

Britain Learns to be British:  
*How Sherlock Holmes Conquered the World*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's four novels and fifty-six short stories about the legendary detective Sherlock Holmes did more for Britain than simply entertain. Holmes' stories of criminality and espionage unified an estranged population and created a national identity. Aided by such illustrious figures as Edgar Allan Poe, Havelock Ellis and Sir Francis Galton there descended upon England an obsession with criminality for which detective stories seemed to be the only antidote. From these stories Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Holmes reigned supreme and enjoyed pandemic-like fame. Holmes became the quintessential British man with whom Doyle brought a nation together and helped to start a period known as 'New Imperialism,' which expanded the British Empire until in 1922 one-quarter of the world's population and one-quarter of the Earth's total land area was under British control.

New Imperialism refers to a period of rapid colonial expansion throughout the world. Beginning in Europe in the late 1800s with such powerful countries as Britain, France and Spain, writers dubbed this the era of 'empire for empire's sake.' Ships scrambled from their homelands towards the heretofore-untouched regions of Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands. Such a momentous undertaking required the full support of a nation's people, and with Sherlock Holmes influencing the daily lives of Britons everywhere the monarchy received all the support they needed.

Holmes was seen as the quintessential Briton because he exhibited characteristics which any reader could find in themselves. Whereas not every audience-member could see themselves having a chemistry laboratory at their disposal, Holmes made up for this by having such flaws as disorganization and a cocaine habit. He even tells Watson that he believes every person possesses his observation skills but may not have his brilliant

ability in abductive reasoning. For his audience to see themselves as near equals with Holmes was thrilling and made him more accessible and believable, giving him great sway over his captivated readers. To bring his enthralled countrymen together in national pride Doyle invoked images of other archetypal Britons with descriptions like a “passionate Celtic woman’s soul<sup>1</sup>” who “was of Welsh blood, fiery and passionate.<sup>2</sup>”

Holmes’ method of detection, where the truth remains locked inside his vault-like mind until he decides to treat his listeners to it, is indicative of how Doyle wanted Britain to be seen on the world stage. For if Holmes is the source of all truth in his stories and the great detective is representative of Britain as a whole, then Doyle sees Britain as the source of global truth. This is further corroborated by Watson’s observation that Sherlock is “the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen,<sup>3</sup>” in such a way that his technique is incomprehensible to onlookers. This sort of scientific plot construction was seen best in *The Cardboard Box* when Holmes assembled a tale of marital infidelity and domestic brutality from the starting point of two severed ears. Reading more deeply into the text we can take his home-built laboratory and scientific precision to be allegorical references to Britain’s recent industrial revolution and its importance in world affairs.

Doyle’s detective did more than simply bring criminals to justice, for in turn he restored power to London. With technological advancements throughout the country came segmented regions of production. Manchester became a sprawling city of textile manufacturers and cotton spinners while London’s infrastructure rotted away beneath an influx of inhabitants and congestion. Doyle’s answer to this was to directly link Sherlock Holmes’ nemesis, the evil Professor Moriarty, to a real life criminal. In *The Valley of*

*Fear* Holmes was asked by Inspector Alec MacDonald to compare Moriarty to a real-world character, to which he responded with Jonathan Wild. Wild was already an infamous name in London after his success in running a gang of thieves while appearing to be the nation's leading policeman. This worked to soothe anxieties over crime and brought back glimmers of faith in the nation's capital, leading the city to increased prosperity. In addition to his dealings with crime Holmes also kept the aristocracy alive in several of his stories. *Scandal in Bohemia* shone a softer light on a Bohemian King who, in spite of an attempt at blackmail, still cared for his antagonist Irene Adler. In *The Musgrave Ritual* Holmes saved the crown of King Charles I from being lost in a great lake and returned it to its rightful owners, the Royal Family. Giving the British people this look at the Royals helped bolster the movement toward a national identity by rallying behind their leaders. This support was tested and proven when General Gordon was killed by rebellious natives in Khartoum, Sudan. His death was seen as a martyrdom and solidified British support for the aggressive pursuit of colonies.

