

“I AM AN OMNIVOROUS READER”

Book reviews by ALISTAIR DUNCAN, MARK MOWER, SARAH OBERMULLER-BENNETT,
JOHN SHEPPARD and ROGER JOHNSON

The Worlds of Sherlock Holmes: The Inspiration Behind the World’s Greatest Detective by Andrew Lycett. *Frances Lincoln*, 2023. 208pp. £25.00 (hbk)

Andrew Lycett, as you’ll probably know, is the author of *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes* and *Conan Doyle’s Wide World: Sherlock Holmes and Beyond*. He’s also an active member of our Society. *The Worlds of Sherlock Holmes* differs from the earlier books in its large format — 10½" x 8½" — and its hundreds of illustrations, many in full colour, all interesting and nicely reproduced. The book’s subtitle is actually too restrictive: Conan Doyle’s reasons for creating the great detective are dealt with, of course, but the book’s chapter headings give a more accurate idea of its contents, which include the stories’ locations, advances in science, real and fictional detectives, dramatic interpretations, art and music, and sport.

The book has its small flaws. Watson’s description of John Scott Eccles is quoted as evidence of *Holmes’s* distaste for official Conservatism. The Baker Street Irregulars is named as “the leading American-based ‘scion’ society”, when in fact it’s the parent society of which innumerable others are scions — i.e. offshoots. Watson, as we know, is astonished at Holmes’s ignorance of the earth’s orbit around the sun; “But,” we read, “Holmes remained nonplussed.” Perhaps that should be *nonchalant*: “nonplussed” means puzzled or at a loss.

Be that as it may, I fancy that anyone who enjoys Conan Doyle’s stories and is curious to know more about the great detective will find *The Worlds of Sherlock Holmes* informative and very enjoyable.

RJ

The Medical Casebook of Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson by Nick Howlett. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 412pp. £24.99 (hbk), £17.65 (pbk)

What we have in this book is a look at all the maladies that feature in the Canon and how they were perceived and treated in Victorian society. The author is a G.P. so you know the facts are solid. A staggering fifty-two diseases are covered, from Diabetes to Lumbago. For each, Howlett follows a pattern: 1. *Introduction*. 2. *Where the disease features in the Canon*. 3. *How the disease was perceived in Victorian times*. 4. *How it was treated*

(*rightly or wrongly*). 5. *How it is viewed by modern medicine*.

The length of each chapter varies depending on how often the condition is featured in the Canon and how much was known (or presumed known) about it at the time. The book is, helpfully, peppered with illustrations. Some of these are contemporary drawings and photos relating to the condition under discussion. Others are original depictions of scenes from the Canon. These are all courtesy of a talented artist named Alex Holt, and I hope he gets commissioned to produce similar works for other authors. His style really impressed me.

My only gripe with this book is the font. Perhaps appropriately, it comes across as too clinical. I don’t feel this is a book that you will read cover to cover. It is very much a reference book that you will dip in and out of. In my opinion, it will be of most use to pastiche writers, who need to understand what diseases were called and how they were treated. It will also be of use to anyone with an interest in Victorian society and medicine.

AD

Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Illustrations, Volume Four by Mike Foy. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 434pp. £29.99 (hbk)

Having long been interested in the illustrations created for the canonical stories, I welcomed Mr Foy’s first volume two years ago, and have been delighted and impressed by those that have followed. We have admirable contributions from Americans, notably Charles Raymond Macaulay for *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur I Keller for *The Valley of Fear*, John R Flanagan (Australian born) for “The Illustrious Client” and “The Three Garridebs”, and four artists who shared twenty-five stories published in the *San Francisco Call*, as well as B Widman, many of whose pictures copy the work of Sidney Paget. But there is, as the editor says, a very European feel to this volume. For Britain, H.M. Brock and Joseph Simpson represent *The Strand Magazine*, with “The Red Circle”. The prolific Czech artist Josef Friedrich takes his cue from Paget, without directly copying him; I particularly like his illustrations for *A Study in Scarlet*. And France provides many splendid illustrations by Pierre Georges Dutriac, Paul Henri

Thiriart and Gaston Simoes da Fonseca, as well as the cartoon-like work of Solar d'Alba.

Like its predecessors, this volume isn't perfect, but it enables us to study, enjoy and often marvel at depictions of Holmes and Watson that most of us will never have seen before. We should be grateful to Mike Foy and to MX Publishing.

