



The Napoleon of Crime: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, Master Thief

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He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson.

He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city.

He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. . . .

--Sherlock Holmes on Professor Moriarty in *The Final Problem*

The Victorian era's most infamous thief, Adam Worth was the original Napoleon of crime. Suave, cunning Worth learned early that the best way to succeed was to steal. And steal he did.

Following a strict code of honor, Worth won the respect of Victorian society. He also aroused its fear by becoming a chilling phantom, mingling undetected with the upper classes, whose valuables he brazenly stole. His most celebrated heist: Gainsborough's grand portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire--ancestor of Diana, Princess of Wales--a painting Worth adored and often slept with for twenty years.

With a brilliant gang that included "Piano" Charley, a jewel thief, train robber, and playboy, and "the Scratch" Becker, master forger, Worth secretly ran operations from New York to London, Paris, and South Africa--until betrayal and a Pinkerton man finally brought him down.

In a decadent age, Worth was an icon. His biography is a grand, dazzling tour into the gaslit underworld of the last century. . . and into the doomed genius of a criminal mastermind.

The Napoleon of Crime: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, Master Thief Details

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From Reader Review The Napoleon of Crime: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, Master Thief for online ebook

William DuFour says

An excellent book on his crimes and friends. With a hat tip to the Pinkertons on who he had respect for and eventual friendship of all things.

Richp says

This is better than mediocre, and the underlying story is definitely a good one. Unfortunately, the best parts are rather thin, as most of Worth's career was not documented, understandably so as successful crooks are not the ones who brag. The author padded the book by going on and on about the few parts he found documentation for, and the results is unbalanced.

Caroline says

Another good one by Macintyre, but for a change, not about spies in WWII, but instead a masterful criminal who led the Scotland Yard, the Pinkerton Agency, the French and Belgian police on a merry chase for most of his life. He died, was resurrected as a Henry Raymond, another famous individual who had died, and remained in this identity for the rest of his life.

He led a sophisticated gang of criminal forgers, bank robbers, thieves and safe crackers. While he built his empire, he rose from his poor American origins to become a wealthy Englishman living among the cream of Victorian society, all of whom were unaware of the criminal mind behind this little dapper gentleman.

His theft of Gainsborough's Duchess of Devonshire was simple and outrageous, and he kept her hidden for a quarter of a century.

The details around his activities make for fascinating reading. He was extremely intelligent, generous and loyal to his friends and family. Until the later part of his life, he didn't drink and he didn't condone violence. He was larger than life and was the inspiration behind Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Macavity the mystery cat in his musical, CATS.

Cindy says

In-depth study of the life and psychology of a master-thief and the supposed inspiration of Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty (though the inspiration would not approve of the Professor's violence). While some of the psychological observations seemed a far-reach, the overall study was fascinating. I found the details of the life of famous detective, William Pinkerton, as compelling as the analysis of Adam Worth. A simple summary of this biography would be "crime never pays," but Macintyre forces a more complex response - one that hopefully finds as Pinkerton did - that there is a fellow human behind the criminal who

needs mercy and dignity.

Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

When I read a review of this in 1998 I immediately put it on my wish list. As a Sherlock Holmes fan how could I not want to read about the man that was possibly the model for Moriarty? (Quick wikipedia link for Worth for those who are impatient.) And so the book sat in my wish list, but didn't get purchased, because I was forever thinking it'd pop up in ebook form. Finally I gave up and just bought a paper copy, because sometimes you just have to hunt down books that have been on your list too long.

(Aside: I'll also blame the airlines for reading this in "fits and starts," because they always force me to take a paper book for those times where you have to put your ereader away. Grumble grumble, etc. etc.)

The book covers Worth's life of crime, the stories of his many associates and capers, and the theft of Thomas Gainsborough painting (this one) of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. That painting allows us to hear the history of Georgiana, which is still interesting, and continues to play a part in the Worth story as he developed strong feelings for it. And it's also the story of the continuing hunt by the Pinkerton detectives - not for where Worth was located (they always managed to track him down), but for a cause to arrest and charge him.

Short version (of what's to follow): the book could have used an editor for polish and tightening/removing a lot of redundant sentences. Thus the writing may make some readers frustrate/bored and skip over content to get to more interesting narrative. It is however a wonderful story and one that's not to be found elsewhere, only in small references in other books. This is really the only book that currently tells this story, and the personalities involved are fascinating.

My main critique is simply that here and there, the way the author's chosen to tell the story is a bit hard on the reader. For instance he often packs into the story quotes by contemporary authors. This in itself is not the problem (in fact I love period literature and journalism). The problem is how they're worked into the text.

