



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Luckhurst, Roger (2021) Arthur Conan Doyle and medical London: reading the topography of round the red lamp. *Victoriographies: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Writing* 11 (3), pp. 295-313. ISSN 2044-2416.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/46041/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

Arthur Conan Doyle and Medical London: Reading the Topography of *Round the Red Lamp*

Roger Luckhurst

This essay focuses on Conan Doyle's brief residence in Bloomsbury in central London between March and June 1891 and the impact it had on his medical fiction. This period was after a series of abrupt and impulsive decisions that propelled Conan Doyle to Berlin in November 1890 to attend Robert Koch's demonstration of a new 'cure' for tuberculosis, the return to Southsea and his immediate announcement, in the local press, that he was abandoning his general practice after seven years of careful building of social networks there, and his uprooting of wife and baby first to Vienna to take in lectures at the Krankenhaus in January 1891 and then to Paris by early March to visit the world-famous optometrist Edmond Landolt, and so, finally, to residence in London.

The Conan Doyles settled in lodgings in Bloomsbury at 23 Montague Place in late March 1891. From the 6th April to the 4th May – so for less than one month – he rented expensive consulting rooms at 2 Devonshire Place, Upper Wimpole Street, close to London's medical epicentre in Harley Street, but also continued his specialist education at the Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital in King William Street in Charing Cross, one of London's eye hospitals.

According to Conan Doyle's own curiously opaque and self-mythologizing account of this period in his autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, he claimed that 'not one single patient had ever crossed the threshold of my rooms' during this experiment (96). He received no referrals as a consultant ophthalmologist, supposedly specialising in refractive lenses to correct astigmatism. Instead, so he claimed, he sat alone from 10 till 3 daily and wrote at least three of the first Sherlock Holmes serial stories, 'A Case of Identity', 'The Red-Headed League' and 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery'. This is somewhat contradicted by an interview that Conan Doyle gave in 1892, however, when he told the journalist that he was 'compelled to attend to his patients in the morning, and spent most of the afternoons at the [Westminster Ophthalmic] Hospital, so that no time remained for his writing but a portion of the night' (cited Lellenburg, 292). This did not fit with his later accounts, perhaps because it did not express as clean a break as retrospection demanded. What is certain is that in May he fell ill with influenza, which had killed his sister in Lisbon the year before. It was during this bout of the particularly virulent Russian influenza, he narrated over thirty years later, that he reached an epiphany, his 'moment of clarity', and decided to abandon his difficult attempt to leap up the medical hierarchy from general practitioner to consultant eye specialist and instead to choose the life of a professional writer. By the 25th June, recovered from influenza, he had moved out of central London and given up his consulting room and was settling in to Tennison Road in Upper Norwood, with a view of the Crystal Palace from his back garden, to live the suburban dream with wife and child.

This moment is seen as a critical phase in Conan Doyle's career, of course, but is also notably marked by Conan Doyle's own cheery bamboozlement at the unreadability of his own motivations. Of his sudden abandonment of Southsea, after years of obsessive penny-pinching, tedious accounting letters to his mother, and hard work embedding himself in local social and political networks, he merely says of the impulsive trip to Berlin – made solely on the spur of the newspaper coverage about Robert Koch – that it left him 'a changed man' and that he had 'felt something of the powers within me' (Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, 88). Of those first serial Holmes stories, he appeals, a little later in *Memories and Adventures*, to the notion of the 'multiplex personality' that splits him as a writer somewhere between Holmes and Watson (100). This is a direct reference to the psychological theory of Frederic Myers, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research. Myers considered the literary genius of Tennyson or Stevenson and many other writers as marked by uncontrollable 'subliminal uprushes' of ideas that came unbidden and overwhelmed the conventional and curtailed conscious mind. Genius was about allowing these subliminal uprushes their proper due as creative energies, however mysterious and hooded from conscious agency they seemed to be. Given Conan Doyle's investment in the psychic powers and sensitivities of Celts in several stories in this period (for instance, in 'John Barrington Cowles' or *The Parasite*), perhaps his several months of impulsive moves were driven by his own Celtic willingness to accede to subliminal messages from elements of his 'unincorporated' mind.

Literary biographers tend to be willing to go along with Conan Doyle's self-mythologizing account of this rapid transition from the profession of medicine to that of writing, since accepting this account gets to the cases of Sherlock Holmes faster. But it is worth pausing on these few weeks in London not just as he lived them in those short months of 1891, but as some elements of that experience recurred in his later fiction, most overtly in his controversial collection of medical stories that appeared as *Round the Red Lamp* in 1894. Where he chose to live in London, I want to argue, is rich in meanings that echo through these fictions.

*

When Arthur Conan Doyle returned to London after his sojourn in Berlin and Paris, he first looked for lodgings in Bedford Square and Russell Square in Bloomsbury. Arthur, Louisa and Mary Conan Doyle moved to a suite of rooms in the short road that connected those squares in 23 Montague Place in March 1891. It was a large house divided into lodgings along a street where the grand houses had mostly become hotels or divided into apartments.

