



# *The Master's Trestleboard*

*The Master's Trestleboard* is the Official  
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A Scion Society of the Baker Street Irregulars  
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Dear Brethren,

Due to the Editor's vocational challenges these past two years, the second edition of the *Trestleboard* has been very irregular. I personally apologize for the publishing delay.

A number of new members have been added and an updated Roster will be sent out privately.

Please send me any Masonically-related articles that would be enjoyed by the membership.

Fraternally,

Ron Fish, Founder/Editor

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**SHERLOCK HOLMES, SIR ARTHUR  
CONAN DOYLE AND  
FREEMASONRY**

**(The Case of Four Masons  
Who Never Existed)**

**By Phil Walker, PM**

Recently, WB Dick Sagar asked me to consider doing a short talk for a Masonic audience on the subject of Sherlock Holmes. He knew I was a member of the local Sherlock Holmes Club in Atlanta, and that I enjoyed discussing Sherlockiana, as we call it. At first I was hesitant, because of the rather obscure nature of the subject and because I had no known way to link Sherlock Holmes to Masonry. After a little investigation, I found that Conan Doyle and the adventures of Sherlock Holmes were indeed connected to Freemasonry. As a matter of fact the connection between the three had

been a subject for many previous writers, as well as for the Transactions of Quatuor Coronati, the premier Lodge of Research in the world, as recently as 1991 and 1992.

Dr. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created the world's most famous detective in 1886<sup>1</sup>. Doyle lived from 1859 to 1930<sup>2</sup>, and between 1886 and 1927 wrote some four novels and 56 short stories concerning Holmes. He also wrote on many other subjects, particularly spiritualism, but here we are only concerned with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and Freemasonry.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was himself a Mason. He was raised as a Master Mason in Phoenix Lodge No. 257 in Southsea, Hampshire, England in 1887. He demitted in 1889, rejoined in 1902, and finally demitted again

in 1911<sup>3</sup>. One of his biographers stated that, “Dr. Doyle looked into Freemasonry and soon looked out again.”<sup>4</sup>

Although he never used his pen to confer the degrees of Masonry upon either of his chief characters, Mr. Sherlock Holmes or Dr. John H. Watson, he did label four characters in his stories as Masons.<sup>5</sup> Even though these four men are fictional, they are very real to thousands of Sherlock Holmes fans around the world. It is these four men I want to introduce to you, and to briefly touch on the type of character Brother Doyle made his fictional masons out to be. I will introduce them in the order in which Dr. Watson wrote about them as he chronicled the work of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

Our first Mason who never existed was Enoch Drebber who appears in “A Study in Scarlet”, Doyle’s first novel, and the first

Sherlock Holmes story. It was written in 1886, the year before Doyle became a Mason<sup>6</sup>. In this story, Mr. Drebber was clearly one of the villains. Holmes identifies him as being a Mason because he was wearing a gold ring with a Masonic emblem. His major role in the story is as the corpse whose discovery is the beginning of the whole adventure. Flashbacks in the tale reveal him to be a churlish, abusive womanizer. Not a good exemplar of the Craft. In fact one researcher has postulated that Drebber was not a Mason at all, but simply wore Masonic jewelry to facilitate access to other Masons for nefarious purposes<sup>7</sup>. It is interesting to note that Mr. Drebber was a renegade Mormon from Utah, and Mormon Church ritual has some basis in Freemasonry<sup>8</sup>. The end of the story portrays the murderer, a man named Jefferson Hope, in a more sympathetic light than Mr. Drebber, the victim, es-

pecially after Mr. Hope dies of an aortic aneurism, and justice is finally done.

The second fictional Mason was a chap named Jabez Wilson who appears in a short story titled the “Red Headed League”, published in 1891 in “Strand Magazine”. Mr. Wilson can be classed as a victim of a cunningly clever con artist, but it was his own greed and slowness of wit that enabled the con artist to take advantage of him. Sherlock Holmes identified Mr. Wilson as a Mason by virtue of a Masonic Emblem, which Mr. Wilson wore, “against the rules of his order”, according to Holmes<sup>9</sup>. (Actually, wearing Masonic jewelry wasn’t forbidden, just frowned upon in England). By the time this was written, Conan Doyle had been made a Mason and had then demitted from his lodge. All in all, Mr. Wilson was not a villain, as Mr. Drebber was in the first story, but he was still not a prime example of an upright

Mason. Mr. Sherlock Holmes was able to solve the mystery and have the perpetrator arrested, to the great relief of Mr. Jabez Wilson.

