

[Back to index](#)

Sherlock Holmes and the Red Indians

Christopher Gair, The University of Birmingham

There are two moments during the career of Sherlock Holmes when Dr. Watson likens the great detective's appearance to that of a Red Indian. Strikingly, both occur within stories that, otherwise, have no American context. Thus, in "The Naval Treaty" (1893), a narrative that revolves around a standard intermingling of domestic and political Englishness, Watson observes that, Holmes "had, when he so willed it, the utter immobility of countenance of a red Indian". Likewise, in "The Crooked Man" (also 1893), we are told that, "when I glanced again his face had resumed that red-Indian composure which had made so many regard him as a machine rather than a man."^[1]

Watson makes his first observation while Holmes is involved in an "enthusiastic" defence of the Bertillon system, developed by the French criminal investigator Alphonse Bertillon, and becoming popular in the early 1890s. The system depended upon close scrutiny of a person's physical characteristics, and was most commonly used to identify criminals. As such, Watson's observation both adopts the subject of Holmes's discourse—in its attention to physical detail—and indicates its limitations—for an expert such as Holmes, it is possible to conceal all outward signs of inner intent behind an impenetrable and inscrutable mask. Of course, this binary underpins the narrative logic of the Holmes/Watson relationship, since the popular appeal of the tales lay in the combination of Holmes's uncanny ability to translate apparently insignificant surface details into mystery resolving signs of psychological depth, and in Watson's own inability to read beneath (or often, even to see) these signs for long enough to generate narrative suspense.

The second quote takes us in a slightly different direction despite, at first, also appearing to be an example of Watson's failure accurately to read the world. Although he suggests that Holmes's "red-Indian composure" leads others (rather than Watson himself) to regard the detective as a "machine rather than a man", the nature of Watson's mixed metaphor seems to illustrate the lack of logic in his attempts at deduction, and hints that we should not *necessarily* take his utterances of amazement at Holmes's powers as confirmation of anything extraordinary in the investigator's abilities. After all, seeing a "red-Indian countenance" and concluding that it conceals a machine is a rather far-fetched application of the Bertillon system. In addition, of course, the quote might lead us to question Watson's memory since, in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891), he had called Holmes "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen" (161).

Watson's representation of the inscrutable Indian plays on what we would probably recognise as a familiar stereotype but, although the American literary culture of the 1890s and early 1900s is packed with moments of identification between the white man and the Native American Indian—most notably, perhaps, in Hank Morgan's description of the knights in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) as "white Indians"—these do not seem to resemble his usage. During this time, representation of the Indian tended to take one of three forms, which I will outline here very briefly. First, was the kind of outright hostility expressed, in typically blunt fashion, by Theodore Roosevelt in 1886:

I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indians are the dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth. The most vicious cowboy has more moral principle than the average Indian.^[2]

While, particularly in the early stories, Holmes too seems to be unswayed by moral principle—indeed, this is one reason that he is prone to being perceived as machine-like—Roosevelt's comments about the sheer otherness of the Native American don't help us much here.

Representations two and three are slightly more positive and contain identification absent from Roosevelt's ideology, though, once more, their application to Conan Doyle is marginal. In the same year that Conan Doyle published his two stories, the World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. Among innumerable other attractions, the Exposition displayed a kind of global village, in which Native American and many other cultures were exhibited. The spatial layout of the Exposition situated the Department of Ethnology outside White City, on the Midway Plaisance, a strategy designed, as Robert W. Rydell has pointed out, to provide visitors with 'ethnological, scientific sanction for the American view of the nonwhite world as barbaric and childlike.' The self-professed educational function of the Exposition served to introduce 'millions of fairgoers to evolutionary ideas about race,'^[1] thus lending 'scientific' weight to the popular hegemonic view of white supremacy. Thus, the Midway comprised what the contemporary commentator Denton J. Snider called a 'sliding scale of humanity,' with the North American Indian at the far extreme from the White City itself. Snider suggests that the best way of looking at the ethnological displays was to behold [the races] in the ascending scale, in the progressive movement; thus we can march forward with them starting with the lowest specimens of humanity, and reaching continually upward to the higher stage.'^[4]

