



Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice,

by Douglas Kerr.

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The cover of this lively and learned book carries a *Punch* drawing of Arthur Conan Doyle encircled by a smoke ring blown by a manikin-sized Sherlock Holmes figure, arms folded and pipe in hand, to whom he is shackled. This is precisely the image of Conan Doyle in thrall to his creation that Douglas Kerr's study works to dispel, as it develops an argument that places Sherlock Holmes in a set of contexts illuminating Conan Doyle's whole career and not only the character and adventures of the famous resident of 221B Baker Street.

Douglas Kerr has absorbed the full range of Conan Doyle's writings: the mass of journalism and non fiction prose (including his 1885 Edinburgh MD thesis, "An essay upon the vasomotor changes in *tabes dorsalis* and on the influence which is exerted by the sympathetic nervous system in that disease"), as well as his efforts in various fictional genres, notably historical novels as well as the detective stories both short and book length that constitute his best-known body of work, together with a substantial volume of commentary. He brings to bear a mature knowledge of the Victorian and modern periods, including the literature of empire, broadly conceived, and of fashions in literary and cultural criticism. Such a compass is fundamental to the unassuming authority of *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*. Not that it is a solemn read: Kerr's urbane tone, and his flair for the telling aside and delicious footnote (such as the parenthesis on page 171: "Arthur Conan Doyle did not do national service: Marcel Proust did"), are integral to his sound and subtle scholarship.

Kerr ascribes his work to the genres of "critical book" and "cultural biography" (2). The study is structured following a rough chronology of Conan Doyle's life, focussing on six themes ("cultural domains"), sport, medicine, science, law and order, army and empire, and spirit. Each chapter stands alone as a consideration of its theme, while cumulatively building a case for the coherence and complexity of Conan Doyle's trajectory, and his right to be considered – in the words of Kerr's opening sentence – "arguably, Britain's last national writer" (1). A second strand to the argument is directed to substantiating the aim of portraying Conan Doyle "as a product, historian, and creator of culture" (2). This is the aspect of the book that extends it way beyond more limited, and frequently more sensational, accounts of its subject's life and work.

Each chapter demonstrates complexity and often contradiction in Conan Doyle. Into the bargain, Kerr buys in to a number of debates: the construction of "England" and "Englishness," high vs low culture and so on. The chapter on "Sport" does double duty in showing how in Conan Doyle's enthusiasm for boxing in particular he was very much a man of his time, stressing specifically the essentially amateur status of pugilism before engaging in a set of persuasive speculations that the amateur ethos underpinned the British Empire. In the following chapter, "Medicine," Conan Doyle's two careers with medicine, as consultant and general practitioner, are teased out, while the development of his writing career is plotted too. And so it goes.

Occasionally, and perhaps ungratefully, I could have done with a bit more biography: Conan Doyle's marriages and children are mentioned briefly in connection with his increasing

obsession with spiritualism after the Great War, but on the whole, women whether in person or principle don't get much attention in the book, obviously reflecting his intensely masculinist tendencies, but meriting some specific consideration. To forego such information is not really a hardship, however, given the generally thick detail for instance of Conan Doyle's unusual medical career. I found the account of his Boer War activity, about which I'd previously been ignorant, especially interesting. He saw service as a volunteer in a field hospital, and wrote two books, a journalistic narrative of the conflict to date, *The Great Boer War* (1900) and a polemic, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (1902), allegedly written in nine days, defending Britain's actions. It was for this work that he was knighted.

The chapter on "Law and Order" is where most discussion of Sherlock Holmes is concentrated. Its opening paragraph is devoted to proposing that "Sherlock Holmes came into a world in which the question of the role and competence of the police was a matter for heated public debate" (133). This kind of historical context is typical of the strengths of the book. One of Kerr's distinctive achievements is to portray Conan Doyle's activities and ideas, however crack-brained they may seem now (his late fascination with spiritualism and his relationship with the fairies, notably), with respect but not adulation. The book is even-handed in respect of all aspects of Conan Doyle's writing, for instance when Kerr argues for the significance of the historical fiction (which the author regarded as his finest work), and gives due measure to the extraordinary adventure romances.

Having begun with the cover, I close with the comment that this volume maintains the reputation of Oxford University Press in terms of the physical attributes of its books as well as their intellectual quality. It is a handsome book, with real footnotes (so no distracting turning to and fro to endnotes), and text conspicuously free of typographical errors. Indeed, the only error I picked up was on page 135, where a "Kieron Dolin" is quoted – but immediately identified correctly in the footnote as The University of Western Australia's Kieran Dolin. If my vigilance in such matters was overridden by my admiring enjoyment of this fascinating and judicious study, so be it.

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