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To cite this article: Tom Ue (2015) Conan Doyle and the Life of Writing: An Interview with Michael Dirda, *Life Writing*, 12:3, 243-249, DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2015.1053030](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2015.1053030)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2015.1053030>



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Published online: 28 Jul 2015.



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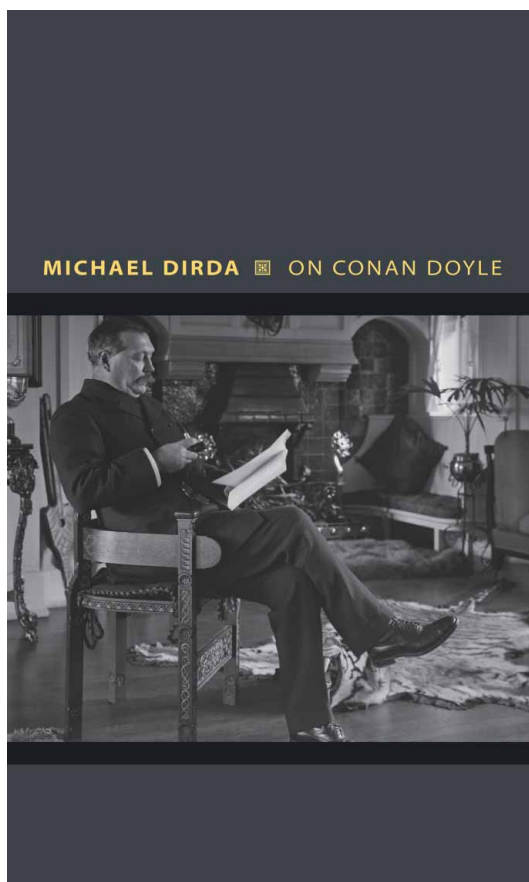
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Conan Doyle and the Life of Writing: An Interview with Michael Dirda

Tom Ue



Michael Dirda, a weekly book columnist for *The Washington Post*, is the author of the memoir *An Open Book* and of four collections of essays: *Readings*, *Bound to Please*, *Book by Book* and *Classics for Pleasure*. His latest book, *On Conan Doyle*, won the 2012 Edgar Allan Poe Award—for the best biographical/critical work of

the year—from the Mystery Writers of America. Dirda graduated with Highest Honours in English from Oberlin College and earned a PhD in comparative literature (medieval studies and European romanticism) from Cornell University. He is a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, a columnist for the online Barnes and Noble Review, and a frequent reviewer for several other literary periodicals, as well as an occasional lecturer and college teacher. He received the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

In the following interview, Dirda discusses *On Conan Doyle*, beginning with a photograph of a meeting between Gissing, Wells, Conan Doyle, and Hornung in Rome in April 1898. The four writers, along with the young American journalist Brian Borù Dunne, saw and explored Rome together, during which time Gissing made passing references to Conan Doyle in his letters and in his diary. By that time, Gissing had written the bulk of his life's work and he had firmly established his reputation for some enormously influential novels—*New Grub Street*, *Born in Exile*, and *The Odd Women* were all published between 1891 and 1893—and, as I have explored elsewhere, his many short stories and his very well-received critical study of Charles Dickens, which appeared just before Rome in February 1898. After the trip, Gissing kept or, in the case of Hornung, tried to keep in touch with all of the writers—with the noticeable exception of Conan Doyle. Conan Doyle referred to Gissing in *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* and *Old Offenders and a Few Old Scores*. Conan Doyle and Gissing both offered criticism about the writing profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gissing never lived to see Conan Doyle's 1904 short story 'The Adventure of the Six Napoleons', though it shared *New Grub Street*'s preoccupation with journalism, the publishing industry, and the life of writing. In what follows, Dirda reflects on his own experiences and how he finds resonances in these earlier writers' understandings of the literary profession.

TU: Thank you so much for *On Conan Doyle*, a fantastic book which charts both his achievements and your experience of them.

There is something of Gissing and Wells in *The Land of Mist*. To what extent do you see Conan Doyle's work as being influenced by these close contemporaries?

MD: I've always been charmed by the photograph which shows Gissing, Wells, Conan Doyle, and E. W. Hornung together in Italy in the late 1890s. Not quite so remarkable a group perhaps as the famous picture of Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and their benefactor John Quinn, but still pretty cool.

What led me to compare *The Land of Mist* to the 'social' novels of Wells and Gissing was simply the setting—the shabby, genteel, grey world of tea rooms, evening lecture halls, street corner preachers, and autodidacts. Novels like *The History of Mr. Polly*, *New Grub Street*, and *The Land of Mist* all reveal the quiet desperation of people who hunger for more from life than it seems to be offering.