The overt racial mapping of White City points to earlier nineteenth century theories of race, designed to imagine an indigenous population that served as forebears of modern, white America, and constructed so as to exclude the African American from this national narrative. For example, in an 1824 letter to William Ludlow, Thomas Jefferson represents the North American continent as containing the 'progress of society from its rudest state to that it has now attained.' For Jefferson, in walking from west to east across the continent, a 'philosophic observer' would see:

The savages of the Rocky Mountains...[whom] he would observe in the earliest stages of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of ~~habitation, the necessities, the conveniences of the~~ advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns.^[5]

By 1893, as Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis (delivered at the Exposition) made clear, the frontier (at least, as ~~imagined on the American mainland~~) to articulate this national identity.

Nevertheless, the same logic applies in the layout of the ethnological display on the Midway Plaisance. As with Jefferson's account, the site provided what Catherine Holland (describing Jefferson's letter) has called 'a virtually unprecedented opportunity to observe human history, to view an otherwise lost and inaccessible past without leaving the present.' Like the continent imagined by Jefferson, the display serves as the 'setting where distant and distinct eras of human civilization coexist in the same calendrical moment.'^[6] As Snider's report suggested, walking along the Midway towards the White City, and viewing the races in an 'ascending scale, in the progressive movement; thus we

~~(can then look at the White Australians)~~ with the lowest specimens of humanity

and reaching continually upward to the higher stage,' a walk toward Lake Michigan that, whether by design or not, matched Jefferson's imaginary journey from west to east.

Once more, then, this kind of representation is of little use as an explanation of Doyle's trans-Atlantic trace. Emergent ~~(if not anthropology was struggling to explain as a discipline)~~ anthropology

~~established a narrative~~ of American origins that, although emphasising the superiority of Anglo

excluded the African American but was also differentiated from its European roots. At a moment when the United States was beginning to flex its imperial muscles beyond the American mainland, such a narrative had a clear ideological function, though one unlikely to appeal to upholders of British imperial values such as Dr. Watson.

The third Red Indian analogy is in many ways an extension of the anthropological model, and was used by Progressive era novelists such as Jack London and Edith Wharton to identify a particular kind of ethnic American identity that ~~could distinguish~~ ~~Saxon~~ families from the millions of immigrants from Southern and Eastern

Europe who were arriving in the United States during the 1880s and 1890s. Thus, in London's *Valley of the Moon* (1913), the hero, Billy Roberts, is described as looking like a "Plains Indian", and his father-in-law as being "wild as a Comanche,"^[7] in efforts to define an American identity that resists what Walter Benn Michaels has elsewhere called

‘subsumption by the Progressive American “nation,”’ the latter defined by the availability of national citizenship to those not born in the United States.[8] Likewise, in Wharton’s *Custom of the Country* (1913), Wharton explicitly links the disappearance of the “old” families with the earlier passing of other American cultures, squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces, with Ralph Marvell, representative of long-established New York “Society”, going so far as to describe Washington Square as “the ‘Reservation’”. For Marvell, the Square’s “inhabitants would [before long] be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries.”[9]

Unsurprisingly, Wharton’s imagery also has a specifically American dimension. First, there is a sense of the inevitability of extinction, coupled with a vision of history in which “progress” is marked by the repeated arrival of new invading races. Thus, where the advance of the pioneer had guaranteed the Indian’s demise, the latter are now condemned to the same fate by the ascendancy of the next generation of pioneers, that is, the new capitalist hegemony of speculators. In Wharton’s fiction, the result is a situation in which identification with the Indian becomes a way to sustain American identity in the face of cultural transformation, but only at the expense of death.

