

*Watson noted that there was something positively inhuman about Sherlock Holmes at times. Could the same be said of Mycroft?*

## MYCROFT RECOMPUTED

by LYTTLETON FOX

"BY THE WAY, do you know what Mycroft is?" Out of a sky that was anything but clear, and getting murkier by the minute, Sherlock, as you'll remember, propounded this portentous question to Watson in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*.

Watson's answer showed that after all those years he still hadn't begun to have a complete or accurate conception of what Mycroft was. All he knew about Mycroft was what Sherlock had chosen to tell him some years before at the time of *The Greek Interpreter*. And even the scanty disclosure made on that earlier occasion represented a dramatic relaxation of Sherlock's policy of treating any and all information about Mycroft as a tiptop secret. He had theretofore kept the very existence of Mycroft hidden from his closest, most trusted friend. It now appeared that on the earlier occasion Sherlock had not told Watson much. It was evident that where Mycroft was concerned Sherlock had virtually been restricting Watson to a need-to-know basis.

"You told me," Watson now recalled, "that he had some small office under the British Government."

Holmes chuckled. "I didn't know you quite so well in those days," he remarked. "One has to be discreet when one talks of high matters of state."

Now, after many more years of intensely intimate association and the closest and most confidential collaboration with Watson in delicate and vastly important matters of detection, Sherlock ventured to allow himself to go a little further in lifting for Watson's benefit the security veil that obscured the truth about the nature and occupation of Mycroft.

But, as I shall try to show, Sherlock did not even now feel that the time was quite ripe to put Watson fully in the know about the Mycroft secret. He was still holding out on him. In-

deed, that question, "Do you know what Mycroft is?" has not been answered in depth, satisfactorily, thoroughly, authoritatively, incontrovertibly, and *in toto* until now. Such an answer, I make bold to assert, is given for the first time in this paper.

By the way, if that declaration seems to bespeak a somewhat flagrant lack of modesty on my part, I'll remind you that in avoiding the restraining influence of modesty I'm merely following one of the cardinal intellectual doctrines of the Master himself. He did not, as he emphatically explained, count modesty among the virtues. Hence he conscientiously abstained from it. He felt that this so-called virtue was inimical to objectivity and hence to truth itself. It follows that if I were to differ with the Master on this point I would be guilty of nothing less than Canonical heresy. Luckily, as you can see, this form of Canonical heresy is not one of my weaknesses.

Let us now review the description of Mycroft's character and *raison d'être* as set forth by Sherlock in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*. It was a fair enough exposition as far as it went—which, as we shall see, was not very far.

"You are right in thinking that he is under the British Government," observed Sherlock. Then came the astounding, albeit only partial, eye-opener. "You would also be right . . . if you said that occasionally he *is* the British Government."

Noting Watson's bewildered astonishment at this remark, Holmes said, "I thought I might surprise you." He then gave a summary of Mycroft's unique position at Whitehall. "He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living," stated Sherlock.

Now it seems to me that this capacity of Mycroft's, exceeding that of any human being, for storage of facts is extremely significant. It almost makes one think of a computer, does it not? We are all quite aware that no one has ever lived who could hope to approach the ability of a computer to preserve within its small chilly viscera of microfilm and memory drums millions and millions of information items for instant recall.

At this stage of our inquiry it would, of course, be utterly premature to jump to any conclusive inferences about the super-human ability, common to Mycroft and the computer, for seemingly effortless retention and recollection of vastly voluminous data. It is suggested, however, that this point be kept in mind

as possibly having a real bearing on the question we are re-examining, namely, "Do you know what Mycroft is?"

In that same conversation Sherlock threw some further light on the nature of Mycroft's work for the Government. "The conclusions of every department are passed to him," Sherlock revealed, "and he is the central exchange, the clearing-house, which makes out the balance."

