

“IT’S THEIR BIRTHDAY TOO—YEAH”

by PETER CALAMAI

The year when Sherlock Holmes entered the world, 1854, was a pivotal time in Britain in Europe and in the wider realm. The entire nation was swept up, by jingo, battling Czarist Russia in the Crimea. Economic and political changes, whose democratizing impacts rippled well into the next century, erupted. Vast new technological vistas unrolled in transportation, communications, and computing. Great statesmen strode the stage and even greater ones were emerging. After 1854, nothing was ever the same again.

Not quite. To start with, the evidence for Holmes being born in 1854 is shaky. The supposed nexus of epochal events in 1854 is no perhaps little more than an artifact of focusing on that particular year. Many historians or professional biographers have been led astray by such tunnel vision, and the field of historiography exists to analyze such biases. Still, as birth years go in the mid-19th century, 1854 was not a bad choice.

It wasn’t altogether pleasant. The land was parched as Britain experienced one of the five driest years between 1766 and 2002.¹ In September hostilities began in the Crimea, a conflict that was Britain’s only major war between the Napoleonic conflict and the Armageddon of 1914. It would touch the lives of four canonical characters, most notably James Armitage who wound up aboard the *Gloria Scott* because regular prisoner ships had all been requisitioned for the Crimea.² In America, the seeds of a bloodier conflict, the Civil War, were sown in Kansas. That agony also left numerous echoes in Holmes’s life and career.

All the following developments in 1854 have some connection to the later world of Sherlock Holmes:

Literature: Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, essays promoting his belief that pursuing wealth does not bring happiness. Holmes, who displays considerable ambivalence about wealth, quotes Thoreau on circumstantial evidence in “The Noble Bachelor.” Also published that year was *Hide and Seek* by Wilkie Collins, who later would write the first English detective novel, *The Moonstone*, paving the way for Conan Doyle.

Music: Giacomo Meyerbeer, in Paris, was writing and conducting operas. His *Les Huguenots* had, however, premiered 20 years earlier. More than three decades hence Holmes would have a box to hear the de Reszkes singing in *Huguenots* (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*). In 1854 Richard Wagner, whose music Holmes would hurry to catch at Covent Garden in “The Red Circle,” had writ-

ten four operas, most recently *Lohengrin*, but none had yet been performed in London.

Africa: In February, Britain granted independence to the Orange Free State through the Convention of Bloemfontein. This agreement ensured decades of stability while Britain expanded its African empire northward from its toehold in the Cape Colony. Those great explorers Richard Burton and John Speke were traveling to the interior of Somaliland.

Allusions to the Dark Continent appear fitfully throughout the Canon, ranging from the vengeful lion-hunter Leon Sterndale in “The Devil’s Foot” to Gilchrist taking up a post in the Rhodesian police force in “The Three Students.” At the century’s end, however, political tensions long festering in South Africa exploded into the Boer War. While that conflict is mentioned only twice directly³ in the Canon, it was a seminal influence in Conan Doyle’s life.

Governance: The Northcote–Trevelyan report was published, leading to the creation of the British Civil Service Commission. The merit-based professional civil service meant that the talented elder son of a country squire could rise to such a position of power that he constituted, at times, the British public service.

Religion: In December, Pope Pius IX formally declared that the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was a dogma of Roman Catholic faith. In the same year, a papal commission started on what would become known as the Syllabus of Errors when proclaimed by Pius ten years later. Containing 80 detailed propositions, the Syllabus declared offensive to the Church’s authority socialism, freedom of conscience, liberalism, religious tolerance, and—most importantly in this context—rationalism in all its manifestations. In 1870 the Vatican Council convened by Pius proclaimed the infallibility of the pope.

That supreme rationalist Sherlock Holmes would apparently experience no difficulty in working with the Church to solve the murder of Cardinal Tosca (“Black Peter”) or on the case of the Vatican cameos (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*). Leo XIII, the pope whom he “obliged,” succeeded Pius in 1878.

Libraries: The opening of the Boston Public Library in 1854 inaugurated the practice among public libraries of keeping large numbers of popular books for borrowers while also acquiring books intended for more limited circulation. This new policy permitted the flourishing of separate collections of manuscripts and rare books within large public general interest libraries. Sherlockian collections at Minnesota, London, and Toronto can be traced back to this library-within-a-library concept.

The deeper relevance of 1854 to the world of Sherlock Holmes lies in the broader sweep of social and technological developments.

WORKING-CLASS PROGRESS

The way was cleared in 1854 for Holmes's inspired creation of the Baker Street Irregulars. Without the Reformatory School Act passed that year by the British Parliament, it would have been far more difficult for the detective to recruit the band of street-smart young boys who could go anywhere with relative impunity and overhear everything without arousing suspicion. The potential recruits would most likely have been behind bars.

