

TIMELINE

The Official Newsletter of the Sherlockian Chronologist Guild

Summer Reading Part 1: Ding Goes The Starting Bell

“One day last autumn,” H.W. Bell wrote, as the opening words his introduction to *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: The Chronology of Their Adventures*. And then, after putting his name at the end of that same introduction, notes the date of its writing: March 1, 1932.

One doesn’t have to apply much chronological skill to that data to get that Bell completed his ground-breaking study of Sherlockian chronology in something a little more than a single season. True, we don’t know what part of that autumn he took his inspiration, but it’s plain that most of his work was done over the winter months, December, January, and February — a very short amount of time, if you’ve made your own attempt.

Inspired by S.C. Roberts’s 1931 biography, *Doctor Watson*, which asserted its dates as a matter of fact, Bell set out to put all the cases of Sherlock Holmes referred to by Watson (or Holmes) in order and give his reasoning for each.

Bell posited three wives for Watson (each from a different continent?), he included the unpublished cases in his chronology (freely admitting eighteen of them were impossible to date), and, in his introduction, compared his bout with chronology to possession by a demon and advised any who wanted to take up the case to “go to the devil.”

Bell’s acknowledgements page makes one long to look in at the letters or conversations that aided his journey. The unfamiliar names of LeRoy King, E.H.M. Cox, G.J. Gomme, Ruth S. Grannis, and Percy H. Muir cause much curiosity, while Gray Chandler Briggs and Frederic Dorr Steele just cause envy. The “definitive edition” of the Canon he used was not the ever-familiar Doubleday, but the 1928 John Murrar, which raises questions for current chronologists’ choices of Canon. And the fact that I find just the contents pages copied and included with other photostatic copies of rarities gifted me in the eighties says something of the value of those pages alone — they lay out the order of Holmes’s career whose proofs and evidence is to follow.

“On the Period of Holmes’s Active Practice” comes after the table of contents and is a nice little overview essay all its own before we get to his work on the stories themselves. And that, my friends, is where we get to the challenge for any writer of chronology. Bell has been clever, interesting, and fun to read up to this point. Will that continue?

We’ll save that answer until next month, as it’s getting a bit warm in the writing room and I need to get this issue together. Back to Bell then!

Membership in the Sherlockian Chronologist Guild

Here is the current list of members of the Sherlockian Chronologist Guild who are openly admitting it, and have chosen their ID date:

Vincent Wright, member ID 4-23-1895
Greg Ruby, member ID 6-26-1902
David Marcum, member ID 6-14-1921
Brad Keefauver, member ID 3-24-1892
Alexander C. Jung, member ID 11-14-1895
Courtney Powers, member ID 7-24-1853
Joe Eckrich, member ID 6-1-1889
Ross Davies, member ID 6-4-1902
Mike McSwiggin, member ID 12-9-1896
Peter Liddell, member ID 2-4-1882
aleSH Kolodrubec, member ID 3-20-1888
Margie Deck, member ID 8-2-1914
Paul Thomas Miller, member ID 3-16-1897
Thomas Cynkin, member ID 6-21-1882
Les Klinger, member ID 3-26-1892
Bruce Harris, member ID 6-19-1889
Mark Anderson, member ID 9-30-1889
James O'Leary, member ID 4-7-1891
Andrew J. Peck, member ID 3-20-1889
Edith Pouden, member ID 11-21-1887
Douglas Vaughan, member ID 9-26-1903
Steve Mason, member ID 4-5-1895
Peter Parker, honorary member ID 1899
John Botkin, member ID 7-15-1895

You can always be a part of the Sherlockian Chronologist Guild as a private member, keeping your status under wraps while working on your own chronology and just getting issues passed along from any of the public members. Or, once you've hit a point where you're comfortable speaking openly about the subject, you can let the newsletter editor know and get your name and member ID date added to the above list by emailing bradkeefauver@comcast.net.

PRIORY SCHOOL

The client explains, “On May 1st the boy arrived, that being the beginning of the summer term. . . . He was last seen on the night of May 13th — that is, the night of last Monday. . . . His absence was discovered at seven o’clock on Tuesday morning. . . . Now, on Thursday morning, we are as ignorant as we were on Tuesday.”

