

Doctor Watson's Agony Column



Dear Dr Watson,
I am a writer with a problem that has probably never been an issue for you. In my idle moments as a doctor, my former profession before literary fate embraced me, I wrote one of those detective stories that I felt would amuse the public. It didn't. A second attempt received an equally lukewarm reception. However, Destiny took control when I submitted a short story to Mr Greenhough Smith, Editor of the (then) newly-born *Strand Magazine*. For this story, I resurrected the detective character I had used in my previous novels and, to my dismay, I was asked to provide a further series of stories. Incredibly, these stories became really popular with the public and my detective, a fellow I named Sherlock Holmes, became some sort of hero figure. My literary reputation, and bank account, were immediately established.

But here is my dilemma. I have had enough of this character, having now written over a dozen stories, and I wish to move on to historical works, which I am convinced is my forté. Currently I have an idea to present the story of the Puritans in a more favourable light than generally thought of in England. I am certain this story will grip the imagination of the public and establish my hero, Micah Clark, as an even more popular figure than Sherlock Holmes.

My dilemma of course is that *The Strand* and an American magazine are offering me considerable amounts to continue my Holmes stories. This is very tempting, of course, but I feel Literature should come first. I am therefore contemplating "killing" my detective in a future story so there can be no possibility of his returning - regardless of how much I am offered. Do you agree that I should forego monetary gain to pursue my literary aspirations?

- In a Dilemma.

Dear 'In a Dilemma',

Obviously you are a fool! How dare you consider killing off Sherlock Holmes. I can't tell you how much I look forward each month to these stories in *The Strand* - once I have finished my latest Clarke Russell novel. You have a duty to your public to continue writing, regardless of your own personal ambitions.

And as for this twaddle about being offered huge sums of money! How often have you looked down a patient's sore throat all the while fantasising about being a full time and well paid author? Well, my friend, now you have it and you're still complaining! Most of we would-be authors would kill to be in your position. Speaking of which, have you previously had murderous inclinations?

I really think you should seek professional advise about this (I can recommend a fellow in Vienna) and not take these feelings lightly. First it's killing off a literary figure, then - who knows? Perhaps this is how Jack the Ripper began. If you're not prepared to seek professional counsel, I suggest you buy some very good whisky, lie back, think of England, and keep turning out those wonderful Sherlock Holmes stories.

The Artist as Witness

by Arthur Williams

This article begins amid the comfortable familiarity of the Baker Street rooms with both Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson at their ease. It had been my intention to proceed from there to reflect upon Watson's particular beliefs and prejudices. Some way into these reflections, however, this intention was hijacked by my stumbling (quite accidentally) upon printed material of such interest that it altered my direction entirely. This material, more than a century old and in a long-forgotten series of magazines, revealed that a noted Sherlockian figure had played a significant, and previously quite unknown, role in Australian Military History.

But to begin at the beginning - towards the end of the 1880s, Doctor Watson bought a portrait of General Charles Gordon, had it framed and then hung it on the walls of the Baker Street drawing room. It was one of the few objects there that reflected his tastes, for the room was cluttered with the professional and personal paraphernalia of his detective friend. To further emphasise the portrait's importance to him, the Doctor had placed it so that it was visible to him while he was seated in his favourite armchair. All of this is known to us, of course, through Holmes's comments at the start of *CARD* while observing Watson lost "in a brown study."¹

Readers today would surely assume that Watson's purchase had been motivated by his admiration for a fellow Army officer who, like himself, had faced ferocious natives on the fringes of the British Empire yet this would be a judgement both narrow and superficial, for Watson's portrait-buying would have resonated both emotionally and socially with every one of *The Strand's* readers in a manner that is quite lost to us today.

In 1883 General Charles Gordon had been known as a distinguished soldier for two decades but it was a sudden turn of events that transformed him first into a national hero and then into a national martyr. A few years earlier Britain had taken de facto control of the Suez Canal but this act had subsequently drawn her into Egypt's difficulties in maintaining control of the Sudan - a vast, primitive and violent province to the south. Prime Minister Gladstone appointed the brilliant but unpredictable Gordon to secure the safety of Europeans remaining in the region and then to withdraw. Gordon, to the Prime Minister's exasperation, did quite the opposite, remaining in the province's capital of Khartoum and telegraphing back that the British Government would have "to smash up the Mahdi"² - the Mahdi being the rebel leader of the Sudanese.



When Charles Gordon was killed in the Sudan thousands of his countrymen, such as Doctor Watson of Baker Street, purchased portraits of the heroic General and hung them in their homes as a gesture of admiration.

