SEVEN PROBLEMS IN "WISTERIA LODGE"

Bill Mason, BSI, ASH, MBt
Nashville Scholars Meeting—April 16, 2022

"Wisteria Lodge" did not appear in *The Strand* under that name. Instead, it was titled "A Reminiscence of Sherlock Holmes" and was published in two parts: "The Singular Experience of John Scott Eccles" and "The Tiger of San Pedro." It took its current tame as the first story in the Sherlock Holmes short story collection we know as *His Last Bow,* which I think is an unfortunate name, since there is a very important short story by the same name.

Conan Doyle apparently originally intended to call this collection *The Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*, and the actual name of the collection is not just *His Last Bow*, as we almost always shorten it, but *His Last Bow: Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes,* just as the short story is actually titled "His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes" In any event, it is a two part-tale and one of the longer short stories. This is kind of involved, but all these names need to be disentangled.

And it's not a wildly popular a story. It is never listed among "the best" tales when those periodic polls of Sherlockians are done. But then again, it is not at the bottom either. Not a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to it.

However, it actually has some interesting angles, and I like to look at it as one of the more intriguing stories because it is different in so many ways from most if not all of the other short stories. It is also a story that presents quite a few "problems" or issues, some very obvious and some not so much. So I want to look at "Wisteria Lodge" as a series of problems for us as Sherlockians.

1. The Problem of the Date

So right off the bat, we have the first great big problem, and that is the date Watson provides for it. He says that the case begins on "a bleak and windy day towards the end of March in the year 1892." Now that is a problem, since just one year earlier, in April of 1891, as far as Watson or anyone else knew, Holmes and Moriarty had plunged into the Reichenbach Falls.

He was dead to the world, certainly dead to Watson, and certainly not in London solving mysteries with Watson. Holmes was globetrotting in disguise in 1892, enjoying himself in "The Great Hiatus" while the world grieved for him.

If not 1892, then, just when did "Wisteria Lodge" take place? Well, it was first published in August of 1908, so the events obviously took place sometime prior to that. We know from Holmes' comments that "some" of the stories had been published already, and we also know that "Wisteria Lodge" took place after "The Five Orange Pips" (which took place in 1889) and "The Red-Headed League" (October 1890), since both are mentioned in the dialogue.

We know explicitly from "The Final Problem" that this story could not have taken place in March of 1891 (just a month before Reichenbach), so a date after the Great Hiatus—after April 1894—is the only explanation. Many chronologists therefore place it in 1895 or 1896, but I am more inclined to accept Ziesler's date of 1902 or even later. As we discuss some other issues, we'll come back to the date of this case, because I think all of the problems related to "Wisteria Lodge" point to a date late in Holmes' detecting career.

2. The Problem of the Bored and Cranky Detective

What do you think about the general attitude of Sherlock Holmes in this story? He declares himself 'bored." This is actually the only time in the Canon that Holmes actually says he was bored. We get that suggestion in other stories, especially in *The Sign of Four,* where Holmes admits that he uses cocaine because "I cannot live without brain-work." He says, "my mind is like a racing engine, tearing itself to pieces." Incidentally, he used that "racing engine" analogy in one other story: "The Devil's Foot."

Here in "Wisteria Lodge," however, he declares himself bored, and he has not resorted to cocaine, which is a stimulant, causing euphoria, at least in the short term. In this case, that boredom manifests itself, I think, in a very unusual way. Something other than boredom seems to be working on Sherlock Holmes.

Whatever that something was in "Wisteria Lodge," it appeared to bring out a streak of downright meanness toward Dr. Watson. It's become kind of cliché to look at Watson as some kind of amiable doofus. That is usually blamed, unfairly in my view, totally on Nigel Bruce, the "Boobus Britannicus" of the Basil Rathbone films. But its roots are deeper than that. Holmes throughout the stories uses Watson's obtuseness to illuminate the truth and, just as important to Holmes, illuminate his own brilliance.

