

# Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859, in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Doyles were a prosperous Irish-Catholic family. Arthur's father, a chronic alcoholic, was a moderately successful artist, who — apart from fathering a brilliant son — never accomplished anything of note.

His mother, Mary Doyle, had a passion for books and was a master storyteller. There was little money in the family and even less harmony on account of his father's drinking. Arthur's touching description of his mother's beneficial influence is also poignantly described in his autobiography, "In my early childhood, as far as I can remember anything at all, the vivid stories she would tell me stand out so clearly that they obscure the real facts of my life."

After Arthur reached his ninth birthday, the wealthy members of the Doyle family offered to pay for his studies. He was in tears all the way to England, where he spent seven years in a Jesuit boarding school. Arthur loathed the bigotry surrounding his studies and rebelled at corporal punishment, which was prevalent in most English schools of that time.

It was during these difficult years at boarding school that Arthur realized he also had a talent for storytelling. He was often found surrounded by a bevy of totally enraptured younger students listening to the amazing stories he would make up to amuse them.

By 1876, graduating at the age of seventeen, Arthur Doyle was a surprisingly normal young man. With his innate sense of humor and his sportsmanship — having ruled out any feelings of self-pity — Arthur was ready and willing to face the world.



Family tradition would have dictated the pursuit of an artistic career, yet Arthur decided to follow a medical one. The young medical student met a number of future authors who were also attending the university, including James Barrie and Robert Louis Stevenson. However the man who most impressed and influenced him was one of his teachers, Dr. Joseph Bell. The good doctor was a master at observation, logic, deduction, and diagnosis. All these qualities were later to be found in the persona of Doyle's celebrated fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes.

A couple of years into his studies, Arthur decided to try his pen at writing a short story. The result, entitled *The Mystery of Sasassa Valley*, was evocative of the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Bret Harte, his favorite authors at the time. It was published by the *Chamber's Journal*.

Doyle obtained his Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery degree. Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle shortly opened his first medical practice. He rented a house but was only able to furnish the two rooms his patients would see. The rest of the house was almost bare and his practice was off to a rocky start. But he was compassionate and hard-working. By the end of the third year, his practice started to earn him a comfortable income. In August of 1885, he married a young woman named Louisa Hawkins. He described her as "gentle and amiable."

In March 1886, Doyle started writing the novel which catapulted him to fame. Two years later, this novel was published under the title, *A Study in Scarlet*, which introduced us to the immortal

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. During that time, he wrote other works which he hoped would position him

Surprisingly, at that time, Doyle was better known as a writer in the United States than in England. In 1889, Joseph Marshall Stoddart, managing editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in Philadelphia, published a short novel, *The Sign of Four*, which made both Sherlock Holmes and Arthur Doyle household names.

To write *The Sign of Four*, Conan Doyle had to set aside for a time *The White Company*, a historical novel he always said was the work he had most enjoyed writing. This is not surprising, for the main characters had the same traits of decency and honor that guided the author through his life. Thirty years later, he told a journalist, "I was young and full of the first joy of life and action, and I think I got some of it into my pages. When I wrote the last line, I cried: 'Well, I'll never beat that' and threw the ink pen at the opposite wall."

In spite of his literary success, a flourishing medical practice and a harmonious family life enhanced by the birth his daughter Mary, Doyle was restless. He moved to Vienna, where he specialized in ophthalmology. A foreign language turned that trip into somewhat of a fiasco and after a visit to Paris, Doyle hurried back to London followed by the gentle Louisa. He opened a practice in elegant Upper Wimpole Street where, if you read his autobiography, not a single patient ever crossed his door.

As a result, he made the most profitable decision of his life, to write a series of short stories featuring the same characters. By then, Doyle made a deal with *The Strand* magazine to publish the Sherlock Holmes stories.

