

Arthur Conan Doyle. Letters from the War

Authors and their task:

Erica Andreose

Responsibilities: Web development with HTML and CSS, transcribing letters, project management.

Karolina Bergamo

Responsibilities: transcription of 4 texts.

Maria Levchenko

Responsibilities: collecting the bibliography, definition of the XML-TEI scheme, transcribing letters, management of GitHub repository.

Alka Rana

Responsibilities: Research about the historical background of the Topic, transcribing the letters and arranging the bibliography for the topic.

1. OVERVIEW

The project aims to catalog and transcribe the handwritten letters of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle during his service in the Boer War (Oct 11, 1899 – May 31, 1902) in South Africa. Arthur Conan Doyle was a British writer and doctor. He is known for his work on Sherlock Holmes. Our work will be concretized into a website with a digital edition of Doyle's known wartime letters that will contain: the images of documents, their transcription (following the setting of a diplomatic edition), accompanied by a

bibliographic reference of the letters published posthumously. Some of those letters will be metadated with XML markup following the rules of the TEI setting for mail. We will improve the web page with the development of an interactive map showing the mailing places of the letters (using tools from Knightlab), a biography of Arthur Conan Doyle (complete with his wartime photos), an historical contextualization of the Boer War, and a section for the comparison with some letters from nurses and soldiers from the same battlefield where was Conan Doyle during the war.

2.CONTENT by Alka Rana

As mentioned above, our website will focus on the Boer war. The outbreak of the war between Britain and the Boer Republics on 13 October 1899 was the culmination of a long campaign in Cape Town by Cecil Rhodes – former prime minister of Cape Colony – and the British High Commissioner Sir Alfred Milner. Their motives were commercial – control of the gold mines in the Transvaal. Arthur Conan Doyle always wanted to participate in the war as a military man or as a volunteer, but due to his age, he was not accepted in the army. But then came an opportunity to show his expertise not as a soldier but as a medical doctor. The Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) was struggling to cope with the huge number of casualties so they offered a volunteer doctor position and that's how Mr Doyle was appointed. He volunteered for six months in the war, and, during that, he started writing letters describing his stay.

He also shared his journey by writing the book *The Great Boer War*. Conan Doyle believed passionately that England was doing their duty in order to capture South Africa. He was very much inclined with patriotism for his country. His Patriotism was the main reason he always wanted to work with the army and serve the country. On 28 February 1900, the 50 hospital staff gathered in the pouring rain on the Royal Albert Dock at Woolwich to board a converted P&O freighter, the SS *Oriental* to reach the Cape Verde Islands. He viewed Britishers as gentlemen in the war which was, according to Paula Kerbs, a way to cover the image of the Britishers. “Sir Arthur Conan

Doyle famously cultivated the image of the British soldier as an honorable, law-abiding figure with a strong sense of fair play in his newspaper reports, pamphlets, and books”.¹ Our project aims to trace the journey of Conan Doyle during the Boer War, with a focus on his letters. The website will provide an in-depth analysis of nineteen letters written by Conan Doyle during this time period. The original letters will be displayed in conjunction with a diplomatic edition of each letter, accompanied by a relevant XML-TEI file. To better contextualize the letters, the website will provide a geopolitical overview, location-based insights, and information about the intended recipient through an interactive map. The website will be created using an HTML structure to showcase the digitized collection in an interactive and user-friendly manner.

3.METHOD by Maria Levchenko and Erica Andreose

After analyzing the epistolary material of Arthur Conan Doyle present in open access on the *Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia* website², we collected images of scans of the original letters and the various information they carried (recipient, departure and arrival addresses, photographic material, geographical and temporal information). Once this material was collected, we focused on transcribing the contents of the letters following the methodology of diplomatic edition.

The amateur edition of the letters in the *Encyclopedia* failed to meet the standards for digital publication, as it lacked essential information regarding the source and the provenance of the letters and frequently contained errors in the transcription. As a result, the transcription was carried out anew by our team. In cases where the handwriting proved challenging to decipher, we utilized the *Transcribus* tool³, which uses the pre-trained models to recognize handwritten English text. The tool proved to be highly effective in transcribing the letters.

