film of mucus covers the back of the throat. Breathing becomes difficult. Within ninety-six hours, the heart muscles and nervous system are hit, leading to paralysis or heart failure. A number of boys succumbed but Arthur escaped the epidemic: possibly, his life in the hugger-mugger, filthy streets of Edinburgh, where such diseases as diphtheria and tuberculosis were endemic, had given him a natural immunity.

Conan Doyle was a rebellious, bumptious boy and the staff of Stonyhurst was glad to be rid of the troublesome pupil when he graduated from the school to go on to college.

[page 35] Once, on being asked by a master what he hoped to be when he grew up, he had replied a civil engineer. The master had replied that he might become an engineer but that he would never be a civil one.

Unfortunately Cassidy had left the school by the time Conan Doyle was eleven and he was no longer happy in Stonyhurst from that time on. The other Jesuit masters "repressed their own emotions and stamped on any the boys might have shown." The unemotional approach of the other masters led Conan Doyle to find his "escape through books, thereby galvanizing his imagination and broadening his horizons." (Page 35)

But what kind of horizons were there for him as one of two sons of a poor family? Leave it to Conan Doyle, when presented with three options, to choose all three. But at first, he was a doctor, and at last he was a writer.

[page 41] It was often said of well-to-do Victorian families that the first son inherited his birthright (and indulged himself in politics, the arts, business or whatever else might appeal to him), the second son joined the military and the third went into the Church. For Arthur Conan Doyle, things were different. His family was poor, there was little to inherit and there were only two sons: and yet, in time, he was to encompass all three stations — polymath, adventurer-at-war, if not actual serving soldier, and, in a way, priest, albeit of a particularly esoteric and nefarious religion.

He was, however, to start off as a doctor.

A famous Venetian writer once wrote, "Whenever I write about a city, it turns out that I am writing about Venice." If it seems to you, dear Reader that as I write about Conan Doyle that I am writing about myself, please forgive me. It is after all a subject upon which I am well-versed. Like a faulty inoculation, Conan Doyle's medical degree never took — it lasted awhile and he went on to other things. But like my degree in physics did for me, it provided Conan Doyle a source of income so that he could do the other things he wished to do.

His undergraduate years at Edinburgh University were not that pleasant, as he wrote in a novel about his so-called *alma mater* this scathing comment:

[page 47] Conan Doyle found the academic work boring and he seldom made more than a passing reference to his student years during later life. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Firm of Girdlestone*, he wrote, 'The University is a great unsympathetic machine, taking in stream of raw-boned cartilaginous youths at one end, and turning medical men', and, in the same book, remarked caustically, 'Edinburgh University may call herself, with grim jocoseness, the "alma mater" of her students, but if she be a mother at all, she is one of a very stoical and Spartan cast, who conceals her maternal affection with remarkable success. The only signs of interest she ever deigns to evince towards her alumni are upon those not infrequent occasions when guineas are to be demanded from them.'

We meet Joseph Bell, the great teacher who in 1878 appointed Conan Doyle as his clerk. The biographer writes that it is unknown why Bell chose the young student to be his clerk, but as the movie mentioned above presents the matter and we might deduct with a bit of Holmesian logic, it was probably his bumptiousness which led to his appointment, something that Bell himself likely had a quantity of himself.

[page 49] Born in Edinburgh on 2 December 1837, Joseph Bell graduated from the university in 1859 at the early age of twenty-one. An outstanding doctor and scientist, he was one of the foremost medical teachers in Edinburgh in the latter half of the century and was a major contributor to medical advance. He spent his entire career in the city, starting off as a dresser and assistant to Sir Patrick Heron Watson, consulting surgeon at the Royal Infirmary, Queen Victoria's personal surgeon when in Scotland and honorary surgeon to Edward VII. In 1869, Bell applied to be appointed to the chair of clinical surgery, but the post went to Joseph Lister, the eminent physician and father of antiseptics. . . . Bell rose through the ranks of his profession as hospital surgeon at the Royal Infirmary then senior and finally consulting surgeon both there and at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. He published extensively, wrote a number of seminal textbooks and was, for twenty-three years, editor of the *Edinburgh Medical Journal*. At the Royal Infirmary, he taught clinical surgery — with students paying to attend his classes which were very popular and frequently overcrowded.

