

HISTORY 2148A
Police Work and Forensics in Victorian Britain
2026-27 | Fall 2026 | Winter 2027

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This is a draft outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description

Late Victorian Britain was the setting for Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional 'consulting detective', Sherlock Holmes, whose afterlife in television and film would have astonished his creator. We examine Holmes's world. Our subjects include the history of policing and detection and the nineteenth-century obsession with murder.

Course Syllabus

This lecture course explores the late Victorian British world, using the short stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, whose fictional 'consulting detective' has enjoyed an afterlife that would have astonished his creator, as a springboard. Criminal justice subjects include the real-life history of policing and detection, the nineteenth-century obsession with murder, the evolution of crime fiction, and the famously unsolved case of Jack the Ripper. We will also use the Holmes stories as points of entry for discussion of late Victorian empire; medicine, drink, and drugs; and male friendship. The course concludes with a brief examination of the ways in which those stories have been adapted, from the twentieth-century to the present day.

Students will write a book report based on the first Holmes story, an online mid-term test, and a final exam.

On completion of this course students will:

- Be familiar with the basic contours of late Victorian society
- Possess an understanding of the history of Victorian policing and detection
- Be aware of the discrepancies between crime and policing in the real world and their fictional representation
- Have gained insight into the way history is reinterpreted and stories retold and remediated over time

Methods of Evaluation

Students will write a 1500-word report on the original Sherlock Holmes story, 'A Study in Scarlet', exploring the fictional portrayal of an amateur sleuth and his relationship with professional detectives. You are expected to meet the word-length specified; do not exceed it. A late penalty of 2% per day, including weekends, will be assigned if the report is not received on the due date. Late papers will also be graded without comment. Extensions **must** be applied for via Academic Counselling. Requests for extensions made after the deadline will not be accepted. The mid-term and final exam will be submitted online via OWL Brightspace within specific timelines. Emailed exams will NOT be accepted under any circumstances.

Book report (due 5 Oct.):	30%
Mid-term (26 Oct.):	35%
Final exam:	35%

Attendance at lectures is necessary to pass the mid-term and final exam. I do not provide notes for students who have missed lectures. Mid-term and final exam answers **MUST** reflect lecture material and assigned readings.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

Course Materials

Required text:

Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 2011)

<https://academic-oup-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/book/9433>

Students will also be assigned Sherlock Holmes stories; these too can be accessed online.

Course Schedule and Readings

1 (14 Sept.) Introduction

Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 1-10

- 2 (21 Sept.) **Policing in Britain: The background**
Shpayer-Makov, pp. 13-32
- 3 (28 Sept.) **Policing and detection: Scotland Yard**
Shpayer-Makov, pp. 32-61
- 4 (5 Oct.) **Class and detection**
Shpayer-Makov, pp. 117-22, 248-62
Book report due

Reading week

- 5 (19 Oct.) **Crime fiction: The historical background**
Shpayer-Makov, pp. 226-48
- 6 (26 Oct.) **Mid-term exam**
- 7 (2 Nov.) **Drink and drugs in Victorian society**
Conan Doyle, 'The adventure of the cardboard box'
- 8 (9 Nov.) **Late Victorian medicine**
Conan Doyle, 'The adventure of the resident patient'
- 9 (16 Nov.) **Holmes and Watson: A bromance? Homosexuality, Homosociability**
Conan Doyle, 'A scandal in Bohemia'
- 10 (23 Nov.) **'Centre' and 'periphery': Late Victorian Empire**
Conan Doyle, 'The adventure of the crooked man'
- 11 (30 Nov.) ***The Strand* magazine: The late Victorian periodical press**
Shpayer-Makov, pp. 156-205

12 (7 Dec.) The afterlife: Holmes revised

In this session we will look at various adaptations of the Holmes stories, and discuss how the originals have been adapted to reflect the changed historical realities of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Additional Statements

Audio or video recording of lectures is not permitted.

The best way to get in touch with me outside of the classroom is via email. I answer emails between 9 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday. Please remember that office hours are not simply – or even primarily! – for dealing with problems. You are welcome to come and discuss course material in these hours.

As both the mid-term and final exams are conducted online, they are open book and you will have internet access.

You may use generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course for activities such as researching and refining your ideas, or drafting an outline to organize your thoughts—but not for generating prose. All writing submitted in this course must be your own, and as stated above, your mid-term and final exam must reflect lecture material and assigned readings. If in doubt, please ask me for clarification and advice.

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.