23 Montague Place was on the northern side of the street, in a row of houses where the University of London's towering Senate House block now stands, built between 1932 and 1937. Conan Doyle's house faced south towards the British Museum. Montague Place was part of the development of the Duke of Bedford's estates, the fields that still ran from the gardens of old Montague House (first home of the British Museum) up to Hampstead until major development started in about 1805 (see Ashton and Ingleby). The speculative housing built by James Burton and Thomas Cubitt around grand squares were meant to attract the wealthier end of the new professional middle classes: lawyers from the inns of court, bankers from the City, and medics, who were accelerating up the social scale fast as part of the new professional society. There was no trade allowed in the Bedford Estates (hence the lack of shops), and the squares were mostly gated as private developments until the end of the nineteenth century.

The wealthy did not, however, move in to Bloomsbury, but went further west, to Mayfair, Regent's Park and St. John's Wood, so Bloomsbury began to acquire its mildly bohemian reputation quite early. The arrival of the three main stations, Euston (1837), King's Cross (1852) and Saint Pancras (1868), also transformed the social tenor of the area, making it a place for a more temporary residential population. Further south, the streets edged into the area long occupied by the St. Giles' rookery. That notorious slum, with a leper hospital at its centre, had been largely erased by the building of New Oxford Street (constructed 1844-7), but Conan Doyle had only to walk across the road to the south side of Montague Place to be in the old ward of St. George's and St. Giles, the two churches rebuilt in the eighteenth century that had towered over the slums.

The UCL Bloomsbury Project website, an encyclopaedic history of the area, describes the Montague Place houses as 'large and luxurious', attracting 'a mixture of well-off residents and aspiring lodgers'. Conan Doyle places Sherlock Holmes in temporary rooms in the neighbouring Montague Street, which runs down the side of the British Museum to Great Russell Street in 'The Musgrave Ritual.' Women in employment might also live alone in the area, respectably: there were specific hotels and residential blocks for women. The governess, Violet Hunter, writes her first note to Sherlock Holmes from her rooms in Montague Place in 'The Adventure of the Copper Beeches.'

One comment in 1906 said of these kinds of Bloomsbury lodgings that 'anyone, I understand, may live there without losing caste' (Ashton, 13). Yet in 1892, the Bedford Estate steward specifically deemed Montague Place a 'lost cause' as a reputable address, since the houses had been so thoroughly divided or illicitly turned into businesses: hotels and lodging houses. The houses on the south side of the street were sold to expand the British Museum in 1895, and demolished to make way for the Edward the VIIth galleries. The north side, where Conan Doyle had lodged, went under the Senate House of the University of London 30 years later.

Bloomsbury was the awkward place between the old City of London and Westminster and the West End. Conan Doyle's choice of lodging can also be seen as significant in its transitional or interstitial location. To the north was University College on Gower Street, the so-called 'godless college' founded in 1826 to outflank the religious requirements of entry at Oxford and Cambridge. University College was built on eight acres of wasteland in 1828 around a neoclassical design, left incomplete in early years due to poor recruitment of fee-paying students. The college hospital opened opposite the entrance on Gower Street in 1834. To the south, very nearby, the British Museum, redesigned by Sir Robert Smirke with a neoclassical portico (completed in 1852), was another centre of learning, and, once entry by application to the keeper was abandoned, its reading room became a demotic and democratic space opened to the poor scholars who crammed the local streets. Conan Doyle joined as a reader with the intention of conducting research for his historical novels. Bloomsbury's key centres of learning, University College and the Museum, drove the kind of progressive and dissident tenor that would eventually attract the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia and Vanessa Stephens moving to Gordon Square with their brother to escape their father's grand house in Kensington in 1904. In 1921, a little after his publication of his scabrous *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey also took a house in Gordon Square. The group's symbolic rebellion against the Victorian intellectual establishment was perfectly embodied in their déclassé address.

From its beginnings, University College brought the chance of lower middle-class professional medical training into London for the first time, a challenge to the closed shops of the medical colleges further west. Although Charles Darwin only lived for 3 years on Gower Street, moving away in 1842, his work symbolised the threat of materialist knowledge to traditional theological centres of authority. By the 1880s, when Karl Pearson was made professor of mathematics at UCL, he and Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, were about to make the college the centre for that problematic form of materialistic social Darwinism, eugenics.

However, in a curious supplemental effect, these modern, progressive institutions of Bloomsbury also supported a whole network of shadow or fringe institutions that were devoted to more arcane, even occult pursuits. The London Mesmeric Infirmary was opened in Bedford Street in 1850 by Professor John Elliotson, the friend of Dickens, Thackeray and Harriet Martineau, who had been forced to resign from his position at the University College Hospital for introducing the disreputable practice of mesmerism into the wards (see Winter and also Bates in this issue). The Infirmary moved out of Bloomsbury in 1853. By the time Conan Doyle lived there, the area had ties to spiritualism and occultism. This might, of course, have attracted him too. 36 Russell Square, just around the corner, had been home to Edward Cox, who founded the Psychological Society of Great Britain in the 1870s, an orthodox sounding cover for a programme of experimental séances with leading mediums.