¹ Conan Doyle p.423.

² Strachey. p. 284

Inevitably Gordon became trapped and the only way to save him was to send an army on a rescue mission. The popular press then led the whole nation, including a certain Gracious Lady, into pleading with Gladstone to do just that. For a time the Prime Minister resisted these calls but finally public opinion forced him to act and an army was dispatched. Gladstone's delay had proven fatal however for, two days before the force reached Khartoum, the Mahdi's followers had broken into the city and slain the General. (It was commonly believed that Gordon's head had been presented to the Mahdi by his triumphant warriors).

When news of Gordon's death reached Britain the nation went into a frenzy of both mourning and of accusation, thus transforming the General into that most potent of all political figures - a martyr. Clearly Watson, typical Englishman that he was, had become part of this surge of national emotion and had felt the need, as did thousands of his countrymen, to place a portrait of the betrayed soldier on the wall of his home.

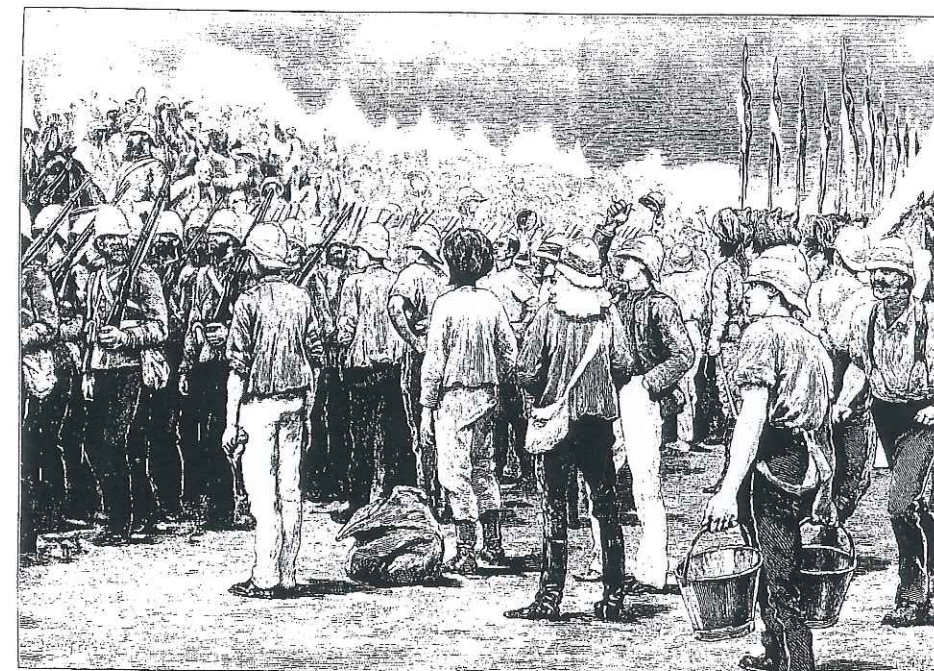
Yet the Doctor also had another quite personal motive for his interest in these dramatic events. Many Sherlockians concede that, when young, John Watson must have passed some of his early years in Australia, for references in both BOSC and SIGN suggest this. Surely then he must have been fascinated to learn that far-off New South Wales had offered to send troops to the Sudan.

The undersea cable (constructed twelve years earlier) had carried the news of Gordon's death with lightning speed to Sydney where patriotic outrage was everywhere expressed and the State Government, reacting accordingly, offered an armed force to assist in seeking vengeance. British officials (perhaps startled, for such an offer had never been made by a colony before) accepted and State authorities hastily cobbled together an expeditionary force of 770 men (i.e. an infantry battalion and a battery of artillery). Only weeks later these troops marched through Sydney's streets amid scenes of the wildest enthusiasm and embarked for the War.

This gesture of support for the Motherland was widely and favourably reported in the British Press and, for Watson, must have revived Australian memories and also kindled in him an interest in the Contingent's activities. One publication that featured the Australians prominently and was certainly available to Watson was the *Illustrated London News*. This was a widely read magazine that covered both Home and International affairs, illustrating them throughout with multiple on-the-spot action sketches by staff artists. These artists often had to work amid demanding (and dangerous!) conditions yet the journal that employed them had built its reputation on their drawing skills. In an age when the camera could cope only with posed or still shots these artists filled the role today undertaken by photojournalists, creating illustrations that were alive with movement and drama.