But in this story, Holmes' digs at Watson are not directed towards the good doctor's erroneous conclusions or his bungling approach to action. They are directed towards his literary efforts, specifically his published stories about Sherlock Holmes himself. No less than three times, he takes a fairly harsh swipe at Watson:

- "I suppose, Watson, we must look upon you as a man of letters," says Holmes sarcastically.
- Then he refers to "one of those narratives with which you have afflicted a long-suffering public."
- Finally, he chides Scott Eccles by saying, "You are like my friend Dr. Watson, who has a bad habit of telling his stories wrong and foremost."

Watson faithfully records these insults for some reason. But what was that reason?

Perhaps he was just being a good reporter. Not that he was so very accurate in other details, if you take his clearly erroneous date as an example, but perhaps these comments stuck with him more than a specific date would have because they were so cutting. If I insult one of you, you might not remember exactly what the date was when I insulted you, but I expect you will remember word for word what that insult was far into the future.

Perhaps he was reflecting something in Holmes' attitude greater than his usual criticisms about Watson's tales. He usually complained that Watson's dramatic presentation took precedence over a more pedestrian explanation of the step-by-step deductive process. Holmes wants a dry, academic, intellectual presentation. No matter to Holmes how uninteresting that would be to everyone else. Process was what fascinated him, drama be damned.

Finally, If you accept the idea that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the stories, these comments may be directed at himself more than towards Watson. After all, Conan Doyle deliberately tried to kill off Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls, probably with several motivations, including a desire to devote his attention to "better things," as he called his historical novels, and he intended to keep him dead. Of course, he finally relented and brought Holmes back to life in "The Empty House." Even so, Conan Doyle's resentment towards Holmes may have never really been eliminated. In these comments directed at Watson, you can hear him say, "Here I am again, writing these detective stories when my talents could be better utilized."

3. The Problem of the Declining Detective

We just mentioned the usual “deductive process” that Holmes pursued, case after case. After all, this is a man who was prepared to write his magnum opus and title it “The Whole Art of Detection.” But is Holmes up to snuff in this story? Is he the best detective on the scene? If he wasn’t, who was?

Inspector Baynes. Well, the obvious answer is Inspector Baynes, who was not only on pace with Sherlock Holmes, but often ahead of him throughout the story.

- Baynes, not Holmes, found the partially burned note and made several accurate analyses and deductions at Wisteria Lodge.
- Baynes, like Holmes, made the deduction about a large nearby house, but he beat Holmes there. He was already on the scene at Henderson’s house, and actually up a tree watching, undoubtedly with amusement, as Holmes was pretty clumsily making his own investigation.
- Baynes surprised Holmes in his tactics by providing a red herring, arresting the mixed-race cook whom he knew was not the murderer to keep Henderson’s guard down.
- Baynes, not Holmes, knew the real identity of Henderson—that he was Don Murillo, the Tiger of San Pedro. And he, not Holmes, had a complete history of Don Murillo’s wanderings.
- Baynes, not Holmes, recognized the importance of the cook’s return to the house.
- While Holmes left Warner to watch the house, Baynes also had a plainclothesman on the scene.
- And it was Baynes who finally brought Holmes an account of Murillo’s ultimate fate.

So we can make the case, and I think a very good case, that Inspector Baynes was the best detective, or at least had the best performance as a detective, in “Wisteria Lodge.” Holmes praised him repeatedly—something he never did for any other official representative of the police—to the point of laying his hand on the inspector’s shoulder and saying, “You will rise high in your profession. You have instinct and intuition.”

Dr. Watson. But Baynes was not the only good detective other than Holmes in this story. What about Dr. Watson? If you need any evidence that this case is upside down, look no further than Watson’s deductions about Scott Eccles. Remember in *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* when Watson offered his ideas about Dr. Mortimer’s walking stick? “I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have overlooked?” To which Holmes replied, “I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous.”

Not this time. We are used to Holmes making all the perceptive deductions about his clients, but this time Watson shines through. When he sees Scott Eccles for the first time, he sizes him up very well: “His life history was written in his heavy features and pompous manner. From his spats to his gold-rimmed spectacles he was a Conservative, a churchman, a good citizen, orthodox and conventional to the last degree. But some amazing experience had disturbed his composure and left its traces in his bristling hair, his flushed, angry cheeks, and his flurried, excited manner.” Watson had come into his own, and he was capable of accurate perceptions on his own.

