

WHO WROTE THE AMERICAN CHAPTERS OF *A STUDY IN SCARLET?*

by BEN VIZOSKIE

But wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state.

Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi

When you first read *A Study in Scarlet*, were you confused when you reached Chapter VIII? This is a common reaction. The first seven chapters of *A Study in Scarlet* take place in London in 1881 and end with the capture of Jefferson Hope. But Chapters VIII through XII are a flashback to events many years earlier in America, culminating in Hope's arrival in London. Chapters XIII and XIV continue where the seventh chapter left off. The first of these concluding chapters is essentially "the old hunter's own account," his statement to the police of his activities in London, and the other is primarily Holmes's explanation of the case.

After recovering from the trauma of being transported from 1881 London to 1847 America and back again, one may ask the question: who wrote those chapters? We may be tempted to say that Watson wrote them. However, there are two objections to this. First, how did Watson know what had happened in America some twenty to thirty-five years earlier? He might have gotten the story from Jefferson Hope, but the rest of Watson's narrative makes it clear that Watson never spoke to Hope about Hope's life in America. The second objection, first raised by Poul Arenfalk in 1960, and more recently by Peter Horrocks, is this: why would Watson refer to his own journal as if it had been written by someone else? He does this in the last sentence of Chapter XII, which reads: "As to what occurred there [London], we cannot do better than quote the old hunter's [Hope's] own account, as duly recorded in Dr. Watson's Journal, to which we are already under such obligations." This sentence clearly implies that Watson was not the author of the preceding chapters, but who else could have written them?

The obvious alternative is the literary agent, Doyle. He was a devotee of historical fiction and had written some himself. Could he have fashioned a fictional life history for Jefferson Hope and inserted it into Watson's narrative?

There is good reason to doubt this also. While the story, in general, rings true, there are a number of inaccuracies that any decent author of historical fiction would have avoided.

The first American chapter sets the scene on the Great Alkali Plain. It is described as “an arid and repulsive desert” stretching “[f]rom the Sierra Nevada to Nebraska, and from the Yellowstone River in the north to the Colorado upon the south....” From this narration, the Great Alkali Plain would seem to cover Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming, and parts of Colorado, Montana, and Idaho. Even in 1847, this was not the “region of desolation and silence” that is portrayed. Also, this so-called “plain” would have included a sizable portion of the Rocky Mountains. Clearly, there is a problem with this description of the scene. From the rest of the story, it seems that the setting was really the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada. We will return to this description later, but for now we will assume that the Great Alkali Plain is the Great Basin.

We are told that “there are no inhabitants of this land of despair. A band of Pawnees or of Blackfeet may occasionally traverse it to reach other hunting-grounds....” This short description contains several errors. There were inhabitants of this area. The Shoshoni, Bannock, Ute, Paiute, and Washoe all lived in Utah or Nevada at this time. If a band of Indians had crossed this land to get to other hunting grounds, it would not have consisted of braves only, as the rest of the passage implies. Any Indian hunting trip beyond a tribe’s own nearby hunting grounds would have meant moving the whole tribe so that the women would be available to do the dressing and curing of the kill after the braves had done the actual hunting. Also, the tribes mentioned would not have been in this region. The Pawnee lived on the banks of the Platte River, in south-central Nebraska, about 500 miles east of the Rocky Mountains. The Blackfeet were really three separate tribes living in Canada and northern Montana. Neither the Pawnee nor the Blackfeet would have crossed hundreds of miles and the Rocky Mountains (as well as this desolate region) to go hunting.

According to the story, John and Lucy Ferrier, facing death in this vast wasteland, were rescued on 4 May 1847 by a band of 10,000 persecuted Mormons following Brigham Young to the promised land. Some of this is true, some false, and some in-between. The Mormons had been persecuted. In 1844, Joseph Smith, the founder and leader of the Mormons, was murdered by a mob in Illinois. The center of the Mormon Church was in Nauvoo, Illinois, where many Mormons had gathered after being driven out of Ohio and Missouri.

When Brigham Young assumed the leadership of the church and persecutions increased, he decided to follow a plan first suggested by Joseph Smith—to move the entire Mormon population to a frontier refuge. The Great Basin area

had recently been explored by John C. Fremont, and Young was impressed by his description of the area. In 1846, Young moved the Mormons across Iowa to a site called Winter Quarters, near present-day Omaha, Nebraska. Young used the winter to plan the remainder of the journey, dividing his followers into several groups, or companies.