¹ Krebs, Paula; *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War*, Cambridge, 1999

² https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php/Main_Page (opened on 06/02/2023)

³Transcribus is an AI-powered platform for text recognition, transcription and searching of historical documents from any place, any time, and in any language.
<https://readcoop.eu/transcribus/?sc=Transcribus> (opened on 10/02/2023)

Thus reproducing, as accurately as possible, in typography all significant features of the original letters, including spelling and punctuation, abbreviations, deletions, insertions, and other alterations. No corrections were made to the text, leaving the letters as the author wrote them. In order to proceed with the work of contextualizing the letters, we used as support several authoritative references such as online resources dedicated to the author and the website maintained by Arthur Conan Doyle's actual descendant family⁴, which holds much of his manuscript material. In addition, the support of texts such as *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*⁵ by Lellenberg, Stashower, and Foley, a critical edition of many letters written by Conan Doyle in his lifetime, and *The Great Boer War*⁶ itself, a historical novel written by Conan Doyle himself specifically to bear witness to this wartime experience, was essential.

For the TEI markup and the creation of the TEI scheme for our letters we used the TEI Guidelines, the materials of the TEI workshop for the Correspondence⁷, and the successful models of existing TEI correspondence projects such as of Charles Darwin⁸, Walt Whitman⁹, Arthur Schnitzler¹⁰, Vincenzo Bellini¹¹, Van Gogh¹², among others. The complete and sufficient TEI scheme provides a comprehensive description of the physical and content-related aspects of the letters.

The TEI scheme we developed specifically describes Conan Doyle's letters as an object, capturing details such as the physical attributes of the paper upon which the letters were written, including any specific images or symbols. For instance, one letter was written by Conan Doyle on the stamped paper of the hotel where he was staying at the time and therefore includes a letterhead featuring the hotel's name and address embossed upon it. This unique aspect of the letter was captured in our TEI scheme using the <letterhead> tag.

⁴ <https://conandoyleestate.com/> (opened on 06/02/2023)

⁵ Lellenberg, Jon; Stashower, Daniel; Foley, Charles; *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, HarperCollins, UK, 2009.

⁶ Conan Doyle, Arthur; *The Great Boer War*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1900

⁷ TEI: Handbook for Encoding Correspondence <https://encoding-correspondence.bbaw.de/v1/> (opened on 06/02/2022)

⁸ <https://github.com/cambridge-collection/darwin-correspondence-data> (opened on 06/02/2023)

⁹ <https://github.com/whitmanarchive/whitman-correspondence> (opened on 06/02/2023)

¹⁰ <https://github.com/arthur-schnitzler/schnitzler-briefe-data> (opened on 06/02/2023)

¹¹ <https://umanisticadigitale.unibo.it/article/view/9162/9914> (opened on 06/02/2023)

¹² <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters.html> (opened on 06/02/2023)

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<fw type="letterhead" place="top-right" corresp="#mh">
  <dateline>
    <name type="place" ref="#L">
      <p>Morley's Hotel.</p>
      <p>Trafalgar Square.</p>
      <p>London. W.C.</p>
    </name>
  </dateline>
</fw>

```

Fig.1) example of <letterhead> tag in the TEI scheme

Additionally, the TEI files not only encompass the physical description of the letters but also provide a comprehensive representation of their content. This includes links to individuals, places, and objects mentioned within the letters, as well as cross-references to reputable and authoritative sources. For example, one of the letters was addressed to Herbert Greenhough Smith, the first editor of the *Strand Magazine*¹³, and this reference was linked to both the Linked Data Service of the Library of Congress and the Virtual International Authority File.

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<listPerson>
  <person xml:id="ACD">
    <idno type="VIAF">https://viaf.org/viaf/65283845</idno>
    <idno type="LC">https://id.loc.gov/authorities/names/n79082292</idno>
    <persName>Arthur Conan Doyle</persName>
  </person>
  <person xml:id="GS">
    <idno type="VIAF">https://viaf.org/viaf/94427281</idno>
    <idno type="LC">https://id.loc.gov/authorities/names/no2016162706</idno>
    <persName>Herbert Greenhough Smith</persName>
  </person>
</listPerson>

```

Fig.2) example of controlled authority ontologies for person names in the TEI scheme

Despite gaps in the source on the provenance of the manuscripts, in some cases in-depth research reveals important details. For example, there is one very interesting specimen in Conan Doyle's collection of letters: a square postcard (87×87 mm) with a photograph of the author standing in a hole in the ground. Conan Doyle is photographed in an important historical

¹³ The Strand Magazine is a British monthly magazine published from January 1891 to March 1950 (711 issues) in its original version. Arthur Conan Doyle was a huge contributor with novels, short stories, poems and articles.

place for the Boer War: the exit of a tunnel in a military prison in the Transvaal.

