

JAMES WATSON, M.D.

by THOMAS CYNKIN

Ironically, it is the Boswell of the Canon, Dr. John H. Watson, who must be the focus of any serious chronologist's efforts. Unlike Holmes, Watson lived a life full of the vagaries of commonplace existence and left a telltale trail of documentary evidence outside the parameters of case studies—a more pronounced biographical footprint. From the practical standpoint of the chronologist, it is precisely these incidental details of Watson's day-to-day existence that are invaluable, as they provide critical clues for the purposes of analysis. Yet even the most renowned chronologists have been baffled by the inconsistencies in Watson's narratives—particularly those that concern Watson himself.

For example, more theories have been spun about Watson's seemingly migrating wound than on the "magic bullet" of the Kennedy assassination.¹ Watson's first reference to a leg wound appears in *Sign of Four*, when he informs us that his leg aches when the weather is changeable; his leg later performs accordingly in "Noble Bachelor." The problem, of course, is that seven years earlier in *Study in Scarlet*, Watson had referred to a completely different wound—one in his shoulder. More to the point, in literally none of the intervening cases had Watson made any reference to a problem with his leg—despite a great deal of perambulation and a dose of changeable weather to boot (see "Resident Patient," "Speckled Band," "Beryl Coronet," *Valley of Fear*, and "Cardboard Box," which most key chronologists place between *Study in Scarlet* and *Sign of Four*).

More frustratingly, in "Greek Interpreter" and "Silver Blaze" (which come on the heels, so to speak, of *Sign of Four*) Watson's leg seems as good as new. Sadly, by "Noble Bachelor," he apparently has a mysterious relapse. This inconsistency continues to be manifested throughout the years: While Watson requires use of a walking stick in "Lady Frances Carfax" and has a cane in "Shoscombe Old Place," he is "fleet of foot" in *Hound of the Baskervilles* and, despite cold weather, performs the equivalent of the triathlon in "Charles Augustus Milverton."

The key milestone cases containing indices of Watson's marriage are equally contradictory. Several point to a marriage in 1887: "Noble Bachelor" (internal evidence places this case in October 1887, "a few weeks before" the nuptials), "Five Orange Pips" (which uxorial Watson places in September 1887, while his wife visited her mother), and "Scandal in Bohemia" (March 1888, sufficiently after Watson's wedding that he had gained a good seven and a half pounds).

Chronologists have not focused upon another potential milestone case in this category, “Naval Treaty”—in the July “immediately after” Watson’s marriage—because there is no prima facie internal evidence for dating purposes. Yet “Naval Treaty” concerned a then-secret treaty actually signed between Britain and Italy in 1887. This might rightly be added to the weight of evidence suggesting that Watson wed some time that same year.

However, other milestone cases indicate that Watson tied the knot in late 1888/early 1889: *Sign of Four* (which saw Watson engaged in April 1888), “Engineer’s Thumb” (internally dated summer 1889, “not long after” the wedding), and “Crooked Man” (“a few months after” Watson’s marriage—and upward of thirty years after the Sepoy Rebellion, hence 1888 or 1889).² In explaining away these discrepancies, some chronologists have attributed to Watson a proliferation of wives. Chronologist pioneer Bell inferred a brief second marriage circa 1896. In order to account for both the earlier (1887) and later (1888/89) milestone references, Baring-Gould suggested a year-long marriage beginning about November 1886 and predating Watson’s ties to Mary Morstan. With a similar objective, Christopher Morley theorized that Watson married Mary secretly before *Sign of Four*. Others were more circumspect, but were forced to resort to altering the recorded days, months, or even years of key milestone cases to fit the square pegs in the round holes.

The leading analysts who attempted to reconcile the discrepancies on a case-by-case basis fall into both the 1887 and the late 1888/early 1889 camps. Among the former, Roberts estimated the Watson marriage circa June 1887, while both Brend and John Hall calculated it at November 1887. As to the latter school of thought, Christ inferred a marriage not long after September 1888; both Blakeney and Folsom opted for November 1888; Dakin, December 1888/January 1889; and Zeisler, January 1889. Much has been illuminated through masterful analysis, but the basic problem remains insoluble: There is strong, contradictory evidence suggesting two different possible timeframes for Watson’s marriage.

The one area in which the brilliant light of logic has illuminated the absolute truth has been the matter of Watson’s medical practice, with its shifting locations and changing fortunes. Nothing could be added to Folsom’s singular effort to reconcile the data in completely logical progression, and chronologists have much for which to be grateful.

That said, John H. Watson’s own accounts of himself contain so many other inconsistencies that many have, in frustration, unfairly adjudged him either a fool or a drunk. Watson was apparently simultaneously both in the British Army (*Study in Scarlet*) and the Indian Army (“Thor Bridge”), two distinct institutions; went straight from medical school into the military (*Study in Scarlet*)

and yet somehow, before donning a uniform, also spent time in civil practice, to which he later returned (“Scandal in Bohemia,” “Engineer’s Thumb”); had a wound pension (“Shoscombe Old Place”) while also a half-pay officer (*Sign of Four*); had a mother-in-law both dead (*Sign of Four*) and alive (“Five Orange Pips”); and had a landlady named both Mrs. Hudson and Mrs. Turner (“Scandal in Bohemia”). He was unfamiliar with the unforgettable Moriarty on two separate occasions (*Valley of Fear*, “Final Problem”). At the time of publication of “Veiled Lodger,” in referring to Holmes’s 23 years in practice, Watson oddly recorded that he had spent only 17 years in faithful assistance.

