

‘Arthur Conan Doyle and the Consumption Cure’

A large number of the important themes of Arthur Conan Doyle’s life, his intellectual character, and the emergence of his vocation, cluster in the story of a trip he made to Berlin in 1890, with the purpose of attending a scientific lecture. He tells the story in a chapter of *Memories and Adventures* (1924) entitled ‘Pulling Up the Anchor’ in token of his own reading of late 1890 as a turning point in his career and life.¹ The Berlin episode constituted a decisive turn in his relation to the professions and discourses of writing and medicine, to science and art, and to the provincial, metropolitan and continental scene. It dramatized the issue of the professional’s responsibility to society. It foregrounded questions of nationality and ethnicity. It provided him with a model of the heroic investigator combating dangerous antagonists, to be developed in the serial figures of Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger. The Berlin adventure was in many ways a critical point in Conan Doyle’s evolution as man of letters, and it merits a thicker description.

In mid-November 1890, Conan Doyle, a 31-year-old provincial doctor in general practice with the beginnings of a reputation as a writer of fiction, decided on the spur of the moment to travel to Berlin, to attend a demonstration of a cure for tuberculosis announced by Professor Robert Koch, the celebrated German bacteriologist. ‘[A]t a few hours’ notice,’ he recalled years later, ‘I packed up a bag and started off alone upon this curious adventure’ (*M&A*, 88). He went up to London from Portsmouth, collected some

¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* 1924 (Oxford, 1989) pp. 82-93. Further references to this book, abbreviated *M&A*, will be parenthetical.

letters of introduction, and hurried on to the continent that same night, meeting on the train a smart London doctor, Malcolm Morris, who was also going to learn more about the consumption cure. In Berlin, Conan Doyle could not get in to the packed hall to attend the demonstration given by Koch's colleague Ernst von Bergmann, but the next day he was given access to the German doctors' wards where Koch's procedure was being tested on tubercular patients. Without delay he sent a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in which he recorded his doubts about the so-called cure; later he wrote a longer piece for the *Review of Reviews* also casting doubt on the curative properties of Koch's procedure, while heaping praise on Koch himself as a Carlylean hero of science. Returning from Berlin via London to his home on the south coast, the following day Conan Doyle gave an interview to a local newspaper about his Berlin trip, in which he announced that he was giving up his Southsea practice. He had decided to go to Vienna to further his studies in ophthalmology before setting up in London as a specialist. The last part of the story is a familiar episode of the Conan Doyle myth, and is cheerfully recounted in his autobiographical *Memories and Adventures*, written in 1924. Setting up in practice as an oculist in Devonshire Place, 'close to the classical Harley Street' (*M&A*, 95), Conan Doyle failed to attract a single patient to cross his threshold. Yet in the time spent vainly waiting for patients, he was establishing himself as a professional writer, and producing the first of the stories for the *Strand* magazine, featuring the detective Sherlock Holmes, which would make him one of the most famous authors in the world.

In his own retrospective narrative there is another reason for paying attention to the Berlin episode. *Memories and Adventures* is for the most part a genial, relaxed book.

Nobody would describe it as racked with doubt. Yet the story told of the Berlin trip is different. Turbulence troubles the normally smooth surface of the discourse. There is uncertainty, as well as urgency, in the narrative. Neither the young Conan Doyle, nor the elder self who tells the story, appears entirely in control of what is taking place. He explains that he might well have remained in Southsea permanently, but for the consequences of Koch's announcement that he would demonstrate his cure in Berlin.

A great urge came upon me suddenly that I should go to Berlin and see him do so. I could give no clear reason for this, but it was an irresistible impulse and I at once determined to go. Had I been a well-known doctor or a specialist in consumption it would have been more intelligible, but I had, as a matter of fact, no great interest in the more recent developments of my own profession, and a very strong belief that much of the so-called progress was illusory. However, at a few hours' notice I packed up a bag and started off alone upon this curious adventure. (*M&A*, 87-88)

'A great urge,' with 'no clear reason' but 'an irresistible impulse' seem to signal that Doyle was under some compulsion of whose nature he was not completely conscious. When he gets to Berlin, at least in memory, this rather frenetic tone continues. 'The great thing was to be present at Bergmann's demonstration', but 'tickets were simply not to be had'; Conan Doyle 'conceived the wild idea of getting one from Koch himself' and goes to Koch's house, but 'Koch remained a veiled prophet'. 'I was fairly at my wits' end and could not imagine how I could attain my end.' He lurks at the entrance to the lecture hall, and when Bergmann appears, he recalls, 'I threw myself across his path', claiming to have come 'a thousand miles' to see the demonstration, only to be rudely rebuffed by

Bergmann, ‘working himself up into that strange folly of excitement which seems so strange in the heavy German nature’ (*M&A*, 89) but is quite in harmony with the excitability of the narrative. All of this seems to suggest that something momentous but not fully understood is afoot, both in Conan Doyle’s own career, and in the worldwide reaction to the news of Koch’s discovery, in which it seemed ‘a wave of madness had seized the world’ (*M&A*, 90). The story culminates with Conan Doyle’s return home. ‘Two days later I was back in Southsea, but I came back a changed man’ (*M&A*, 90). The ‘curious adventure’ of the Berlin trip had been a crisis. This essay attempts to find its meaning, and in doing so will approach Conan Doyle’s Berlin experience as a cultural as well as a personal event.