Why were Bell's classes overcrowded? Because Dr. Bell was entertaining as well as informative, something college students yet today find irresistible. I am listening currently to Richard Feynman's lectures from Feb. 1962, a month after I graduated in Physics myself, and he is fun, informative, and irresistible, no doubt like Bell in his day.

One cannot read Conan Doyle's description of Dr. Bell without conjuring up a vision of the fictional Sherlock Holmes.

[page 49, 50] Known to the students as Joe, he was a sparse and lean man with the long and sensitive fingers of a musician, sharp grey eyes twinkling with shrewdness, an angular nose with a chin to match, unkempt dark hair and a high-pitched voice. He walked, according to Conan Doyle, with a jerky step, his head carried high. Blessed with a wry sense of humor, he spoke precisely and clearly but, in the company of patients, could slip at the drop of a hat into the broadest brogue. More than a medical man, he was also a widely read amateur poet, a competent raconteur, a keen sportsman, a naturalist and a bird-watcher. He was a good shot and enjoyed grouse-shooting: Conan Doyle met him on the Isle of Arran in 1877 whilst shooting there . . .

The game was afoot. Mr. Doyle was quickly becoming a forensic expert under the tutelage of Dr. Joe Bell and would be able to call upon this knowledge in so many of his Sherlock Holmes detective stories. One wonders if there could have been a detective Sherlock without the doctor Joe.

[page 50] It was Bell's dictum that a doctor had to be not only learned but also

immensely interpretative of all relevant features of a patient. Diagnosis, he taught, was not made just by visual observation but also by the employment of all the senses: do not just look at a patient, he advised, but feel him, probe him, listen to him, smell him. Only then could a diagnosis be attempted.

Curiously it was not Dr. Watson who was the keen diagnostician, but the non-doctor Holmes. This would also mirror in an inverse way the young Mr. Doyle's experience with the Dr. Bell: Conan Doyle was the bumbling Dr. Watson to the keen diagnostician and forensic expert, the Sherlockian Dr. Bell.

How did Conan Doyle get to spend so much time with Dr. Bell?

[page 50] Every Friday, Bell held an open out-patient clinic at the Royal Infirmary which students attended. Patients were prepared in an anteroom, wheeled in before the doctor who studied and diagnosed them: they were then wheeled out for treatment. The students scribbled notes as fast as they could. Bell waited for no man.

In 1878, Bell appointed Conan Doyle his clerk for these clinics. Why he chose him is a mystery although it was a part of the course that students should take on junior responsibilities now and then as part of their training. Whatever the case, it afforded Conan Doyle valuable experience.

His relationship as clerk is fleshed out admirably and intriguingly in the movie, "Dr. Bell and Mr. Doyle." There is likely little documentation of what the two men did together, other than the corpus of the stories of Sherlock Holmes which their time together apparently inspired.

The biographer reveals a couple of instances of Bell's capability "An example might be Bell's guessing correctly that a man with a callused ball to his thumb was a sail-maker because his address was close by the docks and sail-makers used this part of the hand to push needles through canvas. A woman with muscular forearms and yet soft hands might be a laundress." (Page 51) The quotation in the next passage was given by Conan Doyle himself on many occasions, and it provides a pointed example of the observational and deductive prowess of his Dr. Bell.

[page 51] In one of his best cases he said to a civilian patient: 'Well, my man, you've served in the army.'

'Aye, Sir.'

'Not long discharged?'

'Aye, Sir.'

'A Highland regiment?'

'Aye, Sir.'

'A non-com officer?'

'Aye, Sir.'

'Stationed at Barbados?'

'Aye, Sir.'

'You see, gentlemen,' he would explain, 'the man was a respectful man but did not remove his hat. They do not in the army, but he would have learned civilian ways had he been long discharged. He has an air of authority and he is obviously Scottish. As to Barbados, his complaint is Elephantiasis, which is West Indian, and not British.'

Five Aye's in a row! One has only a 1 in 32 chance of being right purely by tossing a coin, but Dr. Bell was providing the content for the questions, and was proven right on all five questions.