TU: Do you find him representative of and/or ahead of his times?

MD: For the most part, I think of Conan Doyle as very much of his time. The late Victorian and Edwardian era, however, was a time of ferment rather than of stasis. Just to stick with the isms: This is the heyday of Communism, and anarchism, and Fabian socialism, and suffragism, and aestheticism, and spiritualism, and rampant industrialism. Conan Doyle, as a public intellectual, participated in

several of these movements, and not just spiritualism. Remember that he was the head of a society to liberalise the divorce laws.

TU: Conan Doyle, in ‘The Six Napoleons’, shared many of Gissing’s concerns about journalism, particularly its quality. Horace Harker, who works for the Central Press Syndicate, was less troubled by the two crimes—including his own narrow escape from coming face to face with the murderer—than he is with losing his story to rivals. Can you relate to Harker?

MD: Anyone who writes for a newspaper always worries about being scooped by a rival publication. The more common concern, though, is how one’s story will be featured—on page one? Above or below the fold? With art? With big art? Buried on C-8 with a lacklustre headline? Trimmed at the last minute because of a layout issue or an unexpected ad? Years ago, I knew a reporter who kept a bumper sticker on her desk that read: ‘Nuclear War?! There goes my career!’ That sums up the ethos of most journalists.

TU: Do you find the industrialisation of literature suggested here accentuated in our own times with developments in technology?

MD: The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries largely benefitted from the ‘industrialisation’ of literature. It was, after all, the great age of magazine culture, the age of the storytellers, when a large newly literate public looked to print for their entertainment and education. Print culture just explodes and you find in this period the foundational works of all our modern genres—the mystery, science fiction, fantasy, horror, children’s books, etc., etc. Things began to change with the advent of radio, movies and television, and even more so now in our computer and smart-phone age. But if we start to discuss twentieth-century technology and its implications we’ll be here all day.

TU: Harker never seems to gain much autonomy as a journalist, and neither does Jasper Milvain from Gissing’s *New Grub Street*. Is this autonomy possible for journalists?

MD: Autonomy for journalists? You must be kidding. Reporters work for editors who tell them what to write about, how many column inches it should be, and when it’s due; then copy editors fact-check and nit-pick every detail of the story and usually want it cut by a third; and if the art director finds some really good art, the story may be trimmed again. A newspaper journalist is a word-worker: he or she has a job, not an artistic vocation. Then, too, a newspaper is a business and section editors report to executive editors who report to the publisher who reports to the board of directors and so on. Those who live by the pen must please their masters.

TU: Conan Doyle offers other kinds of writers, including Watson and himself. As you say, what matters to Conan Doyle in his writing are its ‘thrilling lessons in

heroism, sacrifice, and virtuous action' (84). Is all literature to some extent didactic?

MD: Most people would say that Conan Doyle's more didactic and 'inspirational' novels—such as *The White Company*—are weaker than those that aim for pure entertainment. In general, I stand with Conan Doyle's old friend Oscar Wilde on this: a work of art may be conditioned by its historical period or the means of production or anything else you'd like, but ultimately it's a thing of beauty in itself. *Lolita*, *Journey to the End of Night*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*—these are all exceptional works of fiction, in their differing ways, but they don't teach any moral lessons nor would you want their protagonists to inspire readers to go forth and do likewise.

TU: Can writing be divorced from an ideological cast?

MD: No. As Georg Lukacs said long ago: 'Without ideology there is no composition'. A writer must believe in something, if only in art for art's sake, and that will come out in his work.

TU: A biographical one?

MD: Yes and no. I grew up in the era of New Criticism and I still tend to believe in 'the poem itself'. But I also know that Addison was right when he said, in the first essay of *The Spectator*, that readers like to know something about the personality and life of the authors whose books they read. Human beings are instinctively curious, after all. Sometimes, too, details from a writer's biography may offer a side door into the work. Knowing that Conan Doyle was a spiritualist and that he was crusading for this cause explains some of the character, and weaknesses, of *The Land of Mist*. It doesn't, however, excuse them.

TU: There are clearly overlaps between critical theory and the method behind the game that Holmesians play. What do you see as some of the differences?

