THE WORLD'S GREATEST CONSULTING DETECTIVE

Robert B. Sivley, Ph.D.

Paper prepared for delivery to the Athenaeum Society,
Hopkinsville, Kentucky, March 3, 1977

TO PREPARE THIS PAPER, I have again dipped into the reservoir of my youthful interests and have written a paper on a subject on which I spent countless hours some years ago and, even now, revisit occasionally. My subject is the world's first, and undoubtedly greatest, private detective, Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

A TYPICAL SHERLOCK HOLMES STORY might begin something like this: "It was on a bitterly cold night, towards the end of the winter of '97, that I was awakened by a tugging at my shoulder. It was Holmes. 'Come, Watson, come!' he cried. 'The game is afoot. Not a word. Into your clothes and come!'" Thus began the adventure of the Abbey Grange.

OR A TALE MIGHT BEGIN LIKE The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez, with Watson supposedly writing the following: "When I look at the three massive manuscript volumes which contain our works for the year 1894, I confess that it is very difficult for me, out of such a wealth of material, to select the cases which are most interesting in themselves, and at the same time most conducive to a display of those peculiar powers for which my friend was famous."

THUS THE WRITER SEEKS TO LEAVE WITH US the impression that the Sherlock Holmes stories are a series of remembrances from the diary of his personal historian, John H. Watson, M.D.

HOWEVER THE STORY BEGINS, we can be sure of several things. A peculiar, mind-teasing problem based on some crime (perhaps a horrible murder as in The Sign of Four, or perhaps an inconsequential misdeed, as in The Adventure of The Three Students) will be set forth. There will be several inept efforts to solve the problem -- usually by a Scotland Yard inspector. There will follow a period of investigation and logical deduction carried out by the imminent detective himself. First he will sit in his parlour at 221-B Baker Street -- London's most famous address (more well known even than Number 10 Downing Street) -- and listen intently to the problem as stated by an interested party, often the victim of the crime or the one suspected by the official police. Afterward, Holmes will busy himself searching for clues, usually followed by a period of quiet reflection with a pipe or two, and perhaps his violin to promote his cerebral activity. Then the problem will be unraveled by the great detective, the seemingly insoluble puzzle will be crystal clear, and the reader will chide himself -- as Dr. Watson so often did -- that he did not see the obvious and deduce the solution earlier. Of such repetitive threads the fabric of some 60 Sherlock Holmes stories were woven by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, M.D., to create one of literature and drama's most successful and fascinating sagas.

I WAS TWELVE OR THIRTEEN years old when I first read the mystery called The Redheaded League. I had already seen several Sherlock Holmes movies, with Basil Rathbone playing the role of the great detective, and Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson.

FASCINATED BY THE INTRICATE and puzzling mysteries posed by each story and by the personality of the fictional detective, I became an avid reader of the Sherlock Holmes series, often re-reading them (because one finds that the details blur after a few years, and the stories can be re-visited as though fresh examples of the Holmes adventures). I am not certain that this time spent with Sherlock Holmes enhanced my education a great deal, though I think a boy could do worse things with his time. The noted critic Edmund Wilson seemed to put it in proper perspective when he wrote that "The reading of detective stories is simply a kind of vice . . . that ranks somewhere between crossword puzzles and smoking."

I WAS ALSO DRAWN to the various efforts to emulate Arthur Conan Doyle and have read many of the Sherlock Holmes stories written by others, such as those by his own son, Adrian Conan Doyle, and the recent best seller called The Seven-Per-Cent Solution. The latter is a fanciful story involving Sigmund Freud, who was a contemporary of the Holmes era.

AS A HOLMES ADDICT, I have also been interested in but have read only a modest amount of the vast literature engendered by the fictional detective, which includes not only biographies of the author but detailed analyses of the settings of the stories, speculations on their cultural impact, characterological studies of Holmes and Watson, and unbelievably complex discussions of the most intricate details of the stories. The two-volume set, The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, published in 1967, lists over 850 references, many published in the Baker Street Journal, a periodical that began in 1946 and deals exclusively with Sherlock Holmes material. Hundreds of other publications can be cited. There even has grown up a sizeable literature about the men who have written, produced, and acted in the numerous dramatic productions of Sherlock Holmes stories.

