A Spiritualist abroad: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's adventures in the Antipodes

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On one of Adelaide's busiest street corners, embedded in a concrete pillar outside a fast-food restaurant, is a fading plaque that only someone with the observational powers of Sherlock Holmes would detect at first glance. It is fitting, then, that the memorial marks a brief visit to the city in September 1920 by Holmes's literary creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who stayed in a grand hotel that once stood on the site.

Conan Doyle was not the only eminent novelist of his era to travel to South Australia. Anthony Trollope and Mark Twain both passed through in the latter half of the nineteenth century, while Joseph Conrad and John Galsworthy met on-board a ship docked at Port Adelaide. Yet it was Conan Doyle who was perhaps most impressed by the city and who left behind the fullest account of his stay.

Adelaide was Conan Doyle's first official stop on a public speaking tour of Australia and New Zealand that would take him five months to complete. (Conan Doyle was distantly familiar with the city long before he visited: he had briefly mentioned it in two of his Sherlock Holmes stories.) Accompanied by his wife and three young children, he spent eight days exploring Adelaide and its surroundings before moving on to Melbourne for more lectures.

A small exhibition commemorating the South Australian leg of Conan Doyle's journey at the state's museum has just concluded. The display presented various artefacts - including photographs, a letter and a newspaper article authored by Conan Doyle himself - and provided a fascinating snapshot of both the city and the man. Unlike Twain, Conan Doyle had not come to discuss his literary work but a cause much closer to his heart - his belief in ghosts, fairies and the power of telepathy.

More than 90 years later, the revelation that Conan Doyle was a committed Spiritualist can still come as a surprise to readers of his detective fiction. Yet Conan Doyle's beliefs should be understood in their proper historical context. "Spiritualism" was the name for a loose collection of creeds that emerged in the nineteenth century and gained momentum in the years following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, a work that shook the foundations of traditional faiths. In hindsight, Spiritualism might be defined as a continuation of religion by other means. Many of its followers were agnostics committed to the idea of a mysterious but benign nether-world, a hidden realm from which lost loves could communicate with those they had left behind.

Conan Doyle's decision to become a torchbearer for the movement has at times been portrayed as a sudden descent into irrationalism, but it was in fact a natural continuation of interests developed earlier in his life. His autobiography *Memories and Adventures* reveals a more-than-passing interest in the supernatural as early as the 1880s. In his account of his voyage to Australia, *Wanderings of a Spiritualist*, Doyle repeatedly refers to the many prominent scientists who held similar beliefs, such as physicists William Crookes, William Fletcher Barrett, Oliver Lodge and Johann Zollner, physician Cesare Lombroso and naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace, who came up with the theory of natural selection independently of Darwin. Others not mentioned by Conan Doyle include Lord Rayleigh and J.J. Thomson, both Nobel Prize winners. Interestingly, several of these men were investigating electromagnetism and radioactivity - phenomena that would undoubtedly have seemed "ghostly" in an era in which the existence and nature of the atom were still hotly debated.

In *The Immortalisation Commission: The Strange Quest to Cheat Death*, John Gray writes that Spiritualism was regarded by its adherents not simply as a religion but an extension of science, as "another version of naturalism, an account of the material universe enlarged to encompass an invisible world":

> "The psychical researchers were all of them characters in a subliminal romance. Science had called up the spectre of universal death - the annihilation of the individual, the extinction of the

species and the death of the cosmos as it collapsed under the weight of entropy. The search for evidence for survival that followed was the quest for immortality adapted to the conditions of a scientific age."

Gray also notes that "many of those involved had suffered agonizing bereavements." This was certainly true in Conan Doyle's case. After the First World War, his Spiritualist sympathies strengthened into deep conviction following a series of personal tragedies. In October 1918, his eldest son Kingsley - who had been wounded by shrapnel while fighting in France - died from Spanish flu. The following February, his brother Innes succumbed to the same illness. Within months, two of his nephews and two brothers-in-law were also dead. In his first lecture on Australian soil in Adelaide's Town Hall, Conan Doyle told an audience of 2000 he had "made contact" with his son and brother with the help of a medium. "It is hard to talk of such intimate matters, but they were not given to me for my private comfort alone, but for that of humanity," he later wrote in *Wanderings*.

