

# A CLUBMAN FOR EMPIRE

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‘I saw the smoke banks on that October evening swirl slowly up over the Atlantic swell, and rise, and rise, until they had shredded into thinnest air, and lost themselves in the infinite blue of heaven. And with them rose the cloud which had hung over the country; and it also thinned and thinned, until God’s own sun of peace and security as shining once more upon us, never more, we hope, to be bedimmed.’

Last sentences of Doyle’s novel *Rodney Stone* (1896), referring to the battle of Trafalgar of 1805.

A member of the Athenaeum from 1901,<sup>1</sup> Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (1859-1930) reflected the openness of Victorian and Edwardian society to talent. Doyle was a man of great variety and wideranging interests, from cricket to Divorce Law reform, football to Spiritualism. He had recently stood for Parliament for the first time, in Central Edinburgh as the Liberal Unionist candidate, gaining 2,459 votes, but his rival, the Liberal Party candidate, won with 3,028 votes. Whereas, in 1900, the Liberals lost their overall majority of Scottish seats for the first time since 1832, this was a safe Liberal seat, and Doyle had been selected for what was a no-hoper. Nationally, in the ‘Khaki Election,’ however, Doyle was more in tune with the mood. The Liberals had little response to Salisbury’s government which enjoyed patriotic popularity on the basis of recovery from initial disasters in the Boer War and (crucially) the return of economic prosperity. Although 1900 is an instance of the general proposition that governments (not oppositions) win or lose elections, that was also one in which the opposition actively acted to make itself unelectable. In his autobiography, Doyle revealed that he did not enjoy electioneering. However, as a supporter of the war, Doyle was keen to do his bit, and he did so, both writing in favour of the conflict and serving there as an army doctor. His writings on the war are in the Athenaeum library. This war-record would not have hurt his subsequently receiving a knighthood.

‘The whole course of future history depends on whether the Old Britain besides the Narrow Seas have enough of virility and imagination to withstand the challenge of her naval supremacy, until such time as the daughter nations shall have grown to maturity, and the British Navy shall have expanded into the Navy of the Britains.’

Not Doyle but his fellow Liberal Unionist, Halford Mackinder in his *Britain and the Seas* (1902). The imperial agenda of the Liberal Unionists, among whom Doyle was politically active, was very much that of Mackinder who, following Doyle in 1906, stood unsuccessfully for Parliament for Hawick in a 1909 by-election. Like Doyle, Mackinder wanted to see strengthening at home and imperial development; the latter indeed a federalist empire. Like Doyle, Mackinder was also interested in medicine. The son of a provincial doctor, Mackinder had studied medical geography and sought to relate diseases to environmental conditions. Both men were part of the energy of ideas in Britain and the Empire at the turn of the century, and propagated notions of Empire.

Alongside the occasional flaw, the idea of Imperial masculinity as noble was frequently presented in Holmes stories, as with the Australian sea captain in 'The Abbey Grange' (1904):

'our door was opened to admit a fine a specimen of manhood as ever passed through it. He was a very tall young man, golden-moustached, blue-eyed, with a skin which had been burned by tropical suns, and a springy step which showed that the huge frame was as active as it was strong.'

Captain Croker himself uses the commonplace language of Empire, addressing Holmes' requirement that he comes clean about events: "I believe you are a man of your word, and a white man," the latter a racist commonplace for being honest.

The most contentious presentation of the Empire to modern eyes would probably be *The Sign of Four* (1890) with Jonathan Small's description of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-9, and the subsequent account of Tonga, the Andaman Islander. Small's account of his earlier life is the deep-history of the story, but does not come until the close of it, thus providing both a lengthy denouement and a second narrative for the novel, one shot through with a degree of drama and violence different to the river chase involving Holmes and Watson, but yet also gripping. Going out to India as a soldier, Small had lost a leg to a Ganges crocodile, thus providing an additional exoticism, and a reminder of the hazards of India, military service, and life. Small then becomes an estate overseer, finding both a role and stability, only to encounter the horror of the Mutiny:

"One month India lay as still and peaceful, to all appearance, as Surrey or Kent; the next there were two hundred thousand black devils let loose, and the country was a perfect hell ... the whole sky was alight with the burning bungalows. ... Dawson's wife, all cut into ribbons ... hundreds of the black fiends... a fight of the millions against the hundreds ... nothing but torture and murder and outrage ... fanatics and fierce devil-worshippers."