RJ

Emissions of a Brain on Sherlock Holmes by Mary Towell Schroeder. *Page Publishing*, 2023. 144pp. £13.42/\$16.20 (pbk)

Ms Schroeder is an Adventuress of Sherlock Holmes and a retired English Professor. She knows her Sherlock Holmes, and she writes to entertain as well as to make a point. Her book's title is amusingly pretentious, and the book itself is a pleasure to read. Because her style is witty, we can enjoy a remark even if we don't agree with it — of "The Five Orange Pips" she says: *All things considered, I think Gladys Knight's 'pips' unquestionably provide better entertainment value.* — and the soundness of her serious observations is not compromised. Her deconstruction of "A Case of Identity", "The Speckled Band", "The Naval Treaty" and others, even in brief essays, gives one furiously to think. Also, perhaps, to remember oddities in Watson's accounts that one spotted but never followed up. There are twenty Commentaries here, two Letters, five Old News Items, and two Toasts. As someone once said, "Let me recommend this book."

RJ

The Science of Sherlock: The Forensic Facts Behind the Fiction by Mark Brake. *Skyhorse Publishing*, 2023. 240pp. £10.99 (pbk)

The author was Professor of Science Communication at the University of Glamorgan, and has been a science communicator for the Royal Institution, NASA, the BBC, the British Council and many others. His "Deduction Diamond", a four-step way of looking at any text, is new to me — 1. *Effects*: what does the text make you feel or think about? 2. *Techniques*: how did the author create the effects? 3. *Context*: consider the circumstances in which the text was made. 4. *Meaning*: what's it all about? Most of us, I suspect, have often applied the process without thinking of it in formal terms; it suits the Holmes stories very well, and Mark Brake makes the most of it. The science of the title isn't restricted to physics, chemistry and biology; nor, for instance, to the actual possibility of Professor Presbury's simian

reversion or the swamp adder's taste for milk. Scientific influences on the stories and characters — not only Holmes himself — include Isaac Newton as well as Edgar Allan Poe and Joseph Bell.

The fact that there are other excellent books on Holmes and science doesn't mean that *The Science of Sherlock* is redundant. It's full of those obvious facts that no one usually notices; it's fascinating, intelligent, and very readable. And it reminds us that in 2002 Sherlock Holmes became an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry, the award being presented by Dr John Watson.

RJ

Conan Doyle: Mystery and Adventure – Inside the Lost 1967 BBC TV Series Sir Arthur Conan Doyle by Mark Jones. *Kaleidoscope Publishing*, 2023. 390pp. £25.99 (hbk)

John Hawkesworth was a major figure in British television, as writer and developer of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, *The Duchess of Duke Street* and many other classic series. Most importantly for us, he was the man who developed the Granada TV *Sherlock Holmes*, and wrote the scripts for half a dozen of the best episodes, including the outstanding feature-length *The Sign of Four*. But his first collaboration with Holmes's creator was in an earlier decade, when he dramatised thirteen of Conan Doyle's non-Holmes stories for BBC2, then only three years old. It began with *Lot 249*, one of the first classic accounts of a revived Egyptian mummy, followed by tales comic, romantic, adventurous and haunting. The series was popular enough to be repeated in part on BBC1, and was well received by the critics, but — for various reasons — all episodes except *The Mystery of Cader Ifan* were wiped in the 1970s. I was away at college in 1967 and never saw the series; Mark Jones's meticulously researched and very readable book makes me long for a time machine.

(Kaleidoscope publishes handsome, well-researched books but is very inefficient at making them available. The only reliable way to get a copy appears to be via

<https://www.lulu.com/shop/mark-jones-and-simon-coward/conan-doyle-mystery-and-adventure/hardcover/product-qrijpkr.html?q=conan+doyle&page=1&pageSize=4>

– but it will cost you £29.90.)

RJ

Oscar Slater: A Killer Exposed by Brenda Rossini. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 406pp. £27.99 (hbk), £12.17 (pbk)

Arthur Conan Doyle famously championed the causes of two men he believed had been wrongly accused and convicted of horrific crimes. In the case of George Edalji he was right, and within limits successful; Oscar Slater was another matter. Convicted and sentenced to death for the savage murder of Marion Gilchrist, an 83-year-old Glasgow spinster, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and he was freed after almost twenty years of hard labour. Some aspects of the case against him were certainly suspicious, and although Conan Doyle was possibly the most influential advocate of Slater's innocence, he was by no means the only one.