Holmes’s encyclopaedia states: “Lord Lieutenant of Hallamshire since 1900. Married Edith, daughter of Sir Charles Appledore, 1888.”

Considerations

May 13th on a Monday occurred in 1889, 1895, 1901, 1907, and 1912.

Past Chronologist Notes

Most go for Thursday, May 16, 1901.

Zeisler, Dakin, Butters, and Thomson disagree. Zeisler cites the phase of the moon and blames Dr. Huxtable for stating the wrong date in his explanation, deciding it was May 17, 1900. Dakin and Thomson agree with Zeisler whole-heartedly. Butters uses the “Abbey School” reference in BLAN to push it to 1902.

Your Final Choice For Priory School

It seems to be a “moon and Zeisler” or “by the calendar” binary. Any new ideas on this one?

What Are We Missing?

Seems like there might be something. Or maybe this is just one of the easy ones, and we should be happy in that.

The Man Who Couldn’t Stop at 40

In his *Historical Sherlock* blog post for the end of May, Vincent Wright wrote of the latest additions to his collection of chronologies (Get hither quickly to historicalsherlock.blogspot.com if thou hast not!) and reaching a grand total of forty, only to have a forty-first online chronology by David Richardson from the early 2000s appear in the comments. It seems that we have more chronologists out there than people who own hansom cab clocks!

Side note: Check out Vincent’s new YouTube channel *Standing By History*, in which you see his love of historical detail expand beyond the Canonical realms where it has served him so well.

STUD – Singularities in the Timeline?

By Peter Liddell, SCG 2-4-1882

Anyone who has studied, or has simply held an interest in, physics should be aware of the concept of the singularity. The most obvious example of such a singularity in astrophysics is, perhaps, “The Big Bang”, that moment when, it is supposed, all the matter in our universe was exploded from an infinitely small point. Understanding fully what has happened, and will happen, on our side of that singularity is an ongoing endeavour that may one day be fully resolved – or perhaps not?

Interestingly, it is apparent that we have such singularities in the Sherlockian timeline, perhaps the first and potentially most significant being the Battle of Maiwand (27th July 1880). Paradoxically, perhaps, this was an event outside of Holmes’ personal timeline, indeed possibly an event of which he was not, at the time, even aware.

Unlike today’s astro- and particle physicists, we are lucky in that we have information from “the other side” of this singularity, but that information is apparently separable from our timeline discussions as it concerns the route to, rather than the consequences of, the singularity. However separable the dating issues might be, we do nevertheless owe it to ourselves to consider Watson’s account of the pre-singularity events as the evidence therein available offers clues that should be fully recognised in our post-singularity analyses.

A crucial base for any robust Sherlockian timeline must be the date when Watson first met Holmes – a second singularity? – subsequently to form their lasting partnership. It should also never be forgotten that it was Watson who encountered, and survived, the Maiwand singularity, thereby locking his timeline to recorded history. It is his history that determines the likely dates for this fundamentally important meeting.

Was Watson really present at Maiwand or is his account a pure work of fiction? My personal inclination is to the former – if it turned out that he was never at Maiwand, there would be insurmountable challenges to his veracity and any confidence in his subsequent writings would be destroyed, rendering chronological analysis futile.

The Road to Maiwand

Watson’s account, or as might quickly be recognised, the scraps that survive from Watson’s account, of the period before the Maiwand singularity amounts to a princely 172 words. Two factors leap instantly to mind. First, if, as advised in the STUD rubric, today’s text is a reprint “from” (not “of”, note) Watson’s *Reminiscences* then the style and detail captured in these 172 words is utterly at variance with both the late 19th century ‘Memoirs’ genre and with Watson’s subsequent highly detailed writing. Secondly, there are glaring errors within these few words that Watson would surely never have tolerated.

