

The infamous Professor Moriarty, the nemesis of Sherlock Holmes: how much of the career of such a secretive one as he can we reconstruct?

MORIARTY: A LIFE STUDY

by PHILIP A. SHREFFLER

MY PAPER "The Dark Dynasty: A Djinn Genealogy" appeared in the March 1971 issue of this JOURNAL, and in it I presented some preliminary remarks concerning the parentage of Professor James Moriarty, as well as what I now believe to be some erroneous conclusions. New evidence, however, has come to light which should permit us finally to put to rest a number of mysteries which currently surround this man who may well have been one of the world's foremost mathematical theorists.

Briefly, my earlier article identified one Barnardo Eagle, a travelling conjurer, who was patronised by George IV, William IV, and Victoria, as the father of Professor Moriarty. The magician was suggestively referred to as "The Napoleon of Wizards," and putting that into juxtaposition with Baring-Gould's suggested birth date for Moriarty—31 October 1846—I hastily reached a conclusion which now seems rather amiss. I persist in thinking, however, that Barnardo Eagle is a credible starting point in Professor Moriarty's history for entirely different reasons, which I shall outline later. I realise that the false start of my previous article casts a shadow of a doubt over my own credibility in this matter, but I trust that the rather remarkable evidence presented here will allay any extant scepticism.

The Moriarty family, or O'Moriarty, from the Irish Ó Muircheartaigh, resided chiefly on both sides of the Castlemaine Harbour in Ireland. Even today statistics show that ninety per cent of the births registered in the name of Moriarty occur in County Kerry. Historically, the Moriartys were an interesting lot. The Most Reverend David Moriarty (1814–1877) "was remarkable for his opposition not only to the Fenians but to Home Rule" (indicating that there was more than one unpopular Moriarty). Reverend Patrick Eugene Moriarty (1804–1875),

born in County Kerry, later became famous as Augustinian Superior in the United States. And Henry Augustus Moriarty made his name in 1866 by recovering a broken Atlantic cable in mid-ocean. There seems to be another branch of the Moriarty family, too, in the Midlands, where Ó Muircheartaigh has survived in modern times as Murtagh. (It is significant to note that the Scottish form of Murtagh is Murdoch, a fact of which we shall make use later.)¹ It should, at any rate, suffice to say that the Moriarty family was an exemplary one for both its determination and its intelligence.

Since I have not had access to any British parish records, it is well nigh impossible to name the man who was Barnardo Eagle or to fix a definite birth date for Professor Moriarty. If we accept the proposition that he was born in 1846 or thereabouts (which I am rather inclined to do), we will understand the sense of Sherlock Holmes's remark in Chapter I of *The Valley of Fear* to the effect that Moriarty came from "a west of England family." During the turbulent years of the potato famine a great tide of emigrants fled Ireland. County Kerry, being not only a marine but also a farming district, did not escape this disaster. Although Barnardo Eagle, alias Moriarty, was described in a publicity poster as being a celebrated conjurer in 1845, we may assume that he was shuttling between Ireland and England as early as the 1820s during the reign of George IV. When the tragedy of the famine struck with full force in 1846, Eagle's possibilities for life in his homeland were shut off. Undoubtedly he settled in Liverpool where there were, and still are, great concentrations of Irish. So was established the "west of England family" from which sprang Professor James Moriarty.

The publicity poster for Barnardo Eagle mentions only a daughter named Georgiana as the offspring of the wizard (probably so named in appreciation of the patronage of the King). Since that poster is dated January of 1847, we may certainly assume that the three James Moriartys were born after mid-1846. We find also that Eagle was on the road with his show in early December of 1846, so that if Professor Moriarty was born in 1846, we may fix the date as some time prior to December, on the assumption that Eagle would wish to be with the baby before setting out again. If his birth date must be in 1846, but before early December, we may consider the

end of October or the beginning of November. This satisfies Baring-Gould's intuition that Hallowe'en of 1846 was the date in question.

So young James (the *first* James, our Professor) spent the early years of his life travelling about England with his showman father, since it would have been unlikely for him to have remained in Liverpool with his mother. Given the hereditary intelligence of the Moriarty family and the cleverness of his father, it is little wonder that James should have been attracted to mathematics, for all its concreteness one of the most abstract and intellectual of human endeavours. But the future Professor Moriarty was not alone in his pursuits. The Moriartys of Liverpool produced *two* mathematicians, as we shall see.

By the time he was twenty-one, James Moriarty had written his treatise on the binomial theorem. Since it is unlikely that he had any formal education, he certainly produced this work through his own studies. In point of fact, the binomial theorem was not new to the world of 1867. Although it became popular in Victorian times, it had been developed by Sir Isaac Newton as an algebraic short cut for raising a binomial to any power.

