

# THE CRIMES CLUB: THE EARLY YEARS OF OUR SOCIETY

By Carrie Selina Parris MA, BA (Hons)

DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA  
SCHOOL OF LITERATURE, DRAMA, AND CREATIVE WRITING  
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## Abstract.

This Life Writing research thesis is a ‘biography’ of a private dining society, popularly known as the Crimes Club, that was founded in 1903 by a group of professional men who were fascinated by the Law and the psychology of criminals. ‘Our Society’ is the group’s official name, and it boasted among its early members such notable figures as Professor John Churton Collins, Arthur Diósy, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Edward Marshall Hall, Sir Travers Humphreys, H. B. Irving, Arthur Lambton, William Le Queux, A. E. W. Mason, Samuel Ingleby Oddie, Sir Max Pemberton, Bertram Fletcher Robinson, George R. Sims, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, P. G. Wodehouse and Filson Young. These barristers, actors, academics, journalists, authors, and scientists were fascinated by the criminal mind, and over regular dinners discussed notable villains such as ‘Jack the Ripper,’ Charles Peace, the Tichborne claimant, Kate Webster, Neill Cream, Dr. Crippen, George Joseph Smith and many others. Inspired by famous crimes and trials of the late Victorian era when they had been young men, the members of the Crimes Club came together in the early years of the twentieth century, at a time when both criminals and the justice system were becoming more professionalised. Members were able to use their influence to help with cases of injustice, and campaigned on behalf of Adolf Beck, George Edalji, and Oscar Slater. Their actions helped to bring about the Court of Criminal Appeal Act 1907. Drawing on material from published memoirs, biographies, newspapers and journals, public and private archives; this thesis explores how the members of Our Society, although they met in private, came to shape the public’s understanding of crime, justice, and forensic science at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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## Introduction.

My creative writing research thesis concerns the formation and exploits of a London dining club for crime enthusiasts, known officially, and enigmatically, as Our Society, but popularly known as the Crimes Club. Our Society was founded in 1903, and my focus is on the activities and members of the group during the early quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with some digressions. Through connecting the stories of the club's members in a work of group biography, my intention is to examine their mutual fascination with crime, and to consider how their activities engaged with contemporary attitudes and debates concerning crime and criminals.

My desire to research Our Society arose from reading some intriguing but unfulfilling references to the club in standard biographies of its more famous members. The starting point was the forensic pathologist, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, and a reference in Douglas G. Browne and Tom Tullett's *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases* (1951) that revealed their subject was a member (to be discussed further in the Prologue). From there I learned that the actor H. B. Irving, eldest son of Sir Henry Irving, was one of the founding members. Browne and Tullett say little more beyond these short allusions. During his career, Spilsbury was often referred to by the Press as a 'real' Sherlock Holmes, so it was thrilling to discover, through short references to the club in biographies of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, that the detective's creator was also a member. By following leads in these standard biographies, I discovered other members, and soon built up a list of core friends I wanted to discuss: all interesting characters who were, to some degree, eccentric, and will be introduced as they become relevant to the narrative.

Biographers of Doyle have, historically, struggled to find information about Our Society. Andrew Lycett, in his 2007 biography *Conan Doyle: The Man who Created Sherlock Holmes*, briefly writes that 'Bernard Spilsbury [...] would get to know Arthur at Our Society (otherwise known as the Crimes or Murder Club), a group of writers and lawyers who came together for convivial discussions of controversial trials.'<sup>1</sup> This is speculation, as there is little proof beyond their membership of the same club that Doyle and Spilsbury ever spoke to each other. Some more sensational writers have tried to make more of Doyle's connection through similar speculation over limited material. Peter Costello's *Conan Doyle:*

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<sup>1</sup> Lycett, Andrew, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p.287.

*Detective*, first published in 1991 then substantially revised for a new edition in 2006, presents a version of Doyle focused on his connections to or interest in real crime. He includes eight pages about the Crimes Club, with sparse detail about the club's activities or Doyle's involvement in them. Costello comments on how odd it is that biographers of Doyle often skirt over his membership of the club and also reveals something that may explain this: '[Our Society] kept their affairs secret, so that even today, a century later, little has been divulged about them. The club still exists and remains, as ever, exclusively secret.'<sup>2</sup> Building on Costello's work, Stephen Wade published a short book in 2013 titled *Conan Doyle and the Crimes Club* which again, elaborating a little on references to the club in various biographies and memoirs, focuses on Doyle's membership and only covers the period up to 1910.

The members of Our Society do not, in fact, consider themselves secretive. The club still exists today, has a strict rule of privacy applied to its transactions,<sup>3</sup> and they keep very few archives. I know this because, unlike these other writers, I was assisted in my research by current members and their contacts, who have provided me with material that is usually only ever seen by invited members and guests. Some of them have requested that this information, or at least its origins, should be kept confidential.

Rather than focus particularly on Doyle, I have taken a collective approach in order to expand the story beyond what is merely relevant to the larger narrative of one person's life. By writing about the Club as a group, I was able to give serious consideration to its various members and describe them in detail as individuals rather than as mere bit players in the lives of the creator of Sherlock Holmes. In turn, this approach results in a level of depth that provides greater context and more detailed analysis of the lives and activities of the individuals discussed, with the intention of showing there is value in extracting the smaller details and placing them under the microscope.

Our Society was founded at a time when criminology was emerging as a respected discipline and the pace of evolution of forensic science was accelerating. Its purpose therefore reflected the growing concerns of an age in which both criminal justice and criminal activity were becoming more sophisticated. At the same time, the sensational press and popular detective fiction had begun to dominate the public's understanding of criminality and

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<sup>2</sup> Costello, Peter, *Conan Doyle: Detective* (London, Constable & Robinson LTD, 2006), p.71.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Rose, a committee member, wrote the following to me in an email on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2010: 'we don't regard ourselves as 'secretive'. OS is a dining club, which meets usually three times a year, and those attending are expected to observe "Chatham House Rules," an understandable requirement when cases of contemporary interest are being discussed.'

criminal investigation. Members of this private club included authors, actors, journalists, editors, and medical and legal professionals who all had varying levels of influence on the public's understanding of contemporary debates about crime. There also seemed to be some lineage in the rapid development of ideas about how criminals are brought to justice in Britain from the emergence of Sherlock Holmes and the crimes of Jack the Ripper in the late 1880s through to the rise of Sir Bernard Spilsbury as a celebrity forensic witness 30 years later. This development could be traced through the related activities in which the various men of Our Society were involved during this time, and writing about the club was a way to draw together their individual stories to construct a holistic group biographical narrative.

What follows is a convoluted tale, hanging on many disparate threads, and there will be a little blood. Though fascinated by notorious villains, the men of Our Society would argue they were not captivated by the criminal through any misplaced or perverted enthusiasm for transgression or the macabre like the casual readers of the sensational press, but because they were studying the psychology of the criminal mind. This eclectic group came together through the social scene of early Edwardian London which, under the relaxed patronage of the new King, had become increasingly diverse. They were connoisseurs and collectors, amassing any material they could discover related to notable trials and atrocious crimes. On occasions, they would seek out personal encounters with felons, and sometimes they tried to rescue those whom they believed were wrongly accused. They were absorbed by curious tales concerning those members of the human race who act outside society's laws, and they loved to talk with fellow enthusiasts about criminals.

The story of the origins of Our Society, and the lives and friendships of its members, is also the story of a pivotal moment in the history of British criminal justice when advances in science and changes in the political landscape catalysed reform. Our Society's members were engaged in this evolution, and developments can be traced through the public works in which these men were engaged – theatre performances, detective stories, newspaper campaigns, police investigations and criminal trials – the dining society thus providing a neat device to unite a variety of otherwise disconnected people and events in such a way that they could be seen as parts of a greater whole, or at least one very interesting conversation.

## Prologue - A Body is Discovered.

It was eight o'clock on Wednesday 17th December, 1947. The Department of Pharmacology at University College London on Gower Street was quiet, most of the staff having long left for the night. Charles Arthur Netherton Evans,<sup>4</sup> a Laboratory Superintendent, had worked late. Evans was a problem-solver and a proficient practical chemist who was always at hand when scientists experienced trouble with their experiments. He had worked for the department for 21 years, since he was only 14 years old, and his dedication to research would eventually earn him a MBE. During the recent war, he had been instrumental in evacuating the preclinical school to Leatherhead, and several of the College's laboratories were still empty. Evans was accustomed to dealing with the mishaps that occur when human beings fumble with chemicals – one student later remembered the time pyrophosphoric acid was spilled in the Haldane Room.<sup>5</sup> He was about to encounter an incident of a more deliberate nature.

As he headed to the cloakroom on the mezzanine<sup>6</sup> floor to collect his coat before going home for the night, Evans noticed the smell of gas and, knowing the potential dangers of a leak, went to investigate. Following the scent to the top floor of the building, he arrived at a laboratory that was assigned to a very famous pathologist who was known to work late into the evening.<sup>7</sup> The door was locked, and the glow of an electric light suggested someone could be inside with the source of the poisonous gas. Acting quickly, Evans alerted a watchman who opened the door with a pass key. They entered together and discovered, still alive but unconscious on the floor and fading fast, the body of the eminent pathologist, Sir Bernard Spilsbury. Town gas billowed from the tap to a Bunsen burner that was running

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<sup>4</sup> His name according to UCL records: misnamed Charles 'Waterton' and 'Watherton' Evans in several newspaper reports. This information was received through Nick Booth, curator at UCL Museums.

<sup>5</sup> Information about Evan's derived from obituary notice at UCL, provided through Nick Booth.

<sup>6</sup> There are no records regarding the exact location of Spilsbury's laboratory at UCL: he had been allowed to use an empty laboratory in the Department while other scientists were evacuated, but was not a direct employee of UCL. With the assistance of curator Nick Booth and using building plans from the 1940s, I carried out field work on successive occasions to discover the most likely location of the laboratory based on details in biographies and news reports. The most likely location seemed to be on the top floor of the building (the laboratory now numbered 234). The location details here reflect that conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> Spilsbury's absorption in work is discussed in Browne, Douglas G., and Tullett, E. V., *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, (London, The Companion Book Club, 1952), p454.

without a flame. Evans turned it off hurriedly and opened the window, allowing the fumes to dissipate into the winter night. They loosened Spilsbury's collar and attempted to resuscitate him, but their efforts were futile. A message was sent to summon the Coroner for St. Pancras, W. Bentley Purchase, who was also Spilsbury's friend and colleague. He arrived around nine o' clock, by which time it was clear nothing could be done. Attempts to revive Spilsbury with an oxygen mask and intravenous stimulus had failed. Dr. R. Wilsdon, the University's medical officer, later told the press: 'Sir Bernard was found in the room at 8.10pm. Resuscitatory measures were unavailing and he was pronounced dead at 9.10pm. He was not admitted to hospital.'<sup>8</sup> Spilsbury was 70 years old.

The flag of University College Hospital flew at half-mast the next day. In that same hospital, a post-mortem examination was carried out on Spilsbury's body by Dr R. H. D. Short in the presence of Sir Roy Cameron. The mode of death was identified as coronary thrombosis and carbon monoxide poisoning, a chemical reaction through which carbon monoxide binds to haemoglobin, starving the body of oxygen and turning the victim's skin cherry red. Spilsbury was very familiar with this type of death. In 1928, he gave a lecture in which he discussed Professor J. S. Haldane's experiments on mice to determine the poisonous action of the gas.<sup>9</sup> Given the unusual circumstances of Spilsbury's death, an official inquiry into its cause was required.

Performing Spilsbury's inquest was a daunting prospect. This was a man whose legendary presentation of forensic evidence had helped condemn to death Hawley Harvey Crippen, George Joseph Smith (The Brides in the Bath), Patrick Mahon (The Crumbles Murders), Frederick Seddon (poisoner), and, perhaps most controversially, Norman Thorne (Crowborough chicken farm murder). It was an uncomfortable experience for Purchase who said: 'There can be few of us in my position who have not been associated with him and who have not benefitted from his great attainments, skill and care, but this inquiry is something I

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in article 'Spilsbury Dead' from the *Dundee Courier*, Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> December 1947, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> This was the second Stephen Paget Memorial Lecture delivered by Spilsbury on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1928, titled *The work and responsibilities of the pathologist*. The transcript is held in the Wellcome Collection archives (catalogue reference SARDS/G/1/45). Haldane, educated at Edinburgh University, was a Professor at both New College, Oxford, and Birmingham University. He not only experimented on himself with poisonous gases, but also on his son, J.B.S. Haldane, who grew up to become a Professor in Genetics at UCL. The Haldane Room, where Evans dealt with the acid spillage, is named in his honour.



approach with considerable reluctance.’<sup>10</sup> It would have been difficult to find anyone to conduct the inquest who had not encountered the forensic knight in some professional capacity, so prolific was his work. As recorded in Spilsbury’s obituary in *The Times* (19<sup>th</sup> December, before the inquest):

Between the two wars, especially, there was hardly an instance where Scotland Yard was engaged in a murder inquiry involving the painstaking collection of medical evidence in which he did not appear as one of the most important figures. His record of successes in his own field was phenomenal, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to cite one case of poisoning or dismemberment of a victim in which his skill failed to establish the guilt of the accused person.<sup>11</sup>

Purchase had worked with Spilsbury for many years in various capacities both inside and outside of the coroner’s court. In 1937, Purchase sat on an inter-departmental government committee on abortion and Spilsbury appeared before this group as a consultant.<sup>12</sup> During the Second World War, they worked together to supply a suitably doctored corpse as part of the elaborate disinformation plan: ‘Operation Mincemeat.’<sup>13</sup> Over their long overlapping careers, Spilsbury had come to be more than a professional colleague to Purchase. In a foreword to a later biography of the pathologist, Purchase described him as ‘the man that many, among them myself, got to know and learned to love’<sup>14</sup> and added details of their friendship:

He became a member of a small dining club to which I already belonged. We had no speeches and no object except the enjoyment of each other’s company. In such an atmosphere he was entirely at home, and could talk about a variety of subjects from opera to his Hellenic travels. He never spoke of his cases, except to correct some misinformed person. His sense of humour, which was rather boyish, seemed to grow up after dinner.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Spilsbury “Suicide” Verdict,’ *Gloucestershire Echo*, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> December 1947, front page.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Death of Sir B. Spilsbury,’ *The Times*, Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> December, p.6.

<sup>12</sup> Records of this committee are held at the Wellcome Library, catalogue reference PPGMG/D/7.

<sup>13</sup> This was later the subject of a book published in 1953 called *The Man Who Never Was*, written by Captain Ewen Montagu, a participant in the operation.

<sup>14</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, 1952, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Purchase's biographer, Robert Jackson, is keen to point out that the two men were not the closest of friends 'because,' he writes, 'the pathologist, though a kindly and lovable man, was innately shy and shrank all his life from prolonged intimate contact with others outside his family circle. But Purchase knew Spilsbury as well as any man had ever done.'<sup>16</sup>

Maintaining a critical distance from the case before him that sad December was not going to be easy, and was further complicated by the interest of the public who felt a connection to this man, known to them through the columns of the sensational press. On the Friday following Spilsbury's death, Purchase received an anonymous letter from 'an old woman in Buxton, Derbyshire':

My husband was saved from just such a death as Sir Bernard Spilsbury. I sincerely hope you will have the privilege of saying it was accidental. Put otherwise, after such a marvellous career, it does not bear thinking of. I trust, as so many others will, to see the verdict as accidental in the papers, as you will know in gas poisoning, the legs go useless first, thus they cannot help themselves to safety.<sup>17</sup>

Spilsbury's admirer wrote in vain: Purchase was a strict coroner. He was willing to doctor a corpse for the war effort, but he would not massage evidence to preserve a reputation, even that of a friend.

Purchase conducted the inquest on Saturday at St Pancras Coroner's Court, a place where Spilsbury presented evidence throughout his career and which adjoined the St Pancras Mortuary where he carried out many post-mortem examinations. Back in 1910, when still a law student at Cambridge, Purchase, disguised as a barrister, managed to sneak into the trial of Dr. Crippen.<sup>18</sup> In Court One at the Old Bailey, he witnessed the now legendary testimony of Spilsbury, then aged 33 and giving medical evidence at a major trial for the first of many times. Immaculately dressed, he radiated confidence while dogmatically supporting his colleague and mentor, Dr Augustus Pepper, in identifying the human remains in Crippen's basement as belonging to his missing wife, Cora. Though the case was certainly a catalyst for

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<sup>16</sup> Jackson, Robert, *Coroner: The Biography of Sir Bentley Purchase*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1963), p.188.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Jackson, *Coroner*, p192. This may be the same anonymous 'old lady living in Derbyshire' mentioned in Browne and Tullett *Bernard Spilsbury* (p.216), who had been acquainted with the Spilsbury family, and who wrote to Spilsbury in 1946 on the death of her husband, receiving two long letters in reply. She learned from his letters that Spilsbury 'had been through great suffering and loss.'

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.188.

the career of the handsome young pathologist, his performance did not attract much attention from the press, but Purchase noted those present at the trial considered him ‘a coming man’.<sup>19</sup> Thirty-seven years after he beheld the trial from which Spilsbury’s reputation grew, Purchase was there to determine the cause of the event that led to his demise.

In addition to a few interested University College students, among those present at the inquest were Spilsbury’s daughter, Evelyn, and her younger brother, Richard. Spilsbury’s eldest sons were both dead. Peter, a doctor at St. Thomas’s Hospital, was killed during an air raid in London in September 1940. Alan, who worked with Spilsbury, died suddenly from a militant strain of tuberculosis in November 1945. Evelyn gave evidence at the inquest, describing how Spilsbury had suffered a heart attack at the beginning of the war and afterwards gave up smoking.<sup>20</sup> These details had little impact on the outcome of the inquest. The awkward verdict presented to Spilsbury’s admirers, friends and family by Purchase was that of suicide.

The hardened coroner was close to tears as he summed up his verdict: ‘It is my reluctant impression – and decision – that Sir Bernard thought his professional life and possibly his physical life was drawing to a close and that he took his own life. I am quite sure this was not the Sir Bernard who had made such a reputation. His mind was not as it used to be.’<sup>21</sup> To take your own life was still a crime in 1947: it was not decriminalised until the Suicide Act of 1961. It was regarded as self-murder and, had Spilsbury survived, he could have been fined or imprisoned. For Purchase to pass this verdict was to place his friend in a contentious legal position: a peculiar end for a man famed for his delivery of damning evidence in the criminal courts. Purchase addressed the case choosing language to lessen the impact of this controversial death on his colleague’s legacy. He predicated his verdict early at the inquest saying: ‘I approach this matter with repugnance because I am drawn to the conclusion that he must have taken his own life. I do not see any other possible conclusion...The Sir Bernard who did that is not the Sir Bernard who made a reputation for himself and which he justly held.’<sup>22</sup> Spilsbury’s actions were presented as a corruption of his character: the self-murderer was an incongruity and not the esteemed colleague beloved by the press or the dinner companion with the boyish sense of humour. This suicide could have been an embarrassment to the medico-legal establishment. The British public, determined

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<sup>19</sup>Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.54.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, *Coroner*, p.191.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.193.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Suicide Verdict at Inquest,’ *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> December 1947, p.1.

survivors of the recent war, were not in the mood to sympathise with those haunted by black dogs. The man who disappointed and saddened Purchase by committing this crime against himself had to be separated from the expert witness whom the public loved and murderers feared. Purchase was creating an official, acceptable, public version of a personal and private act of devastation, and in doing so presented Spilsbury as if he were not truly one but truly two: a noble Dr Jekyll transformed into Mr Hyde.

As if to excuse this transgressive behaviour, the news reports on the inquest emphasised the idea that Spilsbury's life was over regardless of his self-determined actions. To have reached the age of 70 as he had, surviving two World Wars, was something of an achievement in 1947 in any case. Headlines appeared such as 'Sir Bernard Spilsbury's Death: "Mind Not As It Used To Be"'<sup>23</sup> and 'Sir Bernard Knew Life Was Almost Over.'<sup>24</sup> Perhaps his actions could be justified if they were the result of knowing the end was near, and that his career as well as his life was drawing to a close. His various medical complaints were listed repeatedly in the Press: he had rheumatism and arthritis; he had lost his sense of smell; he had suffered multiple strokes; his heart was not in a strong condition. Purchase asked Dr Short if 'a person of Sir Bernard's knowledge would be able to realise the danger to himself?' Short replied 'I think it is only too probable. There is no doubt whatever about it.'<sup>25</sup> Here lies a contradiction: Spilsbury required his signature medical expertise to realise he was close to dying in order to make a decision that was deemed entirely out of character. What was missing from all of the reports on the inquest was any mention that it was approaching Christmas, and Spilsbury was an unwell old man living alone in a hotel.

Autopsy is a word with a Latin root which simply means 'to see with one's own eyes.' Spilsbury had been famous for his microscopic vision, but as he grew older it became necessary to wear spectacles. His slow decline had been witnessed by the coroner's officer at St Pancras, P. C. Shreeve, who had known Spilsbury for 25 years: '[Shreeve] had seen, perhaps more than Purchase, who did not latterly go into the mortuary very often, the steady deterioration in Spilsbury's health. Shreeve recalled an incident a short time previously when Spilsbury had fallen off a chair while resting in the mortuary, and had been picked up in a collapsed state.'<sup>26</sup> A richer man in a similar situation might have retired, but Spilsbury had

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<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1947, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1947, front page.

<sup>25</sup> 'Spilsbury "Suicide" Verdict,' *Gloucestershire Echo*, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> December 1947, front page.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Coroner*, p.192.

never made much money. Richard Whittington-Egan (a medically-trained criminologist and writer who assisted at the autopsy of Mussolini) describes the elderly pathologist's heart-rending attempts to keep working:

His last big case was that of the murder of Alec de Antiquis in London's Tottenham Court Road, in April 1947. But he had been failing for some time. And he knew it. He had had several strokes. He was aware that his coronary thrombosis was increasing, and that his time was limited. His hands, once so ambidextrously dextrous, were arthritic, crippled and clumsy. In the end he was touting for jobs, turning up at various mortuaries and asking: 'Have you anything for me?' It was a pathetically undignified – and undeserved – situation for him to find himself in.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the information it is possible to glean from newspaper reports and memoirs, it is difficult to get a full idea of the discussion held at the inquest because the files were destroyed.<sup>28</sup> However, Spilsbury's biographers<sup>29</sup> generally agree about the same main events of his final day. He left his small second-floor room at the Langorf Hotel in Frognal that morning, and went first to Finchley Road to pick up his car from a garage in order to drive to St Pancras Coroner's Court. He then headed to Hampstead mortuary where he carried out his final post-mortem examination on the body of a woman who had died during a routine operation (an unexceptional case beyond the fact the woman was the wife of a naval commander). He had lunch at Euston Station, and then returned to the Langorf having forgotten something. The manageress had to let him into his room because he had not taken his key that morning. When he left once more, he did not take the key with him. He returned his car to the garage on Finchley Road and gave gifts to the staff, telling them he would not need the car again before Christmas. He went to his laboratory at University College – a dusty shrine to the memory of his son, Alan, who used to work with him there as a clerk – and wrote up his final autopsy report for Purchase. Biographers Douglas G. Browne and Tom Tullett note that 'He used his last form, and walked out to catch the 5.30 post, the first and last time he was to use the post for this purpose.'<sup>30</sup> He tidied up and destroyed some paper

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<sup>27</sup> Whittington-Egan, Richard, *William Roughead's Chronicles of Murder*, (Exeter, Lochar Publishing LTD, 1991), p.358.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Rose, writer of Spilsbury biography *Lethal Witness*, (Chalford, Sutton Publishing, 2007), discovered this when he corresponded with the Coroner for Inner North London in April 2006, according to his notes.

<sup>29</sup> The main events from this day are adapted from Browne and Tullett *Bernard Spilsbury*, and Rose *Lethal Witness*.

<sup>30</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.469.

work: newspaper reports from the inquest noted that the waste paper basket was filled with torn documents, including a photograph from his daughter's wedding. He then had dinner alone at the Junior Carlton Club where he also returned his locker key to the hall porter, saying he would not require it in the New Year. Around 7.30pm, he returned to Gower Street, and died.

Spilsbury's final day is often seen as representative of his meticulous attention to detail, and his biographers generally regard his actions as evidence of an organised plan. An alternative view would be to interpret the sequence of last encounters as quiet pleas for help from a proud and lonely man. Andrew Rose, whose book *Lethal Witness* takes a critical view of Spilsbury's life and work, makes the following observation:

[In] what seems to have been a well-planned exercise, he turned on the tap of his Bunsen burner, filling his laboratory with a potentially explosive quantity of coal gas. He would not have known how long it would be before someone raised the alarm. People were used to him staying at his workplace until late into the night, and there was no particular reason for anyone to have visited his laboratory that evening. Spilsbury's suicide can be seen as a nihilistic exercise, which could have caused a major explosion at University College Hospital [*sic*], with possible loss of life.<sup>31</sup>

Rose portrays Spilsbury as having a callous disregard for the lives of others, but coal gas rises and, with a laboratory on the top floor of a sparsely occupied building, in the event of an explosion in the night it is unlikely anyone else would have been harmed. Without evidence of, or witnesses to, Spilsbury's intentions it is impossible to determine his state of mind. He could have chosen this uncertain method in the hope that someone would smell the gas in time to save him. After all, he took his life in a laboratory based in the School of Pharmacology where far more certain and expedient options were readily available. It is also possible to speculate, as the anonymous woman from Derbyshire suggested, that he hoped his suicide could be interpreted as an accident, as the tap could have conceivably been left on out of simple forgetfulness, and that his friend would be spared the embarrassment of defining the incident as self-murder.

Spilsbury did not leave a note, although it is recorded that in the middle of December he sent a letter to his friend Dr. Eric Gardner, who was in Switzerland, telling him that 'it would be all over.'<sup>32</sup> Dr. Gardner received the newspapers detailing the reports of his friend's

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<sup>31</sup> Rose, *Lethal Witness*, p.268.

<sup>32</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.469.

demise in the same post. This small detail from the letter to Gardner is mentioned in Browne and Tullett's book, but how they came to be aware of it is not made clear: all references to the letter in later biographies refer back to their work. Whether there were any further revelations is unknown. For Spilsbury to reveal as much as he did to Gardner in any case was regarded as out of character for a man who, despite Purchase's claims that he was known and loved, was notoriously aloof. Browne and Tullett discuss the problems of knowing Spilsbury:

Few men so well known to the public that they have become...a legend in their life-time can offer biographers, at first sight, less material on the personal side than Bernard Spilsbury. If a questionnaire were addressed to the thousands who knew him, in one degree or another, it is safe to say that every answer would begin, 'I really can't tell you much about him.' The minority in constant contact with him would add, 'He never talked of himself. He seemed to have few friends. His only interest was his work.' This absorption in work, coupled with methods patient and thorough almost to excess, isolated him in later life even from his family, who would catch only brief glimpses of him at a hasty lunch, or during a week-end, in between endless, increasing, over-riding labours for the police, in coroners' courts, or in the laboratory.<sup>33</sup>

Browne and Tullett are delicate in this paragraph when dealing with Spilsbury's isolation from his family and do not mention that he separated from his wife during the War or that they never reunited. Neither do they mention Hilda Bainbridge, Spilsbury's assistant, with whom it is believed the pathologist conducted an affair in the early 1920s before her own untimely death from pneumonia in 1926.<sup>34</sup> The man portrayed by Browne and Tullett is an aloof workaholic, the sort of description that emphasised Spilsbury's reputation as a real Sherlock Holmes: 'the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen.'<sup>35</sup> According to Purchase's biographer, Spilsbury had little patience for the mythology that developed around him:

No man was more modest than Spilsbury. "Nonsense," he would snap, when people suggested that he was a real-life Sherlock Holmes. He hardly ever spoke of his cases, even among friends, unless some one made a false or absurd statement. While his name was still being splashed all over the newspapers in a sensational murder case, he would return to Bentley Purchase's court to give

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.202.

<sup>34</sup> As detailed in Whittington-Egan, *William Roughead's Chronicles of Murder*, p. 358, and Rose, *Lethal Witness*, p.142.

<sup>35</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, 'A Scandal in Bohemia,' *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1986), p.3.

evidence in the case of someone who had died miserably in the canal or was the victim of a street accident in North London.<sup>36</sup>

Taking this mythology into consideration, another perspective on Spilsbury's suicide is that his death punctuated the end of an era as the lone-expert archetype he was seen to represent became an anachronism. His status as Honorary Home Office to the Pathologist was unusual at the beginning of his career, but forensic pathology at the time of his death was a more established profession. Browne and Tullett write: 'he was born in an age, and of a stock, which attached great value to character as a human quality. He lived on into another age, among the marked characteristics of which appear to be self-pity, envy, and hatred.'<sup>37</sup> They echoed similar feelings expressed by Purchase: 'He represented an age that seems to me to be passing all too fast wherein professional (and other) work was valued by the worker in terms of its excellence and not in terms of its reward.'<sup>38</sup> It should be remembered that Spilsbury may not have made much money, but he did accept a knighthood. Spilsbury's high-profile career had coincided with a time when the evolution of forensic science in Britain accelerated and the administration of justice underwent significant change. He also came to prominence while Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories were still appearing in *The Strand*, but were eclipsed by 'Golden Age' detective fiction writers such as G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie.

Spilsbury had played a significant role in raising the profile of forensic science. Purchase described him as 'the visible plinth upon which there now needs to be built and kept in repair a proper structure.'<sup>39</sup> There were, however, flaws in the foundations. Spilsbury's representation of forensic science suggested that the discipline could, or should, provide definitive evidence that pointed to absolute truths. Purchase explained that: 'his method was to implant in the mind of the other person that which he believed to be the truth, and this involved making that person understand even to a limited extent. It would be well if more medical evidence were given with the same end in view.'<sup>40</sup> It is odd that Purchase chose to emphasise the partiality of Spilsbury's evidence in such a way rather than his scientific methods, but the stories of his performances in the criminal courts constitute the bulk of his legacy. He left no textbooks or memoirs, developed no new methods, made no significant

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<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *Coroner*, p.189.

<sup>37</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.471.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.



scientific discoveries, nurtured no apprentices. What he left behind was the impression that the meticulous observation, ratiocination and other feats characteristic of detective fiction were possible in real life. The unknowable reasons for his suicide were therefore an ironic coda to a life spent producing evidence that was considered definitive in order to condemn suspected murderers to death: another indication, perhaps, that this was the end of an era.

Spilsbury was an expert in death. It can be assumed that, whether he contrived it or not, Spilsbury knew the manner of his death would require a post-mortem examination and, almost certainly, an inquest. Dying in Gower Street meant that he fell under Purchase's jurisdiction so his death would be investigated by a friend. Back in 1936, Spilsbury wrote the foreword to the memoirs of another London Coroner, H. R. Oswald, and made the following observation about coroner's courts: 'there is no other Court in which the daily routine – not merely the sensational case – provides a more intimate revelation of the lives and motives of those around us, and of the problems which beset and the tragedies which too often terminate them.'<sup>41</sup> Keeping this in mind, it is possible to imagine that Spilsbury thought the inquest, conducted by his friend, would function as a testimony of certain intimate details of his life that he otherwise left unrecorded. The case cards and notebooks that Spilsbury left behind show how his approach to post-mortem examinations combined routine scientific analyses with an instinct for biography. His books of Post Mortem records<sup>42</sup> are stuffed with ephemera on which he wrote down any material he discovered about his subjects that was of interest but unnecessary for furnishing his reports: the lives of the dead reduced to short paragraphs written on the backs of old court summons, account sheets and receipts from the Junior Carlton Club. Perhaps the real tragedy of Spilsbury's demise is that, allowing for the possibility of secrets kept, no such records of his own death survive.

Without much personal material left behind, and given that he was an intensely isolated figure, Spilsbury's character is elusive. For a man to build his career around evidence to leave behind relatively little material regarding his life and work seems like a cantankerous act of mischief, particularly as he anticipated during his life the difficulties his era might present for future researchers:

If we reflect upon the immense output of printed matter in the form of books, journals and newspapers, we must pity the historian of the future in his attempt to sift the grain from the chaff, in order to present an accurate picture of our times.

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<sup>41</sup> Foreword by Sir Bernard H. Spilsbury in Oswald, H.R., *Memoirs of a London County Coroner* (Plymouth, William Brendon and Son, LTD, 1936), p.7.

<sup>42</sup> Held at The Wellcome Collection and Royal London Hospital.

Of the different sources of information, the memoirs of distinguished men and women may be of the greatest value, from the details which they give of the lives of themselves and of their intimates, and from their accounts of and comments upon current events and controversies.<sup>43</sup>

He authored no books of his own, but traces of Spilsbury are hidden in those different sources of information he points the historian of the future towards. Through a careful reading of those memoirs of distinguished men of his time who *did* leave their own records, it can be discovered that, although aloof, Spilsbury was a clubbable man. Major Arthur Griffiths, a former Inspector of Prisons (1878 to 1896), in his 1907 book *Clubs and Clubmen*, explained in a Wildean manner ‘Some are born to club life, some achieve it, many have it thrust upon them.’<sup>44</sup> Spilsbury seems to fit most obviously into Griffiths’s third category:

There remains the third category of those who are driven to frequent a club constantly, not because they like it, but because they cannot help themselves. They are mostly bachelors, widowers (actual, potential, or temporary), single men, who for the moment have no home of their own, and must be satisfied with the two-thousandth part or share in this great caravanserai. We might be disposed to envy them; but our views change when chance or design brings us to become one of the melancholy band. It is a common fallacy, that he is happiest whose hat covers all his responsibilities. A life self-centred, without close family ties, without duties and affections of one’s own belongings, becomes an intolerable burden some day, and entails an inevitable nemesis. Existence drags on in a dreary, monotonous round, unchequered perhaps by great sorrows, but barren of sunshine and solace; and the miserable end comes after an untended, uncompassionated illness, when the landlady of a lodging round the corner closes the defunct clubman’s eyes.<sup>45</sup>

Spilsbury’s fatal actions on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1947 may have saved him from being found dead in his room by the manageress of the Langorf Hotel. To suggest that loneliness was Spilsbury’s only motivation for attending meetings of clubs and societies, however, would be too simplistic, particularly as many of those he joined complimented his professional interests. He was a member of the Algernon Club with Bentley Purchase, and he ate his final meal at the Junior Carlton Club, one of his regular haunts. He was a dedicated freemason, he joined the Medico-Legal Society, and was accepted as a member of the private group with which this thesis is concerned: Our Society, or the Crimes Club.

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<sup>43</sup> In Oswald, *Memoirs of a London County Coroner*, p.7.

<sup>44</sup> Griffiths, Major Arthur, *Clubs and Clubmen*, (London, Hutchinson and Co., 1907), p.202.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.203.

Browne and Tullett include a tantalising reference to this dining club while discussing Spilsbury's friendship with Sir Travers Humphreys, which began during the Crippen trial: 'The pair met constantly after that, in the courts as counsel and witness, and then as judge and witness, and in later years as members of 'Our Society', the Crimes Club founded by H. B. Irving and others.'<sup>46</sup> The authors provide little more description of this group, or how Spilsbury came to be a member, though his connection to crime certainly did not need elaboration. Relating any more detail about the club and its practices would have been problematic in any case: even though Douglas Browne was a member in the 1950s<sup>47</sup> and so had access to Our Society in a later form, the club kept no archives relating to its events and discussions. Like Spilsbury himself - whose ashes were scattered, unexhumable, at the Golders Green Crematorium Gardens of Remembrance over an unrecorded plot<sup>48</sup> - traces of Our Society can be found throughout the memoirs of clubbable crime enthusiasts of his time. It was a group that is always mentioned by its members with pride and reverence, placing on it a significance that suggests a greater knowledge of its activities would lead to a closer understanding of the men it embraced.

Of the origins and activities of this body, as with the examination of Spilsbury's, there is little evidence. From its early years, Our Society had a policy of discretion, and it was a rule that all members and guests should keep proceedings absolutely private. Yet trails exist that can be followed through the printed material of their times, and by turning upon these men that detective gaze, by attending to details and ephemera, it may be possible to uncover enough evidence to make a case that reveals a version of the truth.

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<sup>46</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.203.

<sup>47</sup> According to the Our Society Members' Book produced in 1958, viewed by me in the private archives of Stewart Evans.

<sup>48</sup> As I discovered on visiting the crematorium and searching the archives with an attendant, very few records were kept of cremation plots in the 1940s.

## Chapter 1 - The Story of a Unique Gathering: Arthur Lambton and the Beginnings of Our Society

‘Our great period in murder,’ wrote George Orwell, in a satirical essay published in 1946, ‘our Elizabethan period, so to speak, seems to have been between roughly 1850 and 1925; and the murderers whose reputation has stood the test of time are the following: Dr Palmer of Rugeley, Jack the Ripper, Neill Cream, Mrs Maybrick, Dr Crippen, Seddon, Joseph Smith, Armstrong, and Bywaters and Thompson.’<sup>49</sup> It was during the latter half of this period that Our Society was established, and one of its most enthusiastic founding members was a man called Arthur Lambton.

Born in 1869, Lambton spent his early childhood in a house on Victoria Road, in the wealthy London district of Kensington. His father instructed him never to play with the lower classes. On one occasion, Lambton remembered a ‘terrible whipping and supperless punishment’ for playing with some children in a neighbouring garden: they were the offspring of a Lord Mayor of London. ‘My father,’ explained Lambton, ‘scoffed at anything civic, just as much as he scoffed at many things.’<sup>50</sup> His father would surely have derided Lambton’s later friendships with some of the other Our Society members, such as William Le Queux who (despite unsubstantiated claims to be descended from French aristocracy) grew up near the Old Kent Road and was the son of a draper’s assistant. As an adult, Lambton discovered his father had reasons in addition to snobbishness for keeping his family isolated, but as a child all he knew was that to avoid punishment he must not stray beyond the confines of his small family circle. Though his father was certainly not a playmate, he was nonetheless a strong influence on his son’s interests, as Lambton describes: ‘my love of criminology must be hereditary, for I know no man, even in the ranks of our club, who was fonder of that study than my father. At the time of the Maybrick case he could talk and think of nothing else.’<sup>51</sup> His father’s strict regime also impeded his interest on occasion: ‘I was forbidden to accompany another youth to the precincts of Wandsworth Gaol, in order to view the hoisting of the black flag signalling the demise of the notorious Kate Webster.’<sup>52</sup> There was another

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<sup>49</sup> Orwell, George, *Decline of the English Murder*, (London, Penguin Books, 2009), p. 15. First published in *Tribune*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1946.

<sup>50</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *My Story*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1925), p.19.

<sup>51</sup> Lambton, Arthur, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, in *The London Magazine*, March Edition, 1923, p.110.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p.109.

occasion on which Lambton believed his father may have scared away a master-criminal attempting to burgle their house. One night, a bell secured to the window shutters sounded and woke the house: 'I can see my father now, marching downstairs with enjoyment written all over his face, and bearing in his hand a carved oaken cudgel, with a monkey's head at one end, and the stem entwined with serpents. However, he discovered nothing.'<sup>53</sup> The next day, footprints were found beneath the window, and plaster casts were taken for the police. Lambton claimed that, two weeks later, one of their neighbours was burgled, and their belongings were later found in the possession of Charles Peace, the notorious burglar hanged for murder in 1879. Lambton claimed the plaster casts 'corresponded with the feet of the arch-criminal.'<sup>54</sup>

Lambton's world began to expand in September 1882 when his mother enrolled him at Westminster School. Towards the end of his second term, he contracted scarlet fever and had to spend some time in a sanatorium. During his recovery, his love of sensational crime fiction was established when he received a parcel from his form-master containing four novels by Wilkie Collins.<sup>55</sup> Lambton loved these books and would later find points within the stories (particularly *No Name*, a novel concerned with illegitimacy) that resonated with his own experience. On visits home from Westminster, he became increasingly aware of his father's dark side. He overheard domestic arguments between his parents concerning his schooling, and was shocked to discover that his father had kept their marriage secret from his aristocratic family, fearing that he would be disinherited for marrying an untitled woman. Lambton's attendance at public school, where he may encounter other members of noble families, threatened to reveal this secret family, and his father feared ruination. The more he learnt about his father, the more Lambton thought of him as a romantic villain from a Wilkie Collins novel. One particular domestic argument, described by Lambton that occurred on a weekend home from Westminster in 1884, revealed how cruel his father could be:

I found my mother crying bitterly and writing a letter; my brother and sister, terribly frightened, standing in a corner of the room; and my father smiling sardonically with the eternal cigar. Then as fast as my mother finished the letter, my father would snigger and then tear it up. This went on till she was worn out. Then upstairs in her room she sobbed out to me that she was writing to be taken away, that she could not stand my father's neglect and ill-treatment of her any longer, and also that shortly before I arrived my father had called her the

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.109.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p.110.

<sup>55</sup> Lambton, *My Story*, p.34.

unprintable name. *I had something to say about that, and if possible I think my father disliked me even more from that day.*<sup>56</sup>

Despite these regular disagreements, Lambton's parents never separated, but their secret marriage had serious repercussions for their children in years to come.

After Westminster, despite his father's concerns that he would get in to debt, Lambton went to Cambridge. He enrolled at Jesus College as a Freshman in September 1888, the Autumn of Terror when Jack the Ripper stalked the streets of Whitechapel. One of his peers at Cambridge was another future member of Our Society, Bertram Fletcher Robinson<sup>57</sup>, at that time a strong member of the Cambridge rugby team (receiving a double 'Blue' for matches against Oxford in 1889 and 1890). It was while he was at Cambridge that Lambton developed a taste for gambling through visits to Newmarket. He would later become a regular at poker clubs and card tables both in London and abroad. As the son of a gentleman (whether recognised as one or not), Lambton believed there were only four careers he could consider: 'the Army, the Navy, the Church and the Bar.'<sup>58</sup> Lambton's father, an army officer, ruled out his son ever joining the military, fearing that gossip about his clandestine marriage would make it through the ranks. Lambton had no interest in the Church and considered studying Law. Halfway through his studies at Cambridge, his mother persuaded him to take up what she believed was a lucrative opportunity working for a stockbroker in the City. This job proved to be a failure, and Lambton was left penniless and without a university education or profession. So began a period of his life when he drifted between countries, gambling and socialising on a very small yearly income allowed by his father. He obtained extra money by writing articles and short stories for magazines, and for one disastrous, though lucrative, period worked as a personal assistant to the ferocious Lady Meux. It was at the apex of his post-Cambridge dalliances that the idea for Our Society was formed. In 1891, whilst on an extended visit to Naples, he befriended a fellow Englishman, as he described in his memoirs in 1925:

Ingleby Oddie – the present Coroner for Westminster – had then but recently left the Navy. It was during a walk on the Corso that our mutual love of criminology came to light. He suggested we should form a small coterie of crime experts and dine together periodically, and asked me to put it into effect. It was not till over ten years later that I gave a lunch at the Carlton Club which was the foetus of

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.41.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.56.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.59.

“The Crimes Club.” And so a casual conversation led to what people to-day kindly call the most interesting dining club in London.<sup>59</sup>

In 1901, two years before that long-planned lunch, Lambton made the mistake of marrying a Hungarian woman whom he barely knew. Their wedding night, as Lambton describes it, was far from romantic: ‘My charming bride informed me that, if I would make a pact with her and consent to live as brother and sister always, I should find her the most correct of wives. She then essayed other tactics. She told me that she would never forgive “the man who had torn her from her Hungarian home.”’<sup>60</sup> The situation peaked when Lambton took his new wife on holiday to Devon, one of several occasions in his memoirs where he references the temptation to commit a crime:

One day, walking on the cliff between Lynmouth and Lynton, she looked at me and said: “I loathe you.”

It is a subject for students, how one can be so wicked in so short a period of existence. As a criminologist, and secretary and founder of “The Crimes Club,” shall I tell you why murder trials fascinate people? It is because of the human interest. We know, at the bottom of our hearts, that we might be in the prisoner’s place in the dock. Many a man, in my place, would have given his wife just one little push and all would have been over – most important of all, she would. There, but for the grace of God, goes Arthur Lambton.<sup>61</sup>

His marriage to this woman was short-lived and a divorce was legally procured: murder was not required. During his attempts to obtain legal documentation for his divorce, Lambton discovered that his father had not merely been hiding his marriage from his family, he had also been lying to his regiment and presenting himself as a bachelor, to the extent that he had signed official forms claiming to be unmarried. Lambton’s lawyer urged him to take legal action against one Lord Huntingfield, who had been publicly declaring that his parents were not married. He received a private apology from Huntingfield who claimed to have been misled by Lambton’s father, and chose not to take the issue further: ‘I was convinced, if there were any scandal, my father would at once commit suicide, and the world would call me a parricide.’<sup>62</sup> Though Lambton always stood up for his parents’ honour, his father remained

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p.76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.190.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p.192.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p.201.

consistently cruel: on his death in 1908, Lambton was left penniless and discovered his father had spent £50,000 on a mistress.<sup>63</sup>

Lambton considered himself to be the unwitting victim of a sequence of terrible injustices and this led him to fantasise about the desperation that could lead a man to commit a crime. He was a prolific memoirist, and it is evident throughout his writing that he was never entirely at peace with his turbulent family history. The sense of unfairness that accompanied what he saw as a denial of his birthright to be allowed to live the life of an aristocratic gentleman, all contributed to Lambton's general interest in crime and justice, but also made him a difficult companion, as an early member of Our Society recalled:

I first met Arthur Lambton in 1905. We were both then members of the New Club in Grafton Street, an institution which catered admirably for impecunious youth. Lambton and I always remained friends, although he was by no means an easy companion due to the fact that he suffered from persecution mania, and was always ready to take offence. The cause of his mania was his illegitimacy.<sup>64</sup>

Evidently, the formal social arrangements of clubland, and the prestige attached to being the founder of a popular dining club, were very important to Lambton: a structured society provided him with a relatively stable social position that he managed to retain while his claims to aristocratic lineage, and his nerves, disintegrated. He received the *decree nisi* from his disastrous first marriage in 1903, the year of the first Our Society dinner.

From the mid-twenties to the early thirties, Lambton produced five books of reminiscences: *My Story* (1924), *The Salad Bowl* (1928), *Thou Shalt Do No Murder* (1930), *Echoes of Causes Celebres* (1931), and *The Galanty Show* (1933). With such an extensive self-cataloguer at its helm, it could be expected that the history of Our Society's early years should have been well documented. This was not the case however, as Lambton's style had much in common with Tristram Shandy, his books filled with diversions and non-sequiturs whilst being thin on dates and specific details. Nevertheless, the members and activities of the club feature throughout all of his books in various ways, showing how important the group was to its self-appointed organiser and irregular chronicler. He wrote a detailed version of the club's beginnings in an article for *The London Magazine's* March edition:

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p.238.

<sup>64</sup> The memories of Quinton Wilson, recorded in the Our Society Members' book of 1993, viewed in the private archives of Stewart Evans.



...it fell out that in Naples I met Mr. Ingleby Oddie, now coroner for Westminster, and an ardent student of [criminology]. When we renewed our acquaintance in England, he told me that he should much like me to meet a friend of his who lived in Norfolk, Mr. Herbert Crosse, and I responded by saying he must meet Mr. H. B. Irving. The result was that on Wednesday December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1903, I gave a lunch at the Carlton Hotel, to which Mr. Oddie brought Mr. Crosse, and the rest of the party consisted of Mr H. B. Irving, the late Lord Albert Godolphin Osborne, Mr. H. Tunstill, and the late Mr. Robert Lang, and I shall always say that that lunch was the kernel of "The Crimes Club."<sup>65</sup>

Lambton notes that Lang never became a full member, although he attended later meetings as a guest, while Tunstill and Lord Osborne did not join the club 'till later.' The true core of original members gathered for the first time three days afterwards:

On the Saturday evening following the lunch at the Carlton, Mr. Tunstill asked me to supper with Mr. Irving. On that night, for the first time, I met Mr. James Beresford Atlay, son of the late Bishop of Hereford, who wrote the only account of the Tichborne trial in the English language.  
...On the night following Mr. Tunstill's supper – or, rather, on the same day – Mr. Irving gave a dinner at his house. We sat down six. We were the original members of "The Crimes Club." Professor Churton Collins, Mr. J. B. Atlay, Mr. S. Ingleby Oddie, Mr. Crosse, the host, and myself.<sup>66</sup>

In other versions of the club's origins, as can be seen in the earlier extract from *My Story*, Lambton tends to omit direct references to Irving's meal: when quoted in *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins* years earlier, Lambton makes no mention of Irving's house but simply observes that the club started with the Professor Collins and 'five other members,'<sup>67</sup> the same list he identified in *The London Magazine* as the originals. A famous actor's involvement in the origins story may have distracted the audience from Lambton's role. Collins's son, author of his father's biography, adds a few more names of members he considers significant: 'Other members of this Club include Sir A. Conan Doyle, Mr E. W. Hornung, Mr Laurence Irving, Mr. William Le Queux, Mr A. E. W. Mason, Mr Max Pemberton, and Mr. George R. Sims.'<sup>68</sup> It is noticeable that L.C. Collins focuses on writers,

<sup>65</sup> Lambton, 'The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering', p.110.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p.111.

<sup>67</sup> Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.202. This book contains an early public reference to Our Society, and L. C. Collins notes: 'I am indebted to the courtesy of the Hon. Secretary of the Club, Mr Arthur Lambton, for the following exclusive and only information to be obtained concerning it.'

<sup>68</sup> Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, p. 203.

in keeping with the interests of his father, who was a lecturer in literature at Birmingham. A few of these names overlap with those identified by Lambton as the first twelve members:

After a short interval the club doubled its numbers and, therefore, by simple arithmetic, we became twelve, the neophytes consisting of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mr Max Pemberton, the late Mr. Fletcher Robinson, Sir Willoughby Maycock, Mr. Arthur Diosy, and the late Mr. F. W. Rose. (I give the names in priority of membership.)<sup>69</sup>

Other versions of Our Society's foundations do not entirely corroborate any one particular story told by Lambton. Samuel Ingleby Oddie, credited by Lambton as his co-creator, makes no reference to meeting him in Naples in his own memoirs, published in 1941. In his version of Our Society's inception, Oddie ignores the meals Lambton claims to have arranged altogether, and gives more credit to Irving for founding the club:

It was in 1903 that I took part in the foundation of "Our Society", a dining-club which met four times a year and consisted of people who took a real interest in cases of murder. The suggestion that such a club should be formed arose at the house of H. B. Irving, the actor, who was himself keenly interested in the subject, and had written several books upon it. We very soon found that many well-known people were anxious to join us, and in 1904 there gathered at one of our dinners at the Great Central Hotel, amongst others, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A. E. W. Mason, Max Pemberton, G. R. Sims, Professor Churton Collins, J. B. Atlay, C. A. Pearson of the *Standard* and *Pearson's Weekly*, Fletcher Robinson, Editor of *Vanity Fair*, Arthur Lambton, and Dr. Herbert Crosse.<sup>70</sup>

Oddie's different emphasis in his version of the club's formation which distances him from its nucleus relates to his negative opinion of its subsequent organisation under Lambton's administration. Once it grew in size in later years, it was no longer to his taste:

It is nearly thirty years since I resigned, but since then I believe it has included among its members such names as Lord Northcliffe, Sir Beerbohm Tree, Sir Edward Marshall Hall, Sir Bernard Spilsbury, and many more famous people. In the early days the dinners were most enjoyable, for they were informal and we were all genuine crime enthusiasts. The discussions of celebrated cases were just pleasant and most interesting after-dinner chats. Later, as the numbers grew, "Our Society" became to my mind, too large and too formal. One's remarks had to take

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<sup>69</sup> Lambton, 'The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering', p.113.

<sup>70</sup> Oddie, S. Ingleby, *Inquest*, (London, Hutchinson & Son LTD, 1941), p.43.

the form of speeches and papers prepared for reading to a large and formidable audience.<sup>71</sup>

Oddie's vision of a small group of friends grew far beyond informality and the waiting list for membership became lengthy.<sup>72</sup> Lambton, however, was proud of the club's popularity and describes the process of its growth:

Then we became twenty. Rules were framed; a nominal subscription imposed; the dinners fixed for three times a year; and a committee was appointed, consisting of the original six members. I have always acted as honorary secretary, except when I was in South Africa and Mr. Rose deputised.

...From twenty we became forty, and well do I remember that when the late Lord Northcliffe joined us, he wrote: "I am delighted to become one of the Forty Thieves."

We remained at forty until comparatively recently, when, on the motion of Sir Edward Marshall Hall – a tremendous asset the great advocate, and a very keen attendant, and we are all indebted to him for many a top-hole evening – we became the pack of cards – fifty-two. And now Sir George Turner wishes us to increase to sixty. This is as good as done; any wish of his is law, for he, too, has worked very hard for us.<sup>73</sup>

The increasing eminence of Our Society made it more attractive to men like William Le Queux, who sought the company of famous people whenever possible. Le Queux's memoir, *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities and Crooks* (1923), is focussed mostly on the writer's encounters with notable people. Published the same year as Lambton's article for *The London Magazine*, Le Queux provides yet another, but similar, version of the club's beginnings:

I am one of the earliest members of [...] "Our Society." It was started by Arthur Lambton – to whom I believe I acted as literary godfather – Ingleby Oddie, now coroner for Westminster, H. B. Irving, Lord Albert Godolphin Osborne, and Herbert Crosse, its object being the study of criminology. Professor Churton Collins, Sir Melville Macnaghten, of Scotland Yard, George R. Sims, Eveleigh Nash, Sir A. Conan Doyle, Max Pemberton, Filson Young, Arthur Diósy, J. B. Harris-Burland, P. W. Everett, Thomas Marlowe, editor of the *Daily Mail*, with Sir Sydney Russell Wells, Sir George Turner, and Sir H. Waterhouse as

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<sup>71</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.43.

<sup>72</sup> Lambton gives a different reason for Oddie leaving the club, stating that he 'had to resign because of holding Crown Office.' Lambton, Arthur, *The Salad Bowl*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1927), p.253.

<sup>73</sup> Lambton, 'The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering', p.113.

representatives of the medical profession, soon gathered round our board, and by the rules membership was strictly limited to forty.

Lord Northcliffe, when he joined, nicknamed us “The Forty Thieves.”<sup>74</sup>

Northcliffe’s Scheherazade-inspired nickname for the group was shared by ‘a local gang of young ruffians’ encountered by George R. Sims in the East End of London while researching *How the Poor Live*.<sup>75</sup> Le Queux goes on to explain that ‘about a dozen guests are allowed and nowadays our membership has been increased to sixty,’<sup>76</sup> confirming that George Turner’s motion, mentioned by Lambton, was passed. Le Queux also lists other notable regular attendants: the Duke of Newcastle, Lord Portarlington, Lord Sackville, Lord Kintore, Sir Eric Drummond, Admiral Sir E. Inglefield, General Sir A. Balfour, Sir Henry Jerningham, Colonel G. Cornwallis-West, Sir E. Marshall-Hall, K.C., Sir H. Curtis Bennett, K C., and Mr Theobald Mathew.<sup>77</sup> Le Queux was a notorious fabricator and his reliability is questionable, but at least some of what he writes tallies with descriptions of the club from Collins, Oddie and Lambton. It is difficult to gather precise information on the club’s early meetings because members were asked to adhere to a policy of privacy. So invested were its members in this rule that there is no real record of their first six dinners at all.<sup>78</sup>

How this secrecy was policed and whether members had to sign an agreement or swear an oath is unclear. Lambton does, however, describe how and why the rule evolved:

When we increased our membership to twenty, each man was allowed to bring a guest, but at the same time we framed a most important rule – viz., that both members and guests were to regard the proceedings as strictly private. It is obvious that this must be so. To have eminent counsel unburdening themselves on famous cases in which they have participated, is a practice that can only be indulged in *in camera*, when secrecy is inviolate.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Le Queux, William, *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities, and Crooks*, (London, Eveleigh Nash and Grayson, 1923), p.295.