With its tally of tragic poets and operatic heroines, tuberculosis or consumption had a certain romantic glamour. But there was nothing glamorous about the facts. Tuberculosis was the cause of one in seven deaths in the mid-nineteenth century.² It was often a prolonged and painful illness as well as a fatal one, and before the twentieth century there was no remedy: a cure for consumption had something of the meaning of a cure for cancer or AIDS in more modern times.

The story of tuberculosis is also tied up with the fortunes of the germ theory of disease, perhaps the most significant advance in modern pathology.³ Highly controversial at first, the work of pioneers like Koch and Pasteur had assured that the germ theory was

² Among the disease’s victims was to be Conan Doyle’s first wife, Louise (Touie), who was diagnosed in 1893, and died of tuberculosis in 1906 at the age of forty-nine.

³ For a lively account, see Dorothy H. Crawford, *Deadly Companions: How Microbes Shaped our History* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 161-83.

almost universally accepted in the late nineteenth century – though in 1894 Conan Doyle has a fictional portrait of an old-fashioned medical practitioner whose idea of a joke is to say, in a sick room, ‘Shut the door or the germs will be getting in’.⁴ The work of bacteriologists gave modern people quite literally a new way of looking at the world and thinking about it, with implications that spread beyond the laboratory and the clinic. ‘In the 1880s,’ argues Laura Otis in her book *Membranes*, ‘because of their minuscule size and deadly effects, bacteria became a metaphor through which one could articulate fears about all invisible enemies, military, political, or economic. Smallness itself became menacing.’⁵

In the competitive atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Europe it was inevitable that the language of bacteriology should become entangled with that of empire and war. ‘Journalistic images of the war against germs produced for mass audiences during the 1890s,’ according to Jennifer Tucker, ‘bear witness to the intensifying scientific and popular interest in bacteria and to the readiness of many scientists to exploit military and imperialist iconography and racial stereotypes to show germs as unruly tribes of deadly microorganisms.’⁶ Conan Doyle gives us an example in the opening paragraph of his *Review of Reviews* article, where he speaks of Koch’s great master mind ‘which is rapidly bringing under subjection those unruly tribes of deadly micro-organisms which are the last creatures in the organic world to submit to the sway of man.’⁷ Earlier that same year,

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘Behind the Times’, *Round the Red Lamp* 1894 (Fairfield, IA., 2004) p. 11.

⁵ Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science and Politics* (Baltimore, 1999) p. 94.

⁶ Jennifer Tucker, ‘Photography as Witness, Detective, and Impostor: Visual Representation in Victorian Science’ in Bernard Lightman (ed.), *Victorian Science in Context* (Chicago, 1997) 378-408; at 394.

⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘Dr. Koch and his Cure’, *Review of Reviews* 2 (1890) 552-56; at 552. Further references to this essay, abbreviated ‘Dr. Koch’, will be parenthetical.

1890, he had had a success with the Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of the Four*, in which, as Otis has observed, Holmes is pitted against a deadly incursion from the East, whose perpetrators he detects as consisting of an Oriental pygmy and a working-class outlaw and murderer named Small. There was a two-way metaphorical traffic between microbes and other sources of anxiety, and figures like Koch and his great rival Louis Pasteur were heroized, as all mankind's champions in the war against disease and death.

After military service in the Prussian army, as a young man Koch had settled down to 'the humdrum life of a country doctor': the words are Conan Doyle's, in the long article on 'Dr. Koch and his Cure' which he wrote for the *Review of Reviews* in 1890 after his Berlin adventure, and in which he dwells, for reasons that may seem obvious, on the obscurity of Koch's beginnings, describing him as 'strong and vigorous, with all his great powers striving for an outlet, even in the unpropitious surroundings in which he found himself' ('Dr. Koch', 553). One simple meaning of Koch's story for Conan Doyle was as a model for the gifted and ambitious provincial he was himself, now increasingly restless in the confines of his general practice in Southsea. The professions provided a ladder open to the talented, and by this ladder Koch had risen from the obscure village of Wollstein to become world famous.

While still a country practitioner, he had succeeded in isolating and cultivating the anthrax bacillus, thus establishing the bacteriological cause of anthrax or splenic fever, in what Thomas M. Daniel calls 'perhaps the first demonstration of the cause of any

infectious disease'.⁸ It was Pasteur, however, who enlarged upon Koch's work and developed the inoculation against the disease.⁹ The rivalry between Pasteur and Koch is a theme of Conan Doyle's article, and he notes that 'France has been millions of pounds the richer for the vast number of animals who have been inoculated against the plague,' adding piously that this 'worthy rivalry' between France and Germany is 'a contest as to which should confer the greatest benefits upon mankind' ('Dr. Koch', 554). With the Franco-Prussian war still very much a living memory, Conan Doyle here seems to characterize science as something both similar to and the opposite of war – still practiced by nations in competition, but with results that are wholly benign to everyone.

An involvement with photography was another very important link between Koch and Conan Doyle. The latter was a keen amateur and a frequent contributor to the *British Journal of Photography* in the 1880s. Koch's interests were professional, and his achievements in bacteriology were made possible by advances in visual technologies, particularly in microscopic and photographic instrumentation and practice, and he developed techniques of staining and photographing bacteria, and became the first to make photomicrographs of bacteria. Koch believed that the introduction of photography to bacteriology would purge microscopic investigations of subjectivity, and thus guarantee them scientific. Conan Doyle was drawn to Koch, I think, not only as a model of the scientist as hero, but as someone who had provided incontrovertible ocular proof of the otherworld of the germ. The great experimentalist was the bringer of undisputable

⁸ Thomas M. Daniel, *Captain of Death: The Story of Tuberculosis* (Rochester, NY., 1997) p. 77.

