

Dr Thorndyke: The First Professional Forensic

Pathologist in Fiction?

Dr John Thorndyke M.D. D.Sc. and Barrister at Law was the brainchild of Richard Austin Freeman, himself a doctor, albeit with less prestigious qualifications. Freeman was registered M.R.C.S. L.S.A on 20 May 1887, having married a few weeks earlier. Being without the capital required to progress in Britain, he enrolled in the Colonial Service, and was forthwith posted to Accra as Assistant Colonial Surgeon. After a year of general duties, he volunteered for an expedition, part exploratory, part diplomatic, to Ashanti and Jaman. Presumably in recognition of his diplomatic skills, he was, on his next tour, appointed to serve on the Anglo-German Boundary Commission. The task was to settle the line of the border between the British territories and (German) Togoland, but he was not destined to play any part in this because, shortly after taking up the post, he was invalided home with blackwater fever.

There were now few options open to him; chronically ill, he lacked the stamina and, presumably, the capital to set up in general practice. He was therefore compelled to undertake short term locum work and to seize any other opportunities as came his way. In the meantime he prepared reports on his travels for the Royal Geographical Society, expanding these into a full account which he published in 1898. "Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman" should surely rank among the classics of African travel literature. It is a vivid and interesting description of day to day life in what is now Namibia, particularly because the

author realised that he was present at a time of rapid change. Above all, he was a meticulous observer; whether it be the layout of a village, the carvings on the houses, the flora, the fauna, climate, all are recorded. The book was a critical success and seems to have given him the stimulus to supplement his meagre medical income by writing.

From 1898, a number of his short stories and articles (mostly on sailing) were published in Cassells Magazine. The first crime stories appear here under a pseudonym, "Clifford Ashdown"; they were later published in the form of two short books 'The Adventures (and the Further Adventures) of Rodney Pringle ". The character of Pringle is akin to that of Raffles or, perhaps, of his real-life French predecessor, Vidocq,¹ but the device of "set a thief to catch a thief" was dropped when a further set of six short stories was accepted. These latter only appeared in book form in 1975 under the title "From a Surgeon's Diary". Clifford Ashdown conceals the names of two authors, Freeman, whose copyright is acknowledged in one of the Pringle books, and one other, whose identity was not discovered until 1948. He was Dr John Pitcairn, a medical officer at Holloway prison. They had met at that institution when Freeman was occupying yet another temporary post as acting assistant medical officer. The two remained friends until Pitcairn moved to Birmingham in 1907.

Such are the bare bones of Freeman's early life. shamelessly culled from a splendidly comprehensive biobibliography by Donaldson² The next phase and, in

¹ Vidocq Memoirs, Paris 1828

² Donaldson N. "In search of Dr Thorndyke" Bowling Green University Popular Press 1971

retrospect, the defining event of his literary career, was the publication in 1907 of a full length novel, "The Red Thumb Mark". The story is told in the first person by Dr Jervis, an impecunious aspiring GP, reliant upon such temporary work as his agency can find for him; presently he is unemployed. Clearly Freeman identifies with him. He happens to meet John Thorndyke outside his chambers. They had been together as students, but the latter had stayed on at his teaching hospital, eventually being appointed lecturer in forensic medicine. Duly equipping himself with medical, scientific and legal qualifications, he had set up as an independent scientific witness. Thorndyke invites Jervis into his chambers but their conversation is soon interrupted by the arrival of new clients. Jervis becomes embroiled and is taken on as assistant in the case. This allows the author to gradually build the character of his hero through the eyes of the narrator. His physical appearance is described, with some hyperbole, towards the end of the book;

"I had often noted the quiet strength of his face, its infinite intelligence, its attractiveness and magnetism, but I had never appreciated what now impressed me most: that Thorndyke was actually the handsomest man I had ever seen..... It was not alone the distinction of the tall figure, erect and dignified, nor the power and massive composure of the face itself that now arrested my attention: a comeliness that made it akin rather to some classic mask, wrought in the ivory-toned marble of Pentelicus, than to the eager faces that move around us....."

His creator deliberately avoided giving him any eccentricities; Thorndyke is the strong silent type, although he relaxes in the company of his friends. His principal characteristic is his relentless and obsessive attention to detail. Nothing connected with a case, whether it be the words of a witness or the appearance of the back of an envelope, is left unexamined or unrecorded. There is thus an abundance of clues for the reader to pick up, although some seem at the time to be irrelevant. In general, Freeman plays fair with his reader, in that it is possible to identify the guilty party, even though the final proof is given in a virtuoso performance by Thorndyke in the witness box.

