

WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT SHERLOCK HOLMES AND JOHN H. WATSON?

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Students of the Canon are faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem in attempting to verify the accounts of the activities of Sherlock Holmes as reported by John H. Watson, M.D.: Watson lied. He lied diligently and frequently. Of course, Watson's motives were purely commercial. In order to publish his records of Holmes's cases, he needed Holmes's permission. To obtain that permission, Watson had to eradicate the aspects of his records that would permit the readers to identify the clients and other actors in the dramas.¹

Intensive research by many scholars (led by Donald Redmond²) suggests that Watson changed not only the names of those who by their actions or problems might be embarrassed by publication of those records, but also peripheral figures in the relevant matters, such as the names of household servants, witnesses, public officials (including police officers), and even pets. Similarly, Watson routinely altered place names, school names, military records, and other identifying data. In addition, Watson was a romantic who may well have embellished the facts for the sake of art, and Holmes himself encouraged Watson to "suppress" certain facts for the sake of a more instructive account.³

With so much camouflage, the historian is left doubting whether any aspects of Watson's records may be taken at face value. For example, in "The Second Stain," Watson admits that even the dates to which he ascribes the events of the case have been concealed,⁴ and in his account of "Wisteria Lodge," he ascribes a date that flatly contradicts the dates he associates with "The Final Problem" and "The Empty House." Are there any elements of the tales that are concrete, on which the reader may rely as the truth? This essay posits that there are certain verities that may form the foundation of any analysis. In a few instances, these "facts" are based on public records. Most, however, are derived from the assumption that Watson was not a *pathological* liar—that is, from the simplistic reasoning that if Watson had no *reason* to lie about a matter, he probably did not do so. If the disclosures in a tale could not lead to identification of the participants, the disclosures are likely to be true. In examining the records, however, Holmes's own warning should be heeded: "There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."⁵ A few points may be confidently stated:

1. **Some tales are true records.** Some of the cases apparently recorded by Watson's hand⁶ are records of actual cases. It must be admitted that this proposition

is impossible to prove definitively, in light of Watson's skill at disguise. However, without this postulate, there is no point to any further consideration of the historical veracity of any of the cases. It is not necessary to take a "fundamentalist" view of the matter,⁷ for it must be admitted that Watson may have *supplemented* historical records with works of fiction.⁸ How would Watson's readers have been injured by such an action? While it is true that Holmes's prospective clients might have been misled about his prowess as a detective if a significant proportion of his recorded exploits were fictional accounts, the dates of publication of the cases, discussed below, make this unlikely (or at least unintentional).

2. Dates of publication—the great publishing hiatus. The dates of publication of the various cases are indisputable. It is clear that *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four* appeared in 1887 and 1890, respectively. Therefore, they were written prior to the dates of publication, and the events recorded in those records must have occurred in or prior to those years, respectively. The actual cases on which the tales are based must have all occurred prior to the date of publication.

No cases were published between 1893 and 1901. Watson explains that Holmes desired that none be published, and there is no reason to doubt that this prohibition occurred. Why otherwise would Watson, who had—after the rocky start of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four*—finally achieved commercial success with the *Adventures* and the *Memoirs*, give up publishing Holmes's cases?

Was there a book written by Watson that was published *before* publication of *A Study in Scarlet*? Watson says so, when he calls the latter a "reprint from [his] reminiscences." Necessarily, a reprint implies a first printing. However, at least one scholar—pointing out that extensive searching has failed to produce a copy—doubts that this earlier work was ever published separately,⁹ and in the absence of a copy of the book, this publication cannot be definitely added to the Watson bibliography.

Additional assertions may be made with less confidence, and it is well to be mindful of Holmes's observation, in "The Sussex Vampire": "One forms provisional theories and waits for time or fuller knowledge to explode them. A bad habit . . . but human nature is weak."

3. The identities of the detective and the doctor. D. Martin Dakin speculates that the names "Sherlock Holmes" and "John H. Watson" (as well, of course, as Mycroft Holmes and Mrs. Hudson) may be aliases.¹⁰ It must be admitted that this is possible. There is no credible unambiguous public record of the existence of either man. While researchers have unearthed school records of men named

“Holmes”¹¹ and medical resumés of various Watsons,¹² none point unmistakably to the persons described in the Canon.