The release of 3187 British prisoners from the Waterval prison took place in the summer of 1900, and lists of those released were long published in the Times.

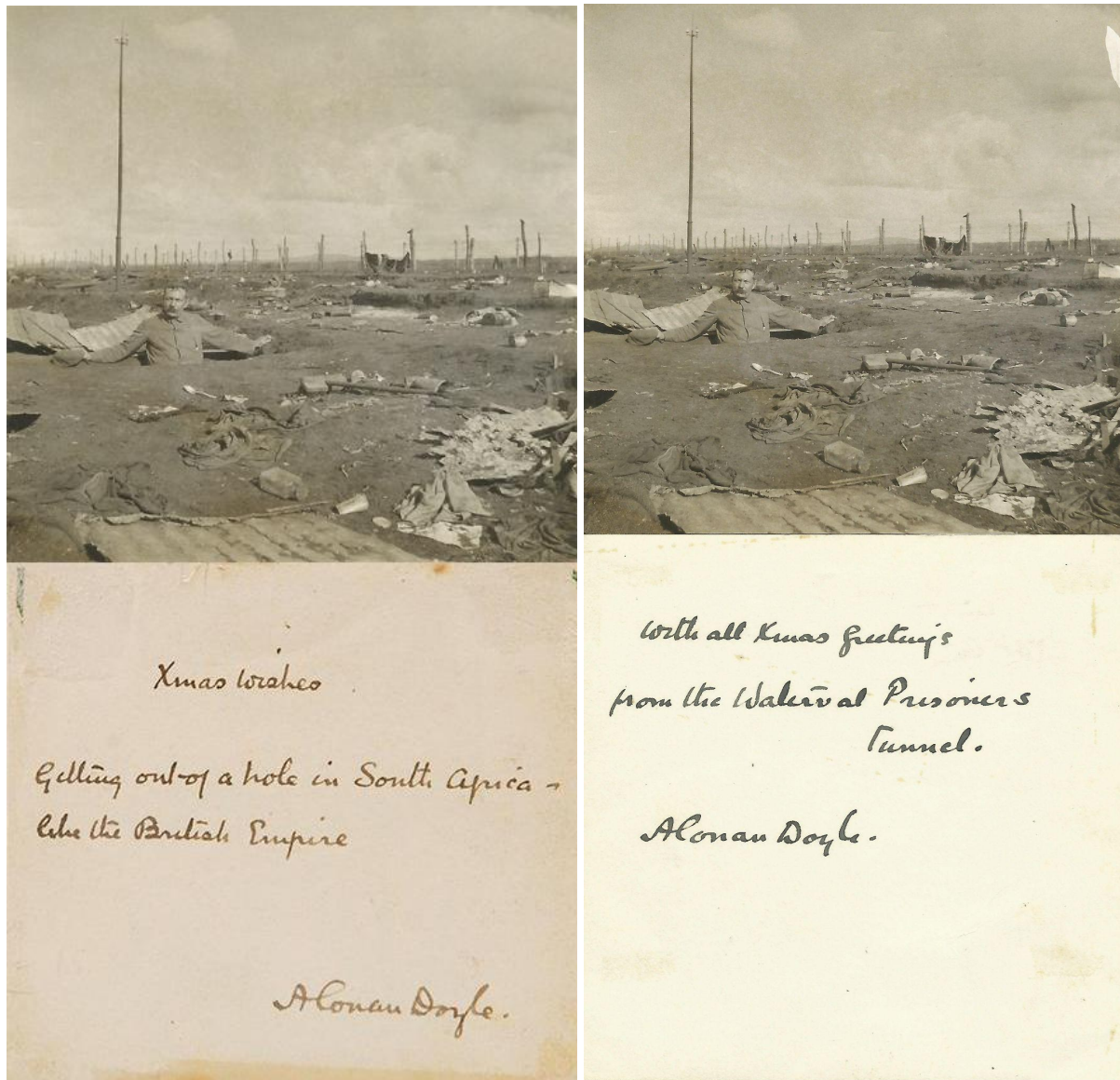


Fig.3) Letter 12 - Letter 13

Apparently Conan Doyle sent several of these cards to his friends and acquaintances with text such as "With all Xmas Greetings from the Waterval Prisoner's tunnel, A Conan Doyle" with slight variations. One of these cards was sold at auction by South African antique dealer Ronald Levin (so we can reconstruct the provenance of our material). Intriguingly, we found another similar photo in this hole that shows an unknown person:



