The Oxford Sherlock Holmes: A Review Essay

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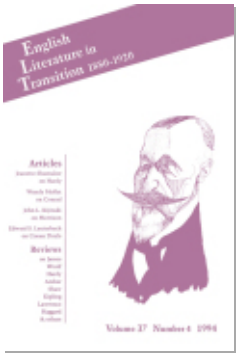

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 37, Number 4, 1994, pp. 502-508 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

The Oxford Sherlock Holmes: A Review Essay

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A Study in Scarlet
Owen Dudley Edwards, ed. liii + 200 pp.

The Sign of the Four
Christopher Roden, ed. lv + 137 pp.

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes
Richard Lancelyn Green, ed. xlix + 389 pp.

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes
Christopher Roden, ed. lvii + 321 pp.

The Hound of the Baskervilles
W. W. Robson, ed. xliii + 188 pp.

The Return of Sherlock Holmes
Richard Lancelyn Green, ed. xlvii + 408 pp.

The Valley of Fear
Owen Dudley Edwards, ed. lvii + 234 pp.

His Last Bow
Owen Dudley Edwards, ed. xlix + 252 pp.

The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes
W. W. Robson, ed. xlv + 290 pp.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1993 9 Volumes. $99.00

IN TERMS OF TEXT and scholarly apparatus, the nine-volume Oxford Sherlock Holmes supersedes all earlier editions. The general editor is Owen Dudley Edwards, Reader in History, University of Edinburgh, and author of the recent Doyle biography *The Quest for Sherlock Holmes*. The other editors are Richard Lancelyn Green, Doyle bibliographer; W. W. Robson, Professor Emeritus of English Literature,

University of Edinburgh; and Christopher Roden, founder of the Arthur Conan Doyle Society and editor of its journal.

Individual volumes are complete in themselves since the General Editor's Preface to the Series, the Select Bibliography and A Chronology of Arthur Conan Doyle are repeated in each. The Select Bibliography lists Doyle's major publications, then works about Doyle and Holmes, with occasional brief comment on important secondary works. The Chronology indicates succinctly the relationship of Doyle's publications to the sequence of important events in his life. For each individual volume there is an Introduction by the editor of that particular title, a Note on the Text and Explanatory Notes. Appendices with short pieces relating to the Holmes stories, by Doyle or by others, are included where pertinent.

In his General Editor's Preface, Edwards comments on the Holmes manuscripts. Of these only about half survive, and many are in private collections and difficult of access. From the manuscripts available it is evident that Doyle often underpunctuated and made comparatively few corrections or alterations. He simply did not pay much attention to the publication or republication of his Holmes stories and seldom questioned changes by editors. Edwards points out that, "In general, American texts of the stories are closer to the magazine texts than British book texts." He also explains why the sequence of a few stories has been rearranged for this edition.

The Note on the Text of each volume indicates the original form of publication, whether a manuscript exists, how each editor has treated his text and additional facts relevant to the original publication. Further publication data are given at the beginning of the Explanatory Notes, including details about British and American editions and original serialization of novels. The original periodical publication of each story in the collections is also recorded for both British and American magazines, and subsequent publication in newspapers is noted. Textual variants are recorded in the Explanatory Notes rather than at the bottom of each page of text as is more usual in modern authoritative texts published by Oxford. Actually there are comparatively few textual variants since Doyle seldom revised his work. Information about where and when Doyle composed a Holmes story is often added.

If read consecutively the introductions to the nine volumes trace the changes in Doyle's technique in the over 40 years he wrote about Holmes. The first two novels, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of*

the Four (1890), were only moderately successful. Roden points out, in his introduction to *Sign of the Four*, that in the first novel "the character of Sherlock Holmes was to create no great early impression," but in the second, Doyle reintroduced Holmes to his readers, refining Holmes's character and clarifying the relationship between Holmes and Dr. Watson. His writing became more confident, and he added touches of humor.

With the series of short stories published in the *Strand Magazine* beginning in 1891, the phenomenal popularity of Holmes exploded. Sales of the magazine always increased when a Holmes adventure appeared in its pages. In contrast to earlier writers of detective stories, Doyle focused on the character of his detective rather than on the mystery, though mystery was, of course, always present. It was Holmes himself who entranced readers of the *Strand*. In his introduction to *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), the collection of these earliest short stories, Green discusses why the "reality of Sherlock Holmes was a quality which struck readers and critics alike."

The Adventures are probably the greatest stories in the Holmes saga. Surprisingly, even with their extraordinary success, Doyle considered abandoning Holmes. But the *Strand* pressured him for more Holmes, so Doyle asked for more money. The magazine met Doyle's demand, and he produced the stories which were collected in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1893). Nevertheless, in the last of these, "The Final Problem," published in the December 1893 issue Doyle deliberately killed Holmes.

