

No end to Baskerville riddle

I gather from my local newspaper that the myths and legends surrounding the famous hound of the Baskervilles are entering yet another cycle. Since its genesis in 1901, the Arthur Conan Doyle masterpiece has been criticised in detail by a host of writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although it is widely agreed that the adventures of those concerned with the hound are centred on a specific area of Dartmoor, there are dissidents. The latest controversy arises from the renewed claim that the spectral hound was in fact found in Herefordshire, where it haunted the area around Bardsley Castle near Kington. The so-called Hergest Hound was associated with the Vaughan family, who may have suggested the theme for a story when Conan Doyle visited them in 1897 or 1898. The Vaughans intermarried with the Baskervilles, whose name became associated with the hound. Another story is that Conan Doyle became acquainted with the tale of the Norville Hound, which haunted Norville Hall in the Severn valley, when he visited the area.

Yet another story concerns a visit Conan Doyle made to Cromer, Norfolk, early in 1901, where he stayed with his friend Bertram Fletcher Robinson. When the two were kept from golf by the weather, Robinson related a story about a spectral hound, prompted by a local legend that a black hound haunted the coast there. During a trip to Rowe's Duchy Hotel in Princetown, Dartmoor, later in the year, the pair were driven in the locality by Robinson's coachman Harry Baskerville and explored the grim local moor, including the Fox Tor Mires which feature in the story as the Great Grimpen Mire.



Since Robinson's home was in Ipplepen, Devon, Conan Doyle had ample opportunities to explore the scene of his story. He wrote to his mother one day that he had wandered 14 miles over the moor, finding it "very sad and wild" and dotted with prehistoric dwellings and abandoned tin mines. On his return to his new home, "Undershaw" in Hindhead, Surrey, he completed his tale of the hound promptly, and dedicated it to Fletcher Robinson, who, he wrote, had furnished many of its ideas. When the work was published in the Strand Magazine in 1901, an issue of 30,000 copies proved insufficient to meet the demand. Several English texts appeared, with minor differences, in rapid succession.

It is interesting to note that Doyle's first draft featured Dr Watson but not Sherlock Holmes. Once Holmes had been introduced, the publishers raised the royalties they were prepared to pay.

To trace the many friends and acquaintances of Conan Doyle who wittingly or unwittingly played their part in building up the story is a tortuous process, but it is certain, whatever critics may argue, that 'The hound of the Baskervilles' is attributable to Arthur Conan Doyle and to no other author.

The chemical universe poses a health threat

In *The Lancet* for 10 July, Robert Walgate describes the World Health Organization's struggle with the international companies responsible for spreading chemical pollution throughout the world. A recent conference in Budapest heard how thousands of possibly hazardous chemicals are loose in our living space. Children are particularly at risk of suffering from their effects. WHO is moving to strengthen guidelines on safety testing of industrially produced compounds but expects an uphill battle against their producers, judging from the reaction to attempts at anti-tobacco legislation already experienced. Leaders of the global chemical industry appear to be worried at WHO efforts to reduce its unhealthy repercussions.

Many undesirable chemicals have already been discovered in breast milk, and they may also cross the placenta and cause foetal malformations. Some may induce asthma, cancer, birth defects and learning disabilities, and recent increases in the incidence of cancer and asthma may offer evidence of the hazard. Such observations indicate that chemicals need more thorough testing before they are released on to the market. Agents already on the market should be retested using revised criteria.

The precautionary principle applied to risks aims to reduce exposure by first assuming that they are harmful unless proven otherwise. WHO has endorsed this principle since 1992. Investigations are also needed to see how compounds to which we are exposed may interact and so constitute new hazards.

The impact of the environment on health, especially that of children, is not an issue only for Europe. All regions are likely to be affected, since many chemical manufacturers make profits on doubtful products in other countries, notably in the developing world. And it is believed that globally 25 to 35 per cent of diseases, particularly in women and children, have an environmental cause. Banning smoking is only the start of the clean-up.

Was it climatic or cultural change that led to the Neanderthals' demise?

There is no end, apparently, to the arguments over the decline and fall of Neanderthal man. He was not a biological ancestor of modern humans but a parallel development. He inhabited Europe just before modern *Homo sapiens sapiens* took his place in the drama.

Although it was once argued whether our Neanderthal colleague evolved into his modern successor, so that we can claim a blood relationship, or whether our coming caused his extinction, it is now almost certain that our predecessor was in fact extinguished root and branch some 50,000 years ago.

In the 2 July issue of *Science*, Richard Klein of Stanford University has discussed

some of the evidence that Neanderthal man may have been eliminated through, alternatively, climatic or cultural changes in his environment. Fossil evidence shows that the two lines of proto-humans and humans diverged more than 350,000 years ago. The Neanderthals evolved in Europe, and spread into Asia some 80,000 years ago. By contrast, modern humans originated in Africa, and some 50,000 years ago had eliminated their predecessors from western Asia and then from Europe. If there was any interbreeding, it was negligible.

The expansion from Africa was driven by advances in culture and technology. That

from Asia and Europe may have been driven by climatic influences. Although the Neanderthals possessed a physique that enabled them to exploit hilly and mixed environments, where they did not have to wander far for food, they could not survive the frequent and sudden freezing periods that came between 45,000 and 30,000 years ago, since they depended largely on mountain refuges in the face of an invading new race.

At least, that is the prevalent argument. In fact there are so many discrepancies and counter-arguments that there is ample scope for a few more centuries of lively argument before anthropologists can rest content.