[page 52] The students, Conan Doyle amongst them, at first found such accurate assessments near to miraculous, but once Bell explained his reasoning, they came to appreciate his lesson. Observation was a vital part of diagnosis. On the other hand, in retrospect, Conan Doyle found Bell's clinics somewhat cold. The non-fee-paying patients

were, he felt, little more than specimens, trundled before the great man, used as teaching aids, then shuffled out again. They were given no privacy, their affairs were openly debated and their bodies turned this way or that by way of exhibition of their symptoms with no more regard than a horse-trader showing off a mare at market. It might have been cold-hearted, condescending and patronizing, but it was free and, for the poor, clinics such as Bell's offered much-needed and often inaccessible medical attention.

And for the young Mr. Doyle, the sessions offered much-needed practice in observation and deduction which he will require for his soon-to-be famous detective stories. But he needed contact with an assortment of people, not just doctors, students, and sick people, but robust men in trying work situations. His chance came when the ship *Hope* needed a ship's doctor, and he jumped at the chance, even though he wasn't fully qualified as a doctor. He wanted adventure and the ship needed a sawbones, and he was certainly qualified to do amputations when required. It was a natural fit.

[page 62] Conan Doyle's voyage on the *Hope* helped develop his ability as a writer. His horizons had been opened up with and by an assortment of men, whom he could never otherwise have encountered, entering his life. They were not educated men yet they had a basic, uninhibited and coarse appeal he could not ignore, and he appreciated their commonality. The crew also taught him a lot about human nature and character which he added to his fund of learning and observation of people. The lecture halls and wards of the Royal Infirmary taught him medicine but the *Hope* was his first classroom in the university of life. For a long time afterwards, many of Conan Doyle's stories relied upon the voyage of the *Hope* for raw material. Together with an intimate working knowledge of the sea and ships, the crew of the vessel reappeared as the basis for characters in many short stories and, later, in the Sherlock Holmes tales.

Later he filled the ship's surgeon position on the steam-powered bark, the *Mayumba*. It was not a pleasant voyage, beset by a near-collision, rough seas, seasickness (including himself). He was kept fully occupied and had to work even when sick himself. He saw many strange lands, peoples, fish, snakes and butterflies all arraying in lands he had only read about in novels and such. He brought photography equipment which allowed him to take occasional photographs. "It was all grist for his own literary mill." (Page 73)

His medical mill required a lot of grist, but Conan Doyle had only grit. What he needed was money, but having none he had to start his own medical practice from scratch.

[page 87] Setting up in one's own practice could be costly and difficult and, once under way, there was no guarantee of patients joining it. They had to be attracted and the practice gradually expanded by word of mouth and reputation. . . . A doctor had to know how to manage his practice, understanding the business side of a practitioner's life. Whatever people thought of a doctor's life, it was often one of very hard work, full of worries and anxieties. The hours were long and virtually continuous. If they could not find someone to cover for them when sleeping or absent, even for a short time, they had to be on call constantly. If they were not there when patients called, they would lose them to a competitor. The average doctor was not as well off as he appeared to be. A doctor might have an imposing house, a smart carriage and subscribe to local institutions, yet these did not indicate a great deal of money but more an appreciation of the advantages of appearing to be flourishing. This subterfuge could drain profits to the dregs.

In the good old days of doctoring, it was the doctors, not the patients who had trouble making ends meet. To attract patients, a large imposing house was required, but most doctors would keep only the few rooms the patients saw furnished. (Page 88)

[page 89] As many doctors did at first, Conan Doyle put the furniture and carpet into the public rooms with medical textbooks, his doctor's case and the usual trappings of a

surgery. The rest of the house, out of sight of the patients, was nothing more than a hovel in which Conan Doyle used his trunk as a larder and table, at which he sat on a small stool. A curtain hung across the hallway prevented patients from seeing the bare interior of the house, whilst more curtaining was arranged with the furniture in the consulting room to give the impression of space. The brass name-plate was mounted on the iron railings outside the house and a red lamp which was the sign of a general practitioner was purchased (also on credit): in a seaport such as Portsmouth, it might well have been misconstrued by sailors, but the surgery was just outside the disreputable area of the town so presumably no one mistook the house for a brothel. For his first few nights in his new home and business, Conan Doyle slept in his coat upon a mattress made of the straw the drug bottles had been packed in, having written to ask his mother to send him some bedclothes, which she did with a few other niceties such as a tea cosy and some ornaments.

