

INTERVIEW WITH DAME JEAN CONAN DOYLE [LADY BROMET]

At her home in Cadogan Square in London, October 1988

By John C. Tibbetts

Lady Bromet: Well, I send my greetings to the Alkali Plainsmen [scion society in Kansas City] amongst your membership, particularly to John Lellenberg, and to Milt Perry, and to Stan and Reenie Carmack. I'm sitting here in my flat now with John Tibbetts and he's been telling me a little bit about your special Scion Branch of the Baker Street Irregulars. I know there's lots of branches in America, but it's so nice to have this opportunity to talk personally to one of them. I believe you are stationed in Kansas City. I remember going to Kansas City with my father and admiring that splendid statue of the Indian. That was in the early 1920's. I'm quite sure that Kansas City looks very different today, but how nice your interest in Sherlock Holmes remains.

JT: Lady Bromet, in talking with you, why don't you first introduce yourself in your relationship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and tell us a bit about where we are sitting, what day this is, right at this point in time?

JB: Well, I am Jean Conan Doyle, and I am the youngest child of my father, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He had two children by his first marriage, Mary and Kingsley. Kingsley, alas, died in the first World war, and Mary died about ten years ago. Then I had two elder brothers, Dennis, who died in the 1940's, and Adrian, who died in 1970. No, I think Dennis died in the 1950's. One rather loses track of these sad things anyhow, that's the family. I'm the only one left and I have a flat in London which is near Harrods and near Sloane Square, very good shopping centers. Today we're sitting in my what used to be called drawing room but now can only be called workroom because everything happens in this room. It's the dining room and the sitting room and the television room and most important of all it's my office.

JT: To your left is a very imposing portrait of a gentleman in military uniform. Tell me about him.

JB: Ah. That is my very beloved husband who died five years ago. He's Air Vice-Marshall Sir Geoffrey Bromet, and after he came out of the Air Force, he was Governor of the Isle of Man for seven years and then afterwards, he was in charge of air raid precautions for Birmingham, no Coventry, which was the city that didn't want to run its own air raid precautions and the government decided that they really must have them and my husband was put in charge of that.

JT: Flanking the image are two swords.

JB: Yes, that's very observant of you. The smaller one of them is a naval dirk which was his dirk when he was at Dartmouth and he was in the Royal Navy and the other one is a replica of the Sword of State of the Isle of Man and this was presented to him some years after he'd retired, and we were very touched when it was sent to us.

JT: On the opposite wall, almost as if you were looking at each other, is a portrait of you, in younger years -- if you would tell me about the circumstances of that.

JB: Oh, one really shouldn't have a photograph of yourself in your own drawing room, but it means an awful lot to me because I served on, for one year in the Air Force after I married, and during that time I had to be out quite a lot. On one of my visits away, my husband had this portrait painted from a photograph and this was to be a very surprising first anniversary present to me and I was so touched because I never thought that anyone would want to have a portrait of me and then suddenly to be given one by one's very dear husband was indeed a wonderful surprise and I'm certainly not going to take the portrait down now.

JT: Would you please tell me about the young woman that we see smiling out at us from that canvas? What was she like in those days?

JB: Oh, I wasn't so young. I was director of the Women's Royal Air Force, and I had lots and lots on my plate waiting to be done, but I loved it. I loved working with people and got an enormous admiration for the men in the Royal Air Force and, indeed, for our own women in the Air Force.

JT: At that time, was there a greatly developed Women's Corps or were you a part in establishing the women's component of the Royal Air Force?

JB: No, cause I'd been in the Air Force for twenty-eight years. I'd been in all sorts of different phases of the Air Force, but by the time I was Directory, and before that, we had become part of the Royal Air Force, and my commission was in the Royal Air Force, not in the Women's Royal Air Force. There was no separate service. It was just a convenient term to show that we were women and in certain respects we might have to be treated differently than men because of our different physical stature. But so, but in the early days. there was a separate corps which was the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, and I belonged to that during the war. I joined before the war.

JT: At that time, was it still rather unusual for a woman, in uniform, in that branch of the service?

JB: Not really. I mean when war broke out, and we women were sent into detachments of fifty or so to various RAF stations, you did come across some elderly men who were very shocked at having women and wouldn't allow them in the Officer's Mess and one

friend of mine who was made Mess Catering Officer, had to have her meals behind a screen in the Officers' Mess all by herself. It was ridiculous and I think of that, think of that now, that later on I lived in the Senior Officer's Mess for two years, I was the only woman in that mess.

JT: As Air Commandant, do I have this title correct?

JB: Yes.

JT: As Air Commandant, I would assume then that a great many men worked under or for you?