THE HOLMES LEGEND is perpetuated by a highly dedicated fan club called the Baker Street Irregulars (named for a gang of street urchins whom Holmes used several times to gain underground information). The club has chapters all over the world and has numbered some very famous men of letters in its membership. The organization is perhaps not unlike our own Athenaeum Society, though the subject of all meetings is Sherlock Holmes.

BESIDES THE PUBLISHED STORIES, Sherlock Holmes has been successful with other media. The first stage production was in 1893, and scores of movies have been based on his

various exploits. A Sherlock Holmes radio program began in 1930, and in 1937 the detective was the subject of a pioneer television production. Recently there has been a surprising revival of interest in Sherlock Holmes, with new publications and movies and several new plays.

THE FIRST SHERLOCK HOLMES STORY was the short novel A Study In Scarlet, sold by the author for 25 pounds (about $70), after numerous rejections by other publishers. It ran in the 1887 edition of Beaton's Christmas Annual and was given scant notice by literary critics at the time. Today that edition, which sold for one shilling, is one of the rarest books of modern times, a copy being worth as least $1,000. The first American edition was published March 1, 1890.

MUCH OF A STUDY IN SCARLET is devoted to the introduction of Holmes to Dr. Watson, and thus to the reading public. The doctor had been, for a short time, an Army surgeon, wounded in the Second Afghan War by something called "a Jezail bullet." He was still recuperating from his injury when he was introduced to Holmes by a medical student named Stamford, whose only claim to fame proved to be that he introduced Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes.

AT THE TIME, Holmes was a kind of Bohemian character who attended various medical school classes in chemistry and anatomy but pursued no systematic curriculum. He summarized

his various studies in preparation for what he described as "a trade of my own. I suppose I am the only one in the world. I am a consulting detective."

THUS HOLMES MAY BE CALLED THE FIRST in a long line of "private eyes," who have enriched our adventure literature. Unlike the real-life private detective, literary versions are among fiction's most romantic figures -- characters like Nero Wolfe, Nick Charles (The Thin Man), Sam Spade, and even Charlie Chan, a kind of oriental Sherlock Holmes. Holmes was the first of these, but was unique even among this group of heroes who owe their origins to his success. He was more intellectual, more scientific, more cerebral, and possessed with more personal eccentricities that helped to make him a successful and unforgettable character, all the more real for his mysterious personal defects and peculiarities.

THERE IS EVERY INDICATION that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had no idea that this story was to be the first of a long series. Mr. Stoddard, the American editor of Lippincott's Magazine, wanted a follow-up Sherlock Holmes story, and he arranged a dinner meeting for himself, Sir Arthur, and Oscar Wilde at a Londan restaurant. Out of that momentous meeting came an agreement by Sir Arthur to write a new Sherlock Holmes story, and for Oscar Wilde to write a short novel that we know today as The Picture of Dorian Gray.

AGAIN, THE CRITICS PAID LITTLE ATTENTION to Doyle's work, and it was not until he conceived the then new idea of writing a series of short stories around one single character that the great detective became famous. Having contracted to do six stories for the Strand Magazine, Doyle turned them out very quickly, submitting five of his most famous stories in a period of some six weeks.

HE SOON CONTRACTED for six more stories, and though the adventures were receiving wide acclaim and had become quite profitable, Doyle complained that the detective stories took his mind from better things. He confided in a letter to his mother that he meant to include the slaying of Holmes in the last story of the series, but relented when she begged him not to do so.

ONE DOES NOT KNOW whether the elder Mrs. Doyle opposed the plan because of her interest in her son's career and income or whether she had simply become one of the detective's growing league of fans. At any rate, her pleas on Holmes' behalf got him only a stay of execution.

AFTER A CONTRACT FOR twelve more stories, Doyle again grew weary of the character he had created and began to plan his death anew. Doyle wrote in his diary that he went with his wife on a short holiday in Switzerland, in the course of which he saw the wonderful Falls of Reichenbach, a place which he

thought would make a worthy tomb for Sherlock Holmes, even if he buried his own bank account with him.

