

MASTERPIECE

Arthur Conan Doyle: Biography

Can a writer be too successful? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle might have asked himself this question when his most famous character, Sherlock Holmes, became more powerful than his creator. Like Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, Conan Doyle could not control the force he'd unleashed upon the world. Readers believed in the fictional detective's existence so ardently that they wrote to him about real cases and mourned his sudden death—a ploy by Conan Doyle to free himself for more lofty literary pursuits. But Holmes would not die; the public would not let him. Conan Doyle revived him for his reading public, but forbade mention of his name within earshot. He spent his last years marginalized and misunderstood while his famous creation grew ever more beloved.

A Born Storyteller

Born on May 22, 1859, to Mary and Charles Altamont Doyle, Conan Doyle was one of 10 children, seven of whom would survive into adulthood (and two of whom were given the compound surname Conan Doyle in honor of a paternal uncle). The youngest son of renowned caricaturist John Doyle, Charles was outshone by his brothers James, Henry, and Richard in professional achievement. While Charles worked as an Edinburgh civil servant, brother James was the author of *The Chronicles of England*; Henry, the manager of the National Gallery in Dublin; and Richard, a cover designer for Punch magazine. Though arguably as talented as his brothers, Conan Doyle's father never prospered. His epileptic attacks were exacerbated by his alcoholism. He not only lost his job but was sent to a nursing facility and later an asylum, where he remained until his death in 1893. His father's institutionalization plunged the family into dire financial straits that Conan Doyle would work much of his life to escape.

A bright child who wrote his first novel at the age of 6, Conan Doyle was initially educated at home and in local schools. But his successful uncles recognized his potential and enrolled him at Jesuit Preparatory School of Hodder in Lancashire when he was 9. He subsequently graduated to Stonyhurst, a Jesuit secondary school, where he was a good but lonely student. While there, he wrote long letters home to his mother (a habit that would continue throughout his life) and adventure stories that he would read aloud to rapt classmates. Little did these schoolboys know, as they hung on every word, that they would serve as models for their classmate's characters, in particular two brothers named Moriarty and a boy named Sherlock.

“On a wet half-holiday,” Conan Doyle once told an interviewer, “I have been elevated on to a desk, and with an audience of little boys all squatting on the floor, with their chins upon their hands, I have talked myself husky over the misfortunes of my heroes. Week in and week out, those unhappy men have battled and striven and groaned for the amusement of that little circle.”

The Pen and the Scalpel

Only 16 when he graduated, Conan Doyle was sent for another year of study with the Jesuits in Feldkirch, Austria. It was a happy year for the teenager, one he spent enjoying the beauty of the countryside, learning the tuba, playing sports, and reading Jules Verne and Edgar Allen Poe, whose detective, Auguste Dupin, was an inspiration for Holmes. Upon Conan Doyle's return to England, he found his father's condition worse and his mother relying on lodgers to support the family. One of these lodgers, Bryan Charles Waller, a practicing doctor and published poet, helped Conan Doyle ace his entrance examination to Edinburgh Medical School, which boasted eminent faculty such as Dr. James Young Simpson, a pioneer in the use of chloroform; Baron Joseph Lister, the radical theorizer of antiseptics; and Professor Rutherford, later the inspiration for Professor George Challenger of *The Lost World* (1912). But Conan Doyle's deepest affiliation at Edinburgh would be with his mentor, Dr. Joseph Bell, in whose amazing deductive skills Conan Doyle found the seeds for his most famous character, Sherlock Holmes.

To earn extra money, Conan Doyle compressed a year's study into six months and worked the rest of the year as a medical assistant to Dr. Reginald Hoare of Birmingham. Without much in the way of duties, he spent most of his time reading and tried his hand at fiction. *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, a prominent Scottish magazine, accepted his first story, "The Mystery of Sasassa Valley." When *London Society* editor James Hogg published his second story, "The American's Tale," he advised Conan Doyle to give up medicine and pursue a literary career. Conan Doyle's next efforts, however, did not sell, and when he returned to Edinburgh for his third year of study, his pockets were no richer than when he'd left.

In February 1880, he signed on as surgeon for the whaler *Hope*, whose crew hunted seals and whales off the Greenland coast. During the voyage, Conan Doyle was rarely called upon to use his medical skills. Instead, he broke up fights among the crew and kept the captain of the ship company. Despite falling ill with malaria three weeks into the voyage, he took part in seal hunts on Arctic ice floes and rode on the lancing boat during whale hunts. That September, he returned to Liverpool harbor a new man. "I went on board the whaler a big, straggling youth," he later said. "I came off a powerful, well-grown man."

