

Watson's Wives

Willis Frick

The lot of a Canonical chronicler¹ is not a happy one. As if intentional obfuscation,² horrible handwriting, and glaring internal inconsistencies³ were not enough, there is the perplexing problem of Watson's wives.

- How many times was he married?
- Where did these women come from?
- Where did they go?

Twice before^{4,5} I have had some success in examining the more difficult Canonical conundrums by applying the most basic Sherlockian principal, "*When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*"^{6,7} to a problem. But, I add to this principal, "*Before you consider the improbable, examine the probable.*" This article applies this method to the question of Dr Watson's wives.

Establishing a canonical chronicle is made difficult not by the lack of data, but by its wealth. Direct information about the timing of the adventures is supplied in nearly every case: times, dates, places, and events. Secondary inferences, such as which days of the week a newspaper was published, when there was a change in Prime Minister, and what could or could not have been done on a Sunday abound. Information about Dr Watson and his marital state is a significant contributor to establishing the timeline. Several kinds of information are provided about the marital state of Watson.

Direct statements about his marriage(s): (See Table 1 for the details and relevant quotes.)

- Eleven cases contain direct statements that Dr Watson was married.
 - STOC, BLAN, TWIS, ENGR, BOSC, DYIN, SCAN, FINA, FIVE, NAVA, SECO
- Four cases contain direct statements that Dr Watson was not married.
 - SCAR, SPEC, BACH, SIGN
- One case does not mention his marital status, but does suggest a recent death in Dr Watson's immediate family, EMPT, "*In some manner he had learned of my own sad bereavement, and his sympathy was shown in his manner rather than in his words.*"

Indirect Statements about his marriage(s). (See Table 2 for the details and relevant quotes.)

Canonical chroniclers have made deductions on Watson's marital status from whether or not he was residing at Baker Street.⁸ While different chronologists and different Sherlockians may reach different conclusions on one or more of these cases, my analysis is:

- In nine cases, I conclude that Dr Watson was not residing with Holmes:
LAST, MAZA, REDH, ILLU, BLUE, CREE, LION, VEIL, IDEN
- In 34 cases, I conclude that Dr Watson was residing with Holmes or they were on road

together.

DEVI, 3STU, SHOS, MUSG, GLOR, RESI, REGI, BERY, COPP, SILV, GREE, HOUN, NORW, DANC, PRIO, BLAC, CHAS, GOLD, MISS, ABBE, VALL, WIST, CARD, BRUC, SUSS, 3GAR, THOR, RETI, SIXN, 3GAB, REDC, LADY, SOLI, YELL.

In the other 17 cases I could not form an opinion.

Chronologists have taken most of the examples of them residing together as indicating that Dr Watson was unmarried at that time and that the most examples of them not residing together as indicating that Dr Watson was married at that time. While it is attractive to mine this source of information for chronological clues, it has the unfortunate effect of increasing the number of *possible* wives to a ridiculous level.

Including the cases with a specific statement of marital status, this method, depending on which chronology you choose, could suggest that Dr Watson could have been married and unmarried 13 or 14 times! Something is wrong here! With strictly the information from the Canon to go on, we seem to have reached the point of *reducto ad absurdum!* This is a problem beyond Occam's razor - it calls for Occam's chainsaw! We must therefore look elsewhere to unravel this conundrum. In mathematical terms, chroniclers have treated Dr Watson's marital status and residence status as dependent variables, *i.e.* knowing one we know something about the other. What if they were independent variables and knowing one does not necessarily tell us anything about the other?

I started my search for a solution by investigating the institutions of marriage and divorce⁹ in late 19th and early 20th century England.

Before 1857, marriage was essentially an indissoluble, lifelong union. The church could grant a divorce *mensa et thoro*,¹⁰ but this was what we would today consider a separation. Husband and wife could live apart but could not marry again. The only way of obtaining a divorce by law was by an Act of Parliament, an option open only to the very, very well connected and equally wealthy. From the first such divorce in 1700, only 317¹¹ such divorces were granted in the next 157 years; that's about 2 per year for the entire country!

The Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 enabled the Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes to grant a divorce where one party could prove that the other party had committed adultery. This was difficult, even for a husband, but a wife had to prove aggravated adultery - that is, adultery plus incest, cruelty, bigamy, sodomy or desertion. This extra requirement was abolished in 1923, but adultery remained the only grounds for divorce. The next change in the law did not occur until 1937, so for the Sherlockian era the 1857 Act was the law. After the act of 1857, divorces were more common than before 1857, but still infrequent. The divorce rate per 1000 marriages per annum from 1857 until 1918 was about 20 per 1000 or about .2%.¹² In comparison the rate in 1994 was 50.2%!¹³

This certainly did not mean that everyone was happily married and lived in wedded bliss. I do not think that the marital relationships between men and women have changed that much - people are still people, men are still men, and women are still women. Most of the urban lower classes (to use the Victorian term) simply didn't marry and, whether or not they did, if the arrangement didn't work

out they simply left each other and perhaps found another partner. In the country side, where the influence of the Church was stronger, more couples became formally committed.

However, in the middle class, what we would now call the “professions” including law, medicine, the military, the church, and so forth, a divorce significantly impaired the parties standing.^{14,15} For example, LtCdr Rupert T. Gould, RN¹⁶, who was widely recognized as a nautical historian and who restored some of John Harrison's original chronometers at Greenwich, was forced to leave his post after he divorced. Should the union between Mary Morstan and Dr John Watson result in a divorce, Dr Watson would be faced with the same situation. It simply wasn't done. A divorce would compromise his social and professional standing as a doctor and an author.

Given the observations from the canon, the laws governing divorce at that time, relations between husband and wife (whatever the era), and the social implications of divorce, I would like to propose an entirely different model for the married life of John H. Watson. I propose a simple, straightforward and, for the times, a normal, if sometime painful, relationship.

- Shortly after the Sign of Four he married Miss Mary Morstan.
- For some time they lived together¹⁷ although there is no reference to any children.
- Watson's periods of living with his wife are sometimes recorded in the canon. During these periods, Watson often left to be with Sherlock Holmes on a case.
- At other times, without any excuse, he simply is or is not at Baker Street. If you look at the cases where he was at Baker Street, even allowing for the different timelines of various chronologists, they span Sherlock Holmes career. Dr Watson resided at Baker Street, or not, as needed, for arbitrary periods, on an irregular basis.

I conclude that, at some point, fairly early on, their marriage failed. Since, for all the practical reasons noted above, they could not divorce, they simply lived apart with periods of reconciliation. How long did his one and only marriage last? I think that it lasted until death did them part. So, for the period covered by the Canon, at good times in his relationship with his wife they lived together, but in bad times (short or long) they lived apart and Dr Watson lived at Baker Street.

Why did the marriage fail? Perhaps the tone of Sherlock's telegram in CREE, “*Come at once if convenient - if inconvenient come all the same!*” points to a stress point in Dr Watson's marriage. If you look at the reasons given in the canon for short absences from his wife to go on a case, they do not strike me as credible. In FINA, the excuse was that his wife was away upon a visit, how convenient. In FIVE, his wife was at her mother's. In NAVA, as soon as the July after his marriage, his wife readily agreed that he should join Sherlock Holmes at once. I'm sorry, but these sound like excuses for periods when they were living apart.

With only 60 of the “...*hundreds of cases...*”¹⁸ to examine, there certainly are many other examples where Dr Watson was called away from his wife to be with Holmes. What kind of a marriage was that? The repeated separations do not suggest a happy and contented marriage, whether this was caused by the relationship of Dr Watson to Holmes or not. Sad, but a better explanation than 4, 6, 7, or 13 wives!