Escaping, Small joins a besieged British garrison, but is then recruited, under threat of death, by three Sikhs into a conspiracy to rob a Hindu pretend-merchant transporting a duplicitous rajah's jewels. In an instructive note about tensions between the non-British inhabitants of India, Abdullah Khan, one of the Sikhs, tells Small that he, Khan, cannot trust Hindus, 'But the Sikh knows the Englishman, and the Englishman knows the Sikh.' The murdered Hindu is discovered. Sent to the prison settlement at Blair Island on the Andamans, where he was 'bullied by every cursed black-faced policeman who loved to take it out of a white man,' including a 'vile Pathan,' Small cures and befriends a young Islander, and the two men escape to hunt down the officer who had tricked Small in the prison colony.

In turn, Tonga, the Islander, is earlier identified by Holmes, and a gazetteer that describes them as fierce, intractable, hideous and cannibals offers a disturbing background. To a degree, it captured the willingness of the indigenous inhabitants to reject the constraints of British India, as, indeed, many subsequently did when faced first by Japanese occupation and then by Indian rule.

In the subsequent chase on the River Thames, the language becomes far more derogatory, and unnecessarily so. Tonga becomes ‘this savage, distorted creature ... never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty ... half-animal fury ... unhallowed dwarf ... venomous, menacing eyes.’ Subsequently, Tonga is described by Small as ‘that hell-hound ... the little devil.’ Fired at by Tonga with a poisoned dart, Holmes and Watson shoot together and hit Tonga who falls into the river.

Doyle’s treatment of the Andaman Islanders reflects the sense of civilisational conflict and progress, and the defence of British imperialism, seen also in his non-Holmes *The Tragedy of the Korosko*. This appeared as a serial in *The Strand Magazine* in 1897, as a book in 1898, and, in an adaptation by Doyle, as the play *Fires of Fate* (1909), which, in 1923, became a film. The story is very much set in the here-and-now of the British conflict with the Mahdists of Sudan. In the novel, Cecil Brown presents the Dervishes (Mahdists) as uncompromising believers in destiny, the proof of how bigotry leads towards barbarism, and a dire threat to the civilisation of Egypt which is protected by Britain. Brown feels that Britain has taken on the excessive burdens of being the global policeman, only for Colonel Cochrane to argue that he has:

‘a very limited view of our national duties ... behind national interests and diplomacy and all that there lies a great guiding force – a Providence in fact – which is for ever getting the best out of each nation and using it for the good of the whole. When a nation ceases to respond, it is time that she went into hospital for a few centuries, like Spain or Greece – the virtue has gone out of her. A man or a nation is not placed upon the earth to do merely what is pleasant and what is profitable. ... That is how we rule India. We came there by a kind of natural law, like air rushing into a vacuum.’

There is also an opportunity for Doyle to advance his view of Anglo-American Manifest Destiny:

‘... the English-speakers are all in the same boat ... we and you have among our best men a higher conception of moral sense and public duty than is to be found in any other people ... these are the two qualities which are needed for directing a weaker race. ... The pressure of destiny will force you to administer the whole of America from Mexico to the Horn.’

