



Dr Watson is rescued by his orderly, Murray, after being wounded by a Jezail bullet during the battler of Maiwand

## Watson's Wound Pension

by Michael Duke

"...an income of eleven and sixpence a day." (*A Study in Scarlet*)

At the outset of the very first Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson story we are told that the good doctor, his health "irretrievably ruined", is given "permission from a paternal government to spend the next nine months in attempting to improve it." During that interval he receives a pension of the above sum. Evidently he continues to be classified as having his health irretrievably ruined, as in 'Shoscombe Old Place', usually dated in a wide range between 1888 (Hall) to 1902 (Baring-Gould, Folsom) but certainly later than the 1881 date of *A Study in Scarlet*, Dr Watson informs us that he gambles on horseracing. He uses "about half my wound pension".

Everyone has assumed that this means he has continued to receive eleven and sixpence a day, or about two hundred pounds a year, quite apart from any other sources of income such as payment for the publication of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Klinger, in his annotation, collects other commentators' ideas and suggests that Watson may have income from his deceased parents' estate, or even his late brother Henry's estate, if there is anything left beside the fifty pound watch (*The Sign of Four*). There is even the idea that Watson lived partly from the sale of one or more of Mary Morstan's six pearls, also derived from India as the Agra treasure.<sup>1</sup>

But what about that "paternal government" allowance of eleven shillings and sixpence a day? Nobody has ventured to investigate who or what is meant by this seemingly generous payer.

Watson trained for the Army Medical Department at Netley and was posted to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, sent to India, but then removed from this regiment. He was attached to the Berkshires, who were part of the brigade routed at Maiwand on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1880. After his Jezail bullet (or bullets) wound (or wounds) and his "enteric fever", he was repatriated to England at the end of 1880. And evidently he was compensated for his travails.

But Shashi Tharoor states unequivocally "Every British soldier posted in India had to be paid, equipped and fed and eventually pensioned by the Government of India, not Britain".<sup>2</sup> The looting of India started by The East India Company in 1757, when Robert Clive won the Battle of Plassey, was continued by the British Government directly from 1858. Taxes levied were "drawing up riches from the banks of the Ganges, and squeezing them down on the banks of the Thames"<sup>3</sup> and used for the betterment of Britain. A "Late Indian Army" medic like Dr Watson was paid his pension by money levied from India, not the British Treasury.

<sup>1</sup> Klinger, Leslie (ed.) *A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*. Indianapolis, Gasogene Books, 2001, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Tharoor, Shashi *Inglorious Empire: what the British did to India*. Scribe, Brunswick, Victoria. Scribe, 2017, p.23

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2 (quoting Company official John Sullivan)

There are other instances scattered through the Canon whereby the India of Rudyard Kipling's paean of praise to the Raj, *Kim*,<sup>4</sup> is scarcely an accurate account of the facts of British rule.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Sign of Four* the Sholto twins Bartholomew and Thaddeus "lived in great luxury", the father having "prospered in India and brought back with him a considerable sum of money." This is partly the Agra Treasure, of course, but would not have been the only wealth the Major derived from his service in the subcontinent. Major John Sholto of the Indian Army would also have had his pension paid for by the India Office.

In 'The Man with the Twisted Lip', a Lascar (Indian seaman) runs The Bar of Gold, an opium den. There Dr Watson finds both his quarry, Isa Whitney, a drug-sodden addict, but also his friend Sherlock



WEIGHING OPIUM IN A GOVERNMENT FACTORY, INDIA

Holmes. Holmes is the very picture of "a tall thin old man, with his jaw resting upon his two fists, and his elbows upon his knees... very thin, very wrinkled, bent with age, an opium pipe dangling down from between his knees." The numerous customers of this establishment, where the steps down to it were "worn hollow by the ceaseless tread of drunken feet", were an ironic and direct effect of British rule in India. The British relied upon opium grown in India<sup>6</sup> and its sales to try and balance the budget of trade with China. They fought a war in 1840 to force the Chinese to take the opium as a recompense for their tea.<sup>7</sup>

The East India Company ensured that both growing and selling opium were British monopolies. Indeed they compelled the Indians to grow it.<sup>8</sup> Even after tea plantations were set up in India and Ceylon, the opium trade continued. And addicts multiplied in the home country of England. About one ninth of India's income became derived from this trade, given the British smashing of their industries in textiles, ship-building and so on.

Major-General Stoner of the Bengal Artillery left two daughters ('The Speckled Band'). Julia and Helen would have his pension of "not less than 1,000 pounds a year" as inheritance, and this is the Macguffin for the whole story. India again would be paying. The same would be true of Colonel Hayter in 'The Reigate Squires', who had been a patient of Dr Watson's in Afghanistan.

In that heartrending tale 'The Crooked Man', Henry Wood uses an Indian rupee to part pay for his lodgings in Hudson St, Aldershot. Having been a captive of the rebels in the "Sepoy Mutiny" in 1857, betrayed by Sergeant Barclay, he was later a slave of the "hill tribes" then a wandering conjurer in the Punjab. He is not a beneficiary of the benevolence of the India Office, although indeed he should have been. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson should, in all fairness, have referred Henry Wood to the India Office to receive a pension himself. Although this would have been exacted from India, it would have been more deserved than many others.