⁹ Koch himself had built on work on splenic fever done by the French bacteriologist Devaine. 'Devaine saw it, Koch isolated it, Pasteur tamed it.' Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Life and Death in the Blood', *Good Words*, March 1883, 178-81; at 180.

material knowledge of what had hitherto been hidden from human sight. The germ theory was one thing: but here were photographs in which it was possible to see, and impossible to deny, the bacteria that carried disease, which could then be combated. This made a great appeal to the extraordinary literalism of Conan Doyle's intellect, a propensity which was to leave him open to ridicule, and worse, later in life, most notoriously in the case of his faith in the evidence of photographs in the affair of the Cottingley fairies.¹⁰ But Conan Doyle was not a man who was comfortable with uncertainties. For all his fertile creative imagination, he quite lacked the quality Keats defined as negative capability – 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.¹¹ Science for him was the realm of what could be tested with the eye, he shared the widespread view that 'scientific' was a synonym for 'undeniably true', and seems to have admired Koch for proving the existence of the hitherto unseen as much as for the clinical applications of his discoveries.

The Berlin story recounted in *Memories and Adventures* immediately follows a passage in which Conan Doyle told of his youthful search for spiritual truth. He considered but rejected Theosophy as inadequate to his needs, he says, 'for I ask for severe proof, and if I have to go back to unquestioning faith I should find myself in the fold from which I wandered (*M&A*, 87).¹² Like many Victorians before him, Conan

¹⁰ In 1917 Conan Doyle publicly declared his belief in photographs produced by two Yorkshire children purporting to show frolicking fairies. Much later it emerged that the images of fairies had been cut out of *Princess Mary's Gift Book*. See Andrew Lycett, *Conan Doyle: The Man who Created Sherlock Holmes* (London, 2007) 384, 389, and Joe Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies* (London, 1997).

¹¹ John Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 3rd edition (London, 1948) p. 72.

¹² His chief reason for rejecting Theosophy was the damning report on Madame Blavatsky's demonstrations of supernatural phenomena, published by the Society for Psychical Research in 1885. See

Doyle seems to turn to science for what religion was no longer able to offer. No wonder there is a hint of epiphany in his reaction to Koch's announcement that he will demonstrate the cure – 'A great urge came upon me suddenly that I should go to Berlin and see him do so' – the half-understood summons, the compulsion to drop everything and hurry off to see this thing which has come to pass.

At stake here is the consolidation in the nineteenth century of science as a profession, and the concomitant establishment of a certain kind of knowledge as 'scientific' – a knowledge derived from agreed methods of enquiry, and consecrated as unassailable by the profession and its protocols of proof. This kind of knowledge, propagated in a veritable explosion of what Alan Rauch calls 'knowledge texts', including encyclopaedias and instruction manuals but also museums and public institutions, had proliferated enormously in the Victorian age.¹³ And the growth of such knowledge about nature, with its practical pay-off in the development of medical therapies and technological devices, was the chief evidence, and for many people the incontrovertible proof, that modernity meant progress. Conan Doyle, at this time at least, shared this faith in the benign growth of scientific knowledge, and the sometimes triumphalist idiom that often expressed it. A. Conan Doyle, M.D., C.M., in a letter to the *Portsmouth Evening Mail* in July 1887, had described vaccination as 'one of the greatest victories ever won by science over disease,' and castigated opponents of vaccination as 'men whose notion of progress is to revert to the condition of things which existed in the

Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research vol. 3 (December 1885) 201-400. See also Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (London, 1993) pp. 82-84.

¹³ See Alan Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (Durham, N.C., 2001) and William H. Brock, *Science for All: Studies in the History of Victorian Science and Education* (Aldershot, 1996).

dark ages before the dawn of medical science'.¹⁴ Developments in bacteriology led the young Conan Doyle to feel confident that within two generations, scourges like consumption, typhus, typhoid, cholera, malaria, scarlatina, diphtheria, and measles might cease to exist.¹⁵ A general practitioner might be a foot-soldier in the march of scientific knowledge: champions of knowledge like Koch and Pasteur were in the vanguard. Crucial to his achievement was the communicable visibility that Koch had conferred on the new objects of knowledge. He made you see. For him, as for Conan Doyle, photography was crucial to the creation and consecration of knowledge, warranting its objects as objectively true.¹⁶ In some obvious ways both science and photography were forms of detection, bringing things to light and knowledge in a realm of certainty, where they could be dealt with. Conan Doyle would bring the same paradigm of visibility, and the same instruments of proof, to bear on the afterlife, with a similar positivistic confidence in their ability to tell the truth.

Conan Doyle's article on Koch – published not in a scientific journal but a literary-political one, the *Review of Reviews* – is illustrated with photomicrographs of the bacilli that were the scientist's deadly antagonists, but it contains no photographs of Koch himself. The great man was invisible to the visitor to Berlin, just as in theory the scientist was invisible in his work, at an epoch when science was impersonalizing itself and claiming a detached neutrality of observation. What Conan Doyle's article does is to

¹⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Letters to the Press*, ed. John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green (Iowa City, IO., 1986) p. 27.

¹⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Life and Death in the Blood', p. 181.