Why would Watson conceal Holmes’s identity? The most likely answer is that Holmes insisted on it, for several reasons. First, Holmes may have believed that if Watson publicized his name, his practice would suffer. Holmes may have expected that publication of his cases, revealing the inadequacy of the official forces—even with names of the clients, victims, and police officials changed—could cause the loss of his valuable police connections.¹³ Also, he probably feared that prospective clients would hesitate to employ him if it were known that Watson would publish their family secrets, even anonymously. To persons familiar with the actual participants in a case, it would not have been difficult to pierce the fog created by Watson.¹⁴

But Holmes also seems to have had a constitutional bent toward anonymity, which went beyond practical considerations.¹⁵ While Holmes might reasonably fear that some prospective clients would not hire him for fear of publicity, surely on the whole Watson’s tales substantially enhanced Holmes’s professional reputation and led to numerous engagements that did *not* require confidentiality. Watson’s accounts were, simply put, good advertising.¹⁶ Yet Holmes complained, somewhat churlishly, about Watson’s “romanticism”¹⁷ and quite evidently ordered Watson to refrain from publication of cases while he was in active practice.¹⁸

However, the suggestion that Holmes himself insisted on use of a pseudonym explains the detective’s name only in *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of the Four*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. All of Watson’s other accounts appeared either while Holmes was presumed dead (and so could not have objected to being identified) or after Holmes’s retirement (when Holmes’s professional reputation no longer required preservation). The appearance of the name “Holmes” in the other stories written by Watson can be explained only on a commercial basis. While Watson’s success with *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four* was limited, he had nonetheless built some audience for stories about “Holmes,” and he must have been reluctant to start afresh. It may even be that George Newnes and Greenhough Smith, publisher and editor, respectively, of the *Strand*, insisted on more tales of “Holmes,” rather than taking a risk on selling the public on the exploits of an unknown (albeit real) detective. Furthermore, if the new “Holmes” tales were well received, sales of the earlier publications would surely increase, and Watson would profit.¹⁹

Of course, it would not do to conceal only Holmes’s name: If Watson used his own name,²⁰ the identity of “Holmes” would be evident.²¹

While a plausible case may be made, however, that “Holmes” and “Watson” were pseudonyms, in the absence of definitive public records, no certainty can

be reached on the true names of the detective and the doctor.

4. **Watson married.** There can be no doubt that Watson married shortly after the events of *The Sign of the Four*. Of course, the woman's name was not really "Mary Morstan," for if so, the clients of *The Sign of the Four* would be readily identifiable from military records. However, there is no definitive basis on which to conclude that this marriage ended during the period of the partnership of Holmes and Watson or that any other marriage ever occurred. Holmes's remark in "The Blanched Soldier"²² could well refer to Watson's resumption of cohabitation with "Mary Morstan," from whom he evidently repeatedly lived apart.²³

5. **Holmes's retirement.** Holmes had definitely retired by 1917, the date of publication of *His Last Bow*, and was alive. Watson so states in the preface, and there seems no point to obfuscation on this date. However, the remaining information in the preface (respecting Holmes's residence and bee-keeping activities) is suspect; it is unlikely that Holmes's penchant for privacy would have lessened in retirement, when his enemies might well have sought revenge.

6. **Descriptions.** The *physical* descriptions of Holmes and Watson are consistent throughout the Canon. Holmes is repeatedly called tall and thin, and his eyes are noted to be gray. Watson is described as "a middle-sized, strongly built man—square jaw, thick neck" ("Charles Augustus Milverton") and a moustache ("The Red Circle," "Charles Augustus Milverton," "His Last Bow"). As he aged, Watson lost his athletic frame ("The Sussex Vampire") but remained "heavily built" as late as 1914 ("His Last Bow"). However, the actual appearances of the detective and the doctor are tied in many respects to the indeterminate matter of their true names. If "Holmes" and "Watson" were aliases, then it is likely that Watson would have changed their physical descriptions as well, to ensure concealment. Whether truly "heavily built" or "thin as a lath," undeniably Watson had some injury to his shoulder and another to his leg (although the dates of such injuries, their causes, and their duration are snarled in controversy).

Character descriptions of Holmes seem also to be distorted to suit the author's purpose from story to story. For example, in "The Dying Detective," Watson states that Holmes "disliked and distrusted" women, and of course, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," the first published short story, Watson establishes immediately that "[a]ll emotions, and [love] particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind." However, as Barbara Roden demonstrates,²⁴ this is patent nonsense, contradicted by numerous occasions of Holmes's courtesy, respect, and "remarkable gentleness" with his women clients

and remarks such as those he makes about Violet Hunter²⁵ and Maud Belamy.²⁶ Other examples, such as Watson's contradictory observations of Holmes's laughter,²⁷ breakfast,²⁸ smoking habits,²⁹ and dressing gown,³⁰ are too well-known to bear repetition here.