The British National Association of Spiritualists had its headquarters in Great Russell Street. James Burns's Spiritual Institute, which held nightly public séances, was in Southampton Row. The Swedenborg Society, built by followers of the Swedish mystical writer Emmanuel Swedenborg, had a hall for meetings in Bloomsbury Square. The controversial mediums, Frank Herne and Charles Williams, operated out of rooms in Lamb's Conduit Street, and the rooms of the American medium Henry Slade, who had been taken to court under a dubious application of laws against fortune-telling in 1876, had been in Upper Bedford Place (for more detail on these connections, see Luckhurst, 'Occult Gazetteer').

Perhaps Conan Doyle also knew the fanciful London legend of 'the field of forty footsteps', the footprints of brothers who killed each other during a duel in the last years of the eighteenth century, still allegedly visible as no grass would grow there. The field was said to be in the fields behind Montague House, roughly where Montague Place was situated. The story was a familiar subject of romances and stage-plays throughout the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, occultists read between the lines of musty tomes for hermetic secrets in the reading room of the British Library. The Rosicrucian mystic and occultist A. E. Waite had spent a decade prising out esoteric secrets from the book stacks there, and in January 1891 had just joined the occult grouping The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The garret Gothicist and student of the occult Arthur Machen had lived all over London, in 1890 and 1891 composing his *succès de scandale* *The Great God Pan*. He lived at 4 Verulam Buildings in Gray's Inn after 1895, where he wrote *The Hill of Dreams*, and in his later reminiscences painted Great Russell Street as that place 'where the ghosts of dead and disappointed authors go sighing to and fro' (99) as they haunted the British Museum reading room. W. B. Yeats's esoteric studies also flowered in those reading rooms (he lived in Bloomsbury, slightly later, in rooms in Woburn Walk in the years 1895-1919). Transient lodgings in the area allowed for transient knowledges to flourish in these marginal locales.

But for Conan Doyle the medic rather than mystic, it is the East/West axis from his chosen rooms in Montague Place that holds the most significance. As a doctor, aspiring to be a specialist, Conan Doyle could and perhaps should have turned his face East, where the nearby Bloomsbury streets around Queen Square had been the centre of progressive medicine in London for forty years. These roads were full of dissenting medical institutions in the vanguard of new research, and often seeking to break with the conservatism of the royal medical colleges further West. The Royal Free Hospital, initially housed in buildings on Hatton Garden and then on Gray's Inn Road, was founded in 1828, and treated anyone without payment or subscription, including, most radically, prostitutes with venereal disease who had hitherto been abandoned to the streets. Also on Gray's Inn Road was the largest specialist hospital in Ear, Nose and Throat in Britain. On Great Ormond Street, The Hospital for Sick Children opened in 1852, founded by a Baptist dissenter who had been

excluded from the traditional Oxbridge route to medical respectability. Next door was the London Homeopathic Hospital, the controversial system of treatment proposed by Samuel Hahnemann that rejected allopathic medicine and thus remained outside medical orthodoxy. In the same area, a number of specialist institutions for epileptics, for 'infirm and incurable women', for children with tuberculosis, and the Italian Hospital, all grew up close to each other on Queen Square from the 1860s. It made Queen Square one of the highest concentrations of medical expertise in the modern world. At a lower rung in the medical hierarchy, but still important in terms of licensing professionals, the Pharmaceutical Society was located on Great Russell Street.

As well as easing class distinctions and allowing space for dissenting institutions, Bloomsbury was also pioneer in allowing women not only to study medicine but to practice it. This was a crucial battle in the 1870s and 1880s (Conan Doyle dramatized the professional horror at the arrival of women doctors in general practice his 1894 short story, 'The Doctors of Hoyland'). The first school of medicine for women opened in Bloomsbury in 1874, first in Handel Street, with women allowed to take courses at UCH from 1878. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson founded the hospital for women on the New North Road in 1890; she lived on Gower Street, very close to Montague Place. Even so, in 1888 only fifteen women were recorded on the Medical Register in London.

Conan Doyle, arriving as an eye specialist, might have chosen to associate himself with the Central London Ophthalmic Hospital, situated on Gray's Inn Road, which had opened in 1843 and had several consultant surgeons on the books. Instead, Conan Doyle chose to face West and to the much more traditional and elite centres of medical London. This might seem of slight importance, but it was a significant decision. The traditional locations of the medical London establishment started at the end of Conan Doyle's road in the grand houses of Bedford Square, which had in the 1850s been almost entirely populated by doctors. This was where Thomas Wakley, the campaigning editor of *The Lancet*, lived for many years. Wakley was outspoken at the need for medical reform, yet happy enough to conform to the medical hierarchy and insult the lowly general practitioner as 'a man so preposterous as to understand both physic and surgery', yet 'fit only to become a subordinate' (cited in Loudon, 194).

Further West, beyond Fitzrovia, the medical elite gathered around Harley Street and the grand squares north of Oxford Street. Here was where the Medical Society of London was located in Chandos Street, the oldest medical association in London, and where the Royal Society of Medicine was established in 1805. It moved to its current grand building at the bottom of Wimpole Street in 1910, on the corner of the aristocratic Cavendish Square, a mark of the shift that medics had made into the heart of the establishment in the course of the nineteenth century. The area was still not quite grand enough for the elite but tiny Royal College of Physicians, who were then located in Trafalgar Square. However, Marylebone

became the centre for regulatory medical bodies after The Medical Act of 1858 and its amendment in 1886. This was where the General Medical Council had its office, and later regulators and membership bodies for the lower medical trades of dentistry, midwifery and nursing. General practitioners were too lowly at this point for any formal association (for more detail on the history of Harley Street, see Adams and Black).