Holmes the humanist?

Conan Doyle's Spiritualism continues to strike Sherlock Holmes devotees as odd, even paradoxical. Holmes is, after all, one of literature's supreme rationalists, utterly meticulous and bitterly contemptuous of wooly-headedness. In *The Sign of Four*, he tells Watson: "I never guess. It is a shocking habit - destructive to the logical faculty. What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought or observe the small facts upon which large inferences may depend." The casual arrogance is palpable. Yet there is much of Conan Doyle in Holmes, a fact that is easily overlooked, not merely because it is often assumed that Dr Watson is Conan Doyle's own literary self-portrait.

Holmes is not simply the unfeeling "logical machine" he is sometimes made out to be. Undoubtedly brilliant, at times cold and dismissive, always precise (he is fond of the adjective "singular") Holmes treats crimes as problems or puzzles in need of elegant solutions. But he never loses sight of their human side and is capable of great sensitivity. (This ethical dimension is surely a major reason for the stories' ongoing appeal. It is also an important point of difference from more recent "whodunits," such as the Miss Marple novels or *Midsomer Murders* television series, which possess all the moral depth of a game of *Cluedo*.)

Conan Doyle was a great champion of noble causes. He wrote a book criticising Belgium's brutal colonisation of the Congo and showed concern for Aboriginal Australians. "Their fate is a dark stain upon Australia," he declared. Holmes possesses the same moral intuition and instinctive sympathy for victims. As John Gray observed in a perceptive audio essay for the BBC, Holmes "wants justice to prevail, and where necessary he's willing to flout the law in order to ensure that it does. The servant of reason, Holmes is also a romantic hero ready to defy authority in order to stand by his sense of morality."

In *The Adventure of the Devil's Foot*, for example, in which Holmes discovers the murder he is investigating was committed by an African explorer in revenge for an earlier poisoning, he decides not to inform the police. "I have never loved," he tells Watson, "but if I did and if the woman I loved had met such an end, I might act even as our lawless lion-hunter has done."

Holmes has, Gray says, "a deep sense of the random cruelty of the human scene." It was a cruelty that Conan Doyle knew well. The son of an alcoholic artist who was later committed to an insane asylum, he was raised in an Edinburgh tenement and attended a Jesuit school in Lancashire where life was, he remembered, Spartan and severe. After studying medicine, he got a job as a doctor on a whaling ship and sailed the waters of the Arctic.

The Sherlock Holmes stories are populated by all kinds of human flotsam - vulnerable young governesses, mysterious benefactors, refugees from far-flung countries, gangsters, gamblers and rogues, secret societies, cruel moneylenders, embittered loners, jealous lovers, vagrants and beggars, disgraced former soldiers, broken sailors, self-made millionaires and aristocrats afraid of scandal. The plots are variously amusing, macabre and poignant. In *The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax*, Holmes describes the missing woman - an heiress of dwindling means - as a "rather pathetic figure," "drifting and friendless," "a stray chicken in a world of foxes."

It is clear from this catalogue of villains and victims that Conan Doyle, like Dickens before him, was a great observer of everyday life and was deeply aware of its hardships and frailties. "To anyone who wishes to study mankind this is the spot," Holmes's brother Mycroft tells him in *The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter* as they peer from a windowsill overlooking a London street onto the throng below.

Wanderings of a Spiritualist

Wanderings of a Spiritualist is a curious work. Part travel journal, part mission statement, the book is rich in descriptions of time and place and provides a fascinating portrait of Australian society after the First World War. Wanderings, it must be said, is occasionally tainted by the racism typical of its time and contains accounts of seances and Spiritualist meetings that are of little interest today. Yet it remains a work of deep historical value.