John Scott Eccles. Then there is John Scott Eccles himself. Finding himself abandoned in Garcia’s house, he became furious, thinking he was either the butt of a terrible joke or the

unwitting pawn in some sort of fraud. But he didn't just rush straight off to Sherlock Holmes, as many other clients had done. No, he made his own well-reasoned and fairly thorough investigation.

He went to the real estate agent in Esher, Allan Brothers, and concluded that Garcia didn't aim to dodge the rent. Then he went to the Spanish Embassy and found that Garcia "was unknown there." Finally, he went to Melville, the retired brewer who introduced him to Garcia, and found that Melville hardly knew him at all. Only then, once he had exhausted all the logical legwork of the case, did Scott Eccles, seek out Sherlock Holmes.

John Warner. Finally, there is John Warner, the discharged former gardener at High Gable, who was charged with standing guard at the gates. In the past, Holmes did his own legwork, and using Warner to stand watch is further evidence, in my view, of Holmes' boredom. In "The Red-Headed League" he kept vigil in the bank vault for John Clay's appearance. In "The Speckled Band," he and Watson waited silently and patiently for Roylott to make his move. In "The Man with the Twister Lip," he stayed up all night long, smoking and thinking, to solve the case. Here, he goes home and lets a man he just met do the watching and waiting.

Warner was able to follow Don Murillo, still posing as Henderson, and his secretary as they tried to drag the drugged Miss Burnet into the train station. He clearly was undetected until he rushed to her rescue and managed to spirit her away from teo of the most ruthless and dangerous international criminals at large at the time.

So you can make the case that Holmes not only was not the best detective in "Wisteria Lodge," he might have ranked as low as fifth in the category. The question is, what does Holmes accomplish in this story, really? Other than locate John Warner by looking for disaffected servants, which of course was an important element of the story, what was his contribution? Would the mystery have been solved without him anyway?

4. The Problem of John Scott Eccles

The whole tale has a problem with secret keeping. Garcia was hiding something from Scott Eccles, obviously. And Don Murillo, masquerading as Henderson, was hiding even more. Miss Burnet was also masquerading, hiding her identity and her motives. Scott Eccles was also hiding something, but what?

The answer, I think is fairly obvious. As I read through the story again, I became excited about it and thought I had an original paper to write. But I found out pretty quickly that John Scott Eccles' secret was so obvious that several Sherlockian scholars before me had figured out the basic truth of it already.

Consider the evidence. He tells us that he is a bachelor, with "a sociable turn" and likes to cultivate "a large number of friends." He visits one of those friends—"a retired brewer called Melville"—who is also entertaining "a young fellow named Garcia."

And how does Scott Eccles describe him? As someone who "spoke perfect English, was pleasing in his manners, and was as good-looking a man as ever I saw in my life." Nowhere else in the Canon does a man describe another man in such a manner.

Even though he was "grey whiskered," he was pleased to think that Garcia "seemed to take a fancy to me from the first." Any older man, of course, is at least flattered to find out that someone much younger and very attractive takes an interest in him. Garcia and Scott Eccles met two days later, "one thing led to another" and what do you know—Scott Eccles is invited to spend a few days at Wisteria Lodge. Holmes himself said, "There is, on the face of it, something

unnatural about this strange and sudden friendship between the young Spaniard and Scott Eccles."

What did Holmes mean by that? Well, obviously, Scott Eccles was gay.

Interestingly, Holmes, Watson, Baynes and Gregson, don't really press Scott Eccles about this "strange and sudden friendship." There are quite a few questions any detective might have asked him, especially with a murder involved. But they were very discreet with him. I suggest that they were all very well aware of Scott Eccles secret, aware of his potential embarrassment if they pushed the issue, and left the whole matter, hopefully forever, or at least until it might absolutely be necessary to pursue it.

Both Garcia and Scott Eccles described Wisteria Lodge as "a queer household," at a time when that term didn't have the meaning it does today. And when Scott Eccles awoke to find himself alone and abandoned, did he really fear he had been made a butt of a joke? Far more likely that he feared being the target of blackmail, a problem older gay men faced all too often in the years prior to our current, more enlightened and thankfully more tolerant age, and sometimes even now.