Next we move to the other players in this nationalization of the British people, namely Havelock Ellis and Sir Francis Galton's contributions to the obsession with criminal apprehension. Ellis' work with eugenics, or the study of heredity, made significant leaps in the field of criminal anthropology. His 1890 book *The Criminal* answered the questions of, Who is the criminal? How is he characterized? How can we identify him? His study paralleled that of physiognomy, a trend sweeping the nation at the time, in its study of human appearance and its ties to character and personality. Ellis' conclusions furthered the movement towards a truly united kingdom by deeming those of a 'lower' race criminal, "The presence of a median occipital fossa has been specially

noted in connection with hypertrophy of the vermis of the cerebellum, as among the lower apes, in the human fetus between the third and fourth months, and in some lower races. <sup>4</sup>” This came as justification for New Imperialism’s planned spreading of the now ‘scientifically proven’ superior race.

Galton’s work with fingerprints and his ensuing book with the same title gave an identity to the criminal. Up until this time criminals could hide in plain sight and without any damning evidence such as blood-stained clothing or witness identification they could get away with almost any crime. Fingerprinting did away with this anonymity when Scotland Yard began cataloging the unique signatures each criminal kept at his fingertips. Now criminals would leave calling cards with every touch, which transformed their lives into a continuous sequence of chases until their followers caught them. Galton’s own analysis of his work in individual uniqueness could not escape the temptation to read much more deeply into this imprint of the body:

*“The number of instances is of course too small for statistical deductions, but they served to make it clear that no very marked characteristic distinguished the races. The impressions from Negroes betray the general clumsiness of their fingers, but their patterns are not, so far as I can find, different from those of others, they are not simpler as judged either by their contours or by the number of origins, embranchments, islands, and enclosures contained in them.... Still, whether it be from pure fancy on my part, or from the way in which they were printed, or from some real peculiarity, the general aspect of the Negro print strikes me as characteristic. The width of the ridges seem more uniform, their intervals more regular, and their courses more parallel than with us. In short, they give an idea of greater simplicity, due to causes I have not yet succeeded in submitting to measurement. <sup>5</sup>”*

Noting his establishment of this certain ‘British-ness’ which united the nation, we must turn our attention to Doyle’s portrayal of foreigners, whom he clearly labeled as outsiders against the now identifiable Britons. Sherlock Holmes’ first two stories, *The Gloria Scott* and *The Musgrave Ritual*, feature the great detective pitted against foreign

evildoers. This characterization of foreign evil invading Great Britain must have stirred strong emotions in the British population. Once again Professor Moriarty, Holmes' archenemy, gives us great insight into Doyle's intentions. From descriptions we learn that Moriarty is a foreigner, though we are never told quite where he is from, and that he is a physiological anomaly. Associating such evil with a foreigner helps to cement the notion of the wickedness of these outsiders in the eyes of Britons. From this description we also see that Doyle is well read in such works as Havelock Ellis' *The Criminal* where physiognomy can reveal deep, dark secrets in personality and psyche. Clearly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle knew how to play on the hair-triggered anxieties of his countrymen.

Interwoven into Doyle's stories are xenophobic nuances intended to mold his readers' attitudes towards foreign entities and their encroachment into British life. In *The Sign of Four* the killer is identified as an aborigine from the Andaman Islands, off the coast of India. This conclusion comes to Sherlock by way of several splay-toed footprints and a 'noticeably un-English' thorn left behind. Because the large majority of Doyle's readers did not have a pair of splay-toed feet stuffed into their shoes and had most likely never seen a thorn that wasn't grown from English soil, the image of the foreigner became that of evil incarnate. In one of the most beloved Holmes stories, *The Speckled Band*, these xenophobic undertones are more blatant. The man behind Julia Roylott's death, her stepfather Dr. Roylott, had just returned from a safari in India with several exotic animals including a baboon, a cheetah and a fictitious 'swamp adder' which spelled his doom. This is another clear indication of Doyle's intent because of India's relationship to Britain. At the time of publication India was Britain's most productive and profitable colony and represented the nation's budding global dominance. During this

time known as *Pax Britannica*, or ‘the British peace’, the empire enjoyed unchallenged naval superiority allowing global travel and colonization. Before any more colonization could occur the United Kingdom’s people had to unite, as Holmes had helped to do by showing Britons their national identity, and recognize the dangers posed by foreign entities. This second requirement was realized by Doyle’s characterization of these exotic animals as inherently dangerous. Any number of British animals could have filled the swamp adder’s role as murder weapon but instead Doyle outsourced the job to an Indian one. This is more proof of Doyle’s steering of popular culture and his likely effect on global exploration and politics.