Perhaps the most intriguing inconsistency is that, as many have observed, while the Moriarty family appears to have suffered from an strange dearth of given names, the Watsons had a remarkable surfeit: Holmes’s boon companion was called both John (*Study in Scarlet*, “Thor Bridge”) and James (“Man with the Twisted Lip”). Efforts to explain away this glaring discrepancy have been highly imaginative—but, as others have noted, have verged on the hammish.³

Similarly, many an ingenious rationale has been concocted to reconcile all the various discrepancies. Taken individually, many are highly persuasive. Yet the sheer weight of the many inconsistencies is enough to give the most redoubtable scholar pause. The difficulty in reassigning dates—including even the years—to milestone cases that contain inconveniently contradictory references has a corrosive effect on the entire chronology. For if the dates of key cases are not sacrosanct, who is to say that the internal evidence dating any other case has any more validity? Bell had a point when he commented that, rather than doing things piecemeal, cutting the literary Gordian knot is in order.

In the interest of advancing the debate, we may postulate that the irreconcilable differences are just that—irreconcilable—for good reason. The personal history of no one individual could contain so many discrepancies—particularly when they are autobiographical! It stands to reason, therefore, that the biographic details of more than one person are evident—and the duality of these details across the board is striking. The phenomenon of literary partners sharing a *nom de plume* is far from unusual; in fact, in the field of mystery fiction, Frederic Dannay, BSI and Manfred Lee were for many years the component partners behind Ellery Queen. An alternative explanation along similar lines for the many Watsonian inconsistencies is that two individuals, most likely Watson and a younger sibling, co-authored the Canon while also in joint medical practice.⁴ And just as the readers of Ellery Queen occasionally caught a glimpse of one of the two individual personae behind the curtain, in the occasional details of the Canon they sometimes discerned something of Watson’s junior contributor. We must also assume that the Watson brothers collaborated on some cases—in assisting Holmes, writing them up, or both—and that some overlap is

inevitable. Consequently, although we may not expect through this theory to resolve the minutiae of chronological inconsistencies, we are at least able to explain decisively why such anomalies exist.

If we begin with this hypothesis, a picture rapidly emerges of the two Watsons to which the facts readily lend themselves: John, the older brother, late of the British Army; wounded in the shoulder at Maiwand, received a wound pension, and joined up with Holmes in 1881; married Mary Morstan in late 1888/early 1889, mother-in-law deceased. James, the younger brother, joined the Indian Army following a stint in civil practice; wounded in the leg, returned from India on half-pay to London (clearly after *Study in Scarlet*, in which John stated that he had no relatives in England); married in 1887, mother-in-law living. And as James's wife never happened to figure in any of Holmes's cases, she would presumably not merit more than passing reference in the Canon. (Although uxorial James appears to have taken the lead in *Sign of Four*, the fair sex department naturally devolved upon John, the bachelor with experience of women of three continents.) James joined his brother as junior partner first in medical practice, then also in assisting Holmes and recounting his adventures; he wrote under his brother's name.

This arrangement would certainly go far in explaining why Watson was always confident about being able to rely on short notice upon his "neighbor" to shoulder his case load; his sibling junior partner was always at hand. We might further speculate that James's landlady was Mrs. Turner, whose establishment was in some fashion closely linked to that of Mrs. Hudson. Other discrepancies are just as readily explained: It was James who, with more time in the military, accurately described himself as an "old campaigner" ("Man with the Twisted Lip," "Boscombe Valley Mystery"); who worked with Holmes in *Valley of Fear*, leaving John to learn of Moriarty later; and who had spent fewer years assisting Holmes than had his older sibling, as enumerated in "Veiled Lodger."

The brothers Watson would certainly have assumed that their readership would focus on the sensational exploits of Sherlock Holmes—not on the mundane, as they must have imagined them, details of their own daily existence. Nor could they possibly have dreamed that chronologists would, a century after the fact, sift through those minutiae so thoroughly for any possible clues, however minor, that might enhance understanding of the Canon. Neither would they have felt that they had anything to conceal, just as the secret of Ellery Queen was far from impenetrable and, at worst, a mild excess of literary license. Therefore, in telling with relish their respective "war stories," John and James Watson would not have expended any particular effort in eliminating any traces of their respective personae. Hence, when James's wife called him "James," he naturally thought nothing of it. And, perhaps, neither should we.

NOTES

1. For a thorough summary, see Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*; and for an excellent analysis, "The Singular Bullet" by "Dr. Hill Barton" (Dr. J. W. Sovine), *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 9, No. 1, January 1959, p. 28.
2. "Stockbroker's Clerk" and "Dying Detective" each make chronological references to Watson's marriage, but contain no independent internal evidence as to dating through which they would serve as useful milestones. Should chronologists find means of dating these independently, as with "Naval Treaty" above, they would add significantly to the body of evidence.
3. See, for example, "Dr. Watson's Christian Name" in Dorothy Sayers's *Unpopular Opinions*, and Giles Playfair, "John and James," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL (O.S.)*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1946, p. 271.
4. Bliss Austin in Edgar Smith's *A Baker Street Four Wheeler* (1944) theorized that James impersonated John following the latter's premature death, a theme reiterated by Shulamit Saltzman in "The Other Dr. Watson," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 28, No. 1, March 1978, p. 6. This theory, while groundbreaking, fails to take into account the fact that Watson's biographical inconsistencies cannot be neatly divided into an earlier and a later period.