

St Aloysius College Archives

Description and Evaluation of letter from Arthur Conan Doyle

The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard was originally published as eight serialised features in The Strand Magazine from December 1894 to December 1895, with the collated book being published in February 1896. The series has been adapted into numerous films and radio plays and the book has served as a source of inspiration for subsequent writers. George McDonald Fraser cites the Brigadier Gerard tales as an influence for one of his own characters, Harry Flashman. As a first edition copy of The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard, the book is one of 7,500 copies published in 1896. It is unknown how many comparable items are still in existence, although some copies are listed online through auction pages and rare book stores. The letter is perhaps the most exciting and unique element of the object, as it gives unprecedented insight into the literary background of the novel and the authors own perspectives. A plethora of examples of Doyle's handwriting are displayed in archives and collections, such as Portsmouth Library, and many books are known to feature inscriptions from the author. However, it is unknown whether such books and letters co-exist in the manner in which the present artefact does.

This object consists of two elements: The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard, by Arthur Conan Doyle and a handwritten, signed letter which has been crudely mounted within the pages of the book. Beginning with its history, the artefact indicates dates and ownership. The book is a first edition, published in London by George Newnes, Ltd. in 1896. An eight-page publisher's catalogue, dated 10.2.96, is inserted towards the rear of the book and it includes twenty-four illustrations by W.B Wollen. The letter is dated 'March 10th 1896' and is written on headed paper curtesy of The Mena House Hotel in Egypt.

Research indicates that the letter is authentic and handwritten by Arthur Conan Doyle (1839-1930); the famed British writer and creator of Sherlock Holmes. Guidance on authentication is listed by The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopaedia, and suggests this is a genuine example of his penmanship. The letter is written on headed paper, embossed with 'Mena House Hotel, Pyramids, Cairo,' and is dated 'March 10th /96'. Doyle visited Egypt with his ailing wife, Louisa, between 1895 and 1896 so she might convalesce in the warm climate. Online records confirm that the Doyle's spent the winter of 1895/96 at the Mena House Hotel in Cairo, thereby linking the hotels headed paper and the date the letter was written with Doyle. The affixed letter begins 'Dear Mr Forbes,' and personal references to Forbes are made throughout its contents, such as when Doyle comments that he has been enjoying reading Forbes' book, Havelock. Further inspection reveals the book belonged to Archibald Forbes (1838-1900), a Scottish war correspondent. Ownership is inferred from several pieces of information; primarily two inscriptions by an unknown hand. The first is located two pages in and the name 'Forbes' and 'from A.C.D' can be read with relative clarity. The second inscription, adjacent to the frontispiece, distinctly denotes, 'Archibald Forbes from A. Conan Doyle Feb" 1896'. Additionally, a bookplate on the inside cover pertaining to the Convent of the Sacred Heart Student's Library in Edinburgh details that the book was presented to them by the heirs of Archibald Forbes. The Convent housed a Catholic teacher training college but was renamed Craiglockhart College of Education 1965. Due to the earlier name being featured on the bookplate, it is assumed the book and letter were donated prior to this date and were incorporated into the library collections. In 1986 Craiglockhart was purchased by Napier University and some books were subsequently donated to St Aloysius College Library, Glasgow. The artefact is believed to have remained at St Aloysius College in relative

obscurity until 2018; upon which time the book was retrieved in its present condition. Forbes' father was a minister who served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1852, therefore it seems logical that when family collections were donated, they aligned themselves with their religious affiliations. My personal view is that Forbes might have glued his letter from Doyle into the book, an action that dually preserved the letter, but also allowed it to be passed down with other collections and remain undiscovered for over a century. Forbes passed away in March 1900, approximately four years after receiving the book and letter. As such, it seems likely that the book's true content was sadly forgotten after Forbes' death.

