

OLD FRANKLAND: A CASE OF IDENTITY

by ROBERT A. MOSS

Of all the characters in *Hound of the Baskervilles*, Mr. Frankland (no first name is given) of Lafter Hall is the oddest. Dr. Watson tells us that Frankland “helps to keep our lives from being monotonous, and gives a little comic relief where it is badly needed.” W. W. Robson, editor of the Oxford University Press edition of *Hound*, agrees: “Old Frankland, as Watson says, is there for comic relief (the only comedy in the book, apart from Holmes’s witty badinage).”¹ Lafter Hall, of course, can also be read as “Laughter Hall,” but is Frankland really humorous?

Frankland’s principal recreation consists of bringing lawsuits against the Crown, his neighbors, and the townspeople of Fernworthy. He has closed the woods to picnickers, established a right of way across his neighbor’s estate, and is engaged in a battle with the local constabulary via a suit against the Crown, over their failure to deter expressions of his victims’ wrath. Indeed, Watson informs us that Frankland is involved in about seven simultaneous legal actions that will probably cost him the rest of his legacy.

In addition, Frankland is estranged from his daughter, Mrs. Laura Lyons, whose parlous financial straits (which render her susceptible to the wiles of the villainous Stapleton) are largely Frankland’s responsibility. Finally, Frankland uses his telescope to spy upon his neighbors on the moor. That he inadvertently puts Watson on the track of Holmes’s moorland hideout does not alter the curmudgeonly nature of Frankland’s activities. All in all, Watson’s sketch of Frankland is that of an elderly misanthrope, rather than the “kindly, good-natured person” he initially describes.

In fact, we may wonder whether “Frankland” is the true name of the master of “Lafter Hall” (no doubt a pseudonym itself). Consider: If “Frankland” is prone to bring suit over trivial issues, how much more likely would he be to sue Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes, the Literary Agent, and the publisher to boot, for invasion of privacy if he were actually named in *Hound*? Would not the publisher, George Newnes, have insisted that the real “Frankland” be disguised when *Hound* first appeared in *Strand* in 1901, and then in book form in 1902?

“Frankland,” it is clear, must be an alias for the real father of Laura Lyons, whom we shall call “Mr. X.” While it is difficult to discover the actual name of this individual, it is easier to trace the origin of the alias.

“Edward Frankland (1825–99) was arguably the most important British chemist of the 19th century,”² and a likely source of the pseudonym used for

Mr. X in *Hound*. We suggest that at the publisher's request, Doyle and Watson consulted Holmes about a suitable alias for Mr. X, and Holmes, the accomplished if amateur chemist,³ suggested Frankland's name. There are many reasons why Frankland's name and career would have been familiar to Holmes, Watson, and Doyle, making him an appropriate cover for Mr. X.

Firstly, Sir Edward Frankland died in 1899 after a long career devoted to chemical research and education, as well as public service; his obituary would surely have been noted by Holmes, Watson, Doyle, and Newnes, so that the use of Frankland's name would have been reasonably "safe" in 1901, when *Hound* was written and published. The key point here is that although the dating of the *action* in *Hound* is contentious, with suggestions of 1886⁴ (Bell), 1888⁵ (Baring-Gould), 1897⁶ (Finley Christ), 1899⁷ (Brend), or 1900⁸ (Dakin) to mention several, *publication* did not occur until August 1901, after Frankland's death. But what were the highlights of his life that so impressed Holmes and his associates that Frankland's name was (perhaps hastily) borrowed for X?⁹

Edward Frankland was born in 1825 near Lancaster, the illegitimate son of Edward Gost (later a lawyer) and Margaret Frankland (a maid). He rose from his humble beginnings by that combination of sheer will and talent that was to serve many another poor boy from the provinces during the Victorian era, but, at the same time, his struggles marked him as a difficult, cantankerous individual who, like X, would know much controversy and familial strife.

Apprenticed by his stepfather to a pharmacist at the age of 15, Frankland gravitated to London in 1845 to take an assistant's position in the laboratory of the Government Museum of Economic Geology. There, by happy chance, Frankland met Kolbe, a student of the great German chemist Bunsen, who had been sent to London to assist the British government's research on the causes of coal gas explosions. Not only did his friendship with Kolbe fix the direction of Frankland's life, but also it initiated a concern with the interrelation of chemistry and public affairs that would form a constant theme in Frankland's career.

