"I AM AN OMNIVOROUS READER"

Book reviews by PAUL M. CHAPMAN, ROSS E. DAVIES, ROGER JOHNSON and MARK JONES

That Ghastly Face: A Facsimile of the Original Manuscript of "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" by Arthur Conan Doyle with Annotations and Commentary. Edited, with an Introduction, by Ira Brad Matetsky. Baker Street Irregulars Press, 2025. 224pp. $44.95 (hbk)

'The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier' may or may not be a great Sherlockian story, but the BSI Manuscript Series edition – edited by Ira Brad Matetsky and titled *That Ghastly Face* – proves that it is a great Sherlockian discussion prompt. I have never read a more wide-ranging, thought-provoking, and entertaining collection of Sherlockian essays.

'The Blanched Soldier' emerges as a kind of literary drop of water, in which a Sherlockian can explore samples from the full range of canonical themes without having read any other story. And it is here that we most appreciate Matetsky's presence, not only for the quality of the scholarship he elicits from the first-rate Sherlockian scholars he has recruited to write, but also in the gentle humour that he inspires – or perhaps liberates – those scholars to employ.

Consider two illustrative examples, one scientific, one artistic.

Marilynne McKay, the author of multiple non-trifling monographs on dermatology (for example, her award-winning textbook, *Obstetric and Gynecologic Dermatology*), is a genuine expert on human skin. Here she presents a comprehensive and compact – yet admirably comprehensible to the lay reader – survey of skin characteristics and conditions in the Canon. McKay also gives us a sense of the science of skin as a field rich in nuance and susceptible to adjustment as expert understanding evolves. Thus, she teaches us that ichthyosis – Godfrey Emsworth's condition in 'The Blanched Soldier' – is not today the simple, somewhat inexplicable condition portrayed in the story. Rather, '[t]oday we divide over thirty different varieties into *inherited ichthyosis* with specific gene findings and *acquired ichthyosis*, a group associated with other medical conditions or as a side effect of a medication.' McKay proceeds to show that while Doyle 'readily saw skin problems as good mystery material' throughout the Canon, he sometimes missed the mark not only when compared to modern experts but also when compared to the state of science at the time of writing. Yet she is generous in her appreciation of his approach: 'he was wise enough to realize that neither he nor Watson — nor even Holmes — knew enough to make a masterful diagnosis on the spot. Unless he's faking, sometimes a detective just needs a dermatologist.'

Burt Wolder takes on the original illustrations in the first printings of 'The Blanched Soldier'. By the time the story appeared in 1926, Sidney Paget (1860–1908) had been out of the picture for a long time, and the mantle of greatest living Sherlockian illustrator had crossed the Atlantic to grace the shoulders of the American Frederic Dorr Steele. But Wolder resists the urge to follow the spotlight on Steele. He does deal with Steele's work in *Liberty* magazine, but he applies most of his attention to Paget's successor at *The Strand Magazine*, Howard Elcock. Thank goodness. Yes, Steele is more important – and his illustrations are better than Elcock's – but Elcock's work is interesting in its own ways, and understudied. Thus, Wolder's assessment of Elcock's portrayal of Holmes & Co. in 'The Blanched Soldier' (and a half-dozen other stories), as well as his enormous output on other projects, is an important contribution to the study of the illustrated Canon. Perhaps more significantly, and definitely more entertainingly, Wolder reveals that Elcock's life was bonkers. Arthur Conan Doyle's romances were interesting, but Elcock's were by turns truly wild and intriguingly mysterious. And Elcock's later-in-life embraces of odd pseudo-sciences were at least a match for Doyle's. But, as Wolder reminds us, Doyle and Elcock both remained masters of their respective core professional crafts throughout. There is much more here; the only way to fully appreciate Elcock's unorthodox existence and canonical contributions is to read Wolder, who tells his story amusingly yet respectfully.

The other chapters – by Mary Alcaro, Phillip Bergem, Shana Carter, Paul Chapman, Catherine Cooke, Bruce Harris, Mark Jones, Monica Schmidt, Andrew Solberg, Randall Stock, Jim Webb, and Matetsky himself – on topics ranging from uncanny valleys to conventional cartography and from authorship of the story to Doyle's other contemporaneous writing are also worthy of your attention.