For example, if Watson was at Maiwand, how did this circumstance come about? He tells us that, sometime after reaching Kandahar and joining his “brigade” he was transferred to the 66th Regiment of Foot and thus, through their leadership, he ended up at Maiwand. But why did he go to Kandahar to join his brigade in the first place? He tells us that he was attached to “the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as assistant surgeon”. At the time of his attachment this would have been the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment of Foot, but they never operated anywhere near Kandahar. No, he would only have travelled to Kandahar had his attachment been changed to one of the regiments who were there, a regiment that later was to be replaced in the Kandahar garrison by the 66th. I find it utterly inconceivable that Watson would not have described these developments in detail, yet these explanations are not to be found in today’s text. Demonstrably, it seems to me, substantial editing occurred when Watson’s failed Reminiscences were converted by the Literary Agent into a marketable STUD text.

Maiwand to Portsmouth

If substantial editing was carried out through the “pre-singularity” text, then, I would argue, it follows that similar editing probably was applied to the whole of Watson’s account of his military experiences in the Agent’s rush towards a focus on Holmes. Obvious questions prompted by the 221 words covering this first post-singularity period include: where were the “British lines” to which Murray carried Watson?; whence, when he was carried away in “a great train of wounded sufferers” did that convoy emanate and where did it go?; wherever that was, how and why did he subsequently end up in Peshawar, there to be committed to the base hospital and to suffer his considerable post-admission trials and tribulations?

The Agent’s apparent deletion of very nearly all of Watson’s personal account will throw the serious scholar upon the, fortunately, well-recorded history of the 2nd Afghan War. Watson’s timeline would have varied only slightly from any other survivor of Maiwand, survivors whose subsequent progresses are generally well-understood. Given Watson’s eventual arrival at Peshawar it is apparent that whilst he was wounded at Maiwand, his wounds could not have been that serious. Had they been, he would have been sent straight home. As a breach of his sub-clavian artery would almost certainly have proved fatal it seems that Watson was highly fortunate as even the slightest adverse deviation of the “jezail bullet”, if indeed it did “graze” that artery, would most surely have taken him from us.

However, by far the most important question has to be “when did he leave India?”

From Portsmouth to the Criterion Bar

These 198 words form perhaps the more problematic post-singularity text as there is no obvious lock to recorded history. We are faced with the need to understand Watson’s sentiment when he used the term “gravitate”, the significance of “there I stayed for some time” and, of course, we must understand how his apparently profligate rate of spend matched his available funds, determining just how long after

Portsmouth the “state of his finances” might, in his view, have become “alarming”. There are of course hints at the end of this process, such as the single student in the teaching hospital’s chemical laboratory, and it would be no bad thing if we could determine just when the “suite of rooms” became available, bearing in mind of course, the need to determine just where on Baker Street “221b” was situated.

Watson Meets Holmes

Notice the dramatic change in style and detail after Watson meets Stamford. From this point the text takes 1,076 words to cover the following couple of hours or so, taking us to Watson’s being introduced to Holmes, approximately twice as many words as describe Watson’s entire prior life, including his experiences in and after the 2nd Afghan War. Indirectly, this further confirms, I believe, the drastic reductions in the text prior to the Watson/Stamford meeting. The description of the events from this meeting to Watson’s moving into “221b” the following day, with Holmes joining him the day after that, takes another 1,225 words, cementing the dramatic contrast in detail and style after his first (and only?) encounter with Stamford.

Final Thoughts.

Analyses which seriously address these issues are to be commended. I personally have little time for those analysts who postulate a post-Maiwand timeline to suit a predetermined date for the Watson/Holmes meeting — often January 1st, 1881, just 158 days after Maiwand — a postulation usually, I would argue necessarily, justified by finding fault with, or simply dismissing, what little of Watson’s text remains.

I would far rather spend my time evaluating an historically supported Watson timeline than spending that same time looking for more and more evidence that demonstrates how and where his texts, specifically the STUD text, are inaccurate or just plain wrong. I always find it interesting when analysts who can be so dismissive feel able nevertheless to claim other Watson statements to be absolutely accurate!