From 1847 to 1848, Frankland taught school at the Quaker Queenswood College, where *practical* laboratory instruction was a specialty. Then, in 1848, he and Kolbe went to Marburg to take their Ph.D. degrees with Bunsen. By 1851, Frankland had been appointed Professor of Chemistry at Owens College in Manchester, where he was to remain for six years. There are two notable developments during this period. First, Frankland established a major research presence; his 1852 paper on "the combining powers of atoms" earned him a lasting reputation in the area of valency, which deals with the ratios in which atoms can unite to form molecules, and is a foundation of the structural theory of chemistry. Obviously, Holmes, as well as Watson and Doyle (both MDs), would have

encountered Frankland's theories when they studied chemistry in the 1870s. Second, Frankland became well known in Manchester as a scientific witness in the law courts where he helped prosecute various Manchester manufacturers for air pollution. The parallel to Mr. X harassing his neighbors and the Crown with lawsuits is near at hand.

Even more apposite was Frankland's return to London upon his next appointment as Lecturer in Chemistry at St. Bartholomew's Hospital! It was at St. Bart's, we recall, that Holmes pursued his unorthodox anatomical researches (1880–81),¹⁰ where Watson also studied (1872),¹¹ and, of course, where Holmes and Watson first met (*Study in Scarlet*). Although Frankland left St. Bart's by 1865 (see below), his name and reputation, as well as the impact of his three lecture per week schedule, must no doubt have lingered.

In 1863, Frankland was made Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Institution, where the immortal Michael Faraday had once held forth. Then, in 1865, he succeeded Hofmann as Professor at the Royal College of Chemistry. Frankland held this position, perhaps the most prestigious chemical chair in Britain, until his retirement in 1885. It was from this vantage point that Frankland embarked on two new initiatives that were to make his name familiar to thousands of chemistry students, to the inhabitants of London, and, not least, to Holmes, Watson, and Doyle.

As Professor of Chemistry at the Royal College, Frankland was also Chief Examiner for the Government's Department of Science and Art, responsible for both the syllabus and examinations for students studying chemistry in Britain. In this capacity, he made fundamental and lasting changes to the curriculum that affected the education of thousands of students. In 1866, Frankland published *Lecture Notes for Chemical Students*, which was republished as a two-volume second edition (1870–72). A third, revised edition of volume 2 (organic chemistry) followed in 1881. Holmes and Watson would certainly have studied from either the 1866 or 1872 edition, and Holmes, whose knowledge of chemistry was profound (*Study in Scarlet*), if eccentric ("Five Orange Pips"), would most certainly have read the 1881 volume on organic chemistry.¹²

In his textbooks, Frankland championed the new ideas of valency and organic structure, helping to instill these principles in the next generation of British chemists. When Holmes later engaged in a "research into the coal-tar derivatives"¹³ his approach was governed by the structural theories of Frankland (and his German contemporary, Kekulé).

Even more importantly, Frankland was aware of the student's need for *practical instruction*, an aspect of the curriculum that was almost nonexistent before he assumed the Royal College chair of chemistry. In 1871, Frankland persuaded

the Department of Science and Art to provide a grant for the endowment of laboratory facilities in school science classes. He also used the examination syllabi to force the teachers to give demonstrations to their students. Perhaps it was this exposure to practical chemistry that fired the 17-year-old Holmes's lifelong interest in the subject.¹⁴

Refining his pedagogical approach, Frankland created a set of 109 experiments for his practical course in chemistry. These required kits containing 143 pieces of apparatus that were supplied to the school laboratories as these were transformed under Frankland's influence in the 1870s and 1880s. By 1872, of course, Holmes had moved on to Christ Church College, Oxford, to read chemistry with Augustus Vernon Harcourt,¹⁵ but he had no doubt familiarized himself with Frankland's experiments, probably by repeating them himself. One of the demonstrations involved the decomposition of marsh gas. Did Holmes recall this experiment when, many years later on the trail of the Hound, he and Watson tracked the nefarious Stapleton through the great Grimpen Mire?

