

## *Ronald Knox, Sherlock Holmes, and 2012*

The new Sherlock Holmes movies, starring Robert Downey Jr., and the recent and returning PBS Sherlock Holmes shows, have attracted wide attention. Few people, however, seem aware of the connections between Holmes and Ronald Knox, or the significance of the year 2012 in this regard.

In particular, they are not aware that Holmes helped solve a serious problem Knox faced shortly after his graduation from Oxford in 1910, or that Knox played a major role in bringing Holmes back from the non-living. Because of this, they may be unaware of what Knox referred to as “my one permanent achievement.”

The story begins in 1910 when Knox was a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, and preparing for ordination to the Anglican priesthood. In his *Spiritual Aenied* (the story of his conversion to Catholicism), Knox relates that, as a Fellow, he faced the task of preparing one talk for general college gatherings, and another for theological groups. Moreover, the young Knox was distressed by the fact that his teachers at Oxford had neglected one feature of religion to which he was especially attached: orthodoxy. It was in this situation that Sherlock Holmes came to Knox’s rescue. Knox wrote a talk titled *Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes*, which he found would fulfill both functions, and simultaneously convey his distress at one feature of his training at Oxford, the attention given to biblical “Higher Criticism.” The Higher Critics were prone to pointing out contradictions in the Bible, and to making claims such as that *Isaiah* had been written not by one author, but by a proto- and deuterio-Isaiah. What Knox did was to treat the then-published Sherlock Holmes stories as a sort of Canon composed, not by Arthur Conan Doyle, but by a proto- and deuterio-Watson. Knox noted such facts as that Watson’s first name appears some times as John, other times as James. Knox thereby found that he had one talk that would suit both audiences, and simultaneously allow him to criticize the Higher Critics, whom, Knox noted, viewed his hilarious spoof as a “tract.” Moreover, when he sent the talk to Conan Doyle, Doyle delighted Knox with a warm response.

The effects of Knox’s paper have been quite extraordinary. It was first published exactly one hundred years ago, in 1912. It was republished in 1920, and then included in Knox’s *Essays in Satire* in 1928. Gradually, what Knox had done caught on. A host of other authors, including Dorothy Sayers, T. S. Eliot, Cambridge University’s Sir Sydney Roberts, and perhaps twenty thousand others decided that this was a fun game to play: to

write about Holmes as if he were a non-fictional character, using a flood of footnotes to prove frequently absurd claims relating to him (e.g. that Watson was a woman), and to do all this in a totally somber way. Dorothy Sayers, who contributed to the literature by a major essay directed at establishing whether Holmes had attended Cambridge or Oxford, described the activity: “The game of applying the methods of the ‘Higher Criticism’ to the Sherlock Holmes canon was begun, many years ago, by Monsignor Ronald Knox, with the aim of showing that, by those methods, one could disintegrate a modern classic as speciously as a certain school of critics have endeavoured to disintegrate the Bible. Since then, the thing has become a hobby among a select set of jesters here and in America. The rule of the game is that it must be played as solemnly as a county cricket match at Lord’s: the slightest touch of extravagance or burlesque ruins the atmosphere.”

Knox’s biographer, Evelyn Waugh, contributed to the story by quoting a remark Knox made on this matter: “it is so depressing that my one permanent achievement is to have started a bad joke.” It is hard to know how seriously Knox meant this remark, but it does seem clear that Knox would be astounded by the impact his paper has had. Recently, Professor Michael Saler has published a richly documented book in which he argues that Knox’s 1912 paper was the pioneering document in the present tendency of thousands of people to treat fictional characters as non-fictional, and, in effect, to attempt to live with and to devote much of their lives to studying the Hobbits, Harry Potter, etc.

Persons wishing to read Knox’s paper, or to read this story in full detail, or to examine the evidence supporting it, may wish to take a look at a book I have recently published, marking the anniversaries of Knox’s presenting and publishing his famous Sherlock Holmes essay:

[\*Ronald Knox and Sherlock Holmes: The Origin of Sherlockian Studies\*](#)

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