The theorem had something of a vogue in the later nineteenth century (it is even mentioned in "the Major-General's Song," in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*), and Moriarty's monograph on the subject attracted some attention. On the strength of the paper, and no doubt due to the fact that his father had been patronised by several crowned heads, James was appointed to the mathematics chair at what Holmes described in *The Valley of Fear* as "one of our smaller universities."

Given this information, it is not difficult to identify Moriarty's university. Prior to 1880, there existed no more than four English universities: Cambridge, Oxford, London, and Durham. We may rule out the universities in Scotland and Wales because Holmes says one of "our" universities (presumably meaning English). Then, too, we learn from Holmes that when Moriarty was forced to resign his chair, he came *down* to London. So we find that Moriarty could not have come down to London from London, and Oxford and Cambridge were definitely not "smaller universities." When we eliminate all the other possibilities, the truth that Durham was the Professor's university remains.

The University at Durham was chartered in 1832 with funds from a church grant and was devoted primarily to ecclesiastical education. No doubt it would have remained so had it not been for the radical changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The increased demand for technological instruction was probably the cause of an opening in the faculty which allowed James Moriarty to become a professor. But it is no mystery that in the isolated, small town of Durham and in a parochial university those "dark rumours" which surrounded Moriarty should precipitate his dismissal from his post. But before we deal with Moriarty's resignation, there are a few other avenues to explore.²

I wrote in my earlier essay that Sherlock Holmes must have known of the Professor's existence and even his lineal descent in referring to him as "The Napoleon of Crime" well before *The Valley of Fear* and *The Final Problem*. Now there is evidence to support this. Ironically, it was Dr. Watson who recorded Holmes's sidelong allusions to Moriarty in *A Study in Scarlet*, years before Watson had ever even heard of the man. The first of these occurs in Chapter IV where Holmes remarks: "You know a conjuror gets no credit once he has explained his trick. . . ." The suggestion here is that Holmes always knew that he was at odds with Moriarty, son of the conjurer, and that he is making an apt metaphor. But if this is not enough, there is one of the most perplexing Canonical puzzles which is explained by Holmes's knowledge of Moriarty—Holmes on astronomy. Why should Holmes have become irritable at the mention of the Copernican system? Clearly, he must have known of Moriarty's treatise, *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, and was unable to control his anger, even toward his roommate. This, incidentally, dates both the treatise and Moriarty's entry into the world of crime some time between 1867 and 1881.

Parenthetically, we must note that *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, "a book which ascends to such rarefied heights of pure mathematics . . . that there [was] no man in the scientific press capable of criticising it," came at a time when little was known about asteroid movement and its mathematics. But we can only understand that Moriarty had picked up where Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777–1855) had left off. One of the greatest mathematicians of all time, Gauss had made astounding investigations into the dynamics of asteroid movement, and had done work with bino-

mial equations! Thus, we may well have been underestimating Moriarty's mathematical achievements. To say that he ranked with Gauss is to say that he was one of the four greatest mathematicians in history.³

What was it, then, that caused the dismissal of this genius from the faculty of Durham University? Was Holmes correct about Moriarty's connection with the case of the vengeful Scowrers? And how was it that Holmes had so harried the Professor before 4 May 1891 that a fatal contest ensued?

We know from *The Valley of Fear* that Holmes is aware of "a master hand" as the planning agent in the murder of Birdy Edwards. We have always assumed it was Moriarty, but we need assume nothing when there is proof. Obviously the murder was well planned, from beginning to end, even down to the hotel reservations for Ted Baldwin—and the name of the hotel was the Eagle Commercial! It was the perfect touch for a man with a bit of the theatrical in his blood. And if the reason for Barnardo Eagle's alias and the choice of the Eagle Commercial Hotel is not obvious by now, we have but to consider the arms of the only Moriarty family listed in *Burke*: "Moriarty (Ireland). Argent, an eagle displayed, sable. Crest: an arm embowed in armour, holding a dagger, the blade environed with a serpent." Nothing more need be added. In taking this liberty, Moriarty had "made a trip—only a little, little trip—but it was more than he could afford."⁴

Nathan Bengis has broken with most chronologists and has dated *The Valley of Fear* on 7 and 8 January 1891,⁵ and I am in agreement with him. For the events which follow the Scowrer's murder were quick and terrible, characterised by viciousness and subterfuge on all sides—and ended in death.

For the sake of brevity, I shall dispense with quotation marks and footnotes in telling the story. For those interested, the information all comes from the beginning of *The Valley of Fear* and *The Final Problem*.