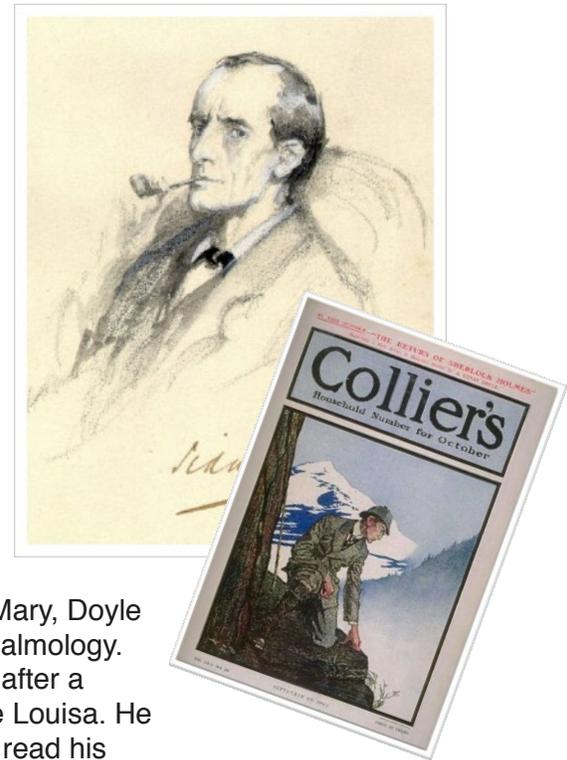
The "image" of Holmes (right) was created by the illustrator Sidney Paget who took his brother Walter as a model for the great detective. This collaboration lasted for many decades and was instrumental in making the author, the magazine and the artist, world famous.

In May of 1891, while writing some of the early Sherlock Holmes short stories, Conan Doyle was struck by a flu that left him between life and death for several days. When his health improved, he came to realize how foolish he had been, trying to combine a medical career with a literary one. He decided to be a full-time author, and in 1892, Louisa gave birth to a son they named Kingsley.

A year later, in spite of everyone's pleading, the prolific but impulsive author decided to get rid of Sherlock Holmes. During a trip to Switzerland, he found the spot where his hero was to come to his end. In his story, *The Final Problem*, published in December 1893, Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty plunged to their deaths at The Reichenbach Falls. As a result, twenty thousand readers cancelled their subscriptions to *The Strand Magazine*.

Now freed from his medical career and from a fictional character that overshadowed what he considered his finer work, Doyle immersed himself into even more intensive activity. This frenzied life may explain why the former physician didn't notice the serious deterioration of his wife's health.

By the time he finally became aware of how sick she was, Louisa was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Although she was given only a few months to live, her husband was able to keep



her in good enough health to see the new century. Writing incessantly, looking after Louisa, and then losing his father, deeply troubled Doyle. As Sherlock Holmes said to Watson, "Work is the best antidote to sorrow..." During that time, he wrote the "Brigadier Gerard" stories, which was an instant hit with the readers.

A trip with Louisa during the winter of 1896 to Egypt, where he hoped the warm climate would do her good, produced another of his novels: *The Tragedy of the Korosko*.

The inspiration for his next novel came from a prolonged stay in the Devonshire moors, which included a visit to Dartmoor prison. At first, it was based mainly on local folklore about an inhospitable manor, an escaped convict and a huge black sepulchral hound. As the novel progressed, he came to realize that his story lacked a hero. He is quoted as having said, "Why should I invent such a character, when I already have him in the form of Sherlock Holmes?" However, rather than resurrecting the detective, the author wrote the story as if it was a previously untold adventure.

To the delight of thousands of frustrated fans, *The Strand* magazine published the first episode of ***The Hound of the Baskervilles*** in August of 1901.

A year later, King Edward VII knighted Doyle for services rendered to the Crown during the Boer War. Gossip has it, that the King was such an avid Sherlock Holmes fan, that he had put the author's name on his Honours List to encourage him to write new stories. Be that as it may, His Majesty and several hundred thousand of his subjects must have been very pleased when in 1903 *The Strand Magazine* started serializing ***The Return of Sherlock Holmes***.

