



PAPER

Bro. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Summary: Arthur Conan Doyle – the creator of Sherlock Holmes.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

'Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognises genius'. The Valley of Fear

'The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes'. The Hound of the Baskervilles

Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh on May 22nd 1859. His father, Charles Altamont Doyle was a civil servant in the Edinburgh Office of Works and his mother, Mary (Foley) Doyle, a vivacious and very well-educated young woman of seventeen. Both parents were Roman Catholics and Arthur was the first in a family that included three sisters and a brother.

To increase his income, Charles painted, illustrated books, and worked as a sketch-artist in criminal trials. He suffered from epilepsy, and not long after arriving in Edinburgh, started to drink. Charles was eventually institutionalised and died in an asylum in 1893.

Doyle's mother was particularly interested in literature and was in fact a master storyteller. She encouraged her son to read, who by the age of six, had produced his first story, an illustrated tale about a man and a tiger. By the age of fourteen he had learnt French well enough to read Jules Verne in the author's original language. Arthur's touching description of his mother's beneficial influence is poignantly described in his biography:

'It is not only that she was — is still — a wonderful story-teller, but she had, I remember, an art of sinking her voice to a horror-stricken whisper when she came to a crisis in her narrative'

'In my early childhood as far as I can remember anything at all, the vivid stories she would tell me stand out so clearly that they obscure the real facts of my life'.

At the age of ten, the wealthy members of the Doyle family offered to pay for his studies, and for a period of seven years he was educated at a Jesuit boarding school at Stonyhurst in Lancashire, where he became a keen sportsman. It was from here that he used as models for his characters in many of his stories from his teachers and his fellow pupils.

During this period, Doyle lost his belief in the Roman Catholic faith, loathed the bigotry surrounding his studies, and rebelled at the corporal punishment that was incredibly brutal in many of the English schools at that time. During these gruelling years his only happiness was when he wrote to his mother, a regular habit that lasted for the rest of her life.

At the age of seventeen he studied medicine at Edinburgh University and graduated in 1881 with Bachelor of Medicine degree. He completed his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1885. During his medical training, he spent seven months as a surgeon on a whaling ship - *Hope*, in the Arctic. Following his graduation, he sailed to South Africa for four months as the ship's doctor, on board the *Mayumba*. After his last stint at sea he practised medicine, first in Plymouth and then in Southsea, as an eye specialist. This however was not particularly successful, so he began to write and finally gave up his career in medicine in 1891.

At University, he met a number of future authors, including James Barrie (*Peter Pan*) and Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*). But the man who influenced and impressed him most was one of his teachers, Dr Joseph Bell. He was a master at observation, logic, deduction and diagnosis. All these qualities were later to be found as part of the persona of the celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes. It was at this stage that he adopted his middle name 'Conan' to his surname.

During the South African war 1899–1902, Doyle served for a few months as a senior physician at a field hospital and at that time he wrote *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, in which he defended England's policy. He displayed the same uncritical attitude in his history of World War I - *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*, published in six Volumes. Doyle was subsequently knighted in 1902 by King Edward VII.

In 1900 and then again in 1906 he ran (unsuccessfully) for Parliament. He was at that time an energetic champion of divorce reform.

Conan Doyle married Louisa Hawkins in 1885 and they went on to have two children. Louisa, whom he called 'Touie', died of tuberculosis in 1906 after a long illness. In 1907, he was married for a second time to Jean Leckie and there were three children from that marriage.

It was in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of 1887 that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presented to the public his first story about Sherlock Holmes, called *A Study in Scarlet*. The novel was written in three weeks. Hence was born this remarkable series of over fifty detective fiction stories. The Strand Magazine started to publish *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* from July 1891. What is particularly interesting is Sherlock Holmes' address at Mrs. Hudson's House, 221B Baker Street, London. Soon to become the most famous London Street in literature.

Although Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is best known for his Sherlock Holmes collection, he considered himself to be an historical novelist and that is where his principal interest lay. He was actually a very prolific writer on various topics of current interest. Besides his Sherlock Holmes novels, he actually wrote more than one hundred other titles. These included plays, verse, memoirs, short stories, several historical novels as well as supernatural and speculative fiction. He was also a remarkably creative character. He introduced downhill skiing into Switzerland, successfully campaigned for steel helmets for soldiers in combat and inflatable rubber collars, the forerunner of today's life jackets, for sailors.