As a final point, I cannot help but note that if a “sensible” Holmes/Watson meeting date is determined — my preference, I believe fully supportable, is October 9th, 1882 — many of the oft-analysed Canonical “problems”, e.g., “The Missing Years”, would simply ‘go-away’! Watson’s account, it would appear, is in many ways a lot more accurate than some analysts have been willing to credit.

Following on from this date, the subsequent “It was upon the 4th of March, as I have good reason to remember” milestone therefore fell, I believe, in 1883, and internal evidence strongly indicates that the Lauriston Gardens Affair occurred in 1884, so this was not their first case together eventually to be published. I assess that 2, possibly 3 of the published cases occurred before the “L.G. Affair”.

However, we are now drifting into the aftermath of another singularity — the meeting in the Chemical Laboratory at Bart’s (?) Hospital.

RED CIRCLE

“The gloom of a London winter evening had thickened into one gray curtain . . .” Watson relates.

“By the way, it is not eight o’clock, and a Wagner night at Covent Garden! If we hurry, we might be in time for the second act,” Sherlock Holmes tells Watson.

“I really have other things to engage me,” Holmes claimed earlier, working on his commonplace books.

“You arranged an affair for a lodger of mine last year,” Mrs. Warren says, “Mr. Fairdale Hobbs.”

Considerations

Inspector Gregson makes no specifically dated appearances in the Canon past 1892, and only two before this story, in *A Study in Scarlet* and “Greek Interpreter.”

Past Chronologist Notes

Here’s the thing on this one — more than a couple of these folks came up with a date, re-thought things, and came up with a second date. Some just gave a range. Here’s how all over the map they were at their worst:

1885 - Keefauver.

1893 - Christ.

1895 - Baring-Gould(1), Zeisler (Start of range).

1896 - Brend, Folsom(1), Butters.

1897 - Bell, Dakin, Thomson.

1902 - Hall, Baring-Gould(2), Folsom(2), Bradley-Sarjeant (Start of range), Zeisler (End of range), Boswell, Miller.

1903 - Bradley-Sarjeant (End of range).

Your Final Choice For Red Circle

This one’s a real challenge.

What Are We Missing?

A whole lot from Watson. Anything in the rest of the historical record that can help?

Chronological Letters From Watson

This month on lettersfromwatson.substack.com, Helen Greetham announced that starting on January 1st, 2023 there would be a new service where you would get an email from Watson three or four times a week on his adventures. The content of the emails are going to basically just be bite-sized pieces of the Sherlockian Canon in chronological order, rather than publication order, so you can move through Watson's timeline as other email literary projects have done.

Of course, the words "in chronological order" cause a Sherlockian chronologist's ears to perk up and raise that eternal question: "What chronological order?" Their FAQ explains, "The Canon of Sherlock Holmes is tricky and inconsistent," and then the project's creator says they'll be using the chronology that Baring-Gould used in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. Their reason?

"It seemed like the choice that was going to result in the fewest Holmesian scholars chasing me with pitchforks."

Plainly, they don't know our little community very well — I know most of us would be more excited to see a newly created attempt at chronology behind the project. And past that, would we have complained if Christ, McQueen, Colpo, or Miller have been selected? I don't think so. In fact, personally, I'm most critical of the choice of the *Baring-Gould Annotated* chronology as a . . . dare I say it . . . *lazy* choice? (My apologies to Helen Greetham, but, hey, I run a chronology guild newsletter — give me something newsworthy!)

In any case, it's always good to see an attempt to put the tales into biographical order and there's a lot of excitement out there about the project.



Jabez Wilson says:

"Always check the date. And your copying work!"

A “Red Circle” Deep Dive

As mentioned earlier, Sherlockians are all over the map with their dates on “Red Circle.” So let’s stop this month and take a look at what they were all thinking:

January 6, 1885 (Brad Keefauver). This chronologist points out all the clues he thinks make this about a younger Holmes, and thinks the presence of Gregson is key. Also uses Holmes’s traditional birthday as reason for Holmes to be wanting a lazy day.

January 1893 (Jay Finley Christ). Winter and a Wagner night at Covent Garden get Christ his date.

January 1896 (Roger Butters). A Wagner night and Gregson’s potential retirement pushing it earlier.

