

THE DEATH OF BARON DOWSON

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“The Mazarin Stone”, that deeply and justly neglected story near the end of the Sherlock Holmes Canon, provides a single sentence that tells everything we know of one of Holmes’s unpublished cases: “Old Baron Dowson said the night before he was hanged that in my case what the law had gained the stage had lost.” The sentence, like many in “The Mazarin Stone”, originates in Arthur Conan Doyle’s play “The Crown Diamond”, which also provides the information that Dowson had been hanged “at Newgate”.

It doesn’t seem much to go on, and annotated editions of the Canon do not seem to take note of this sentence at all. If it has had any interest for Sherlockians, it is as one of the indications that Sherlock Holmes not only could have been, but actually was, an actor — an idea that goes back at least to William S. Baring-Gould’s *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* fifty years ago, with its narrative of Holmes’s theatrical career in England and America in 1879-80. Probably, however, old Baron Dowson was not recalling the experience of seeing Holmes (“William Escott”) treading the boards, but rather reacting to the discovery, similarly made with dismay by Count Negretto Sylvius in “The Mazarin Stone”, that he had been entertaining detectives unawares.

The price Baron Dowson paid, his life on the gallows, was rather higher than any that was likely to be exacted from Count Sylvius. The latter was presumably a foreigner (there are no “counts” in the English system of nobility) and in any case one did not swing for theft, even of a Crown jewel. The golden age of the death penalty in Britain had come in the late eighteenth century and largely ended before the career of Sherlock Holmes began, with hanging abolished for such crimes as theft (1832), forgery of wills (1837), and rape (1841). During Holmes’s epoch

there were just five crimes that called for capital punishment: murder, treason, espionage, arson in Her Majesty's dockyards, and piracy.

It does not seem possible to know which of the five Dowson had committed, though the probability lies with the most common of the crimes, murder. One wonders whom he killed: perhaps the Baroness? Treason is no doubt also a possibility, and the Treason Act of 1351 (still in effect though many times amended) offers many ways of committing that dreadful offence, from violating the sovereign's eldest daughter to "adhering to the sovereign's enemies, giving them aid and comfort" (a phrase that was little changed when it was incorporated into Article III of the Constitution of the United States). The authors of pastiches love to see Sherlock Holmes battling treason and espionage — and, most of all, attempts to kill the sovereign, another of the specific acts that constitute treason. Baron Dowson's case might well stand beside such recorded adventures as "The Bruce-Partington Plans" and "His Last Bow", if we only knew its details.

It is also treason to use force or other constraint "to intimidate or overawe both Houses or either House of Parliament", a detail that gains importance when one remembers that Baron Dowson was necessarily a member of one of those Houses himself. Barons in fact make up the majority of the House of Lords, greatly outnumbering the dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts and bishops who are also members. (We are speaking here of the House as it was in Holmes's day; in our own, barons still dominate the House of Lords, but most of them are now "life peers" appointed for their achievements and expertise, and not the sort to be accused of arson in Her Majesty's dockyards.)

To put it another way, barons constitute the most numerous, and lowest, rank of the nobility, or peerage. There was a time when they were the real power in the land, as demonstrated by the events of 1215 when a barons' rebellion compelled King John to sign Magna Carta, the greatest of the "old English charters" about which Sherlock Holmes was, according to "The Three Students", a researcher. Despite mythology that has arisen over the centuries, Magna Carta said rather little about the rights of a free people, and rather a lot about the revenues of the barons. By the 1890s they were no longer a principal economic power, though many were individually wealthy, and there were more than 300 of them in the House of Lords.

Baron Dowson must have been among this group, assuming of course that he was an English baron and not one from France, the Netherlands, or any of the other countries where barons were also a part of the nobility. His very English surname suggests that this is so — in contrast with, say, Baron Gruner of “The Illustrious Client”, presumably a member of the very complicated nobility of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Germany too had barons, including Von Herling, the diplomat and spy who is Von Bork’s sidekick in “His Last Bow”. Another foreign figure mentioned in the Canon (“The Reigate Squires”) is Baron Maupertuis, whose surname marks him as French although he and his colossal schemes are said to be associated with “the whole question of the Netherland-Sumatra Company”.

Indeed, in the whole Canon the only mention of an English baron, apart from Dowson, involves the Duke of Holderness (“The Priory School”), whose subordinate titles include “Baron Beverley”. The reader may be grateful that the whole vast and messy topic of subordinate titles, including those that can by courtesy be used by noblemen’s sons such as Lord Saltire, is outside the scope of the present study. It may also be safe to skip over one other rather small class of big men who were styled “baron”: the judges of the ancient Court of Exchequer, which was abolished in 1880.

What does have to be taken into account is that barons are only very occasionally referred to as “Baron”. The usual form of reference is “Lord”, and although the same word might be used for more highly ranked noblemen, or for sons and grandsons enjoying their courtesy titles, Lord So-and-so is very often a baron. It suddenly becomes evident that the Canon is studded with barons, from Mount-James in “The Missing Three-Quarter” to Bellinger in “The Second Stain” and Cantlemere in the very story that also features Baron Dowson. The historical Lord Roberts, mentioned in “The Blanched Soldier”, was a baron from 1892 to 1901, when he was raised to the rank of an earl.

