

The Cardboard Boxes

by ROSS E. DAVIES



WHEN THE UNITED STATES ENTERED World War I in 1917, its citizens showed real enthusiasm for sending books to the troops, especially little books in little cardboard boxes. At this late date, we cannot know exactly how many American soldiers and sailors received a "Booklet Packet" from the YMCA,¹ or a "Soldier's Kit of Books" from the Little Leather Library, or "Sweets with a Book" from Whitman's, or some other, similarly literary care package. But we can be pretty sure the number was large. For example, in a February 1918 advertisement for its "Soldier's Kit of Books," the Little Leather Library claimed: "In the last few months, over 200,000 have been sent to soldiers and sailors as gifts!"² If you take a close look at the illustrations, you will see that the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, a British author, seem to have been popular with the Americans.

The people of Great Britain and its empire had shown, since the beginning of the war in 1914, the same enthusiasm for sending small packages to their troops. Theirs were filled mostly with chocolates and other sweets, and tobacco. And their little boxes were usually made not of cardboard, but instead of metal, and commonly called "tins."³ Two handsome examples of this type, one sent by the British Grocers' Federation, the other by the Colonies of Trinidad, Grenada, and St. Lucia, are pictured here. Conan



[Above] *This battered, empty tin, emblazoned with good wishes — “To our Fighting Heroes with Best Wishes from British Grocers’ Federation Xmas 1914” — once contained sweets for a no-doubt grateful soldier or sailor in British service.*



[Left] *The inscription on this tin reads, “The gift of the Colonies of Trinidad, Grenada & St. Lucia, to His Majesty’s naval & military forces. This Chocolate is made from Cocoa grown in Trinidad Grenada & St. Lucia.”*

Doyle was neither a chocolatier nor a tobacconist, so we should not be surprised at the absence of his name and work from the British tins.

There was a moment, however, when those American and British enthusiasms may have come together. That moment involved the most famous British tin. It was known back then, and still is today, as the Princess Mary Christmas gift tin. Here is what happened.

In the autumn of 1914, Princess Mary—the young, beloved-by-the-public daughter of King George V and Queen Mary—volunteered to spend her personal allowance on gifts for, as she put it, “every sailor afloat and every soldier at the front.”⁴ It was a generous and patriotic thought, but utterly unrealistic. The cost and logistics were far beyond her reach. But the idea took hold, and soon a massive program—supported by private donations and managed by prominent British leaders—was under way to send tins of goodies not only to sailors and soldiers from all over the British Empire, but also to pretty much everyone else directly involved in British service in the Great War. More than 400,000 Princess Mary tins were distributed by Christmas 1914. By the end of the war, the total would exceed 1,000,000.



[Left] A 1914 Princess Mary Christmas gift tin. [Right] A 1914 Princess Mary Christmas gift tin, with its contents of cigarettes and tobacco still for the most part intact.

The Princess Mary tin was a handsome gift. Her Royal Highness's profile was embossed on its brass lid, surrounded by symbols of Britain, its empire, and its allies in the war against Germany and that nation's allies. The contents of the tins varied. They tended to have somewhat of a mix-and-match, charmingly irregular look. That was because Britain and the empire encompassed people from a range of cultures with a range of tastes, and because items were coming from a variety of suppliers with different capabilities. In 1914, though, most tins included some combination of tobacco products in yellow packaging, like the box pictured above.⁵

Unfortunately, the Princess Mary tins, with their British imperial and warlike look, would have been a problem for one group that was bravely serving in the war: secret agents in the new British spy agencies—what would later be called MI5 for domestic counter-intelligence and MI6 for foreign intelligence. They were serving the cause, sometimes at great risk to their lives. They undoubtedly deserved Princess Mary tins. But in order to serve their country effectively they had to conceal their roles in the war effort. Receipt of a tin festooned with British, imperial, and allied imagery would, as we say nowadays, blow their cover.