The plot hinges on the identification of a bloodstained fingerprint - is it that of the defendant or is it forged? Thorndyke has his own forensic laboratory on the third floor of his chambers, with its own presiding genius, Polton, butler, cook and technician extraordinaire, who not only works the apparatus, but has made much of it himself. Between them they demonstrate by means of accurately calibrated photographs that the incriminating fingerprint is 5% larger than that of the defendant, taken at his arrest; in addition, there is a break in the pattern of the disputed print which exactly matches an anomalous artefact in a print taken during a family game using the "Thumbograph". This is sufficient evidence to clear the defendant, but Thorndyke goes on to humiliate the police witnesses in front of the jury by means of a theatrical, if not entirely fair, challenge. A side plot is dovetailed into the main theme, and involves three attempts on the detective's life. Two are highly ingenious, and one (murder by poisoned cigar, laced with crystalline nicotine) is used in a later novel.

Freeman makes it clear in his preface to the Red Thumb Mark, that he has misgivings about the reliance placed on fingerprint evidence, misgivings which surface in three of his subsequent stories. At first the police used prints only to identify recidivists; fingerprint files were kept at the jails (where Freeman may have seen them) and it was not until 1902 that Sir Edward Henry set up the Central Fingerprint Branch; it held information on about 80,000 individuals. That same year print evidence was first accepted by the English courts and sent a burglar to jail, but it was not until May 1905 that a single right thumbprint helped to send two murderers to the gallows.³ In contrast to the novel, which Freeman must have started to write within a few months of the trial, it was the expert witnesses for the defence who were humiliated.

Donaldson⁴ tells us that another novel “The Mystery of No 31 New Inn” was prepared for publication before this one, but held back, and it is difficult to avoid the impression that the Thumb Mark was a novel with a mission.

Freeman/Thorndyke states repeatedly that fingerprints by themselves are useless without corroboration. His claim that a print can be faked has never been put to the test in court, although it has been shown experimentally. The dictum that “experts never make mistakes” is clearly ridiculous, as well as being an attempt to prove a negative. As late as 1916 he wrote “I.....hope that those who are concerned in the administration of the law will be subject to the most jealous

³*Old Bailey Proceedings online*. May 2nd, 1905.
oldbaile-415.yonline.org.jsp?id=t19050502-415&div=t19050502

⁴Donaldson, N. 1971. *In Search of Dr Thorndyke*. p.76.

*and searching scrutiny of all finger-print evidence that is not fully corroborated.”*⁵

His objections are still relevant, and apply equally to today's DNA evidence.

Thorndyke next appears in a series of short stories which were published first in Pearson's Magazine, but, in 1909, as a book "John Thorndyke's Cases". In the preface he gives us his credo:

"I have been scrupulous in confining myself to authentic facts and practicable methods.....The stories illustrate, in fact, the application to the detection of crime of the ordinary methods of scientific research. I may add that the experiments described have in all cases been performed by me, and that the microphotographs given in the original edition (in the magazine) are, of course, from actual specimens."

There are eight tales in the book, each being centered round the examination of some piece of evidence. The first involves a complex series of footprints, of which Thorndyke takes plaster casts; for good measure he identifies a stab wound as having been inflicted after death. Another case describes an apparent stabbing with an aluminium dagger⁶. It is a classic "locked room" mystery. Thorndyke carefully measures, photographs and sketches the crime scene, and works out from the angle of insertion of the dagger that the victim must have been shot through an open window. Freeman includes a drawing of the dagger

⁵Donaldson, N. 1971. *In Search of Dr Thorndyke*, p. 89.

⁶ Donaldson, N. 1971. *In Search of, Dr Thorndyke* p. 93

and Donaldson describes how the author and his son experimented by firing a dagger from a pistol, only to find that it struck with such force that it would have completely penetrated a body! This may be why the weapon in the story was an air rifle. In the final story some silver sand is found on the pillow of a victim whose throat has been cut. Under the microscope the sand turns out to contain foraminifera of a species found only in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thorndyke knows that these arrive as a contaminant of sponges imported from Turkey, from which information he traces the perpetrator. It may be unfair to enquire why the murderer decided to do the deed by standing on a stool behind the sleeping victim - unless it be to ensure that when he leaned over the bed, sand trickled from his pocket.

An indication that Freeman wanted his readers to be more interested in the nuts and bolts of detection, rather than in the elucidation of a mystery is given by his invention of the “inverted detective story”. The first of these was ‘The Case of Oscar Brodski.’⁷ The exact sequence of events leading up to a murder is described, followed by the method of disposal of the body. The identity of the murderer is in no way hidden. The second half of the story gives Jervis’s explanation of how Thorndyke reconstructs the evidence, taking, as usual, nothing for granted. For example, he finds broken glasses by the body, meticulously collects the fragments, recreates the lens and discovers there is too much glass. Other forensic evidence invokes the direction of blood flow from a

⁷ Freeman J.A. *“The Singing Bone”* Hodder and Staughton 1912

wound and the identification of rabbit hair and shellac in ash. Thorndyke's final exhortation is: "this case illustrates...the vital importance of instant action before....a clue has had time to evaporate. Second, the necessity of pursuing the most trivial clue to an absolute finish... third the urgent need of a trained scientist to aid the police." Freeman is being a little unfair to the police here, the story is based on a real case R v Watson and his wife 1867 which is detailed in Taylor's Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence, a book the author acknowledged as his inspiration.