But his practice began to grow, which allowed him to start pipe-smoking and to hire a housekeeper who doubled as a receptionist. Later the housekeeper appeared reincarnated as Mrs. Hudson, Sherlock Holmes' housekeeper.

Apparently Conan Doyle's medical background was not very well known until recently. One medical piece he wrote in 1883 proved to be the inspiration for the 1966 science fiction movie, *Fantastic Voyage*.

[page 101] Much of Conan Doyle's medical background came to light with the 1984 publication of *The Medical Casebook of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle* by Alvin E. Rodin and Jack D. Key. In a closely researched study, they showed how imaginative and advanced Conan Doyle was in his medical thinking, particularly concerning bacterial infectious diseases and methods of immunization. Amongst other details they discovered, they indicated the importance of an 1883 article he wrote for Good Works entitled 'Life and Death in the Blood'. Whilst a medical piece, it asked the reader to shrink himself to microscopic size for a tourist trip through the blood system, looking at the cells, seeing how toxins attack and antitoxins protect, watching the war between bacteria and blood. It was pure science fiction, a precursor to his science fiction stories and the basis, eighty-three years on, of the Oscar-winning sci-fi movie *Fantastic Voyage*.

As a twelve-year-old, I recall having trouble checking out a book on a similar theme, only this time it was a small cartoon character named Spiro and his adventures through the blood stream, eventually ending up in the eyeballs and other places. The librarian, my favorite librarian, Mrs. Edith Lawson, looked at the book looked at me, several times, asked me a few questions, and reluctantly allowed me to check out the book. Only a decade or so later did I figure out that lovable little Spiro was a syphilis virus.

What Conan didn't know was that a premier science fiction writer lived around the corner from him, H. G. Wells.

[page 101, 102] Perhaps there was something about Elm Grove and King's Road that made them conducive to science fiction: it is appealing to think, how often Conan Doyle, going to the shops, passed by the draper's store less than a hundred meters from his surgery where, from 1881 to '83, one of the shop assistants was a young man called H.G. Wells. They must even have met, for the proprietor of the shop was one of Conan Doyle's patients.

During this time, his patient load grew and his output of writing became prodigious for the man some would call, with justification, The Father of the Short Story. He wrote in an elegant handwriting known as copperplate and rarely made corrections, all the while writing at break-neck speed between countless interruptions to see patients.

[page 102] All the while, Conan Doyle ploughed on with his fiction-writing, squeezing this in between patients, working on it in the evenings. The fallacy that he wrote because he lacked patients is untrue: the more his practice grew, the more he wrote. A very fast writer, though his copperplate handwriting rarely suffered from speed, he had the enviable knack of being able to drop a story in mid-sentence when the doorbell sounded, then pick it up again the minute the interruption was past.

There were detective(3) stories in Conan Doyle's lifetime, but most of them seemed to him as nonsensical with rickety plots and full of *Deus ex machina* arising to rescue the awkward story lines. He obviously thought he could write a better detective story, and in April 1886, his novella, "A Study in Scarlet", appeared — its hero was a detective called Sherlock Holmes. The liveliness of this modern detective was startling compared the high-faluting Auguste Dupin who remained a flattened-out literary character who did not evolve, but Sherlock did.

[page 105] Fictional he may be, but Sherlock Holmes is a living, almost tangible, character with real failings and definable traits with well-developed self-assurance and a mien of infallibility that is not only captivating but also realistically likeable. Poe had no awareness of his audience whilst Conan Doyle, ever conscious of it, never forgot who he was writing for or, as it were, speaking to. The result is obvious. Dupin is a paper character; Sherlock Holmes, with his dry wit, confident air and acerbic tongue, is flesh and blood.