MD: The methods of analysis, the use of historical resources, the close attention to what is said or not said in the text—these are common to both 'the game' and academic criticism. After all, Ronald Knox's ground-breaking paper on the morphology of the Sherlock Holmes stories was modelled on the techniques of classical and biblical scholarship. I suppose the only difference between the two is a matter of belief: Sherlockians don't really believe, for example, that Professor Moriarty was Dracula, but they will relish a good argument that attempts to prove this. In a sense, playing the game is a kind of intellectual gamesmanship—how clever can you be? Of course, there's a lot of the same chutzpah in late twentieth-century and contemporary critical theory.

TU: Few critics would wish to dismiss the importance of biographical criticism. However, it is always a challenge to get it right. Do you find this apparent in Holmesians' game?

MD: Getting it right isn't the point; presenting a convincing argument, no matter how fanciful, is more important.

TU: In your talk at the Baker Street Irregulars' (BSI) meeting, you traced the organisation's history to Moriarty. Give us the evidence that you didn't reveal!

MD: Oh, I can't do that here. Still, this is the sort of speculative confection that Sherlockians relish. Three Morley brothers—Christopher, Felix and Frank—founded the BSI; there are three Moriarty brothers mentioned in the Holmes stories. If you have the right turn of mind, you're already working out how the Morleys/Moriartys might be one and the same.

TU: You received a death threat! Can we get a scan?

MD: Alas, no. I still have the note somewhere, but it would take me hours to find the thing. I think I've lost at least a couple of the five orange pips that went with it.

TU: BSI's new members are granted investiture names that normally harmonise with the honouree's profession or personality. In what ways do Langdale Pike's fit yours?

MD: Langdale Pike is a journalist; I'm a journalist. That's the main connection. But he's a gossip columnist and a somewhat shady one; I'm mainly a book reviewer and essayist. Still, I'm tickled that Pike is a mastermind figure, one of those spider-kings like Moriarty and Mycroft Holmes who have their information networks spread out across the world. At one point in 'The Three Gables'—generally viewed as the worst Holmes story—the great detective says: 'Now, Watson, this is a case for Langdale Pike and I'm going to see him now.' It suggests that Holmes looks up to Pike, at least in some ways. As you know, I later wrote a couple of pieces revealing Langdale Pike's involvement in some of the major historical events and scandals of the age.

TU: Tell us about your research for Langdale's story.

MD: There was no research. My aim was to emulate, in my small way, Max Beerbohm's biographical vignettes in *Seven Men*. I hoped to write a story that mixed together the factual and the fictional, the fanciful and the historical, so that people—especially people familiar with late Victorian popular fiction—would be amused. I also had Nabokov's *Pale Fire* in the back of my mind and I wanted people to be confused about the 'truth' of anything and everything.

By the way, the 'Case for Langdale Pike' chapter of *On Conan Doyle* is highly abridged from the fuller version printed in *Canadian Holmes*.

TU: You made Langdale into a kind of dandy. Tell us about that.

MD: In Conan Doyle's story, Langdale Pike lounges at his club all day, so that suggested he must be a dandy. Plus, nearly all English detectives, even those like Pike who were born in America, are dandies of a sort. In truth, though, I simply thought of him as a jaded, world-weary clubman.

TU: Emily Dickinson was a fantastic touch! What led you to connect Langdale with the poet?

MD: Pike, of course, couldn't remember her name, but, yes, it was Dickinson. If you consult Richard Sewall's biography of the poet, you'll find that Dickinson and Pike were introduced by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and that the poet was quite smitten. But Dickinson, in her peculiar way, always associated love and death, so it's not surprising that some scholars have speculated that Pike, who dressed all in black in those days, may have inspired the romantic figure of Death in some quite famous poems.

See? One can just do this all day.

TU: In your account, Langdale helps to protect Holmes' image. Why is it important for him to create and retain this false image of a hero?

MD: There are two answers to this: 1) You're making too much of a moment's fancy on my part; and 2) We always see Holmes being so masterful and omniscient; I wanted to cut him down a peg, reveal his growing insecurity that he was losing his touch as a detective.

TU: Will we get a complete biography of Langdale?

MD: Probably not a complete biography, but perhaps a series of installments, like the Flashman papers, edited by George MacDonald Fraser.

TU: What are you working on now?

MD: I'm reading a lot of popular fiction from 'the great age of storytelling' and hoping to turn the research into a book. The approach will resemble that of *On Conan Doyle*, but with much greater scope. I do like to combine the personal and the scholarly to make my writing sprightly, no matter how serious the thought.

TU: Thanks very much for your time, and best wishes with your projects!

Reference

Dirda, Michael. *On Conan Doyle: Or, The Whole Art of Storytelling*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.