Our third “Mason who never was”, was named John Hector McFarlane, and he appeared in a story titled, “The Norwood Builder”, published in both “Strand” and in “Colliers” magazines in the late fall of 1903. This was after Doyle had rejoined his Masonic Lodge. Holmes identified Brother McFarlane as a Mason by virtue of a Masonic watch emblem he wore. It is interesting that one Masonic and Sherlockian scholar noted that Doyle made no disparaging remarks about Mr. McFarlane displaying a Masonic emblem because McFarlane was presumed to be Scottish, and Scottish lodges had no written or unwritten rules against wearing Masonic jewelry.<sup>10</sup> Brother Conan Doyle portrays Mr. McFarlane as a

fine upstanding man; apparently quite worthy of being a Mason. He was clearly the intended victim in the story. The perpetrator in this case tried to frame him for a murder that never took place. The motivation of the perpetrator was revenge against McFarlane's family for a presumed slight that had happened before Mr. McFarland was even born. Again, Mr. Sherlock Holmes solved the mystery and lifted the mantle of suspicion from Mr. McFarlane, while leading the police to the evildoer who had set up the victim in the first place.

Finally, our fourth Mason who never lived was a chap named Detective Barker. He appears in a story titled, "The Retired Colourman", published in 'Liberty Magazine' in 1926, and in 'Strand Magazine' in 1927, fifteen years after Doyle left the Craft. (For those who do not follow Victorian English, a colourman is one who deals in artist's sup-

plies). This was the third from the last Holmes story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle<sup>11</sup>. Detective Barker was described in the story by Holmes as his “hated rival on the Surrey shore”<sup>12</sup>, but upon careful reading, it is quite clear that Sherlock Holmes has respect for Detective Barker, and in fact Barker seems to be virtually the only other law enforcement person that Conan Doyle describes in a positive manner. He of course does this through Watson’s narrations of the work of Sherlock Holmes. In this story, Detective Barker is identified as a Mason by virtue of a Masonic tiepin he wears. Barker is instrumental in the solving of a murder case, acting as Holmes agent on the scene when he, Holmes, had been engaged elsewhere.

Brother Conan Doyle seems to have portrayed his Masonic characters in increasingly better light as the years passed.

The first character described, as a Mason was a despicable person, whereas the final character so described was very nearly the stature of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, himself.

I'd like to relate a bit about the extent that Sherlock Holmes has become a cultural icon. There are Holmes clubs all over the world; the study of these fictional characters is quite serious and intense. For a Masonic audience it should be noted that these stories written as long some 120 years ago, are still being read by a very serious group of people, and that the negative image of Masons portrayed in some of them can be carried into the present.

The fans of Conan Doyle, and more especially fans of the great detective have labeled the 60 Holmes stories Doyle wrote, "The Canon". There are many Sherlockians around the world who have practically committed the Canon to memory and can

be quite remarkable in a closed book quiz on any one of the stories. In addition to the Canon, there are hundreds of Sherlock Holmes stories (or pastiches) that have been written by other people.

Dr. Conan Doyle left the regular practice of medicine in 1891 and took up writing full time. He returned to medical practice in the Boer War (1899-1902) and was knighted for his activity in that conflict. He was also an early proponent of the Chunnel between England and France, introduced downhill skiing into Switzerland, and championed metal helmets for soldiers in combat, and life preservers for sailors. As early as the 1890's Conan Doyle tired of Holmes and attempted to kill him off. Everyone, including Conan Doyle's own mother, objected, so eventually Holmes was resurrected.

There are Sherlock Holmes Societies

all over the world. These groups are called Scions, and usually carry names taken from stories in the Canon. The Atlanta Georgia Sherlock Holmes Society Scion, for example, is called “The Confederates of Wisteria Lodge”. The name comes from a Holmes Story called “Wisteria Lodge”, written in 1908<sup>13</sup>. The ‘Confederates’ part was added because of our location. Other Scions in the Southeast are the “The Three-Pipe Problem” Scion in Nashville, Tennessee, and, the “Genius Loci” group in Birmingham, Alabama. The name, “Three-Pipe Problem” refers to a characteristic of Sherlock Holmes when he goes into mental seclusion to smoke his pipe and think on a particular problem. A ‘three-pipe problem’ is one that takes three loadings of his favorite pipe to solve. I am not sure from which story The Genius Loci Scion in Birmingham derives its name. [Ed: Holmes to Watson in VALL: “ I

am a believer in the genius loci (spirit of place).”]