Most interesting are the small vignettes, the various detours and digressions that are interspersed throughout the narrative. Conan Doyle describes going down a mine at Bendigo, seeing shearers work at Nerrin-Nerrin, being stung by a jellyfish on Manly beach, cruising across Sydney Harbour on a steamship and spending a relaxing week at Medlow Bath in the Blue Mountains. Other episodes include a day trip to the Dandenongs, a meeting with a young South Australian war poet and a hot and humid train trip to Brisbane. Conan Doyle comments insightfully upon the recent severe drought and the nation's political landscape. On a more personal note, he records the strong opposition he faced from some sections for promoting his beliefs.

A keen sportsman in his youth, Conan Doyle attended the VFL Grand Final and was greatly impressed by Australian Rules football, which he compared favourably to soccer and rugby. "It was suggestive," he observed with a hint of mischief, "that the instant the last whistle blew a troop of mounted police cantered over the ground and escorted the referees to the safety of the pavilion." He also saw the touring English cricket team play against Victoria in Melbourne (where the great Australian off-spinner Hugh Trumble gifted a cricket ball to Conan Doyle's son Denis) and against New South Wales in Sydney. With great prescience, he pondered the threat to England's Ashes hopes posed by Australian all-rounder Jack Gregory. "We have no one of the same class; and that will win Australia the rubber unless I am - as I hope I am - a false prophet." On this point at least, Conan Doyle was no such thing. Gregory was the second-highest wicket taker and fourth-highest run scorer, helping Australia to accomplish a 5-0 clean sweep, the first time such a result had been achieved in Test cricket.

Conan Doyle's first step on Australian soil was in Perth, which he explored briefly before travelling to Adelaide. "I have seen few such cities, so pretty, so orderly and so self-sufficing," he wrote of the city of churches. He visited several places of interest, including the local museum, botanical gardens and art gallery, where he was particularly impressed by H.J. Johnstone's *Evening Shadows*. The highlight, however, was an outing to Humbug Scrub, a nature reserve north-east of Adelaide, in the company of local conservationist Thomas Paine Bellchambers ("a sort of humble Jeffries or Thoreau, more lonely than the former, less learned than the latter.") Conan Doyle loved the place, writing lyrically in a newspaper of the flora and fauna:

> "There are vivid colour impressions - deep green of the Australian spring; late grey of eucalyptus trunks with untidy moulting bark; light yellow of budding wattle; purple pink of the carpet of knot grass; and everywhere the familiar home flowers, but all a little altered in their new home - the dandelion, the buttercup, the mustard plant, each imprinting its tiny yellow dot upon the variegated ground work of Nature."

Conan Doyle was amused by "a dear little possum which got under the back of my coat, and would not come out." He saw a blue headed wren, kangaroos, wallabies, lizards, an eagle and "noisy mina birds which fly ahead and warn the game against the hunter. Good noisy little mina!" He urged the local authorities to ensure the place remained protected. "Do this, and your grandchildren will extol your wisdom. Don't do it, and in ten years it will be too late." Happily, they followed his advice. Humbug Scrub remains a wildlife sanctuary to this day.

"More English than the English"

As much as he enjoyed the Australian landscape, Conan Doyle also had genuine affection for the local people. Even when expressing dislike for particular aspects of the culture, the whiff of snobbery one might

expect from a British upper-middle-class man of letters is entirely absent. Conan Doyle saw Australians as essentially friendly and good-humoured, albeit with a quietist streak:

> "In some ways the Australians are more English than the English ... The Australian is less ready to show emotion, cooler in his bearing, more restrained in applause, more devoted to personal liberty, keener on sport ... than our people are. Indeed, they remind me more of the Scotch than the English."

High praise indeed from a native of Edinburgh! But he was also critical of what he perceived as local vices. He argued that the overwhelming emptiness of the Australian interior had fostered an unhealthy, insular mentality. In words that anticipated Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* by more than 40 years, Conan Doyle wrote:

> "Australians do not take a big enough view of their own destiny. They ... are inclined to buy the ease of the moment at the cost of the greatness of their continental future ... That little fringe of people on the edge of that huge island can never adequately handle it. It is like an enormous machine with a six horsepower engine to drive it."

