

‘DANGEROUS WORK’ DIARY OF AN ARCTIC ADVENTURE. Arthur Conan Doyle (editors J. Lellenberg and D. Stashower). 2012. London: The British Library. vii + 368p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-0-7123-5864-4. £25.

This splendid book is a compilation of the Arctic writings, published and unpublished, of the great author Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the immortal Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. The centrepiece is a facsimile of Doyle’s diary that he compiled during a whaling and sealing voyage to the Spitsbergen and Greenland Seas in 1880 as surgeon on board the Peterhead vessel *S.S. Hope*, under the captaincy of John Grey. A note on Doyle’s Arctic publications appeared in this journal in 1995 (Stone 1995).

Doyle was not a qualified medical practitioner at the time but was merely a third year student when the opportunity for the voyage presented itself due the previous appointee being unable to travel. The diary covers some 199 pages, including reproductions of the front and back cover of the notebook in which it was written, and is in Doyle’s excellent handwriting throughout. It is obvious that Doyle not only observed the operations of the ship, the processes of whaling and sealing, and the officers and crew with care and sympathy, but that he also participated in the actual whaling and sealing work of the voyage, taking an oar in one of the boats, to a full extent and thoroughly enjoyed himself. ‘Never had such a jolly time in my life’ in his own words (page 303). Fortunately his medical services were little in demand and so he had the time to learn much about the work on board. He also tried to gain in other respects from the voyage; on 6 March 1880 we find him starting ‘Boswell’s Life of Johnson’ although there is no record of him finishing that formidable work and on 10 April he began ‘Carlyle’s “Hero Worship”’. A great and glorious book.’ As a testament to his rapidly acquired competence, at the end of the voyage, Grey offered him appointment at double pay as harpooner and surgeon for the 1881 season. Doyle declined the offer, fortunately perhaps for lovers of the Holmes stories. In addition to the text, the diary is fully illustrated and this reveals that Doyle was no mean artist. Among the sketches included are ‘School of Hunchback [sic] whales south of Jan Mayen’, ‘Flinching (i.e. cutting up) a whale. July 8th 1880’ and ‘All hands over the bows – young sealing. 1880.’

So clear is Doyle’s handwriting and so excellent is the reproduction of the diary that it comes as a slight surprise to realise that the editors have found it necessary to include a full transcription but this enables them to incorporate a comprehensive critical apparatus. The transcription covers some 80 pages and, demonstrating the thoroughness with which they have approached their task, there are no fewer than 185 footnotes covering multifarious topics ranging from the conservation of seals to points relating to the various Sherlock Holmes stories revealing how much Doyle’s Arctic voyage influenced his subsequent literary career.

One might think that the editors’ task would be complete at this juncture but far from it. It seems almost as if they obtained a valuable second wind and realised that for the sake of completion other elements of Doyle’s *oeuvre* needed to be included. This section of the book starts with a brief biography of Doyle after returning from the north that includes a lengthy extract from newspaper reports of an address he gave, in 1883, to the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society entitled ‘The Arctic Seas’. By this time he was in medical practice in Southsea close to Portsmouth. Doyle gave up medicine for literature in 1891, a consequence of the enormous success of the Holmes stories, but his output was not confined to the exploits of the famous detective. He referred to the Arctic and whaling in several publications all of which are faithfully reproduced towards the end of the book.

The first of these was a piece entitled ‘The glamour of the Arctic’ which was published in *The Idler* in 1892. It includes several anecdotes from his diary and in it Doyle expresses his views concerning the relative ease of reaching the North Pole. Subsequent publications are ‘Life on a Greenland whaler’ from *The Strand Magazine* of 1897 that includes some of the same material. We then turn to fiction with Doyle’s famous ghost story ‘The captain of the *Pole-Star*’ ‘an extract from the singular journal of John M’Allister Ray, student of medicine’ which retains its ability to chill the blood into this more matter-of-fact age. To round off the book we revert to more familiar ground in the company of Holmes and Watson who solve ‘The adventure of Black Peter’ concerning the murder of an old whaling captain.

It should be stated straightaway that this is a magnificent publication. Little more remains to be said about Doyle and the Arctic and in one volume we have the main primary and secondary sources covering the topic. Moreover the diary reveals that Doyle’s literary talents were obvious at an early age and reading it, it appears to this reviewer at any rate, that the leap from the voyage of *Hope* to Sherlock Holmes was much shorter than one might have thought. At all events the reading is very easy and the book is difficult to put down. The editors have performed a delicate task with skill and their diligence in unearthing matters of relevance to the topic is most praiseworthy. Not only is the book excellently compiled but it is marvellous to handle. The binding is solid, the dust cover, presenting a sketch by Doyle of ‘A Peterhead Whaler’, is attractive, and the whole volume has a solidity and substance about it worthy of the topic addressed within. For a work of this quality the price is incredibly modest. It would make an excellent present for Arctic historians or for Doyle enthusiasts. Very warmly recommended. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Rd., Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk))

Reference

Stone, I.R. 1995. The polar writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *Polar Record* 31: 63–65.