Twain’s “white Indians” come closest to Doyle’s metaphor, since they also seem to link man and machine. By the end of the nineteenth century, ambivalence about machine culture and incorporation increasingly led to the Indian being associated with unconquerable and inflexible individualism in a more widespread, systematic fashion. Because the Indian was seen as unresponsive to change and therefore not only unsuited to, but also subversive of, the Taylorization processes of machine culture, he or she must be destroyed. It is this logic which informs the conclusion to Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, in which Hank Morgan’s recognition that his “white Indians” do not correspond with his dictum that “Training is everything... Training is all there is to a person,” results in his decision to exterminate them. Thus, although *Connecticut Yankee* is useful as an American precursor of Doyle’s tales, and Holmes’s character also appears to be “rocklike” and unconquerable, the novel adopts a stance diametrically opposed to the one found in “The Crooked Man”, since while Holmes’s countenance suggests a machine, Twain’s Red Indians *refuse* to become machines.

There are, of course, numerous other examples of American presence in the Holmes tales, but these function in a rather different manner. For the most part, as in the first section of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), or in “The Dancing Men” (1903), the foreign presence temporarily disrupts the stable workings of English society, before Holmes resolves the mystery and restores that society to its normal routines. In Doyle’s fiction, as with the earlier 19th century novels of Anthony Trollope as summarised by Paul Giles, “the perverse... is constantly associated with what is foreign, with what deviates from the self-regulating codes of British society,” and, as with Trollope, “it is America which frequently represents the intrusive agent, the manifestation of something foreign within the structures of national life.”[10]

In *Study in Scarlet*, Indians also play various roles: first, when the Mormons are crossing the “Great Alkali Plain”, the “word ‘Redskins’ was on every lip,” and one character suggests that, “there can’t be any number of Injuns here” (56), stereotypical usages that are not unlike Roosevelt’s utterances. Later, there is a stranger moment of Indian identification. I will quote this passage at greater length, since it offers one possible clue to Watson’s descriptions of Holmes in “The Naval Treaty” and “The Crooked Man”. We are told that:

With indomitable patience and perseverance, Jefferson Hope possessed also a power of sustained vindictiveness, which he may have learned among the Indians amongst whom he had lived” (73).

This is an odd passage for a number of reasons. Most notably, it is a rare example of a double ambiguity in Doyle’s narrative form, since we are both unsure who is relating the incident, and uncertain about exactly what we have been told. Most of the second section of *A Study in Scarlet* is told ~~is told~~ ~~of the fisher~~ ~~American~~ ~~pre~~ by an omniscient narrator. We never learn who this is, though he does refer us back to Watson’s Journal at the end of chapter five, before Watson himself resumes and concludes the tale. This unusual mode of telling contains what, for the present purposes, is a more important detail: in Watson’s accounts, despite his own repeated befuddlement, the grammatical constructions tend to be straightforward. Thus, even if Watson is confused by what he is witnessing, he is able to convey that confusion in unambiguous sentences. His mind is befogged, but his discourse is clear. Here, however, meanings are more problematic: it is evident that Jefferson Hope “may have learned” his “power of sustained

vindictiveness” from the Indians, but the relationship of this lesson to the sentence’s opening clause is less certain. Did he also acquire his “indomitable patience and perseverance” from them? Given that Hope is presented as a kind of double to Holmes, even being described later as, “a human bloodhound, with his mind wholly set upon the one object to which he had devoted his life” (76), such a reading would help to explain why Holmes is likened to a Red Indian. To extrapolate from and across the different tales, Watson both displaces the account of behaviour from the double on to Holmes, and applies the Bertillon system retrospectively—Holmes looks like a Red Indian because he does, indeed, behave like one.