A succinct Doyle Sudan contribution was ‘The Début of Bimbashi Joyce,’ which, while involving a mystery, was not a Holmes story. It appeared in *Punch* on 3 January 1900, and then in *The Green Flag and Other Stories of War and Sport*, a Doyle short story collection, published on 27 March, and in *McClure’s Magazine* in the United States that May. This was very much an account of the Mahdist threat, and Sudan is described in the opening paragraph as: ‘That country of darkness. Sometimes the sunset would turn those distant mists into a bank of crimson, and the dark mountains would rise from that sinister reek like islands in a sea of blood.’ British force was presented as benign: ‘... it was time for civilisation to take a trip south once more, travelling, as her wont is, in an armoured train.’ British command emerges in the story in a positive light.

The same collection was led off by ‘The Green Flag,’ a story first published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in June 1893, and one about how imperial service redeemed Irishness and in particular those involved in the Land League. Set also in Sudan, this story told of an attack by a far larger number of

Mahdists or ‘fanatics.’ Each side benefits from artillery, which obliges the British to rely on bravery. The ‘fighting blood’ of the Irish was crucial, but there was a clash of identities: ‘You are not fighting for England. You are fighting for Ireland, and for the Empire of which it is [sic] part,’” said Captain Foley. The Mahdists are described as looking ‘like a blast of fiends from the pit. And were these the Allies of Ireland? ... the murder of the wounded, the hacking of the unarmed.’

In the end, the Irish rally for the army, but under the green flag, reform the square, and die bravely. The Sudan theme continues in that collection with ‘The Three Correspondents,’ which was published in *The Windsor Magazine* in October 1896. In this, three journalists defend themselves from Mahdist attack, Doyle commenting ‘The law-abiding Briton is so imbued with the idea of the sanctity of human life that it was hard for the young pressman to realise that these men had every intention of killing him, and that he was at perfect liberty to do as much for them.’ Getting the news to the public from the war zone is presented as heroic in a powerful tribute to war correspondents. Doyle’s portrayal of the Irish in ‘The Green Flag’ corresponded to that of his letter in *The Irish Times* on 3 October 1900 which had closed with an attack on intolerance in Irish politics: ‘By such an attitude they alienate from themselves the sympathy of many men, who like myself care nothing for the bolstering up of any sect or of any narrow party, but who are whole-souled in one desire that Ireland should become prosperous, happy, and reconciled to that great empire which has been so largely built up by Irish valour and Irish intellect.’

Doyle was far from alone. Sudan was to the fore for many writers. A.E.W. Mason’s *The Four Feathers*, a successful novel of 1902, was a presentation of British operations in Sudan as a definition of manliness and heroism. In addition, Arthur Raffles, a successful short story creation in 1898 of Doyle’s brother-in-law, Ernest Hornung, is killed in 1900 in the Boer War at the very close of the short story ‘The Knees of the Gods.’ His companion, Bunny Manders, had already been wounded.

Sudan also appeared in the adventure stories for boys by the war correspondent George Alfred Henty. These included *The Dash for Khartoum: A Tale of the Nile Expedition* (1891), two on the Boer War - *With Buller in Natal* (1900) and *With Roberts to Pretoria* (1901), and *With Kitchener in the Soudan* (1902). Henty presented the conquest of Sudan as a ‘stupendous achievement,’ the Preface to the last declaring ‘Thus a land that had been turned into a desert by the terrible tyranny of the Mahdi and his successor, was wrested from barbarism and restored to civilization; and the stain upon British honour, caused by the desertion of Gordon by the British ministry of the day, was wiped out,’ the last a reference to the events of 1885.

Dr Watson keeps a portrait of Gordon, while Holmes’ essential loyalty was displayed in his lodgings rented from Mrs Hudson, where, as recorded in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ (1893), he would ‘proceed to adorn the opposite wall with a patriotic V.R. [Victoria Regina] done in bullet-pocks.’