The Atlanta Sherlock Holmes Club has recently written three or four pastiches just for the fun of doing it. We do it by chapters. One person writes a short chapter describing the crime to be solved, with a few confusing clues, and then hands it off to the second author, who may add clues, and/or embellish the clues he was handed, and so on down to the final writer who is charged with wrapping the whole case up in a plausible manner.

In one of the Holmes stories, Doyle introduces a band of street urchins in the hire of Holmes who are known by the name of the ‘Baker Street Irregulars’. In the stories they conduct stakeouts, and generally do odd jobs for Holmes. In 1934<sup>14</sup> a group of American Sherlock Holmes aficionados and scholars formed themselves into

a group and took the same name, Baker Street Irregulars, or BSI's. Entry to this by-invitation group is limited to only the most serious scholars of Holmes and his era.

The various Sherlock Holmes groups meet regularly for social and scholarly undertakings, and throughout the year some individual groups sponsor national events, which attract Sherlockians from all over the country.

Recently, The Atlanta, Nashville, and Birmingham Scions met in Chattanooga, Tennessee for a weekend of Sherlockian fun and discussions, and in more recently the Atlanta Group met for a picnic at Oakland Cemetery, to hear the evidence which would locate the 'burial' site of another Conan Doyle character who died about 1883-4. Our fellow Sherlockian deduced from the particular story that since the character had died in Atlanta in 1884 or earlier, he

had to be buried in Oakland Cemetery, it being the only one in Atlanta at the time. He then developed a theory as to the exact burial site, which we then visited. It was somewhat like visiting the graves of Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler, two other purely fictional characters of Atlanta fame. The author of the *Quatuor Coronati* article to which I referred in the writing of this paper made the statement that, "Sherlockians are known to become victims of whimsy....".<sup>15</sup> This might be an example of that.

The Sherlock Holmes story, from which this grave situation arises, *The Yellow Face*, was published in 1893, and is the only Sherlock Holmes adventure that mentions Atlanta, Georgia.

On a closing note, perhaps one of the more appealing aspects of the Holmes stories is the entire setting of the world of the late 1890's. In reading the stories it's easy to

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forget that the setting is over 100 years ago, because so much of our world is still the same, even though so much has radically changed. We tend to view it as it probably never was; as a more serene place where, except for the villains encountered by Sherlock Holmes, there wasn't the crime and violence we hear of now. We tend to forget that there were vast pockets of poverty and misery, with few social agencies to relieve the suffering, and that the streets of any large city of that era were probably littered with the 'exhaust' of the thousands of horses that made movement in such a city possible.

A poem, written by Vincent Starrett (1886 - 1974), BSI, captures the allure that Sherlock Holmes stories have for many people.

221B Baker Street \*

by Vincent Starrett, BSI

Here dwell together still two men of note  
Who never lived and so can never die:  
How very near they seem, yet how remote  
That age before the world went all awry.  
But still the game's afoot for those with  
ears  
Attuned to catch the distant view-halloo.  
England is England yet, for all our fears-  
Only those things the heart believes are  
true.

A yellow fog swirls past the window-pane  
As night descends upon this fabled street:  
A lonely hansom splashes through the rain,  
The ghostly lamps fail at twenty feet.  
Here, though the world explode, these two  
survive,  
And it is always eighteen ninety-five.

\*Internet: <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/43263>. (This poem is believed to be in the public domain, by this website, and therefore available for use).

## Endnotes

1. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 104, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes and Freemasonry*, by Brother Robert T. Runciman, London, 1991. ed. Frederick Smythe, p. 178.
2. Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon. Internet: [http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/doyle\\_ac/doyle\\_ac.html](http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/doyle_ac/doyle_ac.html). Page 1.
3. *Ibid.*, Page 1.
4. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 104, p. 181.
5. *Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*, Mathew Bunson, Barnes and Noble Books, 1994,

New York, p. 84.

6. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 104, Page 179.

7. *Ibid.*, Page 181.

8. *Masonic Influences on Joseph Smith and Early Mormonism*, Georgia Lodge of Research Transactions, 2000, page 24.

9. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 104, Page 182.

10. *Ibid*, Page 185.

11. *Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*, Page xvii

12. *Ibid*, Page 23

13. *Ibid*. Page 289

14. Internet: <http://webpages.charter.net/lklinger/Chrotabl.htm>.

15. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol. 104, Page 184.