Fig.4) Photograph of an unknown person in the same hole in the Waterval Prisoners' tunnel

4.OUTPUT by Erica Andreose

Once the texts and their metadata were collected, we moved on to the stage of developing the virtual container that would house this information. Our goal was to create a website that was easy to navigate, eye-catching yet simple in presenting its content. We built a structure in HTML, with styling and design additions in CSS. For enriching the interactive side of the website, we made use of tools such as *Bootstrap* and *KnightLab*. *Bootstrap*¹⁴ for creating buttons, carousels, cards and other layout elements of the site. Knightlab for creating the interactive map and audio listening. *KnightLab*¹⁵ is a community of designers, developers, students, and educators from Northwestern University (Chicago) working on experiments designed to push journalism into new spaces, it provides various tools aimed at enriching virtual storytelling. These

¹⁴ Bootstrap is a collection of free tools for creating Web sites and applications. It contains design templates based on HTML and CSS, both for typography and for various interface components such as forms, buttons and navigation, as well as some optional JavaScript extensions. <https://getbootstrap.com/> (opened on 06/02/2023)

¹⁵ <https://knightlab.northwestern.edu/> (opened on 06/02/2023)

tools are often used in the field of online journalism but are also very well adapted to knowledge websites. For the home page, we thought of a horizontal navigation bar that allows the user to find his/her way around the website. Immediately after that a carousel guides in choosing the most "clicked" sections of the website. And this is followed by informative sections presenting the project, biography of the author, and historical contextualization of the Boer War. Finally, a section devoted to quick links to the online resources we relied on for the creation of this collection of documents. In the footer, we chose to include a form to fill out to quickly get in touch with us and a brief explanatory section on the project's purposes and copyrights. A page dedicated to the exploratory catalog of letters was then developed, with a series of cards containing photos and brief description of each letter. On the side it is possible to proceed to refine the search by activating some filters (by addressee, chronological order and destination). Going then to the page dedicated to the individual letter, we have tried to put the greatest attention in creating two close carousels that allow the user to explore the content of the letter in its various versions: the full metadata, the scanned image of the original document and its transcription. All these facets are browsable and juxtaposable with each other, so that one side holds the original manuscript and the other side holds the comparison with its metadata or transcription. Immediately below this, are buttons to allow downloading the XML-TEI files of the document and the ability to listen to the contents of the letter read by a narrator. The latter plugin was created with *SoundCite*¹⁶, a tool provided by *KnightLab* for listening to mp3 files while reading a text passage. The audio recording, on the other hand, was created with an Artificial Intelligence: *TTSMP3*¹⁷ a Free Text-To-Speech and Text-to-MP3 for British English. This open access and free tool allows you to enter an input text and select the type of pronunciation and voice (male-female/young-adult) that you want to hear in the audio file that will be created. The result obtained is very good and convincing at the reading level. This plug-in allows

¹⁶ SoundCite is a simple-to-use tool that lets you add inline audio to your story. The audio is not isolated; it plays right under the text. SoundCite is developed and distributed by KnightLab: <https://soundcite.knightlab.com/> (opened on 05/02/2023)

¹⁷ TTSMP3 easily convert your british english text into professional speech for free. The official website reports " perfect to increase the accessibility of your website": <https://ttsmp3.com/text-to-speech/British%20English/?fbclid=IwAR2vzARbTsohENAnZ-isv0iunEUExSj6XDRFTuqnLxzExUd9pOL179dV1ws> (opened on 05/02/2023)

the user to be more involved in the enjoyment of the website, but more importantly, it is a great advantage in expanding the accessibility of the website to the blind population. Below this section is the space dedicated to the interactive map for exploring the starting and ending points of the letters. The map was developed with *StoryMaps*¹⁸, another useful tool provided by KnightLab. By scrolling the buttons it is possible to observe the map on the left and a photo or text item on the right, which will accompany the description of the location in the map. This section can definitely be implemented and improved to arrive at great results. The last page developed is the contact page, where there are references for each member of the group, with photos and institutional email contacts.

