

# SHERLOCK HOLMES MASTER OF ESPIONAGE

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The life and career of Mr. Sherlock Holmes has inspired the interest of many of the brightest intellects in the world. They have expended great efforts to penetrate beyond the glimpses afforded us in the 60 published adventures - to detect the real underlying character of "the best and the wisest man" Dr. Watson has ever known (*The Final Problem* by A. C. Doyle).

To the hundreds of past and present day Sherlockians, Holmesians, Doyeleans, we owe a great deal of gratitude for helping to shred the veil which has been created to obfuscate the real character of our remarkable hero: from the sainted Christopher Morley and Vincent Starrett, the renowned commentators Ronald A. Knox, William S. Baring-Gould, Edgar W. Smith, Sydney C. Roberts, Michael Harrison, Michael Hardwick, and many others too numerous to mention. Commentators have included bookmen, journalists and essayists, physicians, psychiatrists and pathologists, chemists, monsignors and vicars, barristers and solicitors, and automobile executives. All have brought their intelligence, unique perspectives, and, most of all, a very desperate need for knowledge to this quest, their labor of love. With great humility but stout heart, I feel highly motivated, even obligated, to attempt to add my voice to this ongoing effort.

As a microbiologist, I hope to bring a different perspective to these studies. I am used to dealing with very minute objects that produce consequences much greater than their size would indicate. Is not this obsession with minutiae the perfect training and background for one who feels the need to participate in Sherlockian studies? I do hope that this makes me somewhat qualified to join in this important area of scholarly research.

All of us have been haunted by the same questions over and over and over again. They have disturbed our sleeping dreams and our daytime thoughts. Why was Sherlock Holmes so reticent to reveal his complete lineage, even to his long term confidential comrade John H. Watson, M.D? Was he protecting relatives from some anticipated danger? Why did Mr. Holmes never allow records of his participation in the successful pursuit of justice to ever appear in the newspapers? Why did he not permit Dr. Watson to reveal the real location of his practice, rather than giving one which had never existed? Why did he make sure that he was never photographed, and why are there so many different illustrations of his visage, so that we may never know what he really looked like? Why, indeed, did he refuse to accept the offer of knighthood? Is this the way of a Private Consulting Detective who has nothing to hide and who is seeking commercial success? It is true that a Victorian gentleman and professional man would never countenance advertising in newspapers or handing out leaflets, as is the accepted practice among some lady and gentleman professionals of today, but to hide his true identity and place of business is surely beyond the pale. He could, at least, have eventually installed a telephone and been listed in the directory, but no such

record exists.

And what about his mysterious brother Mycroft? He "audited the books in some of the government departments, but in actuality, in Sherlock's words, Mycroft occasionally was the British government" (Jack Tracy's *The Encyclopaedia Sherlockiana*, a marvelous treasure trove of Sherlockian lore).

A scientist's first effort must be to review whatever primary evidence is available. In this case, the original source of truth is the Canon itself. Following this, the investigations and opinions of other seekers of knowledge must be consulted for their insight. Then, a working hypothesis must be reached and a model constructed to fit all of the available facts. Unable to follow my instincts to don my tattered and stained lab coat and to perform marvelously constructed controlled experiments to test my hypotheses, I was forced to enter foreign territory and apply the strange (to me) methods utilized by scientists in the fields of geology, anthropology, and archeology. I was required to pick my way through the fossil traces of a previous epoch to seek support for my conjectures. The theory easily fell into place. Following the lead of my predecessors, who are much more experienced and skilled in such explorations, it seemed logical to me that Mr. Holmes' main business was that of a super secret agent for the British government, and that Mycroft, his older brother, was the first and original director of the very first and very, very underground British secret service. Their machinations in this regard were so well covered-up that only Her Majesty the Queen, her Prime Minister, and the Foreign Office were privy to these activities. His detective practice was an excellent cover for his more underground activities. As a detective he could perform most of the functions of a spy without revealing the true nature of his quarry. He could go anywhere day or night, follow people and keep track of their comings and goings, delve into classified official documents, and pursue many other practices which are common to both of these careers.

What is the basis for refuting Mr. Sherlock Holmes' publicly professed practice as that of a Private Consulting Detective as his only profession? Why should we instead insist on characterizing him as a master, undercover espionage agent? Let us first explore some of the evidence available in the Canon. In only four published accounts did Mr. Holmes perform services for the British Government.