<sup>75</sup>Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years’ Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.137.

<sup>76</sup> Le Queux, *Things I Know*, p.295.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p.296.

<sup>78</sup> According to the 1993 Our Society member’s book, no paper was read at the first six meetings ‘so far as is known.’ No record exists until the meeting of 21/5/1905, when J. B. Atlay gave a paper on the Edmund Pook Murder Case.

<sup>79</sup>Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p.113.

In one of his memoirs, Lambton also provides a contradictory description of the secrecy rule as both rigid and flexible: ‘we have an iron rule that what transpires remains within four walls, but naturally the subjects that are to be discussed are another proposition, for it is obvious that any unusually interesting case is bound to come up for discussion sooner or later.’<sup>80</sup> The Great Defender, Sir Edward Marshall Hall, was very supportive of these pledges of secrecy that all members and their guests had to make: he wrote that it gave ‘free play to unfettered discussion.’<sup>81</sup> As well as giving members the freedom to voice opinions about crime and criminals in private without potentially implicating themselves in slander or adversely affecting their careers, secrecy added elements of excitement and escapism – members could consider themselves trusted insiders.

Le Queux, no doubt characteristically eager to show he was in on a secret, could not resist giving a few details about the meetings in his memoirs:

Arthur Lambton, to whose untiring efforts the club is due, and who acts as honorary secretary, takes the chair, and the procedure is, that a member reads a paper on some recent criminal case, and sometimes it is followed by a discussion in which counsel, who has acted for the prosecution or for the defence, takes part. The cases are analysed and the mentality of the guilty one dissected in a manner that is of intense interest to those who study the psychology of crime. My own small contributions have been the description of the crimes of Landru, and how I helped the Sûreté to investigate them, and also a small description of spies I have met. It certainly is the most exclusive and most interesting club in London, and its subscription is two half-crowns yearly!<sup>82</sup>

There is no mention of Le Queux giving a paper on Landru – there is no record of him giving any paper at all – so if this is true, it was likely part of an informal discussion. A comparison between Le Queux’s version of Our Society meetings and Oddie’s demonstrates the difference between the original set up and the later formalisation. It is unlikely that Le Queux is breaking any rules in providing this description as it is related purely to the administration of meetings and he does not divulge any opinions or any other information about discussions that could jeopardise the privacy of his fellow members.

Given the list of famous members, it is unsurprising that Lambton includes numerous anecdotes in his memoirs concerning their behaviour. Because of the privacy rule, these

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<sup>80</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Echoes of Causes Célèbres* (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1931), p. 173.

<sup>81</sup> From Hall’s ‘The Late H. B. Irving: An Appreciation,’ his introduction to Irving, H. B. ed., *Trial of the Wainwrights*, (Edinburgh & London, W. Hodge & Co., 1920), p.xvii.

<sup>82</sup> Le Queux, *Things I Know*, p. 296.

stories are usually about minor social incidents that happened at their meetings. They are often interesting only because they involve eminent men and they give Lambton opportunities to name-drop, perhaps demonstrating the influence of his ‘literary godfather,’ Le Queux. For example, as with any large group, there were disagreements, though not necessarily related to the discussion of crime. Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and the orientalist Arthur Diósy had a memorable falling out. Tree was putting on a play called *The Darling of the Gods* which was based in Japan. Diósy, founder of the Japan Society, came in to consult during the rehearsals. He did not receive an invitation for the opening night and so purchased a ticket for the second, taking with him a Japanese lady. To his horror, Tree had ignored all of his advice and the play was littered with mistakes and anachronisms. According to John Adlard, whose biography of Diósy was published in 1990, Tree had consulted a Japanese artist called Yoshio Markino about ‘Japanning’ the play and was quoted in *The Referee* as preferring ‘the opinion of “a scholarly native of Japan” to that of “a cosmopolitan globe-trotter.”’<sup>83</sup> Their disagreement caused problems for Lambton when organising seating arrangements, especially as Diósy was not the only person with whom Tree had a disagreement:

I think the *Evening Standard* tried to smooth matters over, but no reconciliation was ever effected as I know to my cost, for in the early days of “The Crimes Club” mine was the dubious pleasure of seating the members and their guests. Consequently I always had to place Tree and Diósy as far apart as possible. And as Kemble<sup>84</sup> was also on bad terms with Tree, my office was no sinecure, and the climax was reached when one night Lewis Waller<sup>85</sup> was brought as a guest, and he was not on speaking terms with Sir Herbert, and I am not *quite* sure that he and Kemble spoke.

Are we not grown-up children, we men?<sup>86</sup>

Another problem Lambton encountered was making sure all members and guests were comfortable:

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<sup>83</sup> *The Referee*, January 24<sup>th</sup> 1904, quoted in the Adlard biography of Diósy.

<sup>84</sup> Which Kemble, presumably of the Kemble acting dynasty, Lambton is referring to here is unclear, but it is likely Henry Kemble, who starred in *The Admirable Crichton* with Harry Irving in 1902.

<sup>85</sup> Waller played the title role in Doyle’s *Brigadier Gerard* on the stage and in a film version in 1915. The source of his argument with Tree is not clear, but he had been part of Tree’s company in the 1890s.

<sup>86</sup> Lambton, *The Salad Bowl*, p.147.

Once during a dinner of The Crimes' Club...a famous and very popular politician fainted. The regulation of temperature in a large room is almost always a matter of difficulty. Some people want windows open and some vice versa, as in a railway carriage; there is, too, always the nebula of cigar smoke. In fact, on one occasion some fifteen years ago even in the month of May, because I had ordered windows to be opened, both Sir Ernest Wild and Max Pemberton shivered – and rightly. Neither of them had been to a dinner for a long time, and Sir Ernest in thanking me for welcoming them back into the fold remarked that by no stress of imagination could their welcome be termed a warm one.<sup>87</sup>

Luckily for the politician who fainted, there were many medical men who attended Our Society dinners, and Lambton observed: 'no man has ever received such prompt first aid. He elected to faint in the presence of the cream of the profession.'<sup>88</sup>

One aspect of the club's formation which none of the early members explain is the origin of its official name: Our Society. Their preoccupation with secrecy provides some explanation for the vagueness of title, but there are other connotations of 'Our Society' than merely to obfuscate the purpose of the club. It is at once inclusive and exclusive, implying social democracy whilst also stating firmly that the club is members only. These members were drawn largely from the dominant social and economic groups in society, whereas the criminal was commonly thought of in terms of being part of the lower or working classes. Lambton describes criminals in terms of either dropping out of or opposing society:

When we are told of a great criminal, we should at once consider what is his family history; what has been his environment; what chances has he had in life; and, above all, how far are his parents responsible for his present position. For criminals are divided into two classes – the potential criminal, and the born article. One succumbs to temptation; the other undisguisedly wages war on society, and regards life much as a game of chess. He would far rather earn half-a-crown "on the cross" than acquire a much larger sum honestly, even if no special effort is required.<sup>89</sup>

Our Society is a title that is certainly apt for a group concerned with the study of crime. When Our Society was founded, the term 'criminology' had been coined relatively recently– its first use is usually accredited to the French practitioners of forensic science during the 1870s. Lambton notes that Our Society was formed for 'men who were keenly interested in the study of criminology,' but also observes that it was a word Professor Collins

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p.255.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p.256.

<sup>89</sup> Lambton, 'The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering', p.109.

‘detested’<sup>90</sup> (though he does not given any reason for this dislike). Meaning simply ‘the study of crime and criminals,’<sup>91</sup> criminology is a term that covers a wide range of fields including criminal law, politics, psychology and social history. It is a discipline that has as much to do with society as it has to do with the individual who transgresses its laws, as a more recent historian, David Taylor, describes: ‘The criminal, as much as his or her crime, is to a very large extent a social construct. Thus it is not only easier but, in some respects, more valuable to discover what a society determines to be criminal behaviour than to seek to discover what makes the criminal man or woman.’<sup>92</sup> The study of crime and criminals is therefore also a study of society.

The more informal and lurid sobriquet ‘The Crimes Club’ was often used by members when discussing the dining club with those unfamiliar with its activities. Lambton claimed G. K. Chesterton had been the inspiration for this more informal name through his novel *The Club of Queer Trades* (1912).<sup>93</sup> Referring to the group by this title, however, allows for potential confusion with a similarly-named society that was set up by a group of crime writers, including Dorothy L. Sayers, but which was not affiliated with Our Society in any way.<sup>94</sup> It also created further humorous misunderstandings about the purpose of the club, as this incident recorded by Lambton reveals:

I am reminded of a question that my cousin, Ralph Lambton, put to me when The Crimes’ Club was founded twenty-three years ago. He asked:

“Do you murder people? If so, I wish you’d murder one or two for me.”

I pointed out that the objects of the club were far more innocuous, but at the bottom of my heart I felt that even the most gentle of us know one or two people we should like to “remove,” or if we did not care to do it ourselves, we should like to hear of their removal. I will even go as far in some cases that I wot of to express the opinion that some of us would wish for, not the happy dispatch but the removal to be effected – as they say in the classics – *cum cruciatus*.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.202.

<sup>91</sup> According to the online Oxford English Dictionary <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44443?redirectedFrom=criminology#eid> viewed 28<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, David, *Crime, Policing and Punishment, 1750-1914* (Hong Kong, Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), p.70.

<sup>93</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *The Salad Bowl*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1927), p.255.

<sup>94</sup> Officially known as The Detection Club, this was formed around 1930 and its first chairman was G. K. Chesterton.

<sup>95</sup> Lambton, *The Salad Bowl*, p.212.



The true objects of Our Society were outlined in Lambton's article for *London Magazine* as follows: 'the idea of "The Crimes Club" is not to indulge in what is termed "a morbid sympathy with criminals" but to regard the psychology of crime and to study certain cases on their merits.'<sup>96</sup>

Regardless of the conflicting opinions of how Our Society began, and how much Lambton would like to take full credit, it is clear that H. B. Irving was hugely important during the formation of the club. Sir Edward Marshall Hall declared that 'No notice of Harry Irving... would be in any sense complete which did not contain some reference to the club in which he took so much interest and helped to found.'<sup>97</sup> The involvement of an Irving was no doubt an influence on the club's early popularity with other famous members. If Our Society was properly conceived during the dinner held at the actor's house in December 1903, as Oddie suggests, this would have been at 1 Upper Woburn Place in Bloomsbury, an area of London popular with writers and academics drawn to its museums and universities – notably the British Museum and its reading room. Fittingly, Irving's house had been a crime scene just over a year before and Irving himself had been a victim of burglary, as this short report from *The Cornishman*, Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1902, details:

**MR. H. B. IRVING ROBBED.**

Prio Rizo, 60, an Italian, described as having no home or occupation, has been charged, at Clerkenwell, with stealing from a room in the basement of No. 1, Upper Woburn-place, Bloomsbury, a silver card-case, a silver tobacco-box, and a pair of gold-mounted lorgnettes, value £3 10s, the property of Henry Brodrigg Irving.

Mr. Irving stated that a servant came into the study and told him there was a disturbance. He proceeded into the hall, and at that moment the cook came in from the street with prisoner. She then went for a policeman, and witness stayed with the accused. On an officer arriving Riza produced the property in question. Clara Churchill, cook, said she was having lunch in the kitchen when she saw the prisoner walking out of the area door. She called "Stop thief!" and went out after him, catching him, and bringing him back to the house.

Mr D'Eyncourt remanded the accused.

This burglary was not the most remarkable of crimes, and it is unlikely it would have attracted attention from the press had it not involved a famous actor. Harry Irving was 32 years old at this time and, as well as being the year he was burgled, 1902 was the year his

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<sup>96</sup> Lambton, 'The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering', p.109.

<sup>97</sup> From Hall's 'The Late H. B. Irving: An Appreciation,' his introduction to Irving, H. B. ed., *Trial of the Wainwrights*, (Edinburgh & London, W. Hodge & Co., 1920), p.xvii.

acting career began to take off. He played the lead role of the eponymous butler in the original production of *The Admirable Crichton* by J.M. Barrie at the Duke of York's theatre in London to popular and critical acclaim. The actor himself had a huge fondness for the role: 'Of all the modern parts I have played ... Crichton is undoubtedly my favourite...though the setting of the play was fantastic, it was very real, and there was a great inherent truth in the character of Crichton.'<sup>98</sup> A comedy of manners in which a butler takes charge of his employers when they are all shipwrecked on an island, Crichton was certainly not one of Irving's darker roles. Irving's biographer, Austin Brereton, was pleased with the success of Crichton because it meant 'he could get out of the beaten track of stage villains and other disagreeable characters which he had so often been called upon to play.'<sup>99</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that Irving wanted to get off this 'beaten track.' For him, the criminal character, whether in fact or fiction, was far from dull and through a study of these individuals he thought it was possible to reach a better understanding of human nature in general.

Irving had a turbulent relationship with his father, Sir Henry Irving, who was separated from his mother, but, as with Lambton, the parental influence is clear. Irving learnt from his father that crime was a suitable subject of discussion for intelligent men, as described in this anecdote:

I remember my father telling me that sitting up late one night talking with Tennyson, the latter remarked that he had not kept such late hours since a recent visit of Jowett [master of Balliol and a churchman]. On that occasion the poet and the philosopher had talked together well into the small hours of the morning. My father asked Tennyson what was the subject of conversation that had so engrossed them. "Murders," replied Tennyson. It would have been interesting to have heard Tennyson and Jowett discussing such a theme. The fact is a tribute to the interest that crime has for many men of intellect and imagination.<sup>100</sup>

Henry Irving set an example that showed a greater understanding of the criminal character was worthy of both analytical and creative activity. In the 1870s, when Harry Irving was just a toddler, a satirical article on Henry Irving's portrayal of villains escalated into a court case. The writer George R. Sims, who joined Our Society in its early years, wittily accused Henry Irving of glorifying criminals through his performances. Sims writes about his

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<sup>98</sup> Brereton, Austin, "*H.B.*" and *Laurence Irving*, (London, Grant Richards Ltd., 1922), p.69.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p.68.

<sup>100</sup> Irving, H.B., *A Book of Remarkable Criminals*, (Teddington, Echo Library, 2006), p.4.

article and its consequences in his memoirs: ‘my first public appearance as a journalist was in the dock at the Guildhall Police Court. I had written something in *Fun* which was intended to be satirical and humorous.’<sup>101</sup> This offending piece was titled ‘To a Fashionable Tragedian’ and was written in the form of a letter from ‘A Disinterested Observer.’ It appeared in the Christmas edition of *Fun* magazine in 1875 and did not refer to Henry Irving by name, but did refer to the Tragedian’s imminent portrayal of Othello, making obvious the subject of the letter. Throughout the letter, Sims accused Irving of elevating the criminal through drama. He wrote ‘You have idealised blank-verse butchery until murder and assassination have come to be considered the natural environments of the noble and the heroic,’ and ended the letter ‘If your performance of Othello be trumpeted to the four winds of Heaven by the gang of time-serving reporters in your employ, you will increase the epidemic of wife murder one hundred-fold, and degrade the national drama a further degree towards the level of the Penny Dreadful.’<sup>102</sup>

This happened during the early years of Henry Irving’s career at the Lyceum Theatre when it was under the management of the American actor Hezekiah Linthicum Bateman. Bateman publicly took offence at the article and applied for a summons against *Fun* magazine (which was a weekly publication, similar to *Punch*). However, the seriousness of these allegations is questionable and the investigation into them was more like a publicity stunt. It was widely reported in the press and Sims considered it ‘really more of a theatrical matinée than a judicial enquiry,’ describing how ‘Dion Boucicault...had to fight his way into the court through the mob which had gathered outside to see the celebrities.’<sup>103</sup> However, Henry Irving was unwilling to be drawn into the argument, and during the second day of the hearing declared he would be happy with a simple apology. This was how the matter was resolved, as recorded by Sims: ‘The editor published a nice little apology in *Fun*, and I went round the next day to Irving’s chambers in Grafton Street and had a chat with him, and he was afterwards my very good friend.’<sup>104</sup> Thus a future member of Our Society became acquainted with the father of one of its founders through criminal accusations (from both sides).

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<sup>101</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years’ Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.14.

<sup>102</sup> ‘To a Fashionable Tragedian,’ *Fun*, (London, England), Saturday, December 25, 1875; p.259.

<sup>103</sup> Sims, *My Life*, p.15.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

Like Lambton, but with each other to play with, both Harry and his younger brother, Laurence, became interested in crime as children, as Austin Brereton records:

...they revelled, strange to say, in mock trials...The most favoured of these mock trials was one in which a man was supposed to have been knocked down by a carriage. The boys were in turn counsel for the prosecution and the defence. It is remarkable that thus early in life Harry should have been interpreting a line of thought which developed strongly in later years.<sup>105</sup>

This line of thought led Irving to read Law at university. In September 1888, the same month Lambton went to Cambridge and the Whitechapel murders began to dominate the sensational press, Irving entered New College, Oxford. He cut a dramatic figure as a student, not least because of the strong resemblance to his famous father. Not all of Irving's peers appreciated his eccentricities, as his grandson John H.B. Irving observes:

Harry decided to strike a pose unusual for a freshman. The summit of his everyday attire was a white 'billycock' hat. Normal sartorial convention of the day decreed that all such hats should be black. In consequence he was set upon by some of his fellow students and the offending headgear was damaged. My father, in his book *The Successors*, suggests that this setback caused Harry to retreat into a self-imposed aloofness.<sup>106</sup>

According to one of his university friends, W. J. Morris, Irving's white bowler hat 'seemed to affect undergraduates in much the same way as the red rag annoys the proverbial bull.'<sup>107</sup> These eccentricities of dress coupled with a general aloofness made Irving an imposing figure. The writer and caricaturist Max Beerbohm, who attended Oxford at the same time, told the following story about him:

...the door flew open: in, with the paternal forward tilt of the body, came H.B. Irving. As he crossed the threshold, he said in a deep voice, 'Ha!' He clapped a hand on his host's shoulder, rather in the manner of a very eminent detective arresting a very unimportant thief...His gaze alighted on me.

'This,' said our host, 'is Mr. Beerbohm of Merton College.'

'Ha!' he repeated. And then: 'A brother of Beerbohm Tree, aren't you?'

'A half brother, 'I said faintly.

<sup>105</sup> Brereton, "*H.B.*" and *Laurence Irving*, p.22.

<sup>106</sup> Irving, John H.B., 'H.B.I. & The Crimes Club,' published in the *Journal of The Irving Society*, *First Knight*, Winter 2009 edition (preview copy of article sent to CC by Society secretary Michael Kilgariff, Autumn 2009).

<sup>107</sup> Brereton, "*H.B.*" and *Laurence Irving*, p.36.

‘Ha!’ he replied. It was as though he had said, ‘that may or may not be an extenuating circumstance. I will consider it.’<sup>108</sup>

Max’s half brother, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, was already a famous actor by this time, and would later become a member of Our Society. It seems fitting that in one of their early encounters, Irving should be compared to a detective.

As an aloof eccentric who was not readily accepted by his peers, clubs became important to Irving and many of his early friendships were made through involvement in university societies. He joined both the Oxford University Dramatic Society and the Oxford Union. The OUDS gave him an outlet for his dramatic interests whilst the Union was a forum in which he could further the performative aspects of law he had enjoyed during the mock trials of his childhood. His friend W. J. Morris observed that he was regarded as an affective speaker in the Union ‘not so much from any power of oratory – mere rhetoric he despised – but from a clear-cut, logical appeal that went home to his hearers ... he loved to talk about criminals and to analyse the case for the prosecution and the defence, as though the Law Courts had been his lifelong environment.’<sup>109</sup> In between performances with the OUDS he was also known to encourage the company to play at mock trials with him. It was also through OUDS that he met a beautiful young actress called Dorothea Baird, who later became his wife.

As the 1880s became the 1890s, Irving was still torn between the courtroom and the theatre. In reference to Joshua Reynolds’s painting *David Garrick between Comedy and Tragedy*, Austin Brereton wrote: ‘O that there had been a Reynolds in modern times! H.B. Irving would then have been depicted between Law and the Stage.’<sup>110</sup> In 1892 he appeared at the Garrick Theatre in a play called *A Fool’s Paradise*. The role certainly resonated with Irving’s interests in crime: he played the part of a loving husband who fails to realise his wife is attempting to poison him. Although he received some reasonable reviews, the part did not immediately lead to anything further and this first foray into professional acting proved unsuccessful. In 1894, he was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple.

While Irving considered his options, he received lots of advice from his father’s theatrical friends, including the dramatist Sir Arthur Pinero who said:

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Brereton, “H.B.” and *Laurence Irving*, p.36.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

I had no hesitation in urging him to choose the Bar. Having conformed to custom by reminding him of the precariousness of the actor's calling, I pointed out to him that his histrionic gifts, if he had any, allied to his educational advantages, would be of as much value to him in the solid profession as in the lighter one, and I told him I truly believed that, while his father's commanding public position would be of assistance to him at the Bar, it would assuredly overshadow him in the theatre. Finally, I expressed the opinion that a man, in his choice of a profession, should always make the circumstances in which it is likely to land him in later life his first consideration, and I entered him to remember that a barrister of fifty is still young, and that an actor of fifty – especially a romantic actor – is a veteran. He listened to me with the deepest attention, and seemed impressed by my arguments. Not long afterwards I heard that he had decided to entrust his fortunes on the stage.<sup>111</sup>

Irving's final choice to become a professional actor seems to have been motivated ultimately by personal preference, but Michael Holroyd has speculated that there may have been a question of financial necessity:

at the beginning of the 1890s, after a year of loss at the Lyceum, [Henry] Irving realised in what financial peril he stood. If Harry was to practise at the Bar and Laurence to enter the Diplomatic, they would need extra allowances for several more years. It was a worrying prospect and he wrote to [their mother] proposing that, since their sons seemed determined to prove themselves actors, it might be better for them to join the Lyceum Company<sup>112</sup>

Although the 1890s was a time of financial worry for Henry Irving, it was also the decade which saw him receive a distinction that no other actor had been given before. In 1895, Henry Irving was on Lord Rosebery's birthday list and received a knighthood. This honour would have a significant impact his son, as Austin Brereton observed: 'Fortune certainly smiled on Harry Irving! His parentage meant that all London was open to the young actor. The distinction which he derived from his father was of priceless value. It placed him upon a sure footing in social circles. ... it was something to be the elder son of Sir Henry Irving.'<sup>113</sup> The knighthood was validation from the establishment, making the Irving family pre-eminent in society and placed Harry Irving in an established position to make the social connections that would later contribute to the formation of Our Society.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, p.40.

<sup>112</sup> Holroyd, Michael, *A Strange Eventful History*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 2008), p.216.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p.49.

Two other founding members of Our Society studied at Oxford, though at different times and earlier than Harry Irving. J.B. Atlay attended Oriel College from 1879 to 1883 and received a First in Modern History. Professor Collins graduated from Balliol College in 1872. This means that half the original group of members were Oxford alumni. Two, Oddie and Dr Herbert Crosse, graduated from Edinburgh. Lambton, as already discussed, attended Cambridge but left after a year and never graduated, despite the fact he considered his student days as his happiest. Lambton notes that, once Our Society became well known, students began to express an interest in setting up their own groups for the discussion of crime:

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I was busily engaged in writing one day when the door burst open and two young men rushed in, profuse in apologies, and hastily explained their errand. They were Oxford undergraduates. They had started at Oxford “The Thugs,” which was a club formed on exactly the same lines as “The Crimes’ Club” in London, with a view of discussing crimes.<sup>114</sup>

Where or when this dramatic interruption of Lambton’s day was supposed to have taken place he does not explain, but he does note ““The Thugs” tried to carry on in London. But it died out because men of certain years at the University scatter over the face of the earth, and the club lacked the youth and environment of Oxford.”<sup>115</sup> There was little necessity for the ‘Thugs’ to carry on in London in any case, as Our Society provided the forum for such interests. In May 1923, S. R. Hughes-Smith, a founding member of the ‘Thugs’, presented a paper on the Sidney Street Affray to the Club.<sup>116</sup>

Unlike The Thugs, youth did not seem as important to the functioning of Our Society: Professor Collins was in his mid-fifties when he participated in its inception. He was one of Lambton’s favourite members of Our Society, as he describes:

it is violating no confidence to say that Professor Churton Collins was the mainstay as he was the life and soul of the meetings. Here his marvellous memory, his power of dramatic narration, and his desperate earnestness found full scope, and his rare social gifts made him always the centre of entranced listeners when the conversation wandered – as wander it would – into paths divergent from the main object of the club. Some of the firmest friendships contracted during his latter years were formed at the dinner table of “Our Society.” And any

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<sup>114</sup> Lambton, *The Salad Bowl*, p.207.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p.209.

<sup>116</sup> Our Society members’ book 1993.

member was always a most welcome and fortunate guest in his house. He was the most hospitable of men.<sup>117</sup>

All members of Our Society from these early days who have recorded their memories of Collins are in agreement with Lambton's summation. He was a very popular man and was often asked by fellow diners to entertain them by reciting large passages of literary texts from memory. Unlike Lambton, Collins often sought the company of criminals and found them far from boring.

Lambton records that Collins's interest in the study of crime was awakened in 1891 when he read a book about the Kirwan case. William Kirwan was sentenced to penal servitude for life in 1852 for the murder of his wife whose body had been found on a beach. Collins suspected there had been a miscarriage of justice as it was his opinion that the wife drowned accidentally whilst swimming. He attempted to trace Kirwan, only to find he had been released in 1879 and was last seen headed for America via Queenstown. Collins first attempt to contact a convicted felon may have been unsuccessful, but this did not discourage him from following similar lines of enquiry in the future.

The Kirwan case interested Collins greatly, but Lambton was wrong to describe it as the genesis of his friend's interest in crime. Collins reported on crime for the *Globe* and the *Daily News* in the 1870s. Andrew Kearney, who wrote a biography of Collins in the 1980s, describes the general content of his articles:

[he wrote] about such things as curious London characters and slum life. In search of material, he visited such places as Johnson's opium den (made famous by Dickens in the opening chapter of *Edwin Drood*) and talked with thieves and other social outcasts, sometimes taking up what he saw as cases of injustice. Thus early on he developed a strong interest in criminal life which led him throughout his career to follow up a succession of famous trials and unsolved cases.<sup>118</sup>

Kearney also argues that Collins's 'morbid obsession with crime' was merely symptomatic of his wider interest in the lives of famous people, and writes that the Professor had 'a fascination with the character and life of anyone famous: Collins had an overpowering curiosity in this direction and was immensely knowledgeable on the subject of famous people

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.202.

<sup>118</sup> Kearney, Andrew, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press Limited, 1986), p.18.



– criminal or otherwise – filing away facts about where they lived and died in addition to what they did and were like.’<sup>119</sup> This may be true, but (perhaps unlike the fame-hungry Le Queux) there was something deeper to his wish to learn about criminals, as his son explained: ‘he was not so much interested in the crime, as in the psychology of the criminal. An opportunity to see and converse with one who had been the principle figure in a criminal case which had excited his interest, he would not willingly miss.’<sup>120</sup> Collins sought audiences with people who were considered psychologically different from average members of society, and this was something with which he was personally familiar. Collins had experienced suicidal thoughts and suffered from depression since graduating from Oxford. His efforts to understand the criminal mind ran parallel to his own battle with mental illness.

Like many Victorian criminologists, Collins was also interested in the physical appearance of criminals. This was a topic of great debate in Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century, partly inspired by Darwinist ideas of degeneration and the theories of Cesare Lombroso, but also in response to the French scientist Alphonse Bertillon’s anthropometric system for the identification of criminals by physical measurements (popularly referred to as ‘Bertillonage’). In March 1895, Collins met and conversed with a famous forger called William Roupell. His main recollections in his diary pertain to Roupell’s appearance:

I was surprised to find him a little man – much below the medium height, as from his figure in the trial he appeared tall and commanding. He slightly resembled Swinburne. His moustache and beard and hair were quite grey, nearly white – his nose well formed – a prominent aquiline: the formation of the brow was very overhanging – savouring decidedly of the criminal: but his eyes were not shifty or evasive though not *quite* at ease when they met mine.<sup>121</sup>

He made a similar record of physical appearance of the Tichborne claimant after a meeting in 1897:

His features were very peculiar: forehead, nose, eyes, chin, and jaw quite those of a gentleman, *almost* aristocratic; his ears were most peculiar, particularly the lobes, which were long and pendulant and flat. His eyes were large and prominent and gouty-looking, somewhat goggly; not shifty but not *always* easily and squarely meeting you; with a curious askance look which, combined with

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, p.189.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.190.

twitching and down-pulled thick black eye-lashes, was not captivating; the expression of his face was weary and care-worn. But on the whole his face and expression were not all bad.<sup>122</sup>

Collins's observations about the claimant's features were of more note in this case because physical appearance was the crux of the affair. The Tichborne claimant's real name was thought to be Arthur Orton (he was also known under the name of Tom Castro). Orton's physical similarity to the missing heir, Roger Charles Tichborne, had convinced his distraught mother, Lady Tichborne, that her son was alive, despite strong evidence of fraud (for example, the claimant knew no French, Tichborne was fluent having been born and brought up in Paris). Orton began to live as Roger, receiving a significant allowance from Lady Tichborne until she died in 1868, after which he could no longer access family funds. The famous series of trials in which Orton tried, and failed, to prove that he was Tichborne began in May 1871 and ended in 1874 when he was found guilty of perjury and sentenced to 14 years hard labour (though he only served 10). Our Society member J. B. Atlay's account of the case for the *Famous Trials* series in 1899 was regarded for a time as the standard work on the subject – Lambton described the account as 'a classic,'<sup>123</sup> as might be expected of a man who had his own problems with legitimacy.

After their initial meeting, Collins kept up a correspondence with Orton (who always signed his letters 'R. C. D. Tichborne'). The claimant's letters usually contained stories of poverty, frequent changes of address, requests for money, and declarations of suicidal thoughts that would have resonated with Collins's personal experiences of depression. The claimant died in April 1898, within a year of meeting Collins. George R. Sims, who had also attended the trial, maintained a vigil over his body. He wrote in his memoirs: 'I sat alone by his side in the Marylebone Mortuary and took a final look at the familiar features before the coffin lid was screwed down. On the lid he was described as "Sir Roger Charles Doughty Tichbourne."' <sup>124</sup>

Oddie may have described Our Society as intended for 'people who took a real interest in cases of murder,'<sup>125</sup> but the members' interest in the Tichbourne case demonstrates that crime in general was of diverse appeal. Nevertheless, murder was of special interest to the Crimes Club, and they were fascinated by the psychology of those who took the lives of

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p.191.

<sup>123</sup> Lambton, *The Salad Bowl*, p.249.

<sup>124</sup> Sims, *My Life*, p.144.

<sup>125</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.43.

others. There was, of course, one notorious killer in particular about whose nature it was only possible to speculate: ‘the Jack the Ripper case,’ wrote George Orwell, ‘is in a class by itself.’<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Orwell, *Decline of the English Murder*, p.16.

## Chapter 2 - Pursuing the Shadow of the Ripper: Stereotypes, Speculation, and Satire.

On the wet and gloomy afternoon of Wednesday 19th April 1905, outside the Bishopsgate Police Hospital, not far from London's Liverpool Street railway station (which occupied the original site of the notorious 'Bethlem' Hospital), a group of Our Society's core members gathered together. Those present, armed with umbrellas, were: Samuel Ingleby Oddie, Professor John Churton Collins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.B. Irving, and Dr. Herbert Crosse of Norwich (who had shared lodgings with Oddie while studying medicine at Edinburgh). The Police Hospital, where they met, served the forces of the City of London who patrolled the Square Mile, the greater city falling under the command of their Metropolitan colleagues. It was an apt and convenient meeting point to begin an exploration of the sites synonymous with the most famous murderers ever to stain the wider public consciousness: Buck's Row, Hanbury Street, Berner Street, Mitre Square, and Miller's Court.

The group had been organised by Oddie, who was always filled with terror by Jack the Ripper's crimes, as he described in his memoirs in 1941: 'I saw the police photographs of the mass of human flesh which had once been Mary Kelly, and let it suffice for me to say that in my twenty-seven years as a London Coroner I have seen many gruesome sights, but for sheer horror this surpasses anything I ever set eyes on.'<sup>127</sup> Oddie also observed that the unidentified killer was quite unconcerned, even demonstrative, when leaving evidence behind: 'on the ground in the quiet courtyards where some of these murders were committed there was sometimes found a curious collection of articles placed by the side of the body, such as farthings, a match, a comb, and other trivial things.'<sup>128</sup> The Ripper had little to fear, as crime scene analysis in the late 1880s was limited. Advances such as fingerprinting and tests for human blood did not come into use until the 1900s. During the 1888 Autumn of Terror, the police were chasing shadows.

The murders had taken place 17 years before the walk, when Oddie was a young man. Along with Herbert Crosse, he studied medicine at Edinburgh University in the 1890s and attended lectures on medical jurisprudence given by Edinburgh's first Medical Officer of Health: Sir Henry Littlejohn. Intrigued by this emerging field of study, Oddie put medicine aside to pursue a career in law and, after a short time in the navy (during which he visited

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<sup>127</sup> Oddie, S. Ingleby, *Inquest*, (London, Hutchinson & Son LTD, 1941), p.60.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

Naples and met Arthur Lambton), he ate the necessary number of dinners in Hall and was called to the Bar in 1901. To help further his ambitions, Oddie shadowed the Coroner for Central London, and he also befriended a police surgeon: Dr. Frederick Gordon Brown.

Brown had attended the Ripper's crime scenes and performed the post-mortem examination on Catherine Eddowes. Eddowes, was murdered in the early hours of Sunday 30th September 1888 and was the second of the Ripper's victims that night: the first, Elizabeth Stride, was found on Berner Street around 1am. Eddowes was mutilated severely; her left kidney had been removed.<sup>129</sup> At the Eddowes inquest, Dr. Brown proposed that the murderer's knife must have been at least six inches long and, in view of the extracted kidney, he inferred that the killer had surgical skill. This was his contribution to the popular theory that the perpetrator was a doctor gone mad: a theory, like all the others, that could never be verified as the identity of the killer remained unknown. Brown was happy to share his first-hand experience of this gory mystery, and offered Oddie a tour of the murder scenes, kindly allowing him to 'bring some friends.'<sup>130</sup>

Brown was assisted by three City of London policemen who were also veterans of the investigations. A note in Collins's diary suggests he was particularly pleased to be hearing from a man who '[saw] most of the corpses just after they were murdered.'<sup>131</sup> Though privileged to have an expert guide, Oddie and his fellow members were hardly the first people to embark on a tour for this purpose.<sup>132</sup> Curious people had been making this dark pilgrimage ever since the women were murdered. The crimes were notable for having occurred within a relatively small area which made such walks possible (very different, for example, to Joseph Vacher, the French 'Ripper' who was executed in 1898 for murders committed all over South East France). Whitechapel was the Ripper's hunting ground, and if the reasons behind its attraction could be revealed, perhaps the killer's identity could be

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<sup>129</sup> This kidney is thought by some to have been the same one that was sent to George Lusk of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, accompanied by the famous letter signed 'From Hell.' Also that night in Mitre Square, the famous graffito was discovered, which read: 'The Juwes are The men That Will not be Blamed for nothing.' The writing was removed hastily, allegedly on the orders of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Charles Warren, in case it provoked a public disturbance.

<sup>130</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.58.

<sup>131</sup> Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.199.

<sup>132</sup> In October 1893, for example, the *Guardian* reported that the French writer Émile Zola had toured Whitechapel. Zola had published *La Bête Humaine* in 1890, which was controversial for drawing links between the sex drive and the urge to kill. Zola stated that the character of Jacques Lantier was 'cast in the same mould as "Jack the Ripper"'

discovered. Despite the seventeen year gap, the sites visited by the group in 1905 did not disappoint and provided opportunities to speculate on the Ripper's methods, as Oddie describes vividly in his 1941 memoirs:

They were all as dark and obscure and secret as possible. Nearly all of them, however, were evidently selected as being places from which it would be easy to slip away unobserved. In Buck's Row, for example, there were easy alternative exits. In Mitre Square there were no less than five. In Hanbury Street the scene was the backyard of a common lodging-house, approached by a passage but giving a ready exit into any one of three neighbouring backyards, and thence into the street. Castle Street was similarly chosen for the same reason, and although Miller's Court in Dorset Street seemed to be a trap, yet one had to remember that in this case the Ripper went into the victim's own single room instead of conducting his operations, as in other cases, in the open street. This latter place was a dismal hole seen on a dark, wet, gloomy afternoon. It consisted of one small room, with a very small window, a fire, a chair and a bed. It was sombre and sinister, unwholesome and depressing, and was approached by a single doorstep from a grimy covered passage leading from Dorset Street into the courtyard. Indeed, it was just the sort of mysterious and foul den in which one would imagine, dark, unspeakable deeds would be done. Yet it was only a stone's-throw from the busy Whitechapel Road.<sup>133</sup>

Oddie's gothic description provides little useful information that might help catch a killer, but certainly evokes an atmosphere of uncanny dread in keeping with the shadowed identity of the murderer. Though the sheltered murder spots, which had been described so often in the press, were as expected, it was their proximity to the busy commercial roads of the metropolis that made the possibility of their seclusion so frightening. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Doyle portrayed London as a comprehensible entity, and an arena for crimes so easy to unravel that Holmes complains of them being 'commonplace.'<sup>134</sup> In the 1892 short story 'The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,' Holmes says: 'It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.'<sup>135</sup> It is one of

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<sup>133</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.59.

<sup>134</sup> In *The Sign of Four* (1890), Holmes comments that 'Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.' Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *Sherlock Holmes: The Illustrated Novels*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1993), p.116.

<sup>135</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, 'The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,' *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1986), p. 213.

Doyle's many lines that disavow the danger inherent in the overcrowded city. In real life, however, the low and vile alleyways of Whitechapel kept their secrets.

Where his descriptions of the crime scenes were gothic, Oddie's presentation of the East End inhabitants of Petticoat Lane has more in common with an anthropologist discovering a lost tribe:

[We] got a very interesting sight of the East End Jews in all the excitement of the eve of the Passover. The crowd of alien Jews in Petticoat Lane was amazing. It was impossible to hold up an umbrella, so dense was the crowd, and it was most difficult for our party to keep together. There was no wheeled traffic at all, for the whole street was packed densely from side to side and from end to end with masses of excited foreigners buying and selling strange articles of food, howling, shouting, laughing, and pushing one another about.

Most of the married women wore black wigs, the idea being that they should conceal their charms from the eyes of all save their lawful husbands. Many of the women carried hens under their arms, on their way to a booth where we saw them pay a halfpenny each to have the hen's throat cut by a priest according to ritual with a clean knife without a notch in the blade which was carefully shown to and inspected by all his patrons. There were other booths where fowls could be plucked for a small charge, and others where unleavened cakes could be bought, and we actually saw a cattle stall in Whitechapel containing fifteen cows. Here came Jewish girls with jugs and with instructions from priests and parents to see that the cow was milked direct into their clean jugs. Thus, I thought at the time, does Moses still act as unqualified assistant to the Medical Officer of Health in the East End of London.<sup>136</sup>

Oddie and his friends, who were more familiar with the comforts of the West End, were as aliens themselves on this side of the city. For decades, the British Empire flowed in and out of London through the docks of the East End, which was consequently heaving with working class immigrant life. The development of the railways was encouraging the more affluent classes to move out to the suburbs, but the working classes – dockers, tailors, shopkeepers, prostitutes – had to live close to their place of work. Though detached and patronising, Oddie's impression of the East End is one of joyful community and good nature, not of criminality. He does not pay heed to the sorts of xenophobic theories that were put forward by such people as Sir Robert Anderson, who was Assistant Commissioner of CID in 1888. Quoted in Collins's biography, Anderson wrote: 'the conclusion we came to was that [the

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<sup>136</sup>Oddie, *Inquest*, p.58.

murderer] and his people were certain low-class Polish Jews; for it is a remarkable fact that people of that class in the East End will not give up one of their number to Gentile justice.<sup>137</sup>

Oddie's remarks about the hygienic milking practices and the 'Medical Officer' reflected his scientific interests. Professor Collins's remarks on the scene signalled his own area of expertise: 'Conan Doyle seemed very interested, particularly in the Petticoat Lane part of the expedition, and laughed when I said "Caliban would have turned up his nose at this."' <sup>138</sup> Born in 1848, Collins was 57 at the time of the walk, 11 years older than Doyle, and more than 20 years older than each of the other members in the group. Collins was a Shakespearean scholar, lecturer at Birmingham University, and a notorious reviewer who was unafraid to upset some of the big names of Victorian literature (Lord Tennyson called him 'a louse on the locks of literature'). For him to equate the East End immigrants with Caliban, the wild half-man creature of *The Tempest*, in conversation with a fellow writer, is particularly loaded: he is placing them in a very low social category, somewhere beneath working class in the realms of the savage. Characterising London's underclass as uncivilised was nothing new. In 1890, the Salvation Army founder William Booth had published his famous book *In Darkest London and the Way Out*, which equated the London poor with the African colonies (the title is coined from Sir Henry Morton Stanley's book about Congo exploration, *In Darkest Africa*, which was published in the same year). What was considered uncivilised was often closely linked to the criminal. There was a tradition in the Victorian era of attempting to classify the criminal species, as if criminality were an inherited disease that could somehow be eradicated. Sir Francis Galton, the father of fingerprinting, inspired by the work of Charles Darwin, had coined the term 'eugenics' during his work on race and heredity. Galton had been in favour of immigrants (the 'better sort', at least), and could not have foreseen that his word would eventually be used to justify one of the most prolific acts of murder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Holocaust.

Professor Collins already had some familiarity with the area they were visiting. In the autumn of 1888, while the Ripper was murdering impoverished prostitutes, Collins was lecturing to lower middle-class women in the East End as part of the University Extension Movement.<sup>139</sup> This was a democratic organisation through which men and women who were

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<sup>137</sup> Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, p. 199.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p.200.

<sup>139</sup> Detailed in Kearney, Andrew, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press Limited, 1986), p.133.



unable to attend university full time could access an academic education. They held an annual summer meeting at Collins's *alma mater*, Oxford. A female correspondent, Gertrude W. Nash, in attendance at one of these summer meetings in 1890 recorded that 'The majority of Extensionists who attend this meeting are ... women ... which goes to prove there is an enthusiasm for self improvement amongst our sex.' She also noted 'The hard working middle class is largely represented, and scanning the appearance of the Students one realises that their presence here must have entailed considerable sacrifice.'<sup>140</sup>

There is no available record of Collins's experiences of the East End in 1888, but it surely made an impression. Sir Max Pemberton, a writer and editor who supported Collins's attempts to establish a School of Journalism at Birmingham University in the late 1900s,<sup>141</sup> related his own experience of the drama in his 1936 memoirs:

Few, who did not live through those years, can imagine the terror and apprehension which that series of ghastly murders brought upon us. For months poor women in the East End were afraid to leave their houses at night. They would plead that an assassin might lurk in every alley-way; that death in a revolting shape haunted every street; that the innocent might perish with the guilty, the honest woman with the poor creature whose scanty bread was earned by vice...Terrified girls could not sleep for those visions of the Ripper – even men moved warily in those ill-lighted streets.<sup>142</sup>

Pemberton's misogynistic victim-blaming in this passage is by no means an unusual response for a man of his time. His description of the prostitutes as 'guilty' portrays Jack the Ripper as a vengeful judge, smiting the immoral. It is another unusual feature of these crimes that the targeted victims were also criminals and worthy of criminological study themselves. Fears about the corruption of women rose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due in part to an increase in popular leisure pursuits that grew alongside the wealth of the British Empire. According to a recent social historian, David Taylor, 'women were more heavily involved in those moral crimes, notably prostitution and drunkenness, which so exercised the minds of contemporary commentators. Fears were intensified in the late nineteenth century when it was discovered

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<sup>140</sup>Nash, Gertrude W., 'University Extension,' *The Women's Penny Paper* (London, England), Saturday, August 16, 1890; pg. 509; Issue 95.

<sup>141</sup> Kearney, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*, p. 139.

<sup>142</sup> Pemberton, Sir Max, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, (Plymouth, William Brendon & Son LTD, 1936), p. 244.

that the habitual criminal was more likely to be female.’<sup>143</sup> Pemberton does, however, acknowledge that the East End prostitute is a ‘poor creature’ and that it is poverty that drives the women to ‘vice’ rather than wild sexual appetite. His distinction between the ‘innocent’ and the ‘guilty’ (despite being written in 1936) is typical of the way Victorian women were judged according to what Taylor refers to as a ‘simple (and simplistic) madonna/whore dichotomy.’<sup>144</sup> Jack the Ripper is the eugenicist bogeyman here, identifying the female criminal disease and attempting its elimination.

Despite his democratic approach to the education of women and the middle classes, and his championing of journalism as an academic subject, Professor Collins had concerns about the general increase in mass literacy that had led to the growth of popular newspaper readership. Collins wrote of concerns about the impact of increased literacy on his academic profession in the opening chapter of his 1901 book *Ephemera Critica: Plain Truths About Current Literature*:

It may sound paradoxical to say that the more widely education spreads, the more generally intelligent a nation becomes, the greater is the danger to which Art and Letters are exposed. And yet how obviously is this the case, and how easily is this explained. The quality of skilled work depends mainly on the standard required of the workman. If his judges and patrons belong to the discerning few who, knowing what is excellent, are intolerant of everything which falls short of excellence, the standard required will necessarily be a high one, and the standard required will be the standard attained. In past times, for example, the only men of letters who were respected formed a portion of that highly cultivated class who will always be in the minority; and to that class, and to that class only, they appealed. A community within a community, they regarded the general public with as much indifference as the general public regarded them, and wrote only for themselves, and for those who stood on the same intellectual level as themselves.<sup>145</sup>

With such an attitude, it is understandable that Collins would be excited at the prospect of forming an exclusive society for the pursuit of one of his favourite hobbies. The increase in literacy following the 1870 Education Act coupled with the printing advances at mid-century led to the growth of a popular newspaper press that shared a hunger for stories of crime with Professor Collins and fellow enthusiasts (in fact Lord Northcliffe, who owned *The*

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<sup>143</sup> Taylor, David, *Crime, Policing and Punishment in England, 1750-1914*, (London, Macmillan Press, 1998), p.59.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, p.60.

<sup>145</sup> Collins, John Churton, *Ephemera Critica: Plain Truths About Current Literature* (London, Archibald Constable and Co LTD, 1901), p.13.

*Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *et al*, would also become a member of Our Society). Some publications, such as the *Illustrated Police News*, were entirely dedicated to stories of crime. As an academic professional, however, Collins preferred to appear above the common gawpers, and to be known to study crime at a high intellectual level in order to better understand the criminal mind.

Collins's indifference towards the general public was obvious through his behaviour, as Oddie observes in his memoirs: 'Collins was always quite unaware of other people. He was always engrossed in his own thoughts and conversation and companions.'<sup>146</sup> But if crime was concerned, Collins was immediately interested, no matter what class was involved: 'He was ready to sit up any night and all night talking if he found his company congenial, and especially if the conversation was about well-known murders. He was also keen on visiting scenes of celebrated crimes.'<sup>147</sup>

In Collins's record of the 1905 tour,<sup>148</sup> he omits to include Harry Irving in his own list of attendees and instead refers to someone called 'Laurie'. In doing so, he may have been confusing Harry with his younger brother, Laurence, which would have been an easy mistake as they were very similar and shared their father's striking features.<sup>149</sup> Certainly, it would not have been unusual for Laurence to have been present as he shared his brother's interest in criminology and was also a member of Our Society. In October 1888, at the height of the Ripper murders, Harry Irving entered New College, Oxford, to read Law. Whilst Harry was at Oxford, Laurence was sent to St. Petersburg to learn Russian (he had passed an interview with the Foreign Office and was learning languages to help further a career in the diplomatic service, though he eventually became an actor like his father as well). The two brothers corresponded with each other regularly about the murders as they unfolded in the Press like a serialised detective story without a conclusion. Harry Irving's grandson, John H.B. Irving, records: 'Sometime before Christmas of that year a letter arrived [from Laurence] with this comment: "I saw in the paper about the latest Whitechapel horrors. The incapacity of Scotland Yard is becoming more and more apparent."<sup>150</sup> In criticising the inability of the

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<sup>146</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.56.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins* from p.198.

<sup>149</sup> It is also possible that Collins is referring to his son and biographer, 'Laurie' L.C. Collins, although this is not made clear in *Life and Memoirs*.

<sup>150</sup> Irving, John H.B., 'H.B.I. & The Crimes Club,' published in the Journal of The Irving Society, *First Knight*, Winter 2009 edition (preview copy of article sent to CC by Society secretary Michael Kilgariff, Autumn 2009).

police force to apprehend the perpetrator, the two brothers echoed popular opinion at the time.

The Ripper murders have long been associated with the Irving family, quite apart from their personal interest. As children, the young Irving brothers were taught to paint by Walter Sickert, known for taking a great interest in the crimes. He was fascinated with the case and produced a painting titled *Jack the Ripper's Bedroom* (and, more recently, was identified as the murderer by Patricia Cornwell in her controversial 2001 book *Portrait of a Killer*). Another man considered, apocryphally, to have been a suspect in the case was renting the Lyceum Theatre from Sir Henry Irving in August 1888: the American actor, Richard Mansfield. Mansfield performed the dual title role in an adaptation of R.L.Stevenson's 1886 gothic novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The often repeated story goes that, so convincing was Mansfield's transformation into the murderous Mr Hyde, that some audience members believed it to be real and asked the police to arrest him as a potential Ripper.<sup>151</sup> The story of Jekyll and Hyde was also used by the popular press at the time of the murders and contributed to the representation of the Ripper as a demonic doctor living a double life in the manner of Stevenson's polar protagonist. Whether through exposure to Mansfield's production or through reading the novella, Jekyll and Hyde made a lasting impression on Harry Irving and he resurrected the play in 1910, playing the title role himself.

The Ripper murders were also an inspiration to Sir Henry Irving's theatre manager, Bram Stoker, who channelled them into his gothic creation *Dracula*, which he began working on in 1890 but was not published until six years later. The character of Count Dracula, who emigrates from Transylvania to London and buys up property in the East and West Ends, played on the public fear of the Eastern European Jews. Van Helsing uses theories of criminal atavism to classify Dracula's monstrous otherness, and tells Mina Harker 'The Count is a criminal of the criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso so classify him, and qua criminal he is of imperfectly formed mind.'<sup>152</sup> In his 1901 preface to an Icelandic edition to the novel, Stoker speculates about the nature of Dracula's crimes and draws enigmatic links with the Whitechapel murders: '[Dracula's] series of crimes has not yet passed from the memory – a series of crimes which appear to have originated from the same source, and which at the same time created as much repugnance in people everywhere as the murders of Jack the Ripper,

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<sup>151</sup> There is little to substantiate this story, but it has become a popular part of the Ripper myth and was a significant part of the *Jack the Ripper* television mini-series starring Michael Caine in 1988 (the centenary of the crimes).

<sup>152</sup> Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (Ware, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), p.285

which came into the story a little later.’<sup>153</sup> Sir Henry Irving was not enamoured with *Dracula*, as Michael Holroyd describes:

[Irving] refused even to take part in the copyright reading on 18 May 1897, and when Stoker asked him what he thought of the work, he pronounced it ‘dreadful’. It has been suggested that this intense dislike arose from the fact that Irving was a freemason burdened with the awful responsibility of concealing the Masonic identity of the Ripper. But it seems more likely that he simply refused to accept Stoker as a writer, insisting that he remain the Lyceum’s business manager.<sup>154</sup>

Here Holroyd refers to the Masonic conspiracy theory propagated in Stephen Knight’s 1976 infamous (and widely discredited) book *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*, which was inspired in part by the faulty testimony of a man who claimed to be the illegitimate son of Walter Sickert. Whatever Irving’s true reason’s for disliking *Dracula*, it is clear that the Ripper and his crimes were more than just of passing interest to his sons.

Unlike *Dracula*, *Sherlock Holmes* pre-dated the Autumn of Terror: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*, had been published in December 1887. In *Holmes*, Doyle created a consulting detective, an amateur with a scientific mind who succeeds when the professional police force are found deficient. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes is first encountered experimenting with a corpse at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, close to the Ripper’s stalking ground. Significantly, Doyle did not feature St. Bart’s nor repeat such descriptions of gory medical research in any of the further *Holmes* stories, which were all published after 1888, thus distancing his hero from the Ripper. The *Holmes* mythology did much to improve its reputation, but forensic pathology at the end of the Victorian era was still regarded as beastly. The myth of the mad doctor stalking the streets of Whitechapel echoed a general scepticism about the medical profession: those mysterious men who earned their money dissecting the bodies of the executed. Doyle, Oddie and Crosse all studied medicine at Edinburgh, where Burke and Hare had committed their murders during 1828. Crosse had viewed the skeleton of William Burke at the Museum of Comparative Anatomy at Edinburgh University, and commented on their scheme of suffocating their victims in order to later sell their bodies to be used in anatomy lectures: ‘It was much less exhausting than body-snatching.’<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Quoted from Klinger, Leslie ed., Stoker, Bram, *The New Annotated Dracula* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2008), p.5.

<sup>154</sup> Holroyd, Michael, *A Strange and Eventful History*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 2009), p.287.

<sup>155</sup> In an article ‘Over the Tea Table’ in the *Eastern Evening News*, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1940.

In 1892, Doyle viewed some of the evidence from the Whitechapel murders during a visit to Scotland Yard's 'Black Museum' along with his cricketer friends and fellow-writers, E.W. Hornung and Jerome K. Jerome (who both became members of Our Society), and the medical officer from Newgate Prison. Hornung, who married Doyle's sister Connie in 1893, later became known as the creator of A. J. Raffles: the Amateur Cracksman. In a subversion of the Holmes and Watson partnership, Raffles draws his old school friend, Bunny, into a secret life of crime while maintaining a gentlemanly façade as a cricketing bachelor who lives at the fashionable Albany in Piccadilly. Without the need for a transformative potion like Dr. Jekyll, and with much less murderous intent than Mr. Hyde, Raffles swaps between his public persona as a social insider adhering to behavioural codes, and his secret life as a criminal outsider with questionable ethics. Hornung even suggested that Raffles could outwit the suspicious minds of Our Society: in one notable story published in 1905, 'The Criminologists' Club,' Raffles dines with a group of eminent crime enthusiasts and audaciously robs the host at the same time. Though Doyle admired his brother-in-law's writing, he found the Raffles stories to be 'dangerous in their suggestion' and declared 'you must not make the criminal a hero.'<sup>156</sup>

Doyle was often asked how Sherlock Holmes would have applied his scientific mind to solve the crimes. Viewing the letters signed by 'Jack the Ripper' at Scotland Yard led Doyle to consider handwriting analysis as a potential way to catch the killer. He felt that some of the content of the letters indicated an American writer, but whoever had produced them could be traced by comparison of written documents. In an interview from 1894 he said: 'Holmes' plan would have been to re-produce the letters in facsimile and on each plate indicate briefly the peculiarities of the handwriting. Then publish these facsimiles in the leading newspapers of Great Britain and America and in connection with them offer a reward to anyone who could show them a letter or any other specimen of the same handwriting.'<sup>157</sup> This idea has two very obvious flaws. Firstly, an international campaign with a reward would create a lot of work for the already strained police force and would inevitably have encouraged more unfounded speculation and false allegations. Secondly, Jack's letters were undoubtedly a hoax (a woman, Canadian-born Maria Coroner, had in fact been convicted in

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<sup>156</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *Memories and Adventures*, (Ware, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007), p.225.