In 1870, Frankland established a summer school for science teachers, designed to improve science instruction in their schools. He stressed practical work in qualitative analysis and organic preparations, two areas that were dear to Holmes and integral to his forensic approach to detection. In 1875 Frankland published "How to Teach Chemistry," in which he described his 109 demonstration/experiments. Although slightly too late for the scientific education of Holmes and Watson (perhaps not for Doyle, who was 16 in 1875), Frankland's pedagogical revolution would certainly have come to their attention.

A second area of Frankland's activities thrust his name before the London citizenry. In 1868, Frankland was appointed to the Royal Commission on Rivers Pollution, an important body that was in part concerned with preventing the repetition of past epidemics of cholera and typhoid. It was for these efforts that Frankland was knighted in 1897, his name appearing in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Birthday Honours list. Watson, the medical man, and Holmes, the chemist, certainly would have noted Frankland's public service and its reward.

This brief review of Frankland's career as a research scientist, chemical educator and administrator,¹⁶ and public servant leaves little doubt that his name and activities must have been familiar to Holmes, Watson, and Doyle, and that his death in 1899¹⁷ would have suggested his name as an alias for Mr. X during or after the writing of *Hound*.

Indeed, it might not be too much to suggest that some traits of the real Edward Frankland have been grafted onto X. Thus the latter's litigiousity and estrangement from his daughter echo Frankland's public controversies and his

strained relations with his two sons, one “exiled” to New Zealand and the second (Percy Faraday Frankland, a well-known chemist in his own right) thrust away because of his failure to return some lecture notebooks. Then, too, Frankland was an amateur astronomer, recalling X’s telescope mounted on the roof of Lafter Hall.

Were we to learn that Sir Edward Frankland maintained a second home in Fernworthy, we might even argue for completion of the equation: Edward Frankland *was* Mr. X, “Mr. Frankland of Lafter Hall.” We need not go that far, I suggest, to discern their close relation. As so often is the case in Watson’s annals, art borrows heavily from history.

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NOTES

1. W. W. Robson, Ed. Introduction. A. C. Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Oxford Sherlock Holmes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. xxvi.
2. A. J. Rocke, review of C. A. Russell, *Edward Frankland: Chemistry, Controversy, and Conspiracy in Victorian England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Chemistry in Britain*, Dec. 1996, p. 55.
3. R. A. Moss, “Knowledge of Chemistry—Profound,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* Vol. 25, No. 4, Dec. 1975, pp. 216–217, 240.
4. H. W. Bell, *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, The Chronology of Their Adventures*. New York: Magico Magazine, 1984, p. 30.
5. W. S. Baring-Gould, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*. New York: Potter, 1962, p. 304.
6. J. Finley Christ, *An Irregular Chronology of Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*. New York: Magico Magazine, n.d., p. 41.
7. G. Brend, *My Dear Holmes*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1951, p. 180.
8. D. M. Dakin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*. New York: Drake, 1972, p. 302. Dakin also appears to accept a dating of 1899, p. 148.
9. The biographical sketch that follows is largely drawn from two sources: W. H. Brock, *The Norton History of Chemistry*, New York: Norton, 1993, pp. 396–408, and C. G. Gillispie, Ed., *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, New York: Scribner’s, 1972, Vol. 5, pp. 124–127. A new biography of Frankland has also appeared; see note 2 above.
10. Baring-Gould, pp. 53f, 298.
11. Baring-Gould, p. 295.

12. Informed opinion holds that Holmes was primarily an (amateur) analytical chemist; see J. F. O'Brien, "What Kind of Chemist Was Sherlock Holmes?" *Chemistry & Industry* (11), June 1993, pp. 394-398, and R. P. Graham, "Sherlock Holmes: Analytical Chemist," *Journal of Chemical Education*, 22, Oct. 1945, pp. 508-510.
13. "Empty House." See R. A. Moss, "A Research into the Coal-Tar Derivatives," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Mar. 1982, pp. 40-42.
14. We follow the chronology of Baring-Gould; see note 5.
15. R. A. Moss, "Sherlock Holmes' College at Oxford," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Mar. 1979, 25.
16. Frankland also served as president of the Chemical Society (1871-73) and founder and first president of the Institute of Chemistry (1877-80), a society for professional chemists.
17. Frankland died in Norway while dictating his memoirs to his mistress.



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