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On the alpine trail of Conan Doyle

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was born 150 years ago. The Reichenbach Falls provided the setting for the disappearance of his hero. We look at the author's connections with the Swiss Alps ahead of the release of a new film about the detective at the end of the year. By Alain Wey



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Conan Doyle and Switzerland? A seemingly obvious association at first glance in light of the disappearance of Doyle's hero, Sherlock Holmes, at the Reichenbach Falls in the Bernese Oberland. But the mark left by the Scottish writer in Switzerland extends far beyond the grandiose setting of the final confrontation between the detective and Professor Moriarty. A memorial in Davos, for example, thanks Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for having brought the world's attention to the appeal of skiing in the Swiss Alps. Anyone delving into the Swiss chapter of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's life can expect quite a few surprises. While Guy Ritchie's "Sherlock Holmes" movie* is due for release at Christmas, Sherlock Holmes fans celebrated the 150th anniversary of the birth of the writer this year by making pilgrimages to the Canton of Berne.

How did Switzerland become part of Holmesian legend? Let's firstly look at the facts as Sherlock Holmes himself would have done. In the second half of the 19th century in Victorian England, Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) published his first short stories in 1879 and obtained his degree in medicine in 1881. He practised medicine near Portsmouth, but as he only had a few patients, he published other writings albeit without much success. In 1885, he married his wife Louise who bore him two children and strongly encouraged him to persevere with his writing. The first Sherlock Holmes adventure,

"A Study in Scarlet" appeared in 1887 and "The Sign of the Four" in 1890. Conan Doyle enjoyed remarkable success following the publication of the first short stories about the detective in the London Strand Magazine in 1891. He gave up medicine to dedicate himself entirely to his writing. His hero occupied his thoughts and prevented him from working on books that he considered more worthy, historical novels. He wrote to his mother: "I imagine I'll kill Holmes off in the sixth adventure. He is preventing me from concentrating on better things." But Conan Doyle did not count on how fond Mrs Doyle had become of the detective, and Holmes won a reprieve. Then the Swiss chapter opened. In December 1892, Conan Doyle moved to Davos Platz to treat his wife's tuberculosis. At the time, this village in Grisons was famous for its sanatorium. Writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson (1880, "Treasure Island") and Thomas Mann (1912) also visited the village to undergo cures. The Doyles lived there until 1895 in the Chalet am Stein.

The Reichenbach Falls

The writer travelled around Switzerland and discovered the Bernese Oberland and the Reichenbach Falls on his long hikes.

He stayed at the Park Hotel du Sauvage in Meiringen where a statue of Sherlock Holmes now sits imposingly in the garden. It is believed that Conan Doyle left Grindelwald, passing through Grosse Scheidegg, before finally descending into Meiringen. He would therefore have had a view from the top of the famous falls where the upper fall is almost 120 metres in height. He then decided to make it the setting for the presumed death of his hero in "The Final Problem" published in October 1893. The plot sees Sherlock Holmes uncover Professor Moriarty and his criminal organisation. But "the Napoleon of



How Conan Doyle intended his hero to die at the Reichenbach Falls.

crime” threatens Holmes’ life, and he takes refuge on the continent accompanied by his faithful companion Watson. “For a charming week we wandered up the Valley of the Rhone, and then, branching off at Leuk, we made our way over the Gemmi Pass, still deep in snow, and so, by way of Interlaken, to Meiringen”^{***}, wrote Conan Doyle with the pen of Watson. The two companions set out for Rosenlaui uphill from Meiringen, but did not get any further than the Reichenbach Falls. They fascinated Watson as they continue to fascinate visitors today. “It is, indeed, a fearful place. The torrent, swollen by the melting snow, plunges into a tremendous abyss, from which the spray rolls up like the smoke from a burning house.”^{***} A ruse by Moriarty separates Holmes from Watson, and the final struggle begins at the top of the falls. Later, Watson can only assume that both men have fallen into the abyss and that his friend is dead. Holmes’ disappearance caused a major scandal in London. Readers protested and urged the author to bring the detective back to life. But the writer did not revive his hero until 1903 in the short story “The Empty House” thanks to the princely fee offered to him by the Strand Magazine.

Love from Davos

Arthur Conan Doyle indulged his passion for sport in Davos. He wrote: “To give and to take, to accept success modestly and defeat bravely, to fight against odds, to stick to one’s point, to give credit to your enemy and value your friend – these are some of the lessons which true sport should impart.” Conan Doyle played cricket, bowls and golf as well as enjoying swimming and boxing. The writer is credited with introducing golf to Davos. He was astonished though to see cows eating the red flags on his course. However, it was a Norwegian sport, not an English one, which Conan Doyle would make popular – skiing. Having discovered skiing a few years earlier in Norway, he recognised that Switzerland’s topography and climate were perfect for skiing. In 1893, Davos was just a small mountain village where skiing actually had a bad reputation. Conan Doyle began to learn the sport on skis sent from Norway. In view of balance problems and countless falls, he said that skiing was a good remedy for anyone suffering from too much dignity. He came to know two local skiers, the Branger brothers, who would assist him. When Conan Doyle was ready, the three men skied

CASE CLOSED IN LUCENS AND MEIRINGEN

In the 1960s, Adrian Conan Doyle (1910-1970), the son of Arthur, moved to the Château de Lucens in the Canton of Vaud. He founded a museum dedicated to his father’s works in a cellar. The room of Sherlock Holmes was recreated with furniture and items which belonged to his father

in a similar way to the exhibition at the “Festival of Britain” in London in 1951. This museum was relocated and reopened in 2001 in the Maison Rouge in Lucens and now focuses more on the writer than on the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes. The Sherlock Holmes Museum

in Meiringen is located in a former chapel next to the railway station and also features a reconstruction of Holmes’ room on a more modest scale.

www.lucens.ch

www.reichenbachfall.ch

from Davos to Arosa in seven hours. Their exploits contained in “An Alpine Pass on Ski” were published under Conan Doyle’s name in the Strand Magazine in 1894 with comprehensive instructions on how to ski. The writer even predicted in a contemporary journal that “the time will come when hundreds of Englishmen will come to Switzerland for a skiing season”.

After the publication of this Victorian adventure in Switzerland, it was remarkable

how alpine tourism developed in our country with Arthur Conan Doyle promoting skiing. In the 56 short stories and four novels about Sherlock Holmes, there is another episode set in Switzerland in “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax”. Holmes sends Dr. Watson to Lausanne, and then to Baden to investigate a woman’s disappearance. “The Final Problem” proves a real crutch for any gallant individual struggling with vertigo in the humid air of the

Reichenbach Falls who has to climb the sharply ascending paths leading to the summit. When he has to cross a bridge at the top of the falls, Conan Doyle’s short story again provides the inspiration to take him safely to the other side. Having discovered the grandiose setting, many people must surely have been tempted to believe that Sherlock Holmes really did exist.



The Reichenbach Falls today near Meiringen.

* Sherlock Holmes by Guy Ritchie with Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law, 2009.

** “The Final Problem”, Strand Magazine, London, 1893.