For example, p 57:

"Victorian Britain was reaching the pinnacle of its greatness, and smugness. "The history of Britain is emphatically the history of progress," declared the intensely popular writer T.B. Macaulay at the dawn of the Victorian era. "The greatest and most highly civilized people that ever the world saw, have spread their domain over every quarter of the globe." A similar note of patriotic omnipotence was struck earlier in the century in an essay by the historian Thomas Carlyle: "We remove mountains and make seas our smooth highway, nothing can resist us. [I skip a sentence here, sorry Carlyle]"

...For a crook at war with the natural order, such heady recommendations were irresistible. Huge spoils, and the social elevation they brought with them, were precisely what Worth had in mind."

Doesn't really flow well, does it? And of course we have no indication that Worth read/knew of either of those quoted authors, but that's a separate problem.

My other critique is that the author often repeats the same point in multiple sentences that don't necessary

enlighten the point. For example, p. 92:

"The Victorians' rediscovered enthusiasm for Georgiana was principally, if covertly, sexual: the chocolate-box coquetry of Gainsborough's portrait, when considered in conjunction with her racy reputation, was just the thing to send a delicious testosterone jolt through the average buttoned-down Victorian male. While they might appear repressed in sexual matters, a function of the fashion for strict outward probity, the Victorians were anything but frigid and knew a sex goddess when they saw one."

This paragraph continues for several more sentences, with some newspaper quotes, all with the same information. If this were an isolated problem I'd not notice it, but the concept of Georgiana as a sex symbol was already emphasized paragraphs before this one, and mentioned again in paragraphs later. (And in other chapters as well.)

This really makes me wonder if Macintyre (the author) had an editor to help him (who might realize the repetition) or whether he felt that the story just needed more length (padding) and that this was the way to do it. Because restating something previously stated continues to occur. (Meanwhile I keep thinking that the phrase "sex goddess" should have been used at the beginning of the paragraph to give it more punch, otherwise it gets a bit lost. Because it's the takeaway thought.)

While these issues were something I noted, it didn't make me stop reading.

Random quotes, etc., that interested me (adding while reading, so in order, as usual):

...All this within the same paragraph, p. 74:

"The contrast between outward protestations and actual behavior was particularly acute in the area of sexual morality, for while the prudish "official" line taken by most ethical commentators stressed home, hearth, and sex within marriage, or preferably not at all... The Victorians, it should be remembered, were the first to publish pornography on an industrial scale. ...If Worth held to a set of high-minded convictions that were utterly at variance with his actions, he was by no means alone. He would have enjoyed Wilde's ironic quip in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy." "

Like '**Georgiana, sex goddess**,' the phrase '**Victorians: industrial scale porn producers**' is going to stick in my brain.

...I loved that a lady long dead could have such an effect on popular culture, p. 115:

"If, before the theft, the *Duchess* [the painting] had achieved iconic status, now women positively wanted to *be* her. She became the haute-couture statement of the hour. The theft proved a blessing to London's hatmakers, since "at most of the public ceremonials a large proportion of the ladies dressed upon the model which the painting provided." Vast ostrich-feather hats became the rate on both sides of the Atlantic, and in New York "the Gainsborough hat...was so fashionable among women (that) one fashionable modiste went so far as to call it the 'Lady Devonshire style.'" "

First quote in that paragraph was from the New York Herald of 1897, the second from the New York Sun of

1894. The history buff in me would have felt those quotes would have benefited more from acknowledging the source (not just in endnotes), since the author constantly quotes both period literature, news papers, and current histories throughout the book, and the reader isn't always made aware of the source of info. Which does tend to allow you to weigh what information is more valid. But then, the author does directly cite sources sometimes and I'm sure that doing so too often would break up the flow of the story.

...Thanks to the photos provided I really disagree about this, p.126:

"Kitty Flynn was undoubtedly part of the key to Worth's change of heart... The former Irish barmaid and the late Duchess of Devonshire, whose piquant history was now enjoying a second lease on life after the theft, had many of the same character traits... The physical resemblance of the two woman was equally striking. The best portrait of Kitty shows her with a teasing, pouting expression which might have been borrowed directly from Georgiana."

Looking at the photo of Kitty the author's referring to (this one, on this page) and the painting (this one) I can see no real resemblance. I can see a parallel in Kitty's duchess-like attitude, as the author portrays her, but I think any physical resemblance is wishful thinking.