The detective story will never be the same again after Sherlock dons his deerstalker hat and places his meerschaum pipe in his mouth. And yet both of these artifacts of the Holmes' persona were due to an actor who later portrayed Holmes on the stage, not Conan Doyle.

The current vogue of comic strip artists to mention in their strips other strips' characters or even have characters from other comic strips drawn in their own strips may seem very new, but Conan Doyle evoked this off-the-page reference in his initial Sherlock Holmes story.

[page 106] Initially, Conan Doyle was a little reluctant to admit the influence of Poe. He even had Sherlock Holmes dismiss Poe in *A Study in Scarlet*, in which Watson remarks to Holmes, 'You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin', to which Sherlock Holmes curtly responds that Dupin was 'a very inferior fellow'.

How did Sherlock Holmes get his name? Apparently Conan Doyle tried several versions of names, and along the way, remembering the future(4)

, he selected the most famous name in detective fiction. Sherrinford and Sherrington, he locked in on Sherlock.

[page 106, 107] His first choice was Sherrinford Holmes, which metamorphosed briefly into Sherrington Hope. Conan Doyle's first notes for *A Study in Scarlet* read, 'Ormond Sacker - from Afghanistan. Lived at 221B Upper Baker Street with Sherrinford Holmes - The Laws of Evidence. Reserved, sleepy-eyed young man - Philosopher - collector of rare Violins. An Amati . . . chemical laboratory. . . "I have four hundred a year - I am a Consulting detective. . ."' Then the name became Sherlock Holmes.

Perhaps what really locked in Sherlock as the name was an item found in the Portsmouth newspapers.

[page 107] Yet the most fascinating potential source has been discovered by Stavert who, searching contemporary Portsmouth newspapers, found a Chief Inspector Sherlock mentioned in connection with a criminal investigation reported in the Evening News on 4

January 1883. Conan Doyle read the paper every day.

Conan Doyle originally called his first Sherlock Holmes tale, *A Tangled Skein*, but building upon his metaphor, he soon imagined a blood-colored thread running through the skein and changed the name.

[page 108] On 8 March 1886, Conan Doyle began writing, finishing his novella about three weeks later. At first, he called it *A Tangled Skein*, but changed this to *A Study in Scarlet*, based upon Sherlock Holmes's comment, 'the scarlet thread of murder running through the colorless skein of life'.

Nothing better illustrates the importance of Dr. Joseph Bell to the creation of the Sherlock Holmes persona than this comment by Conan Doyle late in his life, recorded on an early phonograph record.

[page 111] Conan Doyle consistently claimed that Sherlock Holmes was substantially based on Joseph Bell. He wrote, 'I thought of my old teacher, Joe Bell, of his eagle face, of his curious ways, of his eerie trick of spotting details. If he were a detective he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer to an exact science.' Near the end of his life, on a gramophone recording made for His Master's Voice, Conan Doyle spoke about how he came to write Sherlock Holmes. 'I thought I would try my hand at writing a story,' he says on the record, 'where the hero would treat crime as Dr Bell treated disease, and where science would take the place of chance.'

If, Conan Doyle surmised, Bell's powers of observation and deduction which he used on his patients could be relevant to a doctor, then why should they not also be relevant to a detective? It was only a matter of transferring the skills from one profession to another. What might lead to a real diagnosis could also lead to a fictional arrest.

My friend and colleague, Doyle Philip Henderson, was named by his father after Conan Doyle. A reporter for a newspaper in Fresno, California, the elder Henderson had a flair for forensic investigation and was often called into to help solve crimes with the local police. Doyle gave me several examples of his father's keen observational skills, for example, he could predict miles ahead a bump in a sloping road. "See that dark area, son?" he told Doyle, "that's where oil drops from pans of cars and trucks are shaken loose by a bump. See the dark streak up ahead in the middle of the road, that's an incline. The motors run harder and drip more oil on inclines." Newer motors drip less oil, but you can see these phenomena, if you look, yet today. Given this early training by his father Doyle Henderson tracked down the cause of feelings and emotions triggered by "thought alone" — he eventually realized that these bodily states are recapitulations of original events from childhood. Through long investigations, helping thousands of people remove their unwanted bodily states, Doyle homed in on five years old as the age above which bodily states are no longer stored, only recapitulated. His early work is the foundation upon which the new [science of doyletics](#) was founded, inspired indirectly by the writings of Conan Doyle.