In three of his earlier cases, Mr. Holmes admitted that he provided services to her majesty's government. Although they required some knowledge of foreign agents and their activities, they were, as far as has been revealed, more in the line of his publicly acknowledged profession and revolved around the retrieval of highly important stolen documents (*The Bruce-Partington Plans*, *The Naval Treaty*, and *The Second Stain* by A. C. Doyle). Had these exploits been published after WWI, I am certain that Mr. Holmes would be portrayed, as is his due, as a much more active participant in these and related activities. In only one case, *His Last Bow* (published in 1917), was Mr. Holmes finally able to reveal his true calling, divest himself of the mantle of detective and tell the public how, in this particular instance, he served his government in the capacity of an undercover secret agent.

Also in the Canon, it is acknowledged that, during the Great Hiatus, Mr. Holmes traveled vast distances to far off exotic locations, at great risk to life and limb, to provide services to the British government. Acting undercover as the Norwegian explorer Sigerson, he that he "paid a short but interesting visit to the Khalifa at Khartoum, the results of which I have communicated to the Foreign Office" (*The Empty House* by A. C. Doyle).

The post-canonical apocrypha is well marked with suggestions which also lead to the same conclusions. For example, in his stirring account, *Sherlock Holmes My Life and Crimes*, Mr. Michael Hardwick proposed an interesting theory of the activities that took place during these famous travels. He suggested that the great detective and his foremost adversary Professor Moriarty jointly penetrated the secret German electromagnetic wave research facility. Although, unlike the Canon, this is a work of fiction, the story does help lend credence to the idea that espionage was Mr. Holmes' main occupation during his career. Even Huret, the boulevard assassin and French anarchist, fell prey to the activities of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, acting in his capacity as a foreign agent ("Huret the Anarchists, and Sherlock Holmes" by Derek Hinrich in *France in the Blood*, 1993). In addition, in another exciting work of fiction, *Son of Holmes*, the admirable Mr. John T. Lescroart proposed the interesting concept that Mycroft Holmes "...ran the British Government single-handedly, especially during World War I. As head of the Secret Service, among other things, he is known as 'M', a title which I'm sure is familiar to all of you. His initials became the title for the head of British Intelligence." I am not at all convinced that the elder Holmes sibling actually ran the British Government. If he had, the British would have been much better prepared to fight off the German onslaught during that horrendous encounter. However, the supposition that Mycroft Holmes was the head of the original British Intelligence Service is very attractive. No doubt this heavy responsibility dates back before the time of *The Greek Interpreter* (A. C. Doyle). This would place these events as far back as 1888, if one accepts the chronological investigations provided by the meticulous work of Mr. William S. Baring-Gould and others (*The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*). Even the popular motion picture series featuring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce seemed to pursue the right path. Although commencing with a Hollywoodized version of the authentic Doylean drama *Hound of the Baskervilles*, they quickly became a variety of adventures featuring Mr. Holmes, with the "assistance" of a bumbling Watson, serving as espionage agents against the Nazi cause. Did the authors of these World War II films have secret information which contained a germ of truth about Mr. Holmes' real vocation? Would a search of studio records turn-up authentic information about this, or has this data also been relegated to carbon dioxide, water and ash as have all other traces of our hero?

As I previously stated, in order to test an hypothesis, scientists need to construct a working model. Then, they attempt to fit the available facts into the model to support it, or failing that, construct a model which is in better agreement with their theories. Since I have no experience in the world of espionage, I was happy to find an available published device to test the theory that Sherlock Holmes had the characteristics necessary to be a professional spy.