¹⁶ Not everyone had an implicit faith in photographs, and 'photography was a controversial new standard of objective reporting in Britain during the late nineteenth century'. Jennifer Tucker, 'Photography as Witness', p. 380. Tucker's article is illustrated (Fig. 18.1, p. 379) with a doctored photograph of 1894 purporting to show Mr Gladstone entering a public house.

bring Koch back into the picture, to render him visible, and to give the process of scientific discovery the human face of a man who had undergone personal struggles, loved mountaineering, and so on.

For Koch was now not just a celebrity, but a hero of a triumphantly modern kind for both the still new German empire and its dominant state, Prussia. In the 1880s Bismarckian Germany was beginning its acquisition of a colonial empire, and was anxious to demonstrate its powers in the world. In 1883, cholera had reappeared in Eastern Europe and spread rapidly over Egypt. The German government sent out a Cholera Commission, led by Koch, to Alexandria to investigate the disease on the spot. At the same time the French sent a team to Egypt headed by Pasteur. Neither succeeded in finding a cure, but when the outbreak in Egypt subsided Koch followed the disease to India, where it is endemic, and there succeeded in identifying the comma bacillus, the causative microbe of cholera. Pursuing the disease which of course knows no political boundaries, Koch (and Pasteur) had become also an instrument of foreign policy and a bearer of national prestige. Returning now to Germany, and to the University of Berlin, Koch resumed his investigations of tuberculosis.

He worked, says Daniel, 'alone and in secrecy'.¹⁷ Conan Doyle too remarks on the intense privacy of Koch's domestic amenities and professional activities, joking that for the visitor to Berlin it was much easier to see the bacillus of Koch than to catch a glimpse of the man himself. In this, Koch was conforming – or Conan Doyle was catering – to a romantic expectation of the behaviour of genius, a person whose special

¹⁷ Thomas M. Daniel, *Captain of Death*, p. 83.

gifts set him apart from others to commune with the source of his inspiration. Conan Doyle reports approvingly that Koch favours mountain climbing, that other occupation of the romantic solitary. But solitude is not the same thing as secrecy. In practice laboratory science is rarely a solitary occupation (Conan Doyle found fifty young men working in Koch's Hygiene Museum laboratory in Kloster Strasse) and there is something suspicious about scientists who work in secrecy. Victor Frankenstein in his laboratory, and Henry Jekyll in his, work alone because they have something to hide. The same is true of Professor Presbury, in the 1923 Sherlock Holmes story 'The Creeping Man', who is trying to hide the fact that the drug he has taken for the purposes of rejuvenation has caused him to acquire the characteristics of a monkey.¹⁸

Robert Koch's secrecy has a less Gothic explanation, as a function of the atmosphere of personal and international competitiveness in which he worked. A cure for tuberculosis would be a boon to mankind, but would also bring glory to its discoverer. Koch had seen his anthrax work trumped by Pasteur, and had also clashed with his French rival in the search for the cure for cholera. As a young man he had served in the Franco-Prussian war, and was 'profoundly nationalistic and violently anti-French'.¹⁹ He clearly had no intention of letting the results of his research escape into the public domain where some foreigner might take the credit for them. In the final quarter of the nineteenth century Germany was busy becoming the third largest colonial power in Africa, while complaining that others, the British and the French, had already scooped up the best of

¹⁸ The tale itself is a weak reworking of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

¹⁹ Thomas M. Daniel, *Captain of Death*, p. 75.

the global spoils. Koch was not prepared to see the greatest of scientific prizes, the tuberculosis cure, snatched from his hands.

And if Koch had not been savvy enough to protect his own intellectual property, there were others on hand to remind him when to keep silent and when to publish, since more than personal issues were at stake. The apparent breakthrough was certainly announced precipitately. Otis states that the cure was not ready for human beings, and that Koch ‘had been forced by government ministers to announce it prematurely so that German scientific achievements could eclipse all others at [the International Medical Congress] in Berlin.’²⁰ Daniel reports that some people speculated that Koch’s secrecy was the result of orders from his superiors in the German government.²¹ Certainly there were rumours of political interference and Conan Doyle heard them. ‘Most scientists,’ says Otis, ‘sympathized with Koch, knowing the pressure to which the normally prudent bacteriologist had been subjected.’²²

There is every indication that Conan Doyle would not have been shocked at the news that a national government had interfered in the conduct of scientific business. There is what looks like an instinctive patriotism in all of his fictional characters, however their *patria* is conceived, and he seems to have expected others too to acknowledge the paramount loyalty owed to a nation. A decade later at the time of the South African war, he himself not only put his life at some danger as an army doctor, but also put his own powers and reputation as a writer in the service of his nation’s

²⁰ Laura Otis, *Membranes*, p. 24.

²¹ Thomas M. Daniel, *Captain of Death*, p. 83.

²² Laura Otis, *Membranes*, p. 24.

government, as an apologist for their conduct of the war. Robert Koch might have been world famous but he is commended for his love for the German mountains and his attachment to home, his ‘domestic turn of mind’, and indeed his Germanness is inscribed for Conan Doyle in his appearance, being ‘of a thoroughly German type’ (‘Dr. Koch’, 552). The German scientist was a German before he was a scientist, and he was a Prussian state functionary. The idea of the lone heroic researcher was a pleasantly romantic one and might have had some plausibility in an earlier age of gentleman amateur investigators.²³ (It can be sustained, more or less, by Conan Doyle in the fictional figure of his Professor Challenger only through some sleight of hand.) But it had no place in a world of expensive laboratory science, academic appointments, public funding and government accountability. And besides, why should not a scientist who was proud of his country put his talents at the service of that country, as any other professional would – indeed, as would a consulting detective, who was always willing to oblige when duty called?