Doyle references this correspondence with Archibald Forbes in his autobiography, 'Memoires and Adventures,' in which he writes;

I began the Brigadier Gerard Stories [...] This entailed a great deal of research into Napoleonic days, and my military detail was, I think, very accurate- so much so that I had a warm letter of appreciation from Archibald Forbes, the famous war correspondent, who was himself a great Napoleonic and military student.

Therefore, this present letter details Doyle's response to Forbes' commendation. Notably, Doyle conveys great pride in his work and respect for Forbes' opinion. Supposedly, this copy of the book was sent to Forbes from Doyle, albeit indirectly by an assistant or publisher. Therefore, this particular book functions as a means for peer review and the letter represents the interaction between the two acquaintances. It is supposed that Forbes retained the book and letter as a commemorative symbol of his friendship with Doyle. From the letter, it is evident that Forbes offered a welcomed critique on the novel and it highlights the respect and friendship that existed between the two men.

Interpretation of the significance of the artefact is rooted in the interests and curiosity of the beholder. The uncelebrated, hand-me-down history of the object is testament to this. However, for fans and literary critics of Arthur Conan Doyle, it provides an invaluable insight into Doyle's nuances, his writing and his friendship with Archibald Forbes. As a first edition copy, the book is a rarity prized among collectors. Similarly, the letter penned by Doyle is a collectable item for fans of the author. A close reading of the letter identifies points in which a better understanding of *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* may be gained. Doyle validates Forbes' suspicion that a character within the novel, Marshal Millefluers, was inspired by Marshal Stockpot. Marshal Stockpot was the name given to a French sergeant who convinced other Napoleonic soldiers to abandon their duties and form a collective. Stockpot would send his men to gather food which he would subsequently prepare in a large stockpot- hence his moniker. When the deserters were discovered, they were to be given a pardon if they helped French soldiers overthrow and capture Stockpot, which they did. He was subsequently shot, and the group was disbanded. Doyle enthusiasts have noted that Brigadier Gerard is modelled on the real-life Baron Jean Baptiste de Marbot; a French light cavalry officer who fought during the Napoleonic wars. In this letter, Doyle confirms this theory, stating that 'Gerard himself was to some extent suggested by Marbot.'

The letter gives an insight into Doyle's openness to engage in critical discourse with regards to his own work. For example, the letter refers to an individual named 'Lobau.' Georges Moutan de Lobau was a French nobleman. However, at the time when the Brigadier Gerard stories were set, Moutan would not have received his nobleman's title yet. Doyle reasons that referring to Moutan by his later, noble name is acceptable and not an oversight, as Forbes

