About Sherlock Holmes
By Katherine Schulten

The Era of Sherlock Holmes
Although Arthur Conan Doyle wrote about Holmes over a 40-year period that spanned three distinct eras in British life (Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian), in the Holmes stories it is always the late Victorian era. Holmes himself so completely embodies the values of this era, in fact, that he is regarded by many as “the perfect hero for his age.”

A man who believed in reason above all, Holmes was ideal for his time—a time in which science challenged long-held beliefs and the status quo was threatened by social and economic changes. Charles Darwin’s 1859 *The Origin of Species* changed the Western world by calling into question the Biblical belief in creationism, in its place suggesting that the mysteries of the physical world could be explained by science. It was also an era of dizzying technological advance; in the 20 years between 1867 and 1887 alone, the typewriter, the telephone, the gramophone, the telegraph, the electric light bulb, the internal combustion engine, and the transatlantic cable were all invented. As critic Rosemary Jann writes, “Through the character of Holmes, Doyle brilliantly popularized the century’s confidence in the uniform operation of scientific laws that allowed the trained observer to deduce causes from effects.” Just as paleontologists could identify an organism from fossil fragments, so could Holmes reconstruct a crime by tracing physical clues and piecing together their meaning. Indeed, when Holmes and Watson first meet in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Holmes is busy in a laboratory where he has just discovered “an infallible test for blood stains.” It is no coincidence that Scotland Yard first adopted the new science of fingerprinting the same year that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was published in *The Strand*. Scientific rationalism was the order of the day, and Sherlock Holmes acted as its standard-bearer.

But Holmes’s role as the consummate Victorian gentleman was equally important in making him a hero. Among the enormous changes wrought by the industrial revolution was an expanding middle class with a growing concern about its place in society. That cliché of the detective novel, “the butler did it,” arose from a real upper- and middle-class fear that those under them would rise up in revolt. Holmes offered readers reassurance about traditional English values, especially useful at a time when England was beginning to feel uncertainty about its place in the world. With each crime he solves, the social order is restored, and proper class values are reaffirmed. The quintessential illustration of this may be the moment in the novel when he reveals himself to Watson after he has lived for days in a primitive hut on the moors—yet “his chin [was] as smooth and his linen as perfect as if he were in Baker Street.” In the film, this same sentiment is expressed when Watson pulls Holmes out of the Grimpen Mire using his well-tailored suit jacket. “Three cheers for Saville Row,” Holmes says wryly afterward. There are no problems, he seems to
indicate, that can’t be solved by the combination of keen reasoning, bravery, and civilized behavior. As he does for Sir Henry Baskerville when he rids him of the family curse and returns him rightfully to his manor, Holmes reassures his audience that all is right with their world.

Although Sherlock Holmes gradually evolves from a cold “reasoning machine” to someone more human, he always remains intellectually far superior to the ordinary man. Eccentric but elegant, brilliant but frequently bored, Holmes injects himself with drugs—then legal—because, as he says in *The Sign of Four*, “I abhor the dull routine of existence.” Holmes’s reliance on a “seven percent solution” of cocaine, or, occasionally morphine, for the stimulation and escape it brought was typical of the fin-de-siècle French and English writers known as the Decadents. Hoping to shock the staid middle classes, these writers made fashionable the image of the brooding “sensitive artist” who, as Holmes himself puts it, loves “all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life.” Indeed, the case of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* particularly invigorates him when it is going poorly since, as he says, “There is nothing more stimulating than a case where everything goes against you.” In the stories, as in this film, Watson—the solid, middle-class British citizen—disapproves of Holmes’s drug use. As Holmes became a more developed character with each story, Conan Doyle gradually dropped Holmes’s use of drugs.

**Sherlock Holmes as Icon**

A struggling young doctor who invented Holmes to wile away unfilled office hours, Arthur Conan Doyle published the first Holmes story in 1887. His innovation in creating a character that would appear over and over in a series of self-contained stories meant that Holmes’s popularity grew with each installment. Soon the character was so beloved that people refused to believe he wasn’t a real person; letters addressed to “Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective” arrived daily at Baker Street and Scotland Yard, each begging him to take on a real case.

Conan Doyle, meanwhile, was growing weary of Holmes and his popularity, and often threatened to kill the character off so that he could write “serious” fiction instead. In 1893, Conan Doyle published “The Final Problem,” in which Holmes’s nemesis, Professor Moriarty, sends him to his death over the Reichenbach Falls. In the days that followed, there was such an outcry that newspapers actually ran headlines about Holmes’s death, and his fans wore mourning garb in the streets. Conan Doyle was forced to resurrect Holmes. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was the first new Holmes story to appear after this, although Conan Doyle set the novel retrospectively so that he could avoid the problem of bringing Holmes back to life.

Based in part on the work of Dr. Joseph Bell, a teacher of Conan Doyle’s at the University of Edinburgh who could draw medical conclusions about his patients simply from observing the mud on their shoes, Holmes’s “method” is perhaps the best-known thing about him. In
The Red-Headed League he famously sums up what he has gleaned from merely looking at a visitor: “Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing.”