

Creating a Holmes/Watson Chronology

Attempting to create a timeline or chronology of Holmes and Watson is a perilous thing. Many have tried, with varying degrees of success. Conan Doyle scattered his stories with dates, giving sometimes an exact date, or a month or season within a year, more often of teasing with a month or season within an unspecified year.

To quote from hungadunga-marinaro.blogspot.com.au:

“The dates, coupled with the first-person narration, heighten the reality of Holmes’ (sic) world. When Watson references a case beginning in June 1902, shortly after Holmes refused a knighthood, the reader feels like it is a matter of history. It’s suspension of disbelief at its best. Yet upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that while writing, Doyle consulted his other stories (and a calendar) maybe 50% of the time. That’s the challenge of constructing a history of Sherlock Holmes’ (sic) career: is it possible to create order where order was never particularly intended?”

I have stated elsewhere that I started to create my chronology in 2009 when I was writing the “Scotched, Soused, and Strung Scotsman”, my first story. The initial object was to identify when that case (SSSS) occurred, 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, 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 Conan Doyle killed Holmes Watson was married, and when Holmes returned Watson was now a bachelor again, and Watson was asked to move back to 221B Baker Street. Convenient for Conan Doyle to restore the status quo and to be able to continue writing stories of Watson living at 221B Baker Street and not being married.

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 rarely mentioned, and there is virtually no cross-referencing between stories; there are frequent references to cases that were 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

on 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 character to cohabit 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 when Holmes was in the USA (to explain his knowledge of Americanisms, the Mafia, and Pinkertons), but this was still deficient by two years. 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 why. 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 that I did not study existential

philosophy, but rather that which in Holmes's times was called Natural Philosophy and that was 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, 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 an 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 nor kin in England” (“Study in Scarlet”), and his father’s watch.

From “Wisteria Lodge”, *‘I find it recorded in my notebook that it was a bleak and windy day towards the end of March in the year 1892.’* This was published in August 1908 some 5 years after the publishing of “The Empty House” in which Conan Doyle describes the return of Sherlock Holmes from apparent death (published in December 1893), and his journeys in the Middle East and Asia for 3 years. Holmes was not in London in March 1892! He was in Tibet, or Persia, or Mecca.

How is it that Holmes goes to Switzerland, presumably not *knowing* he is going to be killed, and then years later he returns to 221B Baker Street and the place is the same, as if he had never been away? And Watson is silent about what happened to Baker Street in Holmes’s absence. If the apartment were still being rented, who paid the rent, and under whose instructions, given that Watson believed his friend to be dead?

The “Wisteria Lodge” story introduces a second and third line of approach to Holmesian chronology: was Watson residing at 221B, and the related question, was Watson married?

Let’s start with a simple overview of the chronology.

Overview of Conan Doyle's Chronology

Watson is single when he moves in to 221B in February 1881, he meets Mary Marsdon some 7 years later in "The Sign of the Four", and marries her and thus moves from 221B. There is then a period when Watson is married and does not live at 221B up to "The Final Problem" in April 1891 when Holmes appears to die. Yet when Holmes returns in April 1894, Watson is again single and is invited to move back into 221B. At the end of Holmes's career as a Consulting Detective, Watson is again married and has left 221B.

To add final elements of confusion, Watson clearly describes how he was wounded in the shoulder at the Battle Of Maiwand 27th July 1880, as described in "A Study in Scarlet". Yet later Watson describes the wound as being in his leg in "The Sign of the Four". Baring-Gould states there is an unpublished story the "Curious Case of Watson's Second Wound" mentioned in the "Hound of the Baskervilles", but not that I can find (perhaps this was Baring-Gould's explanation of "chest or leg"). Regarding Holmes's drug usage, in "Scandal in Bohemia" he is using cocaine (speculation he started in 1885), and in the "Sign of the Four" Watson asks 'cocaine or morphine' and yet there is no reference to Holmes using morphine. Then there is Watson's name: after being only recently married, in the "Man with the Twisted Lip" Watson's new wife calls him *James*.

Inconsistences in Conan Doyle's Writing

Then there are specific references where Conan Doyle contradicts himself:

In the “Sign of the Four”, we read “*It was a September evening*” when Holmes, Watson, and Miss Morstan set out on their adventure. Yet only that morning she had received a letter postmarked July 2nd!

In the “Sign of the Four” again, Mary Marston is an orphan, and yet in “Five Orange Pips” perhaps 2 years later, she goes to visit her mother. In this instance Conan Doyle admitted his error and had it corrected to read *Aunt*, but there are still versions that read *Mother*.

Watson’s knowledge of Prof. Moriarty: he knows of the Professor in the “Valley of Fear” (1888 by 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 of the week 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”.

Finally, there are references that give a day of the week, and this *should* match to a calendric event, but when one of the *year, month, or day number* is missing this becomes difficult, and this is exasperated by the situation where the known date is one of an actual event, as reported to Holmes, start date, end date, etc.

