Few fictional characters are as well recognized around the world as the London-based crime-solving duo of “consulting detective” Sherlock Holmes and his loyal confidant Dr John Watson, created in 1887 by British writer Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Watson and Holmes’ literary association spanned 40 years, from their first appearance in A Study in Scarlet: Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department to The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place, published in The Strand Magazine in 1927.

Doyle was not always careful with details or consistency between his stories, leading to some contradictory information across the Holmes-Watson narratives, including ambiguity in basic biographic information. For instance, Watson’s first name is stated to be “John” on 3 occasions (including the subtitle to A Study in Scarlet), but his wife Mary calls him “James” in The Man with the Twisted Lip — which some commentators have suggested is not an authorial slip-up, but instead either a pet name she had for him, or an Anglicization of the Scottish “Hamish,” which may have been Watson’s middle name. The chronology of Holmes’ and Watson’s shared lodging, sequence of cases, and Watson’s marriages have challenged scholars for nearly a century.

Watson was most likely born in 1852. He attended public school in England and may have spent a portion of his childhood in Australia. He studied medicine at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, graduated from the University of London in 1878, and after training at Netley Hospital in Hampshire (home of the British Army Medical School until 1902) joined the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers as an assistant surgeon. He was athletic and played rugby for Blackheath Football Club in London in his youth, prior to his military service.

Young Dr Watson served in Afghanistan in the Second Anglo-Afghan War, joining his regiment at Kandahar in the Spring of 1880, and was soon attached to the 66th (Berkshire) Regiment of Foot. In July 1880, he was wounded in the left shoulder by a “jezail bullet” (jezails were long smooth-bore muskets favored by Pashtun tribesmen) during the Battle of Maiwand. He was rescued from the battlefield by his courageous orderly, Murray. Subsequent stories make it unclear whether Watson’s leg was injured in addition to his shoulder. After suffering enteric fever (ie, typhoid) while recovering from his combat wounds in a hospital in Peshawar, Watson was sent as an invalid back to England on the Royal Navy troopship HMS Orontes, discharged from the Army due to poor health, and given a temporary pension. By the time he returned to London and took up residence in a hotel, he had “neither kith nor kin in England,” as his father and older brother had died. He did inherit his father’s gold watch, but apparently not much else.

The year after his return to England, Watson was introduced to consulting detective Sherlock Holmes by a mutual friend, Watson’s old surgical dresser, a man named Stamford. The two decided to split living expenses and share a flat at 221B Baker Street in the Marylebone district of the City of Westminster in London. Watson became a keen observer of Holmes’ habits and soon began to accompany Holmes on many of his detective adventures. After Watson became upset that Scotland Yard police took all of the credit for resolution of the case described in A Study in Scarlet despite
Holmes' critical part in solving it, with Holmes' permission Watson began to chronicle some of Holmes' cases, in many of which Watson played a key role.

Watson's conventional Victorian personality traits and sense of duty, discretion, and honor coupled well with his desire for adventure and his enjoyment of collaboration with Holmes on dangerous escapades. While Watson never fully learned to employ Holmes' deductive techniques, his observations and insights often helped Holmes find a solution to a perplexing problem, and Watson provided physical aid on numerous occasions - sometimes using his service revolver.

In 1889, Watson married Mary Morstan, a governess who was the daughter of a captain in the British Army who had been stationed in India. Captain Morstan's mysterious disappearance was explored in *The Sign of the Four*. A few years later, Mary died of unknown causes and Watson returned to living with Holmes on Baker Street. Another wife for Watson is alluded to in several stories and Watson moved off Baker Street in 1902, but this second wife is not named or described in detail.

Watson did have a private medical practice, but like that of author Doyle, it seems to have been not especially demanding. He criticized Holmes' use of cocaine, and often expressed concern about the degree of mental or physical strain his friend appeared to be under during cases or while restlessly awaiting a new case. The most common remedy Watson applied seems to have been brandy, sometimes supplemented by ammonia, as when resuscitating a man who had been suffocated with poison gas in *The Greek Interpreter*. After being shocked into unconsciousness by Holmes' surprising return after the great detective had presumably fallen to his death over the Reichenbach falls, Watson himself had to be resuscitated with brandy by Holmes.

The above description of Watson's biography reflects statements in the 56 short stories and 4 novels by Doyle that have collectively become known as the "Sherlock Holmes Canon" and which have been the subject of numerous scholarly articles, as well as books and conferences organized by enthusiasts — including the *Baker Street Irregulars* society that formed in 1934 and its numerous scion societies, who treat Holmes and Watson as real historical people. Watson himself referred to having notes on “hundreds of cases,” most of which he never published, either from lack of time or the need to protect the privacy of involved persons (Watson frequently changed details in his case reports out of a sense of discretion).

Doyle's stories have spawned numerous pastiches and homages, and have been adapted for television series or films more than 100 times over the last century. One of the most popular adaptations was the BBC One television series “Sherlock,” which reimagines Holmes and Watson in contemporary London; this series debuted in 2010. Holmes and Watson have strongly influenced the literary detective genre, which is populated by detective duos, such as Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings (also an Army veteran); Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis; and Alan Hunter's George Gently and John Bacchus.

More than 20 countries have depicted Sherlock Holmes on postage stamps. The first was Nicaragua in 1972 (Scott #C812), as part of a series featuring 12 fictional detectives — Holmes was the subject of the highest-value stamp. Holmes has been accompanied occasionally in these philatelic images by Dr Watson, such as in Great Britain's 1993 *Five Sherlock Holmes Stories* issue, one of which depicts Watson and Holmes in the 1893 story, “The Adventure of the Reigate Squire” (Scott #1515; Stanley Gibbons #1784; Figure 1A). In August 2020, Royal Mail issued a set of stamps commemorating the Sherlock BBC series; one stamp in this series shows Martin Freeman, the actor who plays Watson, in a scene from the episode *A Study in Pink* (Scott numbers pending; Figure 1B).
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