<sup>4</sup> Kipling, Rudyard *Kim*. Lond., MacMillan & Co, 1901.

<sup>5</sup> Hopkirk, Peter *Quest for Kim: In Search of Kipling's Great Game*. Oxford, OUP, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *Chambers Encyclopaedia*, Vol VII, 1895. 'Opium', pp.612-4.

<sup>7</sup> Inglis, Brian, 1976. *The Opium War*. Kent, Coronet Books, 1976.

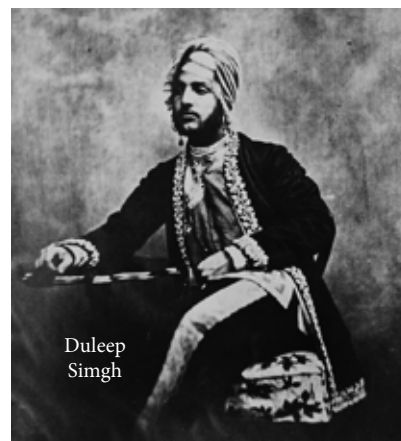
<sup>8</sup> Tharoor *Op.Cit.*, p.226

“Colonel Sebastian Moran, once of Her Majesty’s Indian Army” (“The Empty House’), was clearly not satisfied with his income from his Indian summers, as he took up with the nefarious Professor Moriarty, becoming his chief of staff and being paid “liberally”. One must note, as an aside, that his pay from the Professor did not suffice, as the Colonel was apparently living by gambling, and cheating at it.

Even in that most American of cases, *The Valley of Fear*, Indian economics obtrudes. Holmes and Watson consult their very up-to-date *Whitaker’s Almanac* and find an article upon Indian trade and resources. The Mahrattas, rivals of the British until crushed in 1818, are mentioned as is the word “Government”. This volume is quickly dismissed as a red herring, being too modern, but the fact remains that the “trade and resources” of India are brought to the readers’ consciousness.

In summary, however, often the ‘foreign’ in the Sherlock Holmes stories is seen as threatening to the Empire, but what we discover in the “Empire writes back” paradigm<sup>9</sup> is that Britain was actually sustained by the “jewel in the crown” due to the imperial colonisers’ rapacious behaviour.

Possible rallying points for Indian industry and self-government were ruthlessly crushed. Possibly the most egregious example of Britain’s heavy rule is the case of Maharajah Duleep Singh (1838–1893), ruler of the Sikh Kingdom of the Punjab, the North-West provinces, Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>10</sup> Coming to the throne aged five after his predecessors were assassinated, he was exiled to Britain in 1854 at fifteen and never allowed to return to India, except for two short tightly controlled visits. The British had annexed the Punjab in 1849 after the Second Anglo-Sikh War. He too was given an annual pension and initially dwelt at Indian expense in the expensive Claridge’s Hotel, then later in a house in Wimbledon, then Roehampton for three years. Again this was paid for not by the British Treasury, but from the exactions of the British from India itself. After a restive and boring stay in Roehampton, he was taken on a tour of Europe by his British minders, then ‘given’ a pension and a Castle in Scotland. Later, he rented a house in Auchlyne. He became known as ‘the Black Prince of Perthshire’. The India Office thereafter bought the captive Prince a 17,000 acre country estate at Elveden on the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk. A princely lifestyle indeed, paid for by the India Office through grasping taxes upon Indians.



Nonetheless, Queen Victoria was fond of him, and she was godmother to several of his children by Maharani Bamba Muller. Prince Duleep Singh tried to return to the Punjab in 1886, but was intercepted and arrested with his consort in Aden and forced to go back to Europe. He thereafter lived in Paris with his mistress. He visited the Czar to try and gain support for a Russian invasion of the Punjab to regain his throne but was unsuccessful. After his early death aged 55, he was even buried back in England at Elveden.

The recent film *Victoria and Abdul* whitewashes the iron rule and exactions of the British in India. Abdul was a real person, whose full name was Hafiz Mohammed Abdul Karim (1863-1909). He had been

<sup>9</sup> Ashcroft, Bill et al 2002. *The Empire Writes back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Lond., Routledge, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, Michael & Anand, Sushila *Queen Victoria’s Maharajah: Duleep Singh 1838-93*. Phoenix, 2002.

a clerk at a prison, but was a member of Queen Victoria's court from 1887 until her death in 1901. It is interesting that the 'Black Prince of Perthshire', Duleep Singh, had left England by 1886, just before the arrival of Abdul, and was living in France, thwarted by the British in returning to the Punjab. Victoria arranged for Abdul to be given a title, Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO), and also a land grant in India itself.<sup>11</sup> The Queen did in fact learn Urdu, as the film asserts, but this fact was suppressed by the Court. Once the Queen died, the new king, Edward VII, had Abdul evicted and sent back to India.

There is no evidence in the Canon that Dr Watson knew the source of his continued "wound pension". Likely not, as the source of his ongoing stipend was undoubtedly less relevant to him than its continued receipt. The exact source of many government revenues is, after all, frequently unknown to those whom it benefits by the time it makes its way to people's wallets.



Hafiz Mohammed Abdul Karim with  
Queen Victoria

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<sup>11</sup> Anand, Sushila *Indian Sahib: Queen Victoria's Dear Abdul*. Lond., Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1996.

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