

"Elementary My Dear Channing!": Sherlock Holmes and Henry David Thoreau¹

Robert J. Galvin

Assiduous detective work reveals that Sherlock Holmes was acquainted with Thoreau's writings. In *The Adventures of the Noble Bachelor*,² Watson recalls the following conversation:

[Holmes to his client Lord St. Simon] "Quite so. Then I do not think I need to detain you longer. I shall communicate with you."

"Should you be fortunate enough to solve this problem," said our client, rising. "I have solved it."

"Eh? What was that?"

"I say that I have solved it."

"Where, then, is my wife?"

"That is a detail which I shall speedily supply."

Lord St. Simon shook his head. "I am afraid that it will take wiser heads than yours or mine," he remarked, and bowing in a stately, old-fashioned manner, he departed.

"It is very good of Lord St. Simon to honor my head by putting it on a level with his own," said Sherlock Holmes, laughing. "I think that I shall have a whiskey-and-soda and a cigar after all this cross-questioning. I had formed my conclusions as to the case before our client came into the room."

"My dear Holmes!"

"I have notes of several similar cases, though none, as I remarked before, which were quite as prompt. My whole examination served to turn my conjecture into a certainty. Circumstantial evidence is occasionally very convincing, as when you find a trout in the milk, to quote Thoreau's example."³

The circumstantial evidence was the key to the mystery, which, I need hardly add, Holmes quickly solved.

How did the great detective become acquainted with Thoreau's works?

In 1953, in an article entitled "Sherlock Holmes: Rare-Book Collector, A Study in Book Detection,"⁴ Madeline B. Stern wrote: "In that fruitful year of 1887, but during his work on *The Adventures of the Noble Bachelor*, Holmes took occasion to cite Thoreau's remark on circumstantial evidence, which is very strong, 'as when you find trout in the milk'—a clear enough sign that he may have owned a

copy of Thoreau's *Miscellanies* (Boston, 1863), to which Emerson had added a biographical sketch including sentences from the unpublished writings.⁵ Among the sentences was, of course, the remark on circumstantial evidence, actually taken from the as yet unpublished *Journals of Thoreau*.⁶

Emerson's biographical sketch, to which Stern refers, was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* for August 1862. In the sketch, Emerson says: "I subjoin a few sentences taken from his unpublished manuscripts, not only as records of his thought and feeling, but for their power of description and literary excellence. 'Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.'"⁷ In 1862, the *Atlantic Monthly* bore the imprint "Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 135 Washington Street [device] London: Trubner and Company, M DCCC LXII." The magazine thus circulated in England.

According to Christopher Morley, Conan Doyle "was always a campaigner for Anglo-American friendship. No one was ever more earnestly convinced that the collaboration of all the English-speaking peoples is of crucial importance to the world. To this hope he dedicated his novel *The White Company* in 1891."⁸ With Conan Doyle's pro-American sentiments, and his appreciation for American literature,⁹ I suggest that it is a reasonable inference, perhaps one which Holmes himself might have been comfortable in making, that Conan Doyle read Emerson's sketch in the *Atlantic*, and that the "circumstantial evidence" sentence caught his eye. *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor* was first published in 1892, thirty years after Conan Doyle may have read Emerson's biographical essay.¹⁰

¹ Readers of the Sherlock Holmes sacred canon will look in vain for the phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson!". Although often attributed to Holmes, in fact, he never said it. Ellery Channing, was, of course, Thoreau's friend, companion on many of his excursions, and first biographer. See Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) 169.

² A. Conan Doyle, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930).

³ In the waning days of the 20th century, this reference may seem opaque. In Thoreau's time, milk was purchased from farmers, not supermarkets. Watering the milk to cheat the consumer was a regrettable but not unknown practice in 19th century New England. The appearance of trout in the milk was eloquent, if circumstantial, evidence that the milk had been watered.

⁴ In *The Papers of The Bibliographical Society of America* 47 (1953): 133.

⁵ I believe Ms. Stern meant "Excursions" which was published in 1863 by Ticknor and Fields. Emerson's biographical essay on Thoreau, which Emerson wrote (and delivered) as Thoreau's funeral eulogy, is the piece to which Ms. Stern refers. However, as I argue below, Conan Doyle may have seen the first printing of this biographical essay in the August 1862 number of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

⁶ The "circumstantial evidence" sentence appears in Thoreau's *Journal* for November 11, 1850. The full sentence reads "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk." I am grateful to Bradley P. Dean, Director of the Media Center at the Thoreau Institute, for locating this sentence.

⁷ *Atlantic Monthly* 10, no. 58 (August, 1862): 239.

⁸ Christopher Morley, ed., *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, A Textbook of Friendship* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), 18. (Hereafter, "Morley"). Conan Doyle was by no means the only British writer to hold this view, especially in 1944; for example, it was one of Winston Churchill's themes.

⁹ Speaking of *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor*, Morley states, "This story is particularly famous for Holmes' pro-American sentiments" (353). And Morley points out that Conan Doyle was influenced by Poe (3). In *Conan Doyle* (London: John Murray, 1966), Pierre Norden says "Conan Doyle was one of the first British writers to be inspired and enriched by American literary traditions. Bret Harte and Poe were his models, and for Poe in particular he felt unqualified admiration" (79). Norden states that Conan Doyle first visited the United States in 1894 (79), two years after publication of *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor*, so the reference to the "circumstantial evidence" quote must have come from Conan Doyle's reading Thoreau in England. Conan Doyle himself, discussing his creation of Sherlock Holmes, recalled, "Poe's masterful detective, M. Dupin, had from boyhood been one of my heroes" (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1924], 69).

¹⁰ Morley, 351.