Conan Doyle's son claimed his father often shared such observations with him.

[page 113] In a pamphlet he published in 1943, Adrian Conan Doyle remembered an American journalist, Hayden Coffin, saying Conan Doyle privately told him that if anyone was Holmes, then he had to confess that it was him, yet he also admitted on a different occasion that Sherlock Holmes was a mixture of Poe's Dupin and Joseph Bell. According to his son, Conan Doyle often made Bell-like assessments in his everyday life, studying diners in a restaurant and guessing from their appearance or behavior who or what they were. He was usually correct.

During the 1960s, there was a series called "Lost in Space" with a doctor who was constantly whining about this or that, and I didn't like this character at all. One day in a break room, my friend Gary Booth and I were talking about the show from the previous night and I shared my negative opinion about the doctor. Gary said to me, "You know, Bob, sometimes the things we don't like about other people are the very things we are doing to others, out of our awareness." I was dumbstruck by the thought. My reaction

was so intense that it confirmed the truth of what Gary had told me, even though I wanted to deny it. In this next passage, a similar thing happened to Conan Doyle's friend David George Thomson, after whom he seems to have modeled Dr. Watson.

[page 114] Another candidate was a fellow doctor from Edinburgh, David George Thomson, whom Conan Doyle first met at university and with whom he was friendly throughout his life. Another keen photographer, Thomson worked for a while under Joseph Bell but was eventually made superintendent of the County Mental Hospital in Norwich, where Conan Doyle often called upon him. According to another asylum doctor, Conan Doyle once asked Thomson what he thought of Watson. When Thomson replied negatively, Conan Doyle is alleged to have said, 'I'm sorry you think that. I rather modeled him on you.' There is, however, no corroborative evidence so, as with Sherlock Holmes, we must conclude that Watson was a mixture.

This quote is too precious to pass up. It comes from Conan Doyle's book, *The Stark Munro Letters*, in which Cullingworth, justifying his work as an eye doctor, says, "I've taken to the eye, my boy. There's a fortune in the eye. A man grudges a half-crown to cure his chest or his throat, but he'd spend his last dollar over his eye. There's money in ears, but the eye is a gold mine." (Page 119)

Was Dr. Watson a bumbling fool, as many make him out to have been? On page 146, the biographer writes about Conan Doyle, "He frequently disdained others in authority whom he considered somehow lacking. In other words, as was the case with Conan Doyle himself, Sherlock Holmes did not suffer fools gladly." If Watson were a bumbling fool, why would Sherlock Holmes suffer to have Watson around him so often? Holmes must have perceived Watson as a useful foil upon which to practice his various tentative thrusts and feints. And for Conan Doyle, Watson served an important literary role.

[page 154] Acting as an intermediary, Watson fulfils a vital narrative role. He is the eyes and ears of the reader, their advocate when it comes to questioning motives and deductions, their representative at the scene of the crime. He was, in many respects, a camera. A lingering judgment of Watson portrays him as dense, a man whose wit is not quite quick enough to keep up with Sherlock Holmes. This is wrong, and possibly brought about by theatrical and cinematic interpretations of his character rather than literary ones engendered by the page. Conan Doyle, aware of this opinion of his character, defended him by saying that those who considered Watson to be a fool were simply admitting that they had not read the stories with sufficient attention.

An important literary moment came when the doctor upon whom Conan Doyle modeled his famous detective had an opportunity to review a book of his adventures. Would Dr. Bell like the stories that he helped to inspire?

[page 155] When *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* appeared, Dr Joseph Bell himself reviewed it for the *Bookman*, complimenting Conan Doyle for his skillful plots and the fascinating twists and turns they took, which criticism must have greatly pleased the author. He must have felt as if Sherlock Holmes himself were congratulating him.