Watson's Wives

Willis Frick

FINA gives us an important clue as to what caused at least some of the problems with Dr Watson's marriage. Holmes said, "*In some manner he had learned of my own sad bereavement, and his sympathy was shown in his manner rather than in his words.*" We know that Dr Watson had neither kith nor kin in England¹⁹ so this comment is unlikely to be about a relative. It has to be his wife or a child or both. Sherlock Holmes was away for two years. Perhaps, free of the interference of Holmes, this reconciliation was more successful than the others and a child was born. In the Victorian era, even with a physician and a midwife present, giving birth was a hazardous and often fatal event for either the child or the mother. Overall infant mortality was still high and as many as 15% of children died in the first year alone.²⁰ Yet, there are some of the cases with specific references to Watson being married which are generally placed by chronologists after Sherlock Holmes' return. Thus, if it was not his wife, it must be the death a child in the first two years of its life.

Sherlock Holmes next comment shows me his social and emotional cluelessness and provides a sad justification for his interference, "*Work is the best antidote to sorrow, my dear Watson ...*" Yes, the solution is more work with Holmes (like that which ruined your marriage)! This quote is like Holmes' equally thoughtless comments about Dr Watson's brothers' watch²¹ that brought such grief to the good doctor.

Freed from the restraints on a chronology tangled by many imaginary marriages and divorces and of the why's of Dr Watson's moving into and out of Baker Street, I hope more learned scholars than I will tackle a new chronology. A new chronology would be based on Watson's marital state and presence at Baker Street being independent variables. Such a chronology would be more straightforward, logical and less convoluted than those in the past!

Notes:

¹ Bell, Christ, Brend, Zeisler, Baring-Gould (twice), and Folsom (three times)

² *"It was, then, in a year, and even in a decade, that shall be nameless..."* SECO

³ In REDH, the advertisement for the league is dated April 27, 1890 and when the league is dissolved Wilson says that he has been at work for 8 weeks, thus it is the end of June. However, the date on the door telling of the league being dissolved is October 9, 1890.

⁴ *A Man's Head Against The Darkening Sky*, by Willis G. Frick, *The Sherlock Holmes Journal*, <http://www.sherlocktron.com/shadow.htm>

⁵ *On The Question of Sherlock's Oldest Brother*, by Willis G. Frick, *The Baker Street Journal*, <http://www.sherlocktron.com/brother.htm>

⁶ BLAN

⁷ BERY

⁸ In a few cases (NAVA, SECO, GLOR) these deductions relate to when Holmes and Watson are discussing a case that occurred previously.

⁹ The literary agent was an advocate of divorce law reform in the United Kingdom He was the President of the Divorce Law Reform Union from 1909 to 1919.

¹⁰ Latin, *mensa et thoro*, "from table and bed."

¹¹ *A History of Divorce Law, Law Department at St. Brendan's Sixth Form College*, www.lawteacher.net/family-law-resources/History-Divorce-Law.php.

¹² *The Health of Adult Britain, 1841-1994: Reviews Broad Trends in Mortality, Life Expectancy, Use of Health Services and Changes in Factors, Health, V. 1* (Decennial Supplement; No. 12) Office for National Statistics, John Charlton, M.J. Murphy.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Family Matters, An In-Depth Review Of Family Law In Britain, A Policy Report by the Family Law Review*, David Dodson, July 2009

¹⁵ *The Operation of the 1857 Divorce Act, 1860-1910 a Research Note*, Gail L. Savage, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer, 1983)

¹⁶ *John Harrison (1693-1776) and LtCdr Rupert T. Gould R.N. (1890-1948)*, Jonathan Betts, Senior Specialist, Horology, National Maritime Museum / Royal Observatory, Greenwich

¹⁷ SCAN, *"My marriage had drifted us away from each other. My own complete happiness, and the home-centered interests which rise up around the man who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient to absorb all my attention ..."*

¹⁸ SOLI

¹⁹ STUD

²⁰ *Infant Mortality In Victorian Britain: An Economic And Social Analysis*, Robert Millward and Frances Bell, University of Manchester, (December 1999), Working Paper n. 41 Department of

Watson's Wives

Willis Frick

History, University of Manchester, Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, 0161-2753086

²¹ SIGN, *"He was a man of untidy habits,--very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances, lived for some time in poverty with occasional short intervals of prosperity, and finally, taking to drink, he died."*