Five more short stories followed this inverted format, but only one full length novel, "The Shadow of the Wolf". In this Thorndyke enlists the aid of a petrologist to identify a specimen of rock, which, in combination with the presence of a marine worm, (and with the assistance of an outrageous coincidence!) serves to locate the murder to the vicinity of the Wolf Rock lighthouse.

In all, Thorndyke features in forty short stories and in twenty full length novels; the last (The Jacob Street Mystery) appeared in 1942. Many clearly derive from the author's own experience - for example, a corpse is discovered in a dene hole in Kent, near to Gravesend where the Freeman family lived. Clues reflect his time in Africa, filariasis in "The Pathologist to the Rescue", anhum in "The Case of the White Footprints" or the theft of an elephant's tail in "The Trail of Behemoth" They are generously distributed throughout the stories but the reader is expected to know, for example, the habitat of the mollusc *Clausilia biplicata*, or the differences between the species of English water -weed. The microscopic examination of hair is mentioned several times, racial differences

and the difference between shed and avulsed hair both feature, as does *trichorexis nodosa*, a clue which puts unreasonable demands on the general reader, but which is a source of fascination for the medical one. It is, however, not the clues themselves, but the careful and meticulous way they are collected and preserved which gives the stories their novelty. Thorndyke's examination of a hat exemplifies this; careful measurements revealed the cephalic index, and hence the probable racial origin of the wearer. Dust and hair were sucked from inside the lining by a machine constructed by Polson. Sections of the hair strengthened the previous evidence, and microscopy of the dust showed it to be of mother-of-pearl. This clue to the wearer's occupation led to his identification and ultimate arrest.

Ward has contrasted this episode favourably with the more intuitive examination of a hat by Thorndyke's illustrious predecessor, Sherlock Holmes.⁸ The latter began his fictional career in 1887 at a time when there was no formal training in crime scene investigation. It was not until 1902 that the newly appointed Assistant Commissioner, Edward Henry opened a "kind of school"⁹ for detectives and, in 1913, extended the curriculum to include the latest technical methods such as fingerprinting. Despite this, the training fell far short of that advised by Hans Gross whose 1898 German textbook "Criminal Investigation, a

⁸ Ward A.C. "*Sherlock versus John Thorndyke and Reginald Fortune*" Windsor: Godscheider 1922 privately printed

⁹ Schapayer-Makov H. "*The Ascent of the Detective*" Oxford University Press 2011

Handbook for Magistrates, Police Officers and Lawyers”^{10]} was extremely comprehensive and included such subjects as the preservation of a crime scene, the reliability of witness statements and of memory, bloodstain patterning, microscopy and photography. The book was translated into seven different languages before an English version was printed in Madras for use by the Indian police force.

The advice given by Hans Gross “*never alter the position of, pick up, or even touch any object before it has been minutely described in the report*” is strikingly similar to Thorndyke’s advice on reaching a crime scene: “*Not a grain of dust should be moved, not a soul should be allowed to approach it, until the scientific observer has seen everything in situ and absolutely undisturbed.*” Holmes complained more than once that this rule was not obeyed and it is arguable that both fictional detectives were abreast or even ahead of contemporary police practice. Thorndyke had his own laboratory before the Metropolitan Police opened theirs in 1935; Savage¹¹ tells us that the “Murder Bag” was devised by Sir Bernard Spilsbury in 1924, but Gross had already listed what the investigator should carry. Thorndyke carried a veritable Pandora’s Box which always seemed to contain the implement or material appropriate to the case in hand.

¹⁰ Gross H. (translated by Adam J) “*Criminal investigation: s, police a practical textbook for magistrate officers and lawyers.*” Madras. G Ramaswamy Chetty and Co. 1906

¹¹Savage P. “*Savage of Scotland Yard*” Hutchinsons 1934

Thorndyke stands out amongst his fictional contemporaries in that he places so much emphasis on the importance of tangible forensic evidence. His creator took great trouble to make this evidence realistic, indeed reproducible. Enough of it was presented for the reader to approach a solution, although they might need access to Polson's laboratory in order to work out the details. The Thorndyke novels did much to introduce the public to the principles and practice of crime scene investigation. Dr Thorndyke can surely be termed the first professional forensic pathologist of fiction and a worthy predecessor to such as Kay Scarpetta and Tempe Brennan.

Martin Crosfill, 2021