Doyle was tired of his detective, and he honestly thought that his historical novels were better and more important than the Holmes stories. Yet when his readers pressed for more, Doyle once again acceded to their demands with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) and the stories which make up *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905). With *The Return* a slight falling off begins to show, a lack of the zest that permeates the earlier books, for Doyle was having problems with Holmes. He said it took him nearly as much effort to come up with a good plot for a single short story as for a novel. He feared that somehow he might use untypical material for Holmes. Above all, from this time on, Doyle often had trouble finding new plots for Holmes stories. Occasionally, he used suggestions from friends. The idea for *Hound of the Baskervilles* came from Fletcher Robinson who maintained that he had helped write the early chapters. Though Doyle gave Robinson credit for the idea of a gigantic, seemingly supernatural hound, he evidently never

used or heavily revised Robinson's writing. For some of his later plots Doyle "borrowed" elements from the Raffles stories by his brother-in-law, E. W. Hornung.

Edwards maintains that the next novel, *The Valley of Fear* (1915), "occupies a unique place amongst . . . Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories...." Analyzing it in terms of structure, he finds that by deliberate design Doyle crafted it in two parts and a coda and carefully stage managed the elements of fear and terror. Whereas Doyle meant most of his previous Holmes stories as entertainments, in *Valley of Fear* he was more concerned with problems of "ethical ambiguity" and attempted to comment seriously on terrorist activity, using American labor struggles to make oblique reference to the troubles in Ireland. Ironically *Valley of Fear*, though strong in novelistic technique, has never been popular. In an excellent defense, Edwards urges that it be taken more seriously.

Critics have been quick to point out the weaknesses in Doyle's last two collections, *His Last Bow* (1917) and *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927). The stories are flawed and carelessly written. Robson says "it is hard to believe that any careful reader of the *Case-Book* would be prepared to testify that they all came from the pen of Conan Doyle." Holmes's usually witty humor, he argues, occasionally sinks to a music-hall level, slang and vulgarisms appear, and Holmes makes racial slurs. He raises the possibility that for some stories Doyle may have had a collaborator, that the hand of an "Interloper" is evident, and suggests that a modern, comparative stylistic analysis might determine whether such lapses are the work of another. Awaiting such research and a careful examination of Doyle's unpublished letters and papers, the question of Robson's Interloper remains open. Doyle may have been so tired of his fictional creation that he really did not care if a collaborator changed the essential character of the great detective, but perhaps there is a simpler explanation. The last Holmes stories may just have been written by an old man lacking physical and creative stamina, disinterested in Holmes, but continuing to write about him to finance his overriding fascination with Spiritualism.

In their introductions the editors suggest diverse influences and sources for the Holmes stories. Doyle himself always acknowledged that his teacher at the University of Edinburgh medical school, Dr. Joseph Bell, provided the model for Holmes's amazing deductive abilities. Doyle had often seen Bell startle patients with stunning diagnostic skills and transferred these to Holmes.

Literary influences cited include, of course, earlier writers of mystery stories like Poe, Collins and Gaboriau. It is a commonplace that Watson serves as a Boswell for Holmes. Doyle drew from Mayne Reid for the American frontier section of *Study in Scarlet*, and elements of *The Sign of the Four* show influences from such disparate sources as Macaulay, Wilde and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. From Scott, Doyle learned how to use comedy as a counterpoint to tragedy, and how to present Dr. Watson as an observer of both nineteenth-century society and the character and actions of Holmes. Scott's impact, of course, was strongest on Doyle's historical novels, but is also evident in Doyle's portrayal of early American society in the second parts of *Study in Scarlet* and *Valley of Fear*.

Edwards suggests that Doyle wrote much of *Valley of Fear* "out of an intensely personal reaction to questions of national identity" for Ireland. He emphasizes Doyle's own background as a major source for his depiction of violence and secret societies, for as a child in Ireland Doyle had felt turmoil and an undercurrent of destructive forces all around him. Later Doyle read about Thomas Billis Beach, a secret agent who infiltrated Irish-American revolutionary organizations, and he met William John Burns, the detective who was instrumental in breaking up secret societies in the United States. All these elements, speculates Edwards, coalesced in the description of the violence and terror among American laborers in part two of *Valley of Fear*. Doyle wrote it "to confront and exorcize the devils from his own past."

Both Green and Edwards call attention to the influence of Doyle on the fiction of his friend P. G. Wodehouse, especially on the characters of Jeeves and Bertie Wooster. Roden notes the influence of Doyle on T. S. Eliot. Edwards points out how the description of violence in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* can be compared with Doyle's description of the American labor troubles in *Valley of Fear*.