LATER HE WROTE TO HIS MOTHER, "I am in the middle of the last Holmes story, after which the gentleman vanishes, never to return. I am weary of his name." Still later, after finishing the story called The Final Problem, he wrote in his diary, "Killed Holmes . . ." For the next eight years Sir Arthur resisted the clamor of editors and the reading public to bring Holmes back to life. At one point he wrote, "I couldn't revive him if I would, for I have had such an overdose of him that I feel towards him as I do pate de fois gras, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day." But his next effort, The Hound of the Baskervilles, was probably the all time most popular Sherlock Holmes story. This story was written as a reminisence, as though it had occurred before the date of Holmes' death. Soon, however, Doyle relented and wrote a story in which Holmes reappeared and explained how he had survived the Reichenbach Falls tragedy.

DOYLE'S NEXT SERIES of mystery stories, called The Return of Sherlock Holmes, received mixed reviews, and some of his faithful fans did not receive them as well as his earlier work, but the stories continued to grow in popularity. The 60th and last story appeared in the Strand Magazine in March, 1927, almost 40 years after the first publication of A Study In Scarlet.

AN INTERESTING SIDELIGHT of the Sherlock Holmes series is the controversy over who served as a model for the great detective. One theory is that he was modeled after one of the author's medical school professors, Dr. Joseph Bell. It is said that Bell, a thin, wirey, dark man with a high nose, sharp chin, penetrating gray eyes, angular shoulders, and a high, discordant voice, would sit in his waiting room and diagnose people as they came in, before they even opened their mouths. He would tell them their symptoms, and even give them details of their past lives, hardly ever making a mistake.

MANY ANECDOTES TOLD ABOUT DR. BELL tend to confirm the possibility that he served as a model for Sherlock Holmes, and it is notable that Doyle wrote Bell in 1892, a few years after he had begun the series, "It is most certainly to you that I owe Sherlock Holmes . . . I do not think that his analytical work is in the least an exaggeration of some effects which I have seen you produce in the outpatient ward." The series called The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes was dedicated to Dr. Joseph Bell by Dr. Doyle.

THEN THERE ARE MANY who believe that Doyle was influenced by Edgar Allen Poe, and suggest that he may have modeled Holmes after Poe's C. August Dupine, the detective in Murders in the Rue Morgue, often called the world's first detective story. Watson once made that comparison himself in a story, and it is possible that Dupine may have been a Sherlock

in embryo, but Doyle carried the idea much further, and most of the Holmes personality development can fairly be said to be original.

OTHER WRITERS POINT OUT that Holmes actually resembled Conan Doyle himself more than Dr. Joseph Bell, and one biographer quotes a letter to Doyle from Dr. Bell in which he states, "You are yourself Sherlock Holmes!" In a recent biography of Conan Doyle, the author makes a very strong case for the similarities between Holmes and Conan Doyle himself (Highon, 1976). He argues that both Holmes and his companion and chronicler, Dr. Watson, are two sides of Doyle's personality -- and indeed Doyle was, in real life, both an amateur detective and a physician.

DOYLE HAD MANY INTERESTS AND HABITS that turned up in the Sherlock Holmes stories as traits of the detective, and on at least two occasions his own detective work resulted in the solution of crimes for which innocent men had been convicted and sentenced to prison.

THE GRANDSON OF JOHN DOYLE, the famous political caricaturist, Arthur Conan Doyle was part of a talented, artistic family. His father, however, though an architect and illustrator in his own right, was apparently a man of lesser talent. Doyle's childhood was spent in genteel poverty. His mother could trace her ancestry back to the Plantagenet kings and from her Doyle gained an interest in the myths of heraldry,

chivalry, and the dash and glitter of the English knights. It is interesting that Doyle endowed Sherlock Holmes with some of his own ancestry on his mother's side.