7. Watson's military and civilian careers. Unquestionably, Watson served as an Army surgeon (*A Study in Scarlet*) and practiced medicine in civilian life. The latter is evident from Watson's strong self-identification as a doctor, whether in active practice or semi-retirement, surely an unmistakable sign of the professional.³¹ However, self-concealment likely obscure the details of his corps and even the Army in which he served (British or Indian).

After his military service, Watson had more than one practice. In "The Engineer's Thumb" and "The Stock-Broker's Clerk," Watson mentions a practice in Paddington. In "The Empty House," "The Norwood Builder," and "The Red-Headed League," he mentions a practice in Kensington (which he appears to have sold by the time of "The Norwood Builder"). He may have had another practice in Mortimer Street ("The Final Problem"), and possibly another practice prior to his marriage ("The Five Orange Pips," "A Scandal in Bohemia"). Still another practice was in Queen Anne Street ("The Illustrious Client"). There is no apparent reason why Watson would have falsified such vague descriptions of the location of his practice, for each of these locations housed numerous medical offices and so could not lead to discovery of his own identity (if concealed).

8. Family lives and education. Holmes's traditional birth date of 6 January is based on only the slimmest of evidence and must be regarded as hypothetical.³² His birth year is generally assumed to be 1854, based on a reference in "His Last Bow" (set in 1917) to a man of 61. However, as S. E. Dahlinger pointed out,³³ the "tall, gaunt man of sixty" is a description of Holmes *in disguise*. "[I]t was not necessary that Holmes actually *be* sixty, nor did the narrator so describe him."

Holmes and Watson each had brothers (*The Sign of the Four*, "The Greek Interpreter"). As noted above, the name "Mycroft" cannot be verified, and it must be admitted that Holmes's description of Mycroft's job borders on the fantastic ("occasionally he *is* the British government"). Even his physical appearance seems unlikely, and numerous scholars propose that he was not Holmes's brother and perhaps not even human.³⁴ Whether Holmes had other siblings is considered frequently³⁵ but to no unarguable conclusion.

Nothing can be stated with certainty regarding Watson's parents except his father's first initial ("H.," revealed in *The Sign of the Four*), and all that is known definitely of Holmes's ancestors is that they were "country squires" with a con-

nection to the Vernet family of artists (“The Greek Interpreter”). It appears incontrovertible that Holmes attended university for two years (“The Musgrave Ritual”). However, which university has been much argued. Watson attended a preparatory school that included among its students a relation of a Cabinet minister (“The Naval Treaty”). Any other assertions in respect to Holmes’s and Watson’s educations are inferential only.

9. **Miscellaneous data.** Of course, there are other points that may be made without fear of controversy. Holmes smoked (many things). Watson smoked. Holmes used drugs for a time. Both enjoyed good meals and good drink. Holmes played a stringed musical instrument, although the level of his musicianship is uncertain.³⁶ They lived together at some point in their friendship, in a flat above street level (not on Baker Street, but almost certainly in London³⁷).

Does the limited extent of these verities mean that scholarship is useless? To the contrary: The very paucity of the historical record necessitates careful, detailed analysis of the existing material and cautious speculation, plainly labeled as such. For example, June Thomson’s biography of Holmes and Watson,³⁸ while annotated with canonical references, attempts to fill in the gaps between known historical points and suggests plausible motives and psychologies. Such a work can give valuable direction to students who seek to verify Watson’s pictures of the detective and the doctor. Even less scholarly studies, such as William S. Baring-Gould’s or Michael Harrison’s “biographies” of Holmes and Watson,³⁹ should stimulate the researcher to sift the evidence rigorously.

While the “verities” may be few in number, the thoughtful study of the lives of Holmes and Watson continues to reward scholars with more and more evidence of the truth about these immortal partners.

NOTES

An earlier version was presented at “A River Runs By It: Holmes and Doyle in Minnesota,” sponsored by the Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collection and the Elmer Anderson Library of the University of Minnesota in June 2004.

1. Watson also reportedly promised Holmes not to identify specific people. See, e.g., “Charles Augustus Milverton” and “The Illustrious Client.” In “The Veiled Lodger,” Watson implies that it is *Holmes’s* insistence on privacy, not his own ethical standards, that require concealment: “Concerning [the documents in my dispatch-cases], I may say that the writers of agonized letters, who beg that the honour of their families or the reputation of famous forbears may not be touched, have nothing to fear. The discretion and high sense of professional honour *which have always distinguished my*

friend are still at work in the choice of these memoirs, and no confidence will be abused” (emphasis added).

2. *Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Sources*, Shelburne, Ontario: Battered Silicon Dispatch-Box, 2002.
3. In *The Sign of the Four*, Holmes remarks of Watson’s account of *A Study in Scarlet*:

“You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid.’