...An example of the author bringing in contemporary literature, p. 147-148:

"There is an uncanny resemblance in Worth's behavior, to that of Captain Nemo in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, but whether the culture-hungry crook read the book, published ten years earlier, will never be known. Captain Nemo is the archetypal criminal aesthete whose gallery contained "thirty or so paintings by famous masters...a veritable museum..."

[Skipping 3 sentences comparing Worth to Nemo]

...Where Verne's villain has his *Nautilus* and his sumptuous gallery to prove his superiority and rebellion, Worth had his false-bottomed trunk; where Nemo has thirty Old Masters, Worth had one."

I really don't think this is a good quote for the situation - I mean, I can certainly see the parallels, but it's something I could see being discussed in a lit class, not relevant in a history text. Especially since there's no indication that Worth even read or knew of Verne, something the author admits in the first sentence.

Again, this is not the first time the author pulls a literary quote in a way that has very little/nothing to do with the history, isn't useful as background, and isn't useful to set the scene. Not a good way to use a literary quote.

...I feel like I'm being too critical - here's the type of info that makes me keep reading, p. 159:

"The uncut diamonds, quickly divided and mounted to prevent them from being traced, were then sold just a few feet away from the scene of the crime..."

...the robbery "had the effect of causing the authorities of the postal department to place in almost every post office the wire-net protection of the counters with which we are all familiar..." "

Security measures changed all over the country due to Worth's methods in robbery, but also forgery and other scams. Definitely a noteworthy figure. Also continually amazing that he doesn't get caught.

...On page 212 the author mentions a 1945 book called *Kitty*, by Rosamond Marshall which makes a hash of

Kitty Flynn's [Worth's one time girlfriend whom he fathered two children with and supposedly always loved] actual history but is apparently a bodice-ripper romance (and also a film). I stumbled into finding an copy you can read online via Open Library (here) and have now wandered too to read it (reviewing it here, spoiler, it is indeed very bad). (This is how I end up reading multiple books at once. I often just sort of wander into it.)

...Oddly my copy of the book doesn't have a table of contents. (Or does the book not have one? That makes no sense.) **The important point here for Sherlock Holmes fans** is that *Chapter 23: Alias Moriarty* is where you'll find that bit of pop culture history. This is actually the chapter I've really been waiting for. It refers to the many aspects of Moriarty inspired by Worth, and makes specific references to historic and academic figures who link the two. Also specific story references, such as, in *The Valley of Fear*, Moriarty has a picture hanging on his wall that Holmes notes is "a picture by Greuze entitled 'La Jeune Fille a l'agneau,' fetched not less than four thousand pounds." While "a 'agneau" is French meaning either from Agneau or perhaps something about a lamb - there's also the pun of l'agneau/Agnew - the later name is the art dealer who owned the Duchess painting. And it was a pun popular elsewhere at the time. That and other hints in the story (as well as other stories) point to Moriarty as Worth. That's one example - the chapter is short but for Holmes fans is definitely of interest. Sadly it's too short. For all the literary quotes elsewhere I'd have thought this chapter might be a tad longer.

And still unsure about the reference(p. 229) to Worth as T.S. Eliot's cat Macavity - but I guess everything with a "Napoleon of Crime" tag could lead back to Worth. Maybe.

...Boy do I dislike some of Worth's family members (brother and sister-in-law). You can't be religious and deride the man on one hand for being a crook and then at the same time tell him he has to give you money or you'll abandon his kids that you're taking care of for him.

...In the William Pinkerton-Adam Worth relationship, which should be adversarial, there's a continuing theme of respect between the two men. One of the best parts of this story - especially since it happens to be true.

...Worth and J. Pierpont Morgan, p. 263: "They never met but their lives were eerie echos of each other..." - Like some of the other comparisons, this only seems true for some of the points made in this chapter.

...p. 275 - Apparently Henry James' final novel, *The Outcry*, has a wealthy American, Breckenridge Bender, buying a family portrait called the *Duchess of Waterbridge* by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which doesn't exist in reality and is supposed to be a reference to the *Duchess of Devonshire* (Georgina) painting bought by Morgan. James was upset with Morgan and other Americans carrying off famous British artwork that he felt should remain within the country, and the book was his protest. (Another book for the To Read list.)

Maggi LeDuc says

Super entertaining and had me rooting for Worth the entire time. A fantastic weekend read.

GoldGato says

Since I'm not a Sherlock Holmes aficionado, I didn't realize that Adam Worth was the inspiration for the famous Moriarty until I picked up this book. Worth was the most brazen thief of the Victorian Age, sort of like a Hitchcockian cat burglar of the 19th century. In this bio, we get to learn about the thief and his gang, plus the famous heists. I enjoyed the actual character of Adam Worth, as he kept to a stringent set of values that his enemies lacked.