JB: Not particularly as Air Commandant, but they did when I was commanding a station, when I was a Group Officer, A Group Captain, and then indeed, I had rather more men on the staff than women and a lot of National Service Men for whom I had great admiration and they seemed to find life in the service very interesting. So much so, that after they were demobilized, they used to come back at weekends and stay on the camp. They had sort of reunions every so often, because they all admitted it was one of the happiest times of their lives.

JT: At what time, then, did you separate from the service or have you maintained connection?

JB: Oh, I retired, as one does, with pension in 1966, but since then I've had quite a lot of work with welfare organizations connected with the services. One was, first of all, the Victory Club in London where service people stay for a very small amount of money and it's a very fine club and then I was a Governor at the Royal Stand Garter for fourteen years and that's for disabled men and now recently they're opening their doors to women too, but badly disabled men and some from the Somme and the Falklands and that was fascinating work because they are such splendid people and they don't complain and they make one feel very humble really to realize that we complain about such little things, but they don't.

JT: I hear in your voice a genuine concern, then, for continued public service.

JB: Yes, I don't look upon it as public service. I just look upon it as something one does very naturally and that it is a great privilege to know the people who are disabled. And they're very kind about talking to one and telling one about their quite extraordinary experiences.

JT: Let's go back to the war years. I'm assuming that many of the men that you would have worked with during the war would have known your father. Is that correct?

JB: No, they didn't. I must say, that during the war years, the only time that I was ever reminded that I was the daughter of my father. During the war years, I was sometimes called "Dr. Watson" or "sleuthie" or something like that but this was all from short-term officers and I really didn't mind it, but when we got down to the nitty-gritty of the permanent Air Force, all this stopped and people knew me as myself and, in fact, on the day when I was leaving the Air Force and went round to say good-bye to some of the more senior officers, one of them said, having just read the newspaper, "I'd no idea you were related to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle at all." And that's how it should be.

JT: How about your husband's feelings in that regard? When did he first become aware that this woman that he was interested in was the daughter of Conan Doyle?

JB: He always knew and then, he wasn't a great reader, but then he made a point of reading a lot of my father's works.

JT: How did he handle that? Did he kid you about it or did he feel like enough people at this time are calling you nicknames that he would respectfully withdraw from that kind of comment?

JB: Nobody was calling me nicknames in those days. This was just a short term thing during the war and he didn't mind at all. He always backed me up when people came to interview me and seem. It always amazed me that here was this man who was so distinguished in his own right and had done so much for the country, just the sort of man that my father would have admired most cause he did admire military people very much and particularly, I think, men who made their names in aviation. And people would come and my dear husband would be so courteous to them as the host and yet, people were not interested in him and his life at all and my father would have been very embarrassed by this. I was embarrassed for it, but my husband was such a big man that I never once heard him complain about it nor did I ever see him feel in any way put out that this was happening. He was a very big man.

JT: At the same time, maybe you were a little put out, once or twice.

JB: Oh, I would be on his behalf, yes. People in this world get things topsy-turvey.

JT: When you were a little girl, where did you grow up? You were born in 1912, the only daughter of the second marriage, correct?

JB: In December. Yes, I was born in December. Another one was born, but I think she didn't survive.

JT: What part of London or outside of London did you grow up in as a little girl?

JB: Oh, I grew up in Croborough in Sussex which was my father and mother . . . When my father and mother were married, he bought this house at Croborough and built on to it and we lived there for the whole of our lives, up to my mother's death and at that time, it was taken over by the Canadian Army during the war and then, after that, my bother Dennis owned it and it was sold.

JT: I know you're asked this many times but yet, growing up, you must have become gradually aware that there was a very famous man that you happened to call Papa living in that house. Tell me again. What did you call him?

JB: Pop. But I don't think we called him Pop until we went to the States on one of the lecture tours. Then we always did. My father loved slang and he liked American slang very much and encouraged us to learn as much American slang as we could while we were out in America, and though he didn't use much slang himself, he was really rather intrigued that we should learn the slang. My brothers both spoke impeccable English. The most beautiful English. But I'm afraid I did pick up this leaning toward slang and then course being in the RAF where there was a lot of RAF slang during the war, I found this very lively and got used to using these words which my father would have approved of thoroughly.

JT: I understand that when he would be writing, that he would sometimes read his works to you. Do you have recollections of that?