Conan Doyle completed his Bachelor's of Medicine and Master's of Surgery degrees in 1881; he marked the occasion by drawing a sketch of himself waving his diploma with the caption "Licensed to kill." But he would only earn the title of "Doctor" through practical experience. In 1882, he joined the practice of his Edinburgh classmate Dr. George Turnavine Budd at Plymouth. At this time, Conan Doyle's mother and sisters moved with Dr. Waller into his family's manor near Yorkshire, where Conan Doyle married Louisa Hawkins in 1884. (Because Conan Doyle made only scant mention of his first wife in his autobiography and never once referred to her by name, there has long been confusion among biographers whether her first name was actually Louisa or Louise.) From Plymouth, Conan Doyle headed to Portsmouth, where he established his own practice and home in a three-story brick house in Em Grove, called Bush Villas.

Holmes Takes Center Stage

The patients were slow in coming, however, so Conan Doyle wrote to pass the time. Sherlock Holmes was introduced in 1887's *A Study in Scarlet*, published in *Becton's Christmas Annual*. To his late Victorian audience, Holmes was the ideal gentleman and his popularity grew with each new story that appeared in *The Strand*. In accompanying drawings, illustrator Sidney Paget used his handsome brother Walter as a model for Holmes. The likeness was so accurate that Walter found himself recognized in the street as his fictional alter ego. Paget also provided Holmes's signature calabash pipe and deerstalker hat, accessories never referred to in the stories. Over the course of some 60 stories, Holmes evolved from a reasoning robot into a more human character, but he always retained his aloof manner and superior intellect. He restored social order and reaffirmed upper-middle-class values with each crime he solved.

As his practice grew, Conan Doyle alternated between writing and medicine, abandoning one or the other for years at a time. Finally, the strain of private practice, hospital rounds, and late-night writing took its toll. His own health began to fail, and he was forced to abandon medicine in 1891, returning to it only once, during a stint at a field hospital during the Boer War.

While Sherlock Holmes took on a life of his own, Conan Doyle grew weary of his creation and began looking for a way to kill him off. In his autobiography, he confessed, "The idea was in my mind when I went on holiday with my wife to Switzerland, in the course of which we saw the wonderful falls of Reichenbach, a terrible place, and one which I thought would make a worthy tomb for Sherlock, even if I buried my banking account with him." In "The Final Problem," Holmes's nemesis, Dr. Moriarty, pushes the detective over the falls to his death. When the story appeared in *The Strand* in December 1893, newspapers ran headlines about Holmes's death, and passionate fans wore mourning garb in the streets. Faced with such public outcry, Conan Doyle resurrected Holmes in 1901 in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, though he set the novel retrospectively to avoid having to bring Holmes back to life.

Conan Doyle himself took on real-world crime solving only twice, coming to the aid of Adolph Beck, who had been imprisoned due to a case of mistaken identity, and George Edalji, a young Indian lawyer in Great Wyrley falsely convicted of mutilating livestock. This case was the basis for the 2015 MASTERPIECE film *Arthur and George*.

New Heroes

Conan Doyle's next fictional hero came in the form of Brigadier Gerard, a brash officer in Napoleon's army. Both brave and lucky, the young soldier manages to succeed on every wrong-headed and dangerous mission the Emperor assigns throughout the two volumes in which he appears. In 1912, Conan Doyle tried his hand at science fiction, introducing Professor George Challenger in *The Lost World*. An unorthodox scientist and explorer, the dashing Challenger leads an expedition into the then largely unmapped Amazon basin in search of prehistoric animals. Conan Doyle let his imagination run wild, creating a lush jungle where primeval

creatures still roamed untamed. A popular success, the ripping tale went on to become a silent movie released in 1925, which is said to have inspired such sci-fi classics as *King Kong*, *One Million B.C.*, and *Planet of the Apes*. The follow-up, *The Poison Belt* (1913), found Challenger and his crew withstanding a gas that is poisoning the world, a dramatic device Conan Doyle employed to explore his growing interest in mortality.

