

# Arthur Conan Doyle

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**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**



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**Born:** May 22, 1859  
Edinburgh, Scotland

**Died:** July 7, 1930 (aged 71)

**Occupation:** Novelist, short story writer, poet, doctor

**Genres:** Detective fiction, historical novels, nor fiction

**Influences:** Edgar Allan Poe

**Influenced:** Agatha Christie and other detective fiction authors

**Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle**, DL (22 May 1859 – 7 July 1930) was a Scottish born author most noted for his stories about the detective Sherlock Holmes, which are generally considered a major innovation in the field of crime fiction, and the adventures of Professor Challenger. He was a prolific writer whose other works include science fiction stories, historical novels, plays and romances, poetry, and non-fiction.

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## Life

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on 22 May 1859, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to an English father, Charles Altamont Doyle, and an Irish mother, Mary Foley, who had married in 1855. Although he is now referred to as 'Conan Doyle', the origin of this compound surname is uncertain.<sup>[1]</sup> Conan Doyle's father was an artist, as were his paternal uncles (one of whom was Richard Doyle), and his paternal grandfather John Doyle. Conan Doyle was sent to the Roman Catholic Jesuit preparatory school St Marys Hall, Stonyhurst, at the age of nine years old. He then went on to Stonyhurst College, but by the time he left the school in 1875, he had rejected Christianity to become an agnostic.

From 1876 to 1881 he studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, including a period working in the town of Aston (now a district of Birmingham). While studying, he also began writing short stories; his first published story appeared in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* before he was 20<sup>[2]</sup>. Following his term at university he served as a ship's doctor on a voyage to the West African coast, and then in 1882 he set up a practice

in Plymouth. He achieved his doctorate concerning *Tabes Dorsalis* in 1885.<sup>[3]</sup>

He took up medical practice in Portsmouth in 1882. His medical practice was initially not very successful; while waiting for patients, he again began writing stories. His first significant work was *A Study in Scarlet*, which appeared in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887 and featured the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, who was partially modelled after his former university professor, Joseph Bell. Future short stories featuring Sherlock Holmes were published in the English magazine *The Strand*. Interestingly, Rudyard Kipling congratulated Conan Doyle on his success, asking "Could this be my old friend, Dr. Joe?". Sherlock Holmes, however, was even more closely modelled after the famous Edgar Allan Poe character, C. Auguste Dupin. While living in Southsea he played for an amateur side that disbanded in 1894 and had no connection to the Portsmouth F.C. of today.

In 1885 he married Louisa (or Louise) Hawkins, known as "Touie", who suffered from tuberculosis and died on July 4, 1906.<sup>[4]</sup> He married Jean Leckie in 1907, whom he had first met and fallen in love with in 1897 but had maintained a platonic relationship with her out of loyalty to his first wife.

Conan Doyle had five children, two with his first wife (*Mary* Louise (born 1889) and Alleyne *Kingsley* (1892 – 1918), and three with his second wife (Jean Lena Annette, Denis Percy Stewart (March 17, 1909 – March 9, 1955), second husband in 1936 of Georgian Princess Nina Mdivani (circa 1910 – February 19, 1987) (former sister in law of Barbara Hutton), and Adrian Malcolm).

In 1890 Conan Doyle studied the eye in Vienna; he moved to London in 1891 to set up a practice as an ophthalmologist. He wrote in his autobiography that not a single patient crossed his door. This gave him more time for writing, and in November 1891 he wrote to his mother: "I think of slaying Holmes... and winding him up for



Portrait of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle by Sidney Paget, 1897.

good and all. He takes my mind from better things." His mother responded saying "You may do what you deem fit, but the crowds will not take this lightheartedly." In December 1893, he did so in order to dedicate more of his time to more "important" works (namely his historical novels).

Holmes and Moriarty apparently plunged to their deaths together down a waterfall in the story "The Final Problem". Public outcry led him to bring the character back; Conan Doyle returned to the story in "The Adventure of the Empty House", with the explanation that only Moriarty had fallen, but, since Holmes had other dangerous enemies, he had arranged to be temporarily "dead" also. Holmes eventually appears in a total of 56 short stories and four Conan Doyle novels (he has since appeared in many novels and stories by other authors).

Following the Boer War in South Africa at the turn of the 20th century and the condemnation from around the world over the United Kingdom's conduct, Conan Doyle wrote a short pamphlet titled *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* which justified the UK's role in the Boer war, and was widely translated.

Conan Doyle believed that it was this pamphlet that resulted in his being knighted and appointed as

Deputy-Lieutenant of Surrey in 1902. He also wrote the longer book *The Great Boer War* in 1900. During the early years of the 20th century Sir Arthur twice ran for Parliament as a Liberal Unionist, once in Edinburgh and once in the Hawick Burghs, but although he received a respectable vote he was not elected.