JB: Oh yes, very very clear recollections, because from the time I was a schoolgirl, he used to bring his whatever he was writing down at lunch time. When we'd finished lunch . . . When he'd finished lunch, rather quickly, he'd go up and collect his manuscript that he'd been writing on during the morning and come down and read it to us and then he'd always say, "Now if there's anything you don't like in this, anything you object to, say. Tell me." And we'd listen to this and one got to learn one's father's own feeling about these characters. I mean he always had an affection for Holmes. No doubt about it. And it amused him intensely to write in little Holmesian jokes, rather dry humor, and Holmes pulling Watson's leg, and he used to laugh about Holmes' conceit well-earned, I mean it was quite justified but he loved to write in a little bit about Holmes and then he'd chuckle away at that. He chuckled a lot over the Holmes stories.

JT: He never confided in you, at times, some of his impatience though with the characters? We do know there was that occasionally.

JB: Oh yes, but that wasn't exactly just impatience. That we all knew that he would prefer to be writing a historical novel or doing some other writing and that is a fact, and then he did resent the fact that Holmes took up so much of his time and that so many people concentrated on Holmes and didn't talk about Brigadier Girard and Professor

Challenger, who in his opinion were just as great characters, and we all as a family loved them just as much as Holmes.

JT: I was going to ask you as a young reader, were you also reading these or were you secretly reading other works by other authors on your own?

JB: No, I was reading Holmes stories under the bedclothes as most children did, and I read those and then I read my father's other works of course, Brigadier Girard and Lost World and his short stories - rather macabre short stories - and that sort of thing. Of course, I read masses of their books as well cause I was a great reader and at that time could read very fast so I just didn't concentrate on Conan Doyle.

JT: I understand that he took you to a stage performance of "The Speckled Band"?

JB: Yes he did. He took all of us to that in 1921. It was terribly exciting and he was very pleased with it. I thought you know the story that when they first put it on, they used a real snake and there were so many complaints that they were obviously using a false snake, they had to withdraw the real snake and use a false snake. Too silly for words.

JT: I wonder if you could give us a portrait of what he looked like and especially what he sounded like when he would come down the stairs and read to you these stories. What remains in your mind and in your ears as you think back to that?

JB: Well, as I start to think back to that, I can hear very heavy footsteps, slow heavy footsteps descending the stairs and then this large, wonderfully genial figure coming in to the dining room. We were all there ready and then it would be as if the sunshine had come into the room. He was such a personality and everything to the light then and everything came so interesting. His talk came so interesting. He wasn't particularly interested in food. He had very, very simple tastes. Apple dumpling was his favorite pudding and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding he'd love or steak and kidney pudding. Those sort of things. He wasn't interested very much in that and not very interested in drinking much either but . . .

JT: The voice itself?

JB: The conversation would stop. Deep voice, when one hears it on these records nowadays and tapes nowadays, it sounds so much squeakier than it was because I think of faulty technicalities in those days and another thing too was that one of them was taken in one of the two last years of his life. At which time, his teeth, he had a great theory. Everyone should have their teeth out very young and then nobody would have a toothache. And he'd had all his out very young. By the time he was in his last sixties, these weren't fitting quite properly and this blurred his voice a little bit. It wasn't quite

the same as it used to be and this comes over in the records but he was a much more full-chested speaker than you can hear on the records.

JT: And I understand that you own dog became something of a movie star?

JB: Oh yes, Paddy. And he appeared in some of the still photographs, too, because when I was away, my father looked after him for me. This was a special thing and he attached himself to my father and they were very fond of one another and Paddy, who was an Irish terrier, used to go round with him so, in every photograph, he would be with my father.

JT: Now, the last years with your father. What memories do remain with you now of maybe the last time you had moments alone with him?

JB: His thought for other people. He was so upset. He sat in the room waiting with oxygen for his heart and so on and my brothers went off to get the oxygen and he said, it has been reported that he said it to somebody else but it wasn't true, he said to me, "Get a book and read. It's so boring for you, and I'm so sorry for you there. This must all be so boring for you." Of course he loved my mother very deeply indeed and he was sweet to her and he was just wonderful to all of us until he was unconscious and died.

JT: Now, you were about how old at that point?

JB: I was seventeen.

JT: Very impressionable age.

JB: It was a terrible blow to me because I was particularly close to my father. I loved my mother dearly, but I think that it's fairly usual for daughters and fathers to be closer and mothers and sons and it certainly happened with me and he'd given me so much companionship when I was on my holidays, we used to spend every evening together, we used to sit round the early radio sets trying to get some message or other from the BBC and we sat and read together and I was allowed to go in his study and read while he was working.

JT: So he did not mind people around him while he wrote?

JB: No, he didn't. He wouldn't have liked people around him who talked to him. I can't remember other people going around him but there was a special chair that I was allowed to go and sit in. And I didn't talk at all. I just sat there and got on with my own business. And also, I looked after his library. I dusted all his books for him, and I could do that while he was working.