As late as early January of 1891, according to Holmes, Professor Moriarty still held his chair at Durham University for which he received £700 per annum. And, according to both Holmes and Inspector MacDonald, Moriarty maintained a study in which hung a valuable Greuze. Since it is not likely that he would keep a painting of great value in a study in London and

teach at the other end of the country, we may infer that the study was in Durham, and that Moriarty, in his best tradition, administered his criminal activities in London through Moran, while he himself was far, far away. We can imagine Holmes making three separate trips to the north in an attempt to gain entry to the study, while MacDonald, a Scot, probably stopped by on Holmes's advice while on a rail journey to visit relatives in Scotland.

But after the outrage of *The Valley of Fear* (which, remember, I date in 1891), Holmes decided to take action to stop Moriarty forever. Knowing the nature of parochial institutions and of small towns in general, Holmes realised it would take little to cast aspersions on the Professor's reputation. So, according to Moriarty's own memorandum book, Holmes crossed his path on the 7th of January in the Douglas murder. (See *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, II, 305, to account for this discrepancy.) On the 23rd of January Holmes visited the administration of Durham University with evidence of Moriarty's criminal involvements. This seemed to have little effect, so Holmes enlisted the aid of an agent to spread malicious gossip about the Professor around the town. And Holmes was later to remark about his success: In *The Copper Beeches* he asserted that "the pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish." By the middle of February this manoeuvre had seriously inconvenienced Moriarty until at the end of March he was hampered in his plans to the point where he was forced by the university to resign. He hastily moved to London where he set up as an army coach, probably through the aid of his brother Colonel Moriarty, and Colonel Moran. His career there, however, was to last only about a month. At the close of April he visited Holmes in Baker Street to warn the detective of the danger of his continual persecution. And persecution was just the appropriate term. Moriarty had been hounded by Holmes to the point where, like a wounded animal, he was forced to turn and spring.

The rest of the story is familiar—the chase over the continent, and the finale at the Reichenbach. With the death of Moriarty and the capture of Moran, Holmes felt that he could breathe a great deal easier. And yet there was one other problem in the case, one that was by no means final. No mention is

ever made of what became of Colonel James Moriarty. Apparently, Holmes thought he had little to fear from him since no steps were taken to apprehend him, and we never hear of him again. But this military man, probably the youngest of the three Moriarty brothers, and probably no more than forty years old at the time (having been born certainly no earlier than 1850), swore to dog Holmes's tracks to the end of his days, waiting for the proper moment. We see him at least once more in the Canon, living near Holmes on the Sussex Downs years after Holmes's retirement. He appears in *The Lion's Mane* as Ian Murdoch, the mathematics coach at Harold Stackhurst's academy, The Gables, and he is described as "a tall, dark, thin man, so taciturn and aloof that none can be said to have been his friend. He seemed to live in some high, abstract region of surds and conic sections with little to connect him with ordinary life." Little, that is, except Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Murdoch's physical description, intellectual prowess, and temperamental disposition are enough to link him with Professor Moriarty. But there is one further point: Murdoch, as we have noted, is the Scottish variant of Moriarty!

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A MORIARTY CHRONOLOGY

1210	O'Moriarty, Chief of the Name, marries daughter of a leading Fitzgerald
1653	Father Thady MacMoriarty martyred under the Penal Code
1714	Four priests named Moriarty proscribed under the Penal Code
late 1820s	Barnardo Eagle (Moriarty) first patronised by King George IV
1835	Birth of Georgiana Moriarty
early 1846	The Barnardo Eagle family emigrates to Liverpool, England
31 October 1846	Birth of Professor James Moriarty
1847–1860	The younger James Moriarty born during this period
1855	Karl Friedrich Gauss dies
1866	Henry Augustus Moriarty recovers broken Atlantic cable
1867	Oldest James Moriarty writes paper on binomial theorem and wins mathematics chair at Durham University
1867–1881	Professor Moriarty enters life of crime and writes <i>The Dynamics of an Asteroid</i> during this period

7–8 January 1891	<i>The Valley of Fear</i>
23 January 1891	Sherlock Holmes calls on administration of Durham regarding Moriarty
End of March 1891	Professor Moriarty moves to London after dismissal from faculty at Durham
24 April–4 May 1891	<i>The Final Problem</i> ; death of Professor Moriarty
1909	Colonel James Moriarty living at The Gables under the name Ian Murdoch

NOTES

1. Information on the Moriarty family is from *Irish Families: Their Names, Arms, and Origins*, by Edward MacLysaght (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1957), p. 230.

2. Information on the English universities is from *England: 1870–1914*, by Sir Robert Ensor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 147–48 and 321; and *The Age of Reform: 1815–1870*, by Sir Llewellyn Woodward (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 492–93.

3. The other three giants in the field would be Archimedes, Newton, and Gauss. Physical theorists like Democritus and mystical renegades like Pythagoras cannot, of course, be included in this number.

4. *The Final Problem*.

5. "What Was the Month?" *BSJ* (NS) 7 (1957), 204–14.

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