But, I suspect that such a reading seems far fetched and depends upon a reading of the sentence that goes against the grain of what first and repeated readings tell us was intended. Therefore, I would like to conclude by offering a brief reading of “The Crooked Man”, followed by a rather different explanation for the adventure of Sherlock Holmes and the Red Indians. “The Crooked Man” is, bar the Red Indian allusion, in many ways a formulaic Sherlock Holmes tale. (What appears to be) a murder taking place in a domestic space in the army town of Aldershot, and with a narrative that ultimately leads back to treachery during the Indian Mutiny, it suggests, as Amy Kaplan has written of the United States at this time, an inextricable link between “the idea of the nation at home” and the “political, economic and cultural movements of empire, movements that both erect and unsettle the ever between the domestic and the foreign, between ‘at home’ and ‘abroad.’”^[11] The story does reject many of the conventions of the typical imperial romance, since the “bad guy”, Colonel James Barclay has been married to Nancy Devoy for many years as a result of his betrayal of Corporal Henry Wood, but Barclay’s death in Wood’s presence serves, typically, as retribution for an earlier deed. Wood himself, has suffered years of hardship and even slavery before his belated return to England, and receives no symbolic compensation for his trials beyond the death of his former rival, which he claims he had not desired. In many ways, Wood appears to have “gone native”—learning the conjuring tricks with which he will later make a living, and bringing back a “singular club of hand carved wood with a bone handle” (415) and a mongoose, which ultimately help Holmes to reconstruct the narrative—and yet it is clear that (this happens to the hand Barclay of the race and class markers of a particular kind of white Englishness) who elicits the reader’s sympathy. Although, as we would expect from one of Dr. Watson’s narratives, the story can hardly be said to be anti-imperialist (and Wood’s return to England has been motivated by a sentimental “longing for home [421]), this kind of inversion does illustrate the kinds of “instability, ambiguity, and disorder” that Kaplan identifies in her work on the U.S. imperialism of the 1890s. In any case, as with Kaplan’s examples from the Spanish-American War of 1898, “the narrative shifts from conflict with an external enemy...to internal struggles with reputed allies,” signalling, “a disruption...in the links among representations of national, racial, and gendered identities.”^[12] But, despite the range of geographical, political, and cultural references that help to construct a logical framework for Holmes’s investigation, narratives of British Empire, determined by race, class, and gender, link all of the above. As such, they further highlight the apparent incongruity of the Red Indian fragment, which is used to describe Holmes at the story’s outset.

Although there is not time to develop a fuller reading here, a similar pattern emerges from a reading of “The Naval Treaty”. In this case, it is the chance discovery and theft of a top-secret government document that generates the crisis but, as with “The Crooked Man”, there is no obvious American content beyond the pairing of Holmes and the Red Indian. It would, perhaps, be possible to argue that the manner in which Joseph Harrison opportunistically steals the treaty, and hopes to sell it to alleviate debts acquired through having “lost heavily in dabbling with stocks” (467) is indicative of a speculative economy associated with the United States, rather than the fixed stock of “character” so often found in Doyle’s representation of Britishness. I want to conclude, however, by returning to the Red Indian to suggest another kind of Americanist presence in the tales.

Along with the filling in of the “open spaces” of the North American continent by largely white settlers, Turner’s closing of the frontier was also equated with the final defeat of its Native American inhabitants. Sitting Bull had been killed in November 1890 and, a month later, soldiers murdered around Wounded Knee Creek. The transformation of the “West” from a place of cultural encounter and national expansion, into a space mythologized in dime novels and plays was already well under way by this time, and the process was

accelerated from 1882 with the staging of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. The show combined re-enactments of famous moments from Bill Cody's Western past with exhibitions of shooting skill by Annie Oakley and others, and displays of horsemanship and of encounters between Cowboys and Indians.

The incredible popularity of the Wild West show was illustrated when it travelled to England for the first time in 1887. The year marked the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, and festivities were planned throughout Great Britain. It was intended that the Jubilee would be, as Alan Gallop has put it, "a very British affair...an opportunity for the rest of the world to pay homage to the lady who had been dubbed the 'widow of Windsor.'" But, in a sign of shifting global power relations, the United States decided to send, uninvited, a large "American Exhibition" displaying what the *Illustrated London News* announced would be, "a complete collection of the productions of the soil, and of the mines and the manufactures of the United States" as had ever been displayed in England.^[1] Despite such grand promises, the organisers of the event were unsure of its success and arranged for the Wild West show to be staged alongside as a guarantee of public interest.

