

## INFORMAL CONFERENCE

Issues in the History of Sciences

Moderator: GENE KRITSKY

### ABSTRACTS

**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Indicted.** CHARLES K. COOK, Tri-State University, Angola, Indiana 46703.—Did he do it? Was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle the perpetrator of the Piltown hoax? A great man once said that “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” The man, of course, the only living 129 year old beekeeper in the South of England: Mr. Sherlock Holmes (1).

In their recent article (2) accusing Conan Doyle, Winslow and Meyer, though admitting the case against him to be “circumstantial, intricate, even convoluted” have provided means, motive and opportunity to substantiate the case against Conan Doyle. Unfortunately the only sources listed are (1) *Memories and Adventures* by Arthur Conan Doyle, in which psychic activities were only stressed in the second edition, updated in 1930, within a few weeks of his death; and (2) *The Quest for Sherlock Holmes* by Owen Dudley Edwards, 1983, which covers only the first twenty-three years of Conan Doyle’s life. A complete listing of Conan Doyle biographies can be found in reference (3).

Undeniably, and Sherlockian would admit that Conan Doyle possessed both the means and the opportunity, so the concentration here will be on motive.

First consider Conan Doyle’s attitude concerning Spiritualism. In 1879 he wrote “When the body dissolves there is an end of matter.” It took more than three decades to wear away Doyle’s resistance on this point. So his total conversion to a fanatical spiritualist was very gradual. It wasn’t completed until 1916 when he observed (and wrote later) (5) that he was lead “to understand that these psychic studies which [I] had so long pursued, could no longer be regarded as a mere hobby or a fascinating pursuit of a novel research.” If he considered his earlier interests as a hobby, it seems unlikely that he would have invested thirty years to retaliate against Lankester over Slade. Doyle, himself, served as a special investigator (6) for the Society of Psychical Research and was well aware of the tricks used by spiritualist charlatans.

Next consider any vindictiveness that Winslow and Meyer claim that Conan Doyle held toward Lankester. Doyle was a busy man: writing prolifically, lecturing, traveling. It would seem unlikely that Lankester would be so important a target that Doyle would or could invest so much of his time and energy to so dubious a cause. But if he did and Lankester were the target, then Doyle misfired: Lankester could now be considered the motivating force behind the writing of *The Lost World*, which many consider to be Conan Doyle’s finest work of fiction.

Furthermore, researching prehistoric jungles and animals for *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle consulted Lankester, (7) a compliment to the eminent zoologist. Lankester’s response went “you are perfectly splendid in your study of the ‘lost world’ . . . What about introducing a gigantic snake sixty feet long? Or a rabbit as big as an ox? Or a herd of pigmy elephants two feet high? Can four men escape by training a vegetarian pterodactyl to fly with them one at a time? Will some ape-woman fall in love with Challenger and murder the leaders of her tribe to save him?”

Is this an exchange between bitter enemies?

So much for the motive of vindictiveness. But could Conan Doyle still have been part of the hoax? (Perhaps participating with Dawson, as a practical joke, amusing at the time, but quickly forgotten?) It would seem reasonable that some reference be made in his writings concerning this event. The quote in *The Lost World* by Professor Summerlee suggesting that a bone could be faked is only a small clue. Conan Doyle probably would have referred to such a prank in a letter or a story in which the prank was the main theme. Unfortunately the Doyle archives have not been opened to the scrutiny of students and researchers (8). So all of the data may not yet be available. Hence, we must heed Holmes' admonition.

In conclusion, consider Conan Doyle, the man. It is known that he was honorable, and tenacious but fair. If he were involved in the Piltdown hoax, he would have left a major clue. To this end note that the scientific name of the purposely broken hinge on the skull is *condyle*, perhaps a signature and clue reminiscent of the blood written "RACHE" found on the wall in "A Study in Scarlet".(9).

#### Literature Cited

1. Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, "A Scandal in Bohemia" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1930, p. 163.
2. Winslow, John Hathaway and Heyer, Alfred, "The Perpetrator at Piltdown", in *Science* 83, September, 1983, pp. 32-43.
3. Redmond, Donald A., "A Reader's Guide to Doyle Biographies," in *Baker Street Miscellanea*, Sciolist Press, Chicago, June, 1978, pp. 31-35.
4. Higham, Charles, *The Adventures of Conan Doyle*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1976, p. 61.
5. Higham, Charles, p. 256.
6. Higham, Charles, pp. 131-2.
7. Carr, John Dickson, *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, Harper & Row, 1949, pp. 212-213.
8. Editorial staff, *Baker Street Miscellanea*, June 1978, Inside front cover.
9. Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, "A Study in Scarlet" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 31.

**Issues in the History of Science—The Piltdown Hoax.** GENE KRITSKY, Department of Biology, College of Mount St. Joseph, Mount St. Joseph, Ohio 45051.—The Piltdown Hoax is a complex chapter in the history of science. At first it was called the missing link, a fossil with both human and ape features, but later it was determined to be an elaborate fraud. Now three decades after the hoax was discovered, Piltdown still raises lively discussions about who was responsible and what was its significance. An informal conference during the History of Science division meeting examined the Piltdown hoax and the evidence implicating various participants.

Dr. Diane Beynon, Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, reviewed the history of the Piltdown discoveries. Found in 1911 and revealed to the world by Charles Dawson in 1912, Piltdown man captured the attention of the British Museum's paleontologist Arthur Smith Woodward. Woodward tried to relate the fossils to the evolutionary tree of *Homo sapiens*. The anthropological world struggled with the fossils during the next four decades trying to fit them into the developing picture painted by the hominid fossils discovered in South Africa.

When the hoax was discovered in 1953, the issue became one of credibility. Anthropology was fooled by the bones, but it was also anthropology that proved they were indeed fake. Dr. Beynon argued that Piltdown was not a tragedy for anthropology,

but rather that it is evidence of its strength. The Piltdown episode shows how the science researched methodologies and reexamined previous finds. The Piltdown hoax has advanced anthropology with the development of sound field techniques that would make another hoax less likely in the future.

Dr. Charles Cook, Tri-State University, examined the new evidence that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, may have devised the elaborate hoax in an effort to embarrass the scientific community. In a lively presentation, Dr. Cook presented evidence that Doyle did not want to set up the scientific establishment, but on the other hand, found a clue that Doyle would have left, if he were the perpetrator, namely a broken condyle.

