

## THE EIGHT ARTHURS OF SIR ARTHUR

by CHRIS REDMOND

THERE is no character in the Canon named Doyle and none named Conan; if there were, the reader would jump with astonishment, seeing in any such person a conscious self-portrait of a man named Conan Doyle, who wrote the tales and created the characters.

But though there are no Doyles and no Conans, there are no fewer than eight Arthurs, at least two of them important characters. In them, one might think, Arthur Conan Doyle probably expressed something of himself. It would be an exaggeration to say that in the eight Arthurs are eight deliberate self-portraits. It is generally accepted now that both Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson are self-portraits of the author, and to add many more makes the man into something of a narcissist. In a broader sense, however, every character created by a novelist is a self-portrait in a way, and what is being argued is that naming a character "Arthur" gives him, in the works of an author named Arthur, a special status. For there is a world of names to give to one's puppets, and to give a puppet one's own name must mean something. A brief survey of the eight Arthurs will show that, indeed, most or all of them do suggest an aspect of their creator, and that he surely cannot have been unaware of that when he gave them his name.

- The first Arthur to be mentioned is a young naval officer, Arthur Charpentier, who is wrongly accused of murder in *A Study in Scarlet*. Doyle was never a naval officer (briefly a ship's doctor), but he did have a pretty sister — in fact several sisters — of whose honour he was jealous. Charpentier's taking a stick to the lecherous Drebber is an echo of the young Doyle's taking a stick to the drunk he saw beating a woman in the street on his first evening in Southsea.

- Second comes Arthur Morstan, father of the heroine in *The Sign of the Four*. He is a colourless man — the strongest praise anyone offers is for his honesty — and his most important characteristic is his absence, for it is his disappearance that sets the adventures of Mary Morstan in motion. A well-meaning but absent father suggests not Arthur Conan Doyle but his own parent, Charles Doyle, who by the date of this story (it was written in 1889) was entirely absent and incompetent, confined to a mental institution. Since Charles Doyle's problems had their root in drink, it is noteworthy that Arthur Morstan is associated with John Sholto, who under the stresses of Andaman life becomes a heavy drinker.

- Arthur Holder is the misunderstood hero of *The Beryl Coronet*. Like Arthur Charpentier, he is wrongly accused, indeed imprisoned; he has his faults (he is "wayward" and a spendthrift gambler) but, as things turn out, he is courageous and honest. He loves and woos his cousin Mary — the Arthurs are surrounded by Marys, who bear the name of Doyle's mother and eldest daughter. She spurns him, but he shields her reputation and at the same time tries to protect his father's interests. Brave, noble, and misunderstood: in Arthur Holder we have a picture of Arthur Conan Doyle as he must have seen himself about

1892, when the memory of economic and family struggle was recent, and his plan was to make a career of historical novels such as his recent heroic *The White Company*.

- A year later, Doyle gave “Arthur” as a pseudonym to one of the Beddington brothers in *The Stockbroker’s Clerk*. He was Arthur Pinner, as Doyle was Arthur the penner, but his most distinctive characteristic was having a brother. (The real brother was not the Birmingham businessman, who was himself in disguise, but the London cracksman, who never appears in person in the tale.) Doyle did have a brother himself, young Innes Hay Doyle, who had served as his page when he first went into medical practice, and who in the following year (this tale was written in 1893) would accompany him on a tour of America. Pinner establishes himself in Birmingham in a couple of bare rooms strongly reminiscent of the household where Arthur and Innes Doyle settled in Southsea in the early, impoverished days of Doyle’s medical practice.

- The Arthur who appears in *The Priory School*, published at the beginning of 1904, is Doyle himself in a dramatic way. This one, more formally identified as Lord Saltire, is a ten-year-old schoolboy, sent away to a boarding school in the northern counties (Doyle attended Stonyhurst in Lancashire), estranged from his father and lonesome for his mother in France. Doyle’s overpowering attachment to his mother, Mary Foley, is well known; she did not live in France but she loved France, had been educated there, and claimed some French noble lineage. Doyle describes himself in Lord Saltire, a name he also used for a character mentioned in his autobiographical novel *The Stark Munro Letters*. He is “charming,” unhappy, his “sympathies” turned towards mother rather than father, and incidentally hated by an older James, who in real life was an uncle and in fiction would become not only James Wilder in this tale but also James Moriarty elsewhere in the Holmes saga.

