The Afghanistan Perceivers, the Fatal Battle of Maiwand and the Canon's Legacy of War

By Brian Wilson
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The inspirations and seeds for this short talk come from two members of the illustrious Baker Street Irregulars – Monica Schmidt of Iowa City, Iowa, and Bob Katz of Morristown, New Jersey, both of whom I've gotten to know over the past two years since I've had the privilege of being president of our 52-year-old group.

Monica Schmidt, as many of you recall, was a featured speaker at our 50th anniversary symposium at the University of Tulsa in 2024. As a clinical psychologist and counselor, she showed how John H. Watson, in many of his behaviors and narrative descriptions, indicates that he has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

Bob Katz, whose front yard in Morristown was once a winter encampment for General George Washington's troops in the winters of 1777 and 1779, reminded participants recently at another Sherlockian meeting that *A Study in Scarlet*, the first Sherlock Holmes work, and "His Last Bow," chronologically the last Holmes story, pivot around war.

A Study in Scarlet begins with Watson's military service in Afghanistan, his being shot with a Jezail bullet during the Fatal Battle of Maiwand on the 27th of July, 1880, and his near-fatal recovery before being shipped to London, where young Stamford introduces him to Sherlock Holmes. In "His Last Bow," Holmes is a British spy acting as an Irish-American mercenary working against the allies in World War I. He cleverly sabotages the German agent Von Bork, and Watson is right there, too, as an undercover chauffeur always having Holmes's back and providing muscle if necessary.

I like to believe that Watson, himself a casualty of war and who only survives because of the help of Murray, Murray's pack horse and others, understands the importance of lending a hand, even when it involves endangering himself. This worldview, shaped by war, may be why he enthusiastically joins Holmes time after time in whatever role his friend wants him to play.

There are direct references to actual wars in other stories. Colonel James Barclay in "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" is decorated for his bravery during the Siege of Cawnpore during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. In "The Five Orange Pips," Elias Openshaw, the uncle of Holmes's client John Openshaw, is a confederate colonel under Stonewall Jackson and John Bell Hood during the U.S. Civil War before returning to England.

There are other military men in the canon, particularly the bad colonels, such as the heartless, murderous Sebastian Moran [prompt hisses and boos] in "The Empty House" and the traitorous Valentine Walter in "The Bruce-Partington Plans." Founding member Dean Clark, our invaluable libations chair, has given many presentations over the years about these bad colonels and the corrupt, historical circumstances leading to ignoble men gaining enormous power and near-immunity from treachery.

Therefore, my points this evening, during our annual commemoration of the Fatal Battle of Maiwand, are how many of the stories narrated by Watson, our favorite wounded war veteran, are shaped in the *form*, not the setting, of war. Take *A Study in Scarlet*, a good-versus-evil archetypal story with a flawed hero undergoing his own epic battle against Joseph Stangerson and Enoch Drebber. Jefferson Hope fights for years before he can fully avenge the kidnapping, probable rape and withering death of his beloved, Lucy Ferrier.

It's no surprise that Watson shows Holmes himself playing life-and-death chess – a game based on war – with Professor James Moriarty, particularly in "The Final Problem." Holmes's measures and Moriarty's counter-measures are battlefield tactics on the fly, much like generals in warfare, such as General George Patton matching wits and maneuvers with Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's tank corps in North Africa during World War II.

Holmes, a consumer of hundreds, if not thousands, of books may well have read *The Art of War*, widely attributed to Sun Tzu and written (maybe) around 512 BCE. Look at how Holmes in case after case employs methods similar to, if not directly from, *The Art of War*. I'll offer a few quotes from *The Art of War* and we can make some connections with Holmes:

- "According as circumstances are favorable, one should modify one's plans." Holmes adjusts as he needs to, depending upon what's happening. For instance, in *The Sign of Four*, he, Watson and Tobey the tracking dog are hot on the trail of the creosote-tainted scent of the peg-legged murderer … until they're not because Tobey gets sidetracked. Holmes, after a good laugh with Watson, has to quickly change his tactics to bring Jonathan Small to justice.
- "Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak." Let's go back to "The Final Problem." Holmes appears to be the hunted, with the ruthless Moriarty foiling his every move. Even at Reichenbach Falls, Moriarty seems to have the upperhand, until the last second, but Holmes's guile, agility and leverage send the villain to his death … and Holmes to his hiatus.
- "Attack him where he is unprepared. Appear where you are not expected." In "The Solitary Cyclist," which the Perceivers discussed last month, Holmes shows up in a pub near Farnham in Surrey and encounters the wretched Jack Woodley, whom the wiry, thin Holmes decks with a straight left. Boom!

- "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself, but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." Doesn't this pretty much describe Holmes and his approaches with every single villain or fool in the canon? In the very first short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia," Holmes knows exactly who the king of Bohemia is and the foolish behavior that leads to Holmes's employment in that case. Holmes, however, does *not* fully understand Irene Adler and he's a tad overconfident in his bid to defeat her, so it's quite possible Holmes, following *The Art of War*, learns from this failing to know the enemy and tries to stay more in control from then on.
- "Ponder and deliberate before you make a move." Close your eyes or do whatever it takes to envision something. Now, picture Sidney Paget's famous illustration for "The Man With the Twisted Lip" with Holmes sitting on the floor in his housecoat among a pile of pillows while he smokes his pipe and thinks for hours. Holmes employs this tenet from *The Art of War*. Many times in the canon, Watson describes these thinking sessions.
- "Make your way by unexpected routes and attack unguarded spots." Having been in the theater, Holmes is the master of disguise and he uses his dramatic training many times in the canon, whether it's as a flirtatious plumber wooing and becoming engaged to a maid in "Charles Augustus Milverton" to an elderly book collector *and* Norwegian explorer in "The Empty House."
- "The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy not coming, but on our readiness to receive him. Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and, when you move, fall like a thunderbolt." Again, Holmes, a master of chess, is almost always a step ahead of his enemy. It's no wonder that the final story, "His Last Bow," has Holmes luring Von Dork … er, uh … Von Bork into the trap and springing it just at the right moment in the darkness of the night. If this were a video game, the big words flashing at the top would be: Game Over!

Americans have always embraced Holmes and Watson for many reasons: their friendship, their cleverness, their adventures, their confidence, their righteousness, their bravery. But these men, Holmes and Watson, are also shaped by war and war-like thinking. And Americans, in their 250 years of existence, have been without war or armed conflict for only about 10 percent of that time – 25 years – when one counts rebellions, genocidal battles against Natives, police actions, and any other foreign and domestic fights involving extended killing of and by U.S. troops.

It might *not* be coincidental that a country almost constantly at war loves two characters whose first and last appearances in the canon have war looming over them. War may be hell … but it's also had an American flavor for a quarter of a millennium.

Any comments? Additions? Disputes? Questions?