The private consultants occupied huge grand houses along Harley Street and its surrounding roads, generating a whole network of private, fee-paying hospitals and charitable institutes for their patients. To garner some borrowed authority, lesser specialists and even some notorious quacks tried to edge in as close to the Harley Street address as possible. The physicians, who held the keys to the upper echelons of the medical profession, guarded entry with a fierce conservatism, and often had consultancy arrangements with the more respectable hospitals of St. Thomas's or the Middlesex Hospital off Oxford Street. Many were celebrity figures, their feats reported breathlessly in the new sensational press; many were knighted or ennobled for rescuing members of the royal household from illness or death.

Conan Doyle allied himself to the Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital in King William Street, very close to Trafalgar Square and the clubland of St James's and Pall Mall. It was then directly adjacent to the charitable Charing Cross hospital. This decision was probably made through connections to the eye infirmary made through Dr Vernon Ford in Portsmouth. Despite the apparent sudden abandonment of Southsea, Conan Doyle had been doing three-hour stints in the afternoon at the Portsmouth Eye Hospital consolidating his specialism under Ford since 1889. The Royal Westminster had been founded as The Infirmary for Diseases of the Eye in 1816 by George Guthrie who had worked as an army-surgeon in the Peninsula War and wanted to continue to treat war veterans, so finding patronage from the Duke of Wellington. By the time Conan Doyle arrived in 1891, it had some of the leading eye specialists in the country, including Jabez Hogg, who wrote the key manual on ophthalmic surgery, and Henry Power, then a Hunterian Professor, Member of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons and Vice-President of the Ophthalmological Society of the UK (see Caddy). These were the men that Conan Doyle wanted to emulate. As he walked across London to his consulting rooms at the upper end of Wimpole Street, he might have eyed up the residences of famous medical men, first the house of Jabez Hogg at No. 1 Bedford Square and then that of Sir Jonathan Hutchinson or Sir Andrew Clark (the Queen's doctor) in Cavendish Square, or the townhouse of Sir Frederick Treves at 6 Wimpole Street. Lord Lister, pioneer of antiseptics, who had been at Edinburgh when Conan Doyle trained, lived further north, in Park Crescent. Conan Doyle had come to London not for advanced medical knowledge and pioneering research, but for status and respect. In order to get that, you faced West, not East.

Conan Doyle's accounting of his medical career in *Memories and Adventures* happily confesses that he never earned more than £300 a year as a general practitioner. In contrast, Walter Rivington's guide to the medical profession explained in 1888 that a home call for consultant physician or surgeon cost 2 guineas for a single consultation or referral, and charged in fee two-thirds of the distance travelled – so 3 miles, 2 guineas, 6 miles, 4 guineas, and 50 miles, to go out into the Home Counties, a whopping 33 guineas. This kind of rate was only for the pure physicians, who numbered barely over one hundred elite doctors in Conan Doyle's time. Dr Ernest Jones, who was Sigmund Freud's first convert in England and therefore struggling badly in his practice, later remembered bitterly: 'What a closed corporation, like an expensive club, the consulting world of those days was, where everyone gossiped with the other and looked askance at anyone who was not quite the thing' (cited in Adams, 33).

Enterprising general practitioners and specialists could still do well, though. In Conan Doyle's *Stark Munro Letters*, the scandalous Cullingworth (based on Conan Doyle's first medical partner, George Budd) mutters avariciously to the bewildered young protagonist, 'There's a fortune in the eye' (341). Cullingworth waxes lyrical: 'Man, if you could only see it, there's a fringe of squinting millionaires sitting ten deep ... with their money in their hands waiting for an oculist' (342). In Rivington's 1888 guidebook the general practitioner is described as 'the rank and file of the medical army, of which physicians, surgeons, and obstetricians and the more select of the specialists, are the generals and officers' (279). In aiming to be an oculist, Conan Doyle was merely aiming to advance to the lowest officer rank of specialist, then, but even this would have been a step up in status and money. Irvine Loudon's study of the general practitioner between 1750 and 1850 deems them 'socially insecure' (202), stuck in that uncertain space between trade and profession. Even forty years later, a Bloomsbury address seems apposite for what Loudon declares a 'marginal man' (203).

