

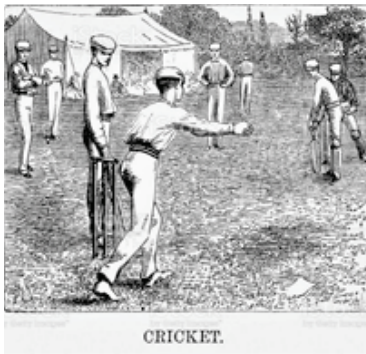
Conan Doyle Down Under: How Stonhurst College, Australia, and a Family Feud Helped Shape the Holmes Tales

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Part One: Dr Watson and the Playing Fields of Preston Hollow

Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes tales do not delve deeply into the early childhoods or family dynamics of his characters. And when he does furnish us with information, it is usually cloaked in mystery. In 'The Greek Interpreter', Holmes divulges that his ancestors were "country squires," and he has an older sibling named Mycroft. But where he attended school, what his parents' names were, what his date and year of birth were, or where he hung his hat as a child are never made known to us. And Dr Watson's backstory is just as vague as Holmes'. In *A Study in Scarlet*, we are told that he received his Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of London, and then went off to "Netley to go through the course prescribed for surgeons in the army." From there, he was dispatched to India where he was assigned to "the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as Assistant Surgeon" and then reassigned to the Berkshire Regiment in Afghanistan where he would sustain a bullet wound and dysentery that ended his military career. In 'The Naval Treaty', Watson tells us that he had attended private school with Percy Phelps, and in 'The Sussex Vampire' we learn that he later played rugby for Blackheath. This lack of family background has led many Sherlockians to perform their own investigations into the origins of these immortal characters. There are many astute literary detectives who insist they have been able to find clues in the Canon that suggest Watson hailed from Australia. But are these Holmesian scholars correct? Let us put them to the test.

In his *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, William S. Baring-Gould refers to Watson's Down Under origins on several occasions. In 'The Naval Treaty' annotation, Baring-Gould declares that Watson is "guilty of two 'colonialisms,'" pointing to his boyhood in Australia: "playground,' to a youngster reared in England would be 'playing field,' and 'wicket' would be 'stump.'" Although this interpretation might initially appear to be plausible, Baring-Gould fails to recall that Conan Doyle had spent seven years at two of Northern England's Jesuit preparatory schools, Hodder House and Stonyhurst College. As



did the schools of Australia, Hodder and Stonyhurst called their playing fields 'playgrounds.' In the 1870 book, *Stonyhurst College: Its Past and Present*, (a period overlapping Doyle's enrollment there) the heading at the top of page thirty two reads 'School-room, Playground, and Gymnasium.' Undeniably, Conan Doyle would have referred to a ball field at his school as a playground, and not a playing field. Another book related to Doyle's alma mater, *Stonyhurst College: Its Life Beyond the Seas*, contains this wistful sentence: "It was not till long afterwards that what is now known as the Old Playground was brought into the form which many still remember." And so it follows that the author of the Holmes tales would have used the term playground and not

playing field, when he crafted his stories. And at Stonyhurst, students played wicket-cricket, which most other English schools referred to as cricket, and the three vertical posts that suspended the bails

were referred to as a wicket and not stump. Quite fittingly, the team that represented Stonyhurst was nicknamed The Wickets. So, when Watson tells us that Percy Phelps was beaten “over the shins with a wicket”, Doyle was recalling his own experience back at Stonyhurst. In fact, Doyle was probably beaten over the shins with a wicket too while a student there, as his autobiography states that “corporal punishment was severe” at Stonyhurst, and that “few, if any, boys of my time endured more of it.” That punishment not only came from the teachers, but from the older students too.

When Arthur Conan Doyle was a fourteen year old student at Stonyhurst, a sensational trial that would indirectly, yet dramatically, involve the ‘playgrounds’ of Stonyhurst dominated the front pages of newspapers throughout the country. The case, known as the Tichborne Trial, centred on the apparent return of Roger Charles Tichborne, heir to an immense fortune and who in 1854 had been declared lost at sea and presumed dead off the South American coast. Twelve years after his disappearance, Roger’s mother, Lady Dowager Tichborne, received a letter bearing an Australian postmark, whose author claimed to be her missing son. She was completely convinced of the letter’s authenticity, and invited her ‘son’ (regarded by most as an impostor) to re-enter her life (and her purse). Lady Dowager Tichborne had no doubts that this ‘long lost wanderer’ was her own child, especially after she had looked closely at his back and determined that it was a mirror image of that of her departed husband. And she also was taken by the uncanny resemblance of his ears which were “exactly his uncle’s”. As Roger Tichborne had spent three years at Stonyhurst, Doyle saw his current professors being summoned to court one by one to offer testimony. Any member of the staff or faculty who had been on campus in 1845 was regarded as a potentially valuable witness. On March 2, 1874, the *London Times* wrote the following rambling sentence describing the trial,

