

# The Legendary SHERLOCK HOLMES



Sherlock Holmes in 54-mm scale by Marlborough Military Models.

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

Sherlock Holmes is no mystery to toy figure sleuth James H. Hillestad, who profiles the fictional detective's creator while rounding up a lineup of arresting collectibles that warrant further investigation

**S**herlock Holmes is an iconic figure, known throughout the world. There are societies which meet periodically to dissect, analyze and eulogize this most significant fictional character. In fact, sometimes they find themselves believing that he actually existed. Such is the magnetic attraction Holmes invokes.

## CONAN DOYLE'S DETECTIVE

The creator of Sherlock Holmes was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1859, he studied medicine as a young man. But Conan Doyle found the practice of medicine financially unremunerative. At age 27, he turned his attention to writing novels as a way to make money.



Moriarty and other villains figures by Little Lead Soldiers.

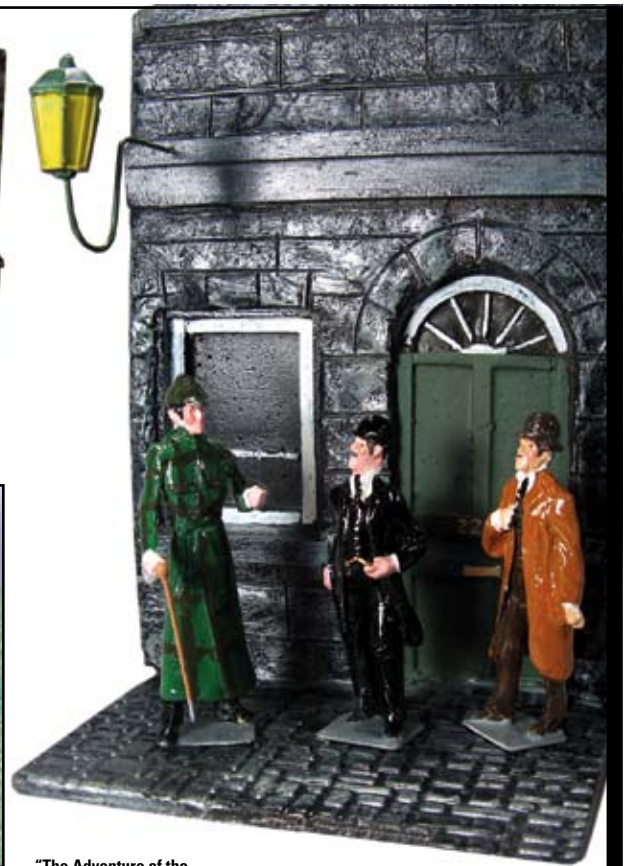


Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote four novels and 56 short stories featuring Sherlock Holmes.



Holmes and Watson with a Bobby outside the detective's London lodgings at 221B Baker St. by Little Lead Soldiers.

"The Musgrave Ritual," one of several sets by Little Lead Soldiers based on stories featuring fictional detective Sherlock Holmes.



"The Adventure of the Six Napoleons" by Little Lead Soldiers.



"The Hound of the Baskervilles," a 54-mm set by Sarum Soldiers.

Conan Doyle invented an amateur detective, basing many of the literary character's characteristics on Dr. Joseph Bell, for whom he had worked as a clerk at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Dr. Bell had an uncanny way of pinpointing details about a patient through careful observation. In fact, he could learn more this way than others might through exhaustive questioning. Dr. Bell even helped police solve a few crimes.

Conan Doyle mulled over what to name his key characters. "Sherrinford

Holmes" was an early idea, with "Ormond Sacker" for his sidekick, Dr. John H. Watson!

The Scotsman's first mystery novel, "A Study in Scarlet," introduced the hyper-observant, deductive Sherlock Holmes in 1887. With his good-natured, question-raising friend Watson, Holmes resided at the fictional address of 221B Baker St. in London.

In 1890, Conan Doyle published "The Sign of the Four." He found himself eagerly sought after by American publishers, who bought his stories as fast as he could produce them.

## HOLMES HOMICIDE

Conan Doyle found the Holmes stories to be extremely easy to write. He could turn one out in a week.

However, the novelist was troubled. Perhaps because the stories came so easily to him, he became concerned that they were worthless as literature.

In 1893, convinced that Holmes was ruining his literary reputation, Conan Doyle set in motion plans to murder his fictional detective. On holiday with his wife in Switzerland, the author had an inspiration.

Conan Doyle later wrote, "We saw the wonderful falls of Reichenbach, a terrible place, and one that I thought would make a worthy tomb for poor Sherlock."

And so it was that in the December 1893 edition ▶



Little Lead Soldiers set depicting London's Limehouse Docks, the setting for Holmes' visit to an opium den in "The Man With the Twisted Lip."

▶ "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" by Little Lead Soldiers.



Watson, Holmes and constable by Valiant Miniatures.

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The public outcry was testament to the enduring popularity of the writer’s fictional character. Conan Doyle gave a series of lectures in the United States and Canada in 1894. In those meetings, he refused to discuss the death of Holmes, who was being mourned by legions of fans.

### WAR & KNIGHTHOOD

At age 40, Conan Doyle volunteered to serve as medical doctor with the British Army in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the 20th century.

He published a pamphlet titled, “The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct,” which sought to justify Britain’s role in the conflict. The writer believed this pamphlet earned him a knighthood in 1902, and appointment as



“Holmes & Watson in London” by Charles Hall.

of The Strand Magazine he published “The Adventure of the Final Problem,” in which the British detective and his archenemy, Professor James Moriarty, plunge to their deaths at the falls.