The most important medical influence in the story of Conan Doyle's sudden move from Southsea general practitioner to London specialist via Vienna and Paris is surely the famous consultant dermatologist, Sir Malcolm Morris, Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order. Morris had started out as a humble general practitioner in Yorkshire, but moved to London to become an extremely successful skin specialist, and had published the manual *Skin Diseases* in 1879 and was consequently made a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1880. All through the next decade, Morris combined his consultancy with the role of medical editor for the Cassell's publishing house, issuing an important series of books on public health, and bringing into print some of the most gifted medical writers of the era, such as the alienist Sir James Crichton-Browne and Frederick Treves (Treves later wrote up his account of finding Joseph Merrick, the 'Elephant Man', whom he had found in a desperate state in his final years). Malcolm Morris was a committee and club gentleman, a fixture at the Middlesex County Cricket Club and with Treves at the Reform Club, where he

dined nightly. He was knighted for his personal medical service to King Edward VII, but was still willing to speak in public about the health crisis around venereal diseases, then a complete taboo, and he eventually chaired the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases that reported in 1915. Sir Malcolm Morris was to end his days in a large mansion at number 8 Harley Street, the outward sign of reaching the pinnacle of his career. He was the ideal model for the ambitious Conan Doyle.

In 1890, Malcolm Morris, whose skin specialism meant he was interested in scrofula, the dermatological version of tuberculosis, also decided to travel to Berlin to see Robert Koch demonstrate his radical new treatment for tuberculosis. Koch's promise of a cure that November did not turn out well (see Goetz). Morris took the same train as Arthur Conan Doyle and they ended up travelling together, partly because Conan Doyle had referred patients to him with skin conditions in the past. In the course of that journey, Conan Doyle recorded in *Memories and Adventures*, Morris had persuaded him he must leave provincial Southsea, spend six months acquiring continental expertise in the latest eye treatments in Vienna, and set up as a specialist in London near Harley Street. Morris offered to Conan Doyle a demonstrable example that it was possible to leap the species barrier from lowly general practitioner to sophisticated metropolitan consultant. He also seemed able to continue a parallel career in writing and publishing, surely important for Conan Doyle.

This model was reinforced, of course, by the world-famous figure they were both rushing to see. Robert Koch had been an isolated country doctor with a small practice in the backwater of Prussia, but had outstripped the research institutes of Berlin to isolate the anthrax bacteria, recording the life cycle of a bacterium for the first time and tracking the mode of infection, thus proving the 'germ theory' and transforming the medical understanding of infectious diseases. This had been done entirely from a position outside the orthodox hierarchies of German medicine. Koch had since been elevated to the head of his own research institute, and given all the funds by Bismarck he needed to maintain German prominence in medicine, particularly given the competition with the French national hero, Doctor Louis Pasteur. Koch's professional story was a place of powerful identification for a young, provincial GP, as is evident in Conan Doyle's write-up of the journey to Berlin for William Stead's *Review of Reviews* in December 1890.

There are some intriguing elements to Sir Malcolm Morris's obituary in the *British Medical Journal*, which might underline the importance of his intervention into Conan Doyle's life. 'His own early struggles made him ever sympathetic towards younger men', the obituarist said, before adding: 'In spite of Morris's virility and decisiveness there was something feminine in his character which was both amusing, annoying and attractive' ('Obituary', 407). This femininity seemed to be equated with a certain over-facility, the fatal flaw of superficiality, a man who was never quite the rational scientist, or so it seemed. Morris's 'devotion and loyalty' to friends, this odd section concludes, was very much 'like a woman'

(408). He sounds like he could have been an immensely seductive presence, sharing a train carriage with Conan Doyle. Both were looking at their own double across the aisle. Almost inevitably, Malcolm Morris's son, Sir Harold Morris, proposed in his own memoirs, *Back View* (1960), that his father was surely the model for Sherlock Holmes.

Perhaps, in the end, Conan Doyle was fatally superficial, too, in what he hoped to gain from his decision to abandon the dead end of provincial practice for the prestige of a London ocular specialist. He wanted the financial security and social status of the specialist, and to be less marginal in his profession, but must have understood quite quickly the years it would take to establish a whole new set of networks in a fiercely competitive metropolitan setting. Meanwhile, with *Micah Clark* selling well (on a £100 advance), *The Sign of Four* released to high praise, and the deals he and his new agent, A. P. Watt, were making on short stories, he must have known he was already entering – and this early on in his writing career – the elite (financially, anyway) of a very different profession. Yet the parallel of lowly general practitioner and lowly commercial author would haunt him throughout his writing career: he sought the secure status of the gentleman in both.

*

Let's now turn to whether the topographical detail of Conan Doyle's sojourn in London can help illuminate the fiction. In December 1893, in Davos, seeking respite for his tubercular wife in the mountains, Conan Doyle killed off Sherlock Holmes in 'The Final Problem', and set about mining his early medical career for two books. *The Stark Munro Letters* was based on his few weeks as a junior partner to the pathological liar George Budd in 1882. Budd, an unorthodox and bewildering charmer, had tempted his fellow Edinburgh student Conan Doyle into partnership with the promise of a guaranteed £300 per year income. In fact, Budd had turned his general practice into an elaborate, barely legal scheme to make money through the dispensary services he conducted out of his office. He might diagnose for free, but would charge through the nose for the medicines he made up for treatment. The paranoid Budd abruptly released Conan Doyle from his contract only six weeks into their partnership, forcing Conan Doyle to set up his own practice, almost penniless, in Portsmouth. The second book Conan Doyle began to pull together was a collection of medical tales based on his years training but also the early period of his career as a newly qualified doctor: *Round the Red Lamp*. After struggling for a long time over a title, the collection was eventually named for the conventional sign – the red lamp – that indicated the office or home of a general practitioner in poor areas of town. Conan Doyle was so poor that he had to buy his first red lamp 'on tick' in Plymouth, he recalled in *Memories and Adventures* (63).