By the end of the story, Holmes commented on Garcia's "scheming mind" but congratulated himself, Watson and Baynes for keeping "our close hold on the essentials." Scott Eccles' sexual preferences weren't "essential" and so were not exposed.

5. The Problem of Victorian Racism

This is the third story we have considered recently with black characters. How do the descriptions of, and attitudes toward, black characters in "The Yellow Face," "The Three Gables," and "Wisteria Lodge" compare?

In "The Yellow Face," Watson's (or Conan Doyle's) sympathetic treatment of interracial marriage, between an white Englishwoman and a black lawyer from the American South, appears extraordinarily liberal for the 1890s, when that story was set. And Grant Munro's loving response is reported approvingly by Watson.

"The Three Gables," on the other hand, has some very crude racist stereotypes in its depiction of Steve Dixie, the black boxer.

But in "Wisteria Lodge," we have a mixed-race character, secondary to the story really and used primarily as Baynes' "red herring" in laying a trap for Don Murillo. All the talk about voodoo and fetishes and animal sacrifice was also a red herring being used by Conan Doyle to cause suspicion of the cook and some suspense in the story. Nevertheless, the terminology used to describe him can only be considered stereotypical and offensive: "half breed" and "devil" and "hungry beast" and a "savage." The newspaper account described him as "a huge and hideous mulatto with yellowish features of a pronounced negroid type." That language is certainly offensive now and would probably be considered offensive even then. All in all, the consistent description of the cook is far closer to the terms used in "The Three Gables" than "The Yellow Face."

Notably as well, Conan Doyle's interest in happenings around the world was increasing at this time. He was especially interested in the plight of the people of the Belgian Congo, and within a year after the appearance of "Wisteria Lodge," he produced *The Crime of the Congo* in which he denounced the horrors associated with the exploitation of that country.

What do these three stories and the appearance of *The Crime of the Congo* so quickly after "Wisteria Lodge" tell you about Conan Doyle's, perception of black people generally? Does he seem to have an inconsistent viewpoint? How does this compare to the racial attitudes of

Victorian society in general, at least toward those of African descent? Overall, we would have a hard time determining Conan Doyle's attitudes towards race were he living in the 21st Century.

6. The Problem of Don Murillo

So, who was Don Murillo?

Prior to 1908, when "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge" was published, Latin America was not a particularly important element in the Sherlock Holmes stories, with the possible exception of *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* in which Beryl Stapleton had a Latin American background. One reason for this might be that the British Empire had very few possessions—in fact, only two of them—in Latin America outside of the Caribbean: British Guiana (now Guyana) in South America and British Honduras (now Belize) in Central America.

With "Wisteria Lodge," Latin American characters began to have a slightly more important role in the Sherlockian saga. Don Juan Murillo, the Tiger of San Pedro, is described as "the most lewd and bloodthirsty tyrant that had ever governed any country with a pretense of civilization," who was being pursued by those who had overthrown his cruel dictatorship and wanted their revenge. The very next story, "The Bruce-Partington Plans," refers to Central and South America as "the countries of assassination."

Various commentators have made much of the incorrect reference to "Don Murillo" rather than the appropriate "Don Juan" as evidence of Conan Doyle's ignorance of Latin cultures. And that is probably true, although I will offer in his (or Watson's) defense that the reference is in a direct quote from Inspector Baynes and not from the narrative.

As for an identification of Murillo, Several attempts have been made, but none seem entirely satisfactory. Julian Wolff claimed that he was Dom Pedro II, the last emperor of Brazil, who died in 1891, but Dom Pedro II was not at all a tyrant. Evan Wilson identified him as Rafael Zalvidar, president of El Salvador from 1876 to 1885. Zalvidar was a reformer in some ways, but his reforms took a brutal turn toward the indigenous peoples of El Salvador. Their lands were seized for agricultural development, they resisted, and Zalvidar responded with force. He was deposed in coup d'état, and he died in Europe—Paris, not Madrid—in 1903.

Wilson's other discovery concerned the colors green and white. No Latin American nation had green and white in their flag or as their official "national colors," but El Salvador does have green and white as the most prominent colors in its coat of arms.