Brenda Rossini has had access to material that wasn't available to Slater's contemporary champions, and her conclusion is evident in the title of her book: Oscar Slater was guilty. I'm now sure that she is right, but she would have done better to spend time in revising the book before publication — not the premise, but the way it's expressed. The writing is sometimes confused and clumsy. Lanarkshire (not "*County Lanarkshire*") is not "in Glasgow": Glasgow was then in Lanarkshire. We're told that "Conan Doyle's participation enervated the public," but the word intended is possibly *energised*; that a brooch was "thefted" rather than *thieved*, or simply *stolen*; that something cost "just a pence", which should probably be "just a *few* pence" or "just a *penny*" — but the reader shouldn't have to guess. The index is erratic, and some of the illustrations appear absurdly distorted. It's very unfortunate, because in essence this is an important book. A great deal of work has gone into it, but more needs to be done.

RJ

The Return of the Ripper? - The Murder of Frances Coles by Kevin Turton. *Pen & Sword*, 2023. 208pp. £20.00 (hbk)

In July 1889, Alice McKenzie, a prostitute known as Clay Pipe Alice, was murdered in an alley near Whitechapel High Street. This was eight months after the brutal death of Mary Jane Kelly, last of the five certain victims of the murderer known as Jack the Ripper. Despite fears that the Ripper had returned, the police discounted the idea, and no similar outrage occurred for more than eighteen months. On the 13th February 1891, PC Ernest Thompson was patrolling his beat in Whitechapel, on solo duty in the early hours for the

first time, and he found a woman lying under a railway arch. Her throat had been slashed in three places, and she died within minutes. Her name was Frances Coles, and she too was a prostitute. Whether her murderer was the man who had killed five "unfortunates" in the autumn of 1888 was a matter for speculation. The police did have a credible suspect, a sailor named James Sadler, who was arrested but, for lack of definite evidence, never tried. Mr Turton makes a good case for Sadler's *probably* being the killer of Frances Coles — but, he says, "I believe *Jack* was long gone by February 1891." Readers who are interested in the true, tragic criminal London of Holmes and Watson's time will find this book fascinating.

RJ

Sherlock Holmes and the Ripper File by Antony James. *Breese Books*, 2023. 162pp. £8.99 (pbk)

Other writers have had Holmes and Watson actively investigate the Ripper murders alongside or in competition with the police (see Adrian Nebbett's list of such stories, if you're interested, at

<https://www.sherlockian.net/investigating/holmesripper/>). Mr James's approach is less dramatic, but more credible, knowing what we do of the detective and the doctor. In this slim, usefully illustrated book, he casts a discerning eye over the known facts of the Whitechapel murders, as considered by the friends twenty years later. They visit the sites, then much as they were in 1888 — there have, of course, been drastic changes since — and examine the evidence. The facts discussed match the authentic records, the conclusion is logical, and the style is acceptably Watsonian. It's a novel idea, effectively executed.

RJ

Baker Street Almanac 2023: An Annual Capsule of a Timeless Past & Future, edited by Ross E Davies, Jayantika Ganguly, Ira Brad Matetsky & Monica Schmidt. *The Green Bag, Inc.*, 2023. 376pp. \$30.00 within USA, or \$50.00 international (pbk), from <http://www.greenbag.org/almanacs/BS/2023.html>

For six years now, the *Almanac* has proved to be a unique and valuable annual. In this year's edition, Susan and Ben Vizoskie's celebration of "The Return of In-Person Conferences" precedes 120 pages of reports on worldwide Holmesian activities in 2022, in-person and virtual, from Australia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Hungary, India, Japan, the UK, the USA, and the World Wide Web,

followed by Mike McSwiggin's list of Sherlockian societies. Then there's the complete year's run of Peter Blau's invaluable monthly newsletter *Scuttlebutt from the Spermaceti Press* and of the BSI Trust newsletter, *For the Sake of the Trust*. Denny Dobry continues the inventory of his magnificent 221B sitting-room. After articles about Holmesian comics, music and recipes, Mark Jones and Ira Brad Matetsky report on the *Doings of Doyle* podcast and "Sherlock Holmes and Law", respectively. There are new annotated editions of "The Stockbroker's Clerk" and, rather unexpectedly, "How Watson Learned the Trick", and finally a small selection of Holmesian Yuletide greetings. Capital!

