

THE ADVENTURE OF THE ELUSIVE POSTCARD

[parallel citation: 2015 Green Bag Alm. 442]

Cattleya M. Concepcion[†]

The story goes like this: After Arthur Conan Doyle killed off Sherlock Holmes in 1893,¹ bereft fans bombarded Conan Doyle with their anger. “I have often been called to task for killing ‘Sherlock Holmes,’ and I was surprised at the number of letters I got from all over the world reproaching me on the subject,” Conan Doyle said. “One, I remember, was from a woman I did not know. It began, ‘You beast!’”²

Conan Doyle offered up a new Sherlock Holmes story in 1901, but as the story was set before Holmes’s death, it was not enough.³ Fans hoped, from the moment Holmes disappeared off a cliff, that he had somehow survived. One reader wrote of “the lamentable and untimely taking off of their old friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes”: “It is grievous news. . . . His many admirers will cling to the last to the hope that he may be found, and found alive”⁴

[†] Reference and Faculty Services Librarian, George Mason University School of Law. Thanks to Ira Brad Matetsky for his help with research.

¹ See Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Final Problem*, STRAND MAGAZINE, Dec. 1893. Conan Doyle explained his decision to kill Sherlock Holmes:

My objections to detective stories are that they only call for the use of a certain portion of one’s imaginative faculty — the invention of a plot without giving any scope to character drawing. The best literary work is that which leaves its reader better for having read it. Now, nobody can possibly be better, in the high sense which I mean it, by reading of Sherlock Holmes, although he may have passed a pleasant hour in doing so.

I therefore determined to stop my Holmes stories, and as my mind was fully made up, I couldn’t see any better way than by bringing Holmes to an end, as well as the stories.

Doyle Writes of His Hero, CHICAGO DAILY TRIBUNE, Dec. 16, 1900, at 9.

² *Death of Sherlock Holmes*, BOSTON DAILY GLOBE, Feb. 17, 1901, at 32. Or the letter may have said, “You Brute.” See ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, MEMORIES AND ADVENTURES 94 (1924).

³ Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was serialized in *The Strand Magazine* from August 1901 to May 1902. There is disagreement among Holmes scholars over whether *The Hound of the Baskervilles* took place before Holmes’s death in “The Final Problem” or after Holmes was revealed to be alive in “The Empty House.” See *Chronology*, in ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES* 143 (Leslie S. Klinger ed., 2002).

⁴ E.S. Martin, *This Busy World*, HARPER’S WEEKLY, Dec. 16, 1893, at 1191.

In 1903, *Collier's Weekly* made Conan Doyle a huge offer to resurrect Holmes: \$25,000 for six stories, \$30,000 for eight stories, or \$45,000 for thirteen stories. Accepting the offer, Conan Doyle sent a postcard to his literary agent A.P. Watt. He kept it simple, responding, "Very well. A.C.D." What followed were thirteen stories published in *Collier's Weekly*, including the theme of this *Almanac*, "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder."⁵

The story of the American magazine's too-good-to-pass-up offer and Conan Doyle's no-frills acceptance has often been told. The first (to my knowledge) telling was almost twenty years after Conan Doyle's death in a 1949 biography, *The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* by John Dickson Carr.⁶ Many biographies since then have repeated it.⁷ It also appears in bibliographies of Conan Doyle's writings,⁸ forewords to reprints of Sherlock Holmes stories,⁹ and newspaper articles on the author.¹⁰

After hearing of Conan Doyle's simple two-word acceptance by postcard of such a momentous contract, a Sherlockian lawyer probably could not help but ask inquisitively, "Where is this postcard?" The real question lurking beneath would be a giddier one: "Can we see it?" Despite the numerous accounts of the postcard in published pieces, none provide any clues to track it down.¹¹

⁵ The stories were collected and published in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905). The London publisher of the book was as happy as readers. See *Sherlock Holmes Unlimited*, FINANCIAL TIMES, July 31, 1903, at 2 ("Incidentally this welcome resurrection [of Sherlock Holmes] should help to make dividends for the shareholders of George Newnes, Limited.").