In a very interesting book by Michael Kurlan entitled *The Spymaster's Handbook* (Facts on File Publications, New York, 1988), is a "Self Test for Spies". If one were to design a secret agent, Sherlock Holmes would serve as the foremost example in almost every respect. This, of course, should come as no surprise. Since this profession is based on Dr. Doyle's characterization of Sherlock Holmes in the Canon, our favorite detective passes with flying colors. Mr. Holmes, without a doubt, would get high marks for his brilliant intelligence and the fact that he is fluent in many languages. Other outstanding attributes would include: being a leader and not a follower, having a strong but unconventional sense of morality based on his own readings and beliefs, and his ability to keep a secret if required. His olympic character physical condition and the fact that he enjoys individual sports rather than team sports is an important feature, along with the fact that he is proficient (black belt or equivalent) in martial arts (baritsu for example), as well as being exceptionally skilled in boxing, swordsmanship, and single sticks. There is also evidence that he enjoys horseback riding, golf, swimming, bicycling, and fishing. His physical strength is heroic; he was even able to bend a fireplace poker back to its original shape, a much more difficult task than that of bending it out of shape in the first place (*The Speckled Band*). His interest in practice shooting and skill with the revolver is attested to by his "adorning the wall of the Baker Street sitting room with a patriotic V. R. done in bullet-pocks" (*The Musgrave Ritual*). Other attributes which mark him as an excellent secret agent are as follows: he reads many newspapers every day (but we do not know if he reads any magazines other than his biographer's stories in *Strand*); he likes to regularly go to such entertainments as the opera, plays, and concerts; he has visited many places more than 100 miles from home (including such exotic locales as Tibet and Khartoum, *The Empty House*); he has a vast knowledge of history (especially criminal), poisons, weapons (including air rifles), cartology, science, trigonometry, linguistics, exploration (as Sigerson, for example), foreign secret agents and their organizations, ciphers and decoding. He is particularly adept at following people undetected. This is exemplified by the verbal exchange between Messrs Sterndale and Holmes in *The Devil's Foot*, "I followed you." "I saw no one." "That is what you may expect to see when I follow you." Thus, there is no doubt that when following someone, Sherlock Holmes would be able to remain undetected while at the same time discovering the person's name, occupation, home, and business address. In addition to the listed requirements for a successful spy, add Mr. Holmes skill as a second story man, master safe cracker, and burglar. Also very useful to his cause are his myriad disguises, acting skills, and his uncanny ability to mix with all levels of British society on an equal footing.

There is only one characteristic of Holmes that will prevent his scoring a perfect grade in the quiz: He can not possibly be able to claim an average appearance. Any reading of the Canon will support this: tall, thin, penetrating eyes, hawk like nose, dominating presence. This incomplete characterization will help explain his obvious desire to never be photographed or appear as a drawing in the popular press, and why illustrations of his image have been made to vary so considerably over the years. Once viewed, he will never be forgotten.

Why it is that of more than 1000 recorded cases, only sixty have been allowed to be brought to the public's attention? Why it is that Mr. Holmes' true address has never been revealed to the public, and why he eventually left London to an even more secret location. To quote

Dr. Watson "... he has definitely retired from London and betaken himself to study and beefarming on the Sussex Downs, notoriety has become hateful to him, and he has peremptorily requested that his wishes in this matter should be strictly observed" (*The Second Stain*). How can we explain why he never allowed accounts of his adventures to appear in the newspapers (preferring instead to allow the official police to take credit for his successes), and why so many different versions of his appearance been published, preventing his true physiognomy from being recognized. Is this the attitude of someone who is trying to establish a going business enterprise? No! All of these subterfuges were necessary to enable him to follow his true secret profession as the world's first and most preeminent master spy. Would it not be exciting to know the true nature of his enterprises during the time of his false retirement, how he worked endlessly and tirelessly on behalf of the Crown, freedom, and the British way?

Two additional reasons come to mind which also help explain the highly secretive nature of Mr. Holmes: personal pride and personal safety. First, as stated by Mr. Kurla, "Spies have been praised, but mostly they have been reviled; they have been thanked, but mostly they have been ignored; they have been rewarded, but mostly they have been disowned." How would the proud descendent of British country squires and elegant French artists respond to having his name reviled as a spy, especially in the era before espionage became considered as a glamorous and worthy occupation. However, I must defer to the opinions of those qualified in psychology to define whether such a revelation would have had a profound effect on his psyche. In my opinion, only a very loyal and patriotic person would take such a great personal risk that this occupation entails. It is sad indeed that he was not even able to accept the richly deserved knighthood offered by his grateful sovereign as a reward for his services to the state. This public announcement would have blown his cover. Another reason for avoiding the spotlight and remaining hidden was the ever increasing effort on behalf of his adversaries to eliminate him from the secret struggle as world conflict became more inevitable. The bravery of Mr. Holmes has never been in doubt. But, a dead hero is of no value to the cause.

The great prolific writer, Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle (later Sir Arthur), introduced the world to the first private consulting detective in the now famous story *Study in Scarlet*. By way of these writings he also created the very paradigm of a highly successful secret agent and a secret service organization. All of the wonderful tools that Mr. Holmes the detective was given to fight crime and solve mysteries can be equally applied to the business of espionage and counterespionage. Later, in 1893, in *The Greek Interpreter*, Dr. Doyle introduced the shadowy figure of Sherlock Holmes' older brother Mycroft. Thus, he completed the stage setting for the introduction of the now famous British secret services MI.5 and MI.6 which were not to appear until sixteen years later in 1909. How much the development of the science of espionage we owe to the mind and skills of Sir Arthur will never be fully known. However, his contributions, as expressed via his alter egos Messrs Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson must surely have contributed greatly to the allied intelligence services which were essential to the successful conclusion of the two global wars.