Koch’s story shows that nationalism and internationalism are not opposites, but dialectical partners. (A further illustration of this truth is to be found in the ‘revival’ and internationalization of the Olympic Games, an idea conceived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in that same year, 1890.)²⁴ For Koch’s fame was now worldwide, but Koch’s lymph, the fluid tuberculin, was obtainable only in Berlin, the imperial centre, and he

²³ Charles Darwin was a self-financing passenger on board the *Beagle*, 1831-1836, but had at his disposal the amenities of a naval ship and a government-financed expedition.

²⁴ Kristine Toohey and A. J. Veal, *The Olympic Games* (Wallingford, 2000) pp. 30-36. De Coubertin admired *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and visited Rugby School. A French patriot and strongly anti-German, he saw sport as a way for France to leave behind the effeminate and over-intellectual habits that had led to defeat by Prussia in 1870-1, and regain its preeminent place in Europe, but also as a way to promote international harmony and co-operation. See also Alfred E. Senn, *Power, Politics and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, Ill., 1999) pp. 19-33. The Olympics remain both internationalist and thoroughly nationalistic.

kept its nature secret.²⁵ Tuberculosis was global, but medicine was international. Such was the scourge of tuberculosis that it was inevitable Koch's discovery should be touted in the press as a miracle. 'A wave of madness had seized the world,' wrote Conan Doyle years later, 'and from all parts, notably from England, poor afflicted people were rushing to Berlin for a cure, some of them in such advanced stages of disease that they died in the train' (*M&A*, 90).

On 3 August 1890, in a lecture to an audience of eight thousand physicians at the 10th International Medical Congress in Berlin, widely reported in the international press, Koch announced his new lymph inoculation had been successful in destroying the tubercle bacillus *in vitro* and in affected tissues of guinea pigs. His paper on tuberculin appeared in the German scientific press on 13 November 1890, and was reprinted in the *BMJ*, in German, on 15 November. Andrew Lycett says this is what sparked Conan Doyle's interest, and that he set out for London that same day.²⁶ He boarded the train in London that evening, and spent most of the night on the Continental express talking to Malcolm Morris. Conan Doyle did not mention Morris, though, when he claimed later to have had 'the good fortune to be the first English physician to arrive in Berlin after the announcement of Koch's discovery' ('Dr. Koch', 555).²⁷ He cannot have arrived in Berlin earlier than the following day, which would be 16 November if Lycett is right

²⁵ 'As regards the origin and the preparation of the remedy I am unable to make any statement, as my research is not yet concluded; I reserve this for a future communication.' Robert Koch, 'A Further Communication on a Remedy for Tuberculosis', *Br Med J*, 22 November 1890, 1193. A footnote to this article gives an address in Berlin where the remedy can be bought, though such was the immediate demand that it was unobtainable by foreign physicians for many weeks.

²⁶ Andrew Lycett, *Conan Doyle*, p. 156. The 15 November *BMJ* is also credited as Doyle's motive in Alvin E. Rodin and Jack D. Key, *Medical Casebook of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle* (Malabar, Fla., 1984) 105.

²⁷ According to a note in the *BMJ* dated Tuesday 18 November, Morris seems to have been present in Berlin at 8.45 a.m. on 16 November, when a patient under his care was inoculated, in the presence of Koch himself. 'The First English Case of Lupus treated by Koch's Method', *Br Med J*, 22 November 1890, 1197.

about the date of his leaving London, and he says Bergmann's lecture was scheduled for the day after his arrival (*M&A*, 88). But a *BMJ* report says Bergmann's 'anxiously awaited address and exhibition' took place on Sunday evening, 16 November.²⁸ After missing Bergmann's lecture, Conan Doyle was taken the following day to visit the tubercular wards and saw some of the patients Bergmann had lectured about ('Dr. Koch', 556). His letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, addressed from Berlin's Central Hotel and describing his visit to the wards, is dated 17 November, that same day. What all this adds up to is that Conan Doyle left England earlier than 15 November – probably a day earlier – and therefore not prompted by Koch's German paper in the *BMJ*, but by accounts in the daily press.²⁹

It is a detail that neatly symbolizes a larger issue, whether Conan Doyle's Berlin adventure is essentially a story about medicine or about journalism – and a further question yet, that of who the young man on the Continental express thought he was and what profession he was following. This period can be seen in retrospect as one in which Conan Doyle was undergoing the metamorphosis from doctor to writer in his own self-conception. Yet in November 1890 these two roles, and vocations, were still quite evenly balanced. While still working hard at his general practice, he was at the same time acquiring the trappings of the professional writer, including a typewriter, and a literary agent, A. P. Watt. He was certainly behaving as a professional writer, rather than a

²⁸ In 'Dr. Koch' Conan Doyle correctly states that the lecture was given 'upon the Sunday night' (p. 555) but in later years he remembered it as taking place at noon (*M&A*, 89).

²⁹ The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, published articles on Koch and 'The Consumption Cure' every day between 11 and 19 November – that is, starting before Koch's scientific paper appeared. Conan Doyle's letter, published on 20 November, is headlined 'The Consumption Cure' to signal its place in this suite of reports in the paper. There is also a question whether Conan Doyle's knowledge of German was sufficient to navigate Koch's scientific paper.

doctor, when he passed through London on his way to Berlin and called on W. T. Stead, editor of the new *Review of Reviews*, to ask if he could supply him with letters of introduction to Koch or to Bergmann. If he succeeded in meeting them, these medical men would respond to a man with a letter of introduction from a magazine editor in a way different from their expected response to someone introduced as a professional colleague. But it seems the decisive meeting was the fortuitous one that came about when Conan Doyle met Malcolm Morris on the Continental express.