In an attempt to appreciate further Watson's reactions to an Australian involvement in the Sudan I went to Sydney's Mitchell Library where I was able to read through the copies of the *Illustrated London News* for 1885 issue by issue. On April 25th the magazine carried sketches of the New South Wales Contingent's arrival at the Sudanese port of Suakim and, as an indication of the importance of the occasion to the British Public, the first of these was full page in size giving a detailed view of these loyal Colonial soldiers marching from ship to camp. This particular illustration conveys vividly the scene of the eager and excited young Australians at the very beginning of their overseas adventure as they moved down a road lined with English "Tommies" clearly anxious to observe the phenomenon of Colonial troops coming to the aid of the Mother Country.

As the N.S.W. Contingent marched from ship to camp on 29th March, 1885, it was the beginning of one of Australia's most enduring traditions and Walter Paget was there to record it.



THE WAR IN THE SUDAN. ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS. VOL. 1. 1885. -- WALTER PAGET. MAR. 29. 1885. -- WALTER PAGET AT SUAKIM.

There had been illustrations published of the Contingent in Australian newspapers before it left while a number of artists in the Sudan were to draw ones later but this particular sketch of events within an hour of coming ashore was undoubtedly the first ever of our troops on foreign soil. For any Australian today, of course, the sketch possesses a poignancy and a significance that far outweighs its artistic merits for, quite unforeseen by its original viewers, it heralds the beginnings of our military history. These young marchers were to be followed over the next century by tens of thousands of their countrymen to Gallipoli, France, North Africa, New Guinea and Vietnam as well as to countless other locations.

These reflections occupied me for some time and it was almost as an after-thought that I glanced at the caption beneath and read:

"The War in the Soudan.³ Australian New South Wales Infantry Marching into Camp at Suakim. From a sketch by our special artist, Mr Walter Paget."

Walter Paget (1863-1935), like his more famous elder brother Sidney, was a magazine illustrator. Canonical legend has always alleged that Walter was the original choice as artist for *The Strand's* illustrations for the Holmes short stories but that an ambiguously addressed letter had been delivered to Sidney in error. Equally well known is the other belief that Walter served as the model for Holmes in his brother's drawing; he

³ In the Nineteenth Century this was the usual spelling.



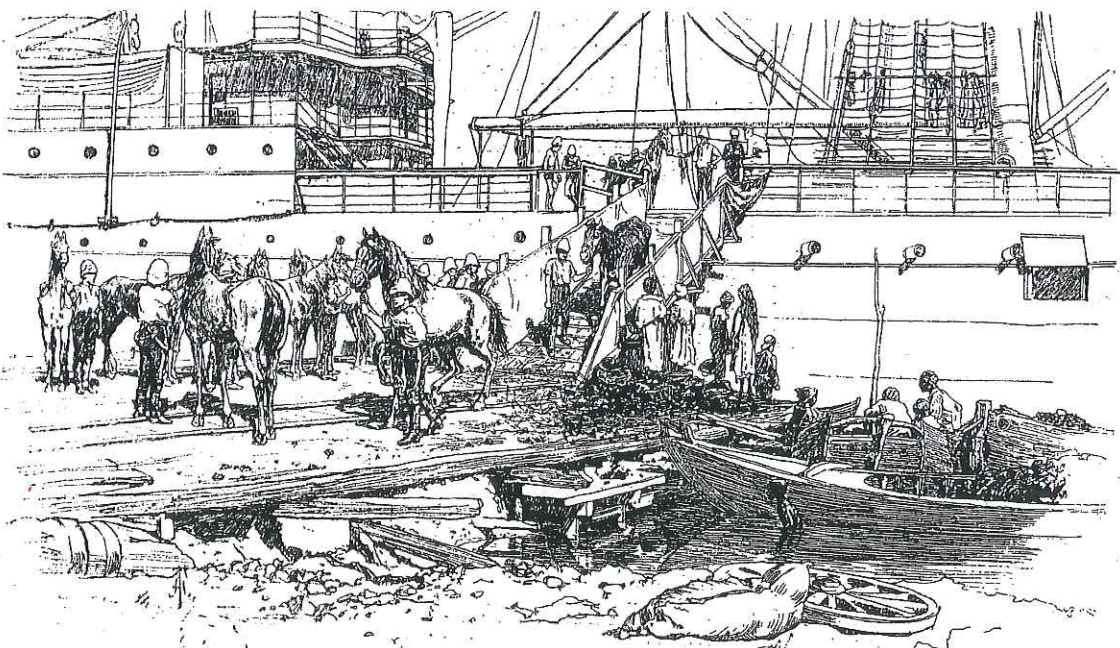
Walter Paget has long been famous as the probable model for Sherlock Holmes in his brother's *Strand Magazine* illustrations. His role as Australia's first war artist, however, remained unknown.

certainly was a tall, striking looking man with a strong resemblance to the Holmes that Sidney drew - an image that defined the Detective's appearance for all time. Later, Walter himself became part of the Canon when, in 1908 following his brother's death, his illustrations were used in *The Strand* for DYIN.

