

# SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

ARTHUR IGNATIUS CONAN DOYLE WAS BORN ON 22 MAY 1859 AT 11 PICARDY PLACE, EDINBURGH. HE WAS ONE OF NINE DOYLE CHILDREN AND THE ELDEST SON.

His father, Charles Doyle, was a London-born clerk employed by the Office of Works. His mother, Mary, had emigrated to Scotland from Ireland with her mother and sister, and claimed a distinguished family history. His paternal grandfather, John – also Irish – was a successful cartoonist and painter known by the pseudonym HB.

As a result of the turmoil at home caused by his father's alcoholism, Conan Doyle lived for a time with his mother's friend, Mary Burton at Liberton Bank in Edinburgh. She was the sister of the Scottish historian and political economist, John Hill Burton, who encouraged the future author's interest in history. His mother had already instilled in him a love of reading and of ancestry. When Conan Doyle rejoined his family they had moved to a tenement flat at 3 Sciennes Hill Place.

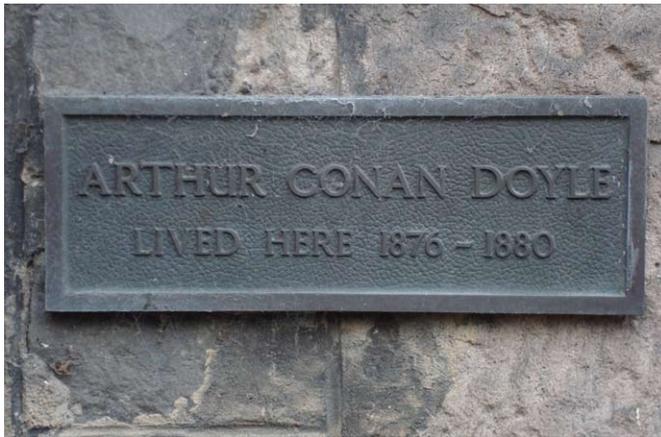
In 1868, dissatisfied with the education he was receiving at Newington Academy in Edinburgh, Mary persuaded Charles' more prosperous brothers to pay for Conan Doyle to attend Hodder, a Jesuit preparatory school in Lancashire. He transferred to its upper school, Stonhurst College, two years later. While at school he developed his talent as a story-teller and was also a keen

Conan Doyle at his desk (reprinted by kind permission of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh).



sportsman (in later life he continued to play cricket, rugby, football and golf, and was a cross-country skier). Among his favourite authors at this time were Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper and Jules Verne.

In 1875, Conan Doyle was sent to Feldkirch in Austria – another Jesuit school – before taking up a place at the University of Edinburgh the following year to study medicine. While still a student, he submitted the story 'The Haunted Grange of Goresthorpe' to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, but it was rejected. He had more luck with 'The Mystery of Sasassa Valley', which was published in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* on 6 September 1879. He received a payment of three guineas. That same year his first work of non-fiction, 'Gelsemium as a Poison', was published in the *British Medical Journal*.



Left: Plaque outside 23 George Square, one of the Doyle family's many homes when they were living in Edinburgh (Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature Trust, 2008).

Below: Professor William Rutherford of the University of Edinburgh who would later provide the inspiration for Professor Challenger in *The Lost World* (Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature Trust, 2008).

Conan Doyle took a break from his studies in 1880 when he signed on as a surgeon for a voyage to the Arctic on the whaling ship *Hope*. He returned to Edinburgh to graduate as Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery in 1881. In October that year he joined the steamer *Mayumba* as the ship's medical officer. This voyage took him out to Sierra Leone and Liberia. He returned home in January 1882.

By the summer, Conan Doyle had moved to Plymouth to join Dr George Budd, a fellow Edinburgh graduate, in general practice. The unpredictable Budd proved to be an unscrupulous business partner and Conan Doyle soon left for Southsea, Portsmouth where he eventually built up a more successful practice of his own (he gave a fictionalised account of his Plymouth experience in *The Stark Munro Letters*, published in 1895).

