

DR. WATSON TO 1878

by JOHN RADFORD

We have very little direct evidence about the early lives of either Sherlock Holmes or John Watson. In my book *The Intelligence of Sherlock Holmes and Other Three-Pipe Problems* I offer some speculations about both. I want here to explore Watson's case in a little more detail.

We must start from the known facts, of which the first is, of course, that in 1878 he took his degree of Doctor of Medicine of the University of London, and proceeded to Netley Hospital to prepare to be an army surgeon. This is the very first thing he tells us. My principle is that we must accept what the Canon says, except where it can be definitely shown to be wrong or fictitious. Thus, in "The Red-Headed League," there never was a Saxe-Coburg Square so named. But Watson says it was close to Aldersgate Street Station, which did exist (it is now Barbican), so thereabouts it must have been.

What else do we know? Watson was at school with "Tadpole" Phelps.¹ He was at St Bartholomew's Hospital (Bart's), with a dresser, young Stamford, under him.² He traveled fairly widely, acquiring a knowledge of women in "many nations and three separate continents" and "coursed many creatures in many countries."³ One of these countries was Australia,⁴ and of course he was in India during his brief military career.⁵ He had an elder brother.⁶

I know of no direct evidence as to when he was born. The date usually suggested is the early 1850s,⁷ or more specifically 7 August 1852.⁸ But the only clue seems to be that in "His Last Bow" "a heavily built, elderly man, with a grey moustache" enters and turns out to be, of course, Watson. Sixty-two is not particularly elderly, and was not so even then.⁹

I have suggested that Watson was, in fact, five or six years older than generally thought. We must start from the M.D. Unlike in many countries, this is not, in the U.K., the qualifying degree for physicians. Qualification is by one of two routes: either membership of one of the professional bodies, obtained by examination, or by a first, Bachelor, degree, either of medicine (M.B.), or, often, that plus one in surgery (B.S.). By custom, however, all those qualified are titled, and addressed as, doctor. The actual doctorate is a higher degree, taken by the relatively few who seek consultant status. The system was thus in Watson's day, although the honorary title was not always accepted. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* both Holmes and Watson address James Mortimer as "Dr. Mortimer," but he modestly disavows it: "Mister, sir, Mister—a humble M.R.C.S."—i.e., a Mem-

ber of the Royal College of Physicians. Such memberships could also be gained after qualifying by a degree, when they would require merely joining, not further examination. The upper grade of Fellowship, however, implies a further qualification, more or less equivalent to a doctorate.

It was quite usual to qualify in one place and take the doctorate elsewhere. Medvei and Thornton¹⁰ give brief career details of those who held the post of Physician, that is the most senior grade, at the Hospital. For example, Dyce Duckworth took his M.B. at Edinburgh in 1862, and followed this with a M.D. at Bart's in 1865. Thomas Lander Brunton did exactly the same in 1866 and 1870. It seems that the doctorate could be done in as little as two years, but three or four were more usual. Original research is now an essential component of the degree, but in Watson's day it was more a question of a reasoned review of the available evidence on a topic, arguing a particular line—a thesis, in fact.

One could not take a M.D. either as a first degree or following one in a different faculty. It is thus quite clear that (a) Watson's M.D. was a second degree in medicine, (b) in order to take it he must have already possessed a first degree in medicine, and (c) he must therefore have been qualified before embarking on it. Besides, there is the important point that young Stamford was his dresser at Bart's, that is, assisted in his work as a surgeon, for which, again, he must have already been qualified. We should note also that Watson's M.D. was "of the University of London," although he worked at Bart's. London, uniquely in the United Kingdom, was and is a federal university, consisting of a number of largely independent Schools, but with formal degree-awarding powers vested in the University itself. Elsewhere I suggest that there are reasons to think that Watson, like Duckworth and Brunton, took his first degree at Edinburgh. However, this does not affect the length of time involved, which would be five or six years.

Examining his schooldays, there is only a single clue, that he was at the same school as "Tadpole" Phelps. However, Watson's words merit attention:

During my school-days I had been intimately associated with a lad named Percy Phelps, who was of much the same age as myself, though he was two classes ahead of me. . . . He was, I remember, extremely well connected and even when we were all little boys together, we knew that his mother's brother was Lord Holdhurst, the great Conservative politician.¹¹

In his letter appealing for help, Phelps writes: "I have no doubt that you can remember 'Tadpole' Phelps, who was in the fifth form when you were in the third."

The first point is that it is curious that Phelps singles out these two years. It would be more natural to say “already in the third form when you were in the first,” or, a little less so, “in the sixth form when you were in the fourth”—that is, to refer to the point at which Watson joined or that at which Phelps was about to leave. The implication I draw is that Watson joined the school in the third form and found Phelps, although of his own age, already in the fifth.