So Zalvidar of El Salvador is the most likely candidate. In reality, the character is probably a composite of many corrupt, severe and repressive dictators who seized power and lost it through countless revolutions in Central and South America.

7. The Problem of Murillo's Fate

Regardless of the identity of the real Don Murillo, what do you think about the account of the ultimate fate of Don Murillo and his secretary in Madrid? Six months after Don Murillo and his secretary Lopez escaped England, two men registered under different names "were both murdered in their rooms at the Hotel Escurial at Madrid." Inspector Baynes visited Baker Street with "a printed description" of those two men. Holmes, Watson and Baynes were all convinced that "justice, if belated, had come at last." The paper described "the dark face of the secretary, and…the masterful features, the magnetic black eyes, and the tufted brows of his master."

But how much credence can be given to that "printed description" that Baynes brought to Baker Street? Murillo, after all, we are told, was "as cunning as he was cruel," and he had managed to elude the howling mobs of a general uprising in the country he had ruled more than a

decade. Despite being hunted, Murillo always "took every precaution," and he and Lopez had managed to escape England altogether.

Surely, such a Machiavellian figure easily could arrange pair of murders in Madrid, cross a few palms among the local police and the press, and see to it that the "printed description'—along with the false conclusion it was intended to produce—found its way to Baynes.

Which might help explain something that seems unusual to me: the fact that Baynes was the person in possession of that printed description, and that Baynes brought it to Baker Street. Don Murillo was an international fugitive. He search for the Tiger of San Pedro had expanded far beyond his jurisdiction, and he certainly had no authority or even any connection with the ongoing hunt. Wouldn't it be far more probable that Mycroft Holmes, not Inspector Baynes, would have been the one to put the pieces together, to connect the dots between two deaths in a hotel in Madrid and the apparent fate of Don Murillo and his henchman?

Another story in which a "curious newspaper clipping" led to Holmes' conclusion that the villains had been killed on the Continent, of course, was "The Greek Interpreter," in which a newspaper clipping suggested the violent deaths of Latimer and Kemp. Another story in which a very thin clue was seized upon to "prove" the death of an escaped villain was "The Five Orange Pips," which relied on a piece of wood with the initials "L.S." found on the open sea to suggest a shipwreck and the death of Calhoun.

Conclusion

I said earlier that I wanted to come back to the dating of this story, and to talk about why I think it is one of the very last adventures to involve Holmes before his retirement to Sussex. I am not an accomplished Sherlockian chronologist, so I won't go further into the analysis of such things as weather according to *The Times* and Watson's marital status or anything else that most chronologists obsess over (causing us to fantasize about our own commission of murder).

Instead, I want to take into consideration at the tone of the story, its unusual aspects, its differences from any other tale. I think the whole psychology of this case, the approach that Holmes took to it, and the actual facts of it all point to a time when Holmes had just about had enough, a point when he was already plotting his retirement, studying bees, mapping out the placement of his beehives. Perhaps he had already found and purchased his Sussex Downs cottage and was getting ready to retire to it.

Holmes, as we noted, was bored. For the only time in the Canon, he says he was bored. Not necessarily craving work and therefore looking for cocaine for mental stimulation but bored with the whole business of detection. And he was annoyed with all the publicity. Watson's writings did not appeal to his vanity, they infringed on his privacy and reduced his methods, he thought, to parlor tricks. He passed off the hard leg-work of the case to Warner.

And he appears ready to pass the torch. After years of belittling the methods and intelligence of whatever Scotland Yard inspectors and members of the local forces he encountered, he fairly lavishes praise on Inspector Baynes. This is unprecedented and out of character. Holmes seems to me to be looking for confirmation that the crime-fighting cause will not fail because of his absence, and in Baynes, he has found that confirmation.

Assuming that Zalvidar of El Salvador was the real Don Murillo, the timing is exactly right, the psychology is right, the tone is right for a very late date for this adventure—March of 1902 or even 1903. If you want to find some explanation for the decision Sherlock Holmes made to go into retirement, or to know his state of mind at the time, "Wisteria Lodge" is the place to look.