“‘But the romance was there,’ [Watson] remonstrated. ‘I could not tamper with the facts.’

“‘Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them.’”
4. “It was, then, in a year, and even in a decade, that shall be nameless. . . .”
5. “The Boscombe Valley Mystery.”
6. That is, excluding “The Lion’s Mane” and “The Blanched Soldier,” which purport to be written by Holmes himself, and “The Mazarin Stone” and “His Last Bow,” told in the third person, with no textual claim of authorship by Holmes or Watson.
7. See, for example, Bernard Darwin’s “fundamentalist” credo, accepting that the various adventures occurred exactly in the order “in which they were told to us.” “Sherlockiana: Faith of a Fundamentalist” in *Every Idle Dream*, London: Collins, 1948, pp. 87–96.
8. It is also certain that Watson’s record is a highly incomplete one: Holmes probably handled over 2,000 cases during his career (in 1891, in “The Final Problem,” he admits to over 1,000), and yet the Canon contains only 60 tales and refers to another 100 or so.
9. John Ball, “The Second Collaboration,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Apr. 1954), pp. 69–74. He proposes that Watson wrote the “Holmesian” sections of *A Study in Scarlet* and Conan Doyle wrote the balance; hence Watson’s portion was characterized by Conan Doyle as a “reprint.”
10. D. Martin Dakin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972, p. 287. Dakin, however, recants his own suggestion: “I recoil in guilty dismay from the hideous spectre I have raised, and hasten to disclaim the whole idea before I am indicted for heresy by the united membership of all the Sherlock Holmes societies.”
11. Nicholas Utechin, “‘This Charming Town’: Sherlock Holmes at Oxford,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Sept. 1976), pp.135–140, discusses the records of Edmond Gore Alexander Holmes, who attended St. John’s, Oxford, in 1869, while Roger Mortimore, “That Is to Say, Holmes,”

- Baker Street Pillar Box*, No. 13 (Jan. 1993), pp. 13–16, considers the records of A. C. [S.] Holmes, who received a B.A. from Oxford in 1875.
12. See, for example, Stephen H. Tolins, “He’s Older Than You Think!” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Sept. 1992), pp. 162–165. Tolins’ account of Watson’s early career in New York is accompanied by a photo of Watson on the surgical staff of the New York Hospital in 1860.
 13. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes explains that when the government detectives are at fault, “they come to me, and I manage to put them on the right scent.” He makes similar remarks in *The Sign of the Four*, when he calls himself “the last and highest court of appeal in detection.”
 14. For example, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery.” For friends and acquaintances of the “Turner” and “McCarthy” families, it could not have been hard to pierce Watson’s disguises, and his account was sure to bring shame to the families involved. Similar embarrassments include “The Noble Bachelor,” “The Priory School,” “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” and “The Creeping Man.” Watson’s assurances (see note 1) seem empty promises.
 15. How else can one explain why Holmes concealed his name as the author of an article on his methods, even though the article (“The Book of Life”) surely could not have brought any discredit to his professional reputation?
 16. It was easy for Holmes to say, in “Thor Bridge,” “I do not think that I am in need of booming. It may surprise you to know that I prefer to work anonymously, and that it is the problem itself which attracts me.” By 1900, the earliest date generally assigned to “Thor Bridge,” he surely no longer needed Watson’s assistance with marketing.
 17. See note 3. Holmes’s insistence on no publicity seems difficult to square with a room “ankle-deep with congratulatory telegrams” (“The Reigate Squires”), although perhaps the very quantity of publicity was the reason for Holmes’s “blackest depression” evident at the beginning of that case.
 18. Holmes’s monograph on tobacco ash, which, in light of his evident pride in the work (he mentions it twice in the Canon), must have been published under his own name, cannot be adduced as evidence on this point, for it was plainly aimed at a “specialist” audience and not the general public.
 19. While Watson received little or nothing for the British rights to *A Study in Scarlet*, he may well have received substantial financial rewards from later sales of other rights to that work as well as enhanced continuing income from *The Sign of the Four*.
 20. Might it be Conan Doyle? This would explain the mystery of the appearance of that writer’s name on the title pages of the Canon. The extant portion of Watson’s notes for *A Study in Scarlet* tantalizingly suggests that other names were considered for the detective and the doctor—“[I]gnatius?]. Sherrinford