Let's ponder those words: "The conclusions of every department are passed to him." There may be an important clue here to just how Mycroft works—or *is* worked. This passing on of conclusions from government departments to Mycroft is what is known in computer technology as "input," is it not? In other words, Mycroft's *modus operandi* involves being fed a prodigious input of data in the form of departmental conclusions. Mycroft, then, does seem to have certain attributes of a computer. It would be utterly superficial, however, to conclude from this that he *is* a computer. At this stage I do not ask you to accept any such conclusion, but rather to suspend all conclusions until this recomputation is complete.

We must consider some further evidence. What else did Sherlock tell Watson that morning? You will remember, of course, that it was in the third week of November 1895, and Holmes and Watson had just pushed back their breakfast dishes in the Baker Street apartment, which was enveloped in a dense yellow fog.

By the way, before anyone objects that this dense yellow fog, which had settled down upon London and stayed at least four days, could hardly have penetrated inside the Baker Street rooms, I would be inclined to take the opposite view on the basis of my own London experience. It happens that I once lived through one of those dense yellow fogs. One evening in the middle of the fog I went to the theatre to get away from it—the theatre of escape, so to speak. Well, to my flabbergasted consternation I found that this outrageous fog, which was indeed of a dense yellow, had made its way to a certain extent inside the theatre itself, and partly obscured the stage. As this theatre was only a few blocks from Baker Street, I have no doubt whatsoever that the dank, fuliginous atmosphere had passed through the bow window or other fenestral apertures and perhaps had appreciably reduced the visibility in their

sitting-room. But, needless to say, there was no fog in Sherlock's brain that morning—any more than any other—and he went on lucidly with his description of Mycroft.

"We will suppose," he said, "that a Minister needs information as to a point which involves the Navy, India, Canada, and the bi-metallic question. . . . Only Mycroft can focus them all and say offhand how each factor would affect the other. . . . In that great brain of his everything is pigeon-holed and can be handed out in an instant."

Here we have a fruitful hint about what is done with this prodigious input contained in Mycroft's massive frame. Here is where the minister needing information comes in. It is superfluous to point out that this minister is a programmer. He tells Mycroft by means of punch-cards, word of mouth, or other device that Sherlock did not bother to specify, just what he needs to know. Thus programmed, Mycroft consults his voluminous stored-up input and out comes the answer lickety split.

By the way, with your indulgence, I can't help digressing for a moment and pointing out that whether you are dealing with Mycroft or an ordinary computer the answer you get will depend to an extent that might be positively frightening on the personality and predispositions of the programmer. Suppose, for example, the programmer wanted to find out this about the bi-metallic question: Whether a currency based on a combined gold and silver standard, with one of those precious metals convertible freely into the other on a fixed ratio of weight, would work out successfully as a medium of exchange in the Navy, India, and Canada? Let's suppose further that this question was asked—or programmed—by two different public figures, each with definite ideas about the bi-metallic question. I refer to Gresham, the much quoted economist, and that more bi-metallic politician—statesman, William Jennings Bryan, who flourished in the 1890s when this conversation about Mycroft took place.

I think that regardless of whether the question was put to Mycroft or a conventional computer the answer would have depended on which of the two, Gresham or Bryan, was the programmer. If Gresham had asked the bimetallic question in his way the instant reply would have been: "The cheaper money drives the dearer out of circulation." If Bryan had put the question in his way, with carefully controlled manipulation of the

program cards, the reply from either Mycroft or the standard machine would unquestionably have been: "You shall not crucify mankind upon this cross of gold."

Returning now to the main point, we can now plainly see two provocative parallels between Mycroft and the conventional computer. Both require input. Both have to be programmed. Are there other points of similarity, besides input and programming? My answer to that is: There sure enough are. Just wait and I'll show you.