In 1892’s *The Cardboard Box*, a tale of marital infidelity and domestic brutality, several significant elements arise. Mr. Jim Browner, the murderous husband of the story, sails a ship christened the ‘May Day.’ This is a reference to May 1, 1517 when London’s apprentices rose up against the privileged foreigners of whom they were jealous. This clearly reveals that demonstrations against foreigners were a part of Doyle’s thoughts. Also hidden inside *The Cardboard Box* is an allegory for New Imperialism. Involved in the story are a shipping company and a marriage that together founder on the rocks of infidelity. This inextricably links naval trade with domestic concerns and serves as an allegory for Britain’s sustained naval superiority and global imperialism. The allegory is a warning not to abandon the homeland’s well being when extending the empire’s reach across the globe, or as the marriage was stretched to its faithless ending, so too would the empire rot from the inside out. This allegory is emphasized by Doyle’s already proven attempts to amalgamate the United Kingdom into a global power.

With the support of a willing population Doyle turned his influence toward the justification for New Imperialism. To do this he first linked the criminal mastermind of his career, Professor Moriarty, to a real life villain from another country to whom the unified Britons could relate. This came in Doyle's attempt at ending the career of Sherlock Holmes with *The Final Problem*. When explaining Moriarty's malevolence Holmes says: "He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. <sup>6</sup>" By associating Moriarty with the Emperor of the hated French who attempted to invade the British Isles Doyle drew clear parallels between the evil of his stories and the evil of the real world.

To cement his argument for New Imperialism Doyle needed the validation of other scholarly figures. His stories prove that he found these corroborators in Havelock Ellis and Sir Francis Galton. This proof again comes from *The Cardboard Box* and is epitomized in Holmes' description of the severed ear:

*"As a medical man, you are aware, Watson, that there is no part of the body which varies so much as the human ear. Each ear is as a rule quite distinctive and differs from all other ones. In last year's Anthropological Journal you will find two short monographs from my pen upon the subject. I had, therefore, examined the ears in the box with the eyes of an expert and had carefully noted their anatomical peculiarities. Imagine my surprise, then, when on looking at Miss Cushing I perceived that her ear corresponded exactly with the female ear which I had just inspected. The matter was entirely beyond coincidence. There was the same shortening of the pinna, the same broad curve of the upper lobe, the same convolution of the inner cartilage. In all essentials it was the same ear. <sup>7</sup>"*

This description joins the work of the two men mentioned previously into a single message about criminal identity. Galton's fingerprint theory of each individual's unique identity is present in the beginning of the quote when Holmes tells Watson that each ear differs from all others. Ellis' criminal type theory concerning the association between biological groups is noted at the end of the quote when Holmes reveals that the original

owner of the ear was a close relative of Miss Cushing's. Doyle's emphasis of the importance of criminal identity offers narrative and scientific explanation for the many prejudices which formed the political rationalization for New Imperialism. This validation is commonly referred to today as the 'white man's burden,' or, the white man's responsibility to imperialize and civilize the globe. This again stems from Ellis' eugenics studies which classified the 'lower races' as inherently criminal.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's reasons for penning these time-honored pillars of British literature may have begun as innocent entertainment, but deep in the text lie hidden messages intended to hoist Britain to the echelons of world supremacy. This is proved by his clever descriptions of Holmes that let each reader see a piece of themselves in the great detective. After gaining the trust of the nation Holmes and Doyle were free to work their way into the consciousness of Great Britain and alter public opinion. Then, by allying his literature with the scientific breakthroughs of Havelock Ellis and Sir Francis Galton the masterful storyteller was able to guide a small island nation to the pinnacle of global domination.

## Works Cited

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