The very positive image of the army seen in these works by Doyle and others, was linked to a more general feeling that manliness was best developed and shown through military training. In addition to Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts, this feeling was reflected in the reorganisation and modernisation of the militia and

volunteers into a Special Reserve and the Territorial Force, later the Territorial Army. Indeed, Doyle's 'Afterthought' to *The German War* (1914) brought up one of his longstanding concerns, manliness, an idea that focused beliefs and anxieties in the pre-war era and linked worries about Britain with hopes about Empire. Having reiterated his confidence in a 'virile nation,' he added:

'Already those Territorials who were so ignorantly and ungenerously criticised in times of peace are, after nearly three months of camp-life, hardening into soldiers who may safely be trusted in the field. Behind them the greater part of a million men are formed who will also become soldiers in a record time if a desperate earnestness can make them so. It is a glorious spectacle which makes a man thankful that he has been spared to see it. One is more hopeful of our Britain, and more proud of her, now that the German guns can be heard from her eastern shore, than ever in the long monotony of her undisturbed prosperity. Our grandchildren will thrill as they read of the days that we endure.'

History as an ongoing process, one of continuity and change, was strong in the Holmes stories, and, more generally, appealed to Doyle and to his readers. He was keen to write historical novels, though, like those of Dickens (and unlike Agatha Christie), none were set in the distant past. Doyle, moreover, had a strong awareness of the changes of his lifetime, but also presented powerful elements of continuity, including personality and landscape. The theme of change was differently offered with Doyle's interest in science fiction.

With the Holmes stories, there is a sense of a cyclical character in history, as in *The Valley of Fear*, in which Holmes draws the attention of the talented Inspector MacDonald to Jonathan Wild:

"a master criminal – 1750 or thereabouts.<sup>2</sup> ... Everything comes in circles, even Professor Moriarty. Jonathan Wild was the hidden force of the London criminals, to whom he sold his brains and his organisation on a fifteen per cent commission. The old wheel turns and the same spoke comes up. It's all been done before and will be again."

Though a man of strong scientific interests with a commitment to new discoveries and their application and use, Holmes is depicted as very interested in the past, both prehistoric and that of recorded annals. Thus, in Cornwall, he studies the remains of prehistoric man, and, more generally, is fascinated with barrows. Landscapes where humans were once more common, notably Dartmoor and, very differently, rural East Anglia, are also of interest in that light. It was a given that, as expressed by Emil Reich in his *New Student's Atlas of British History* (1903), the 'influence of the locality ... is both spiritual, through its historical traditions, and physiological, through its climatic and other physical factors.'

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle slows the account and lessens the intensity by providing an account of the prehistoric peopling of Dartmoor, which indeed had struck him when visiting in 1901. Watson notes 'The whole steep slope was covered with grey circular rings of stone, a score of them at least.' Striking a note of continuity, Jack Stapleton explains:

'they are the homes of our worthy ancestors. Prehistoric man lived thickly on the moor, and as no one in particular has lived there since, we find all his little arrangements exactly as he left them. These are his

wigwams with the roofs off. You can even see his hearth and his couch if you have the curiosity to go inside. ... he grazed his cattle on these slopes, and he learned to dig for tin when the bronze sword began to supersede the stone axe. Look at the great trench in the opposite hill.'

In turn, and again unnecessarily so, Watson reports to Holmes on this sense of continuity:

'The longer one stays here the more does the spirit of the moor sink one's soul, its vastness, and also its grim charm. When you are once out upon its bosom you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but on the other hand you are conscious everywhere of the homes and the work of the prehistoric people. On all sides of you as you walk are the houses of these forgotten folk, with their graves and the huge monoliths which are supposed to have marked their temples. As you look at their grey stone huts against the scarred hillsides you leave your own age behind you, and if you were to see a skin-clad, hairy man crawl out from the low door, fitting a flint-tipped arrow on to the string of his bow, you would feel that his presence there was more natural than your own. The strange thing is that they should have lived so thickly on what must always have been most unfruitful soil. I am no antiquarian, but I could imagine that they were some unwarlike and harried race who were forced to accept that which none other would occupy.'