It is important to note that a baron is not a baronet. Baronets are not nobility and not members of the House of Lords, but essentially knights (hence their title of Sir) whose rank is hereditary (which ordinary knighthoods, such as that of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, are not). Sir Eustace Brackenstall, the drunken and abusive murder victim in “The Abbey Grange”, was a baronet; so was Sir Robert Norberton, the

gambler and faker in “Shoscombe Old Place”. Indeed, when one throws in the sins of Sir Hugo Baskerville, whose title was inherited over the years by a long line leading down to Sir Charles and Sir Henry, baronets can be seen to hold a reputation in the Canon every bit as bad as that of colonels. But this stain is not peculiar to the Sherlock Holmes narratives by any means. “All baronets are bad,” says one of the professional bridesmaids in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta “Ruddigore”, in which the plot turns on the hereditary curse suffered by the Bad Baronets of Ruddigore. (Of course she had not met Sir Henry Baskerville.) One wonders whether this operetta, first performed in London in 1887, was among the unrecognized sources of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Baron Dowson was not a baronet, but he apparently was bad, having done something that got him hanged. Traditionally, enjoying one of the privileges of the nobility, he would have met his end with a silken cord rather than the usual hempen rope, although historians are unsure that anything of the sort was actually used when the 4th Earl Ferrers was hanged for murder in 1760, the only precedent available. A more important privilege, however, was trial not by the customary jury, but by the House of Lords itself — a judgement by his peers in both senses. Such trials actually happened from time to time through the decades, before the procedure was abolished as part of legal reforms in 1948. The last instance was the trial of the 26th Baron de Clifford in 1935 on a charge of vehicular manslaughter (he was found not guilty), and the only one during Sherlock Holmes’s era was the 1901 trial of the 2nd Earl Russell, who was found guilty of bigamy and sentenced to three months’ imprisonment.

The spectacle of a criminal trial in the House of Lords is better known from fiction than from either of these historical instances — in particular, from the 1926 novel *Clouds of Witness* by Dorothy L. Sayers. The author would go on to be one of the pioneer Sherlockians, writing a series of essays (initially in 1934) on which much subsequent canonical scholarship would be based; her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, borrows many characteristics from Sherlock Holmes, and has been suggested as the Great Detective’s son, at least by those who have not already assigned that role to Nero Wolfe.

Wimsey is a “Lord” by right of being the younger son of a duke — one of those subordinate titles already alluded to — and at the time of his detective adventures his older brother, Gerald, has become head of the family as the 16th Duke of Denver (Denver being, in sober reality, a village in Norfolk). In *Clouds of Witness*, he is charged with murder, in one of those it-may-have-been-a-shooting-accident affairs that have become a staple of detective fiction. The last several chapters of the novel describe his trial before the House of Lords, and Sayers spares no effort with the colour and texture: “The lords in their scarlet and ermine, the peeresses in their rich furs, counsel in their full-bottomed wigs and billowing gowns, the Lord High Steward upon his high seat, the ushers and the heralds and the gaudy kings-of-arms, rested rigid in their places. Only the prisoner looked across at his counsel and back to the Lord High Steward in a kind of bewilderment.”

So must it have been with Baron Dowson, with the trifling difference that the Duke of Denver went free, whereas the Baron was hanged — at, possibly, Newgate Prison (a detail that would help to set the date of “The Mazarin Stone”, since the prison was closed in 1902). Why the execution might have taken place at Newgate, rather than at the Tower of London where so many nobles have lost their lives over several centuries, is not altogether clear.

The remaining question is why the Baron was a Dowson, which is an English name but not a common one. Where did Arthur Conan Doyle, or John H. Watson, get his alias? Donald A. Redmond in *Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Sources* associates him with any number of cricket players — ACD was a great fan of cricketers — or with Mary Emily Dowson, whom DAR identifies only as a religious writer but who was also the first female graduate (1886) of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. There was also lawyer and judge Richard Dowse (died 1890), who for a time became Baron Dowse when he sat on the Court of Exchequer. “As a ‘Young Irishman and a contributor to National journals in his youthful days,’ he would surely, in Conan Doyle’s opinion, have been a candidate for hanging,” DAR writes.

He acknowledges only glancingly the most prominent Dowson of the later Victorian era, poet Ernest Christopher Dowson, who is best remembered today for creating the phrase “the days of wine and roses” and for a poem of conflicting emotions with the refrain “I have been

faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.” He lived a short and sordid life (1867-1900), supporting himself for a time by translating pornography; he moved in witty but decadent literary circles; his 1896 volume of *Verses* was an artistic success, and must have been known to Arthur Conan Doyle, who was a long-time member of the Authors’ Club and kept his eye on developments in literature, whether he approved of the decadence or not.

It was Dowson the poet, not Dowson the baron, who wrote (under the arch title “Impenitentia Ultima”) that “I will praise Thee, Lord, in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder, For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour.” One imagines Baron Dowson rather as scheming and bitter, whether his offence was treason or murder or, improbably, piracy. We can only wish that we knew the whole story.

TRIOLET: ET TU, BARON

Heralds and sleuths must keep in mind:
 a baron is not a baronet.
 One’s the hereditary kind
 heralds and sleuths must keep in mind
 when examining documents to be signed;
 the other’s the sort, drunk or in debt,
 heralds and sleuths must keep in mind.
 A baron is not a baronet!