This is a decent good read, perfect for a fire and a cuppa.

Book Season = Winter (London fog)

Kay says

What a disappointment! It sounded like a terrific book, and I'd recently read another book by McIntyre that was quite engaging. Briefly, Adam Worth was the man whom Arthur Conan Doyle modeled his fictional Professor Moriarty on. Unfortunately, this book takes an extremely plodding approach to the subject -- it's a bit of a dull-witted bobby, if you will. There's lots of material here on the Pinkertons, a famous stolen painting, lots of double dealing, and a roller-coaster of a life, but it's just not told here with any verve or dash. It sounds like the author did a lot of digging... and then dutifully wrote everything.

I wanted to like this one, really I did. I kept hoping it would get better, but it didn't. I barely managed to finish it, and I pretty much skimmed the last portion. It was that dull.

Gerry says

Having been killed in at the Second Battle of Bull Run in the American Civil War, one would have thought that Adam Worth's life was over. But, no it was not for he faked his death and then became a professional 'bounty jumper', earning himself plenty of money into the bargain.

Thus began his life of crime and another soldier in the Union Army was later to comment on this part of Worth's career. He was none other than William Pinkerton, later of the famous detective agency and someone who not only kept a keen eye on Worth, or Henry Judson Raymond as he became known, but who, despite the pair being on the opposite sides of the law, befriended and even helped him.

Worth's serious life of crime began in a relatively small way but he quickly built up his coterie of associates and was then able to mastermind many robberies without even taking part himself. But he wasn't averse to playing a leading role when the occasion demanded.

He had plenty of lady friends and was in a three-way relationship with one of his associates and that gentleman's wife, a liaison that produced two children, of which he was said to be the father. He then set up an American Bar in Paris and although the authorities kept watch on it, for it was not only the rendezvous for many a criminal, there was illegal gambling upstairs, the operation thrived for quite some time. One reason for the continued success was that Worth was well in with the Parisian authorities, one of whom would tip him off prior to any raid.

He continued his various affairs, both criminal and romantic, in the latter category with such as Kitty Flynn,

before relocating to London where he became, at least ostensibly, the perfect English gentleman. And it was in London that he performed his most notorious feat when he robbed Agnew's Gallery of its prized possession, a Thomas Gainsborough portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire. It was with Georgiana, the Duchess, who he was to have his longest love affair for she remained with him for over 20 years.

He carried her with him wherever he went and although he was suspected of the crime nobody, not even William or Robert Pinkerton, could pin the crime on him. But when committing a robbery in Belgium he was pinned down, captured, tried and imprisoned.

Despite his influence and influential friends he remained in prison for some time but when he was released he returned to London, with the Pinkertons passing on this information to their Scotland Yard counterparts.

His doings had been widely reported in the press and it was from these reports that the author suggests that Arthur Conan Doyle formed his idea for Sherlock Holmes' arch-enemy Moriarty. The author points out similarities between the pair and there is no doubt that Conan Doyle perhaps did use some of Worth's characteristics to create Moriarty. But I must confess, I am not totally convinced by the totality of the tale and when it is suggested that McAvity, T S Eliot's deceitful and suave cat, may also be based on Worth, my credibility is stretched to its limit.

However, Worth, who continued his criminal activities to earn money on which to live, eventually wanted to return the Duchess to its rightful owners so he set up a deal, with the help of William Pinkerton and with a sum of money as reward to be passed on to him, to return it to its rightful owner.

This deal was eventually completed and with Agnews in possession once more of the Gainsborough, Pierpoint Morgan, whose family was about to purchase the painting when it first went missing, stepped in and became the new owner. It passed out of their family much later and was sold, back to the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, for the princely sum of £265,500.

On 8 January 1902, just four days after Morgan had taken possession of the Duchess, Worth died of heart failure at the age of 56 and he was buried in an unmarked grave at Highgate Cemetery. The 'New York Journal' proclaimed, 'Adam Worth is dead. His demise marks the closing of a singular modern romance.' And there is no doubt that is a true statement for he was a cool, charismatic character who played a leading part in the Victorian underworld and Ben Macintyre's biography certainly does him full justice.

Ron says

“[He had] plenty of time for morals; it was laws he disdained.”

Award-winning well-researched and written biography of a criminal no one heard of ... even in his own day. His most infamous crime was the theft of a Gainsborough portrait, then the highest priced art in the world. Along the way, he burglarized, robbed, or forged on five continents and became the model for one of literature's most famous criminal: Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty.

“Crime need not involve thuggery.”