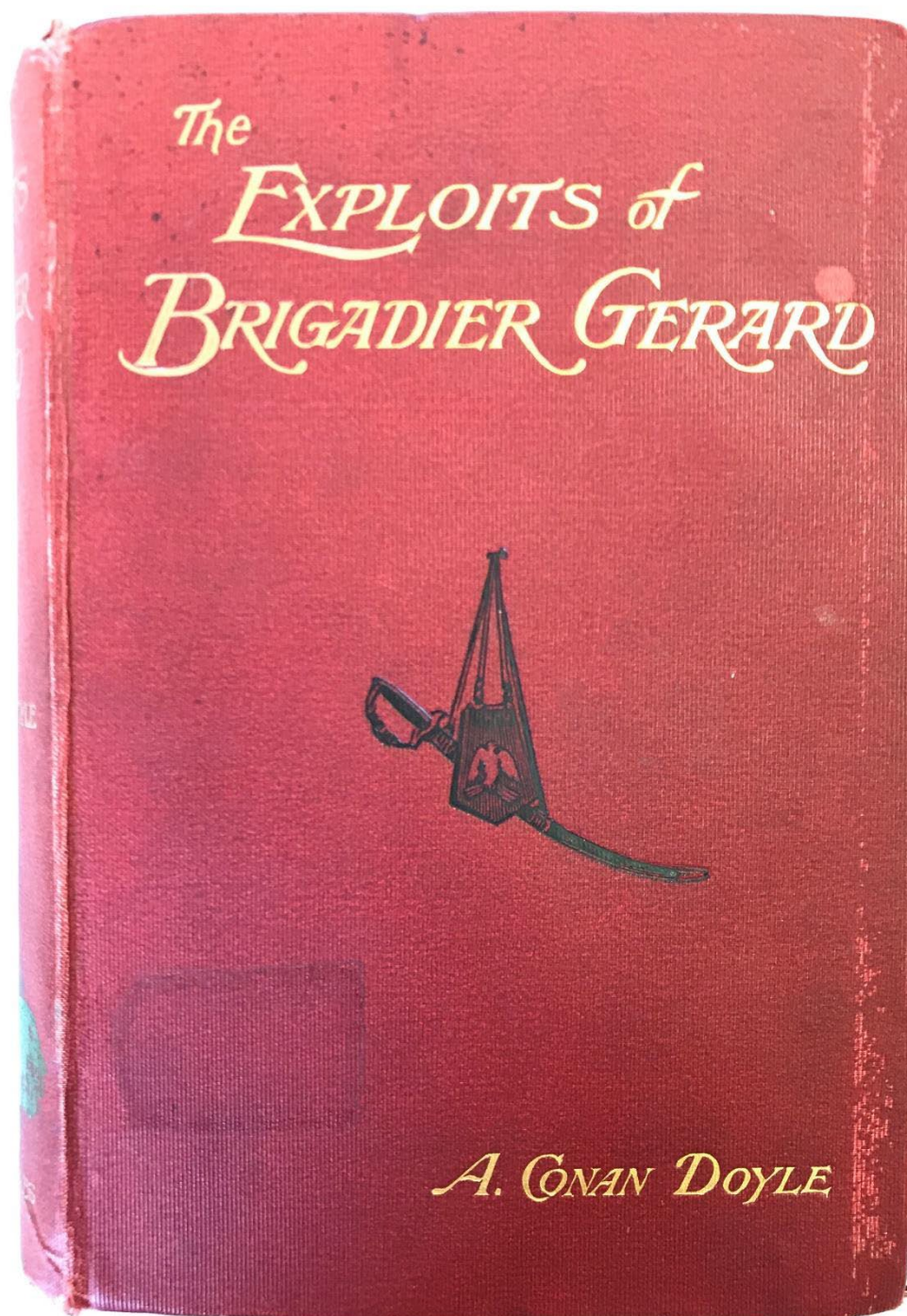
may have inferred. Doyle justifies this by explaining that while the story may focus on Brigadier Gerard during the Napoleonic wars, the story is told through his memoirs. Therefore, when looking back, 'old Gerard' would probably refer to Lobau by his name as he was presently known. Doyle is also willing to admit to errors, as evidenced in the letter on two occasions. He recognises the misprint in the text where the printers have spelled Lobau as 'Labau.' He acknowledges his spelling mistake when referring to the real-life General Robert Craufurd in the novel. Doyle concedes that 'Crauford was a blunder and shall be amended.' Craufurd (1764-1812) was a decorated Scottish soldier and it is assumed that Forbes must have pointed out the misspelling of his surname in his letter to Doyle. This is further reinforced by an annotation found in the margin on page 123 of the book; the 'o' in Crauford is scribbled out in pencil, and a 'u' placed alongside the text, signifying the spelling correction. It would appear that Forbes was editing the story as he reviewed Doyle's work, and Doyle was keen to take Forbes' critiques on board for future editions of the text.

At the foot of the letter, Doyle informs Forbes that he has been reading his 1980 book, Havelock 'with enthusiasm.' On that note Doyle goes on to express that 'the 64th is here, but the average British officer seems to know and care very little about the history of his own regiment.' The 64th refers to The 1st North Staffordshire Regiment, who had arrived in Egypt on 11th October 1895 and remained there whilst Doyle and his wife holidayed. Given Doyle's previous commentary about 'the ordinary critic' having 'no idea whether you are accurate or not' with regards to military detail, there is the suggestion that Doyle is somewhat disheartened by widespread disinterest in military histories. Therefore, in his friendship with Forbes, Doyle seems to have found great commonality and share mutual passion.