<sup>157</sup> 'Conan Doyle in his Study: Theory of Sherlock Holmes Concerning the Whitechapel Murder', *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, 10 June 1894, p.17, reprinted in Orel, Harold ed., *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Interviews and Recollections*, (Wiltshire, Macmillan Academic and Professional LTD, 1991), p.73.

1888 for writing some of them), though Doyle argued it would be just as well to know who had written them.

He had another theory that the killer was a man in female disguise: as a stealthy way to approach his victims and baffle any potential witnesses who were not expecting 'Jill the Ripper.' Doyle was also asked by the local press of Portsmouth in 1888 (when he was still a practising doctor in Southsea) if he would consider the use of spiritualism to contact the victims and identify the culprit. His response, if there was any, is unrecorded. These were the early days of his notorious beliefs regarding the after-life and he was not as vocal about Spiritualism then as he was after 1900. There were, however, other people attempting to detect the killer using the sixth sense, most notably the psychic Robert Lees, friend to the journalist W.T.Stead.

Members of Our Society other than those who were on the walk in 1905 had their own theories too. Arthur Diósy had a particularly curious one with a supernatural flavour. Diósy's father was a political refugee from Hungary who set himself up in London as a wine and food merchant. When Diósy was born in 1856, his father held business premises at 81 Bishopsgate Within, not far from the location of the Police Hospital where Oddie and his friends began their tour in 1905. Diósy was sent to an international school and travelled extensively throughout his life. From an early age he was fascinated by Japanese language and culture, and in 1891 he founded The Japan Society. In keeping with his interest in unusual foreign culture, Diósy's ideas about the Ripper's motives were exotic. In his memoirs, Sir Max Pemberton recalled how Diósy visited CID at Scotland Yard to outline his theory:

He believed the person who committed the Ripper crimes, the maniac who cut so many wretched women to pieces, was the victim of Black Magic. He declared that the concomitants of the crime proved this beyond a per-adventure. In every case, he declared, even when one of the murders was committed on the open street under the very nose of a policeman, there had been a pentagon of lights. In the street case, this pentagon had been formed of the stumps of five matches; in the houses themselves candles had been used. These lights were supposed to bestow invisibility upon the particular person favoured of the devil, and so one murder was committed while a policeman stood but a few yards away. Goats' hair was found, I believe, in almost every instance, and all students of Black Magic will understand the significance of that. There were various other clues, but they were too intricate to be enumerated by the uninstructed; yet they seemed to have convinced the police that there was a great deal in what Diósy said and I am told that they began to make enquiries among those who vended books on Black Magic and among those who were their customers. In the end, Diósy

averred that the names of five men were marked down and that one of them certainly was Jack-the Ripper.<sup>158</sup>

Diósy regaled Our Society with his theory when presenting an impromptu paper in November 1914.<sup>159</sup> Though Pemberton seems to have been quite taken with this Black Magic theory, Oddie was less convinced. In his own memoirs, Oddie recalled that Diósy believed the killer was collecting ingredients for an *elixir vitae*, but differs from Pemberton in his remembrance of the reaction from Scotland Yard: '[Diósy] had been received without enthusiasm, as one can well understand.'<sup>160</sup> The Our Society member's books records that Diósy's presentation of his theory was an impromptu paper given on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1914, during a meeting otherwise concerned with a causerie on 'War Incidents'.

In 1888, there was a more earthly fear that the failure to catch the Ripper could provoke civil unrest. The police had been criticised heavily for their handling of the Bloody Sunday Riots that took place in Trafalgar Square during 1887, and there were concerns that the Ripper would provide an excuse for the emergent working-class socialist movements to arrange a similar protest. The threat of working class action, like the potential for violent murder, was a fear played upon by the sensational press. Lord Northcliffe encouraged his journalists to emphasise these suspicions of the enemy within, destabilizing the empire, in his popular newspapers (notably the *Daily Mail*). One of these journalists was William Le Queux, who featured the threat of working class socialism in his speculative novels about imagined attacks on Britain. Recent biographers of Le Queux made the following observation:

In *The Great War [in England in 1897 (1894)]*, the invasion from abroad is exacerbated by attacks from the enemy within. In the East End of London "the scum of the metropolis had congregated to wage war against their own compatriots"; riots break out in Trafalgar Square, and England is under "attack from both enemy and friend". In *The Invasion [of 1910 (1906)]* the "riff-raff from Whitechapel" swarm through London "in lawless, hungry multitudes".<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Pemberton, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, p. 245.

<sup>159</sup> Our Society Members' Book 1993.

<sup>160</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.62.

<sup>161</sup> Baister, Stephen and Patrick, Chris, *William Le Queux: Master of Mystery*, (Purley, Chris Patrick and Stephen Baister, 2007), p.62.



Le Queux was an infamous and paranoia-inducing conspiracy theorist. He was a prolific writer of gossip and pulp fiction – both concerned in the main with mystery, crime and spies. Often it was difficult to tell if his writing was intended to be fiction or fact, as he was prone to telling fantastic tales - a great example of this being his autobiographical work *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities, and Crooks* (1923). In a chapter which begins with spurious claims about a number of establishment figures on the German payroll to spy during the Great War, Le Queux tells a story about how he came into possession of a number of documents supposedly written by the notorious Russian monk, Rasputin: ‘I found the greater part of a manuscript which he himself a criminal, had evidently intended to publish, entitled “Great Russian Criminals.” It was in French, a language which the monk knew only slightly, and being typed, had evidently been dictated. In it I found to my amazement *the actual truth concerning the “Jack the Ripper” crimes!*’<sup>162</sup> The crux of this revelation (suspiciously secreted away as an aside in an unrelated chapter) was that the truth of the murders had been uncovered by a Russian spy called Niderost who was a member of an East End Anarchist Club. The man identified encompassed the generally held suspicions against foreigners and the medical profession. His name was Dr. Alexander Pedachenko and he lived in Walworth during the Whitechapel murders, having previously worked at a maternity hospital in Tver, where he was known for his ‘homicidal tendencies.’ He was helped by a friend called Levitski who kept watch for police patrols and also wrote the ‘Jack the Ripper’ post-cards. Le Queux quotes heavily from this revelatory document, which also reveals why the Russian Secret Police decided to keep quiet about the Ripper:

The report of Niderost’s discovery amused our Secret Police greatly, for, as a matter of fact, they knew the whole details at the time, and had themselves actively aided and encouraged the crimes, in order to exhibit to the world certain defects of the English police system there having been some misunderstanding and rivalry between our own police and the British. It was, indeed, for that reason that Pedachenko, the greatest and boldest of all Russian criminal lunatics, was encouraged to go to London and commit that series of atrocious crimes, in which agents of our police aided him.<sup>163</sup>

The wild accusations of this tale therefore not only suggest the Russian Police knew who the Ripper was but that they effectively invented him in order to discredit the British

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<sup>162</sup> Le Queux, William, *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities, and Crooks*, (London, Eveleigh Nash and Grayson, 1923), p.270.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, p271.

Police. The story continued with how Pedachenko was eventually smuggled out of London and returned to Ostend where he was ultimately condemned to an asylum after attempting another murder and then died in 1908 whilst still incarcerated. This tale neatly includes every aspect of the usual Ripper conspiracy – the mad doctor, the Eastern immigrant, the intrigue from establishment figures, threats to Britain from foreign forces. Le Queux goes on to say that he checked the verity of the document and there had indeed been a murderer called Pedachenko who lived in Tver, and there was an Anarchist called Niderost who was also connected with the Sidney Street Siege of 1911. Despite Le Queux's presentation of the story as real and his claim to have found evidence of a murderer called Pedachenko, there is nothing to suggest that any of these people or events were anything other than a product of imagination as no corroborating evidence has ever been found. It was undoubtedly another of Le Queux's many tall tales which fed into the mythologies of both Rasputin and Jack the Ripper.

Conspiracy theories involving secret societies or establishment figures portray a dichotomous London society, but during the *fin-de-siècle* there was a blurring of lines. Men such as William Le Queux, who grew up near the Old Kent Road and was the son of a draper's assistant,<sup>164</sup> were able to work their way up in society and build reputations which allowed them to join the exclusive clubs such as Our Society and fraternise with royalty (if Le Queux is to be believed, of course). Eminence, though certainly aided by being born into an established family, was becoming equally determined by financial status and profession. The journalist Bertram Fletcher Robinson, a friend of Doyle and an early member of Our Society, wrote of London Society in 1898:

...there are no rigid lines such as you will find in Vienna or St. Petersburg. [London] Society is a Republic without recognised leaders. A presentation at Court is rather a sign of respectability than of fashion. Dullness and poverty are alike unpardonable sins. No nation in the world welcomes the rich man with more enthusiasm than do the English. In this respect our American cousins admit that we surpass even them. Yet the position of money in the gay world is not surprising when it is remembered that every year its amusements, like the rates, grow more costly.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Patrick and Baister, *William Le Queux: Master of Mystery*, p.3.

<sup>165</sup> Robinson, Bertram Fletcher, 'Capitals at Play: London', *Cassell's Magazine* (series of articles found in bound volume of magazines dated December 1897 to May 1898).

It was important to be interesting and to have money, and the crime enthusiasts of Our Society generally qualified on both counts. They were men who could afford the rates of the best clubs and who were charming enough to have been invited to join in the first place. A successful man could climb his way up in London Society, but a man who was seen to have adhered to working class habits<sup>166</sup> or who failed in some significant way by loss of money or reputation would be less welcome in the wealthy West End. In his article about London amusements, Robinson describes the capital as being less like its European neighbours because the East and West Ends rarely mix:

Between the amusements of the east and west of London a great gulf is fixed, far deeper than that which divides the rich and poor in foreign capitals at play. There is no Prater, no Thiergarten, no Champs Elysees, no Neva islands where all classes flock during the stifling heat of summer in a great city. It is said that in the vast eastern districts live thousands who have never seen the West End. The life of these toilers would to a foreign workman be unendurable. No tree-shaded gardens welcome them of an evening where, their work over, they may sit and listen to the stirring music of military bands, sip their cheap beer, and read their halfpenny paper. South of the Thames lies Battersea, far to the East, Victoria Park. But of what use are these open spaces to the teeming myriads of Islington and Hoxton, of Bermondsey and Walworth, of Poplar and Rotherhithe? A tired man will not walk three miles to a place where he cannot get a glass of beer and some bread and cheese for supper. A greasy coffee tavern, a poisonous public-house, a desolate music-hall is his only resource when he wishes to leave the eternal sameness of the dreary streets behind him. Is it surprising that numbers of them drink? Would not many of those who blame them most severely do the same in their place? On Saturdays they may crowd to the nearest football field; on bank holidays they may journey to Epping Forest or Hampstead, to Greenwich or even distant Margate. But despite the noble efforts of a hundred missions and fresh air funds, many children of twelve and fourteen have never seen a wild flower growing, and do not know the difference between a thrush and a blackbird.<sup>167</sup>

By describing the city as polarised, Robinson continues the conventions established by earlier writers on the London poor such as Henry Mayhew and William Booth. Robinson presents the East and West as two different cities, each unfamiliar with the social world of the other. It is, of course, the view of a Cambridge-educated man familiar with the West End,

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<sup>166</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle was very secretive about his involvement with the Portsmouth Football Club in his early days as a doctor in Southsea, playing under an assumed name to avoid the prejudice of potential patients (and the local cricket team) who regarded football as a working class sport.

<sup>167</sup> Robinson, 'Capitals at Play: London', *Cassell's Magazine*.

someone who would not wish to be seen to have anything in common with the working class of the East End: they are not part of his society. He judges what he considers to be the deficiencies of the East End from a middle class perspective, and some of his observations are over-stated: that a foreign workman would find the East End unendurable, for example, does not acknowledge the considerable number of immigrants who travelled to live there. The living conditions of the London poor could be interpreted as a sign that the Capital itself had failed to keep up with the civilising influence of the British Empire. The activities of Jack the Ripper pointed a bloodied finger at the impoverished conditions of the East End and undermined the claim of the British to have the most civilised society.

George R. Sims - a journalist, playwright, and early member of Our Society – made his own contribution to the literature on the London poor in a series of articles in the same spirit as Booth and Mayhew, collected together and published in a book called *How the Poor Live* in 1883. These articles were written following some time spent exploring the poorer parts of Southwark with a School Board officer. This journey involved some subterfuge: ‘We smoked like furnaces the whole time, but we did not smoke cigars or silver-mounted briars. In order to avoid all suspicion of swank and to make the inhabitants feel more at home in our company, we smoked short clay pipes and coloured them a beautiful black in the course of our pilgrimage through Poverty Land.’<sup>168</sup>

In his introduction to the completed work, he describes his collection of articles as ‘a book of travel’ which he hopes will ‘be found as interesting as any of those newly-explored lands which engage the attention of the Royal Geographical Society – the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as those savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary Societies never cease to appeal for funds.’<sup>169</sup> His efforts to raise concerns for the poor were realised when he was invited to stand before a Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor, presided over by the Prince of Wales. Sims does not record any major changes that followed on from this commission, the members of which seemed more concerned with persuading him to support their own presuppositions: ‘Mr. Samuel Morley tried to make me say that drink was the cause of poverty, and pounded away at me like an Old Bailey cross-examiner until Lord Salisbury came to my rescue and contended that I had

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<sup>168</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.136.

<sup>169</sup>Sims, George R., *How the Poor Live; and, Horrible London*, (London, Garland, 1984)

fully answered the question when I said that drink was one of the causes of poverty, but that poverty was one of the causes of drink.’<sup>170</sup>

Sims credited his adventures in Southwark with sparking his interest in crime: ‘from that moment the criminal became to me a fascinating study. It was my pursuit of this study that earned me whatever reputation as a criminologist I may have, and brought me later on not only into close connexion, but frequently into close personal touch with the authors of some of the most sensational crimes of the day.’<sup>171</sup> This first-hand experience also provided tales of violence in the East End that may provide better examples of how the Ripper may have evaded capture than any theories involving Black Magic or Rasputin:

One afternoon I was talking to a woman who lived in a room that looked on to a backyard in which a few nights previously a man had killed his wife.

The wife had, it seems, shouted “Murder! Help! Murder” when she was attacked; but not one of the inmates of the house had gone to her assistance.

“Why on earth,” I said to the woman, “didn’t you do something when you heard the poor creature shouting for help?”

“Lor’ love yer, sir!” was the reply, “if we was to get out o’ bed every time we ‘eard murder shouted in this ‘ouse we’d be ‘oppin in and out all night.”<sup>172</sup>

During the Ripper murders, Sims reflected on the casual attitude to violence he related in his articles on the London poor, Sims believed *How the Poor Live* to have been prophetic:

Under any civilised conditions it would have been impossible for these monstrous crimes to have been committed one after the other in the heart of a densely-populated neighbourhood. In a series of articles which I wrote some years ago, I described these back yards and the lawless scenes which went on in them night after night, and I explained why the inhabitants took no notice and in no way resented the intrusion of bad characters of both sexes upon their premises. I called attention then to the evil which would certainly result to children reared amid scenes of violence and vice, and familiarised with everything that was loathsome and criminal from their earliest infancy. In “How the Poor Live,” these murders which are now horrifying London were clearly foreshadowed.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Sims, *My Life*, p.137.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, p.138.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, p.137.

<sup>173</sup> From column dated September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1888. George R. Sims ‘Dagonet’ Whitechapel columns from the *Sunday Referee* are collected on this website

[http://www.casebook.org/press\\_reports/dagonet.html](http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/dagonet.html), viewed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

Sims argues that the uncivilised conditions of the East End produced the killer, that the murders must have been committed by someone raised in an area he characterises as lawless and violent. This contradicts the myth of Jack the Ripper as an outsider from the West End, or from abroad, preying on his poor neighbours. Sims does not take into account the anomalous nature of the crimes: if the London poor were breeding such monsters, surely these sadistic mutilations would be more common. The East End was more notorious for gang related violence and social unrest in the form of strikes, protests and riots. For those in power, the threat of working class unrest to the foundations of the British Empire was more frightening than the mutilation of the poor women of its capital.

Sims knew that his essays on the London poor had provoked attention from other journalists in connection with the crimes, particularly foreign observers. His work was quoted in many Continental newspapers and Sims was soon lamenting that his rights were not recognised and he would not profit from the translations of his work. Conversely, whilst the Ripper was helping to publicise Sims's journalism, fear of attack was having a detrimental effect on his interests in the theatre, as many people feared to go out in London at night with the killer still at large.

As well as presenting himself as an informed analytical observer of events, Sims was caught up in the sensation of the unsolved murders as this story from *Cassell's Magazine* shows:

...the following tale is told by [...] Mr George R. Sims (who, it may be recollected, is supposed to have borne a striking personal resemblance to the "real" Jack the Ripper). "On one occasion," says the popular "Dagonet," "I quite accidentally ran a terrible risk. I had borrowed from Paul Merritt a long Japanese knife of a particular murderous character, for melodramatic purposes, and putting it in a black bag, I had gone to the Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel, late at night. I often wonder what would have happened if someone had cried out 'That's the Ripper!' and my black bag had been opened. I could, of course, have proved my innocence at the police-station. But should I ever have got there if a crowd had had the first handling of a man with a knife in a black bag who was declared to be 'Jack'?"<sup>174</sup>

'Dagonet' was the *nom-de-plume* Sims adopted when writing for the *Sunday Referee*. The story of how he was supposed to resemble 'Jack the Ripper' was one he repeated regularly in his column. The tale, which Sims managed to embellish with extra detail over the

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<sup>174</sup> Standing, Percy Cross, 'The Adelphi Dramatists,' *Cassell's Magazine* (series of articles found in bound volume of magazines dated June to November 1905).

years, involved a coffee-stall keeper who served a suspicious man with a blood-stained shirt cuff. This customer had predicted two further murders during a conversation and, suspecting that the man may have been 'Jack' himself, the coffee-stall keeper went to the police. In an attempt to describe the man, he pointed out the portrait of an author on a book he saw in a stationer's window as being very much like the suspect. The author in the portrait was, of course, Sims. This slight brush with mistaken identity would be echoed in Sims's later life when he campaigned for the release of Adolf Beck, a Norwegian falsely imprisoned for another man's crimes.

The columns written by Sims during the murders in Whitechapel are generally satirical. He pokes fun at the media hysteria, first around the suspect known as 'Leather Apron' then around the postcard signed 'Jack the Ripper' which he believed unreservedly was 'an elaborately-prepared hoax.'<sup>175</sup> The fact that the postcard was sent to the Central News Press Agency rather than directly to a newspaper is proof enough for Sims that the prankster belongs to the Press: 'It is an idea which might occur to a Pressman perhaps; and even then it would probably only occur to someone connected with the editorial department of a newspaper, someone who knew what the Central News was, and the place it filled in the business of news supply.'<sup>176</sup> He is suggesting that the newspapers are perpetuating the sensationalism of the story for profit.

Sims had walked the path of the Ripper long before his friends joined the tour group of April 1905. In October 1888, he went on his own tour of the Ripper's hunting ground while the murders were still being committed. He chose a Saturday night and went out with a friend in Whitechapel, both disguised as sailors:

We visited the spots where the murders were committed, and about midnight we had Buck's-row [*sic*] entirely to ourselves. How on earth a murder was committed here without attracting the slightest attention is a great mystery. The houses are so close to the spot – there are so many chances against a secret crime being committed – the place was such an unlikely one for a deliberate assassin to select!<sup>177</sup>

Sims's trip to Whitechapel was not just to investigate the locations of the murders and come up with his own theories, but also to observe the impact the killer was having on the

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<sup>175</sup> From 'Dagonet' column dated 7th October 1888.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> From 'Dagonet' column dated 21st October 1888.

area. The views he saw on that Saturday night in October 1888 when the crimes were fresh differed somewhat from Oddie's experience 17 years later:

The border line between the horrible and the grotesque has grown very fine in Whitechapel of late. There has probably been a revulsion of feeling, and the inhabitants have relieved their overstrained nerves by laughing. Certainly last Saturday night, although another murder was confidently expected, the general body of sightseers and pedestrians were making light of the matter. Along the pavement, which for many a mile is hedged with shooting-galleries and various arrangements, based upon the six-throws-a-penny principle, plenty of hoarse-voiced ruffians were setting a penny puzzle in which the puzzle was to find Jack the Ripper. Jack was upon every tongue, male and female, last Saturday night. The costermonger hawking his goods dragged him in; the quack doctor assured the crowd that his marvellous medicine would cure even Jack of his evil propensities; and at the penny shows, outside which the most ghastly pictures of "the seven victims," all gashes and crimson drops were exhibited, the proprietors made many a facetious reference to the local Terror.<sup>178</sup>

'Jack' was an active threat in 1888, but by 1905 his crimes were a haunting memory, and the murderer himself dormant, if not dead. Sims's experience in Whitechapel illustrates the great extent to which the murders were imprinted on the public consciousness, and this was worrying to some social commentators. Sims was concerned that the sensationalism around the murders and the ready availability of gory detail was unhealthy for the average reader. He predicted the possibility 'of an epidemic of butchery'<sup>179</sup> as a result of exposure to violent ideas. These tales of blood-lust and the mutilation of prostitutes were not appropriate reading for the average middle-class drawing room as he explained:

One enterprising journal has trotted out for the benefit of its readers the Marquis de Sade – probably the most infamous person in the entire history of infamy – and the young lady of fifteen, when she has finished the free love discussion in the Telegraph, turns to her ma and says, "Mamma, dear, who was the Marquis de Sade that they are talking about in connection with these Whitechapel murders?" Mamma probably asks papa, and papa is quite possibly as ignorant as the police; but inquiry begets inquiry, and a great moral pestilence once more sweeps over the surface of society, and leaves its traces upon the generation.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> From column dated 16th September 1888.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*



The potential for the discussion of crime – particularly a crime characterised by violence and sex – to corrupt the innocent was another reason to keep such subjects away from the masses and behind the closed doors of secretive dining societies for intellectual men.

The moral degeneration of society coupled with the increased literacy of the masses was particularly detrimental in Sims's opinion, an interesting echo of Professor Collins's concerns. This was most evident, in his opinion, through the many hoax letters that were regularly sent to and printed by the Press:

The School Board has much to answer for. Many people foresaw a danger in placing the pen within the reach of everyone. It was felt that the indiscriminate use of a weapon far more dangerous than the revolver, far more murderous than Jack the Ripper's knife, would lead to much discomfort and confusion; but the greatest pessimist among the anti-educationalists never imagined that the great newspaper Press of the country would make itself a dustbin for the reception of the waste scribble of irresponsible frivolity and bumptious ignorance.<sup>181</sup>

Sims was an early critic of the almost immediate mythologisation of the Whitechapel murders. He could see that there were too many people caught up in the sensationalism who were not in possession of all of the facts and could not process the information thrown at them by the media in a comprehensive manner. Mass hysteria was not a productive response and it inspired numerous wild theories – some of which originated from men who would join the 'Crimes Club.'

For the 1905 tour group, however, the murders themselves were sensational enough without requiring any further embellishment from conspiracy theories. Oddie stuck to the generally held ideas about the murderer's identity: 'there seems little doubt that the real explanation lies, as I have said, in some insane medical man, possibly a Russian Jew living in the East End, who was a lust murderer, a Sadist, whose insanity increased until it culminated in the wild orgy of Dorset Street and was followed by his own suicide in the Thames.'<sup>182</sup> According to Professor Collins, this theory did not quite agree with Dr. Gordon Brown's own:

There was absolutely no foundation, in his opinion, for the theory that he was a homicidal maniac doctor, whose body was found in the Thames, though that is the theory at Scotland Yard...

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<sup>181</sup> From 'Dagonet' column dated 7th October 1888.

<sup>182</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.62.

...Dr G. Browne (sic) was absolutely of opinion that they still remain an unsolved mystery. He thought the murderer suffered from a sort of homicidal satyriasis – that it was a sexual perversion.<sup>183</sup>

Collins's son and biographer, L. C. Collins, expanded on this supposed theory of Scotland Yard by quoting from the memoirs of Sir Robert Anderson, who claimed CID actually knew the Ripper's identity:

I am almost tempted to disclose the identity of the murderer. But no public benefit would result from such a course, and the traditions of my old department would suffer. I will merely add that the only person who had ever had a good view of the murderer unhesitatingly identified the suspect the instant he was confronted with him; but he refused to give evidence against him.<sup>184</sup>

This idea that CID actually knew the identity of the killer was rather far-fetched, especially as the reputation of the police was so damaged by the failed investigation it could only have been restored by a dramatic uncovering of the real murderer.

George R. Sims was more concerned with satirising the theories of others than in discussing his own interpretation. In a column on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1888 he observed 'The wrong man has not been arrested this week quite so frequently as he was last,'<sup>185</sup> and in his column of 7<sup>th</sup> October he criticised the unnecessary publicity given to various ideas about the crimes:

Everybody has a private theory of his own with regard to these crimes, and naturally I have mine. In all probability mine is as idiotic as the coroner's. But this is such an unpleasant subject – it is becoming such a dangerous subject – that I will spare the public my private views upon the matter, and try and get to something more cheerful as speedily as possible. Bloodshed always has an immense fascination for ordinary mortals. Murders and battles are the things to hurl the circulation of a newspaper sky high, and the Whitechapel lady-killer's essays in lightning surgery have become as a boon and a blessing to men of the Press, who were weary of concocting in the office letters on various subjects of domestic interest, and trying to make them look like genuine outside contributions.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, p. 199.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> From 'Dagonet' column dated 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1888.

<sup>186</sup> From 'Dagonet' column dated 7<sup>th</sup> October 1888.

He outlined his own theories in later years, which were not dissimilar to those of Oddie. Sims did not have much faith in the integrity of the journalism surrounding the Whitechapel murders or in the theories that were reported. In fact, the quantity of reporting muddied the investigation to the extent that it became difficult to tell what was real and what was not, with so much hearsay and many false leads including the distasteful hoax letters.

As with all those who wandered the streets of Whitechapel before and since that April day in 1905, Oddie and his friends were unable to reveal the identity of the murderer, though they and their other Crime Club associates contributed a variety of theories. The gruesome murders were entwined with the history of the capital and its police forces, but in the absence of the killer there was too little to hold the serious attention of those who were more interested in the psychology of the criminal. On some occasions, the carnal blood-lust of the Ripper murders figured as little more than a ghoulish in-joke between members. The first Honorary Secretary of Our Society, Arthur Lambton, recalled that an unnamed peer had applied for membership of the club and was keen to present his own ideas about the unsolved case. This peer, however, was unpopular with the established membership. To put him off, James Beresford Atlay sent the following letter:

Dear -----

I am desired by my Committee to thank you very much for your kind offer to read to us a paper on the Whitechapel murders, but you will appreciate the reason why we cannot accept it when I tell you that the Whitechapel Murderer happens to be a very near and dear relative of one of our most popular members...<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *The Salad Bowl*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1927), p. 249.

### Chapter 3 – Was He Anything Like a Detective? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Influence of Sherlock Holmes.

In his memoir *Things I Know*, one of the many unreliable stories told by William Le Queux involves a meeting with the Queen of Romania: ‘She was eager to know about a number of our popular writers. What was Conan Doyle like? Had I met him? Was he anything like a detective?’<sup>188</sup> Though his record of these questions implies that there was some reason the Queen would expect Le Queux to be familiar with Doyle, he does not document his answers to these questions or in any other way confirm the familiarity with Doyle she assumes him to have. Whether Le Queux was as well-known to Doyle as this incident implies or not is unclear. Le Queux does not feature in Doyle’s memoirs, though he is mentioned briefly by the author during correspondence published in the *Saturday Review* in 1922 (to be discussed in Chapter 7). In fairness to Le Queux, Doyle makes no mention of Our Society at all in his autobiography, indicating perhaps that this author of mysteries and adventures took the rule of privacy very seriously. For Le Queux to leave his relationship with the creator of Sherlock Holmes unexamined and unsubstantiated suggests there was actually little to tell about any encounters they had. He tantalises his readers with the promise of some insight into the character of the famous author, then leaves them asking the same questions as the Romanian Queen.

Whether Doyle was anything like a detective or not is a superficial question in any case: a more productive line of enquiry for this thesis would be to ask what lay behind the archetype he created, and how the popularity of Sherlock Holmes fed into the activities and discussions of Our Society. In the 16 years before the club was founded, Sherlock Holmes had appeared in two novels and 24 short stories, through which he had begun to seem alive to the general public. Doyle himself had grown to dislike his creation and attempted to kill him off. It was at the end of a second series of short stories – *The Memoirs* – published in *The Strand Magazine* during 1892-93, that Holmes was supposed to have died in battle with Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls. It was the end of Doyle’s detective stories, or so it seemed for a time, but it was only the beginning of an immortal global phenomenon through which

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<sup>188</sup> Le Queux, William, *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities, and Crooks*, (London, Eveleigh Nash and Grayson, 1923), p.93.

the pipe and deerstalker became universally recognised symbols of a character that transcended the original texts.

Doyle could never have imagined the extreme level of dedication his stories would attract, and he wrote in his autobiography:

I do not think that I ever realised what a living actual personality Holmes had become to the more guileless readers, until I heard of the very pleasing story of the charabanc of French schoolboys who, when asked what they wanted to see first in London, replied unanimously that they wanted to see Mr Holmes's lodgings in Baker Street. Many have asked me which house it is, but that is a point which for excellent reasons I will not decide.<sup>189</sup>

Doyle furnished Holmes with a realistic address and this attracted letter writers, though in reality Baker Street did not extend as far as 221 at the time of the stories and there was no letterbox to receive them. The Royal Mail decided to send them somewhere, however, and in the absence of 221B they were forwarded to Doyle. The first known letter to have been written to Sherlock Holmes was from a tobacconist in Philadelphia requesting a copy of his monograph on tobacco ash. This was in 1890, when the second Holmes novel *The Sign of Four* was published. Ever since then, letters have been written to Holmes with all sorts of requests from autographs, general well-wishing, personal information and clarification on points from the stories, to requests for help with mysteries both genuine and fabricated. Peter Costello describes some of them in his book *Conan Doyle: Detective*:

There was a young man in Glasgow who would write the exact minute of composition – say 7.14p.m. – on his letter; a letter all the way from the south of Portugal; an American lady with curvature of the spine; a Liverpool merchant who ‘burns to know who Jack the Ripper is’; and others “who believe their neighbours are starving maiden aunts to death in hermetically sealed attics.”<sup>190</sup>

Not all the letters received by Doyle as a response to the Holmes stories were addressed to his creation: he received a large amount of correspondence from readers addressed directly to him as well, and was often approached to solve mysteries in his own right (as will be discussed in later chapters). Creator and creation were often confused for each other, like

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<sup>189</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *Memories and Adventures*, (Ware, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007), p.92.

<sup>190</sup> Costello, Peter, *Conan Doyle: Detective* (London, Constable & Robinson LTD, 2006), p.35.

Frankenstein and his monster. Doyle himself certainly felt he had at least some analytical powers akin to a detective and wrote: ‘a man cannot spin a character out of his own inner consciousness and make it really life-like unless he has some possibilities of that character within him’<sup>191</sup> – a dangerous claim from the man who also invented the Napoleon of Crime, Professor Moriarty.

Unlike Arthur Lambton, Doyle kept the details of his family past very private, but, like Our Society’s Honorary Secretary, he had also lived through a traumatic childhood, punctuated by instances of chaos and poverty as a consequence of his father’s alcoholism and turbulent mental state. As the eldest son, when his father, Charles, was finally institutionalised, Doyle assumed the position of man of the house at a young age, vowing to provide for his mother and make some reparation for her difficult marriage. When his father eventually died in 1893, Doyle did not attend the funeral. That December, ‘The Final Problem,’ in which Holmes was supposed to have met his demise at the Reichenbach Falls, was first published in *The Strand Magazine*. In 1893, at least, Holmes and Charles Doyle mirror each other in death.

Holmes is an autodidact and an amateur: part of his appeal is that he is autonomous and operates according to his own moral compass rather than the mechanisms of the Law. Like the villains he pursues, Holmes operates outside of societal constraints and expectations. Unlike Charles Doyle, Holmes’s eccentric behaviour does not have any negative consequences for any dependents because he eschews love and dedicates his life to work. Although consulted by the police force, he is neither employed nor trained by them – in fact, the police are portrayed as severely deficient throughout the stories, hence the need for the help of an expert. Holmes is university educated, but the nature of his degree and the location of his studies are never disclosed. His method of applying scientific thinking to criminal investigation is slightly ahead of his time, though he was soon overtaken by real forensic scientists and never quite caught up with them, as will be discussed in chapter 7. The respect given to his knowledge often gives him licence to act above, and occasionally outside, the Law: whether burgling a blackmailer, pardoning a jewel thief, or throwing his nemesis from a Swiss waterfall.

Just as the Whitechapel Murders of 1888 had demonstrated the inadequacies of police methods in real life, Holmes’s fictional adventures highlight some potential deficiencies of British Law and Order. Holmes’s unconventional approach to justice is, however, too

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<sup>191</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.84.

fantastical and morally ambiguous to be applied in reality. In an article for *T.P.'s Weekly* published in 1903, Sir Robert Anderson, a former Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, highlighted that Holmes could easily be accused of ‘felony-compounding’:

Some of us have done a little in that line, but not without misgivings, and only in matters of small importance. But Sherlock Holmes displays his magnificent contempt for law by dealing in this way with felonies of exceptional gravity, as in “The Blue Carbuncle” and “The Beryl Coronet.” And in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” he goes to the extreme length of screening a murderer, albeit an innocent man stands charged with the crime. To pursue this further by calling attention to minor slips in both law and practice would be ungracious to the distinguished author to whom we are indebted for these charming tales. For, as we have seen, his purpose has been not to give us pattern cases of crime and detection in order to instruct police officers in their duties – some of his best stories, indeed, have no relation whatever to crime – but to promote in all of us the habit of thinking; and to teach us, as he himself expresses it, “to think analytically” – “to think backward.” All classes of the community may profit by this lesson; and by none is it more needed than by those who fancy they need it least, our scientific experts and teachers of science.<sup>192</sup>

As can be seen from his parting challenge, Anderson reverses the criticisms aimed at police deficiencies and uses Holmes as an example to challenge the practices of the rising professions of the scientific expert witnesses. This was a field with which Doyle was very familiar as he studied medicine at Edinburgh University from 1876 to 1881 (Our Society founders Samuel Ingleby Oddie and Herbert Crosse did the same in the 1890s).

Doyle’s medical background was evidentially an influence on his fiction. Elements of Holmes’s methods have more in common with those of a medical practitioner than with those of the police force. He refers to himself as a consulting detective, and potential clients visit him in his Baker Street apartment – a stone’s throw from Harley Street - to have their mysterious problems diagnosed. Dr Watson is introduced to Holmes in the dissecting wards of St Bartholomew’s Hospital<sup>193</sup> in London, 1880. When they first meet, Holmes tells Watson he has made ‘the most practical medico-legal discovery for years’<sup>194</sup> by developing a test to

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<sup>192</sup> Anderson, Sir Robert, ‘Sherlock Holmes, Detective. As Seen by Scotland Yard,’ *T.P.'s Weekly*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1903, p.557.

<sup>193</sup> St. Bartholomew’s Hospital would later become the employer Sir Bernard Spilsbury in real life.

<sup>194</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, ‘A Study in Scarlet’ in *Sherlock Holmes: The Illustrated Novels*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1993), p.7.

identify human blood – a real test would not be developed until 1900 (the precipitin test, perfected by German scientist Paul Uhlenhuth). An American academic, Ronald R. Thomas, has observed that the Holmes stories ‘anticipated actual procedures in scientific police practice by offering fantasies of social control and knowledge before the actual technology to achieve either was available. At times, these texts seemed to call those technologies into being.’<sup>195</sup> Holmes’s analytical faculties are used to restore order from chaos or mystery, creating an idealised fantasy of the possibilities of the scientific study of crime in the real world.

The popularity of Doyle’s analytical detective helped catalyse the public interest in the evolution of forensic science. Sir Sydney Smith, an eminent forensic scientist who graduated from Edinburgh University in 1912, wrote in 1959:

To-day criminal investigation is a science, and the plodding policeman gaping admiringly at the gifted amateur is an anachronism. This was not always so and the change owes much to the influence of Sherlock Holmes. An author may feel satisfaction when his fiction is accepted as true to life: Conan Doyle had the rare, perhaps unique, distinction of seeing life become true to his fiction.<sup>196</sup>

Though he treats Holmes and his creator with reverence, Smith positioned himself as a rival to Sir Bernard Spilsbury, who for a time was regarded popularly as Sherlock Holmes made real (as discussed in the Prologue to this thesis). The development of forensic science, however, pre-dated both the Holmes stories and the famous expert witnesses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Spilsbury and Smith, by some time. Smith describes the importance of Edinburgh University to the emerging field:

Modern forensic medicine...grew up first in Germany and France. Britain was late in the field, and the first Chair – at Edinburgh University – was not created until 1807. This step was criticised in the House of Commons, one member opposing it on the grounds that he could not understand what medical jurisprudence meant. In 1834 Alfred Swaine Taylor was appointed to a similar Chair at Guy’s Hospital Medical School.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Thomas, Ronald R., *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.4.

<sup>196</sup> Smith, Sir Sydney, *Mostly Murder*, (London, George G. Harrap and Co. LTD, 1959), p.30.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, p.38.



There was one distinctive person at Edinburgh who provided inspiration to the young Doyle, as described vividly in his memoirs:

...the most notable of the characters whom I met was one Joseph Bell, surgeon at the Edinburgh Infirmary. Bell was a very remarkable man in body and mind. He was thin, wiry, dark, with a high-nosed acute face, penetrating grey eyes, angular shoulders, and a jerky way of walking. His voice was high and discordant. He was a very skilful surgeon, but his strong point was diagnosis, not only of disease, but of occupation and character.<sup>198</sup>

After this description, it comes as no surprise later in his memoirs when Doyle writes ‘I thought of my old teacher Joe Bell, of his eagle face, of his curious ways, of his eerie trick of spotting details. If he were a detective he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer an exact science.’<sup>199</sup> Sherlock Holmes owed much to the Edinburgh doctor. During his studies, Doyle became Bell’s outpatient clerk, a partnership that has tempted comparison with Holmes and Watson<sup>200</sup>. In fact, Bell fulfilled the role of sidekick to another scientist, Sir Henry Littlejohn, as described here by Smith:

In Edinburgh it was usual for the Professor of Medical Jurisprudence to be also Chief Surgeon to the City Police. Sir Henry Littlejohn...held both appointments when Conan Doyle was learning the habits of observation from Joe Bell. Bell dabbled in criminal investigation, and worked with Sir Henry on a number of cases. Although a purely amateur detective without any official status, the original of Sherlock Holmes sometimes put the seal on his efforts by giving evidence to the Crown.<sup>201</sup>

Doyle was, of course, the conduit between Bell and Holmes and, as Bell’s protégé, one may infer that the student would have picked up some of his teacher’s investigative skills.

Doyle’s university years were also characterised by a loss of faith. His family background was predominantly Catholic and he had attended a Jesuit boarding school (Stonyhurst, in Lancashire) but by the time he came to study medicine, he felt he had read too widely to adhere to religious didacticism:

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<sup>198</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.19.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, p.63.

<sup>200</sup> The BBC produced a sensational series called *Murder Rooms* in 2000 which played with this idea and had the pair solving unusual crimes together in Edinburgh.

<sup>201</sup> Smith, *Mostly Murder*, p.38.

I found that the foundations not only of Roman Catholicism but of the whole Christian faith, as presented to me in nineteenth century theology, were so weak that my mind could not build upon them. It is to be remembered that these were the years when Huxley, Tyndall, Darwin, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill were our chief philosophers, and that even the man in the street felt the strong sweeping current of their thought, while to the young student, eager and impressionable, it was overwhelming.<sup>202</sup>

Doyle highlights some famous names that were shaping the way many of his generation understood society, which in itself was also increasingly secular. Their ideas were fundamental to the changing ways of thinking about criminals and influenced the Positivist, or determinist, arguments about criminality that arose during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, they were moving away from Biblical ideas about human nature that were based on the free choice of an individual to commit or not to commit a sin, and towards biological explanations for criminal behaviour. Five years after Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* was published in which he discussed the possibility that criminals were men reverting to a savage or atavistic state. One of the main problems with this Positivist stance is that it suggests criminal behaviour is predetermined and therefore the perpetrator is not really at fault, criminals are merely suffering from a biological condition that could be cured if the scientific cause were established. This approach to understanding criminality does not take into account an individual's power to choose or to make moral judgements, nor does it acknowledge the impact of social circumstances. Doyle later rejected those early thinkers who influenced his student self and wrote in his autobiography 'I know now that their negative attitude was even more mistaken, and very much more dangerous, than the positive positions which they attacked with such destructive criticism.'<sup>203</sup> Nevertheless, the influence of their theories can be found in both Doyle's fiction and non-fiction work, not least in Holmes's diagnostic approach to crime-solving.

After the 'The Final Problem' appeared in the December 1893 edition of *The Strand Magazine*, it seemed Doyle had lost interest in detectives, crime, and forensic science. He had grown weary of Holmes, he said, 'I felt that it was irksome, this searching for plots – and if it must be getting irksome for me, most certainly, I argued, it must be losing its freshness for

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<sup>202</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.25.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

others.’<sup>204</sup> In Holmes’s absence, during the latter years of the 1890s, Doyle had turned his attention to historical romances and semi-autobiographical medical tales. The attitudes he held as a student were softening. He was now a married man and a father, and the interest in spiritualism which characterised his later life (to be discussed in chapter 7) was beginning to grow. Capitalising on the fame that came with being a popular writer, he became a regular campaigner in the press, writing frequent letters to voice opinions on a wide range of subjects including the conduct of war, the ethics of literary criticism and Britain’s relationship with America.

Yet it was because of the ‘irksome’ detective stories that Doyle had the financial freedom to embark on these other projects. Holmes might be dead but the royalties continued to roll in and were swelled by an eponymous play that opened in America at the turn of the century. Holmes was played by an actor named William Gillette<sup>205</sup> who collaborated with Doyle in 1899 to produce the play. Doyle had not been at all precious about his intellectual property and gave Gillette more or less free reign to do as he liked with the character. Gillette took full advantage to the extent that he gave Holmes, the confirmed bachelor, a love interest called Alice Faulkener. *Sherlock Holmes* opened with a tour of New York State in October 1899 before a residency at the Garrick Theatre in New York City from November 1899 to June 1900. Despite Gillette’s melodramatic interpretation, which distanced his Holmes from the original stories, the play was a huge success in America and continued to be so when it moved to London in 1901. It was an exciting play because, despite the liberties taken with the character, it was the first time audiences were able to view a serious incarnation of Holmes. Gillette’s interpretation, including the use of a curved pipe and deerstalker, influenced the image of the detective for a long time to come and inspired other actors who subsequently played the detective such as Basil Rathbone.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes (but in the spirit of his more gregarious companion, Dr. Watson) Doyle was a serial joiner of clubs, from casual groups like cricket teams and literary societies to more exclusive institutions like the Reform Club and the Freemasons. Andrew Lycett explains why he feels clubs were important to the author: ‘Always conscious of being a Celtic outsider, Arthur was attracted to such clubs for their sense of belonging. The more

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<sup>204</sup> Introduction to Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996) p.XI.

<sup>205</sup> Gillette also played the eponymous Crichton in the 1903 Broadway production of J M Barrie’s play which shared the same producer, Charles Frohman, as the original 1902 run starring H. B. Irving.

secretive, such as the Freemasons, the more they appealed to his ingrained Jesuit sensibilities.<sup>206</sup> It is true that, as a Scotsman with Irish relations and a Jesuit education who was trying to integrate into English society, being recognised as a member of such prestigious clubland institutions as the Reform and the Atheneum helped Doyle solidify a certain social status.

Membership of clubs was incredibly important to the class of men who attended Our Society dinners. Sir Max Pemberton and William Le Queux include of whole chapters of their memoirs dedicated to the London clubs (Pemberton's titled 'Some of London's Dining Clubs' and Le Queux's 'Adventures in Clubland'), and although this may appear to be merely an excuse to divulge some humorous anecdotes and observations, these chapters also send an important message to the reader: their authors are clubbable men. Clubland had evolved from the coffee houses of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to something more established and organised. Clubs were where men went to debate and enjoy fellowship and discussion. The private gentlemen's clubs had rooms where their members could stay overnight, providing a second home away from domestic responsibilities. Doyle often resided at the Reform Club during his first wife's convalescence. One of Doyle's Reform Club friends in the 1890s was Sir John Robinson, editor of the *Daily News* for which Sims had written his *Horrible London* series of articles in the 1880s (in his memoirs, Sims referred to Sir John Robinson as 'my very good friend'<sup>207</sup>). Sir John's nephew, Bertram Fletcher Robinson, a journalist and an early member of Our Society, developed a famously influential friendship with Doyle. It was Robinson who reawakened Doyle's interest in crime and inspired him to bring back Sherlock Holmes from the dead.

Robinson's career as a journalist began in 1892 when he was employed by a fellow Cambridge alumnus, Rudolf Chambers Lehmann, to write rugby articles for a periodical aimed at undergraduates called *The Granta* (Robinson's Cambridge days, which coincided with Lambton's, were discussed briefly in chapter 1). In 1896, he wrote a book on rugby for *The Isthmian Library* which was edited by Max Pemberton. Robinson became friends with Pemberton, who also wrote detective fiction and whose novel, *The Wheels of Anarchy* (1908), was dedicated to Robinson for conceiving the original idea. During the 1890s, Pemberton

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<sup>206</sup> Lycett, Andrew, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p.287.

<sup>207</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.248.

worked as the editor of *Cassell's Magazine*, for which Robinson wrote many articles and which also featured stories by William Le Queux.

Doyle became close to Robinson at the end of an adventure. On July 11<sup>th</sup> 1900, after spending some time in South Africa as a medical volunteer during the Second Boer War, Doyle left Cape Town for Southampton aboard the patriotically-named *Briton*. The passenger list was impressive, including the Duke of Norfolk, Lord Edward Talbot, Sir John Willoughby, the Duke of Marlborough, Lady Sarah Wilson and the Hon. Ivor Guest (later Lord Wimborne).<sup>208</sup> Doyle, however, spent most of his time during the voyage with Robinson. Athletic and moustachioed like his new friend, but over 10 years his junior, Robinson was covering the war for the *Daily Express* – a new publication at that time as the first edition appeared in April that same year. According to Harold Gaye Michelmores, a friend of Robinson, on the voyage home from South Africa, the two new friends discussed the unreliability of finger-prints as evidence:

Fletcher Robinson asked Conan Doyle if it had occurred to him how easy it would be to implicate a man in a murder crime if you could obtain a finger-print of his in wax for reproduction in blood on a wall or some other obvious place near the seat of the crime.

Conan Doyle was taken by the idea and asked Fletcher Robinson whether he intended to use it in his own literary work. Fletcher Robinson replied: 'not immediately,' and Conan Doyle offered him 50 pounds for the idea which Fletcher Robinson accepted<sup>209</sup>

This idea was eventually used just over three years later, in a Sherlock Holmes short story 'The Adventure of the Norwood Builder,' which was first published in October 1903. It was a significant plot device as a fingerprint bureau was only established at Scotland Yard in 1901, demonstrating that both Robinson and Doyle had awareness of contemporary issues in crime detection.

The author and the journalist shared a dining table throughout the voyage home and became very close. Robinson soothed relations between Doyle and a French officer, Major Roger Raoul Duval, who enraged the loyal volunteer by suggesting that British troops had been using Dum Dum bullets against the Boers (these were expanding bullets, the use of

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<sup>208</sup> Listed in Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.160.

<sup>209</sup> From letter to The Western Morning News, quoted in Pugh, Brian and Spiring, Paul, *Bertram Fletcher Robinson: A Footnote to The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London, MX Publishing, 2008), p.77.

which was banned in warfare under The Hague Convention of 1899). Doyle took to his cabin until Robinson brought him a letter of apology from the Frenchman that, according to Doyle, ‘ended what might have been a serious incident.’<sup>210</sup>

Despite Robinson’s attempt to keep the peace on board the *Briton*, he shared Doyle’s unwillingness to believe that British troops would ever resort to underhand or criminal tactics. In June 1901, he produced an article for the *Daily Express* in which he criticised the ‘Pro-Boer Sentimentalist’:

Oh you who slander our soldiers in the field, you who “suggest” and “insinuate” and “are led to believe” that they are capable of any atrocity, you who aid their enemies hinder their work and prolong the sufferings of the war. There will surely be a day of reckoning for you, an outburst of generous indignation that will drive you forever from the councils of the nation in whose sorrows you have rejoiced from, whose triumphs you have stood apart, whose bravest and best you have calumnised.<sup>211</sup>

This particular article was published in the wake of Emily Hobhouse’s report in which she accused the British government of having a policy of extermination, evidenced by the mistreatment of concentration camp inmates she had witnessed during a visit to South Africa earlier that year. There was strong evidence of misconduct by the British, but Doyle and Robinson were both rigorous in support for their army, and mutual engagement in pro-British propaganda underpinned the beginning of their friendship. It was Doyle’s patriotism during the Boer War that earned him a knighthood.

In an article of reminiscences written for the *Evening News* in May 1939, Pemberton recalled a dinner with Robinson in April 1901, within a year of the journalist’s return from South Africa. He noted that their conversation had turned to demonic hounds:

I told my friend of a certain Jimmy Farman, a Norfolk marshman, who swore that there was a phantom dog on the marshes near St. Olives (near Great Yarmouth, Norfolk) and that his bitch had met the brute more than once and had been terrified by it. “A Great black dog it were,” Jimmy said, “and the eyes of ‘un was like railway lamps. He crossed my path down there by the far dyke and the old bitch a’most went mad wi’ fear...Now surely that bitch saw a’ summat I didn’t see...”

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<sup>210</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.161.

<sup>211</sup> Robinson, Bertram Fletcher, ‘Pro-Boers Please Note!’ *Daily Express*, Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> June 1901.

Fletcher Robinson assured me that dozens of people on the outskirts of Dartmoor had seen a phantom hound and that to doubt its existence would be a local heresy.<sup>212</sup>

This anecdote is significant because, in the days immediately following this dinner, Robinson went to Norfolk on a golfing holiday with Doyle. They stayed at the Royal Links Hotel in Cromer, where, over dinner one night, the subject of phantom hounds was raised yet again.<sup>213</sup> Towards the end of the holiday, Doyle wrote the following to his mother: 'Fletcher Robinson came here with me and we are going to do small book together "The Hound of the Baskervilles" - A real creeper.'<sup>214</sup>

As far as the titular hound was concerned, Robinson was influential with respect to the location as well as the plot. His family was based in Devon and Doyle joined him for a short holiday in Dartmoor at the beginning of June 1901. They stayed at the Duchy Hotel, Princetown, and visited the market town of Buckfastleigh and the Robinson family home in Ipplepen. During the trip, they were accompanied by a coachman with a significant name: Henry Baskerville. Doyle wrote to his mother from Devon: 'Here I am in the highest town in England. Robinson and I are exploring the moor together over our Sherlock Holmes book.'<sup>215</sup> Though he generously referred to it as 'our,' once Doyle decided to include Holmes there was only ever going to be one named author. Doyle had officially announced his intention to do so in May when he wrote to his publisher requesting more money to write a new story featuring the detective, who had been presumed dead for nearly eight years.

Before Doyle turned his thoughts to the Baskerville curse, he started writing a series of real-life crime articles for *The Strand*. Originally intended to be a run of twelve but ultimately finishing at just three, *Strange Studies from Life* took real crimes and presented them in Doyle's short story style. They were published during that same spring of 1901 when Doyle and Robinson visited Cromer, and the distraction of writing the Hound was a likely

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<sup>212</sup> Pemberton, Sir Max, *Evening News*, May 25<sup>th</sup> 1939, quoted on website BFR Online compiled by Paul Spiring [http://www.bfronline.biz/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=55&Itemid=9](http://www.bfronline.biz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=55&Itemid=9) viewed 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

<sup>213</sup> The coastal path between Cromer and Overstrand is known popularly as the haunting ground of the Black Shuck, as you can discover at The Hill House Inn at Happisburgh, if you ask the right people.

<sup>214</sup> Lellenberg, Jon, Stashower, Daniel, Foley, Charles ed., *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, (London, HarperPress, 2007), p.477.

<sup>215</sup> Quoted in Lellenberg, Jon, Stashower, Daniel, Foley, Charles ed., *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, (London, HarperPress, 2007) p.479.

contributor to the premature cessation of the series. *Strange Studies from Life* also shared the same illustrator, Sidney Paget, as Sherlock Holmes. Each story begins with the caveat ‘The cases dealt with in this series of studies of criminal psychology are taken from the actual history of crime, though occasionally names have been changed where their retention might cause pain to surviving relatives.’<sup>216</sup> Doyle’s decision to write true crime stories and yet change some of the names was an odd one. Unlike his fictional narrator, Dr Watson, who indicates that he makes changes to the facts and names in Holmes’s cases to protect his clients (not all of whom end up in a public criminal trial), Doyle is merely retelling stories that were widely publicised in the press. Where he does change names, it is very easy to recognise the original of his stories, and the delicacy over identification is not only redundant, but serves to undermine the reliability of Doyle’s true crime writing.

One reason for Doyle’s unnecessary delicacy could be a lack of clear purpose in choosing to retell these true crimes. Unlike his Our Society colleagues J.B. Atlay and H. B. Irving, who researched the intricate details of real crimes to tell meticulous stories of famous trials and remarkable criminals, Doyle presents only the surface detail in favour of using his chosen crimes to moralise about human behaviour in general. The opening of his first story, ‘The Holocaust of Manor Place,’ which deals with the murderer William Godfrey Youngman, reads more like a sermon than the considered opinion of a former medical professional:

In the study of criminal psychology, one is forced to the conclusion that the most dangerous of all types of mind is that of the inordinately selfish man. He is a man who has lost his sense of proportion. His own will and his own interest have blotted out for him the duty which he owes to the community. Impulsiveness, jealousy, vindictiveness are the fruitful parents of crime, but the insanity of selfishness is the most unlovely of them all.<sup>217</sup>

This moralising over the dangers of selfishness reads like the introduction to a story about a trivial theft, not the retelling of how a man murdered his mother, brothers and fiancée in cold blood. Doyle’s representation of selfishness as a form of insanity is particularly clumsy, though in keeping with the biological explanations of criminality he followed during his student days. Doyle portrays Youngman as a lunatic throughout the story. He was executed

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<sup>216</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *Strange Stories from Life and other narratives* (Indiana, Gaslight Publications, 1988).