More than once, he remarks upon Australians' tendency to drink to excess. "We have been shocked and astonished by the number of young men of decent exterior whom we have seen staggering down the street, often quite early in the day," he wrote. It was a curse that went hand-in-hand with Australia's addiction to horse-racing, which Conan Doyle decried as a "real drag upon [the nation's] progress":

> "It goes on all the year round, though it has its more virulent bouts, as for example during our visit to this town when the Derby, the Melbourne Cup, and Oaks succeeded each other. They call it sport, but I fear that in that case I am no sportsman. I would as soon call the roulette-table a sport. The whole population is unsettled and bent upon winning easy money, which dissatisfies them with the money that has to be worked for."

Conan Doyle was not among the crowd of thousands that flocked to Flemington for the running of the Cup that year. Instead, he took his family down to St. Kilda beach where he spent a quiet day recuperating and "preparing for more strenuous times ahead."

"What purpose?"

Before Conan Doyle left England for Australia, he became captivated by photographs taken by two young cousins in the Yorkshire village of Cottingley purportedly showing fairies. At the time the images were brought to his attention, Conan Doyle was writing an article on fairy sightings for *The Strand* magazine. (This story is beautifully retold, with some adjustments, in the movie *Fairytale: A True Story*, in which Peter O'Toole plays Conan Doyle and Harvey Keitel plays illusionist and committed rationalist Harry Houdini, whom Sir Arthur had befriended. The pair had a public falling out after Conan Doyle's wife claimed to have been contacted by Houdini's dead mother during a seance). While in Australia, Conan Doyle exchanged letters with theosophist Edward Gardener, who visited the girls in an effort to verify the photographs.

Almost a century later, it is amazing to think the fairies, which are clearly cardboard cut-outs, could ever have been considered genuine. Yet there are none so blind as those who will not see, as the saying goes. To Conan Doyle, the photographs were the final piece of evidence he needed to convince the sceptics and launch the revolution he had forecast at the end of *Wanderings of a Spiritualist*. Perhaps this is why his next book, *The Coming of the Fairies*, at times reads like a tract announcing the beginning of a new age of enlightenment:

> "These little folk who appear to be our neighbours ... will become familiar. The thought of them, even when unseen, will add a charm to every brook and valley and give romantic interest to every country walk. The recognition of their existence will jolt the material twentieth-century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud, and will make it admit that there is a glamour and a mystery to life. Having discovered this, the world will not find it so difficult to accept that spiritual message supported by physical facts which has already been so convincingly put before it. All this I see, but there may be much more. When Columbus knelt in prayer upon the edge of

America, what prophetic eye saw all that a new continent might do to affect the destinies of the world?"

It was a desperate dream that Conan Doyle did not live to see dashed. There was no fatal blow but an arguably crueller fate - waning interest and a gradual drift into irrelevancy. In hindsight, it is perhaps no surprise that the decline coincided with the rise of the science of quantum mechanics - a theory of reality almost as strange as Spiritualism but one based on rigorous methods. Yet the instinct that propelled him to seek solace in the spirit-world was a very human one.

Driven by the idea that there is some deeper, natural truth behind the appearance of things, Conan Doyle was convinced that there must be some cosmic consolation for the sufferings endured in mortal life. In *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box,* Holmes wonders aloud, in a moment of rare metaphysical speculation, "what is the object of this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must have a purpose, or else our universe has no meaning and that is unthinkable. But what purpose? That is humanity's great problem, to which reason, so far, has no answer." On this point, Holmes and Conan Doyle were of one mind.

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06 September 2013–03 November 2013

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the celebrated author of the Sherlock Holmes series, arrived in Adelaide on 21 September 1920. He was on a four month lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand on the subject of spiritualism.

His visit included time at the South Australian Museum with then Director Edgar Ravenswood Waite, and the two also visited Humbug Scrub, north east of Adelaide.

This Spotlight display follows Conan Doyle's time in Adelaide, introducing us to people he met, and museum specimens he encountered, which later influenced his stories.

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