This find presents a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between Forbes and Doyle. The two men, both successful in their own right, evidently share respect and admiration for each other and this object depicts a friendship that is not widely discussed. It also seems quite fitting that the book now resides in a Jesuit school, following Doyle's own Jesuit education in Stonyhurst. Furthermore, the book and letter have become an amazing teaching aide that pupils have had the opportunity to use in projects. I think that after spending so long hidden in a dusty cupboard, it is only right that it can be brought out and enjoyed now. Finding this book and letter is exciting on a number of levels. Certainly, the insight it provides into the text and the relationship between Doyle and Forbes are the most obvious assets.

- Katie Lapping

Images



March 10th 1906.

MENA HOUSE HOTEL,
PYRAMIDS, CAIRO.

Dear Mr Forbes

It was very kind of you to write to me, and what you say about the little Napoleonic sketches gives me sincere pleasure for I know no one whose opinion on such a point has the same weight. As you surmise it was Marshal Stochpot who suggested 'Mille fleurs' just as Gerard himself was to some extent suggested by Marbot. I think perhaps Lobau - or Labau as the printer has it - ought to be defended as the old Gerard would look back on him under that name altho' he did not hold it at the year of the story. Crawford was a blunder & shall be amended. Thank you once more very heartily for your

good nature in reading the book and
letting me know your kindly
impression. One never gets any credit
for pains or accuracy from the ordinary
critic for they have no idea whether you
are accurate or not, but still it is
pleasant to try and get the thing right,
and more pleasant still to hear that you
recognize that I have so tried

Yours very truly

Alonan Doyle.

I have just been reading your Havelock
with enthusiasm. The 64th is here, but
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Transcribed letter

March 10th /96

MENA HOUSE HOTEL,

PYRAMIDS, CAIRO.

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Crauford was a blunder and shall be amended.

Thank you once more very heartily for your good nature in reading the book and letting me know your kindly impression. One never gets credit for pains of accuracy from the ordinary critic for they have no idea whether you are accurate or not, but still it is pleasant to try and get the thing right, and more pleasant still to hear that you recognise that I have so tried

Yours very truly

A Conan Doyle.

I have just been reading your Havelock with enthusiasm. The 64th is here, but the average British officer seems to know + care very little about the history of his own regiment.

1896



Arthur Conan Doyle on camel in Mena, Cairo, Egypt
(spring 1896).



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By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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Published by Delphi Classics (Parts
of the original text)

...we succeeded, then I think that the doctor had one of what is called "galloping consumption," and that the doctors did not give more than a few months, and yet that we postponed the fatal issue from 1893 to 1906, I think it is proof that the successive measures were wise. The invalid's life was happy too, for it was necessarily spent in glorious scenery. It was seldom marred by pain, and it was sustained by that optimism which is peculiar to the disease, and which came naturally to her quietly contented nature.

As there were no particular social distractions at Davos, and as our life was bounded by the snow and fir which girt us in, I was able to devote myself to doing a good deal of work and also to taking up with some energy the winter sports for which the place is famous. Whilst there I began the Brigadier Gerard series of stories, founded largely upon that great book, "The Memoirs of General Marbot." This entailed a great deal of research into Napoleonic days, and my military detail was, I think, very accurate — so much so that I had a warm letter of appreciation from Archibald Forbes, the famous war correspondent, who was himself a great Napoleonic and military student. Before the end of the winter we were assured that the ravages of the disease had been checked. I dared not return to England, however, for fear of a relapse, so with the summer we moved on to Maloja, another health resort at the end of the Engadine valley, and there we endeavoured to hold all we had won — which, with occasional relapses, we succeeded in doing.

Archibald Forbes



Archibald Forbes, by [Elliott & Fry](#), c. 1880s.