Throughout this period, he continued to write and among his early short stories were two inspired by his maritime adventures: 'The Captain of the *Pole-Star*', a ghost story set on a whaler, and 'J Habakuk Jephson's Statement', a version of the *Mary Celeste* mystery. Around this time he also began writing a novel, *The Firm of Girdlestone*. This was eventually published in 1890. The previous year the historical romance, *Micah Clarke*, became his first full-length novel to get into print.

Conan Doyle completed his studies and graduated as an MD from the University of Edinburgh in 1885. On 6 August that year he married Louise Hawkins who was the sister of one of his Southsea patients. Conan Doyle had already developed an interest in



Issue of *The Strand Magazine* featuring a Holmes competition (reprinted by kind permission of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh).

mediums by this time and, through his wife, he mixed socially with people who took part in séances. The world of spiritualism would become increasingly important to him and was one he would try to reconcile with the world of science.

Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series began with 'A Study in Scarlet', which was published in 1887 in Beeton's *Christmas Annual* (Conan Doyle had sold the rights to Ward Lock for £25 the previous year, a decision he would later regret, feeling he had been exploited by the publisher). It was described by the *Glasgow Herald* as the annual's 'pièce de résistance'. Its sequel, 'The Sign of the Four', was commissioned and published by *Lippincott's*



*Magazine* in February 1890 (Oscar Wilde was commissioned to write 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' at the same meeting). In his Holmes stories, Conan Doyle applied the knowledge he had gathered from his medical studies of how a case was built up by the logical accumulation of evidence. The character of Holmes was partly based on that of Dr Joseph Bell, one of his lecturers at Edinburgh, who had impressed his students with his deductive reasoning.

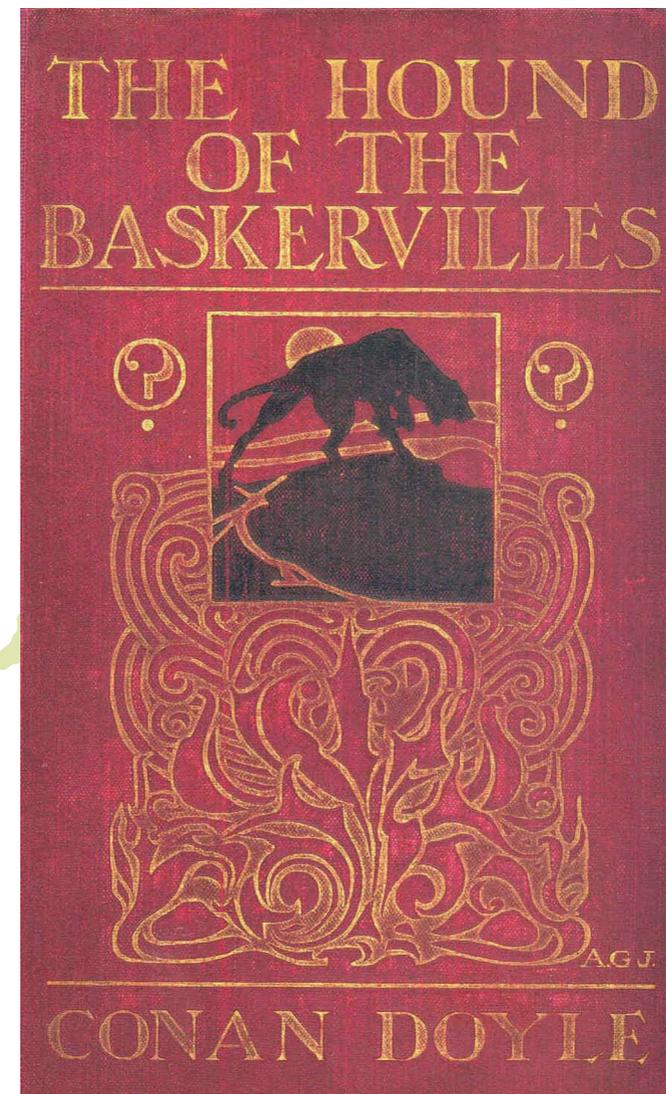
At this stage, Conan Doyle still intended to continue working in medicine. On a trip to Berlin in 1890 he had met Malcolm Morris, a Harley Street doctor, who advised him to leave Southsea and set himself up as an eye specialist in London. The career move was unsuccessful, but fortunately the Holmes stories were taken up by the newly founded *Strand Magazine* and quickly became a hit with readers (the first to appear there was 'A Scandal in Bohemia'), allowing Conan Doyle to increase his author's fees and become a full-time writer.