A scholar and critic no less than Nick Utechin routinely sang the praises of the BSI's Manuscript Series, and rightly so. It is a valuable and impressive

project. *That Ghastly Face* is an excellent addition and an exemplar of all that is good in it. Viewed from another angle, there's at least one odd feature of *That Ghastly Face* that is strikingly identical to every other volume in the series: From the first volume in 2001 through this, the nineteenth, the editors have always been men. The questions are obvious. What are the answers?

RD

The Serpent Under: A Sherlock Holmes Adventure by Bonnie MacBird. Collins Crime Club, 2025. xiv+367pp. £16.99 (hbk)

The book's title comes from Lady Macbeth's instruction to her husband: "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't." The forty-one chapters are divided into seven parts, each graced with a suitable serpentine quotation, and the first letter of each chapter is beautifully and appropriately embellished as a pictorial "drop cap" by Mark Mázers.

Like Bonnie MacBird's five previous novel-length contributions to the Holmes-Watson saga, *The Serpent Under* is a satisfyingly chunky book – notably more so than most editions of the four canonical 'long stories'. However, that effect is due in part to the sensible size and spacing of the text, which enhances the compulsive quality of the story. The tale that Dr Watson relates is a remarkably complex one, but I digested it with great pleasure in two sittings. As Nathaniel Hawthorne observed, "Easy reading is damn hard writing."

Having just learned from Heffie O'Malley, a former member of the Baker Street irregulars, of the suspicious death of a one-time prospective irregular, Holmes and Watson are unexpectedly summoned to Windsor Castle, where Jane Wandley, companion to the Duchess of Ormond, has apparently killed herself after having her beautiful face exquisitely but grotesquely tattooed with the images of two snakes. Despite the disapproval of officials at the Castle (which is frequently but inaccurately referred to as "the Palace") Holmes carries out as full an investigation as he can, and proves to his own satisfaction that the supposed suicide is actually murder. He and Watson visit the Wandley family seat, where the estate manager, Peter Oliver, explains that Jane's father, Sir James, is indisposed. Under Holmes's prompting, Oliver gives them information about the family: of the late Lady Wandley's joy at the expulsion of a Gypsy family from a remote corner of the estate – and of her death shortly after; of Jane's younger sister Kate, a radical suffragette, their brother Clarence, a rather precious artist, and the resentment that both felt towards Jane and their father.

More connections come to light, including the death of Lash Crowley, the would-be Baker Street irregular. Watson is injured – and arrested. One of Clarence's paintings is stolen: it depicted the exact image that was later tattooed on his sister Jane's face. Holmes and Watson return to 221B to find a dead snake-handler and a live king cobra in their sitting-room…

At the end, when justice has been served, Dr Watson writes, "But what shall remain vivid in my memory forever was the sheer number of murders Holmes had untangled."

The characters, familiar and unfamiliar, are all credible, some of them horribly so. And *The Serpent Under* is a real page-turner.

RJ

The Stark Munro Letters by Arthur Conan Doyle. Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by James Machin. Edinburgh University Press, 2025, 327pp, £100 (hbk).

The Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Arthur Conan Doyle, under the general editorship of Professor Douglas Kerr, is an ambitious and commendable ongoing enterprise to produce a standard, if not entirely exhaustive, scholarly edition of Conan Doyle's works; from the significant and celebrated to the obscure and neglected.

The Stark Munro Letters, which was first published serially in *The Idler* between October 1894 and November 1895, then in volume form in September 1895 (the base text for this edition), is both significant *and* neglected. It encompasses, as editor James Machin makes clear, a number of different approaches and genres, but is essentially fictionalised biography (or 'autobiografiction', to mention a particularly clumsy – and ugly – neologism listed here). But, as Machin sensibly comments; 'Any work of fiction is, of course, impossible to disentangle fully from the author's life and previous work', adding that, '*The Stark Munro Letters* … presents unique challenges in this respect, challenges that it is impossible to completely overcome.'