Conan Doyle was thirty-one years old, Morris forty-one. As they talked through the night they must have discovered that they had much in common. Both were born into Catholic families, both had begun their career in general practice in the provinces (like Robert Koch). Morris's ambition had brought him back to London where he had studied, and by 1890 he was one of the leading dermatologists in the country, well launched on a career of medicine and public service that would bring him a knighthood in 1908 and many professional honours. *Who's Who* gives his address as 8 Harley Street, London W.1. His studies in diseases of the skin had been widened by frequent visits to Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, and Paris, underlining again the busy traffic between the scientific centres of Europe among the upper orders of the profession. Although primarily a consultant in dermatology, Morris had a secondary specialism in tuberculosis, which explains why he was hurrying to Berlin in November 1890. He was taking with him a long-term patient suffering from lupus, and was sufficiently well-connected to have the

patient inoculated with the revolutionary treatment, under Koch's personal supervision, upon arrival in Berlin.³⁰

Morris was an eloquent, stylish and cosmopolitan travelling companion. When he had met Stead earlier that day, Conan Doyle had seen himself in the great London editor's eyes as 'this big unknown provincial doctor' (*M&A*, 88), and a similarly galumphing self-image may have met him in the gaze of Morris, an already distinguished man of 'virility and decisiveness' who 'did not suffer fools very gladly'.³¹ Morris however seems to have taken a shine to the younger man, and treated him to some vigorous advice, telling him that he was wasting his life in the provinces, and had 'too small a field for [his] activities'.

He insisted that I should leave general practice and go to London. I answered that I was by no means sure of my literary success as yet, and that I could not so easily abandon the medical career which had cost my mother such sacrifices and myself so many years of study. He asked me if there was any special branch of medicine on which I could concentrate so as to get away from general practice. (*M&A*, 90-91)

Conan Doyle replies that he is 'interested in eye work' and Morris then prescribes six months' study in Vienna followed by setting up as an eye specialist in London. 'Thus you will have a nice clean life with plenty of leisure for your literature.' (*M&A*, 91)

³⁰ Lupus is tuberculosis of the skin. Koch's work of 1882 had proved the presence of the tubercule bacillus in lupus.

³¹ Obituary, Sir Malcolm Morris, K.C.V.O., F.R.C.S.Ed, *Br Med J*, 1 March 1924, 407, 408.

Conan Doyle was to follow this recommendation, almost to the letter. But the main burden of Morris's advice is not the satisfactions of ophthalmic surgery as a career. The argument is what you might expect from a metropolitan consultant. Get out of general practice, move to the capital, exercise your powers. It was the story of Malcolm Morris's own career, and of course of Robert Koch's, and behind it lies the great bourgeois ambition of self-realization that had brought likely lads on the make from provincial obscurity to triumph or disappointment in the great city, in countless nineteenth-century novels since Balzac. With examples like Koch and Morris before him, Conan Doyle's world of local medical practice and provincial culture (such as was embodied by the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society, and the Portsmouth Football Club) was losing its savour. Under the pressure of an ambition very much of its time, he was ready to enact that late Victorian transition described by José Harris as 'a subterranean shift in the balance of social life away from the locality to the metropolis and the nation'.³²

In urging him to quit general practice and set up as a specialist, Morris was inviting Conan Doyle to make the move he himself had already made so successfully, from the subordinate grade of family medicine in the provinces to the more modern, more scientific (and lucrative) practice of specialist medicine informed by the latest international research. The Harley Street address, the hospital consultancies and memberships of learned and professional societies, the scientific publications, the easy familiarity with the languages and institutions of European science – these added up to

³² José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (Harmondsworth, 1994) p. 19.

social and cultural capital that marked Morris, as Koch was marked, as one of the aristocrats of professional society.³³

The advice of Malcolm Morris was decisive. Yet the older man was only recommending a plan that had been in Conan Doyle's mind since 1888, two years earlier. In a letter to one of his sisters that year, he had broached the idea of going abroad to 'study the eye', then returning to set up as an eye surgeon in London, while continuing to earn money from his writing, for, he added, 'If I were successful as a general practitioner it would be fatal to me as a writer.'³⁴ Yet it seems it was only when Morris endorsed this ambition that Conan Doyle felt confident enough to put it into practice. Like so much else in the Berlin adventure, it is as if ideas and decisions long incubating in his mind suddenly become manifest, and active; or as if Berlin was the optical instrument that brought matters sharply into sight and focus. After the pleasant provincial obscurity of Southsea here was a different and invigorating culture, articulated in the talk of successful professional men.

Conan Doyle had much to think about when he stepped off the train and began his strange frenetic adventure in Berlin. He was quickly to discover that not all medical mandarins were as friendly as Malcolm Morris. The contacts Stead had given him were of no help. Koch himself was completely inaccessible to a lowly practitioner, though he met Morris. Putting himself 'in the position of a German medical man who was seeking information in London,' Conan Doyle says he thought it best to go straight to Bergmann

³³ See Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 1989).