For Conan Doyle, both books would mark a break with the medical profession. He wrote to James Payn in March 1894 that 'I fear some of them will seem to you to be too realistic, but

the practical details of a Doctor's life do take a sombre shape' (cited Lellenburg, 327). When he concluded that 'I expect, however, to lose friends over it and over "The Stark Munro Letters" also' (cited Lellenburg, 327), he meant prudish readers, perhaps, but also undoubtedly medical colleagues.

Round the Red Lamp, published in October 1894, was something of an improvised mess. The original plan to publish these tales serially was wrecked by the medical forthrightness of the contents, and was received with some disturbance by the lay public and medical press as upsetting, even transgressive. The book nailed its colours to the mast in its identification with broadly virtuous general practitioners against its consistently ghastly portraits of the caddish physicians and callous surgeons who lived in the terrains of the medical elite around Harley Street. Quite soon after his abandonment of his dreams of specialism, this terrain was no longer a zone for identification, but the Gothic territory that had been laid out by Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* ten years before, in which Dr Jekyll's thoroughly respectable town house address hides a monstrous secret that operates through the back door (for more on Stevenson's psychic topography of London, see Luckhurst, 'Introduction').

Round the Red Lamp was initially commissioned as a series of thematically interlinked stories on the medical life by Jerome K. Jerome for his journal *The Idler*. Only four stories appeared in *The Idler*, however, as Jerome considered some of them too strong. Jerome took 'The Curse of Eve', but warned him: 'Let us have others a little less sad. I dread the effect upon the sensitive reader' (Letter, cited Lellenburg, 334). Conan Doyle wrote to his mother that he was working 'to modify at least one of those strong stories to make them less painful' (cited Lellenburg, 332-3). Yet at the same time, Conan Doyle was becoming involved in the debates to defend 'realism', publicly defending the 'frankness of expression' in George Moore's *Esther Waters*, for instance, which W. H. Smith's refused to carry. In the immediate years after an obscenity trial over the English translation of Emile Zola and literary figures such as Moore, Thomas Hardy and Walter Besant debated 'Candour in English Fiction', Conan Doyle seemed to ally his medical tales with the Realists, placing himself in the literary vanguard, his preface warning off the sensitive reader who might not be able to deal with medicine treated 'with a certain amount of realism' (*Round the Red Lamp*, v).

In actuality, the stories collected in *Round the Red Lamp* make abrupt shifts of tone, from comically gruesome anecdotes of medical training in Edinburgh ('His First Operation') to sentimental defences of benign, old-school, provincial general practitioners who are proved to have a more intuitive, holistic understanding of their patients than the fully professionalised, accredited, upcoming men who are trying to replace them ('Behind the Times'). The story 'A False Start' directly mines the poverty-stricken first weeks of Conan Doyle's own medical practice in Plymouth, and 'The Doctors of Hoyland' mocks a general

practitioner who proves unable to cope with a rival GP, who turns out to be a woman trained at Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin and Vienna. 'I do not think medicine a suitable profession for women and ... I have a personal objection to masculine ladies' (302), the doctor pompously declares. He is soon disastrously outmatched by her expertise and knowledge, placing Conan Doyle on the side of medical reform – on the side of Queen Square not Cavendish Square, Bloomsbury not Marylebone. Of the stories set in London, there is a precisely located tale, 'The Curse of Eve', set in the poor area of New North Road and the Caledonian Road about a general practitioner attending a difficult birth and having to call in a specialist, who in turn calls in an obstetrician for three guineas extra. It precisely details the hierarchy of knowledge in the medical system and the pressures on the lower middle-class to afford this kind of life-saving expertise. When Conan Doyle first read 'The Curse of Eve' to a gathering of the Author's Club, the child died in childbirth, which his audience did not appreciate. The baby survives in the revised book version of the tale.

It is only when surgeons appear that we fully enter the Gothic mode. 'The Third Generation' is a story about a case of hereditary syphilis discovered just prior to the wedding of Sir Francis Norton (for all Conan Doyle's appeal to medical realism, syphilis is of course never explicitly named in the tale). It features the cynical consultant Dr Horace Selby, who lives in the City of London by the Thames (in Scudamore Lane, 'sloping down riverwards from just behind the Monument' [46]), outside the Bloomsbury/West End topography I've been outlining here. Selby is rather indifferent to the human catastrophe unfolding before him in his consulting room, which ends, the next morning, with him reading of the suicide of his patient, who has done the honourable thing to avoid the shame of confessing his situation to his betrothed. Dr Selby seems merely hungry for a case that can be added to his latest publication. The doctor, who keeps his patient waiting as he gambles and gossips in the next room, is identified with the generation of Norton's debauched grandfather, 'that foul old dandy' (55) who introduces the hereditary taint into the noble family.

