Yes, Virginia,
SHERLOCK HOLMES LIVES

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Sherlock Holmes Lives!

by George Hubbs

Dear Virginia,

Every year at Christmas time, you write to the newspapers and ask if Santa lives. And every year, people write clever answers to your question, always concluding that yes, indeed, Santa Claus lives! Now you have written to ask if Sherlock Holmes, too, lives (and not just at Christmas). The answer, of course, is yes. Sherlock lives all the time!

Indeed, Sherlock Holmes lives! The Master Detective is alive and well, just as the bumper sticker at the top of this essay proclaims (though it is a bit of a fraud, because that profile is not, strictly speaking, his). How can we say that a man who would be 141 years old if he had lived, is still alive? This question, and some others, can be answered by exploring the world of Sherlock Holmes.
In the first place, that Holmes and his exploits live on can often be demonstrated quite simply by referring to maps of many American cities. For example, in the Twin Cities, there are streets named Holmes, Watson, Hudson, Doyle, and even Baker—though not Moriarty! One library has a stained glass window dedicated to Holmes, and just outside the city there is a pub named for him.

Worldwide, Sherlock lives in scores of Sherlockian societies, which study and celebrate his cases. In fact, the rumor persists that Holmes himself attended early meetings of several of these groups. Although a thorough search of membership lists did not uncover Sherlock's name, an engaging theory is that Sherlock was there in disguise! After all, in the Canon he disguised himself as a master mariner, clergyman, French laborer, Italian priest, common loafer, and so forth. Why not an Oxford don or a New York magazine editor? For that matter, why not come disguised as himself? Further research may reveal exactly which member of one of the early societies was really the Master Detective.

Of course, there's no doubt that he's real. The fourteenth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica contained a list of all persons mentioned therein. Real people were in boldface type and fictional personages were in italics. Naturally, Sherlock Holmes was in boldface. And since his name has never appeared in the obituaries of either the Times (London) or the New York Times, the conclusion that he is still alive is inescapable. Is more proof needed? Sherlock's 141st birthday was celebrated worldwide in 1995. Why worldwide? Because Sherlock Holmes is everywhere! (And because the selling of Sherlockiana is a hot growth industry, economics being an important measure of life.)
The only problem with such notoriety is that it has turned Sherlock himself into something of a recluse. You might better empathize with Sherlock’s dilemma if you personalized it and pretended that you were Sherlock Holmes.

How would you feel if Dr. Watson had recorded all your exploits and published them in the popular press? Hardback versions of the stories about you and your foibles number in the ten millions, plus millions more in paperback form. How much privacy would you have left after all that?

Nor can you travel to foreign lands to get away, because your exploits have been translated into more than sixty languages. Six biographies have been written about you, plus pamphlets, studies, essays, and monographs by the ton. And, as if your real life were not sufficient, people have embroidered on it by concocting all manner of parodies and pastiches.

Furthermore, your name and utterances are used in advertising, on greeting cards, and in comic strips—and even bumper stickers! Numerous radio shows, more than twenty plays, at least seventy-five television productions, and over one hundred and fifty motion pictures have dramatized (not to say sensationalized) your exploits. To say nothing of the posters, games, puzzles, toys, songs, jokes, book bags, and postage stamps that carry your picture! The University of Minnesota alone has a collection that would fill a warehouse of items about you, and encourages academic research in the collection.
(An irony of course, is that the signature profile on the bumper sticker and in other popular places is not yours, but that of the first actor to portray you, William Gillette. He found he could not speak his lines with a straight-stemmed pipe and so began to use the calabash. That curved pipe, which you never used, has become one of symbols most frequently used to represent you.)

People visit your haunts in London, where pubs and restaurants are named for you. Hundreds of profiles of you (or is it that actor?) decorate the Underground station at Baker Street. And, strange to say, Moriarty’s Pizza occupies a store near your old lodgings.

Your followers form societies, often named after things mentioned in the Sherlock Holmes (“your”) cases. For example, the society in the Twin Cities is called the Norwegian Explorers, after a disguise which “you” assumed while roaming the world for three years (seeing the Dalai Lama in Tibet, visiting Khartoum in the Sudan, and studying coal tar derivatives in the south of France). These societies exist in countries throughout the world.