⁶ See JOHN DICKSON CARR, *THE LIFE OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE* 199-200 (1949).

⁷ See, e.g., DANIEL STASHOWER, *TELLER OF TALES: THE LIFE OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE* 240 (1999); MARTIN BOOTH, *THE DOCTOR AND THE DETECTIVE: A BIOGRAPHY OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE* 248 (2000); ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE: *A LIFE IN LETTERS* 510 (Jon Lellenberg et al. eds., 2007); ANDREW LYCETT, *THE MAN WHO CREATED SHERLOCK HOLMES* 297 (2007); RUSSELL MILLER, *THE ADVENTURES OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE* 245 (2008).

⁸ See RICHARD LANCELYN GREEN & JOHN MICHAEL GIBSON, *A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF A. CONAN DOYLE* 140 (1983).

⁹ See Anthony Lejeune, *Foreword* to ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES* 9 (Capuchin Classics 2008).

¹⁰ See Hugh A. Mulligan, *Sherlock Still Hounded Conan Doyle Despite 'Final Problem'*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 26, 1987, at 2.

¹¹ The sources cited *supra*, notes 7-10, point to other second-hand accounts of the postcard. See, e.g., LYCETT, *supra* note 7, at 297 (citing CARR, *supra* note 6). Carr's bibliography includes family papers, see CARR, *supra* note 6, at 340-52, but it is unclear which, if any, he relied on to learn about the postcard.

Here is how I tried:

The logical place to start a search for the postcard was with its intended recipient, Conan Doyle's agent A.P. Watt. A.P. Watt, we can safely assume, took possession of the postcard before Holmes was revived in *Collier's Weekly* in 1903.¹² Despite A.P. Watt's British roots, some records for the agency are within reach in the United States, at the New York Public Library¹³ and the University of North Carolina.¹⁴ Although both collections include correspondence from Conan Doyle to A.P. Watt for the relevant time period, neither includes Conan Doyle's two-word postcard.¹⁵

The other participant in the exchange, the postcard's sender — Conan Doyle — seemed like the next best lead. Special collections relating to Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes form a sizeable list. They can be found in academic libraries: Birmingham-Southern College,¹⁶ Harvard University,¹⁷ Indiana University,¹⁸ Kent State University,¹⁹ University of Michigan,²⁰ University of Minnesota,²¹ University of North Carolina at

¹² See *The Adventure of the Empty House*, COLLIER'S WEEKLY, Sept. 26, 1903.

¹³ For a finding aid, see Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, *A.P. Watt and Son Records*, archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/generated_finding_aids/brg19277.pdf.

¹⁴ For a finding aid, see Rare Book Literary and Historical Papers, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *A.P. Watt Records*, www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/a/A.P.Watt.html#d1e51.

¹⁵ I received copies of A.P. Watt's private account files relating to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories in box 112, folder 119.02 of the A.P. Watt Records, collection no. 11036, Rare Book Literary and Historical Papers, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Email from The Wilson Library (Jan. 5, 2015) (on file with author). The postcard was also not found after searching a small file of correspondence dated between 1896 and 1914, and addressed to A.P. Watt as literary agent for Conan Doyle, in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library. Email from Ira Brad Matetsky (Dec. 31, 2014) (on file with author).

¹⁶ For more information, see Birmingham-Southern College Library, *Richard and Joshua Green Sherlock Holmes Collection*, library.bsc.edu/bsclibcollections.html#green.

¹⁷ For a finding aid, see Houghton Library, Harvard University, *Baker Street Irregulars (Organization: U.S.) Archive, 1923-2007 (MS Am 2717)*, nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:Hough:h02178.

¹⁸ For an inventory, see Lilly Library Manuscript Collections, Indiana University, *Doyle Mss.*, www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/lilly/mss/index.php?p=doyle#xtocid54943.

¹⁹ For a finding aid, see Department of Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries and Media Services, *Sherlock Holmes Ephemera Collection*, www.library.kent.edu/sherlock-holmes-ephemera-collection.

