

*Arthur & George* by Julian Barnes (Jonathan Cape) R160

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In 1903 the little village of Great Wyrley in Staffordshire was shaken by a series of grotesque, apparently motiveless, maimings of farm animals. The police, no doubt embarrassed by their own failure to make an early arrest, made amends by arresting possibly the least likely candidate: an earnest, seriously myopic young solicitor, son of the local Anglican priest, who for bizarre though uncriminal reasons slept in the same locked bedroom as his father at night, when the mutilations took place.

The young man was called George Edalji, and his surname probably suggests the clearest reason for his arrest: his father, though an Anglican priest, was a Parsee from Bombay who had married an Englishwoman. In a parish as cut off and benighted as Great Wyrley this constituted prima facie evidence of his guilt, though the police did go to the trouble of fabricating further evidence: horse hairs on a jacket they found hanging in the vicarage, a "handwriting expert" who swore that George had written the anonymous letters that were being sent at the same time as the maimings were taking place. With surprising skill, given their lack of acumen thus far, they managed to build a case against the young man strong enough to have him sent to prison for seven years.

To the credit of the great English public, an outcry followed, with petitions to the Home Secretary. The Home Office stood its ground, refusing to reopen the case, but quietly released George after three years. George, however, wanted more than his freedom; he wanted an exoneration that would enable him to return to his job as a solicitor. In despair, he wrote to the most famous writer in England, creator of the most famous detective in history. Enter Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

From this historical material Julian Barnes has fashioned a remarkable novel, a seamless blend of historical fact with fictional invention. The work is clearly researched to the hilt – it is amongst other things a masterly recreation of Edwardian England – but the characters are fully and credibly imagined. The diffident and yet obdurate George Edalji, the boisterous, confident, slightly swaggering Sir Arthur: Barnes doesn't miss a tic or a tremor, and yet without succumbing to the temptation of debunking his subjects. The archaic chivalric romanticism of Arthur, the earnest dedication to duty of George: we are never invited to smirk at how old-fashioned it all was. Under pressure both men showed at their best, and Barnes, though never humourless, pays them the compliment of taking their virtues seriously.

There is any case scope enough elsewhere for a critical view of Edwardian England, in the closing of official ranks in the face of the overwhelming arguments for George's innocence. That the dim Sergeant Upton of Great Wyrley should immediately assume George's guilt on the strength of his complexion is perhaps not surprising; but that the Chief Constable of Staffordshire, Captain the Honourable George Anson, later Sir George Anson, should so assume and act on that assumption, is more disturbing. Indeed, it is quite clear that had Arthur Conan Doyle not been the immensely popular figure that he was, with the ear of the press and the public, even *his* campaign would have come to nothing. As it was, his victory was severely circumscribed by official reluctance to admit to a mistake.

In essence, this is a straightforward, tense and satisfying account of a miscarriage of justice, with a swashbuckling hero charging to the rescue. Next to, for instance, Barnes's immensely sophisticated examination of the relation of life to literature in *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Arthur & George* may seem almost naïve. But Barnes does not, of course, forget that Conan Doyle was amongst other things the creator of Sherlock Holmes, and that in investigating George's case he would, for all his professed dislike of his own creation, be tempted to use some of Holmes's methods of deduction.

Thus the novel broadens into a consideration of the conventions of detective fiction as against the rules of evidence in a real crime. Early in the novel we are given a quote from a newspaper article on Doyle's working methods: "Dr Doyle invariably conceives the end of his story first, and writes up to it." In pursuing George's case, Arthur knows "the end of his story": George's complete exoneration and substantial damages for the time he spent in prison. To this end he not only proves to his own satisfaction that George was innocent, he also produces the identity of the guilty party.

Barnes gives to George the sober reflection on Doyle as detective: "Sir Arthur had been too influenced by his own creation. Holmes performed his brilliant acts of deduction and then handed villains over to the authorities with their unambiguous guilt written all over them. But Holmes had never once been obliged to stand in the witness box and have his suppositions and intuitions and immaculate theories ground to very fine dust ..."

Inevitably, then, *Arthur & George* does not provide us with the primitive satisfaction of seeing all the heroes vindicated and all the villains brought to justice. It gives us, rather, an intelligent, balanced, humorous evocation of a fascinating episode. But it is comprehensive enough to go well beyond "the Edalji case", as it came to be known: interwoven with the main narrative is the history of Arthur's rather sad first marriage and considerably more robust second; also his life-long enthusiasm for spiritualism, culminating after his death in a mass séance in the Albert Hall, where he obligingly puts in an appearance.

Much of this would be easy to ridicule, but Barnes makes us feel, rather, that Doyle's enthusiasms were all of a piece; and if at times they issued in behaviour that we now find quaint, they were all motivated by a decency and generosity that restored at least one wronged man to his rightful place in society.