About now, if you were still pretending that you were Sherlock, you would have had it. All this publicity would be more than enough to make you think about taking another identity or maybe retiring to keep bees. It is no wonder the real Sherlock Holmes tried both—disguising himself and retiring. No wonder at all, when just about everything about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson has found its way into print: education, health, appearance, food, drink, smoking habits, and so forth. With all this notoriety, you can see that Sherlock has to take counter measures in order to be able to
continue his work. After all, what good can you be as a consulting detective if you are so recognizable that people follow you around, taking your picture and asking for your autograph?

The "Real" Sherlock Holmes
An Ordinarily Extraordinary Man

The "real" Sherlock Holmes lives in retirement, somewhere near Eastbourne in Sussex, actually keeping bees and doing genetic experiments. After all, if Mendel could use fruit flies in his experimentation, Sherlock Holmes can certainly use bees to make new genetic discoveries, which probably explains why he is still very active and well at 141 years. By all accounts, it is a very sweet existence.

In many other things, Sherlock Holmes appears to be quite ordinary—albeit in some extraordinary ways:

¶He has practical, but very limited, knowledge in geology: he can identify at a glance any soil or mud stain from anywhere within fifty miles of London. As for the rest of geology, however, his knowledge is zero.

¶He has a specialized knowledge of botany. Unlike his fellow Englishmen, Sherlock knows nothing of practical gardening, but is well up on belladonna, opium, and poisons in general.

¶He has a good practical knowledge of British law, as might be expected of a British citizen.

¶He knows a great deal about printers' type faces and
typewriters and can date any document within a
decade or so. (One wonders, though, if he has updated
his skill to meet the challenge of the word processor.)

On the other hand, his knowledge of chemistry is
profound.

He is also an expert boxer and swordsman, and he plays
the violin well. These are the marks of an upper-class
nineteenth century Englishman.

He is an expert on tattoo marks and keeps voluminous
clipping scrapbooks on sensational events, people and
crimes. He appears to know every detail of every horror
perpetrated in the last one hundred years.

But then each of us has our little specialties!

Sherlock has a few other eccentricities as well: he can
identify 42 different bicycle tire impressions; 75 perfumes;
140 varieties of tobacco; 160 variations of ciphers and secret
writings; and he opens safes as a hobby.

Eccentricities, however, do not confer immortality.
Scholars and researchers do not think it is his oddities that
cause Sherlock Holmes to live on in our minds today.
Instead, scholars of the Canon are convinced that Holmes's
living grip on our imagination results from the four great
themes of the Sherlock Holmes stories. These themes are
the sense of teamwork, the use of professional detection
methods, the employment of rational thinking, and the
ultimate triumph of good over evil.
Although he is clearly the center of gravity, Sherlock's detective feats are often based on teamwork. For example, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," he hires a whole crowd of accomplices. He uses at least two different bloodhounds, Pompey and Toby. Sherlock's brother, Mycroft, also is a teammate, as is the police force.

And then there are the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of street urchins Holmes recruits. They watch over people, such as Henry Wood in "The Crooked Man," find a cab in A Study in Scarlet, and locate the steam launch Aurora in The Sign of Four. Of the Irregulars, Sherlock says, "There's more work to be got out of one of those little beggars than out of a dozen of the force... These youngsters... go everywhere and hear everything. They are as sharp as needles, too; all they want is organization." (STUD)

Of course, the best team player is Sherlock's friend, Dr. John H. Watson. Teamwork takes many forms. For example, in "The Speckled Band," Sherlock makes the following request, "I should be very much obliged if you would slip your revolver into your pocket. An Eley's No. 2 is an excellent argument with gentlemen who can twist steel pokers into knots."

Holmes appreciated Watson's help so much that his last recorded words (in His Last Bow) are "Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age." The theme of teamwork runs all through the Sherlockian scriptures, reassuring us that not even the Master Detective tried to go it alone. He knew when he needed help and he asked for it.

Another theme in the Canon is the use of professional
methods of detection. In addressing this theme, one might suppose that the amateur would be Sherlock and the professionals, the London Metropolitan Police. It's the other way around! Amateurishly, police inspectors asked for Holmes's help at least ten times. Inspector Lestrade himself asked four times. The British Home Secretary brought Holmes in on the case of the Mazarin Diamond. And on three occasions the police actually referred clients to Sherlock.