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.



for his crimes in 1860, but Doyle argues ‘In these more scientific and more humanitarian days, it is perhaps doubtful whether Youngman would have been hanged.’<sup>218</sup> Beyond describing Youngman as a ‘homicidal maniac,’<sup>219</sup> he provides little definition of the nature of this supposed mental disease. He does describe how there was ‘lunacy’<sup>220</sup> on both sides of Youngman’s family and that he had a grandmother and an uncle who were in asylums, but as Doyle’s own father was committed under a detention order he should have been more sensitive to the fact that inheritance is not guaranteed. Charles Doyle’s struggle with alcoholism and mental illness partially explains why his son felt sympathetic towards criminals who were potentially insane. Where Lambton is explicit in his discussion of his own potential to turn to criminality (discussed in chapter 1), Doyle is not open about any fears he may have held about inheriting his father’s disease. Underlying his work, however, there is an apparent uneasiness about the punishment of anyone who could be regarded as mentally unwell.

Though some evidence related to a life insurance policy indicates his Youngman’s crimes were premeditated, Doyle is consistently critical of the capital sentence and ends the story as follows: ‘That the man was guilty seems to admit no doubt, and yet it must be confessed that circumstantial evidence can never be absolutely convincing, and that it is only the critical student of such cases who realizes how often a damning chain of evidence may, by some slight change, be made to bear an entirely different interpretation.’<sup>221</sup> This questioning of evidence and unwillingness to deal with absolutes can be seen in Doyle’s arguments about spiritualism in later life (to be discussed further in chapter 7).

In another story from *Strange Studies from Life*, ‘The Love Affair of George Vincent Parker,’ Doyle yet again shows bias in the criminal’s favour. This story deals with a crime of passion: a man murders his former fiancée for breaking their engagement and immediately confesses to the crime. At his trial, the relatives of ‘George Vincent Parker’ give evidence to show that madness was rampant in the family. But the Judge was not convinced:

He declared that the world was full of eccentric people, and that to grant them all the immunity of madness would be a public danger. To be mad within the meaning of the law, a criminal should be in such a state as not to know that he has

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, p.16.

committed a crime or incurred punishment. Now, it was clear that Parker did know this since he had talked of being hanged.<sup>222</sup>

In Doyle's story, 'Parker' is sentenced to death but then reprieved following further assessment by 'four eminent alienists.'<sup>223</sup> His sentence is commuted to penal servitude for life. Doyle presents this verdict in a positive light as it 'satisfied, upon the whole, the conscience of the public.'<sup>224</sup>

Doyle neglected a vital point from this story. The real name of the murderer was George Victor Townley and he stabbed to death his former fiancée, Elizabeth Caroline Goodwin on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1863.<sup>225</sup> He was sentenced to death and this sentence was later commuted as Doyle describes. Townley's defence had tried to prove that he was insane, though not necessarily at the time of the murder. He had exhibited signs of mental illness after the crime and, although the jury had deemed him guilty and not insane, his solicitor was able to exploit the laws regarding the care of insane people to get him a reprieve. This was a futile effort, because not long after beginning a life sentence of penal servitude, Townley killed himself in prison by jumping from a staircase. Doyle omits the suicide from his story and so does not raise the difficult question of whether a death sentence may have been more humane in this instance. Neither does he question the ability of prison officials to care for the insane and protect suicidal prisoners. He only includes details that support the story he wishes to tell. This approach to truth was evident in his arguments about other aspects of 'real life,' including his pro-Boer propaganda and his championing of Spiritualism.

It is clear from his *Strange Studies from Life*, particularly as he never wrote the promised twelve stories and stopped at three, that Doyle was not as comfortable with writing true crime. He describes the murder committed by 'Parker' as 'a crime characterised by all that inconsequence and grim artlessness which distinguish fact from fiction. In fiction we make people say and do what we should conceive them to be likely to say or do, but in fact they say and do what no one would ever conceive to be likely.'<sup>226</sup> By his estimation, the administration of criminal justice was very uncertain in comparison to the assured conclusions in his fiction, especially considering the finality of hanging: 'when one looks

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<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, p.31.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

<sup>225</sup> Noted in Costello, Peter, *Conan Doyle: Detective* (London, Constable & Robinson LTD, 2006), p.55.

<sup>226</sup> Doyle, *Strange Studies from Life*, p.29.

back and remembers how often what has seemed certain has failed us, and that which appeared impossible has come to pass, we feel that, if the criminal law has been conducted upon such principles, it is probably itself the giant murderer of England.'<sup>227</sup> It is noticeable that, following immediately after these three real life stories, criminal trials are absent from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The debate over what leads a person to become a criminal is central to the plot of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. This is evident through the character of Selden, an escaped convict loose in the hound's domain of the moor. His sister presents him as a man who was encouraged to become a criminal rather than one who was born bad, and describes the circumstances that led him to become a murderer:

We humoured him too much when he was a lad, and gave him his own way in everything until he came to think that the world was made for his pleasure, and that he could do what he liked in it. Then as he grew older he met wicked companions, and the devil entered into him until he broke my mother's heart and dragged our name in the dirt. From crime to crime he sank lower and lower, until it is only the mercy of God which has snatched him from the scaffold.<sup>228</sup>

It is not, however, the mercy of God that saves Selden from a death sentence, but the mercy of the courts where it is decided that leniency must be shown 'due to some doubts as to his complete sanity.'<sup>229</sup> This presents a dichotomy in the presentation of Selden's criminality: did he become a criminal due to life experience or did he have a psychological condition? The idea that mental illness could cause criminal behaviour was first pioneered by a French mental health reformer, Philippe Pinel, who published a classification of mental diseases in 1801. According to Pinel, 'The mentally sick far from being guilty people deserving of punishment, are sick people whose miserable state deserves all the consideration that is due to suffering humanity. One should try with the simplest methods to restore their reason.'<sup>230</sup> This idea was taken up by English psychiatrist, J.C. Prichard, in his *Treatise on Insanity* of 1835 where he referred to the 'morally insane' and 'morally imbecile.'<sup>231</sup> If Selden was insane, he could not be held responsible for his actions as they were the consequences of

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, p.33.

<sup>228</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' in *Sherlock Holmes: The Illustrated Novels*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1993), p.285.

<sup>229</sup> Doyle, 'The Hound of the Baskervilles,' p.253.

<sup>230</sup> Quoted in Birkhead, Michael Dow, *The Search for the Causes of Crime*, (North Carolina, McFarland and Company, 2006), p.125.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, p.125.

serious illness and he deserved to be treated with leniency. Yet his sister, Mrs Barrymore, who treats him with compassion throughout the novel, does not describe his crimes as the result of mental disorder but blames his indulgent upbringing, peer pressure and the ‘devil.’ This may be because she is a servant in a country house who could not be expected to be educated in psychological theories, and also because she is part of a wider Dartmoor community that believes in the myth of the demonic dog with which the novel is primarily concerned. Through these different representations of Selden, Doyle figures the different ideas of criminality that stem from science and superstition. As a doctor who became a spiritualist, it is perhaps unsurprising that he does not definitively choose sides in this debate.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* pits Holmes against a potential supernatural threat (although at no stage does the rational detective believe that the true background of the hound is unearthly). This juxtaposition of reason and superstition is a common theme in the Holmes stories. Holmes, of course, represents reason, science and logic. ‘The world is big enough for us, no ghosts need apply,’<sup>232</sup> says Holmes in ‘The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire’. Yet the supernatural and the uncanny are not always defeated completely. Although Holmes proves that the hound itself is corporeal, its owner is identified but never brought to justice (even if he was caught, it would be difficult to prove him guilty of anything other than owning a dog). Instead, he disappears, and is thought to have been consumed by the primeval ooze of the Grimpen Mire though no corpse is discovered. Holmes suspects that the perpetrator is a direct descendant of Hugo De Baskerville, the decadent aristocrat who is fabled to have first brought the curse upon the family. Therefore, through the Grimpen Mire the moor gets its own revenge on the bad side of the Baskerville family and both criminality and retribution are presented as supernatural. Doyle’s portrayal of divine justice was in keeping with his own changing beliefs that were turning ever more to spiritualism. Though Holmes dismissed the idea of ‘ghosts,’ Doyle was rejecting the atheist, or at least agnostic, position he had been inspired to adopt by the writers he had encountered as a student. Holmes personified the scientific approach to life Doyle had previously admired but now rejected, which explains in part his complex relationship with his creation.

Work on the ‘Hound’ was fast and its serialisation in *The Strand Magazine* ran from August 1901 through to the ninth and final instalment in April 1902. Robinson was not listed as a co-author, but Doyle did credit him in a footnote: ‘This story owes its inception to my

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<sup>232</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, ‘The Sussex Vampire,’ *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes & His Last Bow*, (Ware, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), p.85.

friend, Mr. Fletcher Robinson, who has helped me both in the general plot and in the local details.<sup>233</sup> He also paid Robinson £500 before the end of 1901 (Doyle earned £6,000 for the serialisation). *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was an incredible success, despite the fact that Sherlock Holmes was absent for a large section of the plot. On the publication of the first instalment in August 1901, there was a queue that surrounded the *Strand Magazine* building and its circulation immediately rose by 30,000 copies, prompting the need for an unprecedented seventh printing.<sup>234</sup>

The narrative of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, though set firmly in the Victorian period before Holmes vanquished Moriarty, reflected the time in which it was published and heralded the beginning of the Edwardian era. The politics of regime change, the rejection of former dissipation and a restoration of order are central to the concerns of the novel. Sir Henry Baskerville, an American, comes to England to claim the Baskerville Baronetcy which he inherits on the mysterious death of his Uncle Charles. Sir Henry must adapt to English society, changing his clothes and his manners to rule over the Baskerville estate on Dartmoor, whilst negotiating the legacy of the family's decadent past and the superstitions of the moorland inhabitants. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, all agents of change are haunted by the demons of the past but, though change is not represented as easy, it is generally shown as progressive.

This positive representation of change echoed Doyle's fondness for the new king. They shared a love of manly pursuits such as sport and motor cars. Doyle was honoured when Edward showed him favour at a meal held at a Charing Cross Hotel in 1901: 'He asked that I should be placed next to him. He proved an able, clearheaded, positive man, rather inclined to be noisy, very alert and energetic. He won't be a dummy king.'<sup>235</sup> Queen Victoria's retreat into mourning on the death of her husband in 1861 had meant that, while still Prince of Wales, Edward became the public face of the monarchy. After Victoria's death in January 1901, he distanced himself from his mother's regime and transformed his former decadent ways into pomp and circumstance, redecorating Buckingham Palace, reviving the state opening of Parliament his mother had renounced, and even commissioning a new

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<sup>233</sup> There were other versions of this acknowledgement in different editions of the novel. See Klinger, Leslie S., *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes: The Novels* (London, W. W. Norton & Company LTD, 2006), p.618, for all versions.

<sup>234</sup> Detailed in Booth, Martin, *The Doctor, The Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), p.247.

<sup>235</sup> Lellenberg, Jon, Stashower, Daniel, Foley, Charles ed., *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, (London, HarperPress, 2007) p.499.

crown. It was clear that the Edwardian era would be different to the Victorian in more than just name. Like Henry Baskerville, King Edward VII had to negotiate the legacy of the past in order to influence the progression of society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The King was known to be a fan of the Holmes stories, although he thought *The Hound of the Baskervilles* poor (he read it whilst recovering from appendicitis in 1902, an illness which delayed the coronation).<sup>236</sup> He was, however, very impressed with Gillette's Sherlock Holmes. There was a royal command performance of the play for Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in January 1902. The King held a long private meeting with Gillette in the Royal Box; so long it caused restlessness in the audience.<sup>237</sup>

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* had proved Holmes could still earn big money and Doyle soon received an offer too good to refuse. The American magazine *Collier's Weekly* offered Doyle \$25,000 for a run of six new stories. *The Strand Magazine* offered £100 per 1,000 words.<sup>238</sup> The money was conditional on the resurrection of the detective: these stories must not, as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, be written as if taking place before Holmes died at the Reichenbach Falls. Both magazines stipulated that the new stories must show Sherlock Holmes to have survived.

The series that brought Holmes back from the dead, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, ran from October 1903 to December 1904, coinciding with the period in which Our Society was established. Each instalment appeared first in America (in *Collier's Weekly*), then in *The Strand Magazine* the following month. The details of Holmes's miraculous resurrection appeared in 'The Adventure of the Empty House' where he made a theatrical return that caused Dr Watson to faint. The requirement to have Holmes raised from the dead may seem eccentric: the new stories could easily have been set before the events at the Reichenbach Falls. The problem was that there were many readers who had an emotional investment in Holmes as a living hero. The idea that the human mind could draw links and make sense of the world by meticulous observation and analysis was attractive in an increasingly secular world, and formed the basis of the Holmes mythology. In his famous work *Myth and Meaning*, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote:

To speak of rules and to speak of meaning is to speak of the same thing; and if we look at all the intellectual undertakings of mankind, as far as they have been recorded all over the world, the common denominator is always to introduce

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<sup>236</sup> Lycett, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, p.274.

<sup>237</sup> Booth, *The Doctor, The Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle*, p.244.

<sup>238</sup> Booth, *The Doctor, The Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle*, p.248.

some kind of order in the human mind and since, after all, the human mind is only part of the universe, the need probably exists because there is some order in the universe and the universe is not chaos.<sup>239</sup>

The world of the Holmes stories is ordered and comprehensible, understandable through the thorough observation of external circumstances. Doyle presents his readers with a universe that can be understood by someone who applies themselves thoroughly to learning all of the rules. Holmes's ability to make sense of seeming chaos through rationality implies inherently the potential to also find a deeper meaning. For Holmes to be alive was therefore essential for his audience as his capacity to rationalise existence must be understood to be relevant to the real world in which they were living. If he were dead, the possibility of understanding the modern world was also diminished.

Holmes's return was permanent and Doyle continued to write new Holmes stories until just over two years before his own death in 1930. In fact, just over half of the total number of Holmes stories were written after 1901 (24 short stories and two novels were written up to 1893, 32 short stories and 2 novels from 1901 onwards). However, very few of these stories take place outside of the 1880s and 1890s. 'The Final Problem' is set in 1891, 'The Adventure of the Empty House' is set in 1894. In 'His Last Bow,' published in 1917 and set in 1914, it is revealed that Holmes retired to Sussex to keep bees in 1903, the year Our Society began. By keeping Holmes in the late Victorian era, Doyle avoids integrating his hero into a world where he would have many professional rivals and his scientific skills would no longer be regarded as extraordinary. In 'His Last Bow,' it is for his skills in subterfuge and his ability to imitate criminal behaviour that he is employed, as he is required to infiltrate a ring of spies (discussed further in chapter 6). His skills in the laboratory are no longer required.

At the end of 1901, Doyle had made a resolution to travel more and to make more friends.<sup>240</sup> It is therefore no surprise that, despite having a schedule that always seemed to be packed, and already being a member of countless clubs, he would be drawn to Our Society where he could socialise with other men who were fascinated by the criminal mind. Lambton was very excited when Doyle showed willingness to join them: 'When I wrote to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle he was an utter stranger to me, and I thereby courted a rebuff, but he accepted

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<sup>239</sup> Levi-Stauss, Claude, *Myth and Meaning*, (London, Routledge Classics, 2001), p.9.

<sup>240</sup> Sir Christopher Frayling, who purchased Doyle's diary of 1901 at an auction in 2004, revealed this quote in a lecture to The Sherlock Holmes Society of London at the National Liberal Club in October 2011. I reported on this event for *The Sherlock Holmes Journal*.

with alacrity, is a life member, and no words of mine could repay him for all that he has done for us, nor express how grateful we all are to him.’<sup>241</sup> Doyle was part of the second set of six early members – neophytes, as Lambton refers to them – who took the membership up to 12 and included Pemberton, Robinson, Diósy, Sir Willoughby Maycock and Mr. F. W. Rose. Lambton became friends with Doyle and makes regular references to the author in his books, including the stories Doyle told him about psychic detectives. So important is Doyle to Lambton that a photograph of the author is included in his second volume of memoirs, *The Salad Bowl*. Everyone knew who Doyle was, of course, and some, like Robinson, were already his friends before the club was formed. Diósy was familiar with Doyle as they were both active members of the New Vagabound Club in the 1890s.<sup>242</sup> Oddie became well acquainted with the author and writes about him extensively in his 1941 memoirs (chapter two of *Inquest* is titled ‘Conan Doyle Investigates’). Oddie and Professor Collins visited Doyle at Undershaw, his house in Hindhead, and both attended séances on his recommendation (to be discussed in chapter 7). H. B. Irving’s father, Sir Henry, starred in Doyle’s play *Waterloo* and the writer was close to the Irving family (and to Bram Stoker). Doyle makes reference to attending a party at Hall Barn, Beaconsfield along with ‘young Henry Irving’ in a letter to his mother in 1902.<sup>243</sup> Sir Edward Marshall Hall, like Doyle, was a spiritualist and they attended séances together.

That so many men from Our Society would have personal connections to Doyle was testament to the popularity of the author, which reflected the success of his fictional hero. Doyle’s stories preceded what would become known as the ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction in the 1930s, when writers such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and G. K. Chesterton produced narratives that adhered to the rules of the Detection Club and allowed the reader to access all clues available to the detective and the opportunity to solve the crime. The detective stories of the *fin de siècle* and Edwardian eras were more concerned with the character of the detective and his or her methods than presenting puzzles for the reader to solve. The titles of the Sherlock Holmes stories are most often preceded by ‘The Adventure

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<sup>241</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p.113.

<sup>242</sup> Adlard, John, *A Biography of Arthur Diósy, Founder of the Japan Society*, (Lampeter, The Edward Mellen Press, 1990) pp.80 – 85.

<sup>243</sup> This letter is quoted in Lellenberg, Jon, Stashower, Daniel, Foley, Charles ed., *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, (London, HarperPress, 2007), page 501. The letter is undated, but estimated to have been written in the first half of 1902. The reference to ‘young Henry Irving’ is indexed as referring to Sir Henry Irving, but the use of ‘young’ means it is far more likely to have been his son, Harry.



of' rather than 'The Mystery of' or 'The Problem of,' and the cases they featured would be solved solely by Holmes whose methods and reasoning would only be revealed fully at the very end. Doyle was inspired by the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly those featuring the detective C. Auguste Dupin (who appears in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' and 'The Purloined Letter'). Though Sherlock Holmes's first two appearances were in novels (*A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*), it was the short story series form that drew the attention of a wider audience. Whereas Poe's Dupin stories were irregular and not serialised, Doyle realised the benefits of a series of short stories featuring the same central character as opposed to serialised novels:

Considering these various journals with their disconnected stories it had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to a magazine, since, sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, and yet instalments which were each complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure that he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. I believe I was the first to realise this and *The Strand Magazine* the first to put it into practice.<sup>244</sup>

The success of Doyle's series format has inspired an unending line of imitators, including several members of Our Society. One of his early successors was George R. Sims, who wrote two series of short stories (the first in 1897, the second in 1898). His detective stories were significantly different from Doyle's because they featured a professional lady detective called Dorcas Dene. By placing a woman in the central role of detective, Sims did something radically different to Doyle's other early imitators, and he led the way for the detective heroines who followed in the near future (Baroness Orczy produced a series of stories featuring Lady Molly of Scotland Yard in 1910, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple first appeared in 1926).

Sims considered himself 'a bit of a radical' and his feminist approach to the detective story was in keeping with this aspect of his personality. From a young age, he had socialised with strong women as his mother was president of the Women's Provident League and an active member of several other societies concerned with female suffrage and welfare. Describing his mother in his memoirs, Sims wrote 'She was a woman of wide sympathies, a

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<sup>244</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p.80.

humorous speaker, a trained elocutionist, and very popular on the “platform” when the various societies held public or private meetings. She was an enthusiastic advocate of female suffrage.<sup>245</sup> Through his mother’s connections, he made many useful friends and in the early 1870s he was commissioned by one of them, a female journalist called Amelia Lewis, to write theatre reviews for a new paper titled *Woman*. The influence of these strong women can be seen in the characterisation of Dorcas Dene, who is portrayed as an intelligent detective throughout the stories, solving mysteries through the use of creativity and intellect, never through coincidence or guesswork. Not only is she presented as equal to a man, she also gives orders to her ‘Watson’ (Mr Saxon, a playwright very similar to Sims), a man who is portrayed as far less capable than Dorcas Dene. Dorcas, like her creator, has a theatrical background, and uses the art of disguise she learnt on the stage to aid her in her investigations.

Although Dorcas is a strong female presence, she is given a background to make her a suitable heroine for a late-Victorian audience. She takes up the profession of acting to support herself on the death of her father who was an artist. She marries Paul Dene, an artist like her father, but he falls ill and goes blind, making it necessary for Dorcas to support them both. She learns detective skills from a former policeman, who takes her on as a partner in his own enquiry business which she inherits when he dies. Though not made explicit, a reader can infer that Dorcas is unable to have children from the sad expressions she makes whenever they are mentioned, and from her doting behaviour towards her dog, Toddlekins. Despite these devices that pander to chauvinistic attitudes about women, the portrayal of Dorcas as a detective presents her as a professional equal to her male counterparts.

A. E. W. Mason, another member of Our Society, achieved his greatest success in 1902 with *The Four Feathers*. He would later produce a series of novels and short stories featuring a French detective, Inspector Hanaud. Hanaud differed from the Sherlock Holmes model of the amateur because he was a career policeman. But he shared similarities with his predecessor in his penchant for hiding his reasoning to the very last moment, particularly from his own ‘Watson,’ Mr Ricardo, from whose point of view the stories are told (although unlike Dr Watson or Mr Saxon, Ricardo does not write them). Hanaud first appeared in the 1910 novel *At the Villa Rose* and was a precursor to Agatha Christie’s Poirot.

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<sup>245</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years’ Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.53.

William Le Queux wrote a series of detective short stories titled *Cinders of Harley Street*, published in 1916. ‘Cinders’ is the alias of Villiers Beethom –Saunders, a Harley Street doctor who specialises in diseases of the chest. In the guise of Cinders, he hunts down evil doers and kills them by means of poison or a specially made x-ray death machine. Le Queux had written an earlier series of stories in 1907 featuring Count Bindo di Ferraris, an Italian aristocratic jewel thief with a love of fast cars. Criminal anti-heroes had become popular following the success of E. W. Hornung’s Raffles, the amateur cracksman who first appeared in print in 1899. Hornung also attended Our Society meetings and was the brother-in-law of Doyle (he married Doyle’s sister Connie in 1886).

Le Queux’s writing career began when he was given the job of reporting on cases heard at the local police court for the *Eastbourne Gazette*. During his career, he wrote several works that purported to be true accounts of his encounters with real criminals, but as with all of his writings they are unreliable. More trustworthy are the true crime writings of other Our Society stalwarts such as H. B. Irving and J. B. Atlay who both wrote for various series of ‘Famous Trials’ publications. The crime writing of Atlay and Irving is often framed around the historical record of a trial and both writers present as much evidence as possible to explain the reason a particular verdict was reached in each case and then to offer alternative possibilities (the ‘Famous Trials’ series will be discussed in later chapters). Lambton recounts several true crime stories in his own books, particularly in *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, but his stories are often merely abbreviated versions of the works already published by his Our Society colleagues, with the occasional personal reflection injected. Whether working with fiction or interpreting fact, it is clear that Our Society brought together many men interested in writing about crime and detectives as well as discussing them over dinner.

Bertram Fletcher Robinson regaled some of his fellow members with a strange supernatural tale, as Oddie recalled: ‘[Robinson] told me that he once asked the late Dr. Budge, head of the Egyptian Mummy Department at the British Museum, why he had given a certain mummy case there such a prominent position and so conspicuous a label.’<sup>246</sup> The story told was one of an ‘Unlucky Mummy’ and the many people who were either injured or died after seeing it. According to Oddie, the mummy had been transported from Egypt to England and was hidden in a house in Streatham until discovered by the famous Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky warned that the mummy was a source of evil influence and must be removed from the house:

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<sup>246</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.72.

...Dr. Budge agreed to take it, and it was removed to the British Museum where two porters carried it up the stairs. One of these men fell on the steps and broke his leg: the other died suddenly the following day whilst apparently in perfect health. Dr. Budge, having heard all about this series of catastrophes, ordered a well-known firm of photographers to come and take a photograph of the wonderful case. The photographer did so and returned the next day in a state of great excitement. He declared that his photograph did not show the conventional painted Egyptian face on the case but the face of some living woman of malevolent aspect. Dr. Budge then told the man the story of all these accidents, whereupon the photographer went home, locked himself in his bedroom, and shot himself!<sup>247</sup>

Robinson spent three months researching this mummy, but did not live to write an article. He died suddenly of typhoid fever on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1907, at the age of 36. Some writers have speculated that this sudden illness was linked to the mummy's curse.<sup>248</sup> Robinson's funeral took place on 24<sup>th</sup> January. Doyle was unable to attend because he was busy playing detective and trying to unravel the case of George Edalji: a man he believed had been convicted of a crime he did not commit.

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid*, p.73.

<sup>248</sup> There is a detailed account of this in Pugh, Brian and Spiring, Paul, *Bertram Fletcher Robinson: A Footnote to The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London, MX Publishing, 2008), from p.161.

## Chapter 4 - The Last and Highest Court of Appeal: Our Society and Miscarriages of Justice.

‘But what good do you do?’ a lady once asked Arthur Lambton,<sup>249</sup> as if a group of law-abiding men meeting to discuss crime could only be excused for doing so if they had a chivalrous purpose. Our Society’s less-enigmatic title ‘The Crimes Club’ could give the impression to imaginative outsiders that this was the name of either a crime fighting organisation or a subversive group for supporters of criminal behaviour. The reality of a group of men enjoying tales of sensational crime over dinner three times a year is a less exciting image. In the foreword to his biblically-titled book *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, Lambton writes: ‘I have heard it said that we were the disciples of Professor Moriarty and hostile to the police. But the most common accusation is that we have a morbid sympathy with criminals.’<sup>250</sup> Though coming down firmly in favour of the seventh commandment, Lambton seems to relish the possibility of being identified as a member of a criminal fraternity, and even fantasised about his own potential to commit crime, as discussed in Chapter 1.

If not aligned with the Napoleon of Crime, then perhaps the men of Our Society were Sherlock’s apostles, especially as they boasted his creator amongst their flock. This would not necessarily improve their social standing, however, as Holmes’s morality was often questionable. ‘I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection,’ he says in the opening chapter of *The Sign of Four*, with unshakable confidence in his own importance, shortly after Watson has rebuked him for his use of cocaine: ‘...the matter is laid before me, I examine the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist’s opinion. I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward.’<sup>251</sup> There is little consideration of the established legal course of justice in the Holmesian model of crime fighting. For Holmes (in this description of his work), crime provides an outlet for his skills and this is the incentive that drives him, far more than the prospect of remuneration or apprehending wrong-doers: the pleasure is in solving the problem. Arguably, this is Holmes at his most inhuman, but his actions

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<sup>249</sup> Lambton, Arthur, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, in *The London Magazine*, March Edition, 1923, p. 109.

<sup>250</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p.7.

<sup>251</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, ‘The Sign of Four,’ in *Sherlock Holmes: The Illustrated Novels*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1993), p. 112.

throughout the stories occasionally reveal a more altruistic core. By taking pleasure in applying his powers to crime, however, he is benefitting from the unlawful acts of felons and the misfortunes of their victims. The amateur detective is in a morally dubious position, and the same could be argued for the formation of a purely recreational ‘Crimes Club.’ Lambton recalls that some people took a violent dislike to Our Society:

As the club became better known, it was inevitable that both abuse and ridicule should be showered upon it. One scribe in a Society paper was particularly vitriolic, and expressed a devout wish that we might all murder ourselves. A glance at the list of members must answer the question as to whether the community in general would suffer, or otherwise, if the gentleman had his wish.<sup>252</sup>

To study crime for its own sake, or for the mere enjoyment of sensationalism, is somewhat transgressive in itself. The existence of Our Society therefore occasionally required some justification. In his article for *The London Magazine*, Lambton outlined his response to such criticism:

We are not formed for eleemosynary purposes on the principle of that admirable institution, Dr. Barnardo’s Homes. It is a private dining club, and, as a rule, private dining clubs do neither good nor harm. But I think ours is different. First of all, we think it is the best in London, which is only right and proper. Secondly, we have results to show. Two of our members were instrumental in obtaining the freedom of two innocent men. I refer to the late George R. Sims’ unceasing efforts in the interests of the unfortunate Adolf Beck, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whom Mr. Edalji has to thank for his freedom.<sup>253</sup>

Lambton’s unidentified lady asked her question on the assumption that the Crimes Club ought to have some moral purpose beyond providing a social forum for men who shared a common interest. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, the Club was not in the business of providing a professional service to the police, though amongst its members were those who worked very closely with the Law. George R. Sims described his experience of the Club in entirely social terms: ‘delightful evenings, excellent dinners, atrocious crimes, good fellowship.’<sup>254</sup> The club may not have been formed for the purposes of campaigning, but nevertheless the group exhibited collective pride when the activities of its notable members produced results.

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<sup>252</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p.113.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, p.109.

<sup>254</sup> Our Society member’ book 1993.

Sir Max Pemberton, in a similar manner to Lambton, described Our Society in his memoirs, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, with emphasis on its campaigns:

A society of a very different kind is that which used to be called “The Murder Club,” by those who knew little of it. Its real name is “Our Society,” and it has frequently been described as the best dining club in London. Assuredly its membership can hardly be matched for variety of distinctions by any similar society and not only has it this advantage, but it has achieved great things in its varied contests with the Law and with injustice.<sup>255</sup>

Pemberton focusses on the exploits of the Club that can be interpreted as distinguished and worthy. His description evokes an image of noble crusaders seeking to right society’s wrongs, and portrays the general intentions of the group as more heroic than the macabre pseudonym ‘The Murder Club’ otherwise suggests. He does not include any anecdotes about the more sensational activities of the club, such as the time Professor Collins presented the alleged right arm bones of John Williams over dinner (to be discussed further in Chapter 5). In fact, his entire focus in his description of the club’s activities is on their attempts to solve mysteries and campaign for justice. These claims to have achieved ‘great things’ may seem bold for a quarterly dining club, but in fact the campaigns headed by some of its members are often credited with bringing into being the Court of Criminal Appeal, which was finally put in place by an Act of 1907 after many previous attempts had failed. The cases most often cited in association with the injustices that immediately preceded the Criminal Appeal Act 1907 are those of Adolf Beck and George Edalji. Both of these men were considered to have been innocent men, found guilty by a faulty justice system, and the campaigns to have them pardoned were led by members of Our Society.

As a writer and editor, Pemberton could take extra pride in the campaigns led by his fellow members as the Press was the tool they used to publicise their causes. The more famous members were able to lend their names to newspaper campaigns in order to help raise public interest. The first case he discusses in his memoirs is that of Adolf Beck, which he regards as ‘the earliest of the Club’s triumphs.’<sup>256</sup> Though Pemberton claims this campaign as a triumph for the Club, there is no record of a paper being presented on the case until 1921 (by Sir Theobald Mathew, who, as Director of Public Prosecutions in 1960, authorised the

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<sup>255</sup> Pemberton, Sir Max, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, (Plymouth, William Brendon & Son LTD, 1936), p.238.

<sup>256</sup> Pemberton, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, p.243.

prosecution of Penguin Books for obscenity over the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), long after the events had passed and their resolution was known. Little is known, however, of Our Society's meetings before 1905 and it is entirely possible that, given the involvement of one of its early members, the Beck case was a popular subject for discussion.

The campaign to free this unfortunate man was led by George R. Sims ('a brilliant criminologist'<sup>257</sup> according to Pemberton) who used the *Daily Mail* to fight his cause. Sims was already very experienced in public debates over social and criminal justice before he took up the Beck case in 1906. His maternal grandfather, John Dinmore Stevenson, was a leader of the Chartist movement. Sims had great respect for his grandfather's cause, and wrote in his 1916 memoirs 'he was looked upon as a very dreadful person simply because he advocated reforms almost every one of which has since been accepted as essential to the public well-being.'<sup>258</sup> Sims's mother was also an active campaigner on women's issues (as discussed in chapter 3 in connection with Sims's Dorcas Dene stories). The essays Sims produced in the 1880s that were collected in the volumes *How the Poor Live* and *Horrible London* were intended to raise public awareness of the conditions in which the poor were living particularly in the East End. He often repeated his desire for action to help the poor in his newspaper columns (his warnings about the violence in the East End at the time of the Ripper murders were discussed in chapter 2). As well as being a spokesperson for general improvement of social conditions, Sims also campaigned on behalf of accused people he considered to be innocent. He 'defended Alice Rhodes vigorously in the Press'<sup>259</sup> when she and three others were charged with the murder of Harriet Staunton in 1877.<sup>260</sup> Sims notes that, 'within a very short time of being sentenced to be hanged by the neck,'<sup>261</sup> Rhodes was pardoned, released, and took up a job in a dining hall run by E. T. Smith, founder of the Alhambra. J. B. Atlay gave a paper on the case to Our Society on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1910.<sup>262</sup> The Rhodes campaign was a success for Sims and showed that public pressure could overturn the decisions of a Court, in this instance saving a woman from the executioner's rope. It was not

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, p.243.

<sup>258</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.9.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, p.140.

<sup>260</sup> The case was commonly referred to as the Penge case or Penge mystery, and was the subject of a novel by Elizabeth Jenkins in 1934, titled *Harriet*.

<sup>261</sup> Sims, *My Life*, p.141.

<sup>262</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.



universally regarded as a satisfactory conclusion to the case, however, as Rosemary Pattenden records:

The conviction of the brothers Louis and Patrick Staunton, Elizabeth Staunton (Patrick's wife), and Alice Rhodes (Louis' mistress) for the murder of Louis' feeble-minded wife by starvation proved highly controversial. A formidable body of expert opinion held that she had died from a medical condition for which the prisoners were not responsible. The Home Secretary's decision to reprieve the three Stauntons and to pardon Alice Rhodes did not still the unease. For to those with a logical mind it seemed that either the Stauntons were innocent, in which case they should have been pardoned, or they were guilty and should have hung.<sup>263</sup>

It was over a case of identity, however, and not of murder, that Sims received the accolades of his Our Society colleagues.

Sims had some personal experience of the problems of identity. As detailed in Chapter 2, he often retold the tale of how he was almost mistaken for a Ripper suspect. Doubling was a theme that recurred throughout his life. In his memoirs, he recalls how he took advantage of a theatre manager's physical similarity: 'Mr Heslop took first-night calls for me when I was unable to be present, and only the company knew that the "understudy" was bowing for the author.'<sup>264</sup> In 1889, a less welcome incident of doubling occurred when Sims returned from holidaying in Switzerland to find reports in the Press that he was taking Queen Victoria's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, to court for assault: 'As I happened at the time of the assault to have been on the summit of Pilatus I could not understand how the Duke, even if his arm had been longer than that of coincidence, had reached so far as from Whitehall to the summit of the mountain where is the tarn in which Pontius Pilate is supposed to have drowned himself.'<sup>265</sup> The Press were confusing Sims with a younger journalist, George E. Simms, who wrote for *The Sunday Sun*. One consequence of this mistake was rather satisfying for Sims, however, as he found the international Press in particular were in awe of his reputation. He quotes the following report from *The Ottawa Evening Journal*:

George R. Sims has claims to respect and public gratitude beside which those of the Duke of Cambridge dwindle pitifully. His sympathies, his industry, and his ability have always been at the service of the poor and oppressed. As Dagonet, of

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<sup>263</sup> Pattenden, Rosemary, *English Criminal Appeals 1844-1994*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), p.11.

<sup>264</sup> Sims, *My Life*, p.228.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, p.228.

the *Referee*, he has kept a warm heart and a ready pen for the welfare of his fellow-beings.<sup>266</sup>

This incident, as well as adding to Sims's list of problems with doppelgangers, demonstrated the power of his popular reputation to incite the respect of his journalistic colleagues. This reputation was essential for Sims's work on the Beck case, an affair in which doubles proliferated. There were even two Sims, as Douglas G. Browne highlights in his record of the case for his history of Scotland Yard: 'one representing the powers of darkness, the other Mr G. R. Sims, the journalist, who led the Press agitation for a full disclosure of the facts.'<sup>267</sup> The former was Mr F. J. Sims, an official with, according to Browne, 'no legal training,'<sup>268</sup> and who prepared the briefs for the prosecution counsel.

Pemberton describes Adolf Beck as 'surely one of the unluckiest of mortals.'<sup>269</sup> Beck was a Norwegian, born in 1841, and he led a varied life. He began his working life as a chemist, but around 1866 moved to England and worked for a few years as a ship-broker's clerk. In 1868 he went to South America and became a singer. Despite being wounded during a revolution in Montevideo, Uruguay, he remained there for several years and found employment as a ship and property broker. He returned to England in 1885, at which point George R. Sims claims to have met him. According to H.B. Irving, Sims described him 'as a deeply religious man, soft hearted and impulsively generous, who had earned the friendship and esteem of many well-known people at home and abroad.'<sup>270</sup> Beck had made money from the Spanish railways and invested his earnings in a copper mine back in his native Norway. This investment proved bad, and by 1893 Beck was in a very difficult financial position, impelled to borrow £900 from a Covent Garden hotel proprietor. By 1895, due to a case of mistaken identity, his life became a lot tougher.

Irving describes how Beck came to be arrested as a suspected con-man:

In 1895 Beck was living in a flat in Victoria Street. On the evening of December 16<sup>th</sup>, in that year, he was standing at the street door looking for a newspaper boy, when a woman came up to him and said, 'What have you done with my watch?' Beck replied, 'Madam, I do not know you, you are mistaken.' The woman

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, p.230.

<sup>267</sup> Browne, Douglas G., *The Rise of Scotland Yard: A History of the Metropolitan Police*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1956), p. 263.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid*, p.259.

<sup>269</sup> Pemberton, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, p.238.

<sup>270</sup> Irving, H.B., *Last Studies in Criminology*, (London, W. Collins Sons & Co. LTD. 1921) p.4.

persisted in her accusation. Beck threatened to give her into custody. The woman still persisting, Beck said, 'Come with me,' and together they went up to a policeman. Beck said that the woman was annoying him by making false accusation against him and asked the policeman to take her in charge. All three went to the nearest police station. There the woman repeated her statement, and Beck, from the accuser, found himself the accused. A little later two other women were brought into the station, both of whom identified Beck as a man who had robbed them. He was detained in custody.<sup>271</sup>

Beck had been mistakenly identified as a known con-man named John Smith, who had been sentenced to five years penal servitude in 1877 for defrauding women. His mode of operation was to befriend women using an aristocratic persona – Lord Willoughby – and then issue them with a bogus cheque in exchange for jewellery, money, or any other articles of value they may have. The women would realise they had been conned once they attempted to cash the cheques. Smith was released under licence in 1881 and his details and description were sent by Portsmouth prison to Scotland Yard but with one critical omission: they failed to include a certificate that stated Smith was a circumcised Jew. Smith had travelled to Australia two years after his release but was known to have returned to England in 1894. A number of women had complained of being defrauded by 'Lord Willoughby' since Smith's return, but the police had been unable to trace the criminal. Once Beck was identified to them as the perpetrator, they stopped looking as they believed they had found the right man, and they had not yet connected the recent crime with those for which Smith was convicted in 1877.

Irving describes how 22 women were asked to see Beck, 10 of whom identified him as the swindler, the rest being uncertain apart from one who declared he was not the right man. Eventually, the police recognised the similarities between the crimes of which Beck had been accused and those for which Smith had been convicted in 1877. A police officer who had been present at Smith's trial was called in and positively identified Beck as the same man. Further insubstantial yet damning proof that Beck and Smith were the same person came from T.H. Gurrin, a renowned handwriting expert who was often called in to help police prosecutions. He compared documents from the Smith and Beck cases and declared that they were all of a Scandinavian type of handwriting, though of two different styles. Gurrin suggested that the documents of both cases were in the handwriting of Adolf Beck, the different styles accounted for by one being natural and the other feigned. Eight years later, he

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<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

would admit to having been mistaken, but this did not help Beck when he was brought to trial in February 1896.

The timing of the Beck trial was significant as it almost immediately preceded two changes in the English criminal justice system that would have helped his case immensely: the use of fingerprinting and the Criminal Evidence Act of 1898. Had the practice of fingerprinting been in place during the the Smith and Beck trials, despite the bungling of the evidence of Smith's circumcision there would have been little chance of the one being mistaken by the other, but this was not in common use by Scotland Yard until 1901 (they rejected a suggestion to use the technique in 1886). As the trial preceded the Criminal Evidence Act by two years, Beck as the defendant was not allowed to appear in the witness box. Had he been able to do so, his Norwegian accent and imperfect English might have been useful in proving that he was not John Smith. But at points in the trial, it was unclear whether he was actually being tried as John Smith or as Adolf Beck.

With no prior knowledge of the crimes of John Smith, the victims of the con-man in 1895 simply identified Beck as the man who had tried to swindle them. The connection with Smith rested purely on the evidence of Constable Spurrell, who identified Beck as Smith, having been familiar with the latter nearly twenty years previously, and on Gurrin's flawed handwriting analysis. But, despite Beck's arrest and the case against him being strengthened by his identification as Smith, the question as to whether Beck was the same man who had been convicted in 1877 was deemed to be unnecessary to his trial. The prosecution lawyer, Mr. Avory, objected to extending the trial to interrogate the subject of Beck's identity because, as H.B. Irving outlined 'if such evidence were admitted, he would then have to prove to the jury that Beck was Smith, and so prejudice the prisoner in the eyes of the jury by proving a previous conviction against him.'<sup>272</sup> The defence were therefore prevented from submitting evidence to prove Beck had been in South America at the time of the previous trial. According to Irving, '[the Judge] held that the question of Beck's identity with Smith was a collateral issue, and therefore inadmissible to be raised in the present case.'<sup>273</sup> Beck was found guilty on March 5<sup>th</sup> and sentenced to seven years penal servitude. He began his imprisonment at Wormwood Scrubs, where he was given the prisoner number previously assigned to John Smith.

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<sup>272</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p.15.

<sup>273</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p.16.

Beck's position was almost helpless. There was no official Court of Criminal Appeal at this time, and the only recourse for a prisoner who wanted a case reviewed was to petition the Home Secretary for a pardon. This is what Beck did, but with little success. In fact, sixteen attempts by Beck to have his case re-examined were rejected during his campaign to prove his innocence. The availability of the option to petition the Home Office had been used in the argument against reform of the appeal system. It was technically a cheap option and therefore better for the poor than an expensive legal process. The difficulty, however, was in getting the attention of the Home Secretary and, unless the prisoner had influential connections, there was little chance of a petition succeeding, as an article in *The Times* outlined:

The machinery of the Home-office is scarcely one of which a condemned prisoner can claim benefit as of right. It depends entirely on the energy and sense of justice of the counsel engaged in the cause, on the humanity of bystanders, on the exertions of influential friends, whether or no a prisoner's case ever comes before the Home Secretary for revision. That is one of the greatest objections to such a tribunal.<sup>274</sup>

In any case, the suitability of the Home Secretary to make decisions on legal matters was questionable, as Rosemary Pattenden outlines in her history of criminal appeals: 'Those who wanted a proper appeal questioned how a politician who was not necessarily a lawyer, who had many other pressing interests of state, and whose career depended, unlike that of a judge, on a favourable public image, could assume the onerous duty ... of deciding an appeal.'<sup>275</sup> The accountability of the Home Secretary was also questionable; he had the power to make decisions without presenting his reasoning in the way expected of a court of law. In practice, the Home Secretary was unlikely to take action unless new evidence was found and the original trial judge agreed that his decisions should be reviewed: the Home Office generally tried to avoid disagreements with the judiciary. The system of the Home Office petition was also semantically troubling: the idea of pardoning an innocent man for a crime he was proved not to have committed was incongruous.

During Beck's imprisonment, the original fact of Smith's circumcision was discovered. It was also noted that Smith was known to have a scar on his face whereas Beck did not. Rather than investigate these facts themselves, the Home Office sent notes of these

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<sup>274</sup> 'Sir George Grey's argument last night,' *The Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1847, p5.

<sup>275</sup> Pattenden, *English Criminal Appeals 1844-1994*, p.20.

physical differences, Beck's petition and other key documents to the trial judge, Sir Forrest Fulton, so that he could review the case. Fulton seems to have misunderstood the relevance of these documents, and according to Irving sent the following reply: 'I do not understand if the paper sent to me, purporting to be a record of the marks of Smith and Beck respectively, is official or not. ... It is, of course, obvious that if at the time of his conviction, Smith was circumcised and Beck is not so, they cannot be one and the same person.'<sup>276</sup> He then emphasised the identification of Beck by a number of female victims and dismissed his alibi for the 1877 trial. The only outcome of Fulton's review was that Beck was given a new prisoner number to distinguish him from John Smith.

Beck was released in July 1901 under licence, after serving five years of his sentence. He had spent £1000 trying to overturn his conviction, despite already being a poor man (a fact that also worked against him during the trial as his financial ruin was regarded as motive). Now free from prison to seek further help in his case, he turned to an influential friend. According to Irving:

One of the first visits after his release was to Mr G. R. Sims. Never from the very first had Mr. Sims, himself a man of the world and one who in his time has rubbed shoulders with all manner of men, good, bad, and indifferent, doubted for a moment Beck's innocence and the fact that his conviction had resulted from some terrible mistake.<sup>277</sup>

Sims, at the time of the trial, had written an article stating why Beck could not be John Smith. The Norwegian presented Sims with several newspaper articles from that same time which extolled the police work that led to his imprisonment and condemned Beck as a criminal. Sims, a popular journalist as well as a playwright, approached the editors of these newspapers and convinced them of the injustice of the case against Beck. In response, the newspapers printed requests for a reconsideration of the case, on the understanding that if Beck's innocence was proved he would not take action against them for the previous articles. Sims was beginning to raise the public interest in Beck's plight.

This public interest in the Beck case was to have wider ramifications. Pattenden postulates 'A crucial factor in the failure to establish a court of criminal appeal in the nineteenth century was the absence of the political will to push enabling legislation through

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<sup>276</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p.22.

<sup>277</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p.26.

Parliament on something which was not regarded as a political issue.<sup>278</sup> Public interest had not been roused over this issue. Isaac Butt, counsel to William Kirwan whose case had greatly interested Professor Collins (as detailed in Chapter 1), had agitated for reform on several occasions during the 1850s and 60s but roused little support. There had been an outcry over the conviction in 1889 of Mrs. Maybrick for poisoning her husband with arsenic (James Maybrick was known to take arsenic on his own volition), a sensational case that had garnered significant public attention: Lambton described how it fascinated his father at the time, who ‘could talk and think of nothing else.’<sup>279</sup> At the end of this case, however, the Home Secretary commuted Florence Maybrick’s death sentence to life imprisonment and, despite an ongoing campaign for a pardon, the case did not inspire the public to demand the formation of a court of appeal. This may have been because of the unusual violence of the alleged crime involved, and the focus on the finality of the death sentence. When Sims took up the Beck case, however, he exposed some serious errors that originated from misunderstandings within the court room. It undermined the authority of the trial judge as mounting evidence suggested Sir Forrest Fulton’s judgement had been faulty.

Judges as a group traditionally had a conservative approach to reform. There were various arguments they made against the right to appeal: it was merely a device for increasing work for the legal profession; witnesses could be interfered with before a retrial or would not appear for repeat questioning; juries would take their responsibilities less seriously; the chance of a retrial would lessen the deterrent effect of the law; the public would not support delayed punishment of criminals. Underneath all of these issues was the fear that the power of the judiciary would be subject to closer scrutiny. There was an underlying assumption that criminals and law-makers belonged to different classes. Defendants, in general, belonged to the criminal classes who were considered a threat to social order and the sanctity of private property. Lambton described two classes of criminals: ‘the potential criminal and the born article. One succumbs to temptation; the other undisguisedly wages war on society, and regards life much as a game of chess.’<sup>280</sup> The educated law-making classes who presided over the judicial system were guarding society from these malefactors and as such their judgements ought to be respected. Setting up a court of appeal would be a purely academic exercise. The Beck case would undermine all of these arguments, particularly following events of 1904 when he was arrested a second time for offences perpetrated by John Smith.

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<sup>278</sup> Pattenden, *English Criminal Appeals 1844-1994*, p.27.

<sup>279</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p. 110.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, p.110.

In April that year, several women reported being swindled by a man calling himself ‘Lord Willoughby.’ The police took these women to observe Adolf Beck covertly and again some - though not all - of them identified him as the con-man. He was tried and once more imprisoned. One fact that went against him at this second trial was that, despite the new rules allowing defendants to appear in the witness box, Beck chose not to be examined under oath. Having been denied the opportunity to state his own case at the first trial in 1896, it was odd that he chose not to take advantage of the significant change in the law that had happened since then. Several social commentators suggested this was symptomatic of an innocent man accused of a crime he did not commit; that an innocent man is so confused by the charges made against him that he cannot think clearly about his defence. In an article for the monthly review *The Nineteenth Century* in December 1904, Sir Robert Anderson observed: ‘Mr. Beck has declared that the effect of his trial and conviction was to reduce him almost to the condition of an imbecile’.<sup>281</sup> He may have been dissuaded after he protested his innocence at the end of the initial hearing at the magistrate’s court and received an unfavourable reaction. As H.B. Irving describes, ‘for some reason or other, whether the foreign accent, the imperfect English, or something unfortunate in the manner of the man, [his protestations] were not convincing – another illustration of the well-known fact that, in their repudiation of guilt, the innocent are only too frequently less convincing than the guilty.’<sup>282</sup> Arguably, a failure to be convincing should have been enough to persuade the jury that Beck could not have been a con-man. Nevertheless, he was yet again found guilty, but the judge deferred sentencing as ‘he felt that Beck was not an ordinary member of the criminal classes’.<sup>283</sup>

Rosemary Pattenden describes the final outcome for Beck:

Luckily for Beck, Smith was arrested at this point trying to pawn a stolen ring and confessed to all the frauds. Two free pardons were obtained by Beck and the Government agreed to pay £2,000 (later increased to £5,000) compensation. Rightly, or wrongly – Lord Alverstone said wrongly – Beck’s suffering was attributed to the lack of court of criminal appeal. Pressure from the press led to the setting-up of a committee of inquiry consisting of Lord Collins MR, Sir Spencer Walpole, and Sir John Edge. The Committee’s report appeared in 1904. It traced the debacle to two main causes: first, the judge’s ruling in 1896 that no mention could be made of the conviction in 1877, a point which the judge had refused to reserve for the consideration of the Court for Crown Cases Reserved; secondly, the failure of Home Office officials to appreciate the significance of the

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<sup>281</sup> Anderson, Robert, ‘One Lesson from the Beck Case,’ *The Nineteenth Century and after: a monthly review*, December 1904, p.1007.

<sup>282</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p. 28.

<sup>283</sup> Irving, *Last Studies*, p. 30.



fact that Smith but not Beck had undergone circumcision and ‘to look at the matter as *res integra* and form an independent judgement upon it’. The Committee of Inquiry did not recommend a court of criminal appeal. In future, it advised, persons in the Home Office who dealt with prisoners’ petitions should have legal training and the law should be changed to remove the judge’s discretion to refuse to refer a point of law to the Court for Crown Cases Reserved.<sup>284</sup>

Pemberton described Sims’s campaign on Beck’s behalf as ‘the earliest of the Club’s triumphs,’ and though it had not concluded with the thorough review of the court system that Sims would have liked, it had raised the public’s interest and prepared a stronger foundation for such arguments in the future.

If the Courts were mistakenly sending the innocent to prison, they could equally be releasing the guilty, and one of Professor Collins’s hobbies was to elicit confessions from people who had been found ‘Not Guilty.’ ‘The psychological interest,’ writes Lambton, ‘must have been stupendous, and one can picture the professor cleverly drawing his subject out, and all the time forming his private conclusions as to the justice of the verdict.’<sup>285</sup> Careful not to reveal the potential criminal’s identity, Lambton relates a scene in which Collins succeeded:

[Collins] possessed a manner so ingratiating and sympathetic, that whereas a reporter would have run the risk of assault and battery, Collins never failed to procure his interview. On this occasion the subject was at first morose, but gradually he thawed, began to talk himself instead of nodding his head either affirmatively or negatively, and shortly the position was inverted and Collins became the listener. Then, in the course of his narrative, the man exclaimed: “And when I got there that night - ” At which a voice behind Collins’ chair chipped in with: “But you never were there that night, you fool!” Collins declared afterwards he was never so startled in his life, as he thought only two people were in the room. The voice behind the chair emanated from the accused’s wife, who doubtless had been there the whole time, and possibly in the same attitude – i.e., her arms folded.<sup>286</sup>

Lambton makes no suggestion that Collins used such confessions to aid the official channels of justice, perhaps another reason why criminals were happy to converse with him. Collins, with more Holmesian proclivities than Sims, exhibited more interest in solving cases

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<sup>284</sup> Pattenden, *English Criminal Appeals 1844-1994*, p. 29.

<sup>285</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p. 110.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

than in ensuring official justice was done. He was, however, perhaps too confident in his instincts about crime. Not long after the completion of the Beck campaign, Collins experienced some embarrassment after making public some theories about a murder case, as Pemberton describes:

For all his cleverness, however, Collins once came to a terrible crash when he investigated a strange murder in a building by the Westbourne Grove, Bayswater. A young man had lived alone in the flat, where he did, or was supposed to do, certain artistic work. His leisure hours he spent with his people, a most worthy couple. One day the young artist had been found brutally murdered in his studio, and everybody said “burglars.” So strongly did Churton Collins hold to that opinion, that he wrote two columns in a great daily paper and showed exactly how the thieves must have entered and left the building. A second article was promised but never printed, for the crime was suddenly revealed as a horrible affair about which the less said the better.<sup>287</sup>

Pemberton provides little detail here but enough to describe a scandal. The crime he refers to so obliquely is the murder of an artist called Archibald Wakley. Wakley was found dead in the lavatory of 76A Monmouth Road at 9am on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1906.<sup>288</sup> He was only partially dressed and had received several blows to the head with a blunt instrument. There was speculation in the press that there was a connection between the murder and the location of the house which was next door to a branch of the London and County Bank.<sup>289</sup> It was thought that Wakley had surprised some burglars attempting to access the bank. Pemberton may have been cynical about the work that Wakley was ‘supposed to do’ on the premises, but he was indeed an artist and that same year his painting ‘Sleeping Beauty’ was exhibited at the Royal Academy. ‘His people’ ran a restaurant in Swallow Street near Piccadilly and he shared the third floor flat in Westbourne Grove with an older man who was also an artist.

While Collins was publicly supporting the theory that Wakley had disturbed some burglars and publishing his theories about how the perpetrators escaped unseen, it was very soon reported in the press that the police were dropping this line of inquiry. Suspicion was falling on a soldier who had been seen with Wakley at his flat the night before the morning he was found murdered, not least because the victim was found with marks on his thighs that appeared to have been made with spurs. Further investigation revealed that Wakley often

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<sup>287</sup> Pemberton, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, p.243.

<sup>288</sup> Details taken from ‘Murder at a Studio,’ *The Times*, Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June 1906, p.3.