- Later in the same year comes the faintest Canonical Arthur of the lot: Arthur H. Staunton, described in *The Missing Three-Quarter* as “the rising young forger.” Doyle by 1904 was no longer young (45), no longer merely rising; but every author is a forger, sending out untruths in cold print. One wonders about the H, for middle initials are not common in the Canon; it matches Watson’s initial, inherited from his father.

- The seventh Arthur is the murdered young man in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, Arthur Cadogan West, who was created in 1908. He is twenty-seven years old (“a sweet age,” Doyle writes elsewhere) and engaged to the attractive Violet Westbury, until chance puts him in the way of a spy, a blunt instrument and a railway carriage. At the age of 27 — which Doyle had reached in 1886, as he was writing *A Study in Scarlet* — he has been working for the government for ten years, has managed to save a few hundred pounds, and is described as hard-headed but honest. Save that Doyle had been married for a year or so by the age of 27, Cadogan West (note the compound surname, rather like Conan Doyle) might well be a portrait of the artist as a young man.

• The last Arthur is, like Pinner, one of a pair of indistinguishable brothers. He is Arthur Willaby, one of the minor Scowrers in *The Valley of Fear*, whose distinction is to have kept the lookout beside McMurdo during the bloody outrage on James Stanger of the *Herald*. The brothers “escaped the scaffold” but suffered ten years’ imprisonment, a later chapter notes. It is difficult to see anything characteristic of Doyle in those few words, and this Arthur is significant only because there was no particular reason for the author to give him a name at all, yet he did so, and chose “Arthur.”

Over the years, then, we have Doyle as unhappy schoolboy, as dutiful suitor, as protective brother, as “forger,” and as entrepreneur in a barely-furnished room. There are, furthermore, hints of Doyle’s father and of his brother. With the possible exception of Arthur Holder, he resisted giving his name to a fully-rounded hero; most of the characters play minor parts, but all seem to have a special meaning. For the most part, that meaning is crime and guilt: three of the eight are criminals, and three others are wrongly accused of crime. (Indeed, the score may be raised from six to seven if Arthur Morstan is considered to be guilty of receiving stolen goods and conspiring to help prisoners escape.) Doyle wrote much of his work during a period of sexual guilt feeling (Arthur Cadogan West, who leaves his fiancée and dies for it, dates from that period, as do Staunton and Lord Saltire), and probably went through life with the more diffuse guilt feelings that grew out of his life with a demanding mother and an improvident father. If an author’s catharsis is found in his work, one might look for it especially in characters who bear his name.

It must not be forgotten that “Arthur” is not the name of Arthur Conan Doyle alone, of course. Arthur was the Duke of Connaught, one of Queen Victoria’s younger sons, a professional soldier (who, like Doyle, married a Louise). Arthur was Sir Arthur Sullivan, the musician; Arthur had been Arthur Wellesley, who became Duke of Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, a conflict which fascinated Doyle and made its way into his writings again and again. Arthur was also such less prominent Victorians as Lieut. Arthur Channer, a member of the *Challenger* natural history expedition, and Arthur T. Stanton, a contemporary of Doyle’s at the University of Edinburgh; their names suggest Arthur Charpentier and Arthur Staunton respectively.

Above all, for anyone writing literature in English, Arthur was the once and future king of the Britons, whose chief expression to the Victorian reader was in the *Idylls of the King* of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (The first *Idylls* were published in 1859, the year of Doyle’s birth.) It was a name for a hero, a leader of whom much was expected, a bringer of civilization — but a man ultimately unsuccessful, as Arthur’s Camelot falls into disaster after the briefest of happy days.

When we imagine Arthur Conan Doyle giving his own name to Charpentier and Holder and the young Lord Saltire, we must also imagine the name being chosen by parents nourished on Tennyson and proud to give their sons a British name. From that point of view it is no wonder that Willaby the Ameri-

can is the palest of the Arthurs, for (though Tennyson certainly was read in America) the name of Arthur hardly had the same importance there as it did in England. The presidency of Chester A. Arthur, 1881-1885, will hardly have done anything to add to its lustre.

Finally, the reader should bear in mind that Arthur Conan Doyle spoke with a British accent; its precise balance between Scots and English features remains a topic of doubt, but certainly he pronounced the letter "r" in a softer way than North Americans are wont to do. In his mouth, in fact, the name "Arthur" sounded very much like the word "author." It is just possible that when he signed a letter or autographed a book "A. Conan Doyle," as he was wont to do, he occasionally reflected that the "A" stood for Author as well as for the name with which he was christened. Whether the stories then mention "author, Cadogan West" and "author, Lord Saltire" is a speculation into Doyle's imaginative whimsy which it is, to say the least, tempting to make.