A pattern emerges: the professional detective is Sherlock Holmes. The Great Detective himself says in *The Sign of Four*: "When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Athelney Jones are out of their depths—which, by the way, is their normal state—the matter is laid before me. I examine the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist's opinion."

Even when Sherlock complimented the police, it was with faint praise sardonically given. He thought of the French detective, Le Villard, as "wanting in knowledge," but translating Holmes's cases into French in order to learn from them. He regarded British detective Athelney Jones as having "occasional glimmerings of reason."

Holmes's professional expertise is demonstrated clearly in many cases. In "The Devil's Foot" he follows Sterndale, a professional lion hunter used to tracking and being tracked, so cleverly that Sterndale claimed, "I saw no one." Or he observed things that police detectives did not, as in "Silver Blaze," where he called Inspector Gregory's attention to "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Gregory: "The dog did nothing in the nighttime."
Holmes: "That was the curious incident."
In the end, the police acknowledge that Holmes is better at detection than they are. In “Black Peter,” Inspector Hopkins says to Holmes, “It seems to me that I have been making a fool of myself from the beginning. I understand now, what I should never have forgotten; that I am the pupil and you are the master.”

The third major theme of the Sherlock Holmes cases, the exercise of rational thinking, is also part of the continuing appeal of the Canon. Strict logic is of crucial importance in Sherlock’s cases. He explains his credo in “A Scandal in Bohemia”: “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensiby one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

A computer-like search for data provides the fuel for Sherlock’s rational engine as he wins out over baffling riddles, formidable criminals, and tremendous odds. “Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else,” he says of a person in “The Red-headed League.” When the information has been gathered, all that is left is to eliminate “the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” (SIGN)

Keeping emotion out of the reasoning process was also very important to Sherlock. “Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.” (SIGN)

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes celebrate a life of
the mind, showing that logical thinking and mental exercise are rewarding in themselves. The cases appeal to the rational person of any age, demonstrating the triumph of logic and clear thinking over emotion and romanticism, the later being the purview of the Watsons of the world. "You [Watson] have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid," says Sherlock in *The Sign of Four*.

The final theme of the Sherlockian stories is the triumph of good over evil. In over a thousand cases, Sherlock Holmes never used his powers on the wrong side. He looked upon his work as good against evil. He saw himself combating some very "flesh and blood" agents of the devil in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and even contemplated taking on "The Father of Evil himself," but concluded that it might be "too ambitious a task."

The theme of the triumph of good was very important in Victorian England. When Holmes and Moriarty (the closest thing to the Father of Evil in the Canon) fought it out on the edge of Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, both of the adversaries allegedly went over the edge and were presumed killed. It seemed that the score was tied between good and evil: 1-1. After this case appeared in print, people in England wore black armbands to mourn Sherlock’s passing. Naturally, no further adventures of Sherlock Holmes appeared in the press. But a general public outcry arose in England. People were incensed and demanded that the cases continue. So Holmes had to be brought back.

What do scholars make of this incident? They believe
that the British public just would not accept a one-to-one tie between good and evil. Good had to win! The champion of good, Sherlock Holmes, had to be brought back to combat and overcome the forces of evil. Once Sherlock was seen to have survived the fall at Reichenbach, the score stood at one-to-zero, a solid victory for good, for reason, and for the British way of life!

It is clear, then, Virginia, that Sherlock Holmes lives—in two ways. First, as a person he still lives, since no obituary has appeared. Secondly, Sherlock Holmes lives because the themes of his cases are endlessly appealing. He uses a team of players; he is a professional who makes the professionals look like amateurs; he is absolutely logical; he is always an instrument for the good that always triumphs. People continue to seek out the countless ways—from books to bumper stickers—that will help them find the Sherlockian world, where Holmes and Watson “still live for all that love them well, in a nostalgic country of the mind: where it is always 1895.”

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Five hundred copies of this booklet were published by the Norwegian Explorers of Minnesota in October, 1995, for the conference, Sherlock Holmes and John Bennett Shaw: The Detective and the Collector, October 13-15, 1995. The conference honored the donation of the John Bennett Shaw Collection of Sherlockiana to Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of Minnesota. Copies of this booklet were distributed to conference attendees and to members of the Norwegian Explorers.

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