A notable difference between Adam Worth and the fictional crime lord is that Worth avoided violence. He regarded carrying, much less using, fire arms a sign of incompetence. But he did not hesitate to lie, cheat and steal his way to the heights of society, starting with faking his own death during the American Civil war.

“The Darwinian struggle for survival, which is after all a struggle without morals.”

Macintyre is exhaustive in his documentation despite having few sources. Worth was uncooperative that way. Repetitive at times, Macintyre propels the reader through Worth’s amazing life and times. Late Victorian England anticipated current America.

“You cannot get a thing right for a newspaperman ... if you write the facts down to him he will change them about to suit himself.” William Pinkerton

Perhaps the most startling thread is the master criminal’s relationship with William Pinkerton, the world famous detective. The latter chased the former across several continents and ended by performing an extraordinary service for the then old, dying reprobate.

“Glorying equally in his real wickedness and his apparent probity.”

In the late nineteenth century international justice cooperation was just beginning. (Odd that not extradition existed between the US and UK.) A nimble crook could stay one step ahead of the law. Worth literally cruised the world looking for opportunities to separate the rich from the burden of their wealth. No Robin Hood, Worth did take care of his own people (even when they didn’t take care of him) and his friends and family.

“Empowerment by fraud struck a chord with thousands outside the genteel upper stratum.”

Macintyre follows Worth through the stealing and wasting of several fortunes, detailing his relationship with both real and bogus upper crust, not to mention some of the most daring crimes of the century.

“... about as correct as a newspaper ever gets anything.” William Pinkerton

A good read.

“There’s money in it.”

Steve Nelson says

Very good at times, *The Napoleon of Crime* is an appreciable attempt at the biography of Adam Worth, the man who served as the true-life base for Conan Doyle's Moriarty. The problems with this book are its slow pacing and its constant tangents into the lives of various other criminals, the Pinkertons, aristocrats, and so on. Many times it feels as though the book is a term paper and the author is trying to stretch it to meet a length requirement (which is almost laughable as each page is packed with words, making this 300-page book feel like a 600-page tome). The parts about Adam Worth and his crimes are quite exciting, interesting, and well-written, but the rest is lackluster and plodding at best. I really wanted to enjoy this book more, and I think that there is a great (much smaller) book trapped inside it, which is really a shame.

Tony says

THE NAPOLEON OF CRIME: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, Master Thief. (1997). Ben Macintyre.
***.

Born in Boston to German immigrant parents, Adam Worth took to crime early in his life. As I read on, I realized that he had never held a salary-paying job in his life. He started out as a pickpocket, or dip, training under the master dip in the city. He showed a real talent for this, and soon moved up to have apprentice pickpockets working for him. From there, he decided that he needed to move up to where the takings were really worth the risks. The obvious targets were banks. He started out small, with local branches, but soon graduated to large main office units. His big score came when he robbed a noted Boston bank, along with a group of hand-picked associates. With all of this money in his pocket, he decided to go off to Europe, where he could spend his money and move on to bigger and better things. He acquired expensive habits, which in today's world would have given him away immediately. He moved from house to house, renting only quality properties – in all locations giving lavish parties for his hoodlum friends and members of the legal and police communities. He never used violence and was essentially a teetotaler. He showed extreme loyalty to his gangster friends, and often came to their aid with loans and provision of legal support. He earned the grudging respect of William Pinkerton, the leader and founder of the famous detective agency. Pinkerton was on Worth's trail throughout his career, and found that he was often in a position to help him in his sleuthing work. He fell in love with a lovely lady, an Irish barmaid, with whom he had two children, although she was the wife of one of his associates. His ultimate downfall came with his theft of a famous painting by Gainsborough, "The Duchess of Devonshire." This eighteenth century painting portrayed the Duchess in her signature had with a large plume. It turns out that the Duchess was a distant relative of our contemporary Princess Di. Worth was ultimately turned in by one of his associates, and soon lost everything. I guess that proves that crime doesn't pay. This book was well researched and well written, supplied with photographs of the principal characters and locations.

John Fulcoly says

The story was interesting but I wanted more details on crimes and travels and such. But the writing style and repetitiveness wore me down. Way too wordy, too many stretchy assertions comparing people and his love affair of a photo. I have loved every Ben M book I've read but this one seemed like a different author. Good thing I didn't read it first. There are some interesting rid bits of history but only for the strong willed readers.

Ronnie Cramer says

Fascinating history that ties together a number of disparate personalities from the Victorian Era. Not as good as Macintyre's later works, but head and shoulders above most books.

Jim Stennett says

What a fun read! And it's all true. Highly recommended.