The better known story 'The Case of Lady Sannox', which was somewhat unbelievably accepted by Jerome for *The Idler* since it is by far the strongest of the medical fictions in the collection, takes the fearless, dashing and debonair Harley Street surgeon Douglas Stone a few streets north to a quiet place, 'a mean-looking house in a narrow and sordid street' (167) just 'off the Euston Road' (166). Here, Stone is tricked by a cuckolded husband dressed in Arabic garb into performing a disfiguring operation on his wife and Stone's mistress, where the vicious incision to the lip is clearly a form of punitive cliterodectomy. "It was really very necessary for Marion, this operation," said he, "not physically, but morally, you know, morally" (172). The surgeon's affair with Lady Sannox has been a public scandal, gossiped about, the narrator says, 'in the bow windows of clubs' (159) – a reference to the aristocratic, conservative club, White's in St James's. The story seems unusually daring in the explicitness of detailing his extra-marital affair with Lady Sannox (it decidedly predates Oscar Wilde's trial and its freezing effect on literary candour). Its horror is also gleeful and

sadistic: Stone reduces a great beauty's face to a 'slobber of blood' (170) as he cuts into her lips with his bistourie knife.

The narrator locates Stone at the pinnacle of the medical profession: his income 'was the third largest of all professional men in London' (158). He is portrayed in the 'heroic' mode of the fearless surgeon, familiar from celebrity profiles of society doctors at the time: 'His nerve, his judgement, his intuition, were things apart. Again and again his knife cut away death, but grazed the very springs of life in doing it, until his assistants were as white as the patient' (157). And so the punishment, played out on the body of Lady Sannox, is apt: Stone will lose his mind and his nerve, and with it his ability to ever operate again.

For this and other 'bracing' content, as the preface put it, meant that the reviewers were not in general very impressed with *Round the Red Lamp*. 'Ought the tragical realities and painful commonplaces of the sick-room and the death-bed to be made the theme of fiction?' asked *The Speaker* ('Fiction', 605), stating the central theme of many comments on the collection. The influential reviewer George Saintsbury called the book 'repulsive' (471) against the measure of Samuel Warren's *Diary of a Late Physician*, which came from a more polite era. The *Pall Mall Gazette* figured the collection as a string of horrible nightmares from which the reviewer at last awoke. 'The candle was burned out, and Conan Doyle's last volume was lying on the floor. We had an unpleasant sensation of having witnessed or undergone several nauseous operations on diseased bones or growths' ('Reviews', 4). The title of the review in *The Globe* 'Novel Diseases' similarly allied the book's realism to a form of infection. The 'morbid habit of thought' it might induce made the reviewer in the provincial *Cheltenham Looker-On* worry that it was 'infinitely harmful' (*Round the Red Lamp*, 15).

The London *Evening Standard* issued a longer and more detailed denunciation:

We maintain that some of its pages are rendered sickening and disgusting by the medical details with which they are carelessly, or perhaps carefully, intersected. By all means let us have, if we must have, the strange, the horrible, and the weird, as elements to be used occasionally in our daily fiction; but what is to be gained by giving to an audience the technical details of a ghastly operation for a deadly disease?'

Having hinted at the ghoulish contents of 'The Case of Lady Sannox', the review continues:

This sort of thing ... would be all very well in the columns of a medical journal, or told to a party of professional men with a taste for such details, but it is, we contend, unfit for publication in a work of fiction meant for the general public: to say that it meant for a special one is all nonsense while it stands in piles on every important

railway bookstall. It is not good art, and it is not even clever, except with a cleverness that a tailor might display in giving directions for the cutting and stitching of a coat. (*Round the Red Lamp* review, 2)

That last comparison is telling, perhaps picked up from the lowly trade of the hapless husband awaiting the birth of his first child in 'The Curse of Eve.' Arthur Conan Doyle is similarly a tradesman, as both a writer *and* a general practitioner, and as such ought to understand that trade-talk of this kind is inappropriate in the bourgeois public sphere of print-culture. To introduce these subjects is 'both cruel and demoralising' to 'the middle-class young people, who delight in his stories' (2). A review in the *Leeds Mercury* echoes this idea, objecting that Conan Doyle 'talks shop in his latest book in a way which is rather disconcerting to people of sensitive nerves' ('Literary Arrivals', 8). He has overstepped professional and class bounds.

If the tenor of the general press is that this medical content is best reserved for private conversations between professionals (a scenario that is actually staged in the last story of the collection, 'The Surgeon Talks'), it is striking that much of the medical press did not exactly embrace *Round the Red Lamp* either. In the week of publication of Doyle's stories, in October 1894, the *Lancet* was being immensely euphemistic in its editorials about public morality and 'social evils' on display in some of London's thoroughfares, unable even to name prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases. Given that the *Lancet* had just published Thomas Bryant's plea that maintaining the 'public relations' of the medical profession was vital to sustain their newly gained social status with virtuous professional behaviour and strict regulation, the journal might not have welcomed the medical realism found in *Round the Red Lamp*. The book was eventually reviewed in *The Lancet* under a 'Christmas Books' round-up in December. The reviewer was displeased with the title ('only a few GPs use the red lamp – forced by custom, and only in the poorest of areas'), but also with the stories continually falling between two stools: 'In some of the stories he has gone into medical detail to an extent that should unfit the stories for popularity, while, on the other hand, as clinical stories or scientific contributions, they are not informative' ('Christmas Books, 1444). 'The Case of Lady Sannox' is dismissed as 'after' – 'a good deal after' – Thomas Hardy, a writer who would shortly abandon the novel form entirely given the controversies about the explicit directions his own realism was taking.