<sup>289</sup> Such as in an article titled ‘Artist Done to Death. Mysterious Crime. Bank Burglars Suspected,’ in *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1906, p.3.

entertained soldiers at his flat. One soldier, Trooper Walker, gave evidence at the inquest. He had met Wakley in Hyde Park four months earlier when he asked Wakley for a cigarette. Walker then agreed to join Wakley for a drink at his flat. He proposed painting Walker's portrait and made an appointment that the soldier decided not to keep. The foreman asked for further detail about what happened in the studio which was reported in the *Dundee Courier* as follows: 'Do I understand deceased suggested something to you to which you objected? Yes, sir, answered witness. (Sensation.)'<sup>290</sup> It would seem the Press were as reluctant as Pemberton to be candid about the possibility of a homosexual scandal. The case was never officially solved, and though he could have pursued new theories, Collins ceased to be involved, no doubt trying to avoid being seen to be interested in case that was now connected with sexual practices that were then criminal. It is worth noting, however, that whilst Pemberton shies away from discussing the homosexual aspect of the crime and reports the behaviour of the victim in a cynical matter, he does not openly discuss the sexual practice as a crime.

It may seem odd that a Society formed around the discussion of crime should be sensitive to certain subjects, particularly when they discussed openly such violent and salacious murders as the mutilation of prostitutes by Jack the Ripper, but certainly in the early years more conservative members seemed to have adhered to Victorian prudery. The Oscar Wilde Trial, for example, was not officially discussed until November 1925, and the paper was presented by Sir Charles Russell, the solicitor who gathered evidence against Wilde for the Marquis of Queensberry when the playwright took him to Court for libel. Quinton Wilson recalled how this was a paper with a 'special interest':

Russell was Queensberry's solicitor, and up to a few hours before going into Court they had no evidence for their defence and felt that they were bound to be subjected to heavy damages; but then, almost at the last moment, a housemaid from the Savoy Hotel was discovered to be at Brighton and she was rushed up to London in the nick of time. Her evidence was as overwhelming as it was disgusting, and Wilde was finished.<sup>291</sup>

Radical though some members of the Society believed they were in certain contests with the Law, in many ways they were just as keen to be seen to uphold British society's conventions.

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<sup>290</sup> 'Artist's Murder. Disclosures in London Studio Crime. Guardsman Proves Alibi. Burglary Theory Disappears,' *Dundee Courier*, Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June 1906, p.5.

<sup>291</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

Collins had been far more comfortable with the Merstham Tunnel Case of 1905, though his investigations here were equally as futile. His biographer Andrew Kearney describes how the Professor used the case to highlight what he saw as the inefficiencies of the police:

In September 1905, a Miss Mary Money was found dead in a railway tunnel, having first been gagged and then thrown out of the carriage she was traveling in. Since the police seemed unable to make much headway with the case Collins decided to examine all the evidence for himself and came forward with his own theories about it. He also offered strong criticism of police procedures (*National Review* December 1905 and March 1906). In the style he used on other occasions to berate the failures of the universities and the literary establishment, he now blamed the inefficiency of the police, the whole system of criminal investigation in Britain and the sensational press for publicising key facts which alerted criminals to the progress being made. In effect, he argued that the whole procedure for solving crime was unsatisfactory.<sup>292</sup>

Samuel Ingleby Oddie, who always took the greatest delight when accompanying Collins on ‘pleasant excursions [...] to places of criminological interest,’ went with the Professor to visit the Merstham Tunnel. The renowned physician and toxicologist, Sir William Willcox, had carried out the post-mortem examination and discovered a scarf stuffed tightly into Mary Money’s mouth, suggesting she had been gagged as Kearney describes. The identity of the perpetrator was a complete mystery, and the police had little information to investigate. Oddie and Collins made the same train journey Money was presumed to have taken to see if they could discover any clues. Finding little of use, they then made some unwelcome enquiries:

...we paid a visit to the dairy where the deceased had been employed, but we received a very cool reception there. Undeterred by this setback, the learned Professor and I, fully convinced that murder had been committed, next visited Watford where we interviewed the dead girl’s family. We learned a good deal, which Collins subsequently embodied in an article in the *National Review* and which made me long to have held the inquest myself, for the Jury merely returned an open verdict which decided nothing at all.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Kearney, Andrew, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*, (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press Limited, 1986), p. 133.

<sup>293</sup> Oddie, S. Ingleby, *Inquest*, (London, Hutchinson & Son LTD, 1941), p.56.

Collins gave a talk to Our Society about the Merstham Tunnel Mystery on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1905. The case, however, remains unsolved.

In 1906, Collins became involved with another case of injustice that would overshadow both his brief involvement in the Wakley case and the Merstham Tunnel Mystery. In a diary entry from Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> December 1906, he records how he spent a few days pursuing his interests in criminal justice:

Went with Donkin to Isle of Wight to see Parkhurst prison: had a pleasant journey. Next day visited the Prison – saw it thoroughly – sat with him while he heard the Convicts who had any complaints or requests to make: most interesting. Saw all over the grounds and in fact the whole thing. Returned to Pier Hotel Ryde; Dr Archdall Reid dined with us and had long talk till nearly 1 a.m. Visited the Prison again – saw this time the Weak-Minded. On Friday at five we left for Conan Doyle's at Hindhead. Motor met us – rather frightened me by the speed with which it raced along the narrow snow-covered road. Had a delightful time with Conan Doyle who is on fire with the Edalji case: going to deal exhaustively with it in the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>294</sup>

George Edalji was himself a convict who had cause to complain, and the nature of his distress became one of significant public concern once his case was taken up by one of the most popular authors of his day.

Doyle's involvement in the Edalji case is well documented. It is arguably the most popular example invoked by those who wish to make a case for the author exhibiting the detective traits of his famous creation (closely followed by the case of Oscar Slater, to be discussed in later chapters). The creator of Sherlock Holmes taking up the case of an unfortunate underdog who had been failed, perhaps even victimised, by the police and the criminal justice system, promised to be an exciting story. Here is the former G.P. turned writer, applying his scientific logic to prove the innocence of a wrongly-convicted man, highlighting the prejudices of the police and the pomposity of the courts. Aably assisted by a willing Dr. Watson – in this instance, Professor Collins – Doyle shows himself to be, as Sherlock Holmes claims for himself in the opening chapter of *The Sign of Four*, the last and highest court of appeal. Whereas Holmes attempted to keep his name out of the newspapers - claiming 'The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward'<sup>295</sup> - the attachment of Doyle's name to the Edalji case was essential for

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<sup>294</sup> Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.246

<sup>295</sup> Doyle 'The Sign of Four,' in *Sherlock Holmes: The Illustrated Novels*, p. 112.

garnering the level of attention required to achieve justice for a man convicted of a relatively mundane crime in the rural backwaters of the Black Country.

Edalji was a mixed race solicitor from the Staffordshire village of Great Wyrley. His mother was Scottish and his father, Shapurji Edalji, was the local vicar. Shapurji Edalji originated from Bombay and had been brought up Parsee but had converted to Christianity and joined the clergy. Shapurji Edalji took over the Parish of Great Wyrley from his wife's uncle. Doyle's opinion of an Asian man being placed in a position of authority in a country parish was not wholly open-minded:

How the Vicar came to be a Parsee, or how a Parsee came to be the Vicar, I have no idea. Perhaps some Catholic-minded patron wished to demonstrate the universality of the Anglican Church. The experiment will not, I hope, be repeated, for though the Vicar was an amiable and devoted man, the appearance of a coloured clergyman with a half-caste son in a rude, unrefined parish was bound to cause some regrettable situation.<sup>296</sup>

Doyle's takes a passive approach to racism here, and demonstrates an attitude that is suggestive of victim blaming, though his opinion of the villagers who meted out racist abuse to the Edalji family was also notably low. Since the late 1880s, the Edaljis had been subject to continuous abuse including rubbish being thrown across their garden and abusive letters sent to them or to other local people about them. From 1892 to 1895, a spate of hoax letters appeared signed 'S. Edalji' that prompted the vicar to send a letter to *The Times* in August 1895:

Some unknown person has sent for the last three years, and still continues to send, a large number of letters and postcards in my name to clergymen, solicitors, detectives, managers of newspapers, and tradesmen generally asking them to do a number of things for me. He has forged my signature, and his handwriting and style of composition are such as to make one believe that his communications must be genuine. ... In numerous cases the requests contained in these fictitious communications have been complied with; the people to whom they were addressed have either called personally or sent the things asked for. They have thereby been put to a great deal of unnecessary trouble and expense.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *Memories and Adventures*, (Ware, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2007), p.189.

<sup>297</sup> S. Edalji, 'A Strange Hoax,' *The Times*, Friday 16<sup>th</sup> August 1895, p.12.

Complaints to the police about these letters proved futile. In fact, the local police suspected George Edalji of writing them himself to get attention, a completely unfounded suspicion, especially because he had been standing with his father when some of the letters were pushed under the door. This claim by the police that George was responsible for the hoaxes had more serious implications in later years when an anonymous letter writer implicated himself in a local case of horse-maiming. George was arrested for these crimes in October 1903, the police seemingly focussed on convicting him rather than exploring other possibilities. On insubstantial evidence, he was convicted to seven years penal servitude.

His imprisonment was controversial long before Doyle came to be involved. A petition was received by the Home Office soon after his conviction, signed by 10,000 people asking for his release. This petition was arranged by R.D. Yelverton, a former Chief Justice of the Bahamas, who also set up a Support Committee for Edalji's release. Yelverton wrote numerous letters to the Home Office highlighting the weaknesses of the case (he also indicated in one letter that Edalji's mother, sister and Aunt were staying at 39 Woburn Place, not far from H.B. Irving's house, in order to be available for cross-examination by Home Office officials). In 1905, Shapuri Edalji released a book titled *A Miscarriage of Justice: The Case of George Edalji*, which outlined facts he believed proved his son's innocence. Support also came from a radical newspaper, *Truth*, edited by one Mr Voules. Edalji was released in 1906 before his sentence was up but he was kept under police supervision. He was not proclaimed innocent and he was not permitted to return to his previous profession as a solicitor. It was on his release that he decided to write to Doyle for help.

Edalji was not the first person to write to the creator of Sherlock Holmes for help: Doyle had been receiving letters either addressed directly to him or to his fictional character almost as soon as *A Study in Scarlet* had been published in 1887. This letter, however, arrived at an important time in Doyle's life and had certain characteristics that would appeal to his interest. In July 1906, his first wife, Louise, finally succumbed to the fatal strain of tuberculosis from which she had suffered from for over a decade. Doyle was now free to marry the love of his life, Jean Leckie, but had to leave a respectable amount of time to mourn his first wife before this could happen. The Edalji case would prove a useful distraction during this period. The location of the case also provided him with an opportunity to indulge in nostalgia. During his years as a medical student, Doyle worked as an assistant to Dr. Hoare in Aston, then a separate town but now part of Birmingham proper, and so was familiar with the area in which Edalji lived and worked. Doyle also had a reputation for being, like his creation, a champion of the underdog. This case allowed him not just the

opportunity to stand up against the police on Edalji's behalf but also to use in real life the detective skills that he wrote about in his fictional work, and attempt to find the real perpetrators of the Great Wyrley crimes. As the case gained more public interest because of Doyle's involvement, so the significance of the Great Wyrley cattle-maimings was taken to be more sinister. George R. Sims was asked about the case by the *New York Times* in September 1907, and drew parallels with Whitechapel murders of 1888, speculating that the crimes were perpetrated by men with a similar criminal pathology:

He undoubtedly is a madman... His particular mania might be called cruelty to animals. It is a sort of blood lust and is well known to students of the psychology of crime. It can be seen frequently in children who do fiendish things to animals and birds.

This man's particular blood lust is slaughtering cattle. What I call the handwriting of a crime is always the same act performed in the same way, just as it was in the 'ripper' murders, which were also the work of a madman. Like all madmen, this young man has his periods of activity and quiescence. This again resembles the 'ripper' murders, which ceased entirely for a month and then broke out afresh. The present outbreak at Great Wyrley simply means that the man has had another attack.<sup>298</sup>

Sims refers to recurrences of the cattle-maimings which continued during Edalji's imprisonment and long after his release while he was living in London and known to be far from the scenes of the crimes. This prompted a double criticism of the police: not only had they persisted in the racial victimization of a man who had a strong alibi for ongoing crimes, they had also failed to do anything about catching the true criminal who was clearly a 'madman'.

Having grown interested in the case during the Christmas period of 1906 as detailed by Professor Collins, Doyle met Edalji at the Charing Cross Hotel, London, in the New Year. This meeting is an incident used by several biographers as evidence that Doyle possessed Holmesian observation skills. He arrived later than Edalji, and found him reading a newspaper which he held very close to his face. Doyle deduced that Edalji was afflicted with astigmatism and later had this confirmed by professional oculists. This became central to his argument that the near-blind solicitor could not have performed, under cover of darkness, the intricate incisions required to maim, and in some cases kill, the animals involved. This was central to the theory he published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1907 (an article he

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<sup>298</sup> 'Doyle Scores in Edalji Case', *The New York Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1907.



requested was headed 'No Copyright' in order that it might be circulated widely through other publications to help the campaign). He followed this up with several letters to the *Telegraph*, reiterating the significance of Edalji's near-blindness, stating that 'To my mind it was as physically impossible for Mr. Edalji to have committed the crime as it would have been if his legs, instead of his eyes, were crippled.'<sup>299</sup>

Whereas there is no record of Sims presenting a paper on the Beck case to Our Society, there were several occasions when Doyle talked on Edalji and it is likely he used the club as a platform for attracting help to his cause. The first time Doyle presented the case to the club, and the first meeting at which he was recorded as having given a paper, was on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1907. Around this time, Doyle set up the 'Edalji Committee' to help support the appeal to get the wronged man pardoned. This was separate to Yelverton's support committee, and included, with Doyle, Professor Collins, Jerome K. Jerome, George Lewis, Horace Voules, and J. Hall Richardson (all members signed a statement to *The Daily Telegraph* in June 1907). He also opened a joint causerie on the Edalji and Slater cases in November 1913.

From the beginning of Doyle's involvement in the campaign, it would seem Collins acted as his proof-reader. L.C. Collins, in his father's memoirs, quotes an undated letter written by Doyle to the Professor in which he asks him for help: 'Would you of your charity cast your eye over the enclosed statement. You are probably conversant with the facts and have views thereon. To me, coming fresh to it, it seems a case which calls aloud to Heaven.'<sup>300</sup> Whether this letter was sent before or after the visit to Undershaw detailed in Collins's diary is unclear, as is whether the statement referred to is the original article Doyle wrote for the *Telegraph* or some other document. What is known is that Collins became a firm supporter and played a significant role in the campaign. As he was based at Birmingham University he was close to Great Wyrley and able to rouse further local support for Edalji. He also wrote an article on the case for the *National Review* as well as working closely with Doyle. L.C. Collins cryptically refers to internal problems in the campaign that his father was also involved with: 'No one can more appreciate the difficulties under which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle laboured than he who reads the voluminous correspondence that passed in this

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<sup>299</sup> Published in *The Daily Telegraph*, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1907, quoted in Gibson, John Michael and Green, Richard Lancelyn ed., *Letters to the Press: Arthur Conan Doyle* (Portsmouth, University of Iowa Press, 1986), p.125.

<sup>300</sup> Collins, *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, p.203.

task. For there were serious dissensions in his own camp, which had to be adjusted, before he was able to cope with the mighty machine of the law.’<sup>301</sup>

What these dissensions were is not clear, but Andrew Lycett, in his 2007 biography of Doyle, highlights what he believes was a significant mistake:

Arthur made a bad strategic mistake: encouraged by weaselly Home Office promises to set up an inquiry and looking no further than to gain Edalji a pardon and perhaps compensation, he cut his links with the support committee which had additional reforms of the legal system in mind. Arthur arrogantly convinced Edalji that his personal contacts with the Home Office were more likely to be fruitful. But having set up an internal committee to look into the matter, the Home Office recruited as a member Sir Albert de Rutzen, the Chief Magistrate of London, who was Anson’s cousin.<sup>302</sup>

George Anson was the Staffordshire Chief Constable whose apparent racism had catalysed the biased case against Edalji. His relative was now placed in a position to support him against allegations of injustice. Doyle’s choice to separate his group from involvement with Yelverton’s Support Committee was odd and, rather appropriately, short-sighted. It would seem he was more concerned with achieving a pardon for Edalji’s case and was less interested in reforming the system that had prevented him from appealing against his conviction through official channels in the first place. By focusing on his own personal ‘adventure’ with Edalji, he lost sight of the bigger picture and of an opportunity to help with a more historically noteworthy campaign. The Home Secretary’s Committee concluded by giving Edalji a free pardon, but offered no compensation.

Doyle continued to campaign after the Committee’s decision and wrote several letters to the Press but he was never able to gain compensation for Edalji, as Richard Whittington-Egan records:

The ‘Letter’ articles never had the impact, nor achieved the result, of the earlier argument in the *Daily Telegraph*. Although at first sight they are impressive enough, with their reproductions of anonymous letters in the case, the handwriting analysis is not profound. It has also been suggested that the jaded public wearied of Doyle’s Edalji crusade, but that is a thing not open now to proof. Certainly Doyle was shaken by his confrontation with the Establishment and later wrote, “Even now, after the lapse of so many years, I can hardly think

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<sup>301</sup> *Ibid*, p.204.

<sup>302</sup> Lycett, Andrew, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p. 304.

with patience of the handling of this case.” Nonetheless, the Edalji affair revived Conan Doyle’s abounding zest for living, and on September 18<sup>th</sup> of that same year, 1907, he felt able to marry his bride-in-waiting. The rehabilitated George Edalji, a gargoyle figure against the silks and laces, was a guest at the wedding reception, like a phoenix emblem of the great man’s renewed march through life.<sup>303</sup>

From his presence at the author’s wedding, it would seem that Edalji had become personally well regarded by Doyle. Though he helped a man and gained him as a friend, by focusing on Edalji’s lack of compensation Doyle missed playing a significant part in a much bigger historical event. Not long after the committee reported in May 1907, Home Secretary Herbert Gladstone put the case for a Court of Criminal Appeal to the House of Commons. Later that year, the Court of Criminal Appeal Act was passed. No doubt the campaigns led by Sims and Doyle had roused the public interest in this area of the justice system, and their work also drew attention to the influence of the Press, as Pattenden observes: ‘Retrial by newspaper had become so prevalent that public confidence in the courts was being undermined.’<sup>304</sup> Members of Our Society celebrated the success of these campaigns, but another outcome was that, now there was an established legal pathway for appeals, notable men such as Sims and Doyle were not called upon as often to use their influence through unofficial channels.

The triumph of the Court of Criminal Appeal Act was closely followed by tragedy. On Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> September 1908, Professor Collins was found dead in a dyke in Suffolk, at Carlton Colville near Lowestoft, his hat and diary lying on a nearby bank. A report in the *Lichfield Mercury* described the state in which his body was discovered:

Some correspondence was lying in the water, and in the clothing was a diary, dating from August 27<sup>th</sup> and, it is said, describing the writer’s suffering from fits of depression which came upon him daily. It is believed that the body had been lying in the dyke since Saturday night for Professor Churton Collins was observed over the entrance to the rookery in the afternoon. About ten o’clock the same evening groans were heard, and the occupant of an adjacent farm made a search, but failed to trace anything.

It is stated that the professor had recently been taking sedatives to ease pain. The diary contained the sentence, “What will become of the children if I break down weighs on me terribly...Enough to provoke suicidal.” There was also an entry to the effect that he was to unveil a statue to Boswell on September 16<sup>th</sup>, this being

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<sup>303</sup> Whittington-Egan, Richard and Molly, ed., Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *The Story of Mr. George Edalji* (London, Grey House Books, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>304</sup> Pattenden, *English Criminal Appeals 1844-1994*, p. 31.

followed by the words, “God grant I am right again.” On the closing page of the diary was written: “I have taken the drug to alleviate the pain.”<sup>305</sup>

Collins had been staying in Suffolk with an old friend, Dr. Daniel, who gave evidence at the inquest to suggest the Professor had simply fallen asleep outside and fallen into the dyke by accident, adding: ‘He was a very peculiar man who would go anywhere and sleep under the trees.’<sup>306</sup> Despite the evidence of suicidal thoughts in Collins’ diaries, the jury reached a verdict of Accidental Death. His funeral took place very quickly, on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> September, and there were very few mourners in attendance (his wife and daughter being ‘too prostrated to attend’<sup>307</sup>). There were no deputations from Oxford or Birmingham. There is no evidence that suggests anyone from Our Society was in attendance: a sad omission for one of its founders.

Thus the Crimes Club first lost an original and much-loved member. Lambton had enjoyed the Professor’s hospitality when he came to London at weekends: ‘on Saturdays I would repair to his house, lean back in an easy-chair, listen to him hour after hour, and steadily deplete his stock of excellent Havana cigars. His memory was extraordinary, prose and poetry alike, and he could give every date and every detail of any murder case without any mental effort.’<sup>308</sup> The timing of Collins’ death could be seen as particularly tragic as, had he lived just two years longer, he would have been able to participate in the drama surrounding one of the most sensational murders of the twentieth century.

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<sup>305</sup> ‘Tragic Death of Prof. Churton Collins’ in *Lichfield Mercury*, Friday 18 September 1908, p. 5.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> ‘Funeral of Professor Collins’ in *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* - Saturday 19 September 1908, p. 8.

<sup>308</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p.111.

## Chapter 5 - Human Remains and Human Sympathy: Dr. Crippen and the Search for Evidence.

Arthur Lambton sought a lost relic from a notorious and grisly crime committed by a terrifying woman. This crime took place during Lambton's childhood, imprinting itself on his young mind, particularly so after he saw her effigy at Madame Tussauds within months of her execution in July 1879: 'I have never seen anything more dreadful, and I do not exaggerate when I say that her very appearance in a nursery would suffice to affect a child's mentality for life.'<sup>309</sup> Kate Webster, a hardened thief who had been imprisoned on several occasions before she was 30, was hanged in 1879 for the murder of her former employer, Mrs. Julia Thomas. Learning of her employee's untrustworthy nature, Mrs. Thomas sacked Webster from the position of maid in her Richmond house, and Webster took violent revenge with an axe. To hide her misdemeanour, Webster dismembered and boiled the corpse, then experimented with several different methods of disposal of its parts (one of the wilder stories that circulated afterwards was that she attempted to sell the victim's body fat as dripping). Things quickly unravelled for Webster, however, once packages of Mrs. Thomas's boiled remains were discovered on the banks of the Thames, minus the head which remained missing. In his book *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, Lambton recounts how he wished to discover this missing remnant:

I was asked to a dinner to meet some famous criminologists. As a *bonne-bouche* I was told that one of the party would bring Mrs. Thomas's head with him. This intrigued me as I wondered where he had found it. In fact, I think my curiosity would have acted as an antidote to any feeling of nausea. But, alas! The gentleman never turned up, and so our expectation was dowsed. If anybody else finds the head, I will esteem it a personal favour if the finder will communicate with me.<sup>310</sup>

Sadly for Lambton, this appetiser remained elusive, and the gentleman was likely bluffing as the head was not found in his lifetime.<sup>311</sup> It would certainly have been a popular talking point at a Crimes Club dinner.

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<sup>309</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p.174.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid*, p.183.

<sup>311</sup> In fact, it was recovered relatively recently in 2011, when it was found in the garden of a house in Richmond, the home of Sir David Attenborough as detailed in an article on *The Telegraph* website from 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011,

Gerald Biss, ‘that jovial Bohemian and Criminologist’<sup>312</sup> as Lambton described him, was responsible for showing a collection of relics at a dinner on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1913. A novelist and motor car enthusiast, Biss is not a name as widely known as some of the famous men who joined Our Society. All the same, he was a revered member of the committee, not least because he possessed his own ‘Black Museum’ and extensive ‘Black Library.’ Lambton was impressed by a provocative object Biss used for decoration: ‘On the door of his study a brass plate was affixed, but the name stamped on that plate was not Gerald Biss – it was a far more sinister one: “*Dr. Palmer*” (the Rugely poisoner).’<sup>313</sup> He was also responsible for creating and distributing typewritten indexes to some of the true crime books used by Our Society for general reference.<sup>314</sup> Like his fellow members, Biss had a penchant for collecting criminous artefacts. A chance encounter with a woman, who would later be remembered more as evidential remains than as a person, gave him an anecdote to rival any object in his museum. Lambton describes this encounter in his book *The Galanty Show*:

I have never forgotten the story told by the late Gerald Biss, the famous writer and criminologist. Being constantly importuned by a well-known music-hall artist to look him up whenever he happened to be motoring past where he lived in the country, Biss one day accepted the invitation and broke his run. Hospitality galore was, of course, lavished upon him, and among the guests assembled was Belle Elmore. The tragedy occurred shortly afterwards.<sup>315</sup>

‘Belle Ellmore’ was the stage name of a woman who had also been known as Cora Turner, and who was originally named Kunigunde Mackamotski. Though she strived for fame as Belle Ellmore, it was as Cora, the unfortunate wife of Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, that she is remembered. Precisely when Biss is supposed to have encountered her is not clear from Lambton’s story (and about the verity of Lambton’s version or Biss’s unsubstantiated anecdote it is only possible to speculate), but it had to take place before 31<sup>st</sup> January 1910, the last time Cora is known to have been seen alive.

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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/8618240/Head-found-in-David-Attenboroughs-garden-was-murder-victim.html#>, viewed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

<sup>312</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *The Salad Bowl*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1927), p.37.

<sup>313</sup> Lambton, Arthur, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, in *The London Magazine*, March Edition, 1923, p. 114.

<sup>314</sup> Discovered during research in the private archives of Stewart Evans.

<sup>315</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *The Galanty Show* (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1933), p. 159.

That night, some friends had dined with the Crippens at their home: 39 Hilldrop Crescent, Camden. These friends were the last people, other than Crippen himself, who are known to have seen Cora alive. After that date, Crippen began to pawn his wife's jewellery and make up all manner of excuses for her sudden disappearance. Oddie records some of the tales Crippen told in order to explain the absence of his extrovert wife:

He first said she had had to go very suddenly to America on business for him. He was a sort of American doctor carrying on a business in Oxford Street, where he was engaged in the sale of Munyon's Remedies and American dental and other specialities...

He gave another explanation of his wife's prolonged absence later to the effect that she had been taken ill with pneumonia whilst in America. Finally, he said she had died in Los Angeles and had been cremated.

In order to give verisimilitude to this rather bald and unconvincing narrative, he went into deep mourning, announced her death in the Press, bought black-edged note-paper, and sent out to all her friends touching black-edged memorial cards. In some cases these were accompanied by a broken-hearted note which explained that her ashes were being sent to London later.<sup>316</sup>

Cora's friends were not persuaded, especially after Crippen behaved even more suspiciously by attending a ball with his mistress, Ethel Le Neve, who also moved in with him at Hilldrop Crescent in March that year. Months went by, and eventually Cora's friends asked Scotland Yard to look into the matter. On 8<sup>th</sup> July, Inspector Dew questioned Crippen and visited Hilldrop Crescent. Crippen made a statement claiming his wife was not, in fact, dead as he had been suggesting, but had left him for another man. After Dew's initial enquiries, Crippen lost his nerve and promptly fled Camden, taking Ethel Le Neve with him. It was a bad move. Ironically Dew had been satisfied by Crippen's responses, but now the American doctor's disappearance prompted further investigation. Descriptions of Cora Crippen, Dr. Crippen and Miss Le Neve were circulated in the Press. On 13<sup>th</sup> July, 39 Hilldrop Crescent was searched and a gruesome discovery was made: buried in the cellar were human remains. Oddie describes the finding as 'the body of Crippen's wife, without limbs or head or bones,' though actually confirming it was the body of Cora would pose a problem: 'It was not really a body. It was a mass of human remains consisting only of the internal organs of the chest and abdomen, but without any organ to enable the sex to be determined.'<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Oddie, S. Ingleby, *Inquest*, (London, Hutchinson & Son LTD, 1941), p.75.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, p.74.

The extreme dismemberment and missing parts of the body resonated with the murder of Mrs. Thomas by Kate Webster which had so fascinated Lambton as a child. Unlike Webster, Crippen had not been seen disposing of suspicious packages or otherwise concealing body parts. His guilt seemed likely, but had to be proved. The easiest way, perhaps the only way given there were no known witnesses, to discover what had happened at Hilldrop Crescent would be to arrest Crippen and interrogate him. So began one of the most famous man-hunts in history. Crippen and Le Neve, disguised as father and son and calling themselves Mr. and Master Robinson, had fled from London to Antwerp, where they boarded the *SS Montrose* and headed for Canada. Two days into the voyage, on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, Captain Kendall recognised the wanted couple. His method of contacting the police by telegram was considered an historic moment, as Our Society member Filson Young, who wrote a book on the case for the *Notable Trials* series, described: 'Wireless telegraphy, then in its early commercial stages, was used for the first time in the science of criminal detection.'<sup>318</sup> Kendall's message was long and thorough, even detailing the books that Crippen was reading: *Pickwick Papers*, *Nebo the Nailer* by S. B. Gould, *Metropolis*, *A Name to Conjure With*. 'And he is now busy reading "The Four Just Men," which is all about a murder in London and £1000 reward.'<sup>319</sup> A thrilling chase to catch Crippen was initiated as Dew boarded the *SS Laurentic* at Liverpool to chase down the *SS Montrose* before it arrived in Canada. He apprehended Crippen and Le Neve on July 31<sup>st</sup> (on which date Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* published Captain Kendall's message in full) and, after extradition proceedings in Quebec, returned the fugitives to England to face justice. This could have been the thrilling denouement of the case, but Crippen kept his nerve, maintained his innocence, and claimed ignorance of the remains in the cellar. The Crown not only had to prove that the remains at Hilldrop Crescent were Cora Crippen, they also had to prove that her husband had killed her and dismembered her to hide the crime. The trial was set up to be a sensational one.

Edward VII, who had officially opened the Old Bailey only three years before, had died earlier that year. The death of the King had dominated the Capital in the Spring, and huge crowds had gathered to witness the funeral procession from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Hall. Now, as Autumn set in, they flocked beneath the watchful eyes of Lady Justice, in the hope of seeing something of note as the gentlemen of the Crown arrived to take on Crippen and the team for his defence. From six o'clock in the morning on 18<sup>th</sup> October

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<sup>318</sup> Young, Filson, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, (Glasgow and Edinburgh, William Hodge and Company, LTD, 1920), Introduction p.XXXI.

<sup>319</sup> Included in Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, as appendix, p.187.



1910, crowds gathered outside the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey in the hope of gaining entrance to the public gallery, or at least catching a glimpse of some of the big players, maybe even of Crippen himself. Towards 10.30am, the time at which the courts opened, crowds swelled around the entrance. A reporter from Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* described the scene:

The first impression received on reaching the Old Bailey was of seething excitement. Around the main entrance to the court an eager crowd clustered, some begging, pleading, wheedling, arguing, lying to gain admission, others, knowing the hopelessness of such endeavours, trying for no more than to catch sight of some of the people prominent in the case, content to feel some thrill in the atmosphere outside the massive walls of the building in which the final act of the great drama was to be played.<sup>320</sup>

Court Room One could only accommodate 150 people including counsel, jury, witnesses, reporters and city dignitaries. Due to the huge public interest in the case, a ticketing system was introduced restricting those who were granted admittance a limited attendance of half a day. Around four thousand people were reported to have applied, but only very few members of the public were allowed to attend and the contrast between the crowds outside and the conditions in the Court was striking, as described in the *Daily Mail*:

...inside the court the atmosphere of a sensational mystery was left behind and eager seekers after emotional excitement found themselves in the calm, still atmosphere of British Justice.

...It was like coming from a raging storm into the warmth and comfort of a quiet house. The oak-panelled, white-walled, dome-lit court makes no ornamental pretence, but is not without a well-proportioned beauty. It has not the air of being attached to the gaol and the scaffold that belonged to the hideous yellow gloom of the demolished Old Bailey. It has the well-arranged, businesslike look of a place built with a purpose, and the ticket holders bustling in there expecting to find themselves in a seething excitement looked round and recognised the absence of the traditional emotional atmosphere of the Old Bailey.<sup>321</sup>

The atmosphere of the new building reflected the increasingly professionalised business of English justice, of which the Crippen trial would provide an influential demonstration. Twenty-two seats usually reserved for jurors in waiting were given over to members of the junior Bar who wished to be present at this landmark event. This is likely to

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<sup>320</sup> 'Crippen Trial,' *The Daily Mail*, 19 October 1910, p.5.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

be where Bentley Purchase, then still a student of Law, sat to observe proceedings, posing as a barrister having secured a seat through a barrister friend.

Despite the overburdened ticketing system, Our Society members seem to have encountered little trouble getting in. On the first day, during the opening speech for the Crown, not only were the jury faced with the burden of determining the outcome of a notorious case that had received a lot of attention from the Press, they were also sitting opposite the familiar face of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle, at the invitation of Sir Edward Marshall Hall, had a privileged seat behind the Bar benches facing the jury box. Unlike the Edalji case, or others like that of Oscar Slater which would attract more of his attention in the coming years, Doyle had not demonstrated any active interest in Crippen's fate: he was at the Old Bailey simply as a spectator, albeit one with an excellent view.

Other members of the Society were part of the official business: Ingleby Oddie held the junior brief for the Crown. It is likely that Oddie left Our Society not many years after the Crippen trial, as he wrote in 1941, 'It is nearly thirty years since I resigned,'<sup>322</sup> though the memories in *Inquest* suggest he attended Biss's meeting in 1913, and Diósy's Jack the Ripper paper in 1914. His friend Dr. Herbert Crosse also resigned his membership, giving the distance he was required to travel from his home in Norwich as the reason. Oddie's loss of interest in the club as it became more formal and grew far beyond a close-knit group of friends was discussed in Chapter 1. Lambton explained that Oddie had to resign due to his holding Crown office, which was certainly the case in 1910, though he was a junior in a team which also contained Sir Travers Humphreys, who apparently did not see the same conflict of interest, becoming a member of Our Society himself. Oddie was aged 41 in 1910 (seven years younger than Crippen), and considered this opportunity to participate in the trial to be his 'reward' for several years of hard work with the famous Crown Prosecutor, Sir Richard Muir. The words Crippen is reported to have said when he discovered that Muir was to lead the prosecution were 'I wish it had been anybody else. I fear the worst.'<sup>323</sup>

Since 1906, Oddie had been working as a junior for Muir and regarded this appointment as the turning point of his career. Acting as an assistant to Muir with his work in chambers and in the Courts, and having access to all of his papers, provided Oddie with a level of experience that helped and inspired his own career from that point on. Oddie and

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<sup>322</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p. 43.

<sup>323</sup> Quoted in various sources, including Browne, Douglas G., and Tullett, E. V., *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, (London, The Companion Book Club, 1952), p.50.

Muir became close friends, although working with Muir could be 'exacting' as Oddie describes:

Muir was an indefatigable worker. His work was his life. He had no amusements and no relaxation. He always took work home every night, and after his evening meal and a short snooze over the paper, he drew up his chair to the table and set to work on his briefs at which he continued nightly up to one and two in the morning. Yet he was always the first to arrive in chambers and the last to leave. His watchword was 'Thorough'. His notes of cases were marvels of accuracy and conciseness. His knowledge of criminal law was complete.<sup>324</sup>

This approach to the study of crime was very different to the delightful evenings and excellent dinners of the Crimes Club. Perhaps the arduous working conditions exacted by Muir also contributed to Oddie's resignation from Our Society: the presentation of formal papers to a formidable audience made the Club too much like his professional work and less like a hobby. Working with such a well-known prosecutor also opened up opportunities to meet other significant figures working in the Courts, compensating for his removal from the social gatherings of Our Society.

With the public and the press so engrossed in the case, the Crippen trial was going to attract a lot of scrutiny. Muir, with his reputation for being meticulous under more ordinary circumstances, led the team for the Prosecution in his trademark exacting style, as his biographer Sidney Theodore Felstead describes:

Weeks of arduous work, particularly that dealing with the medical evidence, had to be devoted to preparing the Crown brief. All the people associated with the case worked without cessation. They refused other work so that they might devote their attention to the conviction of Crippen. With Travers Humphreys, Ingleby Oddie and the detective officers concerned Muir worked on the case all hours of the night. There were endless consultations which also took place while the trial was actually in progress. After leaving the Old Bailey at night Muir would take his colleagues to his chambers in the Temple, where he would start off with a long list of topics for discussion neatly arranged on separate sheets of paper each with references to the page of the depositions and proofs, and underlined in various colours which he always used in making notes. I suppose I am not divulging any great secret when I say that everybody connected with the prosecution of Crippen heartily cursed his name long before the trial concluded. Muir's consultations would begin shortly after the rising of the court. About half-past seven there would be a short interval for dinner, after which the topics would be resumed. In vain for the jurors and the medical men to suggest fatigue or the elimination of any matter as being of but slight importance.

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<sup>324</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p. 74.

Muir would not have it. He would go solidly through the topics until they, like the consultants, were exhausted. He spared neither himself nor others in his conscientious determination to convict the accused man, thereby completely fulfilling the fears which Crippen expressed when his solicitor, Arthur Newton, brought him the news that the redoubtable R. D. Muir would conduct the prosecution for the Crown.<sup>325</sup>

In his opening statement for the Crown, watched by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the members of the public who had been lucky in the ballot, Muir directed the all-male jury to consider three questions when considering Crippen's guilt: 'What had become of Belle Elmore? Whose remains were those in that cellar? If they were Belle Elmore's, what explanation of their being found in that place was there, mutilated as they were?'<sup>326</sup> It had to be proved that the mass of remains definitely belonged to Cora Crippen and that it was her husband who killed her. In order to give a reliable testimony about the remains, Muir required the assistance of medical experts. He turned to the team at St Mary's Hospital led by Augustus Pepper, William Willcox and A. P. Luff. It was a junior member of their team, however, and a future member of Our Society, who would be remembered for sealing Crippen's fate: Bernard Spilsbury.

While Oddie was working hard under the exacting timetable of Muir, Spilsbury cancelled a planned holiday to Minehead to work on the case (his wife went without him, foreshadowing his later estrangement from his family). It was an exciting opportunity for 33-year-old Spilsbury: his first major criminal case. Muir may have been aware of Spilsbury through Travers Humphreys, who had seen the pathologist present evidence in 1909 at an inquiry into the death of a 29 year old woman who died unexpectedly while having her hair shampooed at Harrods. Another factor that may have led to his involvement in the trial was the imminent retirement of Dr. Augustus Joseph Pepper, whom Oddie describes as 'the Spilsbury of that day.'<sup>327</sup> Spilsbury was considered to be Pepper's obvious heir. The purpose of engaging Spilsbury in the Court room was to corroborate Pepper's thesis that a piece of flesh from the remains corresponded with the scar from an abdominal operation undergone by Cora Crippen. Pepper was cross-examined regarding his analysis of the evidence on 19<sup>th</sup> October, the second day of the trial. Jars containing the remains were passed around for the Jury to examine.

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<sup>325</sup> Felstead, Sidney Theodore, *Sir Richard Muir: A Memoir of a Public Prosecutor*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1927), p.110.

<sup>326</sup> Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, p.9.

<sup>327</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.78.

Pepper had attended the scene at Hilldrop Crescent with Inspector Dew on 14<sup>th</sup> July, and his testimony came after Dew's, who was cross-examined on the morning of Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> October. Pepper was first cross-examined by Muir, although as he was a witness for the prosecution this amounted to a series of long statements prompted by infrequent questions. At one point, Pepper was berated by the Judge for commenting, subjectively, on Cora Crippen's weight. 'From the remains that I examined,' said Pepper, 'I would say that the person was stout when in life. I have seen the photographs, exhibits 28 and 29.' The Lord Chief Justice responded: 'I hardly think you need go into all that.'

As would be expected, Pepper's cross-examination by the defence was far more robust, and Alfred Tobin attempted to undermine the authority of the forensic evidence by hinting at the potential for human error in examination of the samples. 'That piece of skin,' Tobin observed, 'has been examined by a medical gentleman on behalf of the defence for some hours, and on several occasions, has it not?'

'Certainly,' Pepper replied.

'Are you prepared to say whether or not those groups of four lines travel and are within the area of the so-called scar?'

'Certainly.'

'Are you prepared to say whether they are outside it?'

'I think not.'

'You think not, but you have never examined it under the microscope?'

'I am looking at it now, and I see marks distinctly, and the end of the marks and the scar; the marks are quite distinct here now, and I see that they end, or apparently end, at the margin of the scar.'

'You are examining it now with your eyes, not with the microscope?'

The Lord Chief Justice interjected at this moment: 'That we can see for ourselves, Mr. Tobin.'<sup>328</sup>

When Spilsbury presented his evidence the following day, it would have been difficult to tell that he was inexperienced in such public presentations, as Browne and Tullett described: 'Tall, handsome, well-dressed, a red carnation in his buttonhole, his bearing in his first capital case was as detached, imperturbable, and confident as it was when he was at the height of his fame.'<sup>329</sup> Introducing himself as a Bachelor of Surgery of Oxford University and

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<sup>328</sup> Adapted from Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, p.50.

<sup>329</sup> Browne, and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.53.

a pathologist at St. Mary's Hospital, Spilsbury described in detail the sample of tissue from the remains that was given to him on 9<sup>th</sup> September and his subsequent microscopical examination. He corroborated Pepper's findings but was also keen to establish himself as an expert voice independent of his mentor. Spilsbury's statements are characteristically clear, considered, and confident, leaving little room for any doubt or disagreement, either about his integrity as a scientist or a gentleman. As an unknown expert witness, he not only needed to convince the jury that his evidence was scientifically sound, he also had to demonstrate that he was a person on whose testimony they could rely, not merely a mouthpiece for his established older colleagues:

I have an independent position of my own, and I am responsible for my own opinion, which has been formed on my own scientific knowledge, and not in any way influenced by any supposed connection with Mr. Pepper. This embedding of a piece of edge of the cut would come about in the process of the healing of the scar. That embedded flesh would really be something that got in after the cut, and it might contain both follicles and sebaceous glands, so that one would have to be careful in diagnosing this to see whether one had got the cut without an embedded piece or an embedded piece in the cut. I have absolutely no doubt in my own mind as regards the scar. What I saw in the rectus muscle and the aponeurosis is not consistent with the flesh being from any other part of the body than that which I have described. I have my microscopical slides here, and I shall send for a microscope in case it should be wanted.<sup>330</sup>

In offering to send for the microscope, Spilsbury was not only demonstrating confidence in his own findings, he was showing that he trusted a jury of laymen to understand his work, and that the opening up an elite field of study to public scrutiny was in no way alarming to him.

Pepper had also employed similar showman-like behaviour during his cross examination when he passed around the court a sample of the remains in a bowl. The decision of the forensic team to present the physical evidence in this way seems to have baffled rather than impressed Oddie:

The gruesome relic, preserved in formalin, was handed about in Court on a dish and was carefully inspected by the Jury. Finally it was taken into an adjoining empty Court where a series of microscopical slides prepared by Spilsbury from the supposed scar were set out and peered at through microscopes by the Jurymen – a proceeding which, as I remembered my medical student days and the

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<sup>330</sup> Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, p.63.

difficulty of understanding pathological specimens under the microscope, struck me as being as futile as it was unusual.<sup>331</sup>

Futile though Oddie may have believed this exhibition to have been, it worked. The evidence of the scar, coupled with proof that Crippen had purchased some pyjamas that were also found buried in the cellar, and that he had obtained a large quantity of hyoscine which William Willcox identified as present in the remains, was damning. The jury took less than half an hour to decide that Crippen was guilty of wilful murder, and he was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead.

Perversely, though Oddie described the presentation of human remains to a layman jury by the medical witnesses at the Crippen trial as ‘futile,’ he had no problem examining such things over dinner. One of the privileges he enjoyed at the Our Society dinners was access to the criminous artefacts obtained by collectors like George R. Sims and Gerald Biss. Examining and handling exhibits from celebrated trials was ‘always interesting,’ not at all futile or unusual. Oddie recalled that the late Professor Collins ‘produced in triumph the right-arm bones of John Williams, the famous murderer of de Quincey’s essay “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.”’<sup>332</sup> Williams was arrested for perpetrating the Ratcliffe Highway murders in 1811, but hanged himself in his prison cell before he could be put to trial. In response to public outcry, Williams’s body was punished, a stake driven through his heart, his body then buried at a crossroads. The opportunity for Collins to retrieve the arm occurred when road works uncovered the remains. Oddie provides no explanation to explain how the identity of these bones, buried in an unmarked grave for nearly a century, could have been confirmed.

Oddie had particularly fond memories of objects relating to a famous poisoner: ‘It was interesting to handle a box of Neil Cream’s pills which were found on him after his arrest and to read his letters sent from prison to a lady friend in which he assures her of his early release. In his photographs he looks quite a mild, decent sort of fellow with a very pronounced squint, a pair of gold spectacles, and a harmless, innocent expression.’<sup>333</sup> It is likely Cream’s memorabilia were brought to the meeting by George R. Sims, as, according to

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<sup>331</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.78.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid*, p.44.

an article about his collection in *The Sunday Post*, he owned ‘a letter written by Neill Cream to Laura, who was one of his victims.’<sup>334</sup>

George R. Sims had an extensive ‘Criminal Museum,’<sup>335</sup> to rival the collection kept at Scotland Yard. How Sims managed to amass such relics was a subject about which he was very discreet, but the reporter for *The Sunday Post* puts it diplomatically by saying of his collection: ‘it was made by a man of imagination, who could gather together the things he wanted by ways which would be impossible for the Yard.’<sup>336</sup> Amongst his hoard he boasted the following treasures: a gold watch that belonged to Jabez Balfour,<sup>337</sup> a former Liberal MP who was imprisoned for fraud; a blood-stained chair from the house of Mrs. Pearcey, who bludgeoned to death a mother and baby; and part of the hanging beam from Newgate. Sims’s wife was unperturbed by the presence of these items in her home: ‘There are some women who would be very disturbed in their minds to have some of these things in the house. They never worried me, however, or caused me a moment’s uneasiness.’<sup>338</sup>

Our Society’s collectors were not the only providers of objects to show at dinner, as Lambton records: ‘Mr. John Tussaud gave me the run of the Chamber of Horrors to borrow any relic I might desire for a meeting, and he presented me with a cutting from the rope that hanged Lefroy, the murderer of Mr. Gold on the Brighton Railway.’<sup>339</sup> Even Madame Tussaud’s struggled to rival Sims, however, who had his own, very personal, item relating to Lefroy. Before he was a murderer, Lefroy wrote a pantomime version of ‘Sinbad the Sailor.’ He visited Sims at home, and Sims advised him to get the pantomime staged at Crystal Palace. Sims’s copy of the script later qualified for entry in his Criminal Museum.

The representative for *The Sunday Post* offered an insight into Sims’s reason for keeping this criminal archive: ‘His importance as a criminologist was not that he solved crimes in the logical manner of a Sherlock Holmes, but that he set himself to reveal the strange moods and aspects of the human mind that underlie so many of them, and of which the law can take little notice.’<sup>340</sup> Collecting these objects and bringing them to meetings was not simply an act of show and tell; these items were symbolic of unfinished stories. The

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<sup>334</sup> ‘My Husband’s Collection of Famous Mystery Relics,’ *The Sunday Post*, Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August 1922, front page.

<sup>335</sup> He refers to his private archive in these terms several times in his memoirs.

<sup>336</sup> ‘My Husband’s Collection of Famous Mystery Relics,’ front page.

<sup>337</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years’ Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.145.

<sup>338</sup> ‘My Husband’s Collection of Famous Mystery Relics,’ front page.

<sup>339</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p.113.

<sup>340</sup> ‘My Husband’s Collection of Famous Mystery Relics,’ front page.



stories of crimes, even if the perpetrator confessed, verdicts had been officially declared and punishments administered, were never complete. There was always some part about which there could be speculation. Studying crime was all the more fun when the answers were not definitive and the puzzle could last forever. For meticulous professionals like Sir Richard Muir, criminal law was almost a science in itself and watertight versions of events were required to achieve a desired verdict. For the members of Our Society, the trial was just part of a wider story, and inconclusiveness meant these stories could be retold, reimagined, re-examined and refuted in excess. Even with the damning evidence presented by the pathologists of St. Mary's Hospital, the Crippen case provided plenty of room for speculation, especially as the defendant never swayed from his claim to be innocent.

In an open letter to Le Neve published in the *Daily Mail*, Crippen analysed the evidence presented by Pepper and Spilsbury:

You will remember that the case for the Crown depended on the identity which they tried to prove by means of the so-called scar on the piece of flesh and skin, 7 inches by 6 inches. Now, on this piece of skin were found two grooves, one as distinctly marked as the other. The medical witness of the Crown made no assertion with regard to this piece of skin until they were told that Belle Elmore had had an operation. Then they suddenly discovered one groove to be a scar, although admitting the other groove to be caused by a fold of the skin which had been under great pressure, notwithstanding the undoubted fact that one groove was absolutely continuous with the other in a curved line. The medical witnesses for my defence brought forward proof to support their denial that the groove was a scar by demonstrating that there were certain structures present in the so-called scar which could not be present if the mark had resulted from an operation. This proof showed so absolutely that the groove was not a scar of an operation that the Crown could only squirm out of their false position by bringing forward at the last moment a theory that the presence of these certain structures was to be accounted for by the supposition that the edges of the skin had been turned under and brought together in sewing up the wound of the operation a most unlikely thing to have been done by skilled surgeons, who specially avoid such an occurrence in abdominal operations.<sup>341</sup>

Though Crippen's aim here is to unpick the evidence presented by Pepper, Willcox and Spilsbury, his coldness with reference to his wife and his use of her stage name perhaps provide more fodder for the story than does his attempt at scientific reasoning, and not in his favour: he did not think of her fondly.

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<sup>341</sup> Published in *The Daily Mail* on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2010, quoted in Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen* Appendix, p.191.

With Crippen unwilling to elaborate on what had really happened at 39 Hilldrop Crescent, there was plenty of room to speculate. Oddie had his own theory about Crippen's intentions, sharing with Pepper a fixation with Cora's weight:

It must be remembered that he was a doctor and that his wife was very fat. Fat people are more prone to fainting attacks caused by indigestion and flatulence than other people. I believe he intended to poison her with hyoscine, and to say that she had often had attacks of heart failure before, owing to her weak heart, and particularly after heavy meals, and that she had had such an attack on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1910, which had unfortunately proved fatal. My theory is that after her death he intended to send for a doctor in the early hours of the morning and to tell him this story of her death, at the same time explaining that he was a medical man himself. My long experience of the facile way in which some general practitioners issue certificates of death leads me to think that in all probability Crippen could in this way have got a death certificate showing syncope and fatty disease of the heart as the cause of his wife's death. The Registrar of Deaths might have accepted such a certificate in those days. If he had not done so and had referred the case to the Coroner, then that official might well have been satisfied that the death was a natural one on the facts and might have passed it, and all would have been well.<sup>342</sup>

Having decided this was Crippen's plan, Oddie then explained why it failed by hypothesising about the sequence of events following the departure of their friends, the Martinettis, at around 1.30am on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> February:

The Martinettis observed how happy and well Mrs. Crippen seemed, how heartily she ate and drank, and on what excellent and affectionate terms husband and wife seemed to be.

This was exactly what Crippen wanted, and was the reason for his insistence on the visitors coming that night, despite Martinetti's illness, so that they could speak afterwards as to the complete harmony that existed between the Crippens, thereby allaying any possible suspicion if Mrs. Crippen were found dead the next morning.

Then it was that Crippen blundered. It was due to his ignorance of the fact that hyoscine in large doses sometimes produces wild delirium. I believe that, after the Martinettis had gone, the very large fatal dose was probably administered in a last nightcap of whisky. Then shortly afterwards Mrs. Crippen became hysterical under the influence of the hyoscine, and started running amok, shouting and shrieking the house down.

This was not at all according to plan, and as it was extremely likely to result in his being hanged, I believe Crippen shot his wife in the head with a revolver (which nearly all Americans possess) to stifle her cries which were also likely to arouse the whole neighbourhood.

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<sup>342</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p. 80.

His well-laid scheme having thus gone adrift, and there now being a gunshot wound in his wife's head, it is easy to understand why he had to dispose of the remains and inform enquirers that his wife had gone to America.<sup>343</sup>

Despite clearly having spent some time pondering over Crippen's motivations and actions, and having some sympathy with him, Oddie believed that his capital sentence was 'thoroughly deserved'. Yet he still expressed some admiration for Crippen, particularly for the way he conducted himself during the trial:

Crippen's ordeal in the box must have been paralysing. He stood up to it, however, with wonderful composure and calmness. The impression formed in my mind was that he was a fatalist; that he knew he was doomed; that it was no use getting excited about it; and that all he really cared about towards the end was to avoid dragging Ethel Le Neve to the scaffold with him.<sup>344</sup>

Oddie displays here a significant level of respect for Crippen, and it is easy to see from language such as this why members of Our Society were accused of having a 'morbid sympathy' with criminals, as Lambton put it in his article for *London Magazine* (discussed in previous chapters). Oddie's attempts to understand Crippen's motivations required a level of empathy with the man who was found guilty of wilfully murdering and dismembering his wife. He certainly makes more of his theories about Crippen than he does about his working relationship with Spilsbury. Although their memberships of Our Society are unlikely to have overlapped (Oddie likely left around 1910, as discussed, and Spilsbury's first recorded attendance was not until the late 1920s), they became regular colleagues once Oddie was appointed H. M. Coroner for Central London. Spilsbury was alive in 1941 (unlike Sir Richard Muir, who had died in 1924, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who had died in 1930) when Oddie published his memoirs, and his scant references to the pathologist may merely have been due to discretion. It does seem unusual that Oddie would not make more of his connection to a well-known expert witness, especially as the Crippen trial punctuated significant moments in both of their careers, but this also correlates with the points made by Browne and Tullett when they discovered that most of Spilsbury's colleagues would say, 'I really can't tell you much about him.'<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, p.81.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid*, p.79.

<sup>345</sup> Browne, and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.202, discussed in Prologue.