That's where an estimated 14,000 juveniles were at some point during this year, a third of those coming from London. A British Inspector of Prisons later estimated that 60% were between 14 and 17, the age range of the Irregulars. Almost half were repeat inmates, and one-fifth had been in prison four times or more. The Reformatory School Act substituted schools for jail, permitting judges to send delinquents aged 16 or younger to reformatories when found guilty of offenses punishable by imprisonment for 14 days or less.

This change quickly demonstrated the soundness of the arguments advanced by the social reformers who campaigned on its behalf, led by Charles Dickens. The reformers had argued that a stint in jail for juveniles was no better than vindictive reprisal and too often served as training for a life dedicated to crime. Indeed, a prison chaplain calculated that 58% of all criminals had their first lapse at 15. By the late 1890s, this Victorian social engineering had so reduced juvenile delinquency that the reformatory population numbered less than 6,000, a sharp contrast to the 14,000 in jail in the year of Holmes's birth. Equally striking was the recidivism rate, which had fallen from 46% in 1854 to 11% by the first decade of the 20th century.

A related social development also ensured there were literate young men on the streets of London ready to be recruited into the Irregulars. Holmes plays an oblique tribute to this aspect when he draws Watson's attention to "lighthouses" glimpsed from the train in "The Naval Treaty," meaning publicly funded schools run by community school boards. In turn, these Board Schools can trace their origins back to the 1850s and the flourishing then of something called the Ragged School Movement.

The same year saw the establishment of the Rochdale Co-operative Manufacturing Society, a seminal event in the flowering of working-class movements from the 1840s onwards that drew attention to the urgency of various social reforms. By the time Holmes's career began, co-operative principles had been extended to numerous other sectors of economic life, including collieries, textile mills, and even banks. Many working-class men and women whose lives intersect that of Holmes almost certainly benefited from the co-operative movement.

TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

As well, technological advances were dawning this year that later shaped much of the career and world of Sherlock Holmes. The late Victorian era was a golden age of luxury steam ocean liners, like Cunard's *Etruria* that could cross the Atlantic in eight days carrying 12,500 pounds of beef, 11,500 eggs, and 834 passengers. Such liners do crucial transportation duty in numerous tales in the Canon, bringing Sir Henry Baskerville to England from Canada and then taking him off around the world with Dr. Mortimer as balm for an aching heart, or providing employment as a steward for James Browner ("The Cardboard Box").

When Holmes entered the world, however, the biggest white elephant in the history of steamships was being built to the designs of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Capable of carrying 10,000 troops, *Great Eastern* was six times larger than any existing ship and had 72 furnaces to power both paddlewheels and a screw propeller. Even then the *Great Eastern* was fatally under-powered, and its lumbering speed was good for little more than laying telegraph cables under the Atlantic in the 1870s. That itself was a culmination of technological innovations decades earlier that allowed Holmes to use the telegram far more than any magnifying glass, including a cable to America in the first adventure published.

STATECRAFT

Also beginning in 1854 were the careers of various statesmen who later loomed large in the professional life of Holmes. Lord Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, for example, made his maiden address as an MP on 7 April. Cecil had been elected unopposed to Parliament only the previous August from the rotten borough of Stamford, as he was for the next 15 years. He considered his maiden speech about the sanctity of Oxford endowments "a failure," but he impressed both Gladstone and Disraeli. Sherlockians have a chance to gauge for themselves the nature of the man when, as the Marquis of Salisbury, he appears in the guise of Lord Bellinger ("twice premier of Britain") in "The Second Stain" and as Lord Holdhurst in "The Naval Treaty." Or perhaps not, as other commentators prefer Gladstone⁴ and Lord George Hamilton, the first Lord of the Admiralty, as the models for those two.⁵

CRIMEA AND U.S. CIVIL WAR

And now to the practice of statecraft by other means, namely military might. Holmes's strong attraction for the United States can be gauged by his hope that Britain might some day be reunited with its lost colonies, under a flag with a Union Jack quartered with the Stars and Stripes ("The Noble Bachelor"). Although he was a teenager during the U.S. Civil War, the savagery and pas-

sions obviously left a mark evidenced by the “mind-reading” incident incorporated twice in the Canon (“The Resident Patient” and “The Cardboard Box”).

The year of Holmes’s birth saw a development that brought that war between the states one step closer. On 30 May, President Franklin Pierce signed the Kansas–Nebraska Act, which abrogated previous restrictions on the northward expansion of slavery. “Bleeding Kansas” became a battleground between slave and free factions with more than 2,000 lives lost there in armed fighting from November 1855 to December 1856.

On the other side of the world, the backdrop to the Crimean War in 1854 was a theme that echoes throughout much of the Canon—the so-called Great Game played out as Britain repulsed Russian encroachments, real or imagined, upon its Indian Empire. Ostensibly the Crimean War was fought over who should control the key to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The real causes were more profound: British and French concern about Russia’s great-power ambitions in the Balkans and the Middle East. These embers were fanned into flames by the annihilation in 1853 of a Turkish fleet by the Russian Black Sea squadron off Sinope.