February 27, 1896 (A.R. Colpo). A Wagner night, but at the Olympia London.

January 1897 (H.W. Bell). Wagner night, but at the Garrick Theatre.

Winter 1894 to 1902 (Ernest Bloomfield Zeisler). Winter and Wagner night, but a disagreement with Christ.

September 24, 1902 (Rolfe Boswell). In “Squaring the Red Circle” (*BSJ*’s July 1951 issue), Boswell points to internal evidence of fingerprint knowledge pushing the case to 1901 or after and a Wagner night at Covent Garden to get his date. Paul Thomas Miller worked out the same logic, citing sources in his 2019 chronology, *Watson Does Not Lie*.

Between November 1902 and March 1903 (C. Alan Bradley and William A.S. Sarjeant). Seems to be going mostly off of Watson’s attitude for Holmes not being too warm.

“Wagner Night” Questioned

Most chronologists find the following quote key to dating “Red Circle” — “By the way, is it not eight o’clock, and a Wagner night at Covent Garden!”

Richard Wagner, the German composer who died in 1883, is the immediate assumption for whom Holmes refers to in that quote, but it’s Sherlock Holmes — the often Puckish, mercurial Sherlock Holmes, speaking to his friend with the “pawky” sense of humor. And there were literally hundreds upon hundreds of folks named “Wagner” living in London in the 1880s and 1890s. Could Wagner have been the name of a ticket taker at Covent Garden who owed Holmes a favor? A particular member of the orchestra Holmes found of interest? While the probabilities lie with “composer Richard Wagner,” they are simply that: probabilities, not solid fact. The easy route.

Sherlockian chronologists are used to having to work with limited data, and here again we find ourselves with exactly that — one name, neither positively identifiable as a first, last, or nick-name: Wagner. You can play the odds, but even there, you’re still gambling.

And A Few Closing Words . . .

As the opening article indicated, I have been looking a bit into Harold Wilmerding Bell this month. His original chronology, five hundred copies of which were published in London in 1932, became so desired over the next thirty years that the Baker Street Irregulars reprinted it in 1953 in their familiar red paperback covers. But only then adding 350 more copies to that existing 500. Another thirty years went by and *Magico Magazine* did yet another reprinting, in amounts we do not know. One would think that, still another thirty-nearing-forty years later, that we're overdue for one more reprint, but perhaps there are enough copies of the work at last — AbeBooks has listings for all three editions as I write this, if one is willing to from \$108 to \$154 plus shipping for each edition.

At the end of his introduction to his 1932 chronology, Bell states flatly that is is done with the demon of chronology after his intensive study and the publication of the book. But his 1934 collection, *Baker Street Studies*, proves his failure at that exorcism, as his “The Date of *The Sign of the Four*” in that volume not only resumes his work on chronology, but actually comes up with a different set of dates for that case than he originally determined two years earlier.

It's only fitting that the first completist chronologist in our ranks was an archeologist, professionally. There is definitely a component of our study that is an archeology of words, digging through strata of the text and pulling out phrases to brush off and see what they reveal. And as with archeology, most lay-persons would just like to see the results and not the laborious work of getting to those final results. When Vincent Starrett first heard H.W. Bell was coming out with a book on Holmes as Starrett was putting together *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, he was concerned about the competition until he found out it was a chronology, at which point his worries vanished like morning mist. No competition there!

H.W. Bell has not been celebrated nearly so much as his contemporaries, even though he was there at that first annual Baker Street Irregulars dinner with Morley, Starrett, Steele, Davis, and the rest. One might blame the travel involved in his job for this separation from the tribe. Or one might guess that Bell had that solitary nature that seems to come easily to Sherlockian chronologists. (Do I over-generalize? Perhaps.) But he was one of the great Sherlockian pioneers nonetheless. Without his subtitle “The Chronology of Their Adventures,” would we even call ourselves “Sherlockian chronologists” today? Maybe not.

This summer's reading has just begun, and I hope the current heat wave doesn't swelter us out of a comfortable time at it.