Conan Doyle was involved in the campaign for the reform of the Congo Free State, led by the journalist E. D. Morel and the diplomat Roger Casement. He wrote *The Crime of the Congo* in 1909, a long pamphlet in which he denounced the horrors in Congo. He became acquainted with Morel and Casement, taking inspiration from them for two of the main characters of the novel *The Lost World* (1912).

He broke with both when Morel (who was rather left-wing) became one of the leaders of the pacifist movement during the First World War, and when Casement committed treason against the UK during the Easter Rising out of conviction for his Irish nationalist views. Conan Doyle tried, unsuccessfully, to save Casement from the death penalty, arguing that he had been driven mad and was not responsible for his actions.

Conan Doyle was also a fervent advocate of justice, and personally investigated two closed cases, which led to two imprisoned men being released. The first case, in 1906, involved a shy half-British, half-Indian lawyer named George Edalji, who had allegedly penned threatening letters and mutilated animals. Police were set on Edalji's conviction, even though the mutilations continued after their suspect was jailed.



Arthur Conan Doyle statue in Crowborough



It was partially as a result of this case that the Court of Criminal Appeal was established in 1907, so not only did Conan Doyle help George Edalji, his work helped to establish a way to correct other miscarriages of justice. The story of Conan Doyle and Edalji is told in fictional form in Julian Barnes's 2005 novel, *Arthur & George*.

The second case, that of Oscar Slater, a German Jew and gambling-den operator convicted of bludgeoning an 82-year-old woman in Glasgow in 1908, excited Conan Doyle's curiosity because of inconsistencies in the prosecution case and a general sense that Slater was framed.

After the death of his wife Louisa in 1906, and the deaths of his son Kingsley, his brother, his two brothers-in-law, and his two nephews in World War I, Conan Doyle sank into depression. He found solace supporting Spiritualism and its alleged scientific proof of existence beyond the grave.

According to the History Channel program *Houdini: Unlocking the Mystery* (which briefly explored the friendship between the two), Conan Doyle became involved with Spiritualism after the

death of his own son during the First World War. Kingsley Doyle died from pneumonia in October 1917, which he contracted during his year plus convalescence after being seriously wounded during the disastrous 1916 Battle of the Somme. The elder Doyle became involved with Spiritualism to the extent that he wrote a Professor Challenger novel on the subject, *The Land of Mist*. One of the odder aspects of this period of his life was his book *The Coming of the Fairies* (1921). He was apparently totally convinced of the veracity of the Cottingley fairy photographs, which he reproduced in the book, together with theories about the nature and existence of fairies and spirits. In his *The History of Spiritualism* (1926) Conan Doyle highly praised the psychic phenomena and spirit materialisations produced by Eusapia Palladino and Mina "Margery" Crandon, based on the investigations of duped scientists and conjurers who deeply desired to encounter psychic phenomena and refused to listen to sceptical and well-informed scientists and conjurers.<sup>[5]</sup>

His work on this topic was one of the reasons that one of his short story collections, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, was banned in the Soviet Union in 1929 for supposed occultism. This ban was later lifted. Russian actor Vasily Livanov later

received an Order of the British Empire for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes.

Conan Doyle was friends for a time with the American magician Harry Houdini, who himself became a prominent *opponent* of the Spiritualist movement in the 1920s following the death of his own beloved mother. Although Houdini insisted that Spiritualist mediums employed trickery (and consistently attempted to expose them as frauds), Conan Doyle became convinced that Houdini himself possessed supernatural powers, a view expressed in Conan Doyle's *The Edge of the Unknown*. Houdini was apparently unable to convince Conan Doyle that his feats were simply magic tricks, leading to a bitter, public, falling-out between the two. Doyle was totally stunned when Houdini pulled off his thumb and then replaced it. [5]

Richard Milner, an American historian of science, has presented a case that Conan Doyle may have been the perpetrator of the Piltdown Man hoax of 1912, creating the counterfeit hominid fossil that fooled the scientific world for over 40 years. Milner says that Conan Doyle had a motive, namely revenge on the scientific establishment for debunking one of his favourite psychics, and that

*The Lost World* contains several encrypted clues regarding his involvement in the hoax.<sup>[6]</sup>

Samuel Rosenberg's 1974 book *Naked is the Best Disguise* purports to explain how Conan Doyle left, throughout his writings, open clues that related to hidden and suppressed aspects of his mentality.

Conan Doyle was found clutching his chest in the family garden on July 7, 1930.

He soon died of his heart attack, aged 71, and is buried in the Church Yard at Minstead in the New Forest, Hampshire, England. His last words were directed toward his wife: "You are wonderful." The epitaph on his gravestone reads:

STEEL TRUE  
BLADE STRAIGHT  
ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE  
KNIGHT  
PATRIOT, PHYSICIAN & MAN OF LETTERS

Undershaw, the home Conan Doyle had built near Hindhead, south of London, and lived in for at least a decade, was a hotel and restaurant from 1924 until 2004. It was then bought by a

developer, and has been empty since then while conservationists and Conan Doyle fans fight to preserve it.<sup>[4]</sup>

A statue has been erected in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's honour at Crowborough Cross in Crowborough, East Sussex, England, where Sir Arthur lived for 23 years. There is also a statue of Sherlock Holmes in Picardy Place, Edinburgh, Scotland, close to the house where Conan Doyle was born.