In early April, 1847, Brigham Young led the first company out of Winter Quarters, travelling on the north bank of the Platte River. They stayed on the north side of the river so that they did not have to compete for wood and water with the settlers using the Oregon Trail, which ran parallel to the river on its south side. Young was leading 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children in 72 wagons. On 4 May 1847, Brigham Young was leading the first small group of Mormons, but on that day he was somewhere on the north bank of the Platte River in present-day Nebraska, about 250 miles west of Winter Quarters—nowhere near any mountain. We are told that the Ferriers were rescued where the plain was “rutted with wheels and trodden down by the feet of many adventurers.” This probably refers to the portion of the Oregon Trail to the east of Fort Bridger; here the Mormon Trail coincided with the much-used Oregon Trail. Young’s group reached Fort Bridger on 7 July 1847 and at that point left the Oregon Trail to create a new trail headed south to the Salt Lake Valley, so the rescue was probably in early July, 1847.

When John and Lucy were rescued, one of the young men told them “we are the persecuted children of God—the chosen of the angel Merona.” He continued, “we are of those who believe in those sacred writings, drawn in Egyptian letters on plates of beaten gold, which were handed unto the holy Joseph Smith at Palmyra. We have come from Nauvoo, in the State of Illinois, where we had founded our temple.” John was then brought before Brigham Young, who is described as “a man who could not have been more than thirty years of age.” Most of this is accurate, but the angel of the Mormons is Moroni, not Merona. The rest is a matter of Mormon history, except for Brigham Young’s age. Brigham Young was actually 46 years old, not 30 or younger.

After the Ferriers join the Mormons, the story jumps twelve years to 1859, and Salt Lake City is described as follows: “It was a warm June morning, and...[d]own the dusty highroads defiled long streams of heavily laden mules, all heading for the west, for the gold fever had broken out in California, and the overland route lay through the city of the Elect.” Again, we find a mixture of the true and the nearly true. The gold fever in California had been ten years earlier. In 1859, gold was discovered in the Pike’s Peak region of Colorado and many California gold miners, headed east, passed through Salt Lake City bound for the gold fields of Colorado. There were westward travelers through the City of

the Elect, but they were silver miners headed for Nevada—the Comstock Lode had been discovered in February, 1859.

One last error: after the failed escape and Lucy’s death, Jefferson Hope tries to take revenge on Drebber and Stangerson. When he is thwarted and his health and fortunes begin to fail, he reluctantly goes back to the mines. It is nearly five years before he returns and finds that “there had been a schism among the Chosen People a few months before” during which his prey left Utah. Once again, this is not quite right. John Ferrier was killed in August, 1860, so Hope would have gone back to the mines some time in 1861, which would date the schism in 1866.

Two groups broke from the Mormon Church in Utah in the 1860s. The first was the Morrisites, led by Joseph Morris in 1862—far too early. The other was the Godbeites, led by the merchant William S. Godbe. The chief motive for this group’s formation seems to have been greed. This was a group to which Drebber and Stangerson could relate. But the Godbeites broke from the Church in 1868, so Hope must have been absent for seven years.

If Doyle had written these chapters to insert them into Watson’s narrative, he would have checked the historical details. He would not have made all these mistakes. What other possibility exists? This story, with all these anomalies, could have come from Jefferson Hope! The seemingly inaccurate geographical description of the Great Alkali Plain could easily have come from Hope. He would have described the area as he knew it in the 1850s and 1860s. Before 1868, Nebraska was not a state but a territory extending from the 40th to the 49th parallel and west to the Continental Divide.

A man familiar with the area before 1868 would have thought of this as Nebraska, and the Yellowstone River would then be part of it. Someone living in Utah Territory might have thought of the area of the headwaters of the Yellowstone as a convenient northern boundary for the Great Alkali Plain. Using these definitions, we have an approximate description of the area known as the Great Basin. The error in the rescue date could simply be because Hope got it wrong from John or Lucy Ferrier or because he misremembered it. The details of Brigham Young’s wagon train might have been exaggerated over the years. While Young’s band consisted of 148 people, about 10,000 of his followers did follow his trail over the next three years, in nearly a constant stream except for the winter months. In twelve years, the facts may have given way to the legend and this legend could be what Jefferson Hope heard from the Mormons.

The mistake in Brigham Young’s age is also reasonable, for one who knew him. Apparently, he looked much younger than his years. Some years later, the

famous Victorian traveler Richard Burton found Young remarkably well preserved, looking more like forty-five years of age than his actual age of fifty-nine.

This still leaves a few unanswered objections. The misnaming of the Indians of the area, and of the Mormons' angel, the inaccurate portrayal of Salt Lake City in 1859, and the number of years Hope was absent from Utah after the tragedy remain. But these anomalies can be explained. I propose that Hope told the story not to Watson, but to his friend, the man who helped Hope retrieve Lucy's wedding ring from Holmes. It was that person who was responsible for these small errors in the narrative.