In this extraordinary drama are wonderfully combined, and played, one against the other, all the characters, all the ranks and classes, all the places, all the circumstances, all the styles and modes, all the spreading nations and universal languages, the chief religions, the prevailing tendencies, the traditions and anticipations, the old world and the new, the most fixed and forced conditions of life and the most unsettled and chaotic, the weaknesses and the strengths of a world always dying to be born again.

Ironically, the man purporting to be Roger Tichborne was brought down by a game that was played on the school’s playground. At the trial, when the Solicitor-General asked, “what does ‘bandy’ mean?” the self-proclaimed ‘Roger’ replied, “To the best of my recollection, it strikes me part of Stonyhurst was called ‘Bandy.”” When the solicitor countered with, “would it surprise you that bandy was a game played with balls by the philosophers at Stonyhurst, and in which Roger Tichborne was a great proficient”, his response was a meek, “my memory isn’t correct enough to enable me to speak of it.” The Solicitor-General closed that session with a sarcastic, “Well, there is a difference between a game and a part of a building you know.”

It is highly improbable that anyone other than a bonafide Stonyhurst student would have known about bandy, a game where a stick was used to get a ball through a goalpost, as it was exclusively played there. The actual Roger Tichborne had achieved legendary status among the students there owing to his mastery of the game. With his reply that bandy was a section of the school, ‘Roger’s’ charade came to a sudden and abrupt halt. It was not long before it was confirmed that the impostor was Thomas Castro, a butcher from Wagga Wagga, Australia, and soon after this, a second discovery was made - Castro was really Arthur Orton from London, England. Although Mr Orton failed to get hold of the family fortune, he did receive a consolation prize of ten years in prison.

Doyle was later to put his own literary spin on the Tichborne case in 'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'. There we find the title character nursing 'Rev. Dr Shlessinger' (a missionary "recovering



Arthur Orton

from a disease contracted in the exercise of his apostolic duties" in South America) back to health. Holmes uncovers the disturbing fact that this Dr Shlessinger is "none other than Holy Peters, one of the most unscrupulous rascals that Australia has ever evolved." The "particular specialty" of this conman "is the beguiling of lonely ladies," and suggests that Shlessinger's affliction has been a sexually transmitted disease and is most likely syphilis. This parallels the Tichborne case in which Thomas Castro beguiled a lonely woman who was still mourning the loss of her son.

'Lady Frances Carfax' was not the only time that Doyle incorporated elements drawn from his Stonyhurst days into his Holmes tales. When Doyle first arrived at Stonyhurst College, the administration assigned him the number 31, a number that remained unchanged throughout his entire time there.

He paid homage to the number thirty one several times. In 'The Retired Colourman', the seat number on Mr Josiah Amberley's Haymarket theatre ticket is number 31-B, while in 'The Illustrious Client', the private phone number that Colonel James Damery uses at the Carlton Club is XX.31. In 'A Case of Identity', Doyle goes even further, having Miss Mary Sutherland residing at "31, Lyon Place, Camberwell." Memorable events that took place at the school were also used in his Holmes tales. In 'The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger', one of Ronder's competing circus troupes is Wombwell's menagerie, which happens to have done Stonyhurst "the honour to come to Hurstgreen" for the students' enjoyment.¹

As for his being a native of Australia, Watson's statements, "In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents," and his recollection that "I have seen something of the sort on the side of a hill near Ballarat, where the prospectors had been at work" run contrary to such a notion. While it is a possibility Watson sojourned there as a young medical student, it is unlikely he would have been romantically involved with women prior to entering the third form in England. And the hill described by Watson as being situated near Ballarat had already seen its golden treasure extracted by the time he would have arrived there, as Ballarat's gold rush began in 1851 and had settled down by the late 1860s. Watson would most likely have been in the state of Victoria in the early 1870s, a period that corresponds to his medical school days. And in 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery', Watson knows nothing about either the "distinctively Australian cry" of 'cooe' or the legend of Black Jack of Ballarat and the infamous Ballarat Gang. And when Holmes places a map of Victoria on a table and covers the letters 'B-A-L-L-' of Ballarat' with his hand, Watson finds it necessary that Holmes removes his hand to understand that he isn't looking at a city called "ARAT." Certainly, if Watson had been raised in that specific state of Australia, he would have deduced the town's name as Ballarat on the spot.