The emphasis on his theories about Crippen in his memoirs shows that Oddie's interests lay far more in the mind and motives of the murderer than in the scientific processes used to prove his guilt. Strangely, given that he had worked hard on his ambition to reach the position of Coroner, an occupation that required daily contact with the deceased, Oddie could also be rather squeamish about these scientific examinations. In his memoirs, he talks about a case he worked on with Spilsbury in the 1930s that required an exhumation. The coffin was flooded, and Oddie was disgusted: 'The results in terms of putrefaction were quite horrible. But Sir Bernard Spilsbury, unconcerned as usual and not even smoking, commenced his customary long, patient, and careful post-mortem examination: I myself beat a hasty retreat.'<sup>346</sup>

Had circumstances been a little different, Oddie and the rest of Sir Richard Muir's team would have done battle in Court One with the Great Defender, Sir Edward Marshall Hall. Hall (who had secured Doyle's seat on the opening day of the trial) had proposed a line of defence for Crippen, but the defendant had rejected this course. As with Oddie's theory, Hall showed a significant level of sympathy with the murderer, despite casting no doubt at all that Crippen killed his wife. Hall's friend and biographer, the Conservative MP Edward Marjoribanks, recalled that in November 1926 he had visited the Great Defender to keep him company while he was ill in bed. During this time, Hall outlined his theory about Crippen:

Marshall Hall's theory was simple. Crippen, in order to spend the night with his paramour, whether at home or elsewhere, drugged his wife with a new and rare drug of which he knew little, and of which he had lately purchased five grains. But a little learning is a dangerous thing. To be on the safe side he gave her a large dose, which turned out to be an overdose; or perhaps his continual dosing of her necessitated a big dose to ensure unconsciousness. No doubt it will be objected that two-sevenths of a grain was found in her body, whereas a safe dose, according to the text-books presume that the drug will be injected hypodermically, which is the normal method, and thus administered it is many times more potent than if taken by mouth, as Mrs Crippen must have done; of this Sir William Willcox has himself assured me. He also informed me that he has known cases where patients have died from the results of overdoses of hyoscine [*sic*] administered by unqualified practitioners, and that a patient constantly taking hyoscin [*sic*] will naturally have to be given bigger and bigger doses, as time goes on, if the purpose of the drug is to be achieved. In the morning he found his wife dead, and in a panic he made away with the remainder of the hyoscin [*sic*], and with all a surgeon's skill cut up her body, rising above his inexperience with the inspiration of despair. Then, hurriedly wrapping the flesh in an old pyjama jacket of his own, he buried it in quicklime, thinking it would thus be destroyed; as a matter of fact the quicklime had the reverse effect, and

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<sup>346</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.111.

preserved the remains. Then he proceeded to write to a number of his friends a transparent tissue of lies. Crippen admitted that Miss le Neve had slept at Hilldrop Crescent on February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Might she not have slept there on one or both of the previous nights, and frequently before that, while his wife was drugged with hyoscin [*sic*] and unconscious?<sup>347</sup>

Marjoribanks was taken with this theory, and believed that his friend could have saved Crippen from the gallows: ‘I could not help thinking that, whatever Sir William Willcox and Sir Bernard Spilsbury might have said about hyoscine [*sic*], twelve reasonable men might have preferred to believe Sir Edward Marshall Hall.’<sup>348</sup> The defendant himself, however, was less enthusiastic about this interpretation of events:

Crippen gave definite instructions to his defence. He denied any knowledge of the remains found in his cellar; he had last seen his wife alive and well on February 1<sup>st</sup>; she must have left him for another man unknown. From that moment his fate was sealed. Many may criticise Marshall Hall for not accepting the brief even then, bearing in mind his stated convictions on the subject of accepting briefs, especially when it was offered to him by an old client. These were, however, very exceptional circumstances. Marshall Hall was convinced of the truth of his hypothesis, but he knew it would be worthless without the testimony of the prisoner; the theory was absolutely inconsistent with the prisoner’s instructions to his solicitor, and with the line of defence disclosed by that solicitor at the police court. Beyond a point, counsel and solicitor alike must cease to advise, and begin to obey; and neither Marshall Hall nor Sir Alfred Tobin (who defended Crippen) could have properly imposed on him a defence with which he would have nothing to do. As Marshall Hall said himself, “Can counsel be called upon to take responsibility of defending a man, of whose innocence he is convinced, if that man ties him down to a line of defence which that counsel knows to be a plea of ‘guilty’? There were many members of the Bar, as able as myself, who were not handicapped by my convictions on the matter. I *could* not have defended Crippen on those lines.”<sup>349</sup>

Hall shows great faith in his own understanding of the case, even willing to argue about it with Crippen, the one man who actually knew what had happened. Hall and Marjoribanks both exhibit frustration with Crippen’s unwillingness to follow their instructions and potentially save himself from the noose. Unlike Oddie, they did not believe he deserved to be hanged, and their interpretation of Crippen’s character is one of buffoonery. It may seem

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<sup>347</sup> Marjoribanks, Edward, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, (London, Victor Gollancz LTD, 1930), p.281.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid*, p.284.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, p.282.

strange that Hall would wish to defend a man whose actions following his wife's disappearance were those of a guilty party, but he was by no means the only person expressing sympathy for Dr. Crippen.

In his introduction to H. B. Irving's *The Trial of the Wainwrights* (published after Irving's death), Hall suggests that Irving shared his opinions about Crippen's defence:

One trait in Irving's character must not be overlooked – sometimes he was so impressed with the methods and conduct of different criminals that he came almost to respect their ability, and whilst he had and expressed the greatest contempt for some of the criminals whose records he unearthed, he undoubtedly admired the misplaced and misused talents of men like Lacenaire and Peace. In recent times he expressed sympathy with the famous Dr. Crippen, and though, from circumstances over which I had no control, I was personally unable to conduct his defence, I too always felt some inexplicable sympathy for him. Of one thing both Irving and I were convinced, that if Crippen had cared to throw over the companion who was eventually arrested with him, he might have made good his escape.<sup>350</sup>

Irving himself wrote nothing substantial about Crippen so whether he was in agreement with Hall or not has not been verified, but his theatrical engagements of 1910 may have prompted a greater empathy with the criminal mind. In the early months of 1910, when Cora Crippen first disappeared, Harry Irving resurrected *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, starring in the role first performed by Richard Mansfield in the autumn of 1888. Irving's vehicle was a new adaptation by Joseph Comyns Carr. It was a role that fascinated Irving and his audience, as described by Austin Brereton, who found the violence of the play distasteful:

Unmitigated horror is not acceptable to the English playgoer, and there was little to mitigate the horror and brutality of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It obtained, nevertheless, a run of four months, the greatest strain upon the actor, physically and mentally, which he ever endured...Incessant was the study for the impersonation of the good and evil characters; perpetual was the drag upon bodily and mental strength in the acting. He went below the surface of things and tried to get at the heart of the idea as expressed by the novelist...<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Hall, Sir Edward Marshall, 'The Late H. B. Irving: An Appreciation,' in Irving, H. B. ed., *Trial of the Wainwrights*, (Edinburgh & London, W. Hodge & Co., 1920), p. xv.

<sup>351</sup> Brereton, Austin, "*H.B.*" and *Laurence Irving*, (London, Grant Richards Ltd., 1922), p. 112.

When considering how the masses thronged to the Old Bailey later that year for the Crippen trial, Brereton was naïve in his assessment of the English public's taste for horror and brutality. The play allowed Irving to wrestle with the mythical archetype that had woven its way into conversations about criminals since the publication of Robert Louis Stevenson's novella in 1886. In 1910, the question of whether man was one or truly two was becoming the remit of students of the growing field of psychoanalysis, though it was still a decade before Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published in which he discussed the mind as being tripartite: id, ego and super-ego. Irving's version of the story was itself a study in psychology, as Brereton describes:

Of all the psychological parts that he played Jekyll taxed him the most. For an actor of his ability the change to the revolting murderer, Hyde, was an easy transition, and the playing of that part, although it demanded constant effort, mild by comparison. By his idealism of Jekyll he elevated the character and raised Stevenson's story to a height which no ordinary reader of the book could imagine possible. The Dr. Jekyll of the novelist is 'a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of fifty, something of a sly cast, perhaps, but with every mark of capacity and kindness.' The Jekyll of H.B. Irving was pale, aesthetic, refined, the essence of gentility. From the first he bore the look of intense suffering. As the play progressed this expression of mental pain, of yearning, of striving after the good that was in him, became almost unbearable to the spectator. It was infinitely pathetic. Would that it had not been so! I saw him act as Jekyll many times and was always relieved beyond measure when the death scene was over. Never can I forget that white, upturned face, the yearning agony of it, the soul of a good man longing, entreating for mercy.<sup>352</sup>

The painfulness of Irving's performance was in the realisation that a gentlemanly façade could be dropped to reveal a terrible criminal, that looks could be extremely deceptive. Perhaps Irving and his audiences later perceived, or projected, something of this struggle between good and evil in the form of the small, quietly spoken Dr. Crippen and his alter ego, Mr. Robinson.

Equating the gentlemanly appearance of Crippen with the acts of wilful murder and dismemberment was certainly difficult for gentlemen of Our Society. Disturbingly, their attempts to rationalise his motivations often led to the revelation of deeply misogynistic attitudes, as exemplified by this passage from Lambton's memoirs:

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<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, p.113.

...there was no greater instance of chivalry than his attitude to Miss Le Neve. He went to the scaffold rather than that one hair of her head should be injured. It is an open secret that otherwise he could have saved his neck. Had he not dressed her as a boy he would have reached America in safety. He was too careful to preserve her from any harm.

Then sympathy is felt for Crippen in many quarters, above all, officially. For it is no news that the police held him in considerable esteem. The terrible domestic drama, to those who can regard things from two points of view, shows Crippen to have been possessed of the patience of a dozen Jobs. Married to a blatantly coarse, extravagant shrew who flaunted her infidelities in his face, this meek little man endured year after year uncomplainingly. Then at last for him heaven itself opened. Miss Le Neve appeared upon the scene. Mrs. Crippen remained the virago. There seemed a way out. He took it. But for one little slip – the fatal slip – and he would have got away with it, and with Miss Le Neve too. After his arrest his iron nerve evoked admiration from all the officials with whom he came into contact – that and his solicitude for Miss Le Neve.<sup>353</sup>

Lambton here justifies his distasteful appreciation for Crippen by portraying him as the victim in the case, a meek man torn between two demanding women. No wonder, when married to the slatternly, promiscuous and overweight Cora Crippen, that he should be driven to murder and dismemberment. If only he had not also fallen for Ethel Le Neve, for whom he sacrificed his chance of living happily ever after. What Lambton fails to mention in his analysis is that Crippen had been in his 30s and Cora not quite 20 when they met (within six months of his first wife's sudden death from apoplexy in 1892). Oddie also portrayed Crippen as a victim of domestic circumstances: 'He made quite a good income it was said, but his wife...was extravagant, and spent large sums on furs, clothes, and jewellery. They had no servant, and Crippen used to get his own and her breakfast and clean his own boots before leaving for business each morning.'<sup>354</sup> Edward Marjoribanks is even more brutal about Cora's character:

...at Hilldrop Crescent they had separate bedrooms, and probably the poor little doctor was a much wronged and much tortured man during the last years of his married life, for Cora Crippen was at once a peacock and a slut. To the outside world she appeared in all her finery; at home she kept no servant, and her husband seems to have performed what little housework was done.<sup>355</sup>

Not only had Cora Crippen been physically diminished to a mass of remains by her husband, his sympathisers were now reducing her personality to the basic tropes of a

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<sup>353</sup> Lambton, *The Galanty Show* , p. 157.

<sup>354</sup> Oddie, *Inquest*, p.75.

<sup>355</sup> Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall* , p.277.



shrewish archetype. One of the singularities of the Crippen case was a displacement of sympathy which would conventionally be directed at the victim, but in this instance resided with the criminal.

Arthur Lambton's sympathy with Crippen may have arisen through deep emotional scars left by his own disastrous first marriage (described in chapter 1). Given the forceful nature of his feelings about Crippen's situation, there can be little doubt he was projecting his own emotions onto the crime, but given the resolution to his own unhappy marriage it is strange that he does not question why Crippen did not employ a similar course, if he was such a gentleman. Doing so, of course, would have incurred costs, and Crippen may have lost possession of his wife's jewels, which he pawned soon after her 'disappearance.' Lambton, despite claiming to have experienced murderous impulses, was not as generally sympathetic towards the common criminal as might be expected from his views on Crippen. In the foreword to his book *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, Lambton demonstrates an anxiety to make sure the members of Our Society seem unsympathetic towards criminality:

... the most common accusation is that we have a morbid sympathy with criminals. This is not so, and for one all-sufficient reason. The average criminal is a deadly dull individual – nearly always boring. I once asked an ex-Governor of Dartmoor if he found his charges interesting. His reply was that they were on the whole absolutely devoid of interest and at the same time undeserving of any sympathy.<sup>356</sup>

Arguably, this is Lambton protesting too much, and his choice of words suggests he is not unsympathetic towards murderers, just towards a certain class of common criminal: he did not want to be associated with the lower classes. His claim to find the average criminal boring is echoed in his recollection of a voyage to Australia when he had to share a boat with a group of lower class men: 'I was not so foolish as to suppose that on the sailing-ship my fellow passengers would be all Eton and Oxford, but I never had a greater shock. I hate to write this, but there was no analogy between them and the passengers on any liner.'<sup>357</sup> Crippen, of course, was an educated man, and well known for being a passenger on a liner.

It is worth noting that, like the criminal justice system itself, Our Society was an all-male institution. A glance over the rules of the club from their 1958 members' book<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Lambton, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, p.7.

<sup>357</sup> Lambton, *My Story*, p.122.

<sup>358</sup> Female members were not openly admitted to Our Society until the 1990s, this will be discussed further in the Epilogue.

reveals that there was no written rule against female members; this was merely a convention of such dining societies and so could be assumed. Men typically claimed to use their clubs to escape from women into a world of brandy and cigar smoke because, in the words of Sir Max Pemberton, they required ‘a refuge from the rigours of married life.’<sup>359</sup> In the case of Our Society, it could be argued that discussions about lewd and violent criminal cases were not appropriate for delicate feminine ears, though paradoxically the members were often discussing the crimes of notorious women such as Mary Pearcey, Constance Kent, and Kate Webster. The secrecy rules, Lambton observed, allowed members to share at least some thrilling details of Our Society meetings with their wives: ‘A member has a perfect right to go home and tell his wife (if she is still awake) that the cutlets were underdone, or that the heat of the room was unbearable.’<sup>360</sup> The idea of admitting women to the club was not one that Lambton would entertain: ‘The most fantastic suggestion ever made to me was that we should have a grille and admit ladies behind it. But we speedily rejected this, and while repudiating any possible accusation of misogyny, we opined that the fair sex already possessed quite as much knowledge as was good for them.’<sup>361</sup>

One person who never expressed sympathy for Crippen was Spilsbury. Despite his mentor’s comments about Cora Crippen’s weight, he did not join in with either the general ridicule directed at the deceased or the esteem for Dr. Crippen. During their work on his biography, Browne and Tullett were able to access Spilsbury’s copies of the *Notable Trials* series (which included volumes edited by Our Society members such as H.B. Irving, J.B. Atlay and Filson Young). They note that his edition of the Crippen trial seemed to be the most ‘carefully read’: ‘the spine is broken by frequent handling, pages are loose, and scores of paragraphs in Filson Young’s introduction and in the report of the evidence are marked in the margin or underlined.’<sup>362</sup> In his introduction, Young took a sympathetic view of Crippen. He interviewed Mrs. Adeline Harrison, Cora Crippen’s friend and a witness for the Prosecution, who described Dr. Crippen as follows: ‘He was a man with no apparent surface vices, or even the usual weaknesses or foibles of the ordinary man. Restraint was the one and only evidence of firmness in his character.’ He also speculated about the moment Crippen chose his criminal path:

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<sup>359</sup> Pemberton, Sir Max, *Sixty Years Ago and After*, (Plymouth, William Brendon & Son LTD, 1936), p.228.

<sup>360</sup> Lambton, *The Salad Bowl*, p. 256.

<sup>361</sup> Lambton, ‘The Crimes Club: The Story of a Unique Gathering’, p. 115.

<sup>362</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p. 39.

Here came the turning point in Crippen's life, when, from being a much-tried and much-enduring man, encoiled by circumstances and the consequences of his own actions, he became a criminal. It is a deep and unfathomable chasm that divides the two conditions, but it may be a very narrow one. Upon what plank he crossed or what exasperating word or deed goaded him to make the leap, I do not know or expect ever to learn. But from that moment he never wavered. He went and bought the hyoscin [*sic*] always considerate, you see, even in the weapon he used to kill his wife. He had decided that it would be better that she should cease to exist; and his ingenuity and consideration combined hit upon what was at once the most merciful and the safest poison he could have used.<sup>363</sup>

Browne and Tullett record that ‘Spilsbury’s comment on this is enlightening and sufficient. He underlined the words “always considerate” and put one of his queries in the margin.’ They do not record precisely what his comment was, but from an earlier discussion about Spilsbury’s character in relation to his work on the trial, it could be presumed negative:

It is worthwhile to consider the effect upon Bernard Spilsbury, still young enough to be impressionable, of his introduction, in his first big case, to his first poisoner. He was himself an upright man of genuine goodness of heart. To the end of his life he would go out of his way to help others. His behaviour to all reflected innate kindness. A sensitive nature remained unhardened by years of experience, and was revealed in a reserve that was not diffidence – in his work he was self-confidence itself – but that nevertheless amounted to shyness. That self-confidence, however, was based on moral strength; and out of this grew an element of sternness which, combined with his terse, unemotional manner and the intense concentration he applied to the business in hand, made him seem in his professional capacity an inflexible machine. It is very likely that to some extent this public front was protective. Even to a pathologist one dead body is not just like another: one lies in the mortuary because of accident or disease, the next, perhaps, through brutal violence; and a sensitive man who comes to be associated with victims of brutality may be expected to acquire two characteristics – a protective mechanism of detachment and a detestation of brutes.<sup>364</sup>

By this analysis, it is hard to imagine that Spilsbury would agree with Young and sympathise with a murderer.

Though the evidence given at the trial was enough to secure a capital sentence, mystery still surrounds the events at 39 Hilldrop Crescent and Spilsbury’s evidence continues to be scrutinised. Andrew Rose, in his 2007 biography of the pathologist, casts doubt on the

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<sup>363</sup> Young, *The Trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen*, Introduction p.XXVII.

<sup>364</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p. 43.

reliability of the evidence regarding the scar when he records how the original slides from the Crippen trial were re-examined by another expert 92 years later:

Spilsbury's slides still exist and are held in the Royal London Hospital archives. In 2002 they were examined by Professor Bernard Knight. The slides were still in good condition, although the haematoxylin, a blue dye used to stain nuclei, had faded. The pink eosin, however, had a normal appearance. Bearing in mind that the fading caused some difficulty in interpreting the slides, Professor Knight could not detect definite indications of scar tissue, as had been so firmly claimed by Spilsbury when giving his positive evidence in 1910.<sup>365</sup>

Spilsbury, of course, believed in his own assessment of the slides, but it was up to the jury to decide whether the scar tissue he identified was enough to confirm the remains were those of Cora Crippen. Browne and Tullett had access to Spilsbury's case cards and they note that the final line he wrote regarding Crippen was, significantly: 'Summary: No direct evidence.'<sup>366</sup>

Quinton Wilson, an early member of Our Society, recalled that the first paper presented to the club on Dr. Crippen was on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1910, only a few months after the trial. In keeping with the club's rules, he reveals nothing of what was said, but does tell an unusual side story regarding the man who presented the paper, Professor William Wright, who also once brought a gruesome object to share with members:

Professor Wright was a distinguished biologist and also a bit of an eccentric. I sat next to him on 6 May 1923, when S. R. Hughes-Smith told us about the Sidney Street affray. I noticed that Professor Wright seemed somewhat uneasy, and I also noticed a small black bag carefully placed under his chair, to which his glance repeatedly wandered. After the paper, the usual discussion took place. Professor Wright then got up, lifted the black bag from under his chair, opened it and, to the horror of all of us, produced a human head which he'd kept in pickle for years. He told us that it was the head of Peter the Painter's companion. It had, he said, many points of interest for a biologist; from careful measurements of the skull, he had deduced that it had belonged to an individual with a weak and undeveloped intellect. The head was then passed around to members, who held it somewhat reluctantly by the hair. When this gruesome object had been safely returned to its sombre receptacle, the Professor turned to me and said: 'D'you know, I've had one thing on my mind the whole evening. I came here in a four-wheeler, and I'm going home in one, and I'm so absent-minded, I'm terrified I shall forget the bag and leave it in the cab.'<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Rose, Andrew, *Lethal Witness*, (Chalford, Sutton Publishing, 2007), p.30.

<sup>366</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.58.

<sup>367</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

Sir Edward Marshall Hall also presented a paper on Dr. Crippen with Filson Young in May 1917. According to the club's records, 'Marshall Hall was at his very best, but Mr. Young's conception of Crippen's character was opposed to official records. The licensing laws precluded any discussion as at 11 p.m. Marshall Hall had only just concluded his oration.'<sup>368</sup> The Licensing Laws that cut short discussion of Crippen in 1917 were relatively new. They were part of the Defence of the Realm Act, brought in not long after a teenager shot and killed a 48 year old man and his pregnant wife in Sarajevo on Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 1914, beginning a chain reaction that culminated in the Great War and the violent deaths of millions.

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<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 6 - The Crime Against Europe: Our Society and the Great War.

‘I think I can claim to be the first person to warn Great Britain that the Kaiser was plotting a war against us,’<sup>369</sup> bragged William Le Queux in his memoirs, once again demonstrating his proclivity for unverifiable declarations. Controvertible though Le Queux’s claim is, he had certainly acted as a harbinger of doom through the fiction he wrote in the years immediately preceding the Great War, most lucidly in *The Invasion of 1910*, which was first serialised in *The Daily Mail* during 1906. Encouraged and financed by Lord Northcliffe, Le Queux travelled around England to carry out meticulous geographical research for his story in order to create a narrative that seemed frighteningly real. Recent biographers of Le Queux have noted that Northcliffe insinuated his own commercial requirements into the plot: ‘Based on this research Le Queux mapped out the German invasion route with the advice of Lord Roberts. However, it was not to the liking of Northcliffe who realigned the attack to take in areas where the Daily Mail’s circulation could best be boosted.’<sup>370</sup> In the final version, Le Queux imagined a stealthy German invasion beginning in Norfolk that takes the complacent and unprepared British population by complete surprise. ‘The object of this book,’ wrote Le Queux, ‘is to illustrate our utter unpreparedness for war from a military standpoint; to show how, under certain conditions which may easily occur, England can be successfully invaded by Germany; and to present a picture of the ruin which must inevitably fall upon us on the evening of that not far-distant day.’<sup>371</sup> The novel presented the scenario as a very real and very urgent threat.

Le Queux’s Germans are a faceless and pervasive mass: ‘The exact whereabouts of the enemy was not known. They were, it seemed, everywhere. They had practically over-run the whole country, and the reports from the Midlands and the North showed that the majority of the principal towns had now been occupied.’<sup>372</sup> They spread through Britain more like a disease than a military force. Le Queux gives little consideration to the motives of the invaders but describes the consequences in great detail, namely the undoing of British society. Once all seems lost, the effect on the British, particularly the Londoners, is to turn to

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<sup>369</sup> Le Queux, William, *Things I Know About Kings, Celebrities, and Crooks*, (London, Eveleigh Nash and Grayson, 1923), p. 235.

<sup>370</sup> Baister, Stephen and Patrick, Chris, *William Le Queux: Master of Mystery*, (Purley, Chris Patrick and Stephen Baister, 2007), p.57.

<sup>371</sup> Le Queux, William, *The Invasion*, (London, Everett & Co. LTD 19-), p.1.

<sup>372</sup> Le Queux, *The Invasion*, p.170.

violence. With much of the capital in ruins, Le Queux describes the female population in particular as becoming ruthless:

Many of the London women now became perfect furies. So incensed were they at the wreck of their homes and the death of their loved ones that they rushed wildly into the fray with no thought of peril, only of bitter revenge. A German whenever caught was at once killed. In those bloody fights the Teutons got separated from their comrades and were quickly surrounded and done to death.<sup>373</sup>

Without the comforts of English domestic bliss to soothe their delicate feminine hearts, women become an uncontrollable, violent mass.<sup>374</sup> In Le Queux's dystopian vision, London becomes a city of savage murderers determined upon having blood for blood. Not only is Britain and her Empire lost, the character of her citizens is corrupted, the foundations of their society destroyed completely. The predominant concern of Le Queux's tale is not, ultimately, fear of attack and invasion, but of national and imperial decline. *The Invasion of 1910* ends with Britain repelling the invaders but not before society has degenerated beyond repair. Le Queux is very clear about who is responsible, and he does not blame the Germans:

As is always the case, the poor suffered the most. The Socialists, who had declared against armaments, were faithless friends of those whom they professed to champion. Their dream of a golden age proved utterly delusive. But the true authors of England's misfortunes escaped blame for the moment, and the Army and Navy were made the scapegoats of the great catastrophe.<sup>375</sup>

Le Queux plays on the fears of a socially conservative readership who were resistant to such modern developments as the Labour Party and women's suffrage. In Le Queux's vision, the Germans may be the invaders, but society is really undermined by the enemies within. The Boer War had shocked everyone and soured Britain's relationship with Germany, but outright European War had been avoided for many years. Though 1910 did not bring major conflict, it did mark the death of Edward VII, the fixer of the entente cordiale, and his diplomatic successes were unravelling.

Le Queux's novel was wildly popular, and the narrative inevitably attracted lampooners. Le Queux's fellow Our Society member, P. G. Wodehouse, produced a satire of

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<sup>373</sup> Le Queux, *The Invasion*, p.195.

<sup>374</sup> Le Queux may have drawn inspiration for this passage from recent violent acts in the name of the suffragette movement.

<sup>375</sup> Le Queux, *The Invasion*, p.272.

invasion novels in 1909 called *The Swoop!* Wodehouse's Britain is attacked by multiple invaders simultaneously, but everyone is too distracted by sporting events to care. In contrast to Le Queux's long and bloody description of the fall of the Capital in a chapter entitled 'The Bombardment of London,'<sup>376</sup> Wodehouse's chapter of the same name runs to just three short sentences: 'Thus was London bombarded. Fortunately it was August and there was nobody in town. Otherwise there might have been loss of life.'<sup>377</sup> Britain is saved solely by the actions of a patriotic boy scout called Clarence Chugwater who becomes a national hero. This character caricatures not just Le Queux's love of alliteration (some of the British heroes in his other novels included Duckworth Drew, Jack Jardine and Cuthbert Croom), but also the efforts of Lord Roberts to mobilise the boy scout movement. Wodehouse's satire plays up the hackneyed and outrageous style of invasion literature to which Le Queux was a major contributor. Overblown and open to ridicule though Le Queux's work was, it nevertheless contributed to a growing climate of fear as the threat of a war between the European empires, and the final undoing of the relative stability of the Victorian era, grew stronger.

During *The Swoop*, Wodehouse imagined a satirical reaction to the multiple invasion from one of his Our Society friends would react to the invasion: 'Mr. George R. Sims made eighteen puns on the names of the invading generals in the course of one number of "Mustard and Cress."<sup>378</sup> In real life, when war broke and the devastation on the Western Front could not be forgotten by leaving town for August, George R. Sims was drawn more to reflection than to writing satirical columns. The London he gazed upon as it drew close to midnight in 31<sup>st</sup> December 1915 had not been invaded, but it was greatly changed from the city he had known as a young man. Across the road from his house, Regents Park was blacked-out and there were no fireworks to herald the coming of the New Year. The city he saw now was in pain: '[It is] a London lying under the stress and strain of Britain's war for her existence, [a] London that at night is a city shrouded in the gloom of the grave, a London sheltering herself in that gloom from the hurtling bombs of death from the skies above, a London restrained in its liberties and its liquor as it has never been since it became a European capital.'<sup>379</sup> Society

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<sup>376</sup> Le Queux, *The Invasion*, p.164.

<sup>377</sup> Wodehouse, P. G., *The Swoop! and Other Stories*, (New York, The Seabury Press, 1979), p.19.

<sup>378</sup> Wodehouse, *The Swoop! and Other Stories*, p. 14. 'Mustard and Cress' was the title of the column under which Sims wrote as 'Dagonet' for the *Sunday Referee*, as discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>379</sup> Sims, George R., *My Life: Sixty Years' Recollections of Bohemian London*, (London, Eveleigh Nash Co., 1917), p.339.



was under threat, and the Bohemian life Sims had enjoyed was beginning to seem like a distant dream. Reflecting on the past gave Sims an escape from the oppressive realities of ‘the greatest war the world has ever known,’ and so he sat down to write his memoirs and focus on happier memories. Just before he did so, as the chimes of midnight sounded, he flung open his front door in celebration: ‘a dark man in the shape of a friendly policeman did me the kindly service of being the first to cross my threshold.’<sup>380</sup>

Some of the changes highlighted by Sims – the black-outs, the restrained liberties and liquor - were brought about by the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). This Act was first passed by the House of Commons without debate on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1914, within four days of the war being declared. The list of regulations grew as the war progressed and impinged on all sorts of aspects of British life: licensing hours for pubs were reduced; British Summer Time was introduced; unauthorised possession of cocaine and opium became illegal; the Press was censored; freedom of movement was restricted. New laws created new criminals, and the war itself provoked discussion about violence and motive. Unsurprisingly, this had an impact on the dinners of Our Society. Although the outcome of their discussions is shrouded in mystery as always, a glance at their list of papers during the war years shows that, alongside the more usual famous subjects such as Crippen, Charles Peace and the Ripper, they dedicated some time to thinking about the impact of the war. On 8<sup>th</sup> November 1914, Sir George Turner led a causerie on ‘War Incidents,’ though Arthur Diosy made an effort to turn the discussion back to its usual preoccupations by supplying an impromptu discussion about his Black Magic Theory of the Whitechapel Murders. They also held causeries on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1915 and 30<sup>th</sup> January 1916, though the subjects on these evenings are not recorded. Of perhaps most particular interest to those concerned with the impact of DORA, on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1916, Ernest Bowen-Rowlands gave a paper with the title ‘What is a Crime?’<sup>381</sup>

Our Society no doubt enjoyed an academic discussion over dinner about the meaning of crime that evening, but for those responsible for apprehending law-breakers, understanding the new and evolving rules and regulations of DORA presented a practical problem, as Douglas G. Browne describes in *The Rise of Scotland Yard*:

Not for one moment after the outbreak of war did the phrase ‘business as usual’ apply to the police anywhere in the country. To the other disciplined forces, the Navy and Army, war was a projection of their training; the police had to begin at once to undertake new duties and responsibilities. More than five pages of

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<sup>380</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>381</sup> All of these details regarding Our Society papers are detailed in the 1993 members’ book.

Metropolitan Police Orders came to be filled with regulations covered by the Defence of the Realm Act. The conscientious policeman must make some attempt to memorize these, because, while carrying out a routine visitation of hotels to see that friendly or neutral aliens were properly registered, not only had he to be on the watch for balloons, kites, and pigeons, and for mysterious signals by day or night, but he was expected to know what military authority was competent to permit the ringing and chiming of bells and the striking of clocks during certain hours of darkness, and a continually growing host of other novel enactments likely to be infringed at any moment. There was, it was true, less crime against property; it was a reflection on the too tolerant granting of a right of asylum that this factor was largely due to the internment of thousands of aliens neither neutral nor friendly. The Traffic Branch, again, benefited by the virtual halving of the issue of licences. But on the whole there was an immense increase of duties, and at the same time a serious reduction of manpower.<sup>382</sup>

These new laws coupled with the anxiety and pressure of keeping civilian peace during a time of war gave rise to some unusual arrests. Edward Marshall Hall became involved in at least one such strange event, as described by his biographer, Edward Marjoribanks:

During the night of October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1915, a Zeppelin flew over London, and an Englishman named Usher went on to the roof of his hotel, the Holborn Viaduct, with the manager, a Swiss, to enjoy a view of the raid. Unfortunately, with the indifference to danger of a true Briton, he lighted a cigarette. This was at once perceived by the vigilant police sleuths beneath, who promptly haled Mr. Usher and the manager to the police station, where they were charged with “vagrancy and signalling to the enemy,” and handed over to the military authorities. When the case came on the next day, the stump and ash of the cigarette were gravely produced to the magistrate as exhibits, and the case was dismissed amid laughter.<sup>383</sup>

Hall’s role in this affair was to defend the magazine *John Bull* against a libel action from the Holborn Viaduct Hotel after they published a paragraph that seemed to refer to the incident. The matter was settled, and Marjoribanks describes it as having provided ‘a good laugh all round.’<sup>384</sup> Though this arrest was dismissed as a humorous misunderstanding, it showed how easy it was during the Great War, not just to be seen to be a criminal, but to be suspected of being a potential enemy of the state. The main action of the war may have been

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<sup>382</sup> Browne, Douglas G., *The Rise of Scotland Yard: A History of the Metropolitan Police*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1956) p.293.

<sup>383</sup> Marjoribanks, Edward, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, (London, Victor Gollancz LTD, 1930), p. 357.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

taking place on French and Belgian soil, but the fear of invasion on the Home Front meant that any foreigners were treated with increased suspicion. As Le Queux had warned, the exact whereabouts of the enemy was not known. They were, it seemed, everywhere, anyone could be a spy. Ever interested in the motivations of those who broke the law, it is unsurprising that the members of Our Society found themselves involved with spies and traitors.

Many of the same authors who had entertained and terrified the British public with their fiction about spies and invasion in the years preceding the war were summoned by the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, to a special conference on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1914. He was concerned about pro-German propaganda that was circulating in the United States, and wanted the help of some famous names to produce counteracting material. Among the group assembled were H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Hardy, and at least two authors who were also members of Our Society: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and A. E. W. Mason. Mason was 49 at this time, only six years younger than Doyle, but keen to do something more active than simply sit at Wellington House writing propaganda. With his friend and fellow playwright, J. M. Barrie, and Barrie's friend Gilmour, he set off for America on an authorised mission to counteract the pro-German propaganda in person. Roger Lancelyn Green, in his biography of Mason, describes what happened:

...on 12th September they sailed from Liverpool in the *Lusitania*. Secrecy was an important factor in their scheme, but their secret had leaked out before ever they arrived at New York; they were received with an official intimation on behalf of the British Ambassador at Washington 'that in the present state of American neutrality any idea of a mission must be abandoned at once. It could only embarrass the authorities, would be bound to provoke counter-demonstrations, and had indeed already been the subject of attacks in the pro-German Press.' Their secret orders now counted for nothing. The reporters were awaiting them, and the only solution was to turn their mission into a private visit of Barrie and his two friends in answer to a long-standing invitation from Charles Frohman.<sup>385</sup>

This aborted mission did not quench Mason's thirst for adventure, however, and he soon after enlisted in the army, signing up as an infantry officer for the Manchester regiment on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1914. This army appointment was, as Green describes it, 'weary work, and

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<sup>385</sup>Green, Roger Lancelyn, *A. E. W. Mason*, (London, Max Parrish & Co Limited, 1952), p.136. The *Lusitania* continued to be a vessel of bad fortune for this group of friends: Charles Frohman was a passenger on the ship when it was sunk by a German torpedo in May 1915.

wasteful for a man of Mason's abilities,<sup>386</sup> but very soon he was enlisted for far more adventurous work, and became a spy himself for the Secret Service, then a recently-formed initiative. It was an exciting period for Mason: he travelled widely and carried a vial of poison with him for a hasty suicide in the event he should fall into enemy hands. He knew well the fate that could befall captured spies: in October 1916, he visited Paris and witnessed the execution by firing squad of Mata Hari. The exotic dancer had been caught carrying 'treasonable documents' into France, supposedly for the German Secret Service. Mason had little sympathy for Mata Hari, but regarded the way she handled her execution as 'magnificent':

When she got to the post the officer in charge of the file proposed to tie her up to it, but she refused. The officer, who was impressed by her courage, pleaded with her that it was the wisest thing to do. Tied up to the post it was certain that she would not be hurt, while if she remained quite free she might flinch or fall at the last moment, and her death not be as immediate as it ought to be. She was insistent, however, that she would not move. The officer then produced a folded handkerchief and proposed to blindfold her eyes, but Mata Hari again refused. The officer once more argued with her: she would know nothing about the execution if he bound her eyes. But she still refused, and since she made a point of the indignity of these precautions the officer in view of her bravery did not insist. She stood erect and quiet against the post whilst the officer gave his orders, and as the rifles of the firing-party were presented she suddenly flung back her chinchilla coat, showed her slender figure stark naked to the tops of her stockings, raised her fingers to her lips and blew a kiss at the soldiers. She fell dead the next instant. It was the death of a poor spy but a great cocotte.<sup>387</sup>

The story of what happened to Mata Hari's body after execution would no doubt have been of interest to Our Society members. An early biographer of spy H21, as she was also known, describes in sensational manner how the Press discovered her grave was empty, and so followed rumours of her escape:

What is the secret of the empty grave? A grisly tale. Before the execution, a medical college, with the gruesome hunger for human bodies upon which to conduct the surgical experiments from which suffering humanity benefits, asked the authorities to surrender this body of a criminal for dissection. In accordance with their usual practice, when there was no claimant, the authorities made this concession to science. On the night that Mata Hari was shot her body was

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<sup>386</sup> Green, Roger Lancelyn, *A. E. W. Mason*, p.138.

<sup>387</sup> Mason, A.E.W., 'War Notes' in *Dilemmas* (London, Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1934), p. 306.

disinterred and carried to the clinic, where the surgeons had ample proof that death was due to the bullets of the firing party.<sup>388</sup>

Following her dissection, parts of her body were preserved as specimens for a French Museum, including her head which has been stolen and remains missing.

As a spy himself, Mason was in danger of being captured by the Germans and forced to talk, or maybe even executed. Roger Lancelyn Green, based on personal but brief notes found in Mason's notebook, believes he was part of a Secret Service mission to foil an attempt by the Germans to smuggle anthrax through Spain with the purpose of causing an epidemic on the Western Front. He had a fatal plan should he fall into enemy hands involving a mysterious 'little phial':

For many years after the War, Mason kept this little phial in its matchbox concealed in a secret drawer of his desk, and would bring it out to show his friends, giving them to understand (and perhaps the story grew a little with the years) that it contained a high explosive which, if broken, would destroy him and everything in the room on the instant. It is far more probable that a tiny, brittle phial, carried everywhere with him in his pocket, contained cyanide of potassium – the deadly poison which kills instantly, with but one spasm of pain, when the phial is crushed between the teeth...<sup>389</sup>

The chairman of Our Society also found himself involved with the secret services, but not in the same adventurous manner as Mason, to his regret. Lambton, who at the start of the war was a widower (his second wife had died in 1912) with poor finances, joined up and was assigned to the Special Branch of Scotland Yard. This was an exciting opportunity for an amateur criminologist to work behind the scenes of law enforcement. Special Branch was a highly respected department, as Douglas G. Browne describes:

In general, the Official Secrets Act blocks the curiosity of the historian – and no doubt rightly. It has been divulged that within a few hours of the outbreak of war in 1914 a score or more of German spies had been rounded up in London and at various ports; and tantalizing glimpses of a very efficient security system were obtained from time to time during judicial proceedings which usually ended with a firing-squad at the Tower – particularly in the course of the trial of Sir Roger Casement. The value of the work of the Special Branch in connexion with

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<sup>388</sup> Coulson, Major Thomas, *Mata Hari: Courtesan and Spy*, (New York and London, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930), p.310.

<sup>389</sup> Green, Roger Lancelyn, *A. E. W. Mason*, (London, Max Parrish & Co Limited, 1952), p.147.

espionage caused it, towards the end of the War, to be so closely associated with Military Intelligence that it was virtually seconded from the C.I.D.; and in 1919 the experiment was tried of detaching it altogether. It became a separate department under an Assistant Commissioner who was styled Director of Intelligence. This arrangement, however, lasted for only a few years.<sup>390</sup>

During this placement at Scotland Yard, as with Our Society, Lambton would get to enjoy the status of being a privileged insider and be privy to secret information – though, as he was unsalaried, it did not help his financial position. He shared an office with a fellow Our Society member, G. H. Gardner, and they received visits from other members. Decorating their office were two photographs: one of a signed donation to the police of £1000 from Queen Alexandra, the other a picture of a complete set of burglary tools: ‘One day I drew Mr Diosy’s attention to this one by pointing to the wall, remarking: “Queen Alexandra gave that to the police,” and then I continued finishing a letter. A few moments later an awe-stricken voice interrupted me with: “Do you mean to tell me seriously, my dear Lambton, that Queen Alexandra collected all these burglars’ tools herself?”<sup>391</sup> Through his work, Lambton encountered members of the public who were keen to report suspected spies, often with ulterior motives, as he describes: ‘The hysterical denunciations of women were sometimes amusing but generally boring. One woman denounced a man because he had not invited her to his party given during the previous season.’<sup>392</sup> When information seemed like it might be genuine, however, things were a little more exciting:

A really genuine piece of information lodged by a charming and beautiful lady of my acquaintance, and of considerable literary attainments [sic]. I was told off to accompany her to the Admiralty, and for what followed, had I been an American multi-millionaire, I would have gladly paid a good deal for the thrill. Double-locked doors, an open ordnance map, over which are bent Sir Reginald Hall, Commander Serrcold (a cousin of Ernald Richardson), Sir Reginald’s private secretary, and myself – all four of us listening to the most lucid narrative of this charming lady. It was specially interesting to me, as a man’s name cropped up during the recital whom long before the war I had regarded with suspicion. I daresay what I have described went on three or four times a day in the Admiralty, but for me it was an ineffaceable experience. I do not think I shall be shot at dawn for mentioning this, or provoke another European war.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Browne, *The Rise of Scotland Yard: A History of the Metropolitan Police*, p.297.

<sup>391</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p.14.

<sup>392</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *My Story*, (London, Hurst and Blackett LTD, 1925), p.270.

<sup>393</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *My Story*, p.270.

Much though Lambton enjoyed his adventure with Special Branch, he only stayed there for a year. Precisely why he was compelled to leave is not entirely clear. In his memoirs he writes: ‘at the end of my year there it behoved me to find something else to do; the spies were long ago all accounted for, and so I tried for the Censorship.’<sup>394</sup> Given that the Secret Services had continuous work for others, such as Mason, throughout the war, Lambton’s reason seems unlikely. There was a great demand for extra help at Scotland Yard. There was a lot of work to be done at a time when many men had signed up to the Army and Navy. Browne describes how a large force of special constables was organised in August 1914 to help with demand, and an even more revolutionary step was taken: ‘More unorthodox still, and startling to those who were elderly when the War began, was the insinuation of women into a police force.’<sup>395</sup> It seems unlikely that there would not have been ongoing work for Lambton at Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, he applied for the Censorship, and spent the rest of the war working through correspondence, moving to Liverpool, Folkestone, Gibraltar, London and Inverness. The final location had its perks, as he received £7 a week (‘Back in London was reduced to £3 10s’) but he also had to work with a colleague who treated him with contempt:

It was a most unpleasant experience, as among the party was a most obnoxious youth who, when I pointed out to him that I was twice his years, replied in his terrible provincial accent:

“Well, what if yer are, age doan’t spell wisdom, does it?”

“No,” I answered, “nor apparently does youth spell respect.”

The climax came when one day, sitting at the table, he opened a letter addressed to me, read it, censored it, and then actually confessed without a blush, what he had done. Eventually the authorities did get him, and put him in the Army – he should have been in the trenches years before – and when he was called up a friend of mine in the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers told me he cried like a child.<sup>396</sup>

This episode certainly reveals an unpleasant, vindictive side of Lambton’s character, no doubt a sad consequence of the underlying bitterness he felt towards society over his legitimacy dispute. This seems evident when he records that, before signing up at the outbreak of war, his brother wrote the following to him ‘Thanks to the Lambton family,

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<sup>394</sup> *Ibid* p.271.

<sup>395</sup> Browne, *The Rise of Scotland Yard: A History of the Metropolitan Police*, p.294.

<sup>396</sup> Lambton, *My Story*, p.279.

neither you, nor Maud, nor I have a drop of patriotism between us. But I suppose one has got to do something.’<sup>397</sup>

Patriotic fervour, to which the Lambtons professed immunity, created plenty of work for Edward Marshall Hall throughout the war. He was in his mid-fifties, and too old for military service. Many of his younger colleagues, however, served in the field which meant that, combined with the new laws created by DORA, this was a busy period for the Great Defender. He did not take advantage of the situation, however, as Marjoribanks records: ‘Lord Birkenhead has informed me that Marshall Hall, and one other, were the only leaders who forwarded him half of the fees of the briefs, returned by him on account of his military service, and delivered to them.’<sup>398</sup> Marshall Hall’s second wife, Henriette Kroeger, was German, and he no doubt felt an increased sympathy with those who fell under suspicion simply for not being British. Marshall Hall represented many clients accused of minor acts of espionage or infringements of DORA, including: a Swedish artist who was accused of signalling to the enemy from his coastal West Country house; an American millionaire with Austrian heritage who was accused of preparing his home at Ewell Castle for the placements of heavy guns (he was actually laying concrete to construct a lake); and a British National with German heritage who was accused of spreading false reports after being overheard on a train speculating about the presence of British troops in Alexandria. These sorts of cases proliferated throughout the war, and the saddest of them all, as noted by Marjoribanks, occurred towards the end, in July 1918, when Marshall Hall appeared on behalf of a young girl:

She was appealing against a sentence of four months hard labour, and a recommendation for expulsion from England. She had been found guilty of going to Folkestone, a “prohibited” area under the Defence of the Realm Regulations, she being an alien enemy. The girl’s father was a naturalised British subject; but her mother went to Germany to visit her dying father, and, while she was at Leipzig, a daughter was prematurely born to her. The baby was at once brought back to England, and she never learned to speak any other but the English language. When she was aged sixteen, she was left alone with her father, who was sent to five years’ penal servitude for drugging and assaulting her. When he came out of prison, he persecuted her until her life became a burden and a terror to her; in her despair she married a German admirer, who treated her almost as badly as her father had done, and was eventually also sent to prison. She then tried to earn her living as a ladies’ hairdresser, and in 1916 she met a British

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid*, p.269.

<sup>398</sup> Marjoribanks, Edward, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, (London, Victor Gollancz LTD, 1930), p.323.



officer, who fell in love with her and wished to marry her if she could obtain her freedom. Her husband refused to divorce her; then came the final blow. On one of her visits to the British officer, she was arrested under the war regulations, and sentenced to imprisonment and separation for ever from her lover.<sup>399</sup>

Luckily for the girl, her new lover obtained Marshall Hall for her appeal, and he secured a reduced sentence of a fine of ten pounds.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made a far less successful attempt to intervene in a more hopeless case: that of Sir Roger Casement. Casement had worked as a diplomat for the Foreign Office but had turned against Great Britain and became a vocal proponent of Irish Nationalism, attempting to encourage Irish Revolutionaries to support the Germans. He published a pamphlet in 1915, *The Crime Against Europe*, in which the actions of the British government and their allies are portrayed as criminal:

The *Entente Cordiale*, to begin with, is unnatural. There is nothing in common between the parties to it, save antagonism to someone else. It is wrongly named. It is founded not on predilections but on prejudices—not on affection but on animosity. To put it crudely it is a bond of hate not of love. None of the parties to it like or admire each other, or have consistent aims, save one. That satisfied, they will surely fall out among themselves, and the greater the plunder derived from their victory the more certain their ensuing quarrel.<sup>400</sup>

He was captured on the South-West coast of Ireland in April 1916 and taken back to London where he was imprisoned at the Tower of London before being put to trial for treason. The trial itself was unusual in several ways. An act of treason required a Trial at Bar, which meant being heard by three judges. Travers Humphreys, who worked on the trial with F. E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead) as Counsel for the Crown, found this unnecessary:

I have never quite understood the point of having three Judges to preside over a criminal trial when there is a Jury to decide the questions of fact and to return the verdict, that is since the creation of the Court of Criminal Appeal... On the trial of Casement three Judges were present and took part in the trial, one being the Lord Chief Justice of England, and when Casement appealed, as he did, his Appeal was heard by five more Judges of the same Division.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> *Ibid*, p. 362.

<sup>400</sup> Casement, Roger, *The Crime Against Europe* (Philadelphia, The Celtic Press, 1915) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p4.

<sup>401</sup> Humphreys, Travers, *Criminal Days*, (London, Hodder & Stoughton Limited, 1946), p.222.

Casement was also being tried according to a medieval law, the interpretation of which (as it was written in Norman French) was the main question argued at his appeal. The fact of his guilt for carrying out treasonable acts was not in question, merely whether he could be tried for crimes that did not take place on English soil. He was found guilty, his appeal was unsuccessful, and he was sentenced to death.

Given the circumstances, it is perhaps surprising that Doyle would have attempted to speak up for a traitor. Doyle, as had been proved by his pamphlets during the Boer War for which he was knighted, was a patriot and a unionist. Doyle had supported Lord Roberts's campaign to train civilians in the use of firearms by setting up a rifle club at his Hindhead home, Undershaw, in 1900. Like William Le Queux, he had produced some alarmist fiction for Lord Northcliffe (published in *London Magazine* between 1909 and 1911), and a more overtly invasion-inspired series titled *Danger!* published in *The Strand Magazine* during the summer of 1914. Like Le Queux, Doyle emphasised Britain's military weaknesses (particularly with regards naval warfare) and also wrote regular letters to the press warning of the unpreparedness of the military for war. Spies and traitors were also regular villains in the Sherlock Holmes stories such as 'The Naval Treaty' (1893), 'The Second Stain' (1904), and 'The Bruce Partington Plans' (1908).

Doyle, however, was always a loyal friend and he had met Casement through their mutual involvement in E. D. Morel's Congo Reform Association. As Andrew Lycett describes, he did not condone the actions of his friend:

After the Irishman was found guilty on 29 June, Arthur joined Yeats, Shaw and others in a campaign to save him from the gallows. This appeared to show Arthur in a favourable light, overcoming his anti-Irish prejudices, linking up with individuals with whom he had not always seen eye to eye, and supporting an old friend. But his motivation was more complex. As he stressed to F. E. Smith, he did not condone Casement's crime or suggest his punishment was unjust. Rather, it was not in the empire's interest that the Irishman should be made a martyr. This was what Casement and the Germans wanted, but it was astute to take the opposite approach.<sup>402</sup>

The claim that Casement's death could help 'German Policy' was the second reason given in Doyle's petition for leniency. The first was mental instability:

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<sup>402</sup> Lycett, Andrew, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p.366.

We would call attention to the violent change which appears to have taken place in the prisoner's previous sentiments towards Great Britain (as shown, for example, in his letter to the King at the time of his knighthood) from those which he has exhibited during the war. Without going so far as to urge complete mental irresponsibility, we should desire to point out that the prisoner had for many years been exposed to severe strain during his honourable career in public service, that he had endured several tropical fevers, and that he had experienced the worry of two investigations which were of a peculiarly nerve-trying character. For these reasons it appears to us that some allowance may be made in his case for an abnormal physical and mental state.<sup>403</sup>

The petition does not mention the notorious 'Black Diaries' which had been circulating, in which Casement was alleged to have detailed his homosexual experiences, though Doyle may have been aware of them (Travers Humphreys was certainly aware of the smear campaign against Casement, criticising some references in the opening speech for the Crown as 'more picturesque than important'<sup>404</sup>). It is also likely that Doyle's general anxieties about capital punishment and mental instability, as discussed in chapter 3, made him uneasy about Casement's fate.

Whether Doyle used *Our Society* as a forum to attempt to gain support for Casement is unrecorded: the meeting that was held in May 1916, after Casement's arrest, was led by Sir Willoughby Maycock and his paper was titled 'The Newquay Mystery'. If Doyle did speak positively on Casement's behalf at the meeting, it is very unlikely that this would have been well received. The attitude of those whom Doyle tried to rally to his cause is exemplified by this response in a letter from Oliver Lodge:

Concerning the immediate object of your letter, I regret I am not able to sign. If Casement is lunatic, there will doubtless be medical evidence to that effect. But on no other ground that I see ought he to be left off. Especially at a time like this, when people are being killed in shoals, and a few of them as a result, I suppose, of his action. Had he been a merely misguided Irish patriot and fomented Irish disturbance, he might be pardonable; but to associate himself with the Germans seems to me quite unpardonable. I wish to goodness he had been killed at once, instead of its hanging on all this time.

The cold-bloodedness of executions is their dismal feature, but so long as there are executions, it seems to me that Casement deserves all he gets.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Quoted in Knott, George H. ed., *Trial of Sir Roger Casement*, (Glasgow and Edinburgh, William Hodge and Company LTD, 1926) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 298.

<sup>404</sup> Humphreys, *Criminal Days*, p. 223.

<sup>405</sup> Letter from Oliver Lodge to Doyle re Roger Casement – 11 Jul 1916 (RLG Bequest Reference ACD1/B/2/7/1).

Travers Humphreys was certainly unimpressed by Casement. He wrote in memoirs: 'I was glad when I saw in the newspaper that Casement had been hanged on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1916. He thoroughly deserved his fate. He was a foul traitor but I had never felt quite at ease during the three months which covered the time from his arrival in England to his execution. The whole case savoured too much of politics for my taste.'<sup>406</sup> The only leniency shown to Casement was that he was spared a public hanging, drawing and quartering (the sentence for those guilty of treason according to the law by which he was tried) and was hanged privately in Pentonville Prison. The following year, Doyle's story 'His Last Bow' was published, in which two German spies are foiled by Sherlock Holmes, disguised as a bitter Irish-American who 'seems to have declared war on the King's English as well as on the English King.'<sup>407</sup>

The Courts and the public were far more sympathetic towards the murderer, Douglas Malcolm, in whose case Bernard Spilsbury and Richard Muir were involved. Malcolm had murdered a Russian called Anton Baumberg, who was rumoured to be a German spy connected to white-slave trafficking (though there was no real proof to substantiate either of these claims). Malcolm had signed up as an officer at the outbreak of the war, and while he was overseas his wife had indulged in an affair with Baumberg, for whom she declared her love. She asked her husband for a divorce so she could be with her new lover. Malcolm ignored her request and challenged Baumberg to a duel. The eventual encounter, when Malcolm returned to England on leave in August 1917, was more of an assassination than a duel. Malcolm, armed with a riding whip and a revolver, gained entry to Baumberg's rooms by pretending to be 'Inspector Quinn' of Scotland Yard, and shot his love rival in the head. Afterwards, he immediately gave himself up to a policeman, giving him the revolver and saying 'I did it for my honour.'

Browne and Tullett state that 'Spilsbury's findings, and the presence of the pistol in the open drawer, were consistent with the theory put forward by the defence at Malcolm's trial. The latter had not fired until after a struggle in which Baumberg reached for his own weapon.'<sup>408</sup> Browne is being incredibly generous to Malcolm. Malcolm's son, whose book about the case was published in 2003, shows that Spilsbury's evidence was not actually in his father's favour:

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<sup>406</sup> Humphreys, *Criminal Days*, p.221.

<sup>407</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, 'His Last Bow,' in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1986), p.793

<sup>408</sup> Browne, Douglas G., and Tullett, E. V., *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, (London, The Companion Book Club, 1952), p. 121.

Two [bullet wounds], he said, were on the left side of the chest, one was in the neck and another almost in the middle of the forehead – the bullet which caused this wound having passed through the skull and the brain. He found it beneath the scalp. The two wounds in the chest were, in his opinion, inflicted first, followed by those in the neck and head...

The judge then commented that he was surprised no question whatever had been asked of the police witnesses as to whether my father had any marks on his face or body that would indicate an assault upon him. This caused Detective-Sergeant McHattie to be recalled, and he confirmed what Muir had said – there were no marks on my father when he first saw him after the incident. There were, in fact, no signs of a struggle on him at all.

...Dr Spilsbury also confirmed that the bullet wounds were the only marks of violence on Baumberg and that there were no signs of a struggle on him.<sup>409</sup>

Under normal circumstances, Spilsbury's evidence would have been damning. The case had been a sensation, however, and the sympathies of the public and the press lay with the patriotic soldier whose wife had been seduced by the enemy. Sir John Simon, who had resigned as Home Secretary in January 1916 as he opposed conscription, defended Malcolm. Marshall Hall was briefed to watch but was not allowed to intervene, and Marjoribanks speculated that this was the best result for the defendant as the Great Defender may have inadvertently prejudiced the jury against him:

Had Sir Edward defended, the prisoner would have gone into the box; there would have been a thrilling reconstruction of the scene between the two men, culminating in the death of the German spy, who was attempting to seduce the British officer's wife, at the latter's hands. Marshall would have pointed the revolver at the jury, and the ring of steel and the click of its trigger would have been heard in court.<sup>410</sup>

Because Simon did not allow Malcolm to speak, the jury did not get to hear him express his vehement hatred of Baumberg. Muir had warned the jury not to be tempted into breaking their oaths and judging the case by unwritten law: the only options open to them should have been murder or manslaughter, any other verdict would not have a precedent in English law (though in France there was 'Le Crime Passionnel', subject of an Our Society talk by Dr G. de Vine in May 1925). Simon reminded them that murder itself is an unwritten law, though he did not encourage them to deviate from proper sentencing. Judge McCreadie instructed them to reach a verdict according to the law, then allow the Court to decide on the

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<sup>409</sup> Malcolm, Derek, *Family Secrets*, (London, Hutchinson, 2003), p.113.