Here is how I believe Chapters VIII through XII came to be written. Imagine the young Doctor Watson taking his manuscript to Arthur Conan Doyle. In it Watson tells the story, in nine chapters, of the capture of Jefferson Hope by Sherlock Holmes. Doyle recognizes the potential value of a story about the mysterious detective whose name is being whispered around London. However, he sees the story as incomplete. He agrees to act as Watson's literary agent on the condition that Watson flesh out the history of Hope and the Ferriers. Watson returns to Baker Street and tells Holmes he is going to try his hand at fiction. Holmes is appalled. It is bad enough that Watson insists on romanticizing his exploits; fictionalizing them, even the parts in which he is not directly involved, is unthinkable. He may also deduce that Watson lacks the imagination necessary to write fiction. And, he is very active himself—Baring-Gould places seven cases in 1887—and Holmes does not want to lose Watson's assistance. He comes to Watson's aid. He finds Jefferson Hope's friend and accomplice, the person who tricked Holmes and retrieved the wedding ring. This person tells Watson the story. Unfortunately, some of the details are not as fresh as when Hope told him the story six years earlier. He doesn't remember dates too well and one Indian tribe is the same as another to him, and he jumbles Hope's description of Salt Lake City in 1859. He misnames the angel Moroni, or maybe this was a typesetter's error, as it was corrected in most later editions. Watson records the story as it is told to him and takes these new chapters to Doyle. Doyle offers to incorporate the five new chapters into the original nine. Watson, busy with his practice and Holmes's cases, naively agrees.

Since I first wrote a paper on this topic, I have found one most convincing piece of evidence that supports this theory: I have been able to determine the real meaning of the sign and countersign used by the Danites while they kept watch on the Ferriers and Jefferson Hope! While they were fleeing from Salt Lake City, Hope and the Ferriers overheard one party of Danites issue a challenge, reported by Watson to have been "Nine to seven" and an answer reported to be "Seven to five."

At first glance, these phrases seem to be the result of the fevered brain of some hack novelist. But let's step back to the time when this sign and countersign were first uttered. The Danites were meeting to discuss the continuing problem of the Ferriers. One of the group summarizes the situation: John Ferrier, the man they had rescued in the desert and treated as one of their own, upon whom they had bestowed the gift of the Mormon commandments, had been told that his daughter was to marry one of the young generation of Mormons, Drebber or Stangerson. He had been given 30 days to decide between them, but during this period he had refused to allow his daughter to speak to them. Indeed, he had even chased the two candidates from his house. Twenty-eight days of this 30-day probation had passed, Ferrier had been reminded daily (or nightly) of the passage of his time, but he remained adamant.

Another Mormon relates how Ferrier has been turning some of his assets into cash and suggests that he and his daughter might be planning to flee. The group decides to set additional sentries on the trails that are already being watched and to put as many men as possible into this endeavor. However, being experienced at this sort of thing, they know they will need some sort of sign and countersign to insure that they recognize each other. One of them, a devout Mormon, looks to the scriptures for an appropriate phrase. He suggests the following: "But wo [sic] unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state."

The assembly agrees that this is certainly appropriate and the fanatic offers a countersign: "For if this people had not fallen into transgression, the Lord would not have suffered that this great evil should come upon them." Again, it is agreed that this is extremely appropriate, but these quotations are a bit long-winded. It is suggested that something shorter would be more useful.

It seems a shame not to use such appropriate quotations, and one clever person suggests that they could be cited as many scriptural quotations are. The first quote comes from the Second Book of Nephi, Chapter 9, verse 27, and the second quote comes from the Book of Mosiah, Chapter 7, verse 25. In actual use they are changed slightly. It is too difficult to distinctly whisper "twenty-something," so what is whispered throughout the hills of Utah that night is "Second Nephi. Nine. Two Seven," answered by "Mosiah. Seven. Two Five."

Despite the precautions of the Danites, Hope is able to overhear this exchange and temporarily eludes the Avenging Angels. Years later, when Hope tells the story to his accomplice he doesn't remember the actual names of the Mormon books he had been able to parrot years earlier. He describes the phrases as "some name followed by '9 to 7' and another name followed by '7 to

5'." The accomplice, years later, would have remembered only the numbers, and someplace along the chain from the Danites, through Hope, through his accomplice and finally to Watson, each one only hearing it, the number "two" was transformed to its homonym—the word "to."

This theory leaves room for only one objection: what about *the* quote? Why would Watson write: "As to what occurred there, we cannot do better than quote the old hunter's own account, as duly recorded in Dr. Watson's Journal, to which we are already under such obligations." The answer is simple—Watson didn't write that sentence.

After Watson agreed to let his literary agent incorporate the five new chapters into the original nine, Doyle rather artlessly inserted them after Chapter VII and added one sentence of his own to serve as a transition back to Watson's concluding chapters. That one sentence made it appear that the whole story was written by someone other than Watson.

So, I conclude that *A Study in Scarlet* was written by Watson, except for the last sentence of Chapter XII. Nine chapters were written from Watson's direct experience and most of the American chapters were composed from information supplied by Hope's accomplice. The one sentence at the end of Chapter XII was contributed by Doyle, but with that one sentence he managed, in the minds of some poor misguided souls, to attach his name to the entire Canon.

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