Panning for gold

¹ Letter from Arthur Conan Doyle to his mother, October 1873: Lellenberg, Jon (Ed) et al, *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*. Lond. Penguin 2007, p.58. (Hurst Green is a village near Stonyhurst College - Ed).

Although *The Sign of the Four* does suggest Watson had spent at least some time in Victoria, there might have been an ulterior motive behind Doyle's crafting of another story that had a relationship to Australia and New Zealand. We must keep in mind that 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery' was not Doyle's first attempt at writing an authentic sounding tale that used Oceania as its backdrop. That honour belongs to his non-Sherlockian adventure, *The Gully of Bluesmandyke*, a murder mystery he wrote while he was serving as ship's surgeon aboard the *Mayumba*. This is an important literary work for several reasons. First, we find the American prospector-turned-hero, Chicago Bill, standing "with his gun still smoking in his hand." This phrase would be recycled and modified in the Sherlock Holmes tale, 'The Gloria Scott' (an adventure that also has a connection with Australia), where "the chaplain stood with a smoking pistol in his hand." Although many Sherlockians attribute the origin of the phrase "smoking gun" to 'The Gloria Scott', they are correct about its writer, but not the story. And *The Gully of Bluesmandyke* also foreshadows Holmes' particular choice of pipe, as Jim Burton's "meerschaums were always a weakness", and he would repeatedly say, "a gentleman is known by his pipe. When he comes down in the world his pipe has most vitality." In 'The Yellow Face', when Holmes' client accidentally leaves his amber pipe behind, Sherlock studies it and tells Watson that it's a "nice old brier with a good long stem of what the tobacconists call amber. I wonder how many real amber mouthpieces there are in London?" That description also has its origins in Stonyhurst, as it matches the first pipe a fourteen year old Conan Doyle purchased for himself ("a nice little pipe with an amber mouthpiece"). Holmes continues on, telling Watson, "Pipes are occasionally of extraordinary interest. Nothing has more individuality, save perhaps watches and bootlaces," words of praise that parallel the sentiments expressed by Jim Burton.

The more we look at Watson's life pre-Baker Street under the lens of a microscope, the clearer it becomes that he is descended from the same genetic material of his creator. Not only does Watson conform to the prototypical Stonyhurst student, but the history of his family bears remarkable resemblance to that of the Doyles. Watson's older brother - a man "with good prospects" who "threw away his chances" - was constantly alternating between "poverty with occasional short intervals of prosperity" which is akin to that of the Doyles. Holmes deduces that Watson's brother was only able to pay off his debts by pawning and repawning the gold watch his father had left him. All this did for him was enable him to drink himself to an early death. This particular vignette had to have been extremely difficult for Conan Doyle to write about, as it describes the similar plight of his own beloved father - Charles Altamont Doyle. A gifted draughtsman, Charles Doyle worked in Edinburgh's Office of Public Works, but he was never able to climb up to the top of the governmental ladder. It was not long before he resorted to alcohol (at first, burgundy wine, but then to furniture polish) to mitigate his depression, an addiction that compelled his supervisor, Robert Matheson, to halve his salary before finally having to let go a man he admired. But the slash in pay did nothing to prevent Charles from accruing enormous drinking tabs at many of Edinburgh's bars and taverns. In order to pay off his creditors, Charles would pawn, and sometimes sell, the valuable art collection he had amassed from his father, the famous caricaturist John Doyle. By the age of forty two, Charles was permanently committed to mental asylums, and died from medical complications, one of them being chronic alcoholism.

Part Two: A Stonyhurst Madman, a Secret Message, and A Study in Scarlet
 Conan Doyle's years as a student at Stonyhurst exposed him to spine-tingling tales spun by one of his favorite teachers, Father Cyprian Splaine. One of the 'jolly' stories young Doyle listened to was a translation of the German thriller, *Der Racher*, whose English translation is *The Avenger*. Doyle later described this 'bedtime' thriller to his mother as centering "about a lot of horrible murders," and

pleaded with her to pick up a copy for herself.² In 1873, after Mary Doyle, for reasons known only to her, abruptly stopped writing to him, Conan Doyle wrote the following note to her: “I was a little frightened at not receiving any letter from you for so long.” He then sent off a second letter to her that centred on a horrible event that had taken place on campus:

We have had a great commotion here lately, from the fact that our third prefect has gone stark staring mad. I expected it all along, he always seemed to have the most singular antipathy to me, and I am called among the boys ‘Mr. Chrea’s friend.’ Ironically, of course. The first signs of madness were at Vespers the other day. I was near him & I saw him, just as the Laudate Dominum began, pull out his handkerchief and begin waving it over his head. Two of the community took him and at once led him out. They say that in his delirium he mentioned my name several times. A story is going about that before entering the society he fell in love with a maiden, but the maiden absconded with an individual named Doyle, and Mr Chrea in his despair entered the society, and the name of Doyle has ever since had an irritating effect on him. I can’t however answer for the truth of this. We are having the most detestable weather possible over here. Rain, rain, rain and nothing but rain. I shall soon at this rate die of ennui, my great comfort however is the thought of seeing you all again at Xmas.

That eerie message begins with a description of a most dramatically vivid and chaotic event that took place at a Vespers service. A Mr Chrea, who Doyle claimed to be the school’s third Prefect, apparently suffered an acute nervous breakdown in front of many of the students. Doyle then informed his mother that this same Mr Chrea has held a long term grudge against him and that the prefect’s sudden outburst had been no surprise to him at all. He writes that this “madman” has “the most antipathy to me” and, further, that his classmates are always “ironically” referring to him as “Mr Chrea’s friend.” And yet, in none of his prior letters home had he mentioned any such person, even though he had told his mother the names of the other teachers’ who had been abusive towards him. Doyle went on to write that, “the first signs of madness” became evident at Vespers, declaring that his fellow teachers had to subdue Mr Chrea before he could inflict harm on anyone else. Although the words of his letter might indicate that this was the sole occasion on which this particular Prefect harassed him, the words, “I expected it all along” and “Mr Chrea’s friend” tend to contradict Doyle’s description of what took place that early evening.

In that same letter, Chrea is described as having removed a handkerchief from his pocket and then proceeded to frantically wave it over his head. Might this handkerchief have symbolised something rather significant - something his well-read mother would have been easily able to decipher!? Conan Doyle had already read, seen, or performed in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *King John*, and *Macbeth* during Christmas recess or Shrovetide, and had probably read *Othello*, where Desdemona’s handkerchief is transformed into a symbol of the unfaithful wife by the evil Iago. Chrea’s waving of the handkerchief may have been Conan Doyle’s circuitous method of alerting his mother that he was keenly aware that she was committing acts of infidelity back in Edinburgh. The Chrea letter contains the following strange sentence: “A story is going about that before entering the society he fell in love with a maiden, but the maiden absconded with an individual named Doyle.” Could Mary Doyle - his mother - have been this maiden? For if that were so, Mr Chrea would have to have been Conan Doyle’s father, Charles. What is not stated directly in the letter is just who the co-respondent in this affair had been. And Conan Doyle’s words indicate that he knew precisely who that person was.

2 Lellenberg, Jon (Ed) et al *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters* Lond., Penguin, 2007.

So, was this Mr Chrea the school's third prefect? An intensive review of the Stonyhurst teaching roster of 1873 lists a Mr Thomas Knowles as being the Third Prefect that year. There is no-one named Chrea on it. And according to a representative of Stonyhurst College who I corresponded with, there has never been a student nor faculty member with the name Chrea. This fact makes it highly unlikely that any such person ever existed, but it does suggest that the account given in Doyle's letter was a figment



Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard finds the word "Rache" written in blood.

of his youthful and brilliant imagination. The last words of that same letter deviate sharply from its previous tone: "I shall soon at this rate die of ennui." If Doyle had been telling the unvarnished truth to his mother, then there was certainly nothing dull or dreary about that day, and we may infer that his tale of a teacher having "gone stark staring mad" had been fabricated.

Conan Doyle's grandfather was an expert in concealing his true identity from the public. For more than fifteen years, he worked under the pseudonym H.B., initials derived from taking the

letter J of John and the D in Doyle and doubling them to visually form the letters H and B in order to poke fun at the Members of Parliament without having to live in fear of any repercussions. Conan Doyle's father, artist and draughtsman Charles Doyle, shared his love of word games and puzzles with his son. In the very first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard finds the word 'Rache' written on a wall in blood. Lestrade assumes that the killer's name is a woman named Rachel, but Holmes is quick to correct him, pointing out that RACHE is the German word for 'revenge.' As mentioned earlier, one of Conan Doyle's teachers had read him the story *The Avenger (Der Racher)*, and that he begged his mother to purchase a copy of it for herself. As the letters in Mr 'CHREA's' surname are an anagram of the word 'RACHE', it is not a giant leap to conclude that the deranged Mr Chrea was Doyle's vehicle for exacting revenge against his mother and her lover.