As the biographer points out, Conan Doyle was interested in a wide variety of sports and wrote on many fields of medicine and science, was an frequent writer of Letters to Editors, and soon his interest in writing Sherlock Holmes adventures waned and led him to create the episode in which Holmes and his arch-enemy Moriarty fell to their death over a waterfall. Conan Doyle thought he was done with the detective, but the public would not allow it. Some furious readers reacted as if the author had murdered an actual person, so vividly had Conan Doyle fleshed out Sherlock Holmes as a fictional character.

[page 190] When Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty went over the falls, there was a massive public uproar which astonished Conan Doyle. More than twenty thousand people

cancelled their subscriptions to the Strand Magazine. The shareholders grew jittery and both Newnes and Greenhough Smith, who had begged Conan Doyle not to kill Holmes, were very worried. Abusive mail arrived at the editorial offices by the sackload whilst hundreds more letters were sent direct to Conan Doyle beseeching him to reverse Holmes's death. One letter from a woman reader began, 'You brute!' People wore black armbands in public mourning. Newspapers around the world reported the death as a news item and there were obituaries by the score. *Tit-Bits*, perhaps in an attempt to regain some of the income lost by the *Strand Magazine*, announced the instigation of a Sherlock Holmes Memorial Prize. Sherlock Holmes clubs sprang up in America. And evil, it seemed, had triumphed over good.

Meanwhile Conan Doyle found refuge in the Swiss Alps in a health resort, Davos, a valley at the five thousand foot level, renown for helping TB patients, and his wife Louise needed the clear air and sunshine it provided. It was in many ways, a place of misery, which had "a certain prison-like effect on the imagination" as Robert Louis Stevenson had written about his time there, ten year before. (Page 191) But "Conan Doyle was stimulated by the alpine air and got down to work. . . ."

[page 192] With Sherlock Holmes dead, he was able to explore other creative avenues. In addition to working, he lectured quite frequently to the Davos Literary Society, wrote letters, went on sleigh rides, walked in the pine forests, skated, tobogganed, read and took photographs. He also imported something he remembered having seen in Norway — skis.

Conan Doyle played an important part in the history of the sport of skiing in Switzerland. By the end of January 1894, he was writing that once his current work was finished, he would be out all day on his Norwegian skis. He had recently read an account by the explorer Nansen of his crossing of Greenland on skis, and felt Switzerland might provide good skiing terrain. Until now, although skis were known in Switzerland, the Swiss went about on snowshoes or with sledges.

He teamed up with two local carpenters and sledge-makers, Tobias and Johann Branger, who had already been experimenting with skis for about a year, teaching themselves the basic techniques, much to the derision of the locals: so embarrassed were they by the hoots of mockery they received that they took to practicing after dark.

Thus it was that Conan Doyle pioneered the use of skis by the Swiss themselves. When they registered in a lodge after a particularly arduous skiing trek, Tobias filled out the register and wrote, "Sportsman" under Conan Doyle's name as his profession, something that no doubt delighted the sportsman part of the famous writer. Unfortunately time can blur beginnings when memory paints with a broad brush, and Conan Doyle is often cited as the one who introduced downhill skiing to the Swiss, when in fact it was simply cross-country skiing which he brought to their notice. Here's how he put it himself.

[page 193] The following winter, Conan Doyle described his skiing adventures in the Strand Magazine. The article, 'An Alpine Pass on Ski', described how they had 'shot along over gently dipping curves skimming down into the valley without a motion of our feet. In that great untrodden waste with. . . no marks of life save that of chamois and of foxes, it was glorious to whizz along in this easy fashion.'

Conan Doyle declared in his autobiography, 'I can claim to have been the first to introduce skis into the Grisons division of Switzerland or at least to demonstrate their practical utility as a means of getting across in winter from one valley to another.' He did not, as many would have it, actually introduce skis into Switzerland, yet he did suggest and promote skiing as a sport, especially what is now called cross-country skiing, a form of long-distance hiking by ski. Contrary to what has often been suggested, he did not initiate downhill skiing, which was begun by Matthias Zdarsky at Lilienfeld in 1896, nor was he, indeed, the first Englishman to ski at Davos. That honor is attributed to a Colonel Napier. Whether he was the originator of skiing or not, Conan Doyle was sure

in his mind of one thing. He was, he said, 'convinced that the time will come when hundreds of Englishmen will come to Switzerland for the "ski"-ing season, in March and April'. A plaque acknowledging his part in the history of Swiss skiing hangs in Davos to this day.

