

The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes and the Red Indians

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There are two moments during the career of Sherlock Holmes when Dr. Watson likens the great detective's appearance to that of a Red Indian. Strikingly, both occur within stories that, otherwise, have no American context. Thus, in "The Naval Treaty" (1893), a narrative that revolves around a standard intermingling of domestic and political Englishness, Watson observes that, Holmes "had, when he so willed it, the utter immobility of countenance of a red Indian". Likewise, in "The Crooked Man" (also 1893), we are told that, "when I glanced again his face had resumed that red-Indian composure which had made so many regard him as a machine rather than a man." Watson's representation of the inscrutable Indian plays on what we would probably recognise as a familiar stereotype but, although the American literary culture of the 1890s and early 1900s is packed with moments of identification between the white man and the Native American Indian, these do not seem to resemble his usage.

"The Crooked Man" is a near-archetypal example of the British adventure romance, in which events that took place in imperial spaces are played out before a domestic audience and with dramatic domestic ramifications. And yet, as with "The Naval Treaty", this narrative is disrupted by the apparently inconsequential intrusion of the Red Indian. As suggested above, these allusions bear little resemblance to the representations of the Native American that dominated American literature and politics, where the figure could maintain the romanticised version of the "natural" propagated by Cooper, could be seen as the evolutionary forebear of the white American, or could be represented as the cunning and unprincipled savage, as in Teddy Roosevelt's play on the "only good Indian is a dead Indian" refrain. Instead, they are informed by the presence of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Great Britain in 1887 and 1892-92, and point to the displacement (or better, co-alignment) of military and cultural imperialism that would make soon lead to the "American century", though which even representations of American otherness function within a matrix of American popular cultural icons. Although, in these tales, it is only a trace, the presence of an American popular cultural artefact within the generic British imperial romance marks the beginning of the end of that romance, and the emergence of the Americanisation of popular culture.