Still, we do not know exactly why Doyle selected the German derived name Chrea or why he chose to tell his mother about a maiden who had had an affair. Conan Doyle, always a



BRYAN CHARLES WALLER.

master of the complex but subtle, provided the answer to his mother in the form of a clue on the cover of the book he had begged her to purchase. *Der Racher* was written by the German author August Lewald, which, if taken by itself, could only be regarded as a piece of trivia. But, when you learn that this same August Lewald's English nom de plume was Kurt Waller, the pieces of a complex puzzle begin to interlock. In 1873, a brilliant third year University of Edinburgh medical student named Bryan Charles Waller moved in with the Doyles. In the Chrea letter, Conan Doyle offers a hint to his mother that he knew all about her inappropriate relationship with this wealthy, well-bred, future physician and future poet laureate of the Freemasons. The source for this damning information most likely was his sister

Annette, who once had a relationship of her own with Waller. And once Waller began focusing his affections on a woman fifteen years his senior, the spurned Annette decided to let her younger brother in on the family secret. Four years later, Doyle's forty year old mother gave birth to a daughter who she christened with the odd name Bryan Doyle. To make things worse, Charles

Doyle absolutely refused to go down to the local courthouse to register *his* child's birth, as he probably assumed that the child wasn't his and had been fathered by Bryan Waller.

This would help explain the opening gambit in 'The Case of Identity', where Miss *Mary* Sutherland provides Holmes with personal information regarding the members of her current household. Her step-father (Mr Windibank) is five years her senior (by extension, Waller is five years Conan Doyle's senior) and her mother is fifteen years older than her new husband (as Mary Doyle was fifteen years older than Bryan Waller). Both 'The Case of Identity' and the Mr Chrea letter revolve around love triangles gone terribly wrong, and both of them make us free to "fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results." (Sherlock Holmes in 'A Case of Identity'.)

Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* holds the key for unlocking the true identity of Mr Chrea, who had to have been the aforementioned Dr Bryan Charles Waller. That he and Mary Doyle shared a deep affection is undeniable, and so, when Mary Doyle's husband, Charles Doyle, became a permanent inmate of several of Scotland's mental sanitariums, Mary seized the opportunity to make her escape from Edinburgh and join her young lover at his Yorkshire Masongill estate. Well after her son had achieved fame and fortune in the world of literature, Mary Doyle remained a 'tenant' there, rejecting her now famous and wealthy son's invitation to move in with him. It would take thirty five years before she left Waller's estate. Even in her old age, she refused to move into her son's lavish home. Rather, she moved in with her daughter Connie and her noted husband, writer E.W. Hornung, for the remainder of her long life.

Wrapping it all Up

Arthur Conan Doyle apparently based Dr Watson's origins on some actual events that took place during his student years in the mountains of Northern England. Each of them had family members who were alcoholics, both were sportsmen who played rugby and wicket-cricket, not on playing fields, but on playgrounds, and both of them had spent some time on three continents. Dr Watson's passport would have been stamped with India, Afghanistan (Asia), and Australia while Conan Doyle's would have borne the marks of Greenland (Europe), North America and Africa.

A debt of gratitude is owed to E.W. Hornung, for he was the man most likely responsible for Conan Doyle having directed some of his energies into the Australian themed 'Boscombe Valley Mystery'. Before he had even laid eyes on his future wife, Hornung had already made a name for himself as an up and coming writer. Although he is best remembered for his "amateur cracksman" Raffles, he is regarded as "The Bret Harte of Australia". Hornung, who had lived a large part of his life in the Land Down Under, had a natural ability to scatter proper colonialisms like 'cooe' into his works, and gave us detailed and accurate descriptions of Australia's rivers, streams, and towns. When Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Gully of Bluemansdyke*, he had not yet met Hornung, and conveniently created the non-existent Wawirra River and Gully of Bluemansdyke. Additionally, he placed the Australian town of Trafalgar in close proximity to New Zealand's Tapu Mountains (which are hundreds of miles away across the Tasman Sea). By the time Doyle was writing 'Boscombe Valley Mystery', he was engaged in a friendly competition against Hornung for supremacy in bookstores and on the cricket field. Doyle certainly sought to make 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery' read at least as good as the works of his future brother-in-law. And by most accounts, Doyle succeeded in this quest.