<sup>410</sup> Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, p.366.

sentencing, reminding them that the Courts had the power to be lenient. The jury took only 20 minutes to reach a verdict of ‘not guilty’. Browne and Tullett suggest that ‘popular feeling was clearly right,’<sup>411</sup> but it is hard to imagine such a verdict being reached in less feverish times. In May 1919 at an Our Society dinner, Ernest Bowen-Rowlands read a paper ‘In Favour of “The Unwritten Law.”’ In the members’ book it reads: ‘The other speakers were on the whole opposed to it.’<sup>412</sup> Who the other speakers were and precisely what was discussed, as ever, is shrouded in mystery, but surely the sensational case of Douglas Malcolm would at least have merited a mention.

Spilsbury also gave medical evidence in 1917 at the trial of the Wheeldons, who Browne describes as ‘unbalanced cranks, and their associates the jetsam thrown up by every war, conscientious objectors and the disgruntled of all kinds.’<sup>413</sup> Alice Wheeldon and her family were conscientious objectors who harboured men fleeing from conscription. She and her ‘associates’ were accused of plotting to kill the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, after they were discovered to be in possession of a large quantity of strychnine (‘enough to exterminate the Cabinet,’<sup>414</sup> according to Browne). There was also a suggestion that they were involved in a plot to shoot Lloyd George with a dart of poisoned curare while he played golf on Walton Heath, a method that could have been inspired by the murders in Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of Four*.

Though Spilsbury’s work was punctuated with these unusual incidents during the Great War such as the two discussed, and he had to take on extra cases due to the absence of other colleagues, the substance of his work in many ways remained routine. His case cards<sup>415</sup> of 1914 reveal a typical mix of deaths under anaesthetic, constitutionally weak new born babies and elderly people, and a smattering of poisonings both criminal and accidental. There were also examples of criminal investigations without fatalities in which he was called in to consult: in May that year he carried out a physical examination on a living 13 year old girl who had been raped by her father. By 1915, it is noticeable that more unusual deaths connected with the war start to appear amongst the routine accidents. The body of an 18 year old soldier killed in France by a sabre wound to the chest was disinterred and returned to England for cremation. A woman who had been discharged from a mental hospital was found

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<sup>411</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.122.

<sup>412</sup> Details from 1993 Our Society members’ book.

<sup>413</sup> Browne, *The Rise of Scotland Yard*, p.297.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>415</sup> Viewed at the Wellcome Collection. Archive Reference PPSPI/A.

dead in Highgate Pond: she had been threatening to kill herself and her children if her husband, who was in the army, did not return (Spilsbury does not record what happened to him). It was, however, his work on notorious criminal cases during the war that would have the greatest impact on his reputation, particularly his involvement in the trial of George Joseph Smith.

In *The Rise of Scotland Yard*, Browne notes that it was business as usual for criminals during the Great War:

The incidence of major crime is little affected by such conditions, and Londoners in these years had their minds taken off more wholesale slaughter by the murder of Mme Gerard in Soho<sup>416</sup> and the trial of George Joseph Smith. The latter's technique for murder showed considerable ingenuity, not only in the use of the homely bath for lethal purposes, but in the choice of *locus crimini* far apart and of the end of the week for the deed itself, the victim's family learning of the inquest and burial when it was too late to attend either. Smith's crimes almost equalled those of Landru<sup>417</sup> in Paris as a distraction from present discontents.<sup>418</sup>

The notorious case of George Joseph Smith and the Brides in the Bath Murders is well known, and during the summer of 1915, despite the ongoing war, he and his drowned wives dominated the front pages of the newspapers. Smith was arrested on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1915 and charged with the murders of Bessie Mundy, Alice Burnham and Margaret Lofty, all of whom he had bigamously married under false names shortly before they were found dead in bathtubs. As Browne and Tullett observe, the crimes took place far apart, and Spilsbury was required to travel:

On the day of Smith's arrest Spilsbury was at the Finchley Cemetery, supervising the exhumation of Miss Lofty's body. Six days afterwards he was at Blackpool, at the grave of Alice Burnham. A week later again, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of that month, his cousin Garfield Williams called late in the evening to see him at Marlborough Hill. The two men sat talking until one in the morning, when Spilsbury remarked

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<sup>416</sup> This case occurred in 1917. Louis Voisin, a butcher, murdered and mutilated his lover, Mme Gerard in the basement of 101 Charlotte Street. One unusual feature of the trial was that Spilsbury was requested to accompany the jury to the scene of the crime, though he was not allowed to speak while he did so. See Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.118.

<sup>417</sup> Henri Désiré Landru preyed on women through 'Lonely Hearts' columns and is thought to have accumulated 11 victims. He was executed by guillotine in 1921. William Le Queux claimed to have assisted the French police in the investigation, and wrote in his memoirs that he spoke about the case to Our Society. There is no record of any paper given by Le Queux to Our Society, on Landru or on any other crime.

<sup>418</sup> Browne, *The Rise of Scotland Yard*, p.297.

that he would be leaving in a few hours for Herne Bay in connexion with what was already known as “The Brides in the Bath” case. He asked Williams to say nothing about this, as reporters were haunting Marlborough Hill. The reporters had other sources of information, for that morning’s papers had the news that Spilsbury was on his way to attend the disinterment of Beatrice Mundy, the earliest of Smith’s known victims.<sup>419</sup>

The pathologist’s reputation had grown since the Crippen case and he now attracted significant media attention. In March 1912, while working as assistant to Dr. William Willcox, Spilsbury had given medical evidence at another high-profile murder trial in between Crippen and Smith: that of the poisoner Frederick Seddon. Seddon was charged with the murder of his lodger, Miss Eliza Barrow, and Spilsbury carried out the autopsy following the exhumation of her body. Edward Marshall Hall appeared for the defence and cross-examined Spilsbury, briefly, about the evidence of arsenical poisoning. Seddon was found guilty and hanged. The trial of Smith 1915 was the first occasion on which Spilsbury appeared as the lead medical witness and involved a much more thorough cross-examination of his evidence. Spilsbury argued that the baths were too small for the women to have drowned in accidentally whilst experiencing fits, as Smith had claimed at the times of their deaths. The onus was on Smith’s defence to come up with an alternative explanation for their deaths other than wilful murder. So it came to pass, on Tuesday 29th June 1915, a year and one day after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, that Marshall Hall and Spilsbury were at the Central Criminal Court in London, in front of an all-male jury, arguing over how a woman might wash her hair in a bath:

Edward Marshall Hall: Have you known of women washing their heads in the bath?

Bernard Spilsbury: They may wash their heads in the bath.

EMH: Wash their hair?

BS: Yes, they may do.

EMH: One of the chief things a woman will do when she washes her hair with shampoo powder or soap, is to be very careful to get the powder or soap out of it?

BS: Yes, that is so.

EMH: If you are in a bath when you are using soap, you cannot get the soap out of your head very well by simply rinsing it with that soapy water?

BS: No.

EMH: And therefore the hairdresser provides the operative nozzle with a shampoo apparatus?

BS: Yes.

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<sup>419</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.85.



EMH: The very natural thing for a lady to do would be to lean forward and put her head under the tap, and let the fresh clear water run on her head?

BS: That would be one method of doing it.

EMH: Assuming a woman had had a fairly hot bath and she was not in a very healthy condition – that is the evidence we have got, and she was rinsing her hair in this way and got a sudden fainting fit, would she not fall backwards – she would have to turn round to wash her head under the tap?

BS: I do not quite follow the position you assume her to be in.

EMH: I suggest, and it is pure suggestion, because it is not suggested anybody saw it, it is the position antecedent to anybody coming into the room, but kneeling in the bath with her face towards the tap she puts her head forward for the purpose of rinsing her hair with clean water?

BS: I think it would be almost impossible for her to rinse her hair in that bath in the position you suggest.

EMH: Did the taps project over the bath?

BS: Yes, they do, slightly.

EMH: If the water will pour from the tap to the bath, it will equally pour over her head?

BS: It wants a certain clearance.

EMH: It would want a certain amount of clearance, I agree, and therefore it would make the operation all the more difficult?

BS: Yes.

EMH: It involves getting her head down more than if there was a greater clearance between the tap and the bath?

BS: Quite so.

EMH: The mere fact of bending the head down might cause a flow of blood to the head?

Mr. Justice Scrutton: I do not follow this. What is supposed to happen – that she is in the water and putting her head under the tap?<sup>420</sup>

This unusual argument demonstrates the typical approaches of both men: the romantic imagination of Marshall Hall as he tries to suggest alternative scenarios to those damning his client; the short and direct answers from Spilsbury who refuses to be drawn into undermining his scientific reasoning. In this particular exchange, Marshall Hall seems desperate. That he should have represented Smith is perhaps surprising. Smith's assets had been seized by the police and he had no money to pay for his defence. Sir John Simon, Home Secretary at the time of the trial, had vetoed attempts by Smith to make money by selling to the press any publication rights to his letters. Though the crimes were sensational, the case gave Marshall Hall limited opportunity to persuade anyone of Smith's innocence, as Marjoribanks describes: 'though this was perhaps the most extraordinary case in its circumstances, it was, in its conduct, the dullest of all. Throughout the trial the atmosphere of the court was not, "is

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<sup>420</sup> Adapted from Watson, Eric R. Ed, *The Trial of George Joseph Smith*, (London, William Hodge & Company LTD., 1922), pp. 229-230.

this man innocent or guilty?" but "is there sufficient evidence in law to convict this undoubtedly guilty man?"<sup>421</sup> In a final attempt to save his client from execution, Marshall Hall played on the jury's sympathy by invoking the war in his closing speech:

At a moment like the present, when the flower of our youth are laying down their lives for their country, does it not strike you as a great tribute to the national character of level-headedness that, with all the panoply of pomp and law, we have been assembled day after day to enquire into the facts of this sordid case, and to decide whether or not one man should go to an ignominious death or not? It is a great tribute to our national system of jurisprudence.<sup>422</sup>

Hall's attempt to reduce the cold-blooded murder of three women for money to a 'sordid case' relative to the deaths of young men in battle did not work: the jury took just a little over 20 minutes to reach a verdict of 'guilty.' Smith was hanged at Maidstone Prison on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1915. Marshall Hall and J. B. Harris-Burland gave a paper on the case at Our Society later that year, on 7<sup>th</sup> November.

As with Crippen, the trial of Smith at the Old Bailey was a major event and attracted huge crowds. Members of Our Society, as usual, had no trouble getting in. In fact, according to William Le Queux, during a lunchtime adjournment he and George R. Sims even managed to get into one of the baths that had been brought in as evidence. Where Crippen, despite the evidence of the horrific remains at Hilldrop Crescent, had garnered a significant amount of sympathy and respect, Smith was regarded as a far more straight forward villain. His collection of wives invoked comparisons with the fairytale villain, Bluebeard. George R. Sims wrote an account of the case titled *Bluebeard of the Bath* first serialised in *Pearson's Weekly* in autumn 1915. Sims referred to Smith as 'a modern Jekyll and Hyde,' and recounted his experience of watching this monster:

As the story has already been told in these columns, so it was told at the Old Bailey. All the people who crowded the court knew it. But as the facts were marshalled by counsel with deadly precision, the effect they were having upon the prisoner himself was apparent to all who looked at him. All the ghosts of his dead past, the past that he thought was not only dead but buried, rose again before his eyes as he sat day after day, a live man on the brink of the shameful grave that was being slowly but surely dug for him.

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<sup>421</sup> Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, p.324.

<sup>422</sup> Watson, Eric R. Ed, *The Trial of George Joseph Smith*, (London, William Hodge & Company LTD., 1922), p. 262.

I have seen a score of men and women tried for their lives at the Old Bailey – I have been present at most of the famous trials of the last thirty years – but I have never seen the ghosts of the past arise to point an accusing finger at a guilty wretch as I saw them arise and pass in solemn procession before this habitual bigamist and murderer of brides.

It was as though a cinema picture of his sordid and shameful story, a picture in three reels, was being flung upon the screen for him to look upon with the jury who were to judge him, and the Judge who was to sentence him when they had given their verdict, sitting around him in this picture hall of fate.

“The Murdered Brides of George Joseph Smith – A Tragedy in Three Reels.”<sup>423</sup>

One of the aspects of the case that seemed to be universally fascinating was how this man had manipulated such a persuasive power over women. Marjoribanks describes Smith as ‘a purely commercial murderer’ who ‘made a trade of love-at-first-sight.’<sup>424</sup> Spilsbury’s biographers Browne and Tullett were perplexed by Smith’s apparent charm:

A more repellent criminal than Smith has never stood in the dock; and here lies the real interest and mystery of his career. How did this vulgar and all but illiterate ruffian contrive to induce a whole series of women, some of whom by nature and upbringing should have shrunk from him at sight, to give themselves to him body and soul, and often within a few days?<sup>425</sup>

They also suggest that it seems probable Smith wielded some form of hypnotic power, though Spilsbury ‘did not believe this.’ Marshall Hall certainly found his client to have some sort of captivating charm, as Marjoribanks outlines:

To condemn Smith, as the contemporary Press did, merely as an unspeakable hypocrite and a human monster, without a single redeeming feature, is the easiest course. Yet, perhaps, after all, there was something more interesting and more dreadful in him than this. Both Marshall Hall and the clergyman, who came into even more intimate touch with him than his advocate, formed this view. The chaplain of the prison found him intelligent and very well read, and the most interesting of the fifty men under sentence of death to whom he had administered.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Sims, George R., ‘The Bluebeard of the Bath,’ *Pearson’s Weekly*, edition Week Ending October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1915, p. 265.

<sup>424</sup> Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, p. 349.

<sup>425</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.86.

<sup>426</sup> Marjoribanks, *The Life of Sir Edward Marshall Hall*, p.350.

H. B. Irving was at the trial and, according to Marjoribanks, ‘overheard two attractive and gay ladies whispering about [Smith’s] charms as a man.’<sup>427</sup> Irving was very familiar with the hypnotic Svengali archetype: his wife, Dorothea Baird, had played the lead in *Trilby* on stage. He no doubt relished the opportunity to attend the trial of a remarkable criminal, as Smith proved to be. In the lead up to the Second World War, Smith would be used by Harold Nicolson to help explain the personality of Hitler, in his 1939 book *Why Britain is at War*:

There are interesting comparisons to be drawn between the case of George Joseph Smith and the case of Adolf Hitler. Even as George Smith might have got away with the murder of Margaret Lofty had not his two previous brides been done to death in an identical manner, so also might Adolf Hitler have got away with the seizure of Danzig and the Corridor, had he not already applied the same technique to the destruction of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The methods adopted by each of these two persons are not dissimilar and merit a comparative analysis.<sup>428</sup>

Had he lived to read it, Irving would have appreciated Nicolson’s approach of combining criminal and political history. Comparison between the lives of criminals and acts of war were central to his *A Book of Remarkable Criminals*, published in 1918, the final year of the Great War. In his introduction to this collection of stories about famous criminals (including Irving’s version of the career of the notorious burglar and murderer, Charles Peace), Irving makes a case for the dramatic importance of crime:

Rob history and fiction of crime, how tame and colourless would be the residue! We who are living and enduring in the presence of one of the greatest crimes on record, must realise that trying as this period of the world’s history is to those who are passing through it, in the hands of some great historian it may make a very good reading for posterity. Perhaps we may find some little consolation in this fact, like the unhappy victims of famous freebooters such as Jack Sheppard or Charley Peace.<sup>429</sup>

Irving makes no distinction between criminal classes: ‘That comforting theory of the Lombroso school’, he writes, ‘has been exploded.’<sup>430</sup> Later in his introduction, he is more explicit about his beliefs in criminal potentiality and the probable influence of nurture: ‘It is not too much to say that in every man there dwell the seeds of crime; whether they grow or

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<sup>427</sup> *Ibid*, p.349.

<sup>428</sup> Nicolson, Harold, *Why Britain is at War*, (London, Penguin, 2010), p.10.

<sup>429</sup> Irving, H.B., *A Book of Remarkable Criminals*, (Teddington, Echo Library, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*, p.4.

are stifled in their growth by the good that is in us is a chance mysteriously determined.<sup>431</sup> If the distinction of class is removed, Irving argues, then there is little difference between breaking the law and acts of war:

Because crimes are played on a great stage instead of a small, that is no reason why our moral judgment should be suspended or silenced. Class Machiavelli and Frederick the Great as a couple of rascals fit to rank with Jonathan Wild, and we are getting nearer a perception of what constitutes the real criminal...  
...Crime, broadly speaking, is the attempt by fraud or violence to possess oneself of something belonging to another, and as such the cases of it in history are as clear as those dealt with in criminal courts. Germany to-day has been guilty of a perverse and criminal adventure, the outcome of that false morality applied to historical transactions, of which Carlyle's life of Frederick is a monumental example...A most interesting work might be written on the great criminals of history, and might do something towards restoring that balance of moral judgment in historical transactions, for the perversion of which we are suffering to-day.<sup>432</sup>

For Irving, criminology was key to understanding the causes and effects of the Great War. He patriotically presupposes, however, that Germany is the source of criminality in the War, and does not discuss any fault on the part of the British (contrary to Casement's analysis in *The Crime Against Europe*).

Sadly for the Irving brothers, neither of them lived to look back and reflect on the greatest crime on record. Laurence Irving died just before the war, having been a passenger on the liner *Empress of Ireland* when it sank in May 1914. H. B. Irving was enlisted to work for the Department of Naval Intelligence in the final year of the war when he published *A Book of Remarkable Criminals*, and his work there seemed to take its toll on his health. During 1918, he had a nervous breakdown from which he never recovered – Michael Holroyd identifies the illness as ‘a progressive and eventually fatal anaemia.’<sup>433</sup> It was a long illness and Irving survived until 17<sup>th</sup> October the following year. His biographer and family friend, Austin Brereton, was convinced that his illness was brought about by other circumstances and compared his end to that of Professor John Churton Collins:

[Collins] often sat up half the night discussing crime with H. B. Irving. Unhappily, he came to an untimely end, in 1908, at the age of sixty. “H. B.”

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<sup>431</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>433</sup> Holroyd, Michael, *A Strange Eventful History*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 2008), p.404.

outwore his physical strength ere he was fifty. Would it have been otherwise if he had not so thoroughly and so constantly pursued such a morbid hobby as the study of murder? And could he not have put his fine intelligence to better use than perpetuating in print the deeds of criminals? In any case, although old gentlemen, be they poets or philosophers or otherwise, may sit up without doing themselves any harm once in a lifetime “talking about murders,” the pastime would not seem to be a healthy exercise for a busy professor and an ambitious actor.<sup>434</sup>

Despite his strong arguments linking the psychology of criminals to the wider concerns of history, clearly not all of Irving’s friends agreed that crime was a worthy subject of study.

Dining out while pursuing a ‘morbid’ hobby that focussed on the darker and distressing aspects of humanity created an environment in which it was likely that offense would be caused. At a time of national crisis when emotions were high and Our Society had grown far beyond a small clique of friends, it was only a matter of time before somebody was upset. In February 1918, Ernest Bowen-Rowlands gave a paper titled ‘Three Little-Known Murders in South Wales.’ He was always a controversial speaker, as Quinton Wilson recalled:

Ernest Bowen-Rowlands, who read several papers of no particular merit, one in 1916, another in 1918, and the last in 1921, was an unattractive individual. His sole aim in life seemed to be to insult everybody who disagreed with him. So offensive was his conduct during the debates following his papers that I wrote to Lambton and told him that unless Bowen-Rowlands was severely reprimanded by the Committee, I should be forced to take direct action if his behaviour remained unchanged. Bowen-Rowlands mysteriously ceased to be a member.<sup>435</sup>

At this particular meeting, member G. H. Gardner (who had shared an office at Scotland Yard with Lambton) brought a guest, the comedian George Graves, and during the discussion they made some comments which were ‘the object of much criticism, accentuated as it was by being a time of war.’<sup>436</sup> The exact nature of these remarks is not recorded, in accordance with the Society’s rules, but it is noted that a ‘salacious’ story was involved which caused particular offence to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle because his son, Kingsley, who

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<sup>434</sup> Brereton, Austin, “*H.B.*” and *Laurence Irving*, (London, Grant Richards Ltd., 1922), p.162.

<sup>435</sup> Quoted in *Our Society members’ book* 1993.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

had been wounded at the Battle of the Somme, had joined him as a guest (Kingsley died later that year in October at St. Thomas's Hospital from pneumonia following the Spanish flu). In the members' book, it is noted that 'it was the first instance in the annals of the Society of such an incident.'<sup>437</sup> It was certainly not the last.

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<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 7 - Spiritualism versus Spilsburyism: Death and Justice in the Wake of the Great War.

The violence of the Great War helped prepare young W. Bentley Purchase for the position of Coroner for St. Pancras – a role he held later in life and through which he grew to know Sir Bernard Spilsbury. As an officer on the frontline, he became accustomed to surreal and horrible deaths, including that of a friend who was strangled slowly by his own parachute while escaping from a balloon. Purchase saw first-hand the senseless suffering and loss of life that resulted from the conflict, the legacy of which was often traumatic for those who survived. On returning to civilian life after the war, in 1920, one of his final tasks was to return the body of Surgeon-General Sir William Babbie from Belgium for burial. Babbie had been involved in a scandal three years before: he had failed in his duty of care towards a large number of wounded patients who had contracted typhoid while travelling on ambulance barges that were under his command. His management of the situation had caused unpleasant and unsanitary overcrowding, and *The Daily Mirror* said of Babbie: ‘he accepted obviously insufficient medical provision, without any adequate effort to improve it.’<sup>438</sup> Babbie had died suddenly alone in his bedroom in Belgium, but Purchase had not anticipated that such a relatively mundane death could prompt an inquest, as his biographer Robert Jackson describes:

Purchase had heard of the scandal, but he was surprised when he called on the Westminster coroner, Ingleby Oddie, and found Oddie raising obstacles to Purchase’s simple burial arrangements.

“If the body comes to Victoria it will be in my jurisdiction, and I shall order a post-mortem,” said Ingleby Oddie.

Purchase was puzzled to know why. “For all I know, General Babbie may have been poisoned by the mother or wife of one of the men who died on his barges,” said Oddie grimly.

Purchase airily pooh-poohed the idea, but Oddie stuck to his proposal. “In that case I shall short-circuit the whole business,” said young Purchase firmly. “I shall go to Dover and get a burial certificate from the coroner there. I am not going to have my arrangements messed about by a civilian.”

Oddie gave Purchase a long look and laughed. “That is one way of putting it,” he said. The talk then proceeded on a more friendly basis, and when the business was arranged Oddie asked the younger man what he intended to do on demobilization.

“I don’t really know,” said Purchase. “Perhaps I might become a coroner.”

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<sup>438</sup> “‘They Went Through Hell’ Owing to Undue Optimism’ in *The Daily Mirror*, Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> June 1917, front page.



Oddie said he thought Purchase might do worse. “Come and see me if you think any more of the idea,” he said.<sup>439</sup>

Jackson portrays Oddie and Purchase as very different characters: the former paranoid and cynical, the latter gentlemanly and straightforward. Purchase had seen death, but he did not have the experience of dabbling in criminal psychology like his new friend. Oddie had his way and carried out an inquest on Babbie, but concluded he had died from natural causes (heart failure). Oddie’s work intrigued the young Purchase, and he certainly did think more of the idea. In the early 1920s, when Oddie already had a full complement of staff, he helped Purchase to get an apprenticeship with Dr Guthrie: ‘the pawky, asthmatic East London coroner.’<sup>440</sup> When a vacancy arose, Purchase was appointed Oddie’s deputy. Working closely with Oddie, Purchase became acutely aware of the coroner’s anxieties about death and disease:

Oddie was a hypochondriac, and his young deputy noticed that he often believed he was suffering from diseases which had killed people whose deaths were officially reported to him. If Oddie had a sore on his lip he would convince himself that he was suffering from mycelium of the mouth, and an indigestion pain would be diagnosed as acute heart disease. By chance, towards the end of his life, on the day Oddie had fixed to have a tooth out he held an inquest on a man who had died in a dentist’s chair. Oddie went to his dentist and was certain that he would never leave the surgery alive. But the next day he was at the court to amuse Purchase with the story of what had happened. He was put under the anaesthetic. “I knew I should die,” he said, “and it happened! There I was, in the next world. There was a passage, and at the end a long flight of stairs leading upwards.”

“That was better than a chute down,” interrupted Purchase.

“I suppose so,” said Oddie gloomily, “but the atmosphere was so thick I could not get along very fast. However, I reached the top of the stairs at last, and through an archway I saw the figure of St Peter, dressed in a white robe. But something seemed to be pulling me back all the time, and just as I started to make progress and I thought I could touch St Peter, I heard a voice, ‘Spit into the bowl, please.’”<sup>441</sup>

Oddie had always been quite open-minded to the possibilities of the afterlife, as had several of his other Our Society colleagues. Back in the mid-1900s, when he was first

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<sup>439</sup> Jackson, Robert, *Coroner: The Biography of Sir Bentley Purchase*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1963), p.29.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid*, p.33.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34.

working with Richard Muir (see chapter 5), Oddie spent a lot of time with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was enamoured with the spirit world. Doyle's interest in spiritualism began in the late 1880s, about the same time he completed *A Study in Scarlet*. As Andrew Lycett observes, 'Becoming a spiritualist so soon after creating the quintessentially rational Sherlock Holmes: that is the central paradox of Arthur's life.'<sup>442</sup> Doyle had joined the Society of Psychical Research in 1893. Spiritualists believed it was possible to communicate with the dead, who could materialise in the form of ectoplasm: a phenomenon that suggested the possibility of scientific proof for life after death and a reconciliation of the teachings of religion with the theories of science. In the wake of the Great War, when so many lives had been cut short, the idea of communicating with the dead was a source of comfort. The problem, however, was that the evidence on which these beliefs were based was often very flimsy, and usually fraudulent. Nevertheless, there were many people who were drawn to its supernatural possibilities, including Professor John Churton Collins. L. C. Collins describes what happened when his father attended a séance:

On the subject of spiritualistic phenomena his mind was quite open, and he had a genuine interest in the search for any true manifestations of this kind. Some time before going to this séance he had made a compact with an intimate friend, named Alaric Watts, that whoever died first would do his best to appear to the other in some form at a particular place in Oxford, where the compact was made. Watts, who was a confirmed spiritualist, died first, and though my father for his part held to the agreement and kept a lonely vigil in the dark at the appointed place, the spirit of his friend did not manifest itself in any way. Far from discouraged, my father was all the more eager to get into communication with his lost friend by methods which are supposed to produce more successful results. And so he went to a séance. I am, unfortunately, not at liberty to print his account of it, as several distinguished people were present, and his remarks on their credulity, as well as on the proceedings, are more forcible than polite.<sup>443</sup>

L. C. Collins may have been unwilling to divulge the names of the distinguished people in case offense was caused, but given that this passage follows immediately after a discussion of his father's relationship with Doyle, it would not be a huge leap to guess the subject of the Professor's remarks.

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<sup>442</sup> Lycett, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, p.131.

<sup>443</sup> Collins, L.C., *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, (London, The Bodley Head, 1912), p.247.

Oddie, whose memoirs were published in 1941, over a decade after Doyle's death in 1930, was far more critical. To begin with, Oddie was thrilled to hear about Doyle's encounters with ghosts, though he was often able to suggest a scientific rather than supernatural explanation. Doyle told him of a consul he knew who had experienced a cold draught while lying in a hot bath, then found himself flung across the room by an unseen force. Later that evening, the man heard two angry voices, a male and a female, speaking Elizabethan language, though he could not see anyone present. Doyle and Oddie had two different explanations:

Conan Doyle suggested, half jokingly, that the room was haunted by the ghosts of a man and a woman, and, the evening promenade of these phantoms having been interrupted by the bath occupied by some impertinent stranger, the male ghost had flung the intruder out of the bath and across the room, and the ghostly promenade had been resumed later in the evening.

There is, however, nearly always a simple natural explanation of ghost stories, and in this case it was obvious that the consul was an epileptic. The true epileptic fit or grand mal is generally preceded by some curious sensation, such as voices heard; or the sound of bells ringing, or a sensation of cold, or a sharp epileptic cry.<sup>444</sup>

Despite his rational explanations, Oddie was still keenly interested in Doyle's supernatural exploits, so when the opportunity arose to attend a séance with the author, he accepted gladly. The younger man, thinking he 'might be about to discover the solution of the greatest mystery in the world,'<sup>445</sup> approached the event with the same level of anxiety that he would demonstrate years later on his trip to the dentist:

Doyle had already described these affairs to me and so vividly that I decided to fortify myself with a phial containing a quick-acting nervous sedative and cardiac stimulant lest I should find myself carried away by the highly dramatized surroundings, and by the mass hysteria of the circle of which I was to form a member.<sup>446</sup>

On entering the room where the séance was to take place, however, it was very soon apparent that there were forces more material than spiritual at work. Oddie observed unusually wired spring blinds, suspiciously-placed curtains and railed-off areas, and an

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<sup>444</sup> Oddie, S. Ingleby, *Inquest*, (London, Hutchinson & Son LTD, 1941), p.28.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid*, p.32.

uninspiring medium wearing distractingly creaky boots. As the room was plunged into darkness, Oddie took his sedative to calm his nerves, and the manifestations began. The first was an ineffective, disembodied voice claiming to be Joseph Grimaldi, the famous clown, who exchanged a few words with Doyle but failed to make any significant connection with the author despite claiming to convey a message from an old friend. The next spirit came in the guise of ‘Abdulla the Afghan’ and a glowing face was visible to the group, but Oddie was convinced the effect was ‘out of a bottle’ and that he was ‘in the presence of plain imposture’: ‘I suddenly put out my foot and caught Abdulla sharply on his very material shin. There was a yelp of pain, and I was asked in consequence to show more reverence or the spirits would disappear.’<sup>447</sup> The final spirit made Oddie quite angry. This was ‘Sister Agnes’, who to Oddie was obviously a living woman, but the lady seated next to him believed her to be communicating a message from her husband who had died recently. Oddie was disgusted by the fraud perpetrated on the gullible heart-broken woman: ‘She had come in simple faith, believing that she might discover the great secret of life, only to receive a bogus message, for payment, and delivered by a bogus imposter.’<sup>448</sup> After the séance, Oddie was very open with Doyle about his opinions but was dismayed to find his friend ‘unperturbed’:

Conan Doyle, with his robust common sense and shrewdness and his extraordinary mental acuity, constructed, as all the world knows, the most fascinating series of detective stories ever written.

One would have thought that the inventor of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, both of whom seem pretty certain of immortality in English literature, would be the very last man to be taken in by imposture.

Such, however, was not the case. From my own knowledge I can say that he firmly believed what was to me absolutely incredible, founding his belief on evidence which ought not to have deceived a fairly intelligent and observant youth of sixteen.<sup>449</sup>

Oddie records that, a few years after this séance, the medium and his assistant were exposed as frauds and were duly charged and convicted: Doyle had exposed Oddie to the work of criminals.

Oddie and Collins had both experienced Doyle’s religious fervour for Spiritualism before the Great War: in the years that followed, he would become far more vocal about his beliefs. Rather than acknowledge the chicanery of the séances, Doyle believed that mediums

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<sup>447</sup> *Ibid*, p.34.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid*, p.35.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid*, p.31.

could assist in the detection of crime, and he spoke to Our Society about this on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1919 when he gave a paper entitled ‘The Psychic in Crime.’<sup>450</sup> The substance of this talk is, as ever, unavailable, but Doyle certainly impressed Lambton, who years later included a chapter on psychic detectives in his book *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*. At the beginning of that chapter, he writes: ‘there are many phenomena incapable of explanation either by the believer in an existence beyond the grave or the preacher of the doctrine of despair.’<sup>451</sup> Around the same time that Doyle spoke to Our Society, he was challenged to a debate by members of the Rationalist Press. This took place a few months later on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> March 1920, when Doyle debated ‘The Truth of Spiritualism’ against Joseph McCabe of the Rationalist Press Association, at Queen’s Hall in London. McCabe was trenchantly critical of Doyle’s willingness to believe in mediums who were obvious frauds, but he understood why vulnerable people were taken with the idea of spirit communication: ‘Just when men are beginning to wonder if at last religion is doomed, there comes this portentous phenomenon we are discussing in the shape of Spiritualism. I do not wonder that my opponent takes it to be a new religion, a new revelation.’<sup>452</sup> Doyle also claimed sympathy with McCabe’s point of view, having once been equally as sceptical:

I have a very deep respect for the honest, earnest Materialist, if only because for very many years I was one myself. But the same forces that brought me out of Orthodoxy into Materialism are the very forces which have brought me out of Materialism into Spiritualism. In each case I followed the evidence, and I tried to obey what my reason told me was true.<sup>453</sup>

Doyle’s description of his conversion to Spiritualism reads like a detective’s solution to a problem: he considered his belief in spirit communication to be entirely rational. The debate was chaired by a man who was likely to have been present at Doyle’s paper to Our Society: Sir Edward Marshall Hall. Sensitive to the likelihood that some audience members may assume that an argument in favour of the existence of ghosts could only be made as a joke, Hall noted in his opening remarks: ‘This is a serious debate. Both these gentlemen are in earnest, and it is only on that condition that I assented to take the Chair here tonight.’<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Our Society members’ book 1993.

<sup>451</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p. 252.

<sup>452</sup> Verbatim Report of a Public Debate on *The Truth of Spiritualism* (London, Watts & Co, 1920), p. 9.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid*, p.20.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.

Although Hall was an impartial presence at this event, he was openly sympathetic to spiritualist beliefs at other times, having firmly believed a psychic had sensed the death of his brother in 1894. The psychic's name was Miss K. Wingfield, and Hall wrote an introduction to a book on her work, *Guidance from Beyond*, in 1923. Though he acknowledges the work of 'imposters and charlatans,' Hall lavishes praise upon practitioners he considers to be legitimate, particularly in the role he perceives them to have taken in assisting with emotional welfare during and after the Great War:

When, if ever, the true history of the awful war comes to be written, some of the bravest deeds will be found to have been done by men whose only object was to try to convey, amid scenes of indescribable horror, misery and suffering, some comfort and consolation to those who were giving up their lives for their country. Such was the padre of the right sort, beloved by all with whom he came in contact, carrying his message of hope that the next existence would do something to make up for the unexplainable cruelty and apparent injustice of this life.<sup>455</sup>

Whether or not Hall made a pact with Doyle along the lines of that between Professor Collins and Alaric Watts is not recorded, but the Great Defender died in February 1927, and on 29th April that year the following message was printed in the personal column of the *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*: 'Sir Arthur Conan Doyle makes the startling claim that the late Sir Edward Marshall Hall has spoken to him since his death.'<sup>456</sup> No further details were given.

Doyle may have had sympathetic allies in Hall and Lambton, but Quinton Wilson remembers his paper to Our Society on psychics in November 1919 provoked a generally hostile response:

This paper was rather distressing, because it left little doubt in members' minds that Conan Doyle had become the dupe of mediums. He described their agitation and distortions in the flow of what he called ectoplasm, which apparently issued from their visible orifices. This was all too much for Filson Young, one of our most brilliant members, who utterly pulverised Conan Doyle in an article in *The Saturday Review*.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Wingfield, K., *Guidance from Beyond*, (London, Philip Allan & Co, 1923), p.13.

<sup>456</sup> 'Fashionable and Personal,' *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, Friday 29<sup>th</sup> April 1927, p.8.

<sup>457</sup> Our Society members' book.

Though it seems likely that the members of Our Society would have considered ectoplasm as wildly off-topic, Quinton Wilson's memory of this debacle is not entirely accurate. To begin with, Filson Young admitted initially to being quite open to the possibilities of the spirit world, and he placed a lot of faith in Doyle, who was a friend and who had originally proposed his membership to Our Society. He had read Doyle's booklet on spiritualism, *The Vital Message*, and had been very impressed by the idea that the spirits of the dead 'show themselves to us in their bodies and, and speak to us in their own voices':

When I say that I bought several copies of this book and sent them to my friends, amongst the others to my own mother, who, inevitably nearing the crossing from earthly life, would be interested and concerned in such a matter, I hope I have said enough to show that my interest was genuine and sympathetic. I have known Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for many years, delighted in his short stories and liked and admired his stalwart, straightforward personality; and having seen very little of him since the war, I felt, on reading his book, that I could take his assurance as to matters of evidence as that of a person who was not likely easily to be imposed on.<sup>458</sup>

Young's article appeared in *The Saturday Review* (of which he was also the editor) in January 1922, just over two years after Doyle's paper on psychic detectives. This therefore suggests that Young was not among those initially distressed by Doyle's paper, but was, in fact, open to learning more about his friend's beliefs. The full title of Young's article, however, is 'Hymns and Humbug: Doings at a Séance. Sir A. Conan Doyle takes me to hear spirit voices, and I discover self-deception and humbug.'<sup>459</sup> Young tells a story very similar to the one told by Oddie in his memoirs published 20 years later. Doyle invited Young to attend a séance with him at a house in Highgate owned by a retired Indian Colonel on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1921. While they awaited the medium, Mrs Johnson, they perused an exhibition of photographs capturing the alleged phenomena known as ectoplasm, 'that disagreeable mystic substance, of the nature of india-rubber, which is said to ooze from all the orifices of the medium's body.'<sup>460</sup> It was clear to Young that all other members of the group were firm believers: 'There was a general impression established that we owed Mrs. Johnson all our support and sympathy, that we were very fortunate to have her services, and that anything in the nature of criticism or incredulous examination would be, if not absolutely irreligious, at any rate

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<sup>458</sup> Young, Filson, 'Hymns and Humbug: Doings at a Séance,' *The Saturday Review*, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1922, p.54.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid*, p.54.

grossly unmannerly.<sup>461</sup> Central to this medium's method was a four foot long zinc trumpet, a device through which the spirits were expected to speak. When the spirits guides eventually spoke – supposedly two men Young refers to as David and Jock – Doyle's friend grew suspicious, as their Glaswegian and Lancashire accents seemed acquired and shared inflections with the voice of the medium. Young was convinced he was witnessing deception on a level with a music-hall performance, but his fellow guests remained entirely enraptured. It all became too much for him when a faint voice was heard, and the woman on his right believed she was listening to the voice of her mother. Young, convinced that the woman's emotions had made her susceptible to fraud, tested his theory by touching her 'on the knee and on the arm and on her dress.'<sup>462</sup> He was alarmed when she claimed to recognise the touch of her mother, and felt around for a possible source of the disembodied voice:

...the voice sounding still quite near, at about the level of one's knee, I put out my hand in the dark and gently grasped what proved to be the broad end of the trumpet. The other end of it was pointing out towards the right hand of the circle, near where the medium sat. It was supported horizontally at its other end; and when I grasped it the other end was immediately let go. With immense care, avoiding making any noise or movement on my chair, I slowly raised the trumpet at arm's length, lifted it over the head of the lady, and gently laid it on the floor behind Sir Arthur Doyle's chair. In doing this, I, being half turned in my chair, inadvertently touched with my elbow the lady on my left, who immediately said that a spirit had touched her.

There were no more spirit voices heard that afternoon.<sup>463</sup>

Despite the lack of further communication with the spirit world, the other guests were not perturbed, and Young felt like 'a sober man in a highly convivial party.'<sup>464</sup> No one referred to the displacement of the trumpet. Young made excuses so that he did not have to stay for tea, but before he left he revealed to his 'poor neighbour' that it had been he who had touched her, not the spirit of her mother. Young believed that he ought to publish the details of the evening: 'As my public testimony would certainly have been welcomed in the event of my having been "converted" by this performance, I consider that I am right in giving an account of it, even although the result was the opposite of what Sir Arthur hoped and expected.'<sup>465</sup> Young also published an angry exchange of correspondence with Doyle which followed the

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<sup>461</sup> *Ibid*, p.55.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid*, p.56.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid*, p.56.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid*, p.56.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.



séance. Young had written a letter to his friend, explaining his reasons for believing the séance was bogus, but explained to Doyle he was still open to the possibilities of a genuine séance. ‘If you are convinced I am wrong,’ wrote Young, ‘and can introduce me to a séance where I am likely to see materialization of some body, I may afterwards be able to tell you something more about it.’<sup>466</sup> Doyle, however, was too incensed by Young’s behaviour to participate in a reasonable debate:

I was shocked and amazed to learn from Mrs. – that you had admitted to her after the séance that you had been producing bogus phenomena and had seized the trumpet, thus interfering with the proceedings and spoiling the sitting. I could not have conceived you capable, as my guest, of acting in such a manner. I fear that this unpleasant incident must be the end of our acquaintance. I have apologised to Mrs. Johnson and the others.

Yours faithfully,

A Conan Doyle.

P.S. – I held this over for twenty-four hours lest I should seem to write in anger.<sup>467</sup>

In response to this, Young’s hackles were clearly raised. ‘Your letter,’ he wrote, ‘which I think silly in form and angry in spirit, shall not prevent me from saying that I do not accept your designation of my conduct at this séance.’<sup>468</sup> He was particularly annoyed that Doyle had taken it upon himself to apologise on his behalf for conduct he did not regret: ‘this poor woman would have gone home in the belief that her dead mother had touched her and spoken to her; and that I regard as a rather sinister matter.’<sup>469</sup> He then threw down a gauntlet: ‘I shall publish the facts, with my letter to you and yours to me, and you will be free to make what reply you like.’<sup>470</sup> In his response, Doyle became more personally insulting: ‘To publish proceedings which are the result of a private invitation to a private house is quite consistent with the rest of your conduct. The only credulity shown by any of the company was our believing that you were a gentleman. This also you may publish.’<sup>471</sup>

For the next issue of *The Saturday Review* on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1922, Doyle supplied a long letter of reply to Young, throughout which Young interwove his own, bracketed responses. Doyle wrote of Young’s article: ‘On the whole I accept it as a fair though ill-

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<sup>466</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

natured account – with some omissions which you will perhaps allow me to supply.<sup>472</sup> Doyle claimed that Young had heard a jingling that was inaudible to other guests and also that he had corroborated a white vapour witnessed by one of the women. Young attributed the jingling to ‘an accidental movement of the musical box,’<sup>473</sup> and explained the vapour by suggesting ‘a touch of liver or a sudden plunge into darkness are excellent producers of light phenomena.’<sup>474</sup> Doyle noted that Mr. Sims and Mr Quex [sic] had given testimony in print to having heard male voices at Mrs. Johnsons séances, attended with the author on other occasions. ‘Yes,’ wrote Young, ‘and will “get” them wherever Mrs. Johnson is, until she gets a new repertoire.’<sup>475</sup> Doyle took issue with Young’s claim that the medium was using the trumpet to project her own voice, claiming she was leaning over to talk to other guests when the voices came through, so could not have been close enough to the mouthpiece: ‘It is a physical impossibility, and enough in itself to stamp you as an incompetent observer.’<sup>476</sup> ‘Physical impossibility?’ Young interjected. ‘The line between the medium and the lady who was being humbugged was an arc of our circle. The circumference of a circle lies outside its arc, therefore your broad frame was not “between” those two points, in the sense that a line between them would have to cut through it. It was on one side of that line. Even Watson would admit this.’<sup>477</sup> Doyle claimed that it was only logical the trumpet would be pointing at the medium ‘since the power comes from her and the trumpet is actually attached to her by an ectoplasmic band.’<sup>478</sup> All Young had to add to this was ‘Good Heavens!’<sup>479</sup> Young ended with some final remarks. He was particularly hurt by suggestions from Doyle that he had behaved in an ungentlemanly way in order to gain journalistic material:

I was not invited to a tea party at Colonel Cowley’s house; and the occasion was not regarded by me as a social one. I regarded it as an opportunity for testing very solemn assertions, of the truth of which I required evidence before I could believe them. It was of much more importance to discover their truth than to conform to the standard of conduct required from people who attend musical parties in a dark room at Highgate...I am therefore not to be blamed for having attempted to ascertain the truth instead of being content to be merely polite to a person whom I

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<sup>472</sup> ‘Ectoplasm or Delusion? Two Points of View’ in *The Saturday Review*, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1922, p.82.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid*, p.82.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid*, p.82.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid*, p.82.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

believed to be engaged in a fraudulent performance. It is no doubt very rude to interrupt a pickpocket and hand him over to the police; but it is more important to protect your property.<sup>480</sup>

Young had been relatively reserved in his first article, but after Doyle's angry and insulting responses he was no longer willing to hold back, ridiculing his former friend to highlight the preposterous way he was behaving:

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to whom ectoplasm is apparently as familiar as cream cheese, who described himself as "simply bursting" with it, and Colonel Cowley's room as "saturated" with it, speaks as glibly about ectoplasmic contacts as you or I would talk of a hook and eye, and finds in it a ready explanation for everything that may puzzle other people.<sup>481</sup>

Young had not set out to undermine Doyle, and despite the angry exchange it is clear that the journalist still had a frustrated reverence in his friend. There was no intended maliciousness in his attendance at the séance:

We cannot all have the same attitude towards things of the spirit. I have never said that the philosophy of spiritualism is mere fraud or humbug. I do not believe that it is. But I do say that the state of mind which produces this dismal explosion of trumpetings, ticklings, and jargon about ectoplasm, guides, trumpet-mediums, and all the other symptoms of the stupor which my article unfortunately stirred up, is a far from beautiful or exalted thing; that it is an essentially ugly and base thing, and leads people away from truth and light into quagmires and abysses of self-delusion in which they completely lose all sense of spiritual direction. For me, at any rate, when I seek contact with the spirit world, it is not to these gross and childish assemblies that I shall direct myself. Rather than the environment of the dark room and the "psychic breezes," for me the sun and the wind; I am nearer there, as in the busy street or the country road, in the heather or the tide-rip, in the company of living friends, in the labour and the struggle of life, nearer – oh, a hundred thousand times nearer, to everything I have loved and lost.<sup>482</sup>

For a time, as Quinton Wilson remembered, Filson Young was a well-regarded member of Our Society, and he gave 'one of the best papers ever read,' on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1923, concerning the Thompson and Bywaters case. Wilson, however, believed that Young was a problematic character: 'Filson was a curious amalgam of both good and bad qualities. He was

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<sup>480</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid*, p.84.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid*, p.84.

unbelievably tactless and suffered from an inferiority complex, in the true sense of the term.<sup>483</sup> Wilson believed the attack on Doyle, though warranted, had been in bad taste and, despite his wonderful performances as an after-dinner speaker, influential members had taken against him:

His attack on Conan Doyle (who, ironically, had proposed him for membership of Our Society) is an excellent illustration of his tactlessness and want of good taste. Arthur Lambton, who had a hero-worship for Conan Doyle, was furious. Rule XV of Our Society stated that a member who had failed to attend at least one dinner during the course of two years should forfeit his membership unless his absence was due, in the opinion of the Committee, to unavoidable causes. Filson Young, owing to absence abroad, omitted, rather than forgot, to notify the Committee of his inability to attend the required number of dinners. On Lambton's insistence, he was informed that his membership had ceased. As I've already said, I was a friend of both Lambton's and Filson Young's, and though I felt that Filson's attack on Conan Doyle had been in the worst possible taste, I believed that if he had not made it, somebody else would – and, in any event, Our Society was going to lose one of its most brilliant members because Arthur Lambton insisted on defending a senile old man.

Major Sir John Hall, a retired officer in the Brigade of Guards, and an old friend of mine, was then serving on the Committee. He possessed a very low, weak voice, and had always been known in the Brigade as 'Whispering Johnnie'. Well, Whispering Johnnie and I were agreed that, under some pretext or other, Filson Young's membership ought to be renewed. But Lambton was adamant. No arguments would move him. So, after fruitless efforts extended over several years, we allowed the matter to drop.<sup>484</sup>

Young was not the only member to cause offence to Doyle at Our Society meetings in the 1920s. Lambton's friend, G. H. Gardner, who had told a story that offended Doyle during a meeting back in February 1918 (see chapter 6), repeated his offensive behaviour when giving a paper on 'Police Methods' in February 1927. In the members book it is recorded that 'Sir Arthur was so incensed at the repetition that when he left he said he would never dine with the Society again. It is hoped that he will reconsider his decision.'<sup>485</sup> Doyle's presence is noted at meetings later that same year, but G. H. Gardner never gave a paper again.

Spiritualism was attractive to those who were discombobulated by intense grief because it promised straightforward answers: an algorithm for the afterlife and access to otherwise irretrievable loved ones. While Doyle was focussing his attentions on supernatural

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<sup>483</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

approaches to understanding mortality, Bernard Spilsbury was attracting attention for his methods of explaining unusual deaths. The professional reputation of the pathologist was on the rise and he was becoming well-known to the public through his now regular involvement in sensational murder trials (some of which were discussed in chapter 6). A recent biographer, Colin Evans, explains Spilsbury's fame as follows:

When Spilsbury started out, circulation-conscious newspaper editors thought nothing of publishing 10,000 words daily on the latest sensational murder trial. Such in-depth coverage focused national attention on everyone connected with the legal process and made 'Spilsbury' a household name.<sup>486</sup>

Spilsbury was exciting copy, not just because of he was the first (and only) honorary pathologist to the Home Office and thus Scotland Yard's first medical detective, but because of his public persona, as pathologist Professor Keith Simpson describes in his foreword to a reprint of Browne and Tullett's biography:

The twentieth century has seen a number of famous detectives...and one medical man who in crime investigation stood head and shoulders above his fellows. This was Bernard Spilsbury, tall, aloof, good-looking, professional; always well dressed, he shouldered the Crown's medical responsibilities in every notable case for nearly forty years without either assistant or secretary – and with very indifferent laboratory support. 'Call Sir Bernard' was, any counsel knew, a body blow to his opponents in court. A positive hush would descend as the great man made his way through to give his evidence: calm, assertive, brushing aside criticism as one might a troublesome fly, his word shut the door on many a good-enough-looking defence. An utterly confident, transparently honest-looking man, he would marshal the facts he had observed at autopsy in carefully chosen words, and then calmly wait for a cross-examination that was seldom more than perfunctory.<sup>487</sup>

Spilsbury had a reputation for reliability and integrity, and was trusted by the public to provide the answers needed when suspicious deaths occurred. In the 1920s, he was at his peak, but he was shy about the media publicity he received and remained a very private figure, giving no personal interviews. In 1923, he received a knighthood, a seal of approval from the establishment.

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<sup>486</sup> Evans, Colin, *The Father of Forensics*, (Cambridge, Icon Books, 2006), p.309.

<sup>487</sup> Found in reprint of Browne, Douglas G. and Tullett, Tom, *Bernard Spilsbury*, (Reading, Granada Publishing Limited, 1982).

In 1924, Spilsbury solved his most interesting case. ‘It gradually took shape as in building a jigsaw puzzle,’ he once said.<sup>488</sup> He meant this in a metaphorical and literal sense: the case involved the most gruesome remains he had ever encountered. This was the Crumbles Murder, the Crumbles being a stretch of shingle on the Sussex coast near Eastbourne. Patrick Mahon had murdered and dismembered his mistress, Emily Kaye, in a holiday bungalow. He claimed that he had struck her accidentally during a quarrel, she had died, and he had panicked and dismembered her. The dismemberment was thorough, making Spilsbury’s work all the more impressive, as Browne and Tullett describe: ‘Remnants by the hundred, such as Spilsbury himself never before or after handled, boiled and burnt, sawn, hewn, and pulverised, all fragmentary and many minute.’<sup>489</sup> He was assisted in this case by his assistant, Mrs Bainbridge (discussed in Prologue). Spilsbury’s meticulous evidence was crucial in this case because he was able to disprove Mahon’s story and show that the murder had been premeditated, that Mahon had dismembered Emily with a different knife to the one he claimed to have used, and that he had not burned her head in the fireplace as he claimed (the location of her head remained a mystery, but it is possible Mahon threw it in the Thames). The murder was likely perpetrated in order to fleece his lover of her money, in the style of George Joseph Smith (soon after murdering his lover, Mahon went to a horse race and changed one of Emily Kaye’s £100 notes). Mahon had also been full of bravado during his trial, wearing a new suit and fake tan, but he was found guilty and hanged for his crime. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Archibald Bodkin, sent the pathologist a thank you letter for his work on the case. He may have been lauded by the Counsel for the Crown, but Spilsbury’s reputation as an expert witness was becoming a problem to those who considered him a rival in the courtroom.

In 1925, not long after the Crumbles case, a trial occurred that not only demonstrated the problems that arose from Spilsbury’s increasing fame, but also brought him close to Doyle’s home. During December 1924, a London woman called Elsie Cameron was reported missing. She had travelled to Sussex to visit her fiancé, Norman Thorne, who owned a chicken farm in Crowborough, the town where Doyle and his second wife had been living for over 15 years. Thorne claimed she never arrived. She had not since returned to her home in London, where she lived with her parents, nor had she been seen by anyone since travelling on 5<sup>th</sup> December. The hunt for the missing woman attracted the attention of the national press

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<sup>488</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, (1952) p.173.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid*, p.176.

which headed to Sussex to be on the scene for any developments. One reporter, Leslie Randall, who wrote a book about Spilsbury's famous cases, remembered encountering Thorne during the search:

Thorne talked too much. He was over-anxious to explain away every little circumstance which might seem to involve him in suspicion, and he could not keep away from the reporters.

Almost every evening he took a long walk to the hotel where we were staying, and, although he was a teetotaller and a non-smoker, he liked to join us in the bar-parlour to discuss the latest "developments" and to offer his often fantastic theories.

His conceit was almost insufferable, and I soon discovered that he was as callous as he was vain.

I was talking to him once outside his hut, when one of his chickens came clucking round us, Thorne was wearing his heavy farm boots. He lifted his foot, gave the fowl a vicious kick that sent it spinning, and resumed his conversation, deaf to the noise the chicken was making as it lay writhing in pain.

Thorne became more arrogant and conceited as the days went on.

"That's where I cut her up," he once said jokingly, jerking his head in the direction of the hut. "And that's where I buried the body," he added, pointing to his chicken run. He indicated the very spot where the dismembered body of Elsie Cameron was afterwards found!<sup>490</sup>

Inspector Gillan of Scotland Yard was called in to help and he sent a group of policemen to dig up the chicken farm where they soon uncovered Elsie's attaché case buried inside the farm gate. Thorne, knowing that there would be another discovery very soon, then changed his story dramatically, and told Inspector Gillan that Elsie had arrived on the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> December claiming to be pregnant and demanding they be married. He had left his hut for two hours and returned to find she had hanged herself from a beam. Panicking, he dismembered her, put the parts of her body in sacks, and buried them under the chicken run. The police found these grim parcels just as he described, and Inspector Gillan called for Sir Bernard Spilsbury.