But being excluded from distribution of the Princess Mary tins would have been a demoralizing reminder to the secret agents that they were alone—isolated from their fellow fighters and invisible to the very people they were striving to protect from the kaiser's legions. Even in those early days of the intelligence services, spymasters were aware of the importance of preserving agents' feelings of connection to, and appreciation from, the country they served. So, while it was clearly foolish to give Princess Mary tins to secret agents, it was equally clearly foolish to neglect those secret agents.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of a British spymaster as Christmas approaches in 1914. What is the best gift that will, without exposing your agents, make them feel they are appreciated contributors to the British war effort, just as much as any of the sailors and soldiers and civilians in war service who are getting those widely publicized and much-celebrated Princess Mary tins? In other words, what is the closest thing to a Princess Mary tin that you can safely give your agents without blowing their cover?

First, the box itself. In 1914, is there a Briton who is as popular as Princess Mary, as closely associated with Britain and its empire as the British royal family, and yet at the same time not offensively British to Britain's enemies? The answer is obvious: Sherlock Holmes. He is world-famous and quintessentially British, a devoted servant of the Crown, and yet also a popular character among German readers both inside Germany and around the world, even as the Great War rages on.⁶ So, you replace Mary's profile with Sherlock's on the box lid, and of course you get rid of all those symbols of the British Empire and its allies.

Second, the contents of the box. Anything that might melt or go stale or attract vermin is out of the question, because no one knows exactly when or in what context these gift boxes for spies will be shipped or shared. So, the usual chocolates and sweets and tobacco are out of the question. You have flexibility here, because there is a lot of mix-and-match variety in the Princess Mary tins themselves. But is there something that would be especially appropriate? Again, the answer is obvious: Something involving Sherlock Holmes, because that way the contents of the box will (a) match the lid of the box and (b) not provide enemy eyes with any additional clues to the identity of the giver of the box or the loyalties of the recipient. Indeed, if you use the American version of the newest Holmes adventure—the just-published *The Valley of Fear*—any German or German sympathizer who looks closely will be pleased to see that German characters are treated sympathetically in the story.⁷

Finally, there is the matter of getting the box and its contents made without a hint of a connection to the British government or its allies. Are there foreigners who can do this, and who will do it discreetly? Yet again, the answer is obvious: Britain's friends in the United States, which is still neutral in 1914. The Americans certainly have the capability to make nifty little boxes, though they tend to make them out of cardboard, not metal. And tiny books have been popular in the United States for years, so publishing a small edition of *The Valley of Fear* is no problem. A deck of playing cards—everyone plays cards, and they are made everywhere—will fill the rest of the box neatly.

If you, in your role as a British spymaster in 1914, were to implement such a plan, the result might look like the box shown here, samples of



which were distributed at the 2018 Baker Street Irregulars Dinner. (Under the small *Valley of Fear* volume there is a modern addition—a magnifying lens for the mature among us whose eyesight isn't what it used to be.)

Now back to World War I. Is it true that sympathetic and discreet Americans could have easily produced such a gift box at that time? Yes. But did they? Do we know

whether there was in fact a secret Sherlock Holmes version of the famous Princess Mary Christmas tin? This is not the place for an extended treatment of those questions, but I will offer one reason for pessimism and one suggestive anecdote.

First, the reason for pessimism. I doubt we will ever see direct physical evidence of a Sherlock Holmes cardboard box. Metal artifacts like the Princess Mary tins are sturdy. They endure. Today, her tins and others like them are easy to find. Paper artifacts, in contrast, are flimsy and ephemeral. Today, the American cardboard boxes mentioned earlier range from difficult to impossible to find, even though they were produced in large quantities and distributed widely. Indeed, there may well be other kinds of American cardboard boxes from World War I that are to this day completely missing in action. It may be that Sherlock Holmes boxes—ephemerally American-made for the British in very small quantities—are among those MIAs. But who knows? Maybe we will not learn about it until a university or an archive or an auction house catalogues the collection of which it is a part.

Second, the suggestive anecdote. In addition to its domestic and foreign spying operations—the predecessors of MI5 and MI6—Britain had a third clandestine agency during World War I. At first it was called the War Propaganda Bureau, and then later the Ministry of Information, but at the time, insiders called it Wellington House, which was the name of its headquarters building in London. Its mission was to operate behind the scenes to create and subsidize publications that would inspire support for the war effort, especially in the United States and in Great Britain itself.⁸ Wellington House was, in effect, the publishing arm of the British intelligence community in World War I.⁹ By all accounts it did a very good job. Photographs of Wellington House—demolished long ago—are intriguingly and appropriately hard to find.