Chronologically yours,
Brad Keefauver

Our Ongoing Chronology of the Chronological

Started in the February 2022 issue, our updated-monthly history of Sherlockian chronological events. Feel free to send any that we might be missing!

1898 to 1995 (so far and incomplete!)

November 1898: “The Life of Sherlock Holmes” by Helen E. Wilson is published in *Cornell Magazine*.

January 23, 1902: “‘The Hound of the Baskervilles’ at Fault (An Open Letter to Dr. Watson)” by Frank Sidgwick is published in *Cambridge Review*.

1911: “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes” by Ronald A. Knox, read for the Gryphon Club at Trinity.

June 9 through October 22, 1927: *The New Statesman* exchange over three issues between Desmond MacCarthy and Cyril Asquith.

1929: *A Note on the Watson Problem* by S.C. Roberts.

1932: *Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson: The Chronology of Their Adventures* by H.W. Bell.

1932: “The Career of Sherlock Holmes: Chronological Survey” by T.S. Blakeney, published in his *Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction*.

1934: *Annals of Sherlock Holmes* by Frank E. Robbins.

1940: “Dr. Watson’s Secret” by Jane Nightwork (Christopher Morley) in *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes*.

1947: *An Irregular Chronology of Baker Street* by Jay Finley Christ (followed shortly by a supplement on the chronology of “The Case of the Man Who Was Wanted” which was published in August 1948).

April, 1948: “A New Chronology of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson” by William S. Baring-Gould, published in *The Baker Street Journal*.

1951: *My Dear Holmes* by Gavin Brend.

1953: “Chronologically Speaking” by James Montgomery in *Shots from the Canon*.

1955: *The Chronological Holmes* by William S. Baring-Gould.

1956: *Sherlock Holmes Almanac* by Svend Peterson.

April 1958: “A Hint to the Next Chronologist” by Gavin Brend in *The Baker Street Journal*.

Spring 1959: “The Date of A Study in Scarlet” by Percy Metcalf in *The Sherlock Holmes Journal*.

1961: “Chronology of the Blue Carbuncle” by Elliott Kimball in *The Baker Street Journal*.

1962: *Watsoniana* by Elliott Kimball.

1962: *Through the Years at Baker Street: A Chronology of Sherlock Holmes* by Henry T. Folsom.

1963: “Chronology of Holmes” by Junji Tanaka in “*Betsusatus Hoseki*” *Magazine*.

1963: “A Sherlock Holmes Chronology” (a chart of previous chronologists' date to create one timeline) by Robert Pattrick in *The Baker Street Journal*.

1965: *Chronologica Watsonensis. I. Resultaterne* by Flemming Christensen.

1966: “Do-It-Yourself Chronology” by Lord Donegall in *The Sherlock Holmes Journal*.

1967: “Sherlock Holmes chronologisch: Ein Wort zum Geliet” by Nino Ern  in *S mliche Sherlock Holmes Stories*.

1972: *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary* by D. Martin Dakin.

1972: “The Date Being -- ?” *A Compendium of Chronological Data* by Andrew J. Peck.

1974: *Sherlock Holmes Detected* by Ian McQueen.

1980: *The Biorythmic Holmes: A Chronological Perspective* by Carey Cummings.

1984: *First Person Singular: A Review of the Life and Work of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, The World's First Consulting Detective, and His Friend and Colleague, Dr. John H. Watson* by Roger Butters.

1989: *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street: The Truth About Sherlock* by Alan C. Bradley and William A.S. Serjeant.

1993: “I Remember the Date Very Well.” *A chronology of the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle* by John Hall.

1995: *Holmes and Watson* by June Thomson.

1995: *The Game Is Afoot* by Charles Layng.

1996: “The Date Being -- ?” *A Compendium of Chronological Data, Expanded and Revised*, by Andrew J. Peck and Leslie S. Klinger.

2001: “A Basic Timeline of Terra 221B” (An online chronology) by Brad Keefauver.

2019: *Watson Does Not Lie* by Paul Thomas Miller.

2021: ‘I Should Like These Dates A Little Clearer.’ *A Chronological Study of the Recorded Cases of Sherlock Holmes* by A.R. Colpo.

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