DOYLE GREW UP IN EDINBURGH, and it is quite possible that the early impressions made by this crime-ridden city influenced his creation of a character who dedicated his life to a crusade against the forces of the underworld whom he regarded as a natural enemy, much as the knights of yore dedicated themselves to the slaying of dragons.

ONE AUTHOR DESCRIBES the Edinburgh of that time by saying, "Even a walk through Edinburgh at night was not advisable because the streets were more dangerous than in most big cities today." (Higham, 1976.) By the mid-1850's, the corruption and extravagance of the town council had stripped the city's coffers bare, and the death rate was said to be extremely high--mainly from murder--strangling and knifing being the most frequent methods in vogue at the time.

THOUGH I HAVE READ NO SUCH SUGGESTION by any of Doyle's biographers, I feel that it is quite probable that this urban crime environment contributed much to the later development of the Sherlock Holmes saga.

IN HIS LATER YEARS, Doyle was preoccupied with spiritualism and psychic research, participating in seances and lecturing widely on his views of the subject. He was taken in by many charlatans but doggedly pursued his obsession to the end of his life, finally becoming the object of ridicule in the

international press.

DOYLE WAS EXTREMELY IMPRESSED by the Great Houdini, whose effects he believed to be achieved by mediumistic means. He attended many performances of the great magician, whom he entertained in his own home in England and whom he visited during his American tour. Houdini found Doyle's naivete amusing, and was unable to prove to him how some spiritualistic effects were achieved by trickery.

DOYLE'S FUNERAL was a bizarre affair, attended by some eight thousand people, at which one medium claimed that the dead author himself walked in, dressed in evening clothes, and sat down in the empty chair reserved for him.

TWO WEEKS LATER his wife announced that her dead husband had established communication with her through a spirit photograph. In the years that followed, scores of spiritualists told of establishing contact with him.

IT IS AN INTERESTING FOOTNOTE that the American movie actor Basil Rathbone, who is remembered largely for his portrayals of Sherlock Holmes on the screen, also became preoccupied with spiritualism and psychic research in his own last days.

A FAVORITE PASTIME of Sherlockians is to analyze the peculiarities of the great detective -- including his propensity for drug abuse and his ignorance of certain subject matter, such as the fact that the sun is in the center of our solar system.

WITH REGARD TO THE LATTER, a strange discussion occurs in one story, when Watson -- a great admirer of Holmes who often dwelled on his positive qualities -- observed that, "His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing." Watson was amazed, for example, when he learned that Holmes was unaware of the Copernican theory that the earth travels around the sun. Seeing his companion's astonishment, Holmes observed, "Now that I do know it, I shall do my best to forget it."

HOLMES WENT ON TO EXPLAIN to the incredulous Watson that he considered a man's brain to be somewhat like an empty attic, able to contain only so many facts, as an attic can contain only a certain number of articles. If his brain becomes too crowded with irrelevant data, the useful information will be either crowded out or jumbled up so that he cannot retrieve it when he needs it. As to facts about the solar system, Holmes contended that they were of no use to him and, therefore, would get in his way.

HOLMES' DRUG ADDICTION was even more frustrating to Watson and rather puzzling to the reader. In The Sign of Four we learn that his forearms and wrists were all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture marks, the telltale signs of "mainlining." Sometimes he "tripped out" as often as three times a day, though such terms as "tripping out" and "mainlining"

were, of course, not in use at that time, and do not appear in the stories. He used cocaine and morphine and excused his habit with the argument that he could not stand the periods of inactivity that punctuated the great problems brought to him, so he indulged himself in drug use when not occupied with an interesting case.

WHY SHOULD AN AUTHOR endow his hero with such a weakness? Perhaps Doyle saw that it gave his character a kind of believability to have vices and weaknesses as well as brilliant traits. Other writers of detective stories have followed Doyle's example, so that fictional detective literature is populated with a wide variety of strange characters.

OR PERHAPS THIS AND OTHER character defects came from Doyle's own well-known personal dislike of Holmes, whose popularity exceeded that of his other fictional works and on whom he had to depend for his livelihood and his reputation as a writer. After the first few stories, the drug addiction seems to have disappeared and is not mentioned in the stories written after 1896.