RJ

The MX Book of Sherlock Holmes Stories, 2023 Annual: Part XXXVII (1875-1899), Part XXXVIII (1890-1896), and Part XXXIX (1897-1923), edited by David Marcum. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 480pp (Part XXXVII), 488pp (Part XXXVIII), 540pp (Part XXXIX). Each £28.99 (hbk), £17.65 (pbk)

Time to make room on the bookshelf as the three-volume 2023 Annual makes a welcome appearance. Fifty-nine new adventures by authors old and new cover the span of Holmes's career, from his early days to his retirement, where the game is still very much afoot. Perusing the list of previous stories at the beginning of each volume, it never fails to impress how much editor David Marcum and the more than two hundred enthusiastic contributors have achieved since the first books appeared in 2015. Eight hundred new stories and over £86,600 raised for Undershaw is no mean achievement. With such an embarrassment of riches, it is hard to pick a favourite, but particular mention must go to Sonya Kudei's "The Norwegian Shipping Agent", which draws on threads from a canon story and Holmes's past to weave a most riveting tale. Tom Turley's "The Adventure of the Lost Alliance" is very well researched and backed up with accompanying notes, which offer a glimpse into real-life historical figures, while Mark Wardecker's "The Adventure of the Wandering Stones" is a thoroughly intriguing story with a satisfying denouement. Overall, an enjoyable selection of adventures in canonical style with something for everyone.

SO-B

The Arrival of Solar Pons: Early Manuscripts and Pulp Magazine Appearances of the Sherlock Holmes of Praed Street by August Derleth, edited and with an introduction and notes by Mark Wardecker. *Belanger Books*, 2023. 523pp. £41.95/\$49.95 (hbk), £19.95/\$24.95 (pbk)

Mark Wardecker may be today's leading authority on August Derleth's sleuth, of whom Vincent Starrett wrote: "Solar Pons is not a caricature of Sherlock Holmes. He is, rather, a clever impersonator, with a twinkle in his eye which tells us that he knows he is not Sherlock Holmes, and knows that we know it, but that he hopes we will like him anyway for what he symbolises."

This new book is a revised and expanded edition of *The Dagnet Solar Pons, et al.*, published in 2011 by the Battered Silicon Dispatch Box. My review of that volume applies at least double to this one, and I repeat: Pons' exploits capture the essence of Holmes better than almost any direct pastiche. When *The Final Adventures of Solar Pons* appeared in 1998 it seemed that the Canon of "the Sherlock Holmes of Praed Street" was complete — and there are actually no new stories here. Instead we have the texts of the first six tales as they appeared in *The Dagnet Magazine* or *Detective Trails* in 1929-30, before the market collapsed in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash, plus original versions of seven stories from August Derleth's manuscripts of that same period. All were eventually revised for inclusion in one or other of the book series that began publication in 1945 with *In Re: Sherlock Holmes - The Adventures of Solar Pons*. The texts in the present book enable us to appreciate how the author and his characters developed and matured, and we are helped greatly by Mark Wardecker's bountiful and perceptive annotations.

Highly recommended!

RJ

The Further Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes by Caiden Cooper Myles. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 274pp. £15.75 (hbk)

A most refreshing book from a British writer, pleasingly almost completely devoid of the inappropriate transatlanticisms that I so often find in pastiches, and which I always deplore. The absence of hackneyed references to a tin dispatch box is noted and greatly appreciated.

Whilst remaining firmly within Canonical tradition and Watsonian prose style, the author has neatly avoided the many other clichés that mar similar works, and has also managed to introduce a few minor touches that are new, and yet by no means out of place.

This is, I note from the final page, volume one of a planned series. I truly look forward to succeeding volumes, trusting that the author will maintain the high standard set by this one. In conclusion, I commend this book most sincerely.

JS

The Endeavours of Sherlock Holmes by Mark Wardecker. *MX Publishing*, 2022. 194pp. £17.99 (hbk)

A collection of very neat short stories. Some have previously appeared in publications such as *The MX Book of New Sherlock Holmes Stories* and *The Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*. My favourite was “The Politician, The Lighthouse, and the Trained Cormorant” – a cleverly constructed case which was first referred to in the canonical tale “The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger”.

There are racy plots, colourful characters, and well-paced action throughout this collection, and an accurate portrayal of the true Holmes. The book also benefits from lots of well researched period details. I very much look forward to reading lots more stories by the author.

MM

Sherlock Holmes: The Coronet Conspiracy (Book One of Sinister House) by James Patrick Heatherly. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 277pp. £10.99 (pbk)

This is a rollercoaster of a tale, from start to finish. A gripping, fast-paced and darkly-drawn pastiche set in 1888, with a cast including an assortment of real-life characters drawn from history alongside some more familiar faces. This includes a cameo appearance by Edgar Allan Poe’s Monsieur Dupin and major roles for Shinwell Johnson (“The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”) and a character called “Ormond Sacker” (Conan Doyle’s originally conceived name for Dr Watson).

