

Creating a Holmes/Watson Chronology

I have stated elsewhere that I started to create my chronology when I was writing the “Scotched Soused and Strung Scotsman”, my first story, if I was to look up my notes and drafts of that story, the dating would be 2005 I think. The initial object was to identify when that case (SSSS) occurred, I *knew* when, but only approximately, I needed to fit my story into the sequence of Conan Doyle.

I found that Conan Doyle had been very lax in referring to his own stories and their dates, and in truth to dates in general. What is one supposed to do about tales such as “Wisteria Lodge”? It has a precise date, but the date contradicts other references, how could it be set in March 1892 when Holmes was hiding from Moriarty's henchmen, and not even in England and probably in (or on his way to) Tibet.

Taking into account when a story was published was of no use, especially as Conan Doyle had decided to kill off Holmes and then later to bring him back. Even more so because when he killed Holmes Watson was married, and when Holmes returned not only was Watson now a bachelor again, but he was asked to move back to 221B Baker Street. Convenient for Conan Doyle to be able to continue writing stories virtually ignoring two deaths (Holmes and Mary Marston) and where Watson was living!

Twenty-four Conan Doyle stories give an explicit year in which they occurred (twenty-four of sixty), another twenty-four mention a month or a season, and eighteen give a month and day, these sets of stories overlap each other. The majority of Conan Doyle's stories are not dated. Real events are virtually not mentioned at all, and from memory there is no cross referencing from related to other related stories; related (published) stories

only related to other tales never published.

In “His Last Bow” Holmes is sixty years old, so if this is to be believed Holmes was born in 1854. So when was Watson born? This is not stated, but it is possible to deduce a year from Watson's education and army service. Working backwards from the Battle of Maiwand of twenty-seven July 1880, it appears that Watson was also born in 1854. I liked this concept: I thought that Holmes and Watson should be contemporaries if they were to share lodgings, also the older bumbling Watson as portrayed by such actors as Nigel Bruce was an unlikely pairing of a character to co-habit with Holmes. I will leave the setting of Holmes and Watson's exact birthday date as research for the reader.

The first Holmes case is the “Gloria Scott” when Holmes is still at university, but which one? Many have speculated that his university must have been Cambridge or Oxford, but which one of the two? I found that the count of years and events between 1854 and 1881 when Holmes met Watson had to contain a period of time when Holmes was in the USA (to explain his knowledge of Americanisms, the Mafia, and Pinkertons), but this was still deficient by two years. Thus I decided that Holmes was at both Cambridge and Oxford universities.

This decision raised more consequences: if Holmes was at two different universities there had to be a reason. It would have been possible to have Holmes change universities mid course, but this was not the English way. I therefore decided that Holmes got a Bachelor of Science (in chemistry) from Oxford. He then went to Cambridge to get a second degree, which I decided must be a postgraduate degree – a Doctor of Philosophy. When asked in a radio interview “Does Holmes Exist - in a philosophical sense”, having already stated that I myself had studied Philosophy at university, I should have responded by saying I did

not study existential philosophy, but rather what in Holmes's times was called Natural Philosophy: logic and logic systems primarily: what I answered from memory is "No", but this subject is exactly what I decided that Holmes studied for his doctorate, along with mathematics.

The consequences now tumbled into place, if Holmes had a Doctorate why did he not use the title? My solution was that Holmes did not have a doctorate, and the reason for that explained many other problems in Holmes's background.

I had "borrowed" much of Holmes early history from Baring-Gould: he seemed to have a good and plausible background for much of Holmes's character. So why did Holmes not have a doctorate, why was his brother Mycroft a civil servant (albeit high ranked), and why are Holmes's parents never mentioned.

My solution was that Holmes was forced to leave Cambridge without his doctorate because of lack of funding: his father lost the family fortune on the stock exchange. Thus also Mycroft had to get a job instead of becoming the next Squire, and Holmes's parents left the country largely penniless to live with Holmes's mother's family in France (linking in Verner who bought Watson's practice in July 1894), and the eventual decision of Holmes to exploit his talents as a Consulting Detective.

Watson's background involved less fiction on my part, because his academic history is largely chronicled, as is his military career. However, in two canonical stories there is indication that he spent some time (in his childhood, since his university career onwards is known) in Australia: see "The Sign of the Four" and "Boscombe Valley". There are also the references to "neither kith or kin in England" ("Study in Scarlet") and his father's watch.

Conan Doyle presents numerous dating problems, including the one of “Wisteria Lodge” mentioned above, some others are:

In “Sign of the Four” Watson dates it as September, yet Mary Marston has a letter dated seventh July “received this morning”.

In “Five Orange Pips” Mary Watson is visiting her Mother, yet in the “Sign of the Four” she is an orphan.

Watson's knowledge of Prof. Moriarty: he knows of the Professor in “The Valley of Fear” (1888 my dating, and others), yet in “The Final Problem (1891)” he knows nothing of him: this contradiction allowed me to let Watson know of Moriarty in “The Vault” (June 1890).

Non-existent dates pose problems: incidents where a specific exact date is made with the day name specified, yet the day name for the date does not match! See “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, “The Red Headed League”, and “The Solitary Cyclist”.

There are three different cases referenced as “The Second Stain”.

So all-in-all creating a consistent chronology is not possible without making some changes to the canon, or at least acknowledging that Conan Doyle made errors.

In the revised Chronology on this webpage, the majority of changes are new entries of already mentioned events, and more comments. There are some date changes regarding matters that I overlooked in the version published in Volume II.