Spilsbury examined Elsie's remains at the mortuary. Unlike Cora Crippen in 1910, there was no mystery regarding identity: all the pieces were there. The question was whether Thorne's story about Elsie's death by her own hand could be substantiated. Spilsbury found no creases in the neck consistent with hanging, a mode of death he was very familiar with having carried out studies on the bodies of executed prisoners. This was corroborated by a

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<sup>490</sup> Randall, Leslie, *The Famous Cases of Sir Bernard Spilsbury* (London, Ivor Nicholson and Watson Limited, 1936), p.164.

police experiment: a weight consistent with Elsie's measurements was hung from the beam where Thorne claimed she was hanged. It left a groove in the beam, but there was no evidence that a similar mark had been left before the test. This left both the mode and cause of death open to question. The only marks of violence Spilsbury found, aside from the obvious post-mortem butchery, were some hidden bruises that he considered consistent with a violent blow to the head. Spilsbury was the sole medical witness to carry out this examination, and he did so visually, without taking samples. The body was then interred. The fact he worked alone on this autopsy without other medical witnesses to corroborate his findings left him vulnerable in Court.

Leslie Randall saw Thorne again after his arrest: 'I expected to find him a changed man, but he was as full of bravado as ever. He boasted that he would be acquitted at his trial, and that Sir Bernard Spilsbury's evidence would be discredited. "I'm not worried about him," he said, with a self-satisfied grin.'<sup>491</sup> The defence sought the assistance of Dr Robert Brontë in an attempt to counter Spilsbury's evidence, and the Thorne Case was his first big trial. Four weeks after her remains were buried at Willesden cemetery, Elsie Cameron was dug up once more to be examined by Brontë, with Spilsbury present once again. The remains were, naturally, in a much worse condition than they had been when first viewed by Spilsbury. Browne and Tullett note that Brontë was known to be slapdash, and that there was an ongoing animosity between the two pathologists:

It is probably that [Spilsbury] had never before met anyone quite like Brontë: having met him, he did not like him; and he never saw cause to change his views. Being Spilsbury, when the pair did meet he was always courteous. Brontë, for his part, seldom failed in public to speak with respect of his eminent antagonist. But disparaging insinuations would often follow; Spilsbury reserved his adverse comments for private circulation. In his lighter moods he would remark that when Brontë did a post-mortem there were never any stomach contents. But after some instance (and there were many) of what he considered to be carelessness or guesswork, in his eyes unforgivable sins, he would refer scornfully to "that person" or "that man." This contempt and antipathy is noteworthy, because no other man seems to have aroused a similar feeling in him.<sup>492</sup>

Spilsbury thought Brontë guilty of carelessness and guesswork, but these were precisely the criticisms Brontë suggested of Spilsbury at the Thorne trial. The bruises that Brontë had seen

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<sup>491</sup> *Ibid*, p.156.

<sup>492</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p. 190.



then, after several weeks of decomposition, were not significant enough to have caused a fatal blow. He also claimed that they had been caused at different stages: before, during, and after death. The defence called seven other medical witnesses to dispute Spilsbury's evidence along similar lines. They could not, however, prove that Elsie had been hanged, nor could they explain how she came to be bruised given that Thorne claimed no physical altercation had taken place. The trial became more about Spilsbury's reputation as a witness than it was about a man who dismembered his fiancée and buried her under a chicken shed. Curtis-Bennett, an Our Society member, appeared for the Crown, and Andrew Rose, in his book *Lethal Witness*, argues that his attempts to bait Brontë into making disparaging remarks about Spilsbury were preposterous. He gives an example of the following wording from the Prosecution lawyer, Curtis-Bennett: 'I am sure you would be the first to agree that Sir Bernard is a very expert and distinguished pathologist?...I might say the greatest living pathologist? ...Sir Bernard would not give evidence unless he had made a careful examination?'<sup>493</sup> As Browne and Tullett noted, Brontë never rose to this sort of questioning during a trial: he saved his disparaging remarks about Spilsbury for more private moments. Whether or not to believe in Spilsbury, rather than Norman Thorne, however, became the main question of the case. Could Spilsbury's word be trusted enough to hang this man? That is not to say it was the only influencing factor: as exemplified by Leslie Randall's involvement, the members of the jury would have seen the story unfold in the press before the trial. Thorne's behaviour was certainly incriminating, but if Spilsbury was correct then he was definitely guilty of murder.

It was usual for Spilsbury to conduct autopsies alone, but in a criminal case it would have been a courtesy to inform the defence team so they could send a representative, which was not done for the original examination of Elsie Cameron. Perhaps Spilsbury had been a little complacent because the case did not immediately present itself as challenging. Whatever the reason for this, be it professional arrogance, complacency, or simple human error, despite finding eight medical witnesses willing to counter Spilsbury's evidence, it was Spilsbury's version, corroborated by the police experiment with the beam, that persuaded the jury, and they took just twenty minutes to find Thorne guilty.

Thorne was sentenced to death, but he did not stop trying to find a weakness in the case to exploit. He was knowledgeable about sensational trials and was certainly aware of The Crumbles Murder: he kept clippings about the case, along with a book on pathology. His

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<sup>493</sup> Rose, Andrew, *Lethal Witness*, (Chalford, Sutton Publishing, 2007), p.133.

appeal was unsuccessful, but he continued to be of interest to the press who published a series of his letters (clearly written for publication, though addressed to his father). Thorne was desperate for public sympathy. 'I swear to God that I never struck Elsie,' he wrote, 'In fact, I could not hit a girl and I do not think any girl has ever been afraid of me.'<sup>494</sup> His bitterness at having been foiled by Spilsbury's evidence was clear:

It could only have been prejudice on the part of the jury to return the verdict they did, for I notice that even Spilsbury said, according to my notes, that the bruises could have been caused by a fall. One man says death was as a result of shock from bruising; four other men hold death to be due to shock from attempted hanging. Now how can a jury decide who is right?<sup>495</sup>

Thorne is astute in noting jury prejudice: the case had been covered closely by the Press and, as the Baumberg case had demonstrated (discussed in Chapter 6), public feeling could still be stronger than scientific evidence. Thorne was still fixated with the pathologist, however, and in a final letter before his execution on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1925, he wrote: 'I am a martyr to Spilsburyism.'<sup>496</sup> Thorne may not have bested Spilsbury, but the trial certainly raised questions about the pathologist's status as a star witness.

The representation of Spilsbury as infallible was a tactic of the prosecution lawyers, whereas the Defence had attempted to undermine the medical evidence with multiple witnesses – a law of numbers approach. Spilsbury himself did not claim to be infallible, but the result of this use of his reputation to sway the jury was that more attention was paid to his personality than his evidence. As observed in a critical but sympathetic article in *The Law Journal* following Thorne's trial:

The more than papal infallibility with which Sir Bernard Spilsbury is rapidly being invested by juries must tend to be somewhat embarrassing to him, for the greater a man's knowledge, the greater, as a rule, is his consciousness of its limits; it is certainly more than a little dangerous to the administration of justice if his word can send a man to the scaffold though other eminent pathologists state on oath their opinion that his theory is impossible.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> Quoted from *News of the World*, Sunday April 26 1925.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>496</sup> This quote was reported widely in the Press and adapted by Andrew Rose as a chapter heading in *Lethal Witness*.

<sup>497</sup> 'The Thorne Appeal,' *The Law Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1925, p.365.

Reverence for Spilsbury was a distraction from discussions of the evidence itself. Doubts about Spilsbury were very evident in Helena Normanton's version of the case for the *Famous Trials* series. This series was not the same as the *Notable British Trials* series to which Filson Young, H. B. Irving, J. B. Atlay and other Our Society stalwarts had contributed – Browne and Tullett suggest that the *Famous Trials* series was 'certainly inferior...evidence is not printed in full, but selectively condensed at the discretion of the editor.'<sup>498</sup> Normanton's version of the trial is certainly biased in Thorne's favour - this is very clear in her preface where she thanks Dr. Brontë and Norman Thorne's father for their assistance – and, as it has become the standard text on the case, her theories about the case have been influential. Andrew Rose highlights that Normanton, the first female barrister in England, was a 'feminist author.'<sup>499</sup> Nevertheless, her interpretation of the case reads like a treatise in misogyny: her suggestion is that Elsie Cameron killed herself because she was menstruating. 'It did not occur to the defence apparently,' wrote Normanton, 'to call medical evidence to prove that the onset of menstruation often takes the form of a period of intense melancholy in which the world appears at its lowest and worst.'<sup>500</sup> Elsie Cameron had allegedly believed she was pregnant with Thorne's child, so a feeling of pre-menstrual tension would have indicated she was not: 'If Thorne did go out and leave her alone, and she suddenly became aware that her main card had vanished, so that in a few hours she would have another period and obviously no longer be the expectant mother, then her motive for suicide was obvious, because Thorne had made it abundantly plain that the prospective marriage turned entirely upon her expectancy of a child.'<sup>501</sup> Normanton goes even further, and suggests that Cameron set up the suicide, perhaps a sham that went too far, in order to punish her lover: 'The devious workings of an injured woman's mind are governed by emotion far more than by common sense or cool reasoning.'<sup>502</sup> Normanton seemed to have, perversely, more respect for Thorne than the woman he dismembered. Having noted his possession of clippings about the Crumbles Murder and books on pathology, she writes:

It is noteworthy that Thorne avoided practically all the blunders which Crippen and Mahon made. He deposited nothing at railway station cloakrooms. He burned the girl's attire and showed care to inter with the remains nothing whatever that in

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<sup>498</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.198.

<sup>499</sup> Rose, Andrew, *Lethal Witness*, (Chalford, Sutton Publishing, 2007), p.135.

<sup>500</sup> Normanton, Helena, ed., *The Trial of Norman Thorne*, (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1929), p.30.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

after years might serve to identify them. He stayed where he was, and professed eagerness to aid the police; at one point in their investigations he was even smilingly talking with the officers who were digging up the farm whilst he was standing nearly over the very spot where, some nineteen inches below, Miss Cameron lay buried.

If Thorne had been a little luckier, in a few months' time there would have been nothing but skeletal remains, and had he waited a year or two before selling up and going overseas...it would have been very hard to bring home any crime to him.<sup>503</sup>

Thorne's behaviour could be interpreted as that of a man trying to commit the perfect crime.<sup>504</sup> Normanton, despite this, demonstrates a sympathy for him— the regret that he did not quite escape, the prejudice against his dismembered partner on whom he was cheating — akin to that demonstrated by Filson Young in his book on the Crippen trial (discussed in Chapter 5). Young's Crippen was published in 1920, under five years before Elsie Cameron went missing. In response to its publication, an anonymous person with the initials M. G. C. had written to *The Saturday Review* concerned about an increase in violence. 'The outbreak of crime and violence,' he wrote, 'that appears, notwithstanding official denials, to be sweeping the country, should give material for thought as to its causes. One is, no doubt, the moral deterioration that always follows war.'<sup>505</sup> War, however, was not the writer's main concern, but rather the presentation of criminals and the possibility that books such as Young's Crippen could have a terrible effect on impressionable minds. He criticised the discussion regarding 'how Crippen might have evaded detection but for his unwise decision to travel with Miss Le Neve' and the presentation of the prisoner's behaviour in the dock as 'masterly':

Then follows an eloquent eulogy of his conduct in prison, and touching extracts from his farewell letters to Miss Le Neve. And so the youthful and unwary reader is carried along, until the execution of such a heroic personage is made to appear almost a tragedy.

It is perhaps not surprising that crime increases when it is put before the rising generation in such attractive guise, and it might be advisable for certain sections of the press to realise the power for good or evil of the manner in which such things are presented to the public.<sup>506</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

<sup>504</sup> The famous Leopold and Loeb case, where two American students kidnapped and murdered a teenage boy as an intellectual exercise in committing the perfect crime, happened in 1924. The case inspired Patrick Hamilton's play *Rope* (1927).

<sup>505</sup> 'Murder Stunts – A Protest,' *The Saturday Review*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1920, p.210.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid*, p.210.

Putting aside the question of whether crime, or merely the public discussion of it, had generally increased or not, the resonances between Thorne, Mahon, George Joseph Smith, and Crippen are undeniable, and Thorne in particular seemed inspired by these earlier murderers and their trials. Neither Norman Thorne nor Patrick Mahon were obvious subjects of discussion at Our Society: in 1924 their papers were ‘A Danish Murder Trial,’ ‘Some Famous Naval Mutinies,’ and ‘The Death of Mary Ashford;’ in 1925 they returned to some familiar subjects in ‘Le Crime Passionel,’ ‘The Oscar Wilde Case,’ and ‘Dr Neill Cream.’ Nor was there any suggestion that the members felt in any way responsible for popularising the discussion of remarkable criminals, though it is notable that Lambton’s books and articles, predominantly published in the 1920s, often included justifications for the club’s existence (as has been discussed in previous chapters).

Despite living close to the scene of the sensational crime, Doyle did not give the Thorne case very much attention. During the investigation, he was finishing his third Professor Challenger novel, *The Land of Mist*, in which spiritualism features heavily. He was, however, asked about the case by the *Morning Post*, the day before Thorne was hanged. Andrew Lycett describes his response:

He told the *Morning Post* that he thought there was only one chance in a hundred that Thorne had not committed the murder, but so long as that chance remained, he was happy to add his name to a campaign (albeit unsuccessful) for a reprieve. “I am against capital punishment except in very extreme cases, and to justify it I think the evidence should be stronger than it was in this case.”<sup>507</sup>

Doyle, it seems, was all too willing to leap to the defence of fraudulent mediums in the press, but when it came to the scientific reasoning of rational detectives he was far more circumspect. Given that Doyle had anticipated the development of this profession in his fiction, his lack of interest in its application and practitioners seems paradoxical and yet in keeping with his rejection of rationalism.

In 1926, by which time he had famously fallen out with Houdini who had criticised the séances he had attended with Doyle in a similar manner to Young, the creator of Sherlock Holmes wrote a letter to the *Morning Post* complaining about the presumption that ‘people

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<sup>507</sup> Lycett, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, p.421.

who were not present are better judges of an episode than those who are present.’<sup>508</sup> It is remarkable that, at the same time Doyle was suggesting those not present at an event were in a false position when claiming better judgement, he was still producing detective stories that argued the opposite point. ‘The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire’ appeared in *The Strand Magazine* in January 1924. In this story, Holmes is told of a supposed supernatural occurrence and says: ‘are we to give serious thought to such things? This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply.’<sup>509</sup> Holmes, unlike his creator, remained a rationalist. As with those friends who pointed out the flaws in his belief, it was soon time for Doyle to cease his relationship with his creation. He published his final Holmes story, ‘The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place,’ in 1927.

Three stories before the last is a particularly disturbing tale in which the villain shares some of Thorne’s characteristics: ‘The Adventure of the Retired Colourman,’ published in January 1927. Holmes’s client is a man called Josiah Amberley, who enlists Holmes to search for his wife. Amberley says he believes she has absconded with his money and a new lover. Holmes, however, realises that Amberley has done a suspicious amount of painting following his wife’s disappearance, and this leads him to the discovery of a gas pipe in a hermetically sealable room in his client’s house: The Haven. Amberley, it is revealed, gassed his wife and her lover, then disposed of their bodies and employed Holmes out of ‘pure swank’: ‘He felt so clever and so sure of himself that he imagined no one could touch him. He could say to any suspicious neighbour, “Look at the steps I have taken. I have consulted not only the police, but even Sherlock Holmes.”’<sup>510</sup> Holmes tells the police ‘The bodies cannot be far away. Try the cellars and the garden. It should not take long to dig up the likely places. This house is older than the water-pipes. There must be a disused well somewhere. Try your luck there.’<sup>511</sup> Holmes is correct, and the bodies are discovered in a well hidden beneath a dog-kennel. Contrary to Doyle’s feelings about third party judgements, Holmes is right on every point in a manner that is almost uncanny. Despite no mention of dismemberment, Amberley’s

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<sup>508</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, ‘Conjurers and Spiritualism,’ *The Morning Post*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1926, quoted in Gibson, John Michael and Green, Richard Lancelyn ed., *Letters to the Press: Arthur Conan Doyle* (Portsmouth, University of Iowa Press, 1986), p.317.

<sup>509</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, ‘The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire,’ *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, (London, Chancellor Press, 1986), p.858.

<sup>510</sup> Doyle, ‘The Adventure of the Retired Colourman,’ *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*, p.961.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid*, p.959.

bravado is reminiscent of Mahon and Thorne: most closely of Thorne given the explicit attempt to out-fox a scientific detective and the attempt to hide bodies beneath an animal house. Though supposedly set in 1899, when Holmes and Watson still live at Baker Street, Amberley is very much a villain of the 1920s.

Despite his indisputable guilt, and an attempt to kill himself with a ‘white pellet’<sup>512</sup> (presumably a cyanide pill, like that kept by A. E. W. Mason), Holmes does not think Amberley will be executed, and says ‘I think his destination is more likely to be Broadmoor than the scaffold.’<sup>513</sup> As has been discussed in chapter 3, and elsewhere in this thesis, Doyle was uncomfortable with the application of capital punishment. This contradicts a broad statement made by Lambton at the beginning of *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*:

I would like to say that I believe not one of our members favours the abolition of capital punishment. It baffles me how anybody can seriously favour such a project. Hanging is a deterrent and all the sophistry in the world will not disprove it. If anyone doubts this let him ask the opinion of any Home Secretary. And besides, what punishment would be substituted for it? A life sentence is twenty years.<sup>514</sup>

Doyle was far happier with the idea of treating murderers as ‘lunatics’ and sending them to Broadmoor, whilst giving extended, perhaps permanent, prison sentences to reoffenders, as he detailed in a letter to *The Morning Post*:

Let us suppose that an annexe was built to Dartmoor Prison, and that the really hopeless criminals were gradually segregated there after they had served their ordinary terms. Their conditions might be those of comparative comfort, but there should be no question of release. By the time you had 1,000 in this cage imagine the relief it would be to the police force and the courts. There is also the question of eugenics, and that of the contamination of the young by the example of the hardened crook. It would take a rather ruthless man to carry the matter through, but there are times when ruthlessness to some means kindness to others.<sup>515</sup>

Doyle wrote this letter in 1927, and his idea, especially given his invocation of eugenics, calls back to 19<sup>th</sup> century theories of criminal class posited by scientists such as Galton and Lombroso (and disputed by H. B. Irving, as detailed in chapter 6). Doyle does not believe this

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<sup>512</sup> *Ibid*, p.957.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid*, p.959.

<sup>514</sup> Lambton, Arthur, *Thou Shalt Do No Murder*, (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p.10.

<sup>515</sup> Gibson, John Michael and Green, Richard Lancelyn ed., *Letters to the Press: Arthur Conan Doyle* (Portsmouth, University of Iowa Press, 1986), p.327.

perceived class of criminals can be deterred or reformed, because crime is part of their nature: they are ‘habitual’. Although he wishes to eliminate their contaminating presence from society, however, he does not suggest executing them, and this is likely because of his ongoing concern with the uncertainty of evidence and the unreliability of the Courts. The Adolf Beck and Edalji Cases had demonstrated weaknesses in the English Justice system and had created the political will needed to instigate a Court of Criminal Appeal. Since 1911, Doyle had been part of an ongoing campaign concerning a Scottish case: that of a man called Oscar Slater.

Doyle spoke to Our Society about Oscar Slater at least three times. The first occasion was on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1911 when he presented a paper titled ‘The Oscar Slater Case’ in which he was supported by Sir Edward Marshall Hall, who according to the members’ book ‘also made a splendid speech and undertook to use his parliamentary influence in the matter.’<sup>516</sup> Some years later, on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1927, Craigie Aitchison K.C. was giving a paper on ‘The Merrett Case’ when ‘There was a little breeze between Sir George Turner, in the chair, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, owing to the latter’s deviating from the subject of the paper to the case of Oscar Slater.’<sup>517</sup> Finally, on the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1929, Aitchison gave a talk titled ‘The Last Word on Oscar Slater,’ which ‘was really a double speech, with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intervening.’<sup>518</sup> Quinton Wilson observes that ‘Sir Arthur was convinced of Slater’s innocence; Our Society was not.’<sup>519</sup>

The criminologist William Roughead had begun to agitate on Slater’s behalf in 1910. Doyle took some persuading to become involved in the campaign – he did not take to Slater as he had to Edalji – but after being approached by Slater’s defence team, he claimed to realise ‘this unhappy man had in all probability no more to do with the murder for which he had been condemned than I had’:

In one respect the Oscar Slater case was not so serious as the Edalji one, because Slater was not a very desirable member of society. He had never, so far as is known, been in trouble as a criminal, but he was a gambler and adventurer of uncertain morals and dubious ways – a German Jew by extraction, living under an alias. Edalji, on the other hand, was a blameless youth. But in another aspect Slater’s case was worse than that of Edalji, since the charge was murder. He was very nearly hanged, and finally the life sentence was actually carried out, so that

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<sup>516</sup> Our Society member’s book.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*



the wrong was never righted and at the present moment the unfortunate man is in gaol.<sup>520</sup>

Doyle wrote this paragraph in his memoirs in 1924 at which point he and others were still agitating for Slater's release. Slater, it seemed, had somehow been framed for the murder of a Miss Gilchrist in Glasgow. She was beaten to death with a blunt instrument on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1908. Neighbours had seen a man leaving her flat but could only offer a vague description. A diamond brooch was thought to be missing, thus indicating the motive may have been robbery (although there was plenty of other valuable jewellery that was left undisturbed). Oscar Slater had pawned a diamond brooch around the same time and was then heading back to America. On these details alone, Slater was arrested, despite the fact it was proven quite soon that the brooch he had pawned was his own and not the one belonging to Miss Gilchrist. Through a series of bungled investigations that were reminiscent of the Beck case (discussed in Chapter 4), Slater was condemned. Doyle describes the bias against Slater in his memoirs:

It was too preposterous to suppose that out of all the folk in Glasgow the police had arrested the right man by pure chance – for that is what it amounted to. But the public had lost its head, and so had the police. If the case had completely gone to pieces surely it could be reconstructed in some fresh form. Slater was poor and friendless. He had lived with a woman, which shocked Scotch morality. As one writer boldly said in the press: “Even if he did not do it, he deserved to be condemned, anyhow.” A case was made up in the most absurd manner. A half-crown card of tools was found in his box with the sort of tools which are found on such cards. The frail hammer was evidently the instrument which had beaten in the woman's skull. The handle might have been cleaned. Then surely there had been blood on it. The police description was already amended so as to be nearer to Slater. He, a sallow, dark-haired Jew, was picked out by witnesses from among a group of fair Scotsmen. Some one had been seen waiting in the street for some nights before. This some one was variously described by many witnesses. Some descriptions would fit Slater, some were his very opposite. The people who saw the murderer leave thought it might be Slater, but were not sure. The chief witness, Adams, was very short-sighted and had not his glasses. A clear alibi was proved by Slater, but as his mistress and his servant girl were the witnesses, it was not allowed. Whom could he produce save the inmates of his house? No attempt was ever made to show that Slater had any connection with Miss Gilchrist, or with the maid, Lambie, and as Slater was really a stranger in Glasgow, it was impossible to see how he could have known anything about this retired old maid.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 194.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid*, p.195.

Despite agitating in Slater's favour, as with the Edalji case Doyle's approach to campaigning was more specific than general, and he focussed on Slater's case as an anomaly rather than attempting to provoke argument about the system that put him in prison. In his memoirs, he makes no significant mention of the problems of the Scottish legal system and its lack of Court of Criminal Appeal at the time. He does, however, use the Slater case to promote the use of psychic detectives:

One strange psychic fact should be mentioned which was brought to my notice by an eminent English K.C. There was a Spiritualist circle which used to meet at Falkirk, and shortly after the trial messages were received by it which purported to come from the murdered woman. She was asked what the weapon was which had slain her. She answered that it was an iron box-opener. Now I had pondered over the nature of certain wounds in the woman's face, which consisted of two cuts with a little bridge of unbroken skin between. They might have been caused by the claw end of a hammer, but on the other hand, one of the woman's eyes had been pushed back into her brain, which could hardly have been done by a hammer, which would have burst the eyeball first. I could think of no instrument which would meet the case. But the box-opener could exactly do so, for it has a forked end which would make the double wound, and it is also straight so that it might very well penetrate to the brain, driving the eye in front of it. The reader will reasonably ask why did not the Spiritualists ask the name of the criminal. I believe that they did and received a reply, but I do not think that such evidence could or should ever be used or published.<sup>522</sup>

Though Spilsbury could not conjure the name of the killer in the manner of Doyle's spiritualist colleagues, he had been willing to give medical evidence to show that Slater's hammer could not have caused the injuries perpetrated upon Miss Gilchrist.<sup>523</sup> The Scottish Courts would not admit Spilsbury as a witness, however, on the grounds that he had not seen the body. It may have been wiser for Doyle to have joined forces with the pathologist during the Slater case: it would certainly have generated a lot of public interest to see the creator of Sherlock Holmes working with a 'real' Sherlock.

Slater was eventually released in November 1927 following a renewed campaign by a Glasgow journalist called William Park, supported by Doyle. Doyle encouraged Slater to pursue an appeal to obtain compensation for his long imprisonment. He loaned Slater £1000 to cover legal costs. The appeal led to compensation of £6000 for Slater, at which point

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<sup>522</sup> *Ibid*, p.198.

<sup>523</sup> Noted in Toughill, Thomas, *Oscar Slater: The 'Immortal' Case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, (Edinburgh, Canongate Press LTD, 2006), p.200.

Doyle assumed he would be repaid his loan, but Slater was not forthcoming with the money and the two fell out bitterly, as Andrew Lycett describes: ‘Arthur moved to take Slater to court, while Slater threatened to counter-sue for slander as Arthur had called him “an ungrateful dog and a liar.” It was not until October 1929 that Slater climbed down and agreed to pay, but it was a most unsatisfactory ending to what had been a noble initiative by Arthur.’<sup>524</sup>

Sherlock Holmes, as discussed in chapter 3, had been born out of Doyle’s experiences as a medical student in Edinburgh, and he had an awareness of medical jurisprudence that helped him to create a modern icon, though he later seemed to take his knowledge for granted and did not keep up to date. Had he continued to write detective stories with enthusiasm, Our Society would have been the perfect forum to meet the new detectives and learn their methods in order to translate them into fiction. Spilsbury, who was connected with Bart’s Hospital where Holmes had experimented with corpses, who had a laboratory in his house, who was consulted by Scotland Yard when they had unusual cases, could have been a wonderful muse. Yet, despite his regular and active involvement in Our Society meetings, Doyle had lost interest in medical detectives and did not seem to equate the skills he gave his detective with those of the new expert witnesses. In ‘The Adventure of the Retired Colourman,’ Holmes refers to the advantage he has over police methods, but he is not talking about expert knowledge: he catches Amberley using trickery and burglary, methods outside the law, and not through the scientific analysis of a crime scene, his older *modus operandi* demonstrated in earlier stories.

It seems that Doyle and Spilsbury must have met at some point, though any definitive evidence of this, or of their opinions of each other, seems impossible to uncover. Spilsbury may even have taught Doyle’s son, Kingsley, at St. Mary’s, as Kingsley studied medicine there and took Pathology (though Spilsbury was one of two teachers on this module so it is also possible they did not interact).<sup>525</sup> It is likely Doyle and Spilsbury would have been present together at Our Society meetings by the mid-1920s. Andrew Rose, a member of Our Society in its current form, dates Spilsbury’s election to the club at around 1921.<sup>526</sup> Browne and Tullett record that it was about 1928 that he became a prominent member, and that he addressed the club ‘on crimes present and past, from those in investigation of which he had

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<sup>524</sup> Lycett, Andrew, *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p.423.

<sup>525</sup> According to correspondence with St Mary’s Archivist and Andrew Lycett.

<sup>526</sup> Rose, Andrew, *Lethal Witness*, (Chalford, Sutton Publishing, 2007), p.80.

taken part to the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey in 1678.<sup>527</sup> Why Browne and Tullett mention the year 1928 is unclear: Spilsbury's talk on Godfrey took place almost a decade later on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1937. The first time Spilsbury gets a significant mention in the club's records is in connection to Dr W. F. Eberlie's talk on The Rouse Case on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1931: 'A marvellous paper, followed by Sir Bernard Spilsbury, who, with the victim's calcined jaw in his hand, held the company spellbound.'<sup>528</sup> He first gave a paper himself on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1932, concerning a Cambridge undergraduate, Douglas Potts, who 'shot dead his tutor and a police sergeant and then himself.'<sup>529</sup> Doyle could not have been present for any of Spilsbury's papers as the author died in 1930.

Quinton Wilson notes the following of the pathologist's involvement in Our Society: 'Sir Bernard Spilsbury was a quiet and reserved member, whose medical evidence was never permitted to go unchallenged, and on occasions was rejected, during debates.'<sup>530</sup> This is somewhat at odds with the portrayal of Spilsbury as a dogmatic expert whose evidence was always accepted without question. That version of Spilsbury seemed to have been created by those who had an interest in undermining his evidence in criminal cases, such as that of Norman Thorne – Brown and Tullett biblically refer to Spilsbury's critics as 'Adullamites.' Given that his status as an expert witness and honorary pathologist to the Home Office was unique at the time, attacking his personality and creating a figure that could be undermined was in the interests of criminal defence tactics when no equivalent scientific expert could be found to counter his evidence simply because no one had a similar level of experience at that time. Forensic science and its use in the Court Room was new and developing: it was not proceduralised as it was a new discipline, and its techniques were experimental and not standard practice. Spilsbury had to be persuasive not just about the results he had obtained, but also the methodology he had used to get them which was original and unfamiliar outside of fiction.

Spilsbury - as well as being, as Bentley Purchase put it, 'the visible plinth upon which there now needs to be built and kept in repair a proper structure'<sup>531</sup> - was part of a new generation of Our Society members who joined as the original cohort diminished. When Doyle died in 1930, he left very few of the notable early members behind. Bertram Fletcher

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<sup>527</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.31.

<sup>528</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, p.6.

Robinson had died in 1907, Collins died in 1908, Laurence Irving in 1914, and H. B. Irving in 1918, as discussed in earlier chapters. J. B. Atlay died in 1912. George R. Sims died in 1922. Edward Marshall Hall and William Le Queux both died in 1927. Arthur Lambton died in 1935, shortly after falling down the stairs at Lord's and fracturing his knee cap. Ingleby Oddie carried out the inquest on Our Society's Honorary Secretary and concluded his death had been due to breathlessness following pulmonary embolism. Oddie noted that Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree had died in a similar manner following an accident in 1917: a comparison that would no doubt have filled Lambton with pride.<sup>532</sup> Oddie, against all of his hypochondriac predictions, outlived most of them and died on V.E. Day, 1945, aged 76.

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<sup>532</sup> 'Died from Breathlessness,' *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> August 1935, p.8.

## Epilogue.

In May 1934 the *Daily Mail* noted that ‘Mr. Arthur Lambton, for more than 30 years honorary secretary of the Crimes Club, has received an inscribed testimonial from his fellow-members, headed by Prince George.’<sup>533</sup> The article also noted that the ceremony took place at the Café Royal on Regent Street, and in addition to the Duke of York (who would unexpectedly become King George VI after his brother’s abdication a little over two years later), other notable attendees included ‘the King of Greece, Lord Durham, Lord Rosebery, Lord Hamilton of Dalzell, Lord Portarlington, Lord Aberconway, the Hon. K Campbell, Sir Henry Jerningham, Sir Percy Everett, Sir John Stewart-Wallace, and Admiral Barry Domvile.’<sup>534</sup> The precise date of the meal was 13<sup>th</sup> May, and in the members’ book it is recorded that T. J. O’Connor, K.C., gave a paper that evening on the Reginald Hinks Murder Case of 1933. The presentation to Lambton took place before O’Connor spoke and is described as follows: ‘Prior to the paper, Mr. Arthur Lambton was presented with a silver salver and a cheque in recognition of over thirty years’ work as Honorary Secretary.’<sup>535</sup> To have been acknowledged and thanked by a group headed by a prince, after years of bitterness and poor treatment from his father’s family over his legitimacy claims, can only have been a seminal and cathartic moment for Lambton. As has been indicated through his writing quoted throughout this thesis, the club and the friends he made through it seemed to be the most joyful aspect of his existence.

An unidentified member of Our Society is quoted at the end of the *Daily Mail* article and explains Our Society as follows: ‘Everyone has probably heard of the Crimes Club ... but few realise exactly what it is. It was formed to study crime from the scientific and psychological angle. Its objects have an enormous appeal to all sections of the community. Prince George is an honorary member, and Sir Bernard Spilsbury belongs to it.’<sup>536</sup> Given its secretive nature, unless they were familiar with Lambton’s articles and books, it is unlikely that many people outside of the London dining club scene would have heard of the club, but they would certainly be familiar with the last two names. That Spilsbury, considering all of Our Society’s prestigious members, should be singled out and included in the same sentence as a prince shows just how revered an expert witness he had become. From its relatively

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<sup>533</sup> ‘Crimes Club Chief’, *Daily Mail*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1934, p.7.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>535</sup> Our Society members’ book 1993.

<sup>536</sup> ‘Crimes Club Chief’, *Daily Mail*, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1934, p.7.

humble beginnings as an informal group of six friends meeting over dinner in 1903, Our Society had grown into an organised coterie that attracted both royal members and real detectives.

This thesis related a story of the origins of Our Society, and the activities and interests of its early members. It showed how the Club was first organised, and how the personalities of a small circle of Victorian men shaped the future of an elite society. Had Our Society's members remained completely secretive, there would not have been a story to tell. Doyle never wrote about the club, Spilsbury never publicly discussed himself nor his friendships, and if other members had behaved in the same way then no one outside of the membership and their friends would ever have heard of the Crimes Club. Lambton, however, could not keep his leadership of such an esteemed group of men secret from the world at large, and capitalised on his honorary secretaryship as social currency, using it to promote himself and his books. Though he was clearly valued by the Our Society membership, the same was not true of the wider public, and some of his books attracted harsh criticism, as exemplified by this review of *Echoes of Causes Celebres* from *The Saturday Review*:

This is yet another of these “made-up” books; in this case the volume is made up of murders. The method of loosely assembling some twenty-two cases and trying to do them justice in two hundred and seventy odd pages of large print is one that cannot be deprecated too much. Those who are really interested in criminology will find many, and perhaps all, of the crimes dealt with here examined properly in other publications...

Mr. Lambton, who is responsible for this pot-pourri, is the founder of the Crimes Club, and I suggest to the members that it is now time to see whether they have learnt anything from their reconstructions of various crimes. They should first torture their founder – they might give him what he describes as “the water inconvenience,” which was meted out to the Marquise de Brinvilliers – for his use of the word “yclept,” and they should murder him for his style in general and for the following sentence, descriptive of the Reverend George Dyson, in particular: “He was so unlike an Anglican cleric as could be imagined, a soldiery moustache being a striking characteristic, but then with preachers of other than Church of England proclivities it is by no means uncommon for them to wear this form of hirsute appendage.”

The perfect crime has not yet been committed, so loose thinkers declare; here is an opportunity for the club to justify its existence.<sup>537</sup>

There is no name to this review, but Filson Young was an editor of *The Saturday Review*'s literary sections and it is possible that he would have infused his writing with bitterness

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<sup>537</sup> ‘Shorter Notices,’ *The Saturday Review*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1931, p.370.

towards Our Society at this point, following his fight with Doyle and the unfair revocation of his membership. Biased or otherwise, this critique of Lambton's work is entirely fair: he was neither a serious criminologist, nor a literary man, with nothing original to say about a series of crimes that had been covered in depth elsewhere by other writers, many of whom he knew and was attempting to imitate. It would seem that, to compensate for the disappointments and injustices of his family relationships, he used the lure of criminal psychology and sensational stories to surround himself with interesting, notable men who could give him an ersatz legitimacy. He was never really one of them, however. He never trained to work in the courts or in medicine (his obituaries state that he had been working as a tax collector), he published little of interest, even his brief stint at Scotland Yard during the Great War seems to have been routine. He was thrilled by the passing of the Legitimacy Act of 1926, but beyond publishing his own misery memoir about his childhood (*My Story*), he had done little else to agitate for reform other than complain bitterly to anyone who would listen. As Quinton Wilson noted, Lambton never really recovered from the traumas of his childhood: 'he was by no means an easy companion due to the fact that he suffered from persecution mania, and was always ready to take offence.'<sup>538</sup> He was right to be proud of his part in founding Our Society, therefore, as the club was by far his most remarkable achievement. Such firm foundations were laid by the honorary secretary and his friends that the Society still flourishes today.

This thesis has covered the period of time during which Doyle was a member and Spilsbury came to prominence, thus juxtaposing crime and detection in fiction with that of reality. The popularity of Sherlock Holmes, particularly during the 1890s, had inspired many imitations, and by the 1920s the 'Golden Age' detective fiction writers such as G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie were at the height of their fame. The public were enamoured with detectives. As has been discussed, the latter half of Doyle's life and the peak of Spilsbury's career epitomise a period of time when forensic science was becoming increasingly important to the criminal justice system in England, and new practices were being variously lauded and criticized. It was a time when, as has been shown, barristers and expert witnesses were celebrities, and criminal trials were a form of sensational entertainment - published first in the press as they unfolded, then republished and reconsidered by various writers in series such as *Famous Trials* and *Notable Trials*. Our Society's meetings may have been private, but their members were often involved in public

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<sup>538</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.



discussions of crime as well, meaning the content of their early meetings can often be inferred. The personalities of Our Society made a huge contribution to the public's understanding of crime and justice at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This thesis, however, is only the beginning of their story.

After Doyle's death, the incidences of friction over dinner seem to diminish, and it is noticeable that the papers presented over dinner seem to become more gruesome, more humorous, and more salacious. No one seemed to be outraged in the manner of Doyle if any offence was caused, but there were still occasions when the content of the papers overwhelmed some members, as was the case when W. H. C. Romanis talked about a double murder in February 1934: 'Major Ian Hay Beith and Mr. P. G. Wodehouse left early, presumably because one or two of the gruesome exhibits proved too much for them.'<sup>539</sup> Most of the members present, particularly the legal and medical men, could have little problem with extreme content, as they encountered the details of death and violence through their professional work. There is no record of Spilsbury shocking the members of Our Society, but he certainly terrified other audiences. He once gave a shocking talk to a newly-formed medical society at Cambridge, as Browne and Tullett record: 'he so wrought upon his hearers that one screamed, threw an epileptic fit, and bit the chairman's thumb, and two or three more fainted.'<sup>540</sup> In February 1931, Captain Gilbert Frankau gave a talk titled 'Crime in Fiction' which is described as 'a remarkably clever satire on the modern average detective novel.'<sup>541</sup> In November 1932, the same speaker gave a controversial talk regarding Elvira Barney, who had been acquitted of the murder of her lover: 'A delicate and somewhat dangerous theme as Mrs Barney had only recently been acquitted of murder, but handled with great dexterity by the speaker. The rumours that Government interference might occur proved groundless.'<sup>542</sup> Dr Harold Dearden introduced a more psychological focus, first with 'Sexual Abnormality' in May 1931 ('A delicate topic, handled with remarkable skill, but the subject did not please everybody'), then with 'Hysterical Women' several years later in May 1938.

Although H. B. Irving's family did not continue to be regularly involved in the club, they still maintained friends amongst its members. His grandson, John H. B. Irving, has fond memories of Dr Harold Dearden: 'He became a friend of my family. He loved powerful cars

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<sup>539</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

<sup>540</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.221.

<sup>541</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.* This case was also notable for the way in which defence lawyer Sir Patrick Hastings outfoxed Sir Bernard Spilsbury at the trial.

and just before the war I vividly remember riding with him on the main road between Reading and Newbury aboard his open Alvis at 70mph, a speed which I had never before experienced.<sup>543</sup> He also has a memory of ferrying A. E. W. Mason:

Before the last war on holiday in Cornwall I was with my father aboard our yacht Dorothea on the Helford River. Alf Mason's converted Brixham trawler was at anchor nearby. I, aged 13, was in charge of our small dinghy and it was my job to convey Mason to and from his luncheon engagement aboard the Dorothea. He was a very large man with an imposing monocle and I was very small. He sat in the stern and I rowed high up in the bows. I saw that our stern was only an inch or two above water. Somehow we managed to stay afloat. As we returned alongside his yacht a crewman was waiting to help Mason aboard. My passenger felt in his waistcoat and then presented me with a half-crown tip. We bade each other goodbye.<sup>544</sup>

In 1975, a significant change was made to Our Society's dining arrangements which upset members who shared Irving's profession:

Till 1975, with a couple of exceptions, dinners were held on Sunday evenings, and were invariably black-tie occasions. Then (despite opposition from Nigel Patrick, who pointed out that when members belonging to the theatrical profession, like himself, were fortunate enough to be working, Sundays were their only free days) the Society began meeting on week-nights, usually a Tuesday.<sup>545</sup>

According to the members' book, another 'innovation' of the 1970s was to allow women to attend as guests:

Though there was considerable opposition to the proposal (a majority against, it appeared to some), the chairman on that particular evening deemed that the Ayes had it; at least a couple of members resigned, for they feared that the 'flavour' of the occasions would be watered down in deference to faint female hearts. It seemed that their apprehension might be justified when, for the first 'Ladies Night' on 7 May 1972, the Hon. Ewen Montagu read a paper entitled (as was his best-selling book) 'The Man Who Never Was' – and when, for the second, on 1 December 1974, the same speaker gave an account of the Archer-Shee ('Winslow Boy') case. However, for the third 'Ladies' Night' on 4 May 1976, there were no

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<sup>543</sup> Irving, John H.B., 'H.B.I. & The Crimes Club,' published in the Journal of The Irving Society, *First Knight*, Winter 2009 edition (preview copy of article received via Society secretary Michael Kilgariff, Autumn 2009).

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>545</sup> Our Society members' book 1993.

concessions to the said-to-be-gentler sex, since the paper, read by Robin Odell, was about ‘Jack the Ripper.’<sup>546</sup>

Though the members’ book conveys the membership of women as a shocking change, it is possible that women were attending meetings as early as the 1920s. There is no mention of her in the members’ book, yet according to an article in the *Daily Mail* from 1925, Fryn Tennyson Jesse was not merely a guest, but a full member:

Miss Fryn Tennyson Jesse, the authoress, who is the only woman member of that exclusive body, the Crimes Club, whose distinguished members meet in London on Sunday nights, has decided to form a Crimes Club for women only, says a London correspondent. And why not? Women are just as much interested in the psychology of crime as men, or should be; and their beauty has had as much to do with crime as any other cause.<sup>547</sup>

Although Our Society seem to have been very quiet about her membership, it seems likely that this was no mere rumour. Jesse was a respected criminologist and close friends with Dearden. Like Helena Normanton, she wrote for Harry Hodge’s *Notable Trials* series. She also knew Spilsbury, and Browne and Tullett include her recollection of attending a dinner party with the pathologist:

Spilsbury, almost always punctuality itself when on business, arrived three-quarters of an hour late, but “quite calm” says Miss Jesse. One of the courses at the delayed meal was partridge on toast, and as she always had difficulties in carving this bird she asked him to cut it up for her, adding, “You ought to be good at this, Sir Bernard.” “It is a curious thing,” said Spilsbury, “but I am no good except with my own instruments – which, by the way, I happen to have with me.” Miss Jesse replied that it was a still more curious thing, but if he were to cut up her partridge with his instruments she would be unable to eat it.<sup>548</sup>

Since Lambton’s death in 1935, there have only been six other Honorary Secretaries of Our Society. Lambton was succeeded by Sir Percy Everett, a famous scout leader who had been close friends with Bertram Fletcher Robinson. Everett retired from the post in 1945 and the duties were taken over by the publisher Eveleigh Nash for the next seven years. In 1952, the

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<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>547</sup> ‘Crimes Club for Women Only,’ *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1925, p.6.

<sup>548</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.222.

role fell to Henry Elam, and he would remain Honorary Secretary until he died in 1993, overtaking Lambton and holding the post for 41 years. Elam, as junior counsel, had cross-examined many notorious defendants, including the unfortunate Timothy Evans who was hanged unjustly for the crimes committed by John Christie. The same year he took over the secretaryship, he became a judge and assumed the office of Deputy Chairman of the Court of Quarter Sessions, Inner London. During his career, he would see a significant change in the administration of criminal justice: capital punishment was abolished in 1965. An obituary for Elam was written for the *Independent* by an Our Society member, Peter Cotes, who told the following story of how they met:

A case at Bristol Assizes in 1946 had Elam cross-examining Mrs Cornock, accused of murdering her perverted husband in a bath, which was when I saw Elam for the first time – gentle and persuasive to the accused when in the witness box, denying the charge before Mr Justice Croom-Johnson, a friend of the crime writer and distinguished novelist, F. Tennyson Jesse. Tennyson Jesse invited me as the theatrical director of her next play to accompany her – the judge’s guest – knowing of my interest in such matters. After Cornock had been acquitted we both went ‘backstage’ to meet the judge in his disrobing room. The two legal luminaries made a widely contrasting pair; ‘Little Croomie,’ as Fryn Tennyson Jesse called her friend the judge, was now wigless, talking to the tall, lean Henry Elam. Together they made a picture of tact, experience and charm with a formidable judge. By the time Elam retired in 1976 he had become one of our most senior circuit court judges himself, with 23 years on the bench.<sup>549</sup>

The attraction of Our Society to a mixture of actors, authors and legal professionals evidently continued long after its founding members had passed away. Cotes also includes the following observations about Elam’s time as Honorary Secretary:

From the beginning of his term of office with the society Elam held the reins up until the time of his death. When he retired as a judge in 1976 the meetings of the club became his favourite recreation; at the quarterly gatherings criminal cases could still be discussed and often chewed over and dissected freely by experts (judges, counsel, pathologists and others ‘in the know’) and interesting psychological, legal and criminological problems freely ventilated by the members after the quarterly paper had been delivered.

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<sup>549</sup> ‘Obituary: Judge Henry Elam,’ *Independent*, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1993, via website, viewed 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-judge-henry-elam-1463813.html>

Elam kept his legal hand in by organising these functions and as a lay member myself, made eligible for membership by the large number of stage plays of mystery and crime nature I had produced in theatre – after being invited to deliver a paper on a noted cause celebre to the membership – it was for nearly 40 years an enjoyable experience for me to hear our popular Secretary regaling his fellow members during the evening with the words of a founding member of the club, George R. Sims, who once wrote before the First World War about Our Society: ‘In memory of many delightful evenings, excellent dinners, atrocious crimes and good fellowship.’ Sentiments echoed heartily and acted upon with good cheer by dear old compassionate ‘Harry’ Elam himself.<sup>550</sup>

It was Elam who requested that Quinton Wilson - who joined Our Society in 1906 after having befriended Lambton through the New Club in Grafton Street – write down his early recollections of the Society’s dinners for the benefit of younger members. Elam requested this of Wilson in 1958, the same year he produced a booklet for members. During Elam’s term, Our Society attracted Royal interest again: ‘At our Diamond Jubilee dinner on 28 May 1963, we were honoured by the presence of H. R. H. The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who has been with us since.’<sup>551</sup> In the 1993 members’ book, the following is also noted: ‘By a pleasing happenstance, at the last dinner arranged and attended by Henry Elam, on 22 November 1992, the guest of honour was Lady Elizabeth Brunner, OBE, daughter of the founding member, H. B. Irving.’<sup>552</sup>

Elam was succeeded by Jonathan Goodman, who was responsible for the 1993 booklet. Born in Wimbledon in 1931, Goodman was the first Honorary Secretary to have no personal knowledge at all of the club’s early members. Goodman was a collector and a full time writer, specialising in literary detective work. Like many of the early members, he had a troubled childhood. According to one of his obituaries, ‘He spoke little of his childhood except to say that his mother, whom he adored, died in his arms when he was in his early teens. His father was unable to cope with the tragedy and Goodman went to live with an uncle and aunt who ran a public house in Putney.’<sup>553</sup> He wrote over 40 books on crime during his career, and edited a successor to the *Notable Trials* series – *Celebrated Trials* – in the 1970s. He was very close friends with another crime-writer and Our Society member, Richard Whittington-Egan, who worked with him on an investigation into the murder of Julia

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<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>551</sup> Our Society members’ book 1993.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> Morton, James, ‘Obituary: Jonathan Goodman: Avid Investigator of historical crimes,’ *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2008, p.32.

Wallace. Following Goodman's death in early 2008, His Honour John A. Baker wrote in *The Times*:

For 15 years Jonathan Goodman... was the honorary secretary of Our Society, otherwise known as the "crimes club". With his persuasive personality and large circle of acquaintances among lawyers, doctors, crime writers and the police, he was able to secure a distinguished list of speakers. He completed three editions of a booklet that contained the records of Our Society from the first paper that was read in 1905, though there had been dinners since December 1903. He ran Our Society most successfully almost single handedly. During his last illness, he resisted all attempts to lighten the load. One might be forgiven for thinking that in the nicest possible way, he was not wholly confident that anyone else could do it. He was a thoughtful kindly man. It was his express wish that at the first meeting of Our Society after his death, champagne should be served and the bill sent to his executor.<sup>554</sup>

There was one set of crimes that was of little interest to Goodman, according to the *Guardian*: 'Goodman was not interested in the quest to find the identity of Jack the Ripper, treating the search with mild disdain and creating his own anagrammatic suspect Peter J Harpick.'<sup>555</sup> His contemporaries, however, particularly in the run up to the centenary of the Autumn of Terror, were obsessed by it. Richard Whittington-Egan not only published his own works on the Ripper, but also wrote the original introduction to Stephen Knight's notorious *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* (1976). Robin Odell, who spoke to Our Society about the Ripper in 1976, was one of the foremost 'Ripperologists' who came to prominence in the 1970s. Goodman was briefly succeeded by journalist Roger Wilkes before another Ripper scholar took over as Honorary Secretary in 2013: Donald Rumbelow, a former police officer and ex-curator of the City of London Police Museum. Rumbelow discovered a large Ripper archive during his work for the City of London Police, and has written several books on the murders. He is also renowned for his guided Jack the Ripper walks, and so continues the tradition of visiting the scenes of the crimes, though they have changed substantially since the Spring of 1905 when Oddie and his friends walked with Dr Frederick Gordon Brown.

Our Society's members maintained a fascination with Spilsbury and his famous cases. Dr Harold Dearden wrote a book titled *Some Cases of Sir Bernard Spilsbury and Others* within a year of the pathologist's death. Douglas Browne, who worked with Tom Tullett to

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<sup>554</sup> 'Jonathan Goodman,' *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2008, p.81.

<sup>555</sup> Morton, James, 'Obituary: Jonathan Goodman: Avid Investigator of historical crimes,' *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2008, p.32.

write *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases*, was listed as a member of Our Society in Harry Elam's book of 1958. Professor Keith Simpson, who wrote a new foreword to their book when it was republished in the 1980s, was also a member.

Andrew Rose, immigration judge and author of *Lethal Witness*, was a committee member when I corresponded with him in 2010. He gave a presentation on Spilsbury to the club in February 2008, followed by a discussion of the Sidney Street Siege led by Donald Rumbelow. Rose was very critical of Spilsbury on both professional and personal levels. Towards the end of *Lethal Witness* he writes: 'The desire for simple answers to complex questions still besets scientific evidence. On many occasions in his long career Spilsbury may well have been correct in his diagnoses and opinions. Sometimes he was palpably wrong, advancing flawed conclusions with consequences that could – quite literally – be lethal.'<sup>556</sup> Rose ignores the fact that it is the death penalty that is the lethal factor, not Spilsbury's evidence. He was not at all persuaded by Browne and Tullett's version of Spilsbury's personality, and in a personal email to me he wrote: 'I suspect that Spilsbury, who was privately quite vain, was not in the least embarrassed to be bracketed with 'mythical Sherlock Holmes', in the reportage of *TIME* and other media sources.'<sup>557</sup>

Rose seems to disapprove of Spilsbury because he provided answers that the author believes he had no right to give. Scientific evidence may be persuasive because of its logic, but the version of the story it tells is limited. Nevertheless, to dismiss Spilsbury's answers as simple seems slightly unfair. For the pathologist, the pathway to these scientific resolutions was complex and time consuming, as Browne and Tullett describe:

This quality of thoroughness, which made Spilsbury what he was, had one defect, apparent as he grew older. Satisfied only with the best, he found that life was not long enough for the amount of work he imposed upon himself. His health suffered, and, to some extent, the work itself suffered too, as he toiled ever harder to get ahead of time. "It must be admitted," Bentley Purchase says, "that with the passing of years, his delivery deteriorated... He overworked himself. Being so individualist and one who refused assistance to himself (though he gave it freely to others), he was likely to do so." This was an old story; many years before Sir William Willcox had said to his son, "Spilsbury is a fool: he'll kill himself with work done for nothing."

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<sup>556</sup> Rose, *Lethal Witness*, p.270.

<sup>557</sup> Andrew, in a follow up email sent on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2010, also disputed my description of Our Society as 'secretive': 'Incidentally, we don't regard ourselves as "secretive." OS is dining club, which meets usually three times a year, and those attending are expected to observe "Chatham House Rules", an understandable requirement when cases of contemporary interest are being discussed.'

In Spilsbury's view it was not done for nothing, but in one sense the verdict is true, as towards the end of his life he realized. One of the saddest features of his case is that his most cherished aim, the object of so much of this overwork, not only was not attained, but was not even begun...[For] years he was collecting material for the book he was going to write on the application of post-mortem work to forensic medicine. For this purpose he summarized 6000 cases on his cards, and almost to the day of his death he was still summarizing, and still talking of his book. But increasing age, infirmities, the necessity of earning a living, and, perhaps, not least, inability to call a halt to note-taking until, in his opinion, his material was complete – an unattainable state of things – these obstacles combined to postpone forever the task on which his heart was set. Not a line of the book was written.<sup>558</sup>

This is the paradoxical tragedy of Sir Bernard Spilsbury: a legacy besmirched by those who found his resolutions to criminal cases too simple and dogmatically presented, when in fact he never felt confident enough about his vast experience and knowledge to write his book. Then he died by his own hand and left more questions than answers.

Logical, forensic evidence during criminal trials, presenting a clear pathway to justice, is understandably popular with judges and juries faced with decisions over a person's guilt. For that reason, it is easy to see why Spilsbury was popular in the Courts yet unpopular with some crime enthusiasts. Spilsbury could answer the howdunit and the whodunit, but other questions were far more complex. Why did Crippen cease to love his wife? Did George Joseph Smith feel any remorse or was he simply a cold-blooded serial killer? Was anything that Norman Thorne said true? Our Society was an ideal place to discuss all of the questions a criminal trial could not answer, and usually could not even ask. Outside the administration of justice, the lure of the criminous is not in its solution, but in its liminality, as Alan Moore describes in *From Hell*:

Murder, other than in the most strict forensic sense, is never soluble. That dark human clot can never melt into a lucid, clear suspension. Our detective fictions tell us otherwise: everything's just meat and cold ballistics. Provide a murderer, a motive and a means, you've solved the crime. Using this method, the solution to the Second World War is as follows: Hitler. The German Economy. Tanks. Thus for convenience, we reduce the complex events. The greater part of any murder is the field of theory, fascination and hysteria that it engenders. A black diaspora. Our tireless, sinister enthusiasm.<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> Browne and Tullett, *Bernard Spilsbury*, p.243.

<sup>559</sup> Campbell, Eddie, and Moore, Alan, *From Hell*, (London, Knockabout Limited, 2006), Appendix II, p.22.



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