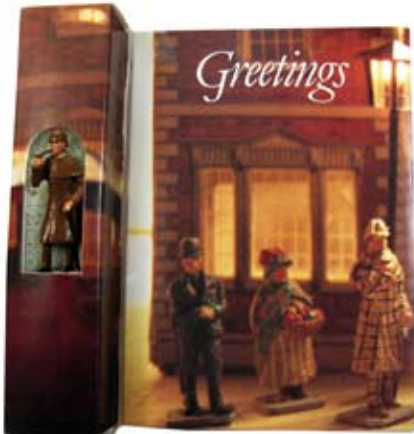
### AOPLECTIC PUBLIC

Public reaction to the demise of Holmes was spontaneous and angry.

About 20,000 subscriptions to The Strand Magazine were canceled. Protest rallies were held in New York City in the United States and on London’s Fleet Street in England. Conan Doyle received piles of angry letters in his mailbox.



“The Silver Blaze” by Charles Hall.



Little Lead Soldiers souvenir gift pack with a 30-mm Holmes figure.



“The Final Problem” by Little Lead Soldiers.



"Holmes & Watson in a Hansom Cab" by Trophy Miniatures.

deputy-lieutenant of Surrey.

Conan Doyle also penned a 500-page book, "The Great Boer War," in 1900.

Running as a Liberal Unionist during the early 20th century, Conan Doyle unsuccessfully sought election to Parliament twice -- once in Edinburgh and another time in Scotland's Hawick Burghs constituency.



The comic team Laurel and Hardy as Holmes and Watson by Unicorn Miniatures.

### DEDUCING RESURRECTION

Conan Doyle had an idea for a new Holmes adventure, "The Hound of the Baskervilles," in March 1901. To avoid explaining the problem of his detective's death, the writer set the story early in Holmes' career.

Again, Conan Doyle had a smashing success. Serialized publication of "The Hound of the Baskervilles" from August 1901 to April 1902 increased The Strand Magazine's circulation by 30,000. Then the crime novel was released in book form.

Collier's Weekly magazine in New York City offered \$4,000 for each new Holmes story that Conan Doyle penned. Suitably tempted, he wrote 12 more.

Conan Doyle explained that Holmes had managed to kill Professor Moriarty by throwing his adversary over the falls, then the detective faked his own death in order to covertly track down some of the "Napoleon of Crime's" villainous associates.



Holmes in a cloak with Watson by Charles Hall.

### INDUBITABLE SUCCESS

Conan Doyle wrote a total of four novels and 56 short stories about Holmes. The last of the stories was published in 1927, three years before the author's death.



Baker Street set by Sarum Soldiers.



"The Hound of the Baskervilles" by Little Lead Soldiers.



Holmes and friends group by Little Lead Soldiers.

## SPIRITUALISM MYSTERY

A lesser-known nugget of information is that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a member of the Spiritualism movement. Followers of the religion believe in God, but they also believe that mediums can contact spirits of the dead to obtain information about the afterlife.

The magician Harry Houdini devoted large portions of his stage show to exposing the Spiritualism movement's hoaxes and fraudulent séances.

Houdini died in 1926. No autopsy was conducted, though it was suggested that he was poisoned.

In Houdini's biography, mention is made of a November 1924 letter from Conan Doyle.

He wrote that Houdini would "get his just desserts very exactly meted out ... I think there is a general payday coming soon."

--James H. Hillestad



221B Baker St. by Phoenix Models.

The immortalized Holmes lived on in parody and burlesque.

One illustration pictured the detective with his hand clapped to his brow, a look of the utmost concentration on his features, standing on a pebbled beach, considering the stones that lay around him -- millions and millions of them, as far as the eye could see. The artist's caption was, "Portrait of a celebrated detective regretting his rash decision to leave no stone unturned."



Watson and Holmes on Baker Street by Trophy Miniatures.



"Hey, Cabbie!" by John Gittins of JG Miniatures.

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Another wag offered this bit of whimsical dialogue:

"Ah, my dear Watson! I see that you have put on your winter underwear.

"Marvelous Holmes! But how did you deduce it?"

"Elementary, my dear fellow. You have forgotten to put on your trousers!"

Since Conan Doyle died at age 71 in 1930, his legendary Sherlock Holmes character has appeared in many stories and novels by other authors. Holmes has also been the central character in many radio shows, television programs and movies.

The classic image of the famous sleuth is of a tall and thin man with a hawk-like nose wearing a deerstalker cap and a cloak. Holmes is often depicted smoking a distinctive calabash pipe or using a magnifying glass to closely examine possible clues. He enjoys playing the violin for relaxation.

## CASTING HOLMES

More than 80 years since Conan Doyle's last story was published, Sherlock Holmes is as much admired today as ever.

It is not surprising therefore that Holmes and Watson have attracted the attention of toy soldier makers. Producers of Holmes-themed items through the years have included JG Miniatures, Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd., Sarum Soldiers, the

U.S.-based Valiant Miniatures, Marlborough Military Models, Phoenix Models, Unicorn Miniatures, the late Charles Hall of Scotland, and Little Lead Soldiers of Cambridge, England.

The mostly 54-mm figures are as wide-ranging as the adventures of Holmes and Watson. There are single figures, mini-dioramas and sets complete with a Baker Street backdrop, a hansom cab or a railway carriage.

It's certainly no mystery why an icon like Sherlock Holmes is so collectible in toy figure form. ■



The kilted "Holmes & Watson in Edinburgh" by Charles Hall.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.