³⁴ Letter to Lottie Doyle, n.d. [1888], *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, ed. Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower and Charles Foley (London, 2007) 252-3.

and explain his difficulty, a tactic that would have succeeded, he says naively, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred ('Dr. Koch', 555). Bergmann's rebuff is developed into an anecdote about nation and ethnicity. Bergmann, 'notoriously gruff to our fellow-countrymen', is gratuitously rude about Englishmen. In 'Dr. Koch', he shouts, and roars. In *Memories and Adventures*, where the memory casts a longer shadow, 'he fairly spat out the word "Englishmen"', and then 'rushed on with his court all grinning at the snub which the presumptuous Englishman had received'; and this is taken as evidence of the strange 'folly of excitement' evident in the 'heavy German nature' –no doubt yet more evident to the Englishman remembering the event after 1914 than before (*M&A*, 89, 90). In these ways, the writer Conan Doyle takes what revenge he can on the snub delivered to the junior doctor Conan Doyle, for already here in the early days of his international experience he was seeing the world in terms of robust national characteristics and competition. To complete this little international allegory, the ethnic dimension is added in the form of an American gentleman, a Dr Hartz of Michigan, who despite his German name, steps in to assist Conan Doyle, 'on the good old principle that blood is thicker than water' ('Dr. Koch', 555-56). The next year, 1891, Conan Doyle would publish the book he considered his masterpiece, *The White Company*, under the inscription 'To the hope of the future, the reunion of the English-speaking races'.³⁵

With the help of Hartz, and after studying Hartz's notes on the lecture from which he himself had been excluded, next morning Conan Doyle was looking at the very patients of Bergmann's who had been the subject of his demonstration, and at other

³⁵ For the idea of a global 'Britannic Confederation', to which Conan Doyle subscribed, see Robert J. C. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Oxford, 2008) 196-241.

tubercular patients under two other German professors. Probably on the same busy day he visited Koch's public laboratory at Kloster Strasse, and looked through the microscope at prepared slides on which pathogenic bacilli could be observed. In the journey from his medical backwater in Southsea to the vortex of scientific and clinical discovery, he had now penetrated, in effect, the most important place in the scientific world. He had reached, not the pinnacle of the profession, but the place where that pinnacle was. In the afternoon he went back to his hotel and wrote his letter to the *Daily Telegraph*. It is an impressive document, remarkable for his usual speed and decisiveness, but also for the self-confidence with which this medical nobody gives, for national publication, a critical account of the shortcomings of the tuberculin cure. He may well have been relaying misgivings voiced to him by Morris, or Hartz, or other scientific men he encountered in Berlin, but the opinions are presented as his own, those of 'an English physician who has had good opportunities of seeing the recent development of the treatment for tuberculosis in Berlin'.³⁶

What Conan Doyle had accomplished was, in effect, a journalistic scoop, and he was proud of it. It was also his very first appearance in print in a national newspaper.³⁷ Later in life when he was a famous author, he was to be a frequent writer of letters to the press, seeing it as part of the role of the man of letters to comment on events and issues of the day. In the *Review of Reviews* article published the following month, he said he wrote as 'the first English physician to arrive in Berlin after the announcement of Koch's

³⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Consumption Cure', letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 1890, *Letters to the Press*, ed. John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green (Iowa City, IO., 1986) 35-37; at 35.

³⁷ His earlier published letters had appeared in local newspapers, in the medical press, and in the spiritualist publication *Light*. In Berlin he had met national journalists such as Lowe of the *Times* and Saunders of the *Morning Post*.

discovery' ('Dr. Koch', 555), and in *Memories and Adventures*, recalling his *Daily Telegraph* letter, 'I rather think,' he claimed, 'that this letter was the very first which appeared upon the side of doubt and caution,' adding, 'I need not say that the event proved the truth of my forecast' (*M&A*, 90). Indeed the 'cure' was discredited within a year, though Koch was to go on to other discoveries and honours. But at the time, Conan Doyle's skepticism was bold indeed, the more so since he was a young and unknown provincial doctor, who had not actually attended Bergmann's demonstration, still less spoken to or even laid eyes on Robert Koch.

One explanation of the breathless tone of Conan Doyle's Berlin adventure is that it was less a matter of intellectual excitement over a scientific discovery than the fervour of a writer in pursuit of a story. When he returned to the subject in *Memories and Adventures* in 1924, he recreated that excitement in a new narrative, while at the same time downplaying the investment of his younger self in the scientific issues involved. He now claimed that, besides having no specialist knowledge about consumption, he 'had, as a matter of fact, no great interest in the more recent developments of my own profession, and a very strong belief that much of the so-called progress was illusory' (*M&A*, 88). That skepticism about scientific progress belongs more to the older writer of 1924 than to the young physician of 1890. It concomitated a rougher handling not only of the rudeness of Bergmann, but also of Koch, whom Conan Doyle had described with unqualified awe in 1890 as 'the noblest German of them all' ('Dr. Koch', 556). The hagiography of the 1890 writings has entirely disappeared in the 1924 account. Koch is now said to have

‘announced that he had discovered a sure cure for consumption’ (*M&A*, 87): in 1890 Conan Doyle had been careful to point out that Koch had made no such sweeping claim.