²⁰ For information about the Parker Family Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Collection, see, e.g., Dave Askins, *Arthur Conan Doyle Collection Unveiled*, ANN ARBOR CHRONICLE, Apr. 25, 2009, annarborchronicle.com/2009/04/25/arthur-conan-doyle-collection-unveiled/. To search the

Chapel Hill,²² University of Texas at Austin,²³ and University of Tulsa²⁴ in the United States, and Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire in Switzerland.²⁵ Also featuring Conan Doyle- or Holmes-centric collections are public libraries in the United States (New York Public Library²⁶ and San Francisco Public Library²⁷), Canada (Toronto Public Library²⁸), and England (Marylebone Library²⁹ and Portsmouth History Centre at the Portsmouth Central Library³⁰). Independent libraries have collections, too: the Huntington Library³¹ and the Newberry Library³² in the United

University of Michigan's library catalog, see mirlyn.lib.umich.edu. The researcher may limit search results to "Doyle, Arthur Conan" in the subject field, and "Special Collections" or "Hatcher Graduate" in the library location field.

²¹ For finding aids, see Special Collections, Rare Books, & Manuscripts, University of Minnesota, *Sherlock Holmes Collections: Archival Finding Aids*, www.lib.umn.edu/scr/bm/holmes/archival-finding-aids.

²² Christy Edina Richards, *An Assessment of the Mary Shore Cameron Sherlock Holmes Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, Nov. 2003, ils.unc.edu/MSpapers/2907.pdf.

²³ For a finding aid, see Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/pdf/00788.pdf. For a digital collection, see Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, *Sherlock Holmes and Sherlockiana Collection*, hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15878coll8.

²⁴ For a finding aid, see Department of Special Collections and University Archives, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, *Jack Powell Collection of Sherlock Holmes*, www.lib.utulsa.edu/mcfarlin/speccoll/collections/powelljack/index.htm.

²⁵ For more information, see Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, *Manuscripts – Publications*, www.bcu-lausanne.ch/patrimoine/collections-precieuses/publications/publications-manuscripts/; Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire, *Trésors des Collections*, www.bcu-lausanne.ch/patrimoine/collections-precieuses/tresors-des-collections/.

²⁶ For a finding aid, see Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Collection of Papers*, archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/generated_finding_aids/brg19164.pdf.

²⁷ For more information, see San Francisco Public Library, *Sherlock Holmes Collection*, sfpl.org/index.php?pg=2000008201.

²⁸ For more information and to search the library catalog, see Toronto Public Library, *Arthur Conan Doyle Collection*, www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/books-video-music/specialized-collections/literature-genre-doyle.jsp.

²⁹ For more information, see City of Westminster, *About the Sherlock Holmes Collection*, www.westminster.gov.uk/about-sherlock-holmes-collection.

³⁰ For more information, see Portsmouth City Council, *The Arthur Conan Doyle Collection Lancelyn Green Bequest*, www.conandoylecollection.co.uk.

³¹ To search the Huntington Library's online catalog, see catalog.huntington.org. The researcher may refine results by limiting to relevant subjects, such as "Doyle, Arthur Conan, 1859-1930 -- Manuscripts -- Facsimiles," "Doyle, Arthur Conan, 1859-1930 -- Diaries," or "Doyle, Arthur Conan, 1859-1930 -- Correspondence."

States, and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in Scotland.³³ Finally, there are national libraries with related collections, including the British Library³⁴ and National Library of Scotland.³⁵

A review of finding aids, library catalogs, and press releases for these Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes collections revealed little. None made specific mention of Conan Doyle's postcard to A.P. Watt. The closest call was an undated message from Conan Doyle to an unknown recipient that said, "Thank you for work *very well* done."³⁶ Alas, five words too many. I also did not see a broader description of correspondence in which the postcard seemed likely to be included. But, there was a caveat to this: Since finding aids might not provide detailed inventories, library catalogs might not capture manuscript materials, and press releases might highlight only selected items, it was still possible that the postcard was hidden in one of the collections.