This Sudan sketch was the first of a series Walter Paget completed of the Australians. Drawn as they all were in a war zone it was obviously completed under conditions that would have been far from ideal and very different from working in a comfortable London studio. His brother Sidney frequently undertook sketches of Army tattoos his method being, as his daughter tells us,⁴ to attend them and "make rough sketches for the final picture". It is very likely Walter used this same method if we are to judge by the balance, detail and overall sense of control he achieved. His study, for example of the New South Wales Artillery disembarking their horses captures the organized bustle of the occasion.

The Australians had, in fact, arrived just too late to take part in the fierce fighting of earlier weeks although, in a skirmish at Tamai during a general advance, a few men were wounded. For most of their service the troops acted as guards protecting a railway line under construction and, after three months of this, with hostilities having ceased, the Contingent was ordered home. Their adventure had proven deadly for some, however, as almost a dozen men died of heat-related illnesses. Many of the Contingent, some fifteen years later, saw action in the Boer War while a few even got away still again in 1914 to the First World War. From the earliest Anzac Day they took part in the march through Sydney's streets frequently being referred to as "The First Anzacs". This present writer, as a young boy at his first such march in the 1940s, has a vivid memory of an open car containing four very elderly gentlemen and bearing a sign that read "Soudan 1885".

⁴ Paget, W. The memoir is unpaginated.



The troops of the N.S.W. Artillery Battery disembarking their horses at the Sudanese port of Suakin. It was Walter Paget's duty to capture such moments for *The Illustrated London News* readers in far-away Britain.

For over a century now Australia has committed its soldiers to fight in wars overseas and, in so doing, has created a tradition that has become part of the national character. As the witness who recorded the very beginnings of this tradition, Walter Paget has, I believe, secured for himself what has not been acknowledged before - a place in Australian history as our first War Artist.

My thanks are due to both Bill Barnes and Phil Cornell for their advice and assistance. I would also like to thank Ken Inglis, the author of that fine historical study of the Sudan Contingent *The Rehearsal*, for his interest in, and comments upon, my research.

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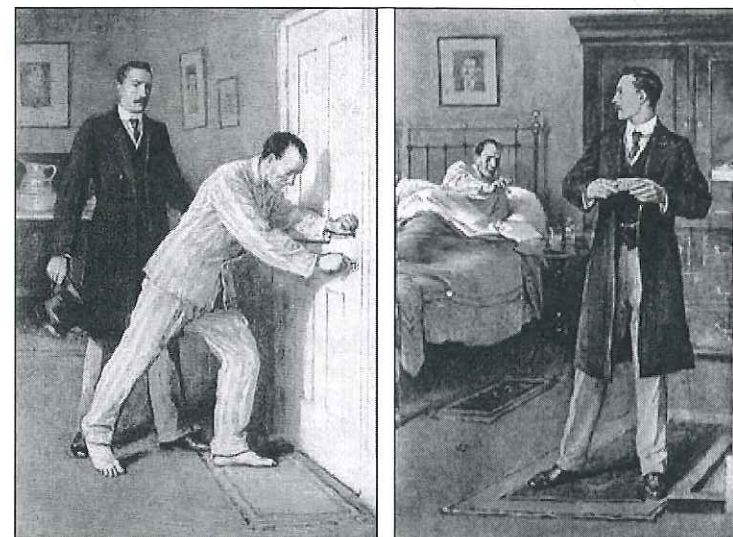
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The Paget Website on <mrholmes.com>

The Best of Sberlock Holmes is a web site by Randall Stock "devoted to covering noteworthy items related to Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle". It's full of fascinating items including lists of "the best" Holmes stories and quotations, ACD manuscripts, *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, Sherlockian and Doylean computer products, great stuff about Sydney Paget and lots more. Check it out at <http://members.aol.com/_ht_a/shbest/index.htm>.

Camden House at <<http://www.ignisart.com/camdenhouse/canon/index.html>> is the web site to visit if you want to read the Holmes stories on line and/or view the illustrations. Camden House aims to present as many illustrations of the Canonical stories as possible by the various artists and includes all 357 illustrations by Sydney Paget.



Holmes preventing Watson from leaving the room

Holmes warning Watson not to open the box

These illustrations by Walter Paget of dramatic moments in "The Dying Detective" were published in *The Strand Magazine* for December 1913.