After Louisa died in his arms on the 4th of July 1906, Doyle slipped into a debilitating state of depression lasting many months. He extricated himself from his misery by trying to help someone in a worse condition than he was. He began working with Scotland Yard on active cases. Doyle and Jean Leckie got married on September 18, . 1907.

With his two children with Louisa, they all moved to a new home called "Windlesham," in Sussex. He would spend the rest of his life living in that lovely house while keeping a small flat in London.

Arthur Conan Doyle was so happy to share many of his wife's activities that his literary output slowed down considerably after his marriage. During the next years, he tried his hand at a number of plays, one based on *Brigadier Gerard*, the other on *The Tragedy of the Korosko*. Neither of them did well. Not one to give-up, he wrote a third play about boxing, he named *The House of Temperley*. That one closed after three months. To make-up for his considerable financial losses, Conan Doyle set out to write a fourth play, but this time with Sherlock Holmes. At first he called it *The Stonor Case* but later reverted to calling it *The Speckled Band*, which was well known and had been so successful. One of the difficulties of the production was the casting of the snake. The author insisted upon a live reptile, whereas the actors and the crew begged for an artificial one. Conan Doyle won, but later wrote admitting his mistake: "The Python either hung down like a pudgy yellow bell rope, or else when his tail was pinched, endeavoured to squirm back and get level with the stage carpenter who pinched him, which was not in the script." Happily, the play got rave reviews, and made the author a lot of money.

Arthur and Jean's wedding picture in 1907 with his brother Innes as best man

After the success of *The Speckled Band*, Conan Doyle chose to retire from "stage work," "Not because it doesn't interest me, but because it interests me too much," he said. The birth of his two sons, Denis in 1909 and that of Adrian in 1910, also contributed to keep the author from concentrating on fiction. A last child, their daughter Jean, was born in 1912.

A couple of years went by before the author's next creation, the delightfully outrageous Professor Challenger, whose own wife called "a perfectly impossible person." His new hero was quite the opposite of Sherlock Holmes; nevertheless, *The Lost World* was an immediate success. It involved the Professor in a delightfully humorous adventure, with a number of other highly personable characters, stranded in a mysterious region of South America, discovering prehistoric fauna and flora.

In those days, the term "Science Fiction" had not been coined, so when Conan Doyle wrote this story, in his mind it was a "boy's book". Another four novels about Professor Challenger's adventures followed *The Lost World*. This series stands out as a masterpiece of the genre authors have had no qualms to "borrow" from.

*The Valley of Fear*, the second full length Sherlock Holmes novel, was serialized in *The Strand magazine* in early 1914. But Conan Doyle's readers were not quite satisfied, for Sherlock Holmes was absent during a great part of the novel.

Conan Doyle playing baseball in Jasper National Park during his second visit to in the United States in June 1914.

In May 1914, Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle sailed for New York, a city the author found unfavourably changed since his first visit twenty years earlier. Canada, where they spent a short time, the couple found enchanting. They returned home a month later, probably because for a long time Conan Doyle had been convinced of a coming war with Germany. He had sent articles to newspapers about organizing "Military readiness," many years before World War I broke out. In 1913 he wrote to the Fortnightly Review, expressing his views about new untested warfare: "These new factors are the submarine and the airship". He foresaw the possibility of a "Blockade" by enemy submersible ships, long before anyone in the British navy did. The only solution he added would be to build a Channel Tunnel. But this intelligent man's warnings were judged to be "Jules Verne fantasies" by most naval experts.