It was his key influence and friend Malcolm Morris who wrote glowingly of Conan Doyle as 'Our Medical Novelist' in the pages of *The Practitioner*, the journal specifically for the lowly general practitioner. Morris unambiguously welcomed *Round the Red Lamp* and *Stark Munro*, yet still needed to reassure his readers that 'There is nothing of the "degenerate" in Conan Doyle; he is one of the healthiest of writers' (472), separating the work from 'Sarah Grandism and Ibsenism' (Grand and Ibsen being the current lightning rods for ire at explicit sexual subjects in literature).

We might now be able to observe that Conan Doyle's key fiction about general practice, *Round the Red Lamp*, effectively came from the wrong side of the tracks – by which I mean from the Bloomsbury bohemia of dissenting doctors and professional writers, rather than the closed circles of the elite Royal Colleges clustered around Harley Street or the social elites and taste-makers of Mayfair or St. James's. With the topography of medical London in mind, we can see that Conan Doyle was in effect writing his revenge on the specialists in his collection of medical fiction, and aligning the massed ranks of general practitioners with the mass culture of the new fiction that strove to break down taboos.

Works Cited

- Adams, John Crawford. *Harley Street: A Brief History, with Notes on Nearby Regent's Park*. London: Royal Society of Medicine, 2008.
- Ashton, Rosemary. *Victorian Bloomsbury*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Barnett, Richard. *Medical London: City of Diseases, City of Cures*. London: Strange Attractor, 2008.
- Bates, Gordon. ADD
- Black, Nick. *Walking London's Medical History*. London: Hodder, 2006.
- Bryant, Thomas. 'Some Subjects of Public and Professional Interests', *The Lancet*, 20 October 1890, 899-903.
- Caddy, Adrian. 'The Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital and its Staff in the Past', *British Journal of Ophthalmology* (1 Sept 1931), 498-511.
- 'Christmas Books', *The Lancet*, 15 December 1894, 1443-4.
- Conan Doyle, Arthur. 'Dr. Koch and His Cure', *Review of Reviews* (Dec 1890), 552-8.
- *Memories and Adventures*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924.
- *Round the Red Lamp, Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life*. London: Methuen, 1894.
- *The Stark Munro Letters*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895.
- 'Fiction' (review of *Round the Red Lamp*). *The Speaker*, 1 December 1894, 605.
- Goetz, Thomas. *The Remedy: Robert Koch, Arthur Conan Doyle, and the Quest to Cure T. B.* New York: Penguin, 2014.
- Ingleby, Matthew. *Bloomsbury: Beyond the Establishment*. London: British Library Publishing, 2010.
- Kerr, Douglas. *Conan Doyle: Writing, Profession, and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Klinger, Leslie. 'Sherlock Holmes Among the Doctors', *Baker Street Journal* 65: 4 (2015), 16-22.
- Krasner, James. 'Arthur Conan Doyle as Doctor and Writer'. *Mosaic* 33: 4 (2000), 19-34.
- Lellenburg, Jon, et. Al. *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*. London: Harper Collines, 2007.
- 'Literary Arrivals', *Leeds Mercury*, 19 November 1894, 8.

- Loudon, Irvine. *Medical Care and the General Practitioner 1750-1850*. Oxford: Claredon, 1986.
- Luckhurst, Roger. 'Introduction.' Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2006. vii-xxxii.
- 'An Occult Gazetteer of Bloomsbury: An Experiment in Method'. *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*. Eds L. Phillips and A. Witchard. London: Continuum, 2010. 50-62.
- Lycett, Andrew. *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007.
- Machen, Arthur. *Far Off Things*. London: Martin Secker, 1926.
- 'Montague Place'. UCL Bloomsbury Project. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/streets/montague_place.htm (accessed 14 June 2021).
- Morris, Malcolm. 'Our Medical Novelist' [review of *Round the Red Lamp* and *The Stark Munro Letters*], *The Practitioner: A Journal of Medical Practice*, New Series 2 (July to December, 1895, 471-5).
- Myers, F. W. H.. *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, 1903.
- 'Multiplex Personality', *Nineteenth Century* (Nov 1886), 648-66.
- 'Novel Diseases', *The Globe*, 13 December 1894, 1-2.
- 'Obituary: Sir Malcolm Morris, KCVO, FRCS (Ed.)', *British Medical Journal* (1 March 1924), 407-9.
- 'Reviews'. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 November 1894, 4.
- Rivington, Walter. *The Medical Profession of the United Kingdom*. Dublin: Fannin, 1888.
- 'Round the Red Lamp review'. *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 17 November 1894, 15.
- 'Round the Red Lamp review'. *Evening Standard*, 7 November 1894, 2.
- Saintsbury, George. 'New Novels.' *The Academy*, 8 December 1894, 471-2.
- Stavert, Geoffrey. *A Study in Southsea: The Unrevealed Life of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle*. Portsmouth: Milestone, 1987.
- Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: The Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).