Going on to describe his visit to Berlin and his reaction to the consumption cure, Conan Doyle remembered that he ‘had the temerity to disagree with every one and to come to the conclusion that the whole thing was experimental and premature’ (*M&A*, 90). Although in 1890 he had been inclined to sympathise with Koch in that he was ‘compelled, in order to prevent widespread disappointment, to give his discovery to the public rather earlier than he would otherwise have done,’ (*‘Dr. Koch’*, 555) now he was much more frankly critical of the human cost of Koch’s haste. Although he still believed in the legitimacy of the demands a nation made on its great men, the story he was now telling about Koch and Bergmann was one of scientific arrogance and national pride with a distinctly postwar inflection. In the aftermath of the Great War Conan Doyle’s views on Germans were unambiguous. More importantly, he no longer had a simple faith in scientific progress, and here was an example of how the modern dogma of the impersonal scientist, invisible in his work, seemed to have led to actions in which the ethical responsibilities of science and medicine had themselves become obscured, and these famous men, in their pursuit of prestige and pre-eminence in research, had lost sight of the effect of their vanity on ordinary people caught up in the ‘wave of madness’ they had created.

The mimetic nervousness noted before in Conan Doyle’s narrative, its strangely keyed-up but also dreamlike pace and tone, may be read as the sign of an ethical

turbulence that troubles this retrospection about the events in Berlin towards which the young Conan Doyle had hastened with all his energy and professional ambition, desperate not to miss a thing. And those other travellers ‘from all parts, notably from England’, those ‘poor afflicted people ... rushing to Berlin for a cure, some of them in such advanced stages of disease that they died in the train’ (*M&A*, 90): who spared a thought for them? For Koch had not been the only invisible presence in Berlin. When he went to the great man’s house in his desperate search for a ticket for the demonstration, Conan Doyle had seen a large sack full of letters, bearing every sort of stamp in Europe, emptied on the floor, “a sign of all the sad broken lives and wearied hearts which were turning in hope to Berlin” (*M&A* 89). Koch’s discoveries about tuberculosis were a scientific triumph, but the vaunted tuberculosis cure of 1890 was an ethical disaster which cruelly raised and then dashed the hopes of many thousands of sufferers – a result, some might well say, of the way onrushing advances in the science of medicine might come at the expense of the humanity of the physician’s calling. If scientific men, and scientific medicine, had in this case failed in their ethical responsibility, other professions had responsibilities of their own. And after all Conan Doyle’s own part in this drama, including his several accounts of it, is not that of a scientist or physician, but is entirely consistent with the role of man of letters – writer and public intellectual – as he was to come to conceive of it.

Meanwhile he took the advice of Malcolm Morris, gave away his Southsea practice, and set off with his wife for Vienna to study ophthalmology. As it approaches its end, the story of his medical career seems to speed up. Morris had suggested six

months in Vienna; *Memories and Adventures* remembers a stay of four months; but Conan Doyle's diary shows they were there for a little more than eight weeks.³⁸ His German was not very good, the glamour of Viennese society was distracting, and he learned little. Returning to England, he recalls that the consulting rooms he took in Devonshire Place cost £120 a year, which suggests that his unsuccessful specialist practice lasted for some time. The permanently empty waiting room makes a good story, but in fact he was in practice as an ophthalmologist for less than a month, 6 April to 4 May 1891, at which point he fell seriously ill with influenza. He recovered, to give up his medical career for full-time writing in June. It is hard to believe that he had been really serious about a career as an eye specialist, and there is no indication he did much at all to forge the connections, and propagate the reputation, on which a specialist's career entirely depended.³⁹ The novel *Raffles Haw* was written in those weeks in Vienna. In his consulting room at Devonshire Place he conceived and produced the first of the Sherlock Holmes stories for the *Strand* magazine, on the formula of self-contained installments featuring a recurring character which was to be a discovery of capital importance to his own career and to the history of popular culture. In Devonshire Place, this was where the action was. He seems only to have been going through the motions as a medical consultant. The die had been cast, and it was cast in Berlin. A straight line ran from the false discovery of the consumption cure to the launching of a career in a different profession, with its own discoveries, triumphs, and responsibilities.

³⁸ Russell Miller, *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* (London, 2008) p. 128.

³⁹ Unlike a general practitioner, a consultant could not go out and find patients: he was dependent on patients being referred to him. For the history of the institution of referral see Irvine Loudon, *Medical Care and the General Practitioner 1750-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), and Anne Digby, *The Evolution of British General Practice 1850-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

In Berlin something other than the microbe had been brought to light. Describing Robert Koch's time as a provincial doctor, Conan Doyle had written of the young German's 'great powers striving for an outlet' ('Dr. Koch', 552). When he himself returned, 'a changed man', from Berlin, he remembered, 'I had spread my wings and felt something of the powers within me' (*M&A*, 90). The important revelation for him was the result of an introspection, but it was one brought about by all the encounters of the Berlin adventure – self-belief, an understanding of his own capabilities and responsibilities, the confirming of his second vocation, the move from the profession and practice of science to that of storytelling.

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‘Arthur Conan Doyle and the Consumption Cure’

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Abstract:

Arthur Conan Doyle, a young physician in general practice in the provinces who had published some fiction, dashed to Berlin in November 1890 to attend and report on a demonstration of what had been eagerly announced as a new cure for tuberculosis, discovered by Robert Koch. This event is examined as a crisis point in Conan Doyle’s career, and his various accounts of the episode scrutinized for what they show about his understanding of, and participation in, the discourses and professions of science and of letters, the kinds of knowledge they produce, and the sorts of responsibilities they entail. The Berlin experience, which exposed him to the workings of the scientific profession at the highest levels, was to be a crucial moment in the formation of Conan Doyle as man of letters.