## **Selected bibliography**

### **Sherlock Holmes books**

- *A Study in Scarlet* (1887)
- *The Sign of Four* (1890)
- *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892)
- *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894)
- *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902)
- *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904)
- *The Valley of Fear* (1914)
- *His Last Bow* (1917)
- *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927)

### **Professor Challenger stories**

- *The Lost World* (1912)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Poison Belt* (1913)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Land of Mist* (1926)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Disintegration Machine* (1927)
- *When the World Screamed* (1928)

## Historical novels

- *Micah Clarke* (1888)
- *The White Company* (1891)
- *The Great Shadow* (1892)
- *The Refugees* (publ. 1893, written 1892)
- *Rodney Stone* (1896)
- *Uncle Bernac* (1897)
- *Sir Nigel* (1906)
- *The British Campaign in France and Flanders: 1914* (1916)

## Other works

- "J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement" (1884), a story based on the fate of the ship *Mary Celeste*
- *Mystery of Cloomber* (1889)
- *The Captain of the Polestar, and other tales* (1890)
- *The Great Keinplatz Experiment* (1890)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Doings Of Raffles Haw* (1891)<sup>[7]</sup>

- *Beyond the City* (1892)
- *Jane Annie, or the Good Conduct Prize* (1893)
- *My Friend the Murderer and Other Mysteries and Adventures* (1893)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *Round The Red Lamp* (1894)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Parasite* (1894)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Stark Munro Letters* (1895)
- *Songs of Action* (1898)
- *The Tragedy of The Korosko* (1898)
- *A Duet* (1899)
- *The Great Boer War* (1900)
- *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* (1903)
- *Through the Magic Door* (1907)
- *Round the Fire Stories* (1908)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Crime of the Congo* (1909)
- *The Lost Gallery* (1911)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Terror of Blue John Gap* (1912)
- *Danger! and Other Stories* (1918)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The New Revelation* (1918)
- *The Horror of the Heights* (1918)
- *The Vital Message* (1919)
- *Tales of Terror & Mystery* (1923)
- *The Black Doctor and Other Tales of Terror and Mystery* (1925)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Dealings of Captain Sharkey* (1925)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The Man from Archangel and Other Tales of*

- Adventure* (1925)<sup>[7]</sup>
- *The History of Spiritualism* (1926)
- *The Maracot Deep* (1929)<sup>[7]</sup>

## Notes and references

1. ^ One source says that the name originated from his great-uncle Michael Conan, a distinguished journalist, from whom Arthur and his elder sister, Annette, received the compound surname of 'Conan Doyle' (Daniel Stashower, *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle*, Penguin Books, 2000.). The same source points out that in 1885 he was describing himself on the brass nameplate outside his house, and on his doctoral thesis, as "A. Conan Doyle". However, other sources (such as the 1901 census) indicate that Conan Doyle's surname was 'Doyle', and that the form 'Conan Doyle' was only used as a surname in his later years.
2. ^
3. ^ available at the Edinburgh Research Archive
4. ^ ***a b*** Leeman, Sue. Sherlock Holmes fans hope to save Conan Doyle's house from developers, Associated Press, 28 July 2006.]



5. ^ *a b* The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero *by William Kalush and Larry Sloman, Atria books, 2006*
6. ^ Highfield, Roger. Thursday 20 March 1997. The mysterious case of Conan Doyle and Piltdown Man. The Daily Telegraph
7. ^ *a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o* Bibliographic information from: Bleiler, Everett (1948). *The Checklist of Fantastic Literature*. Chicago: Shasta Publishers, 102.

## See also

- The Toronto Public Library has an extensive collection of Arthur Conan Doyle's works.
- William Gillette Personal friend. Performed the most famous stage-version of *Sherlock Holmes*.
- American horror writers Christopher Golden and Thomas E. Sniegowski feature Arthur Conan Doyle as a protagonist in their fictional "The Menagerie" series.

## External links

### Biographical

- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle - His Life, All His Works, And More
- The Arthur Conan Doyle Society
- The Sherlock Holmes Museum
- Arthur Conan Doyle Online Exhibition
- Conan Doyle in Birmingham
- The Chronicles of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- Arthur Conan Doyle: Cricket Statistics
- YouTube clip of an aged Doyle speaking on Holmes and his interest in psychic phenomena

### **Real life cases**

- Conan Doyle and the Parson's Son -The George Edalji case
- The George Edalji Case
- The Oscar Slater Case
- The true legend of the Hound of the Baskervilles.

### **Works**

- Works by Arthur Conan Doyle at Project Gutenberg
- Works at Project Gutenberg Australia
- Online works available from The University of Adelaide Library
- Sherlock Holmes: Audio books

- The Complete Sherlock Holmes: Illustrated

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