A computer must have some means of reading or scanning the punch-cards, magnetic tape, or other program media, referring them to its memory drum, microfilm—I'll come back to this subject of microfilm very shortly—or other input memoranda in order to figure out its answer in the limited time (usually about a millionth of a second) allotted to it for the entire job. Did Mycroft have such a reading or scanning device? Let's look at the evidence. As everyone know, one of the reliable, tried and true mechanisms in general use today for looking over punch-cards and enabling the computer to make up its tidy mind is the photo-electric cell. Even if you don't own a computer you've seen those photo-electric cells thousands of times in supermarkets where they open the door for you as you walk out. (For some reason or other they refuse to give you any assistance when you walk *in*.)

Well, was Mycroft equipped with a photo-electric cell? (I'm not alluding to the door-opening type, needless to say, but to such a one as might have been suitable for examining punch-cards, tape, film, and the like.)

Yes, it seems to me uncontrovertible that Mycroft was so equipped. Consider, if you will, the following sentence of Watson's from *The Greek Interpreter*. On seeing Mycroft then for the first time, the astonished Watson observed: "His eyes, which were of a peculiarly light watery grey, seemed to always retain that far-away introspective look. . . ."

This description of Mycroft's "eyes" seems to constitute evidence whose importance to this inquiry—or recomputation—cannot be exaggerated. I ask you to face the question unflinchingly. Were *these* really eyes at all? Who ever saw eyes, real eyes, on a natural human being that were of a peculiarly light watery grey? No, there never were such odd eyes. Now, bearing

this undeniable point in mind, will you close your own eyes, such as they are, for a moment, so to speak, and concentrate your memory down hard on those photo-electric eyes, or cells, on the door of your supermarket. Are they not of a peculiarly light watery grey, with a far-away introspective look? Of course they are. The inescapable fact is that Mycroft's so-called eyes were photo-electric cells. They were no doubt used primarily for scanning and correlating input, program, and memory data.

I honestly think now that the evidence already considered is of such weight and cogency as to justify the tentative conclusion that Mycroft, although undeniably human in some respects, was not, strictly speaking, human at all. After all, that's nothing very serious against him, is it? Besides, in some respects, he was clearly superhuman, which I'm sure Mycroft himself, if given the choice, would have preferred to being merely human.

What was—or rather, what *is*—Mycroft, then?

He is an anthropomorphic model of a somewhat old style of computer. I say he's old style, bearing in mind that at this writing (1968) Sherlock is 114 years old, and therefore Mycroft, whom we know to be seven years his senior, is now 121. A computer 121 years old wouldn't exactly be *le dernier cri*.

All right, then we have still to consider whether Mycroft is analogue or digital. Clearly he's analogue, because he can be shown beyond question not to be digital.

How can that be shown? Quite simply. Referring once again to the occasion described in *The Greek Interpreter* when Watson had the unsurpassable thrill of seeing Mycroft for the first time, he made this profoundly significant observation about the formation of Mycroft's hands: "I am glad to meet you, sir," Mycroft said to Watson, putting out *a broad flat hand like the flipper of a seal*.

There you are. The outstanding and distinguishing characteristic of the flipper of a seal is that it is one big undifferentiated paddle—without anything resembling fingers or toes. In other words, no digits. Ergo, being without digits, Mycroft couldn't be a digital computer. Ergo, he's analogue, because all computers, unless they are hybrids, are either digital or analogue.

By the way, how did Mycroft store his input? What data storage medium did he use? While we can't answer this with absolute

certitude, the evidence leads one to the belief that he favoured microfilm. What evidence? Why, the very name Mycroft is evidence enough. Or isn't it? Does not Mycroft sound like an abbreviation or nickname for microfilm? If that leaves the "t" in Mycroft unaccounted for, maybe "t" stands for type—thus the name Microfilm Type, which is a handy abbreviation of the particular model. I do not insist on this point, however.

If Mycroft was a computer, did he have any special-purpose adaptations? There is reason to believe he had two. He had a cheque-writing attachment which was used to issue regularly the cheques to Mrs. Hudson to pay the Baker Street rent during the years of Sherlock's disappearance. Probably Mrs. Hudson never noticed the magnetic numerals at the foot of the cheques.

Was there another special adaption? I strongly believe so. What, then?