Conan Doyle's first love remained historical fiction and he worried that his detective stories would come to overshadow his more serious literary work. He wrote to his mother Mary in November 1891: 'I think of slaying Holmes... and winding him up for good and all. He takes my mind from better things.' To that end, in 'The Final Problem' (published December 1893), he plunged Holmes and his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty, seemingly to their deaths at the Reichenbach Falls. Conan Doyle's liberation was short-lived, however, and he was forced to bring Holmes back by popular demand with 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' in 1901. He negotiated a generous fee of £100 per 1,000 words from *The Strand* for his work. From this he paid a percentage to the journalist Bertram Robinson who had first told him the legend of a terrifying dog at loose on Dartmoor and had provided some local background for the story. Conan Doyle continued to produce Holmes stories in the coming years, concluding with the collection published as *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories* was published the following year.

During a visit to Egypt for Louise's health in 1895, fighting broke out between the Dervishes and the British, and Conan Doyle cabled *The Westminster Gazette*, offering his services as a war correspondent. With the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, he

enthusiastically volunteered to serve as a doctor at the hospital set up by his friend John Langman in Cape Town. More than 300,000 copies of his pamphlet *The War in South Africa: its cause and conduct* were sold in Britain, and it was also made widely available abroad to counter anti-British propaganda. Conan Doyle's patriotism made him a public figure, his fame going far beyond

First edition of  
*The Hound of the  
Baskervilles* (City of  
Westminster Libraries).



what he had achieved with his fiction, and he was rewarded, to his apparent embarrassment, with a knighthood in 1902.

Conan Doyle had moved from London to Haslemere in Surrey in 1893. By now he had two children, a daughter Mary Louise, born in 1889 and a son, Kingsley, born in 1892. His wife had contracted tuberculosis soon after their son's birth and remained an invalid for the remainder of her life, finally succumbing to the disease on 4 July 1906. The following year, Conan Doyle married Jean Leckie, with whom he had had an unconsummated love affair for over ten years (one of the many causes he adopted was that of reforming British divorce laws). They moved to Windlesham in Crowborough, Sussex and had three children. It was here he wrote *The Lost World*, which was published in 1912.

During the First World War Conan Doyle served as a private in the Crowborough Company of the Sixth Royal Sussex Volunteer Regiment, and as a military correspondent and historian (his



Conan Doyle with his sons from his second marriage (reprinted by kind permission of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh).

six-volume *The British Campaign in France and Flanders* was published in 1920). His eldest son, having been injured while serving as a captain at the front, died of influenza in 1918. Conan Doyle found some degree of solace from this death, and those of other close family members, through spiritualism; although he had long lost his religious faith, he still believed in an after life. Throughout the 1920s, his time was dominated by his commitment to evangelising worldwide on behalf of the spiritualist movement, leading to publications that included *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), *The History of Spiritualism* (1926) and *Pheneas Speaks: direct spirit communications in the family circle* (1927). *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922) was his account of the story of two little girls from Cottingley, Yorkshire, who had made photographs of fairies (a hoax which had taken him in completely). This along with his spiritualism led to criticism in the press of his credulity.

Conan Doyle died at his home on 7 July 1930 following a heart attack. He was originally buried in the rose garden at Windlesham, but was later interred with his second wife in Minstead churchyard in the New Forest.

In his biography of Conan Doyle, Andrew Lycett writes:

At the time the obituaries were respectful. But there was a sense that his day had past. As the bright young things of the jazz age struggled with economic depression, they were not greatly interested in a man who had become obsessed with another world.

His reputation as an author was not helped by the activities of enthusiasts such as the Baker Street Irregulars who lived in a fantasy world in which Dr Watson actually wrote the Holmes stories and Conan Doyle was just his literary agent! However, Conan Doyle's skill as a storyteller can not be in doubt, whether this be in historical, detective or science fiction, and he remains one of the world's most popular authors.