JT: Did he ever work at a typewriter, or was it strictly longhand?

JB: No, always longhand, such very neat longhand. Have you seen any?

JT: No. Where are the manuscripts? What do you have?

JB: I could probably show you some replicas here in one or two books which will show you them, but I have manuscripts, a lot, but they're in the bank.

JT: Where they should be.

JB: Yes.

JT: However, behind us, to my right is a library. Now you say many of these are his books?

JB: Yes, a great number of these are his and a lot of them have inscriptions to him from people like H.G. Wells and Barrie and so on, a lot of them and then another lot are marked by him. He's marked the interesting paragraphs and one or two, I think, are prizes for him when he was at Stoneyhurst College. We had the three of us, my two brothers and myself, divided his library up between us and I was given first choice and first one and then a brother and then another brother and then me again and that sort which means that I was able to get the books that I wanted myself. One of my brothers sold his section to one of the American universities. I think it's the University of Texas, but I may be wrong.

JT: Now directly across from you on the wall is a very famous image of your father. I feel like I've seen this many times before. What can you tell me about it?

JB: Well the awful thing is that my memory is so bad that I've forgotten the artist's name. I think it's Gates, but I would have to verify that. The artist went down and saw my father quite a lot down in the Psyche Bookshop. My father had this bookshop which he ran as a hobby in Victoria Street in London and Gates then took a lot of sketches from it and then a photograph and then he painted from that and at one stage I had two, this one and one far less formal one, a smaller one, far less formal, which I really wanted to keep because it was more my father as I knew him. I mean, that's when he's lecturing and . . .

JT: And in his right hand are glasses. Now tell me about the glasses. Did he not wear them very often?

JB: No, but at that stage of his life for reading, but not until then and he'd just but it on in case he had to read some notes, I suppose.

JT: Now that famous formidable mustache. As a little girl you must have been fascinated by this as any child would be, I would think.

JB: You see I can't remember the one when it was black and waxed, I was too young for that, but this one I didn't mind in the least. There were a lot of men with mustaches in those days. you see, it wasn't just him. My uncle had a mustache. Bother uncles had a mustache. There wasn't anything really odd about it.

JT: Now among all the children, is it safe to say that it is Adrian who pursued the most literary bent?

JB: Yes, it would be. He wrote, at least he wrote one pastiche of Sherlock Holmes stories and he wrote two about his own adventures fishing, deep-sea fishing. Dennis, on the other hand, wrote many, many articles. He was a good journalist and he wrote many articles for the Sunday papers on the subject of spiritualism.

JT: Now spiritualism must have been something that was discussed a lot.

JB: Yes, it was.

JT: Is that something that he ever communicated to you especially or was it just an interest that you would believe in or not believe in, as you chose, or was he emphatic about . . .

JB: He spoke to all of us at different times. He talked to me about spiritualism when I was about six. You mustn't worry about death, and what death is, and this is not the end of everything. There is another life afterwards.

JT: And is it interesting, even for those who don't believe that, in his books, that indeed was true?

JB: Yes.

JT: When did you become a Dame Commander? For those of us who are not aware of what a Dame Commander is, or what she does . . .

JB: Well, I was just lucky enough to be the Air Force and to have risen to be the Director of the WRAF because, not now, but until fairly recently, the directors of the Women's Royal Air Force were appointed dames either on retirement or on appointment. I was very lucky cause I got it shortly after my appointment.

JT: Now, when people refer to you, or when you refer to yourself to people, is the term Dame Commander more proper or Lady Bromet?

JB: No, it isn't Dame Commander. If I'm using the name Conan Doyle, it's Dame Jean Conan Doyle, but the full title is Air Commandant Dame Jean Conan Doyle which shows people, people wonder why I should be a dame. Was it something to do with Sherlock Holmes? Well, no it wasn't. It was an Air Commandant. I was a military dame. My medal is marked military one, you see, and so it's helpful, I think, sometimes, to make it quite clear that I'm not an academic. I'm not a politician, but I am a service woman and that's the Dame.

JT: I think it's important that we note that in 1980 something happened regarding the Sherlock Holmes stories. I'll let you describe what happened and what the results have been because we've sure been seeing the name Sherlock Holmes around a lot lately, but your father's name is not attached to it.