Two early participants in Wellington House work were Conan Doyle—who, from 1914 on, without disclosing his ties to the agency, wrote books and articles that supported the cause¹⁰—and George Doran—the American publisher who, in a memoir published long after the war, revealed: “In the four years and a little more between August, 1914, and the Armistice, I distributed millions of books and pamphlets . . . without the slightest suggestion that they were of British or propaganda origin.”¹¹ The British reimbursed the George H. Doran Company for its Wellington House work. “On each side,” Doran recalled, “we were as meticulous as bankers.”¹²

In light of that meticulousness, consider this: In early 1915, just a few weeks after Christmas 1914, the first Doran royalty statement for *The Valley of Fear*—yes, Doran was Conan Doyle’s primary American book-publisher at the time—listed an unprecedentedly and disproportionately large number of “Free Copies” distributed, which meant that no royalties would be paid on them. There is no explanation by Doran and no objection by Conan Doyle or his agent.¹³ Very odd. Could it be that the meticulous record keeping of the Doran Company has left us with a clue that Conan Doyle and Doran—and Wellington House—collaborated on a special printing of *The Valley of Fear* to help the British war effort? At that time, what cause other than the war would have inspired Conan Doyle to silently acquiesce in the unexplained distribution of hundreds of extra “Free Copies” of his latest lucrative bestseller, beyond what would normally be expected for promotional purposes?

There is more that might be learned and said about this topic, and so I hope that someday soon I will be able to let another shoe—and maybe another Sherlock Holmes box—drop.

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NOTES

1. Constantine Rossakis, “‘The Dying Detective’: A Bibliographic Re-examination and Two Newly Described Early Editions,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 48.
2. Advertisement, *The Metropolitan Magazine* (Feb. 1918), p. 61.
3. The British did like their tins. See, for example, Michael J. Franklin, *Biscuit Tins 1868–1939: The Art of Decorative Packaging*, London: New Cavendish Books, 2001.
4. “Christmas Gifts for the Troops,” *The Times* (16 Oct. 1914), p. 11.
5. Diana Condell, “A Gift for Christmas: The Story of Princess Mary’s Gift Fund, 1914,” *Imperial War Museum Review*, No. 4 (1989), pp. 69–78.

6. *The Universal Sherlock Holmes* database maintained by the University of Minnesota lists contemporary German Sherlockian publications in both Germany and the United States. For example:

C2934.—A1171. *Erinnerungen an Sherlock Holmes*. 3. Teil. 5 *Detektivgeschichten*. Autor. Übers. von R[udolf] Lautenbach. Stuttgart: Robert Lutz, [1914]. 238 p. (Lutz' Kriminal-und Detektiv-Romane, 68) and C3124. Lucke, Maximilian. *Herr Lock-Sholmes, der Amateur-Detectiv*. 2. Band. Plaudereien aus der Oregon Deutsche Zeitung (German-American Daily). Portland: German Publishing Co., 1917. 64 p. illus.
7. See, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear*, *Washington Star Sunday Magazine* (25 Oct. 1914), p. 9 (“‘I thought it was Father,’ said she with a pleasing little touch of a German accent.”).
8. Remarkably little has been written about this important institution, perhaps because so little material has survived. For a history that appears to be as complete as possible, see Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914–1933*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987; Gary S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992; Kenneth J. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe 1914–1918*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 53–85; John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States, Volume 2: The Expansion of an Industry*, New York: R. R. Bowker, 1975, pp. 81, 82, 86, 88–89, 95–96, 140, 161, 326, 340; Horace C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914–1917*, Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968; and James Duane Squires, *British Propaganda at Home and in the United States from 1914 to 1917*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935.
9. Speedy production was one of its specialties. Wayne A. Wiegand, “An Active Instrument for Propaganda”: *The American Public Library during World War I*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1989, p. 19: “On one occasion, Wellington House produced an entire book in ten days.”
10. Andrew Lycett, *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Free Press, 2007, chap. 19.
11. George H. Doran, *Chronicles of Barabbas 1884–1934*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935, p. 390.
12. Doran.
13. Folder 6, Royalty statements (1020) for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1892–1916, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.