The fact that the United States could unilaterally stage such an exhibition as part of a planned celebration of British imperial culture demonstrates the extent to which the old country's "Transatlantic cousins" had come of age as a global power. Likewise, the choice of Buffalo Bill's Wild West as the major drawing attraction illustrates the manner in which American popular culture was starting to generate interest in Europe. Indeed, the show's co-founder, Nathan Salsbury had told the British newspaper, the *Topical Times* that, "when we first organised it, we intended to come to England at once, because we thought...it would be a greater novelty here than anywhere else."^[14] Salsbury's remark neatly encapsulates the combination of interest in the spectacle and lack of prior knowledge of what it represented that constituted the general reception of the show in England.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West moved on from London to perform in Birmingham and Salford, and returned to Britain in 1892, 1902-03, and 1904 (as well as featuring on the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Chicago Exposition), and was instrumental in introducing ideas about the West and the Native American to the British public. Although its arrival in London in 1887 preceded the publication of *Study in Scarlet* by six months, Doyle had written a draft of the first Holmes story the previous year, so the presence in the show of "Squaw man" John Nelson, who had guided Brigham Young and his Mormon caravan across the desert to Utah's Great Salt Lake is probably no more than a coincidence.^[1] In contrast, the comparison of Holmes with the "Red Indian" coincides with representations of the Native American in the show in ways that are significant early markers of the Americanisation of British popular culture. In 1888 a bizarre example of the overlap of frontier life and its commodified depiction, Sitting Bull had featured in the show for four months, pictured with Cody alongside the caption "Foes in '76—Friends in '85." Before deciding that he didn't much care for show business, Sitting Bull rode impassively around the showground each night as the audience booed and occasionally spat at him. Although it seems that Sitting Bull's expression could be as animated as anyone else's when he was socialising off-stage with Annie Oakley and Bill himself, his public pose helped to construct a popular Eastern perception of the immobile Indian countenance. Numerous other similar examples surround Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, but I will confine myself to one further case. During a performance in Sheffield in August 1891 Paul Eagle Star, a Sioux brave, suffered serious leg injuries when his horse stumbled. Commenting on his condition, the *Sheffield Evening Telegraph and Star* reported, "He is a docile patient, bearing the most agonising pain with customary Indian fortitude."^[16] Tetanus later set in, doctors amputated his leg in an attempt to save him, but Star died. Clearly, the press and the showgoers of the time were aware of what must have been by particular Native American stereotype in the England of 1891. In the same year, it would seem Arthur Conan Doyle was also aware of the currency of this usage.

"The Crooked Man" is a near-archetypal example of the British adventure romance, in which events that took place in imperial spaces are played out before a domestic audience and with dramatic domestic ramifications. And yet, as with "The Naval Treaty", this narrative is disrupted by the apparently inconsequential intrusion of the Red Indian. As we have seen, these allusions bear little resemblance to the representations of the Native American that dominated American literature and politics, where the figure could maintain the romanticised version of the "natural" propagated by Cooper, could be seen as the evolutionary forebear of the white American, or could be represented as the cunning

and unprincipled savage, as in Teddy Roosevelt's play on the "only good Indian is a dead Indian" refrain. Instead, they point to the displacement of military and cultural imperialism that would make soon lead to the "American century", though which even representations of American otherness function within a matrix of American popular cultural icons. Although, in these tales, it is only a trace, the presence of an American popular cultural artefact within the generic British imperial romance marks the beginning of the end of that romance, and the emergence of the Americanisation of popular culture.

[1] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 1981), 460, 412. Subsequent page numbers from this edition are provided in parentheses in the text.

[2] Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 274.

[3] Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)

[4] Quoted in Rydell, 6 is apparent in the posters advertising the Exposition. (See fig. 3).

[5] Qtd. in Catherine A. Holland, 'Notes on the State of America: Jeffersonian Democracy and the Production of a National Past,' *Political Theory* (April 2001), 190-216, 195.

[6] Holland, 196

[7] Jack London, *The Valley of the Moon* (London: Mills and Boon, 1914), 437-38, 295.

[8] Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 45.

[9] Wharton: *The Custom of the Country*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 199

[10] Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001)

[11] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 1.

[12] Kaplan, 14, 1

[13] Alan Gallop, *Buffalo Bill's British Wild West* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), ix-x.

[14] Gallop, 2

[15] See Gallop, 29.

[16] Gallop, 17