5.FUTURE DEVELOPMENT by Erica Andreose

We can clearly think of several improvements on the already imprinted website. Being a draft design, it is clear that a lot of work could be done on the accessibility of the site and the clarity of display and navigation of the content. For example, we would like to integrate an XML markup viewer tool, so that not only the raw file can be downloaded, but the metadata can be viewed on the web page itself. Currently this function is relegated to the table containing the metadata, but it would be interesting to use a tool such as *EVT*¹⁹ or another similar viewer that would give the user the ability to scroll over the words of the text and be easily led back to the additional metadata information contained on the XML version.

As far as adding new and interesting features is concerned, we can think firstly about the creation of an image gallery. Since there are numerous photographic records of Arthur Conan Doyle in South Africa, during the Boer War, we can hypothesize the

¹⁸ StoryMapJS is a free tool to help you tell stories on the web that highlight the locations of a series of events. <https://storymap.knightlab.com/> (opened on 05/02/2023)

¹⁹ EVT is a light-weight, open source tool specifically designed to create digital editions from XML-encoded texts, freeing the scholar from the burden of web programming and enabling the final user to browse, explore and study digital editions by means of a user-friendly interface. <http://evt.labcd.unipi.it/> (opened on 06/02/2023)

creation of a visual gallery of all the moments captured in chronological order. The images could be collected, metadata and stored in this gallery. In addition to this, we could also collect period photos of the various places where the letters were sent and received. It would also be useful to create a single interactive map with the presence of all the locations of departure and destination of the letters. The departure and arrival locations of the various letters could be highlighted by different colors and numbers in the interactive map that would allow people to zoom and move around the space. An additional cue could be the development of a "listen" button for letter content. To implement this tool, it is conceivable to use the Soundcite tool proposed by KnightLab, as we have already done with some small examples on the draft in the website. A tool that allows listening to a text while viewing it. It might also be useful to provide the additional option for the user to be able to download these audio files. As said before, the artificial intelligence named *TTSMP3* could be used to prepare the mp3 files. The tool works by simply entering the text you intend to turn into an audio recording, and the converter will provide an MP3 file ready for download. Another feature that could be implemented would be the creation of an interactive timeline where the mailing of letters could be placed in chronological order. The user could navigate through the months and years of the Boer War and better visualize the rhythms of Conan Doyle's correspondence. In addition, a special page dedicated to his person could be created for each letter recipient with a descriptive table, brief biography, photos, and links to reference authority ontologies. Finally, the most interesting future development, and the one that could expand the horizons and purposes of the currently navigable website: the possibility of creating a section for comparing the letters of Arthur Conan Doyle with those of other soldiers, nurses, doctors, and officials participating in the Boer War in the same years as our author. A comparison section would be useful to be able to develop new narratives and analyze various points of view on the historical context of the war and on the social and human conditions that were intertwined with it. For example, as previously said, through the *Anglo Boer War* website²⁰ and forum (with information and photo collection about the historical event), we found a photo depicting another soldier

²⁰ Anglo Boer War website and forum: <https://www.angloboerwar.com/> (opened 07/02/2023)

in the hole in the ground²¹ where Arthur Conan Doyle took his postcard used for Christmas greetings (letters 12-13). It is an interesting cue to compare the experiences of soldiers and ordinary people involved in this historical event. We found another example of an exciting comparison, through the *British Army Nurses* site²², which collects historical information, sources, documents and photos regarding British nurses who served over time in various historical conflicts in the British Army. The section devoted to letters from the Boer War by nurse Kate Luard²³ caught our attention. Since Arthur Conan Doyle also worked within the field hospitals as a military doctor, it would be interesting to bring this material together in order to make comparisons and enrich the historical contextualization of the conflict from the perspective of the workers active in the hospitals and infirmaries. Trained staff who saw the most atrocious side of the war concretely every day and wrote about it to tell and inform relatives back home.

²¹ Here the photo of the soldier in the same spot as Conan Doyle at Waterval Boven in South Africa: <https://www.angloboerwar.com/media/kunena/attachments/62/p1.jpg> (opened 07/02/2023)

²² British Army Nurses website is the official site for the history and heritage of the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps and its antecedents (Army Nursing Service; Princess Christian's Army Nursing Service (Reserve); Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, Territorial Force Nursing Service, Territorial Army Nursing Service), collectively British Army nurses. <https://britisharmynurses.com/> (opened 07/02/2023)

²³ Kate Luard joined the Princess Christian's Army Nursing Service (Reserve) in March 1900, and served in South Africa during the Boer War. <https://britisharmynurses.com/kate-luards-boer-war-letters/> (opened 07/02/2023)

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