Basically, *Stark Munro* is a (thinly) disguised and re-fashioned fictionalisation of Conan Doyle's own early life and struggles in the medical profession, with specific concentration on the years between 1881-1884; from Doyle's ['Stark Munro'] first apprenticeships, to his entering a chaotic and ill-considered partnership practice in Plymouth ['Bradfield'] with an Edinburgh University

acquaintance, George Turnavine Budd [‘James Cullingworth’], and the subsequent establishment of his own nascent practice in Southsea [‘Birchespool’]. The action is episodic, rather than plot-driven, and marks a great advance over his earliest self-examining ‘novel’, *The Narrative of John Smith*, which he claimed had been lost but which resurfaced around the time of the controversial sale of his archive at Christie's in 2004, and was subsequently published by the British Library in 2011.

Rather than the unfocused philosophical meanderings of *John Smith*, *Stark Munro* utilises the epistolary narrative device popular in the eighteenth century (Samuel Richardson – a Doyle favourite - was a noted exponent) and is centred around the correspondence between Munro and an old student friend, Herbert Swanborough of Lowell, Massachusetts. Despite its avowedly contemporary concerns this ‘antiquated’ choice of narrative structure led some critics to dismiss the book as outmoded. Machin quite rightly disagrees, arguing that ‘the epistolary novel also has the capacity to allow for more experimental, even modernist forms of writing.’ Doyle's friend Bram Stoker was shortly to prove the point by widening and re-invigorating the form via typewriters and phonographs in *Dracula* (1897), and Machin highlights the curiously apposite presence of a copy of *The Stark Munro Letters* on Leopold Bloom's bookshelf in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

If the early reviewers were unenthusiastic about *Stark Munro*'s framework they seem to have been almost unanimous in their praise of the unhinged character and madcap escapades of Munro's (un)professional partner, Cullingworth (a version of whom had first appeared in the 1884 short story ‘Crabbe's Practice’, and who would take his curtain-call in more ‘factual’ form – though still as ‘Cullingworth’, rather than ‘Budd’ – in Conan Doyle's actual autobiography, *Memories and Adventures* (1924)). Even the medical press evinced a sneaking regard for this unscrupulous adventurer, although they may have been more circumspect if they had known how worryingly close his exploits were to those of the all-too-real George Budd.

It is quite clear that *The Stark Munro Letters* is an indispensable part of Conan Doyle's output and, as Machin emphasises, he would regularly return to its central themes and concerns throughout his career, not least in the Sherlock Holmes Canon. It is also a highly enjoyable read in its own right, and its neglect is both puzzling and sad. This is the first notable reprint since 1982, and its entry into this prestigious series is to be welcomed. James Machin's Introduction is wide-ranging, informative, readable and largely unencumbered by academic jargon and theory. In addition to his considered use of contemporary reviews, this edition also includes a number of well-chosen appendices, such as Conan Doyle's youthful essay ‘On the Intemperance of our Country’ and his late speech extolling ‘The Romance of Medicine’; as well as a contextual Editorial essay on the original manuscript and later variant texts.

As with other entries in the series this is a very well-produced volume, but – as is often the case with academic press publications – its price tag will prove prohibitive to many potential readers (and collectors). Given the Edinburgh Edition's aim to raise awareness of Conan Doyle's wider oeuvre, the profile of the project itself might be served by the corresponding publication of a consumer-friendly paperback edition. Nevertheless, Douglas Kerr and his team are to be congratulated, and James Machin in particular for assiduously accompanying this welcome return visit of Dr. Stark Munro.

PMC

The Golden Era of Sherlock Holmes and His Contemporaries by Michael Cohen. Genius Book Publishing, 2025, 282pp. £13.18 (pbk)

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the phenomenal publishing success of the Sherlock Holmes stories in *The Strand Magazine* is that it inspired a generation of imitators. In this cogent, wide-ranging and highly readable volume, Michael Cohen explores the many diverse responses to Holmes from authors who sought to tweak the new proven formula to those who challenged its conventions. In this, he is not a pioneer, and Cohen responsibly situates his own analysis alongside foundational works by Julian Symons and Howard Haycraft, more recent surveys by Martin Edwards and Claire Clarke, and the anthologising work of Hugh Greene in the 1970s. But Cohen also adds his own layer, neatly categorising twenty-five years’ worth of Holmesian rivals into an accessible typology that spans women who solve crimes, rogues, specialists and even occult detectives.