Amongst the tragedies in Doyle's life was the death of his son Kingsley, who died from his wounds incurred during the First World War. As a result of his supposedly contacting his son, Conan Doyle began to dedicate himself to Spiritualism. Many of his works at this stage in his life showed a distinct interest in the occult. He became President of several important spiritualist organisations and in 1925 he opened the Psychic Bookshop in London. To the surprise of his closest friends Doyle supported the existence of the 'Little People' and he spent a vast amount of his fortune in support of their cause. During this period the so-called *Cottingley Fairy Photographs* caused an international sensation, when Doyle published a favourable account of them. The photographs showed fairies dancing in the air. A year later *The Star* newspaper reported that the photographs were a hoax and that the fairies had in fact been taken from a poster. It was at this time in his life that such bizarre behaviour began to affect his credibility. He even began to display signs of jealousy against Sherlock Holmes, and he got quite irritated that his detective stories received more attention than his other work. In fact, he got so disenchanted with his famous detective that on several occasions the writer attempted to kill him off in a bid to steal some of the limelight. In *The Final Problem* written in 1893, Holmes was killed in a fall over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, whilst in deadly combat with his arch enemy Professor Moriarty. It may be difficult to believe, but at the time, men wore black armbands in respect to departed merit. Typical of Doyle, Sherlock Holmes was brought back to life in 1903 in *The Adventure of the Empty House*.

Let us now look at his Masonic career. Mr Arthur Conan Doyle was Initiated into Phoenix Lodge No. 257, Southsea, Hampshire, on 26th January 1887,¹ at the age of 27. One month later he was passed to the Second Degree on 23rd February 1887, and was raised to the Sublime Degree the next month on 23rd March 1887.

He resigned from his Lodge two years later in 1889. In the October 1901 edition of *Masonic Illustrated* it was reported that Conan Doyle visited a Lodge at Bloemfontein with Bro. Rudyard Kipling during the Boer War. Also, in 1901, upon his return home he was made an Honorary Member of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No.1. This was conferred upon him when he accepted an invitation to speak at a Burns Night Dinner. In his speech, he confirmed the many reports which had been received of the value of Freemasonry on the field of battle. Prisoners on both sides, when found to be members of the Craft, were invariably treated with more courtesy and consideration than would otherwise be the case. In 1902, he re-joined the Lodge; coinciding with him becoming a Knight of the Realm. Without having made any further progress he finally resigned from the Craft in 1911.

It may be of interest to note that the following stories written by Conan Doyle that clearly have reference to The Craft:

A Study in Scarlet – 1887

A Scandal in Bohemia – 1891

The Adventures of the Red-Headed League – 1891

The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual – 1893

The Adventure of the Stockbroker's Clerk – 1893

The Adventure of the Yellow Face – 1893

The Adventure of the Norwood Builder – 1903

The Valley of Fear – 1914

The Adventure of the Retired Colourman – 1927

This is a remarkable list of Masonic matter, when it is considered his short time as a member of the Fraternity. It must have made a significant impact upon him at that time.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle remained an ardent Spiritualist for the rest of his life.² He was taken ill upon his return home following a psychic lecture tour on the continent in 1929. On a cold day in 1930 he was found lying in his garden with his hand upon his heart and clutching a single snowdrop. He passed to the Grand Lodge above on 7th July 1930 surrounded by his family. He was buried in the garden of the family home at Windlesham in Surrey. The headstone over his grave was of English Oak and is inscribed with his name, his date of birth, and the four words: *Steel True, Blade Straight*.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.ugle.org.uk/9-famous-freemasons/204-sir-arthur-conan-doyle>
2. It was the subject of Spiritualism that brought Conan Doyle and Houdini together in 1920; but it was hardly the only thing that the two men had in common. Both men were famous around the globe, and whilst their career paths were quite different, they shared an energy and vitality that few could match. Houdini's athletic feats were obviously central to his act; although more famous as a writer, Conan Doyle was an avid sportsman and adventurer. But for all their similarities, the two men had divergent views about the subject of Spiritualism. Houdini thought that he knew trickery when he saw it and declared war upon Spiritualism; and set out to punish all mediums that he considered to be charlatans. In 1922, two years after their first meeting; Conan Doyle and his family travelled to America and arranged to meet Houdini and his wife in order to hold a séance. Jean Conan Doyle believed that she was an inspired or automatic writer and felt that she could help Houdini with his wish to contact his departed mother. She produced fifteen pages of writing in English during the séance. What she did not know was that Houdini's mother was Hungarian-Jewish and could hardly speak English. In addition to this, Mrs Doyle did not know that the séance was actually taking place on Houdini's mother's birthday. Hence the relationship ended abruptly, culminating with an exchange of harsh letters to each other in the New York Times. Houdini's parting shot was the remark: *'There is nothing that Sir Arthur will believe that surprises me'*.
3. <https://www.ugle.org.uk/9-famous-freemasons/204-sir-arthur-conan-doyle>
4. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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