- Holmes” and “Ormond Sacker”—but whether these were the parties’ real names or, as seems more likely, alternate aliases is unknown.
21. In a letter, Carl L. Heifetz makes the interesting suggestion that Watson allowed the Canon to be considered a collection of fictional tales written by Conan Doyle to avoid potential liability to those clients whose secrets he disclosed. *Holmes & Watson Report*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Mar. 2004), pp. 17, 20.
 22. Holmes remarks that in January 1903, “Watson had at that time deserted me for a wife, the only selfish action which I can recall in our association.”
 23. See, e.g., “The Creeping Man,” “The Illustrious Client,” “The Mazarin Stone,” and “The Three Gables,” all cases unquestionably dated after the events of *The Sign of the Four*, in which Watson is living alone.
 24. “Canonical Misconceptions III: Holmes and the Ladies,” *The Ritual*, No. 18 (Autumn 1996), pp. 32–37.
 25. Holmes touches Hunter’s face and observes, “‘There is a spirituality about the face, however’—he gently turned it towards the light—‘which the typewriter does not generate’” (“The Solitary Cyclist”).
 26. “I could not look upon her perfect clear-cut face, with all the soft freshness of the downlands in her delicate colouring, without realizing that no young man would cross her path unscathed” (“The Lion’s Mane”).
 27. For instance, Watson remarks in “The Mazarin Stone” that Holmes seldom laughs, but A. G. Cooper, in “Holmesian Humour,” *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Spring 1964), pp. 109–113, claims to have counted 292 examples of his laughter; Charles E. Lauterbach and Edward S. Lauterbach, in “The Man Who Seldom Laughed,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL Christmas Annual* (1960), pp. 265–271, offered a table of the ways in which Holmes expressed amusement.
 28. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson refers to his own “late habits” and confesses that “I get up at all sorts of ungodly hours”; Holmes generally had breakfast and left his apartment before Watson rose. This was presumably before Watson went into “harness” in Paddington. In “The Speckled Band,” however, Watson describes himself as “regular in my habits” and Holmes as a “late riser as a rule.” In “The Engineer’s Thumb,” Watson expects to discover Holmes taking his breakfast shortly after seven o’clock.
 29. See the numerous listings in Kelvin I. Jones, “*Thank You Watson—The Matches!*” Cheltenham, Gloucester: Privately printed, 1981.
 30. Bill Mason, *Deeper Shades: The Dressing-Gowns of Sherlock Holmes and the Psychology of Color*, Centreville, Virginia: Privately printed, 1998.

31. Not only are there constant gratuitous references to Watson's practices, his patients, and his rounds throughout the Canon but also several references to his professional reading habits.
32. See generally S. E. Dahlinger, "A Very Merry Unbirthday," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 8-10; Charles Press, "On the Birthday of the Master," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 11-14.
33. Dahlinger, p. 9.
34. See material collected in "Mycroft Holmes," *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, by Arthur Conan Doyle. Edited, with annotations by Leslie S. Klinger. Indianapolis: Gasogene Books (1999), p. 213.
35. See, e.g., Kevin J. J. Gallivan, "No Ghosts Need Apply," *Covert Notes* (New Series), Vol. 2, No. 1 (Mar. 1979), pp. 7-9 (brother); John Leonard Holmes, "Was Sherlock Holmes's Brother a Remittance Man?" *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (June 1972), pp. 87-89 (brother); Willis G. Frick, "On the Question of Sherlock's Oldest Brother," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Mar. 1988), pp. 41-43 (brother); Robert Schutz, "Half Sister; No Mystery," *Baker Street Gasogene*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1961), pp. 14-15 (sister); H. B. Williams, "Half Sister; Half Mystery," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 8, No. 12 (Apr. 1958), pp. 100-103 (sister).
36. That it was a violin is expressly stated in such tales as "The Red-Headed League" and *A Study in Scarlet*, but Watson's description of the instrument as "thrown across his knee" in the later adventure raises doubts in some scholars' minds as to the identification. See, e.g., Harold C. Schoenberg, "Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 1965), pp. 83-85 (vielle); Rolfe Boswell, "Quick, Watson, the Fiddle," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* [OS], Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct. 1948), pp. 435-440 (viola); Bruce Kennedy, "The Sound of Music," *Shades of Sherlock*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Aug. 1967), p. 4 (dobro guitar). Dayna McCausland pointed this out in a personal communication to the author. Arguments as to the quality of Holmes's musicianship are too many to discuss.
37. However, the frequent mistakes about London geography in Watson's tales might be readily explained if he did not in fact reside there.
38. June Thomson, *Holmes and Watson: A Study in Friendship*, London: Constable, 1995.
39. William S. Baring-Gould, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street: A Life of the World's First Consulting Detective*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1962; Michael Harrison, I, *Sherlock Holmes*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977.