Lofty Ambitions

While readers favored his detective and adventure stories, Conan Doyle harbored loftier literary ambitions and considered his historical novels—*Micah Clark* (1887), *The White Company* (1891), and *Sir Nigel* (1906)—of greater consequence. He also prized his work as a war correspondent, which began on a trip to Egypt with his wife, who was at the time suffering from tuberculosis. When fighting broke out between the British and the Dervishes, Conan Doyle became an honorary war correspondent for the *Westminster Gazette*. During the South African War (1899–1902), he penned a defense of England’s policy, *The War in South Africa*, for which he was knighted in 1902. (Rumor had it that King Edward VII was such an avid Holmes fan that he had put Conan Doyle’s name on his Honours List to encourage him to write new stories.) The same unvarnished patriotism marked his six-volume history of World War I, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders* (1928).

Conan Doyle ran for Parliament twice, in 1900 and 1906, but was unable to win a seat either time. Shortly after his second attempt, his long-invalided wife, Louisa, died. Only 14 months later, Conan Doyle married Jean Leckie (said to be descended from Scottish hero Rob Roy), with whom he had two sons and a daughter.

The Edge of the Unknown

The Catholic-born Conan Doyle’s scientific training, reinforced by unhappy days with the Jesuits, led him to abandon his faith as a young man. Able to write with stunning clarity about logic and reasoning, he nonetheless developed a fascination with the occult, reading books, attending séances, and looking for proof of communication with the dead. When his eldest son Kingsley, his brother, two brothers-in-law, and two nephews all died in World War I, Conan Doyle became an acolyte of spiritualism, the belief that the living communicate with the spirits of the dead. He came to regard his exploration of the link between this life and the afterlife as his greatest work. His ardent devotion to this cause proved unpopular, however, and led to his being viewed as ridiculous and eccentric. “Poor Sherlock Holmes Hopelessly Crazy” read a 1922 headline after he declared the Cottingley Fairy photographs to be genuine. (The photographs, taken by two young Yorkshire women in 1917, were later proved to be forgeries, the fairies made of paper.)

Conan Doyle served as president of several spiritualist organizations, including the British College of Psychic Science, the London Spiritualist Alliance, and the Spiritualist Community. In 1925, he opened the Psychic Bookshop on Victoria Street in the shadow of Westminster Abbey. He spent thousands of pounds of his own money to keep it open and never wavered in his belief in the existence of spirits. Doyle recorded his own psychic experiences in countless articles and

many books, including his last, *The Edge of the Unknown* (1930). Upon his death on July 7, 1930, from heart disease, his family awaited a message from beyond the grave. His son Adrian affirmed, “There is no question that my father will often speak to us, just as he did before he passed over.”

A week later, a spiritualist memorial service was held at Albert Hall in London. A medium in attendance, Estelle Roberts, claimed to see Conan Doyle enter and sit down in a chair beside his wife that had been left empty for him. Two weeks later, Jean herself announced that her husband had communicated with her during automatic writing and had also appeared in spirit photographs, which supposedly captured images of spirits and ghost among the living. Later he supposedly communicated with other family members as well, consulting on health and business matters, even the purchase of a new car. Like his revived hero Holmes, Conan Doyle too, it seems, got a second chance.

Sherlock Holmes Novels

A Study in Scarlet (1887)

The Sign of Four (1890)

The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902)

The Valley of Fear (1915)

Sherlock Holmes Short Story Collections

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1892)

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes (1894)

The Return of Sherlock Holmes (1905)

His Last Bow (1917)

The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes (1927)

The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories (1928)

Professor Challenger Stories

The Lost World (1912)

The Poison Belt (1913)

The Land of Mist (1926)

The Disintegration Machine (1927)

When the World Screamed (1928)

The Professor Challenger Stories (1952)

Historical Novels

Micah Clark (1887)

The White Company (1891)

Refugees (1893)

Rodney Stone (1896)

The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard (1896)

Uncle Bernac (1896)

The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard (1903)

Sir Nigel (1906)

Pamphlets

The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct (1902)

The Case of Mr. George Edalji (1907)

The Case of Oscar Slater (1912)

Spiritualism and Rationalism (1920)

The Early Christian Church and Modern Spiritualism (1925)

Psychic Experiences (1925)

Spiritualist Works

The New Revelation: or, What Is Spiritualism? (1918)

The Vital Message (1919)

The Wanderings of a Spiritualist (1921)

Spiritualism: Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers (1922)

The Case for Spirit Photography (with others) (1922)

The Coming of the Fairies (1922)

The Spiritualists' Reader (Editor) (1924)

The History of Spiritualism (vol. 2) (1926)

Pheneas Speaks: Direct Spirit Communications (1927)

What Does Spiritualism Actually Teach and Stand For? (1928)

The Edge of the Unknown (1930)

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