Rightly understood, Conan Doyle would have disdained the use of mechanical lifts as being "unsportsmanlike" and would have preferred to ski the hard way, climbing the sides of valleys to reach the next valley. Later when he spent Thanksgiving with Rudyard Kipling in Brattleboro, Vermont, he brought along his golf clubs, making it plausible that he introduced golf to the American as well as skiing to the Swiss!(5) (Page 201)

In Boston after a long speaking tour, he met a cabbie who was a likely reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes.

[page 201, 202] Arriving in Boston, a cabbie had refused his fare, asking to be paid with a ticket to the lecture. Conan Doyle demanded to know how the cabbie knew who he was. The cabbie's response was to point out that Conan Doyle's coat lapels wee badly twisted downward where they had been grasped by the intransigent New York reporters, his overcoat showed the slovenly brushing of the porters on the sleeper from Albany, his hair had the Quakerish trim of a Philadelphia barber, his right overshoe had Buffalo mud on it, his clothing smelt of a Utica cigar, his bag had a scattering of Springfield doughnut crumbs on it and, finally, his walking cane was stenciled with his name!

He was not without his critics, especially Catholic ones. Lord Alfred Douglas called him "a disgusting beast" full of "blasphemous ravings". Conan Doyle's reply was worthy of Churchill who was known for his incisive replies in his day, "Sir, I was relieved to get your letter. It is only your approval which could in any way annoy me."

Conan Doyle was a writer and a sportsman in equal measure, forever keeping the boy in him present in his life of sports. He wrote *The Lost World*, a story which has led to many movies, for example, *Jurassic Park*. The following quatrain he wrote as a dedication to that book; it might well have been written about himself as a man who was ever half a boy:

**I have wrought my simple plan,
If I bring one hour of joy,
To the boy who's half a man
Or the man who's half a boy.**

Upon his headstone are these words, "Knight, Patriot, Physician and man of letters" plus the words from the original epitaph carved into an oak board, "Steel true, blade straight." A true man who was ever half-boy and created a world for the child in all of us to play in(6).

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Given the Copyright dates of this movie as 2000 and this biography as 1997, it seems unlikely that the biography influenced the movie which comes so close on the heels of the book, and impossible that the biography was influenced by the later movie. I confess that having read the book, I immediately acquired the movie because I knew of Dr. Joe Bell's influence on the young Mr. Doyle.

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**Footnote 2.** This is a practice I am familiar with, having had to add the name Ann to my daughter, Maureen Grace, after my mother-in-law complained that Grace is not a Saint's name. After my trip to Rome in 2001, I had a dream which shed light on the practice of using Saint's name. A Saint is guaranteed to have been a Christian, and that allows the child to bear the name of a true follower of Christ Jesus, in effect, the name of Christ. Read the dream here: <http://www.doyletics.com/digest11.shtml#saintsname>

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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Footnote 3. The word "detective" came into being about 1843 with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug", and his detective Auguste Dupin had some of Sherlock Holmes' salient characteristics, such as "deducing the truth from clues." (Page 104)

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**Footnote 4.** This is a reference to [Matherne's Rule #36: Remember the future. It hums in the present.](#) If this seems a bit *outré*, click on the link to read the evidence I have acquired for it.

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Footnote 5. Later he wrote "The Disintegration Machine" which describes what came to be known as a "transporter" in *Star Trek* films.

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**Footnote 6.** This reader looks forward to the day when Conan Doyle's hidden papers are made public.

[page xii] *Note*

**For several decades, access to Sir Arthus Conan Doyle's private papers has been refused to biographers, due to an on-going complicated dispute. All letters quoted in this biography, therefore, have been drawn from previously published records or material available prior to the withdrawal of the archives. Several early biographers were allowed access to the papers but the content of their biographies was, to some extent, controlled by the family who only permitted what they wished to see printed being released. Needless to say, when these papers are once more made available to biographers, then a thorough and much more comprehensive biography than this one may be written.**

[Return to text directly before Footnote 6.](#)