The book opens with a concise analysis of the Holmes formula in terms of its narrative style, plotting and characterisation, before embarking on a review of those early imitators who responded in arguably a more transactional way by exaggerating or refining one or more Holmesian characteristic. Enter the likes of Martin Hewitt, Addington Peace, Philo Gubb and Dagobert Trostler (who has recently

acquired new mysteries from the pen of Balduin Groller, courtesy of Kazabo Publishing). These names alone should give a sense of the breadth of Cohen's survey, which extends beyond the British periodical press to include American and European detectives. Cohen neatly captures their essence, with short summaries of their most important cases, each time drawing out connections to Conan Doyle and in some cases individual Sherlock Holmes stories.

Thereafter, the book delves into different archetypes more fully, beginning with 'Lady Detectives' Loveday Brooke, Lady Molly of Scotland Yard and the oft-overlooked Hilda Wade (whose adventures were completed by Conan Doyle when Grant Allen succumbed to liver cancer). For those familiar with these and other names, Cohen's book is a delightful trip down memory lane. For those unfamiliar, it is a jumping off point, and the book comes with a helpful finding aid for online sources and publications of interest. Of course, it is impossible to be exhaustive, with new detectives effectively (re)discovered all the time as periodicals are digitised, but Cohen's book highlights the principal authors and sleuths.

Moreover, Cohen makes well-judged selections. For example, in the category 'Doctors, Scientists and Other Specialists', he rightly singles out R. Austin Freeman's Dr John Thorndyke and Jacques Futrelle's S. F. X. Van Dusen for comment as one might expect, alongside lesser-known figures such as Max Pemberton's Bernard Sutton, Gaston Leroux's Rouletabille and L. T. Meade's Dr Halifax, each notable in their own way. In fact, one of the serendipities of the book is that it does much to assert Lillie Thomas Meade's significance to detective fiction in both volume and quality. In addition, Cohen names three greats who he feels could justifiably rival Sherlock Holmes: G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Melville Davison Post's Uncle Abner (the USA context again) and Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados, each of whom receive extended treatment.

While there were indeed serious rivals, Cohen maintains Sherlock Holmes as the 'one fixed point' around which authors gravitated, even where they sought to invert the format entirely. This is most obvious in Cohen's 'Rogue's Gallery' containing the likes of Simon Carne, Romney Pringle and Madame Sara (Meade again) alongside Raffles and Arsène Lupin. Cohen gives an astute analysis of Arthur Morrison's contribution to detective fiction with the character of Horace Dorrington, a thoroughly immoral (and enjoyable) villain. Morrison did much to upset reader expectations, including making the victim the narrator. The format inversion is more apparent in the 'Occult Detectives' – Carnacki, Flaxman Low and John Bell among them – who permitted the supernatural explanation.

If there is one small point of contention, it is that Cohen presents Conan Doyle's influence as a one-way street. In fact, there is good evidence that Conan Doyle read and engaged with his contemporaries and responded in kind. One cannot read *The Case-Book* without feeling the influence of the new detective fiction on Conan Doyle's own writing, while ACD's late story 'The Last Resource' is a (clumsy) swing at hard-boiled. But then both these examples are drawn from the period after Cohen's 'First Golden Age', so this is not a criticism and an opportunity to enhance the book if it moves to another edition.

The book closes with two excellent chapters that show how far authors were prepared to deviate from the Sherlock Holmes formula. In 'Iconoclasts', Cohen examines three works that were 'especially egregious departures' from reader expectations of the detective story. While E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913) is well-known (not least for its influence on the young Agatha Christie), Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* is almost never discussed. Its sensationalism and cynicism are staggering counterpoints to Holmesian home comforts, although being published in the same month as 'A Scandal in Bohemia' it is evidence of how the detective story could have evolved rather than an explicit reaction to Conan Doyle.

The book concludes with a survey of post-war detectives and a warming homily to the 'flowering of strange and wonderful variations on the detective theme' that flourished in the quarter century after *The Adventures* first appeared. *The Golden Era of Sherlock Holmes and His Contemporaries* is a greatly accessible and enjoyable tribute to these early detectives and one that hopefully will inspire readers to seek out these forgotten gems.

MJ