When I starting writing about Holmes and Watson in 2009, I wanted to know where exactly to position the tale within the Canon. I felt that this would also be necessary for any future writings I might create. So I ordered a copy of William S. Baring-Gould's "Annotated Sherlock Holmes", and his "Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street". I also researched on the Internet and downloaded chronologies from various sites. I started organising the Canon as best I could. To make life easier for myself I also downloaded the entire Canon as text files to facilitate searching the texts. With this database, I can search all the texts for any occurrences that contain, for example, "*LESTRADE*" and "*INWARD TWIST*"; "Boscombe Valley" being the single result. I was disconcerted to find the texts had been converted into American spelling, I read of the *Bark Gloria Scott*, when my hardback "Complete Holmes" has *Barque*.

Watson's Marriages

One problem became immediately apparent: the number of wives that Watson had, I had assumed 2, but Baring-Gould had the number at 3. I also started to notice the inconsistencies in the Canon: Mary Marston is an orphan when Watson meets her, yet after marrying Watson she visits her mother. I found Baring-Gould's conjecture of Watson having a wife before Mary Marston to be unacceptable, and I originally thought the premise to be based upon the 'facts' in "Scandal in Bohemia". These facts are Watson is married and has not seen Holmes recently, the implication being more like months than

weeks or days. But the date in “Scandal” is stated as March 1888, and it can be safely established that Watson’s marriage was in 1889... in the “Engineer’s Thumb” it is said to be the summer of 1889 *not long after my marriage*, in “Naval Treaty” it is the July immediately succeeding his marriage (year not stated), in the “Stockbroker’s Clerk” it is *shortly after* his marriage, and in the “Crooked Man” a *few months after*. I thought that Baring-Gould had literally taken the dating and so Watson must have had a wife before Mary. Not so, Baring-Gould actually has a first wife of Constance Adams who dies in December 1887, and Watson not marrying Mary Marston until May 1889, so the dating of “Scandal” as March 1888 is a problem for him. He moves the date to May 1888 and yet this does not solve the problem because whichever way you look at the problem, Watson was not married at this date. Most sources agree that all the above referred to stories are set in 1889, so “Scandal in Bohemia” must also be in 1889 or in 1890, if we accept that the month was March, then it must be 1890.

So for whatever reasons, Baring-Gould *invents another wife*, and not only that, but an American who Watson must go to the USA to meet and woo. In Baring-Gould’s world of Holmes and Watson, Watson travels to USA, woos, weds, and somehow loses this wife in roughly a period of one year. I simply reject this concept, there is no supporting evidence for any of it.

“The Game”

This whole process, that of attempting to rationalise what Conan Doyle wrote about Holmes and Watson, and put the 56 short stories and 4 long stories into an explainable order of dates, is called The Game (or the Sherlockian Game, the Holmesian Game, the Great Game). The object being to treat what Conan Doyle wrote as truth, and explain away any problems found. Well, obviously this cannot be done! There can be no explanation that Marston was an orphan and had a living mother, or how Holmes could be in Tibet and London at the same time. And then there are simple errors: in the “Man with the Twisted Lip” and the “Solitary Cyclist”, the day of the week name is calendrically in error.

Therefore, I decided there must be another way to play The Game. Let’s examine the unwritten rules, Watson writes the stories, Conan Doyle is his literary agent, and as such Conan Doyle vets, changes, obfuscates, and probably rejects some stories for publication. In real life Conan Doyle wrote the stories and made errors: he acknowledged that in “Five Orange Pips” Mary Marston’s relative should read *Aunt*, not *Mother*, but this correction was implemented after the first edition. The real world is not the fantasy world of Holmes and Watson. In the real world Conan Doyle publishes the first story “Study in Scarlet” in November 1887, followed by “Sign of the Four” in February 1890, and “Scandal in Bohemia” in July 1891. But in the fantasy world of Holmes and Watson, Watson has been publishing stories for some time before the case of the “Greek Interpreter”: *“I hear of Sherlock everywhere since you became his chronicler”* says Mycroft Holmes. In the real world only “Study in Scarlet”

story was published and has a setting which precedes the fantasy setting of the “Greek Interpreter” in January 1888, hardly possible for Mycroft to *hear everywhere* of Holmes’s cases.

One cannot play *The Game* and win! There are aspects of the Canon that simply cannot be explained by anything other than admitting that Conan Doyle made errors that create inconsistencies.

Even Conan Doyle’s name is an affectation. **Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle** or simply **Conan Doyle**, implying that “Conan” is part of a compound surname as opposed to one of his given middle names. His baptism entry in the register of St. Mary’s Cathedral in Edinburgh, gives “Arthur Ignatius Conan” as his given names and “Doyle” as his surname. The cataloguers of the British Library and the Library of Congress both treat “Doyle” alone as his surname. When he was knighted, he was gazetted as Doyle, not under the compound Conan Doyle.