This is very much Doyle looking toward his novels *The Lost World* (1912) and *The Maracot Deep* (1929). The first, originally published as a serial in *The Strand Magazine*, depicted, alongside dinosaurs, a struggle between a friendly race of natives and a hostile race of ape-men; and while the latter novel offered a sub-marine equivalent. As with the lost world of Neolithic Devon, these stories reflected a fascination with the idea of competing races, and thus with evolution, which, to Doyle, seemed to be far from fixed as a process.

In 'Borrowed Scenes,' a non-Holmes short story published in *The Pall Mall Magazine* in September 1913, the narrator brings to his visit to Sussex a strong sense of history:

'As I walked, I entertained myself by recollections of the founders of Sussex, of Cedric that mighty sea-rover, and of Ella his son, said by the bard to be taller by the length of a spear-head than the tallest of his fellows.'

There are references to 'half-timbered houses of the early English pattern' and settling differences in 'the old English fashion.' Yet, there is also a clear facetiousness in the treatment, with the locals obviously not interested in the Saxon references.

In contrast, there is a much stronger presentation of continuity in 'The Adventure of Black Peter' (1904), which is set in Sussex and provides more than one sense of change:

'we drove for some miles through the remains of widespread woods, which were once part of that great forest which for so long held the Saxon invaders at bay – the impenetrable "weald," for sixty years the bulwark of Britain. Vast sections of it have been cleared, for this is the seat of the first ironworks of the country, and the trees have been felled to smelt the ore. Now the richer fields of the North have absorbed the trade, and nothing save these ravaged groves and great scars in the earth show the work of the past.'

Holmes is described as doing 'laborious researches in Early English Charters' in 'The Three Students' and 'The Golden Pince-Nez.' As far as more recent history is concerned, Doyle scatters the

Holmes stories with historical references, expecting that his readers will be able to follow them, or at least be interested, and certainly not be put off. ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ expects knowledge of the English Civil War (1642-6) and the Restoration of Charles II (1660). The references include throwaway remarks. In ‘The Adventure of the Reigate Squire,’ a house ‘bears the date of Malplaquet upon the lintel of the door.’ That was 1709. Readers would have been expected to know the dates of Marlborough’s victories. At any rate, the date is not provided.

In ‘The Retired Colourman,’ Holmes describes Josiah Amberley in historical terms: ‘He has, to a high degree, the sort of mind which one associates with the medieval Italian nature rather than with the modern Briton.’ Napoleon provides a particular source for comparison, notably with ‘The Six Napoleons,’ but also with a reference, in ‘The Abbey Grange’ (1904), to the key battles of Marengo (1800) and Waterloo (1815). Holmes says of the former: ‘this is our Marengo, for it begins in defeat and ends in victory,’ which was indeed the case for Napoleon in that battle with the Austrians, which was even more prominent to contemporaries for providing the background to the action in Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Tosca* (1900). The opera was a total triumph when it opened in London that year, six months after the Rome première.

In ‘The Japanned Box’ (1899), another non-Holmes story, it had been the case of Thorpe Place near Evesham:

‘... that part of the Midlands which is drained by the Avon. It is the most English part of England. Shakespeare, the flower of the whole race, was born right in the middle of it. It is a land of rolling pastures, rising to higher folds to the westward, until they swell into the Malvern Hills. There are no towns, but numerous villages, each with its grey Norman church. You have left the brick of the southern and eastern counties behind you, and everything is stone - stone for the walls, and lichened slabs of stone for the roofs. It is all grim and solid and massive, as befits the heart of a great nation. ... It was a very, very old house, incredibly old – pre-Norman, some of it, and the Bollamores claimed to have lived in that situation since long before the Conquest,’

a reference to the Norman Conquest of 1066. Repeatedly with Doyle, there is a sense of continuity that looks toward the ruralist literature of the interwar years, one that contrasts with his engagement with the futurist possibilities of science and technology.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Wheeler’s excellent club history.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, he was hanged at Tyburn in 1725.

Jeremy’s *The World of Sherlock Holmes* is coming out this winter.