As soon as the war broke-out, Conan Doyle then fifty-five, offered to enlist again. He was denied his wish once more but set out to organize a civilian battalion of over a hundred volunteers. When the navy lost more than a thousand lives in a single day, his brilliant mind never at rest, Conan Doyle made suggestions to the War Office to provide "inflatable rubber belts," and "inflatable life boats." He also spoke of "body armour" to protect soldiers on the front. Most government officials found him irritating at best. One of the exceptions was Winston Churchill, who wrote to thank him for his ideas.

While writing a book, which was to be called *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*, the author was given permission to visit the British and French fronts in 1916. A while later, the Australian High Command invited him to observe their position on the river Somme. Witnessing the Battle of St. Quentin made Conan Doyle say he would never be able to forget the horrors of the "tangle of mutilated horses, their necks rising and sinking," lying amidst the blood soaked remains of fallen soldiers.

In late 1914, the author made up for the lacklustre reception of his second Sherlock Holmes novel, with the publication of *His Last Bow*. In this tale, Sherlock Holmes infiltrates and vanquishes a German spy-ring, a timely war propaganda story.

Two years later, Conan Doyle's acute sense of justice was awakened again and made him rise to the defence of Sir Roger Casement, an Irish diplomat accused of being "the foulest traitor who ever drew breath." Conan Doyle had known and liked the diplomat several years before, as the man had alerted him to awful injustices committed against the Congolese. The author had even based the character of Lord John Roxton in *The Lost World* on Casement. Now, the

"traitor" was found guilty of having tried to get Germany's support for the Irish independence movement.

Conan Doyle almost succeeded in sparing the convicted man's life, on grounds of insanity, had it not been for the discovery of Casement's diary. It chronicled in detail his homosexuality, which at the time was also a criminal offense. Conan Doyle's feelings about homosexuality were more liberal than the norm, which may have been the reason why, he later was not elevated to sit in the House of Lords.

The toll of the war was cruel on Conan Doyle. He lost his son, his brother, his two brothers-in-law and his two nephews.

After the death of his son and the horrors of World War I, Conan Doyle progressively became attracted to spiritualism and the occult. While researching the topic of fairies he came across some pictures belonging to a family in Cottingley, rural Yorkshire. These images seemed to show several diminutive fairies dancing in the presence of two teenage girls. The pictures seemed not to have been tampered with. Conan Doyle championed the photos and eventually included them in his 1922 book, *The Coming of Fairies*.

He was compulsive in his new passion for the occult and pursued it with the same dogged energy he had shown in all his endeavours when he was younger. As a result, the Press mocked him and the Clergy disapproved of him. But nothing deterred him.

His wife, reputed to be such a level-headed woman, came to share his beliefs and developed the talent of "trance-writing."

Photos of the "Cottingley Faeries"

The Conan Doyle Family during a visit to New York in 1926

After 1918, because of his deepening involvement into the occult, Conan Doyle wrote very little fiction, writing arduously about Spiritualism instead. Their subsequent trips to America, Australia and to Africa, accompanied by their three children, were also on psychic crusades.

As years went by, having spent over a quarter of a million pounds in the pursuit of his esoteric dreams, Conan Doyle was faced with the necessity to earn money. In 1926, Professor Challenger and his colourful friends appeared again in *The Land of Mist*, a novel of Psychic adventures followed by *The Disintegration Machine* and *When The World Screamed*. Two years later, his last twelve stories about the exploits of the immortal detective were compiled in *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*.

In the autumn of 1929, in spite of having been diagnosed with Angina Pectoris, Conan Doyle went off for his last Psychic tour to Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. He was in such pain by the time he returned, that he had to be carried ashore. Bedridden from that time on, he managed to have one last quixotic adventure on a cold spring day in 1930. He rose from his bed, and unseen went into the garden. When he was found, he was lying on the ground, one hand clutching his heart, the other holding a single white snowdrop.

Arthur Conan Doyle died on Monday, July 7, 1930, surrounded by his family. His last words before departing for "the greatest and most glorious adventure of all," were addressed to his wife. He whispered, "You are wonderful."