Heatherly clearly knows his Canon, but he also demonstrates a wealth of knowledge about the specific events and intrigues surrounding the Jack the Ripper murders, which are occurring as a backdrop to the story. He captures the atmosphere and heightened tensions of the period extremely well. The plot concerns an international conspiracy being co-ordinated across Germany, France and

Britain, and the book is the first of a planned series of ‘Sinister House’ volumes. The relationship between Holmes and Watson is particularly well observed, with the good doctor acting as a sounding board as the investigation unfolds. We also have the very welcome appearance of Wiggins and the Baker Street Irregulars, who provide some much-needed legwork in this complex, multi-faceted, case.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and look forward to reading more in the series.

MM

The Devil’s Disciples by Richard T Ryan. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 230pp. £11.00 (pbk)

The source for this intriguing pastiche was a tin dispatch box, once in the vaults of Cox and Co, which the author claims he won in an estate auction in St Andrews, Scotland. Holmes and Watson have been asked to try to bring an end to the reign of terror imposed by the Irish Republican Brotherhood on London in the late nineteenth century. To assist in this they naturally enlist the help of, among others, the indefatigable Wiggins and his friends, and it wouldn’t be the same without them!

Fortunately, Mr Ryan makes only token efforts to imitate the Irish mode of speech in his narrative. This is enormously to his credit as such imitation is too easily overdone and hence clumsy. The author acknowledges some help from an editor who, he says, makes certain his Britishisms are correct and that no Americanisms creep in. I would give this editor around 8 out of 10 on that matter, but that is a lot better than some books I have reviewed for this *Journal*. In conclusion, it’s a thoroughly exciting and worthwhile read, and I commend it to all who enjoy a Holmesian pastiche.

JS

A Study in Statecraft by Orlando Pearson. *MX Publishing*, 2023. 177pp. £9.45 (pbk)

Its introduction states that it is based on the papers of Dr Watson, discovered in 2015 at the Public Record Office, and among them, would you believe it, were the private papers of Mycroft Holmes! Each chapter deals with a different aspect of government; economics, strategy, public health, etc. I found one in particular both interesting and amusing, as it was centred on matters which had been of professional relevance to me at one time.

I confess that I was irritated to observe two really silly errors on one page. There is no Jack Ryder in “The Blue Carbuncle”: he is *James* Ryder.

And Charles McCarthy in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” was the *victim* of the murder: John Turner was the killer whom Holmes allowed to die peacefully in bed so as to avoid a scandal.

Mr Pearson’s blending of thoroughly up-to-date events and personalities into his narrative is clever and amusing, and will impress many of his readers. I would characterise this book as candy-floss writing, a comparatively small amount of substance has been spun into a fluffy sweet confection, and as such will prove a delight to what I hope will be its many readers.

JS

Sherlock Holmes and the Hellfire Heirs by Margaret Walsh. *MX Publishing*. 2023. 208pp. £9.99 (pbk)

Walsh is not unfamiliar with the enthralling world of Holmes and Watson, this being her sixth pastiche. And, for me, this is the best to date. Holmes is asked to assist in a case involving the disappearance of a 14-year-old girl, the niece of a Mrs Lucille Turner. As a result, our heroes find themselves investigating what looks to be a criminal enterprise luring young women into prostitution.

The backdrop to the tale is well drawn, as we encounter the seedy, grim and gritty nature of life in Victorian London. Equally well observed are the attitudes and double-standards of many men in the period. I particularly liked the central role played by Inspector Lestrade in this case. All too often in pastiches he is side-lined, ridiculed or excluded from the action. And it was great to see other canonical characters popping up as the plot unfolded.

Despite its graphic tone, this is an enjoyable and memorable book which does not disappoint.

MM

The English Garden Mystery: A Problem in Deduction by Dan Andriacco. *MX Publishing*, 2022. 254pp. £9.99 (pbk)

Billed as the eleventh book in the McCabe and Cody series, this is actually the thirteenth, as two volumes of short stories are omitted from the list. The investigations of Professor Sebastian McCabe, BSI, successful author of detective novels and a notable amateur sleuth, are chronicled by his brother-in-law Jefferson Cody, who can never quite match him at either. The Holmesian influence is always evident in the books, but here, as in the earlier *Queen City Corpse*, that of Ellery Queen is stronger. Also William Shakespeare, as the

mystery involves Shakespearean scholar and philanthropist Ezra Bainbridge, patriarch of one of Erin, Ohio's wealthiest old families, and his three daughters: Ophelia, Desdemona and Portia. Their separate houses at Stratford Court encircle the English garden of the title, and all seems tranquil until accusations of elder abuse emerge — and then murder follows murder... It’s an intricate story of a bewildering mystery, meticulously devised, wittily told and immensely entertaining.

RJ