The second point is Watson’s reference to being “little boys together.” No ex-public schoolboy could possibly refer to himself, when at that school, as a “little boy.” He might say “when we were boys together,” or “when we were at Greystones together.” Here, then, the implication is that Watson knew Phelps much earlier, most likely at preparatory school, the stage that traditionally precedes public school. It is likely that this school (if I am right) was in England, because they played cricket. Phelps was hit “over the shins with a wicket.” Cricket has always been played in Scotland,¹² but not to anything like the same extent as in England. The expression is odd, however, as a wicket consists of three separate uprights (stumps), and two small cross-pieces (bails). The wicket as such is ill adapted for use as an offensive weapon. Watson must have known this, especially if he was himself a cricketer, as I argue elsewhere. Conan Doyle most certainly was, and surely would have queried it.

One may remind non-British readers that “public schools” are in fact private establishments. The oldest of them were originally public, founded by benefactors, often for local boys. Over the years richer parents came to desire the education they offered, and were willing to pay for it, and fee-paying eventually became the norm. The traditional pattern has been preparatory school from eight or nine to thirteen, then public school to eighteen, followed by university for three years. Of course there have been many individual variations on this pattern. Watson and Phelps must have been at a public school, because at that time no state schools extended as far as fifth and sixth forms. Phelps must have gone on to the sixth form, since he won a scholarship that sent him on to continue his triumphant career at Cambridge.

When did Watson travel, in particular to Australia? It was before *The Sign of the Four*, when he says he has “seen something of the sort on the side of a hill near Ballarat”—that is, probably, before 1888. But in any case it must surely be before he met Holmes, since there is no mention of a lengthy absence from England after that. Travel to Australia and back took a good fifteen weeks in Watson’s time, and there would be little point in undertaking such a trip unless staying for a substantial period, at least as long as the travel took—that is, the better part of a year for the whole thing. The most likely time is after taking his first degree but before starting on his second. It cannot, of course, have been

after the M.D., since he immediately embarked on his military career. As a now qualified physician, Watson would be able to finance his travels by work as a *locum*, especially in British-linked territories. This would be a very appropriate juncture at which to acquire his extensive knowledge of women and the chase.

We can suggest a chronology for Watson's early years. It does make him rather older than Holmes, according to the usually accepted date for the latter's birth. But I can see no reason why this may not have been so. In any case, without wishing to confuse things even further, Holmes's birth date is not certain. It is based mainly on the statement, in "His Last Bow," that Altamont (that is, Holmes, "was a tall, gaunt man of sixty." The often-overlooked point is that this refers to Altamont. With his matchless powers of disguise Holmes could surely have assumed any age within a decade or so either way of sixty.

I offer the following suggested chronology of Watson's early career:

Year	Age	
1848 or 1849	0	Born in Scotland or the North of England
1857 approx.	8 or 9	Enters preparatory school, probably in England, also attended by Percy Phelps
1861	13	Enters public school
1863	15	Goes to new public school, possibly in Scotland. Meets Phelps again
1866	18	Medical school, possibly at University of Edinburgh
1872	24	Graduates M.B. thus qualifying to practice
1872-74	24-26	Travels, including Australia
1874	26	Joins Bart's Hospital as surgeon, registers for M.D. degree
1878	30	Awarded M.D. degree. Takes course for Army surgeon, and appointed to Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers

The events of 1878 are worth mentioning. Watson says that having taken the degree he "proceeded to Netley,"¹³ that is, presumably at once. He was appointed to his regiment, but the Second Afghan War broke out before he could join it. The outbreak occurred in late November. The implication is that Watson was ready to join just before that. We may infer, to allow time for the surgeons' course, that Watson took the M.D. early in 1878. As it was awarded by thesis, not examination, it would not be tied to academic terms or years.

It seems clear that Watson, a promising young doctor with good prospects, was torn between medical advancement and adventure. Thus he took his first degree, and then traveled; he took his second, and then enlisted. Finally, after a longish period of convalescence, he settled for a combination of adventure with Holmes, and a series of fairly undemanding medical practices. But as late as 1894 he could be found “deep in a recent treatise upon surgery”¹⁴ for which he would have little call as a general practitioner. I hope the above sheds a little light on his earlier years.

NOTES

1. “The Naval Treaty.”
2. *A Study in Scarlet*.
3. *The Sign of the Four*.
4. *The Sign of the Four*.
5. *A Study in Scarlet*.
6. *The Sign of the Four*.
7. Jack Tracy, *The Encyclopaedia Sherlockiana*.
8. William S. Baring-Gould, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1962.
9. Of course, Daisy Ashford began her masterpiece, *The Young Visitors* (sic), in 1890 with the memorable words, “Mr Salteena was an elderly man of forty-two,” but that was from the perspective of nine years old.
10. V. C. Medvei and John L. Thornton, eds., *The Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew 1123–1973*, London: St. Bartholomews, 1974.
11. “The Naval Treaty.”
12. We should note, too, that the name Watson is found about twice as frequently in Scotland and the North of England as in the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Watson family may have been northerners.
13. *A Study in Scarlet*.
14. “The Golden Pince-nez.”