JB: No, that's very bad. Well, in 1980 the works came into public domain in this country and anybody could write whatever they liked, put on any sort of show or anything in this country and write pastiches using the characters. This doesn't apply in America, I'm glad to say, where, thank goodness, your laws have been changed fairly recently and quite a number of my father's works are still in copyright and then copyright to me. Over here there have been several pastiches written, more and more recently, I'm afraid to say, and there have been, a lot of films have been made but we, by having a right, a copyright on the film, on my father's works in America, I hope to influence the standard of work here in England because most people want to publish the work in America afterwards, after it's been published in England, or they want to have it produced on the American stage or screen and I won't give permission for that to be done unless the characters are shown in character and in period and are very well written. For a time I did allow pastiches to be published on these terms, but always against my inner judgment and I don't allow it any longer. I allow a certain amount of films and television and cinema if they follow the rules I've just told you about.

JT: Let's take, as an example, "The Secret of Sherlock Holmes," now playing at the Wyndham Theatre in the West End. When this project came up, were you consulted at first, and if you would follow it from there?

JB: Yes, I was. I was consulted very early on in that I was asked to a private view on a Sunday. I was sent the script. I heard it on a tape, and I kept in very close touch with the author, Jeremy Paul, and with the star, Jeremy Brett, and I could see nothing objectionable in it at all. I thought it was very elegantly written, fascinating in its way, something that would have amused my father greatly. He didn't much mind what liberties were taken on the stage, within reason, providing they were in good hands, the hand being William Gillette. I don't think he would have been so happy with some

other actor-producers, but certainly with "The Secret of Sherlock Holmes," it's been beautifully handled by people who obviously love Holmes and Watson and the acting is splendid. Jeremy Brett's been appearing as Holmes in films for the television for a long time now, but his performance has changed beyond measure. I didn't really like him in the early series. He was far too arrogant, too mannered, too highly strung altogether, whereas Holmes was a very cool character, and it has been wonderful to see the change in him, and the last series, instead of being a rather unpleasant man, he became an endearing man in spite of his conceit, in spite of this, that and the other. He's somebody who you really care about, and I think it's an absolutely great performance . . . He holds you.

JT: I wish I could have been present in his dressing room when you went back to see him.

JB: Oh, it was a lovely party. very nice to see him again. And such a privilege to meet Watson. Edward Hardwicke is a splendid Watson, just the sort of Watson my father would have envisaged unlike Nigel Bruce who really was the most appalling Watson so far, I believe he was a very nice man, but Watson was never the old bungler like that. I mean, Holmes would never have shared digs with a fool.

JT: Now by contrast to all of this, has there been a project come your way that you've had to say no?

JB: John Lellenberg, who acts as my agent, has certainly had to say no on my behalf to many projects. Yes, there have been. In this country, a book has come out recently which I think was highly objectionable, but of course, I can't do anything about it in this country, and that is a book produced by some homosexuals in society. I think they've got some rather inappropriate name, and they, I think they're absolutely disgraceful to suggest that there was a homosexual relationship between Holmes and Watson. There was never any such thing.

JT: So, then in general terms, you are very aware then of a role you must maintain in the 1980's to keep the Holmes character with some kind of integrity. How would you paraphrase that: how would you describe that role?

JB: Well, I am a protector of Sherlock Holmes' reputation, and therefore, my father's literary reputation. It's a funny thing cause I'm not a Sherlockian. Holmes is not necessarily my favorite character. I would fight just as strongly, if not more strongly, for Brigadier Girard and Professor Challenger, but I have an affection for him. Like my father, I find him to be a terrible nuisance. He takes up far too much of my time. I can well understand my father wanting to push him over Reichenbach Fall. I quite feel that way myself at times. But what I can't be having, I've grown up with an affection for

this character who I feel I know so well, and I hate to see other people putting him in their books which are [NOT!] nearly so well-written and really denigrating . . .

JT: And, besides, how could you come back to your apartment and look at that image of your father on the wall without, with as direct gaze had you not been so careful?

JB: Oh, you're quite right. I couldn't. It's a pity that people will try and write these pastiches cause I always feel that a writer who's worth anything should create their own characters. What an admission that you must use another man's characters in order to get a book published and really, and to allow these very special characters to be handled by writers who can't produce their own characters. What a fate!

JT: Dame Jean Conan Doyle, I want to thank you so much for your time and your observations on keeping Holmes alive and well in the 1980's. It's been a pleasure seeing you and sharing the library and the images of your father and your late husband and on behalf of Sherlockians everywhere, thank you so much.

JB: I've enjoyed meeting you enormously. As you know, I was rather hesitant about seeing you today because I was so busy going off on holiday, but it's been a very great pleasure to meet you, and you couldn't have made it easier for me to have this interview.

JT: I appreciate that. Broadcasting from London, the apartment of Jean Conan Doyle, this is John Tibbetts. I'll talk to you next time.