Obviously, the primary purpose of the Sherlock Holmes stories is to entertain, and they succeed in this gloriously by combining elements of adventure, romance and the fairy tale. The editors, however, suggest other ways of looking at them, often on a more serious level. Green says the stories in *The Adventures* are "part dream, part comedy, and part illusion. It is Conan Doyle's greatest masterpiece. . . ." But *The Adventures* also stands alongside *Treasure Island* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "as an expression of its period," for the "greatness [of these stories]

lies not in applying and developing the methods of Gaboriau and Poe, but in their relation to the style, atmosphere, and ethos of the period."

Roden emphasizes, in his introduction to *The Memoirs*, the repetition of the themes of infidelity, past misdeeds and revenge. "The Final Problem," with the struggle to the death between Holmes and his alter ego Moriarty, "assumes epic proportions in miniature." Discussing *Hound of the Baskervilles*, Robson perceives the female characters as "victims of masculine oppression," women who "carry within their identity a latent old-fashioned feminism." He notes the theme of atavism in the novel and sees the sinister Grimpen Mire "as fully dominant as Egdon Heath in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. . . ." And he points out that Holmes himself is the real "hound" of the novel as he pursues the criminal.

Edwards, on the other hand, argues that in *His Last Bow* Holmes is possibly a Christlike figure. He also discovers feminist themes in several of the stories. The editors of *His Last Bow* and *The Case-Book* both note that the later Holmes stories reflect a disintegrating Edwardian world. In the story "His Last Bow," where Holmes defeats a German espionage agent, Edwards points out that Doyle sends a war-time message to the Irish that they had been misled by Germany. Furthermore, Doyle's attitude toward empire changes; he fears the misuse the British might make of that ideal, for it is "exceedingly dangerous in its encouragement of the morally unfit in the vilest forms of avarice." And in his discussion of *The Case-Book*, Robson finds that "There was no place for the one-time cosiness of Baker Street in the cruel, disenchanted post-war world." After 1914, Holmes and Watson "were both incongruous survivors" from the Victorian era.

The Explanatory Notes to each volume incorporate many of the notes from William S. Baring-Gould's two-volume *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (1967). But the editors go much further and add an immense amount of information helpful to a clearer understanding of the stories. Biographical facts about Doyle and other actual persons mentioned in the stories, historical background and geographical locations are given. Literary parallels and allusions are pointed out. The glosses of scientific, medical and technical terms, Victorian idioms, sporting slang, cockney dialect, American slang, terms for Victorian apparel and Victorian money clarify Victorian usage. When appropriate, the notes quote briefly from letters or other writings by Doyle and refer to published commentaries on a particular story. They identify occasional inaccuracies and inconsisten-

cies of detail by Doyle; ideas or descriptions occasionally repeated by Doyle in various Holmes stories; similarities of subject matter in some Holmes stories; parallels to some of Doyle's non-Holmes stories. And this is only a sampling of the material furnished.

Never has so much information about the stories of Sherlock Holmes been gathered together. The learning of the editors is impressive. Of course any reader, drawing on his own expertise, will find occasional lacunae. For example, no note is given to explain the source of Holmes's deduction from the size of Henry Baker's hat in "The Blue Carbuncle." Holmes was applying the widely held Victorian belief in a now disproved theory of French scientist Paul Broca (1824–1880) that the size of the human brain is an indicator of intelligence. And it is surprising that there is almost no mention of the American artist Frederic Dorr Steele. In his introduction to *The Adventures*, Green credits the British artist Sidney Paget with creating the popular image of Holmes, wearing a deerstalker cap and Inverness cape, for the *Strand*. But little is said about Steele, whose vivid, dramatic illustrations fired the imaginations of readers of Holmes' trans-Atlantic appearances in *Collier's Weekly*.

As some critics have pointed out, Sherlock Holmes is the best known character in literature, a prominence that would have astounded Arthur Conan Doyle who considered his Holmes stories to be inferior efforts. Now, more than a hundred years after his creation, Holmes receives the accolade of an Oxford University Press edition. The authoritative text is scrupulously edited with attention to the smallest detail, using the same scholarly-critical apparatus that has been applied to works of great nineteenth-century authors like Dickens, Eliot and the Brontës. Yet this attractively priced edition should also appeal to those who read primarily for entertainment. Unlike the formidably thick Oxford editions of mid-Victorian fiction, these nine small volumes are easy to handle. They are surely less bulky and awkward than *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (1938) or the two-volume *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. And the annotations will not only instruct, but also greatly enhance the pleasure of everyone who reads these stories. The Oxford Sherlock Holmes is unusual because it meets the most stringent requirements of the serious scholar but will still delight the common reader.