That brought the search to *Collier's Weekly*, which had an interest in the postcard as the offeror in the contract. Did A.P. Watt give the postcard to *Collier's Weekly* after receiving it from Conan Doyle? Unfortunately, no records could be located for publisher P. F. Collier & Son or its founder Peter F. Collier. While a collection of records is available for Crowell-Collier Publishing Company, which took over and published

³² For a finding aid, see The Newberry Library, *C. Frederick Kittle Collection of Doyleana*, mms.newberry.org/xml/xml_files/KittleDoyle.xml.

³³ For finding aids, see The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh Library & Archive, *Arthur Conan Doyle*, www.library.rcsed.ac.uk/docs/GD21_Papers_of_Sir_Arthur_Conan_Doyle.pdf; The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh Library & Archive, *The Stisted Bell Collection*, www.library.rcsed.ac.uk/docs/GD16_Papers_and_memorabilia_of_Joseph_Bell.pdf (includes materials related to Sherlock Holmes).

³⁴ For more information about items in the collection, see, e.g., Press Release, The British Library, *Dangerous Work: Diary of an Arctic Adventure – British Library to Publish Arthur Conan Doyle's Previously Unseen Arctic Diary* (Aug. 6, 2012), www.bl.uk/press-releases/2012/august/dangerous-work-diary-of-an-arctic-adventure--british-library-to-publish-arthur-conan-doyles-previous; Press Release, The British Library, *The Narrative of John Smith, Arthur Conan Doyle's Lost First Novel, to Be Published by the British Library for the First Time* (Sept. 25, 2011), www.bl.uk/press-releases/2011/september/the-narrative-of-john-smith-arthur-conan-doyles-lost-first-novel-to-be-published-by-the-british-libr.

³⁵ For more information, see, e.g., Press Release, National Library of Scotland, *Conan Doyle Papers* (Apr. 30, 2012), www.nls.uk/news/press/2012/04/conan-doyle-papers.

³⁶ Correspondence from Arthur Conan Doyle to Unknown Correspondent, n.d., Box 2, Folder 132, *C. Frederick Kittle Collection of Doyleana*, The Newberry Library, Chicago (emphasis added).

Collier's Weekly in the early twentieth century, it only includes records after 1931.³⁷

What remained to be considered were collections held outside libraries. Many manuscripts related to Holmes are in private collections.³⁸ For example, in 2004, auction house Christie's sold a lot containing over 150 letters and cards from Conan Doyle to A.P. Watt to a private collector.³⁹ The lot description did not discuss the postcard,⁴⁰ but as with finding aids, library catalogs, and press releases, its absence from the description did not necessarily mean it was not in the lot. Since collections like these are privately, and often anonymously, owned, research here could go no further.

Finally, my search included an inquiry to the Conan Doyle Estate. The postcard, however, is not among the correspondence in the family papers held by the estate.⁴¹

As I saw it, this left a list of places where the postcard was not located; places where it was unlikely, but still possible, to be; and places where there were barriers to further searching. To be sure, there were also places where it could be but that I did not think of checking.⁴²

What now is the next step in the search for the postcard? Enticing, I hope, more eyes to join the search. If you have any leads on the whereabouts of this elusive postcard, do follow the clues. The game's afoot!



³⁷ For a finding aid, including a history of the company, see Manuscripts and Archives Division, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, The New York Public Library, *Crowell-Collier Publishing Company*, archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/crowell_collier.pdf.

³⁸ *A Tangled Skein: The Papers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, THE ECONOMIST, May 22, 2004, at 97, 98.

³⁹ Christie's, *Auction Results for Lot 37: A.P. Watt & Son, Literary Agents*, May 19, 2004, www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/ap-watt-son-literary-agents-4290279-details.aspx?intObjectID=4290279; Randall Stock, *A Census of The Conan Doyle Collection: Ownership Records and the Christie's 2004 Sale*, May 28, 2014, www.bestofsherlock.com/ref/200405christies_lots.htm (noting lot 37 is owned by a private collector).

⁴⁰ See Christie's, *supra* note 39.

⁴¹ Email from Jon Lellenberg, U.S. Agent for Conan Doyle Estate Ltd (Dec. 9, 2014) (on file with author). For more information about the Conan Doyle Estate, see www.conandoyleestate.com.

⁴² Museums with Sherlock Holmes exhibitions, for example.