

CLIFTON HOUSE

THE CASE OF THE EDINBURGH DOCTOR

A young Edinburgh medical student with an alcoholic father from a poor Scots-Irish family is given the chance of a lifetime when a fellow medic poses the question "Would you care to start next week for a whaling cruise? You'll be surgeon, two pound ten a month and three shillings a ton oil money." After being assured that his friend was offering him a job he could not take up himself, and would happily loan him his Arctic kit, Arthur Conan Doyle found his life "deflected into a new channel".



Clifton House, Peterhead

Indeed, it was the man who would become world-famous as the creator of Sherlock Holmes and an adherent of Spiritualism, who turned up in Peterhead to seek out Captain John Gray of the town's famous whaling family to be ship's surgeon on *The Hope* in 1880. John Gray lived at Clifton House in Queen Street; he had amassed a fortune with his three whalers, *Hope*, *Queen* and *Mazinthien*, and was equally successful when he and brother David invested in the *Eclipse II* which took a staggering haul of 15 whales and 13,000 seals in 1871.

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Conan Doyle met Gray at the end of his whaling career, but the 50-year-old Blue Tooner was more than an intellectual match for the youngster. The pair would discuss literature and even resort to parodying contemporary poetry. The rest of the crew adopted him happily, especially after being challenged by steward, Jack Lamb to a boxing bout. Conan Doyle punched him deftly and Lamb was impressed, declaring "He's the best surgeon we've had! He's blackened my e'e." The medic was adept at hunting, but not so steady on the Arctic ice. The whalers nicknamed him 'The Great Northern Diver' after he twice fell into the freezing water but survived.

It was not all fun on the voyage, as Conan Doyle discovered, holding the body of whaler Andrew Milne as he died of an infected intestine. The wild, beautiful landscapes punctuated with the bloody work of slaughter inspired the fledgling writer in many of his future stories, such as *The Captain of the Pole Star* and the Holmes' tale *The Adventure of Black Peter*. His newly found skills as a whale and seal hunter impressed John Gray who offered him a berth on his next trip as harpooner. Conan Doyle declined. The latter returned to Edinburgh and completed his studies.

The Gray family knew that whaling's heydays were long gone. Youngest brother, Alexander shipped out to Canada to join the Hudson Bay Company and elder sibling, David took his ship *Windward*, Peterhead's last whaler, out on a final trip in 1893 before retiring to his house on the Links, now part of the Cottage Hospital. John Gray never saw that final voyage, having died the previous year. Forty winters at sea dealing with the Arctic climate had taken their toll. Captain Gray 'crossed the bar' in the same year as the first volume of Sherlock Holmes stories was published in London.