The Crimean conflict was the first war in which journalism played a key part in stirring interest and shaping opinion among non-combatants. The outstanding performance of the press there, in particular William Howard Russell of *The Times*, contributed greatly to the growth in press influence over the next three decades and to its pervasive presence in the Canon.⁶ Although Russell could be thought of as the first “imbedded” reporter because he moved with the troops, his reports were totally uncensored. His compelling prose brought home to the British public the medical chaos and lamentable conditions under which the expeditionary force fought; it forced government action. Nonetheless, more soldiers succumbed to cholera than to enemy fire, a legacy the armed forces attempted to remedy by expanded training for medical staff at institutions such as Netley, attended by Watson in 1878.

A social legacy from the Crimean War was the beginning of the ascendancy of cigarettes over pipes and cigars among Englishmen, who rapidly adopted this “smart military” fashion of smoking. Although Holmes favors a cigarette in 11 tales, he is much more likely to be recorded smoking a pipe.

IMPERIAL ECONOMIC EXPANSION

The imperial action in the 1850s led to a late Victorian world where references to India, Australia, and Canada are sprinkled throughout the Canon, even exotic colonial locales like the Andaman Islands (*The Sign of the Four*).

This expansion was most noticeable in overseas capital investment and trade arrangements. In 1850, about one-third of Britain’s overseas investment

was in America and the rest largely in Europe. By 1870, the focus had shifted to Britain's empire. About one-quarter of overseas capital investment was by then loans to colonial governments; more than £75 million had been sunk into India's railways alone. The many echoes of Empire in the Canon are an accurate reflection of Britain's geopolitical concerns in the late Victorian era.

Geopolitics was interwoven with the world of Sherlock Holmes in small ways as well as large. It could be argued, for example, that Henry Baskerville would have been most unlikely to be farming in Canada at all had Britain not engineered a Reciprocity Treaty with the United States, signed on 5 June 1854. By opening up the much larger U.S. markets to exports of agricultural products from Canada, the treaty avoided a backlash against Britain for the loss of the preferential treatment of prairie grain exports. This substitute market—growing and nearby—made it much more economically attractive to put vast prairie tracts under the plow. In turn, this agricultural burgeoning attracted a steady stream of young men from Britain, one of whom was Henry Baskerville.

BRAIN WITHOUT A HEART

In 1854 one of the era's most poignant personal tragedies was unfolding at 1a Dorset Street, just a few minutes' walk from 221B Baker Street. A consulting detective described by his closest friend as a "brain without a heart" ("The Greek Interpreter") would have found the tribulations of Charles Babbage of particular interest. A mathematician and computer pioneer, Babbage moved to the Dorset Street backwater in 1829, seeking quiet for hours of daily thinking and inexpensive workshop space to build a huge mechanical calculator.

By the 1850s, however, Babbage couldn't concentrate because of the din from buskers who filled London streets day and night, especially Italian organ-grinders. A campaign against street musicians gradually took over Babbage's life, to the detriment of work on his "analytical engine"—a mechanical brain programmed by punch cards, with a central processor and memory. His lobbying resulted in a new anti-busker law in 1864, but the ensuing quiet came too late.

Frustrated by the limitations of Victorian engineering and a lack of funds, Babbage was never able to complete any of his calculating machines. Yet his Difference Engine 2 accurately calculated to 31 figures when it was finally built from the original design in 1991 by the Science Museum in London.

These two strands in the web of time again crossed in 1986 when police forces in the United Kingdom began using a computer crime program for serial murders, large-scale disasters, and multi-million-pound fraud cases. It was called the Home Office Large Major Enquiry System, or HOLMES.

NOTES

1. <<http://www.booty.demon.co.uk/climate/wxevents.htm>>.
2. The other three are a Crimean pensioner in “The Golden Pince-Nez,” Admiral Green of “Lady Frances Carfax,” and Col. Emsworth of “The Blanched Soldier,” awarded a VC for bravery there.
3. Helen and Richard Moore, “In Search of the Gallant Murray,” *Canadian Holmes*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 3–8. A third connection is made in their argument that the “gallant Murray” who saved Watson at Maiwand was the same James Murray awarded the VC for bravery in the Boer War.
4. Jon Lellenberg, “Revised Treatise,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 1983), p. 100.
5. F. E. Morgan, “Sherlock Holmes and Foreign Affairs,” *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 1973), pp. 28–30.
6. Peter Calamai, “Headlines and Deadlines: How Sherlock Holmes Used the Press” in *Sherlock Holmes: Victorian Sleuth to Modern Hero*, edited by Charles Putney, Joseph A. Cutshall King, and Sally Sugarman, Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996, pp. 25–36.

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