WHAT IS THE APPEAL OF SHERLOCK HOLMES? Why does this character, created almost 100 years ago, still fascinate and charm the general public? Why do we see, even now, a revival of interest in his exploits and many efforts to expand his legend through movies, television, and new publications?

FOR ONE THING, Holmes was and still is very real to many of his fans. Sir Arthur received many letters addressed to Sherlock Holmes with a request to forward them. When Holmes "retired" to keep bees in the country, several elderly ladies wrote to Doyle applying for the job of Mr. Holmes' housekeeper. Even today there are those who still write to him at 221-B Baker Street.

THERE IS NO DOUBT that Sherlock Holmes is pure escape literature. We leave our own world behind us when we enter the door of 221-B Baker Street around the turn of the century. Holmes appeals to us because he is perfect logic, complete intellect -- able to solve mysteries without allowing emotions to interfere with his ultimate goal. Neither desire for riches, fear of assault, nor the attraction of women deter him from his ultimate goal -- the solution of difficult human problems.

INDEED, SHERLOCK HOLMES is more akin to the modern computer than to modern man. His eyes and ears -- even the capacity for taste and smell and his sensitive fingers -- are like input terminals that receive data and transmit them to the magnificant Holmes brain, there to be processed. The problems posed by such data are compared with thousands of possible answers, from which those with the highest probability and validity are selected and fed back.

NO MERE HUMAN BEING could compare with Holmes, though modern computers perform similar functions. In Sherlock Holmes,

however, we see the wonderful process being carried out by a human being with the same frailties and vices that we see in ourselves.

BUT IN THE HOLMES SAGA there is much more. There is, for example, the time in which he lived. The half-remembered, half-forgotten times of smug, Victorian illusion, of gaslit comfort and contentment, of perfect dignity and grace.

AND WE LOVE THE SETTING in which Holmes and Watson moved: the England of those times, strong and daring, still possessed of the spirit of imperial adventure. Surely the nostalgic appeal of Sherlock Holmes' simpler, turn-of-the century mileau accounts for part of his popularity.

BUT TODAY HE SEEMS MORE CONTEMPORARY than ever; his victorious struggle against drug addiction, his fascination with Tibetan Buddhism, and his enthusiasm for Japanese martial arts -- all are the stuff of today and strike closer to home now than ever before.

IN A SOMEWHAT CHAOTIC and bewildered modern world, Holmes conveys the reassuring message that no problem is too tangled, that the force of reason must eventually triumph over every evil and every mystery, no matter how baffling it may seem.

IN HOLMES WE SEE the fine expression of our urge to trample evil, to solve "the crime problem," and to set aright the wrongs with which the world is plagued. He is the success of all our failures, the bold escape from our imprisonment.

FOR IT IS NOT SHERLOCK HOLMES who sits in Baker Street, comfortable, confident and self-assured; it is ourselves who are there, full of a tremendous capacity for wisdom, conscious of a warm, well being, and timeless, imperishable content. It is our tobacco in the Persian slipper on Holmes' mantlepiece, and our violin lying so carelessly across the knees. And the time and place of all the great events are near and dear to us, not because our memories call them forth from pure nostalgia, but because they are part of us today.

THERE CAN BE NO GRAVE for Sherlock Holmes or Dr. Watson. They shall always be there -- alive in Baker Street. Outside, the hansoms rattle through the rain, and the forces of crime plan their latest deviltry. Within, warm flames dance upon the iron grate, and Holmes and Watson take their well-won ease. They still live (for all that love them well) in an adventurous chamber of the heart, in a romantic country of the mind, where it is always 1895.

REFERENCES

Baring-Gould, William S. The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, 2 vols. New York: Clarkson N. Petter, Inc., 1967.

Doyle, Arthur C. The Complete Sherlock Holmes, 2 vols. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Doyle, Adrian C. & J.D. Carr. The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes. New York: Random House, Inc., 1952.

Highon, Charles. The Adventures of Conan Doyle, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1976.

Meyer, Nicholas. The Seven-Per-Cent Solution. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974.