There is strong evidence that Mycroft was adaptable for use as an automatic pilot. Consider the facts. There are two principal types of automatic pilot in common use. One, of course, is the aeronautical, with which, manifestly, we are not concerned here. The other and older mechanism of this kind is used for steering ships. It could probably be used for other purposes, I dare say, with a few simple adjustments. Now, this variety of steering or guidance mechanism is known as the "Iron Mike."

Well, although I can't prove it beyond a scintilla of doubt, I'm convinced that it was an Iron Mike, not a human coachman, that drove the brougham that took Watson on that fateful day through the streets of London, past many lurking enemies, to join Holmes at Victoria Station for the blood-curdling trip to the Continent that ended up at that fearful place, the Reichenbach Falls. Yes, it was an Iron Mike that drove that brougham, and that Iron Mike was Mycroft.

Now for my Final Problem I am about to throw some much-needed light on that utterly *sui generis* institution, the Diogenes Club, with special reference to the exact nature of Mycroft's relationship to it. The clarifications here presented are based not so much on grubby research—which my doctor told me to avoid when I explained that it always gave me a splitting headache—but are, rather, the products of that pellucid, high-level ratiocination to which we Sherlockian scholars are peculiarly partial.

First of all, I must make bold to take exception with the Master—something which no Sherlockian would ever do without the gravest reflection. I question his appraisal of the Diogenes Club as the queerest club in London.

It was indeed a mighty queer club, and no questions asked. Nevertheless, I cling insistently to the view that it was only the second queerest.

In my opinion, the queerest club in London, far and away beyond any reasonable dispute, was the club to which that amiable gander, Mr. Henry Baker, belonged—the Goose Club at the Alpha Inn. You won't find an organisation like that once in a blue carbuncle. It seems to have been a kind of ornithological predecessor of the modern Christmas club in which geese of a feather painstakingly deposit their money regularly, receiving no visible advantage that they could not have achieved on their own, with a modicum of character, without the club.

In passing it is worth noting that the Goose Club at the Alpha Inn differed sharply from the Diogenes Club in respect to their conception of the value of silence. Although conversation was forbidden at the Diogenes Club under pain of expulsion for the third offense, it is understood that in the clubrooms at the Alpha Inn there was no restriction on honking.

I must now lay aside any air of levity that may have slipped into these remarks. I want to consider with intense seriousness what the origin, functions, and character of the Diogenes Club really were. It is, after all, quite irrational to accept the glib explanation, given out to the public, that it's a social club. In the first place, there is nothing even faintly social about the outfit. We must look deeper.

In one of those blinding flashes of insight that, happily, are vouchsafed generously to us Sherlockians from time to time, it came to me that the so-called Diogenes Club is in reality, to give it its more descriptive name, the Diogenes Foundation.

As you all know, Diogenes' quest for an honest man was not brought to successful fruition in his lifetime. Every day he went out searching with his lantern. (Since he worked in daylight it could just as well have been a dark lantern, for all the use it would have been to him.) But every night the old World Cynic No. 1 returned to his tub empty-handed. No honest man. Real-

ising that his search for an embodiment of virtue might not be completed in his lifetime, what could have been more natural than to establish the Diogenes Foundation to carry on the pursuit after his death? He probably was able to endow the foundation generously by turning over to it all the money he saved on rent by living in a tub.

At last, after some 2,200 years, the Diogenes Foundation came upon Mycroft. They discovered that he never told a lie. His answers, which is to say, his output, were always meticulously faithful to his input. With cries of "Eureka," which Diogenes would probably not have recognised as an Anglicisation of *Eureka*, the Foundation brought Mycroft into its headquarters building. He was the only permanent occupant. The mysterious other clubhouse figures, scanning newspapers silently in their cubicles, were not members, as Holmes and Watson supposed. Undoubtedly they were various special-purpose adaptors for Mycroft.

Mycroft actually had the place all to himself, and he deserved it. Diogenes, through his testamentary foundation, had found his honest man.

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