

Inheritance and the Fate of Second Sons

The brief review of the fate of Sir Charles' estate in chapter five of the *Hounds of the Baskervilles* provides a short guide to English inheritance laws applied primarily to the aristocracy and other large landowners. (1) In this chapter, Dr. Mortimer notes that Henry Baskerville will inherit Baskerville Hall because it is entailed, and should he pass, the estate would then go to James Desmond, a distant cousin. Sir Henry, however, could distribute funds associated with the estate as he desired. The new baronet's response, however, was that the majority of the estate needed to be passed to the next in line to ensure the upkeep of Baskerville Hall.

When Sir Charles died, his title of baronet and all the land associated with it passed on to his closest living male relation (his nephew Henry) and would have done so regardless of any living female relatives. Beyond the oldest male descendent, any other children received whatever their father's will dictated. Thus, wives, daughters, and "second sons" could find themselves homeless if the inheritor was so inclined to turn them out (such as the fate of the Dashwood women in Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*.) With such future, most women sought as "fortunate" a marriage as possible while younger brothers prepared themselves to earn their own way, usually in such class-appropriate professions as the clergy or the military—although a "fortunate" marriage of their own was not out of the question. (2) Some even took to go abroad such as Sir Henry's father did to Canada and Rodger Baskerville to Central America.

Given his country squire ancestry, Sherlock Holmes would have been all too aware that, with an older brother, he could anticipate little inheritance. As a "second son," he would have to make his own way in the world, and he carved out his own vocation. Unlike the traditional path, however, he created the unique profession of consulting detective.

Not only did English inheritance law in the 1800s provide the basis for the motive in many a plot, it also helped create one of its most intriguing and popular characters.

(1) <https://americancountess.wordpress.com/2013/03/17/the-entailment-or-how-the-english-aristocracy-perpetuated-itself-and-why-lady-mary-will-never-the-countess-of-grantham/>

(2) <http://blogs.northcountrypublicradio.org/inbox/tag/inheritance-law/>

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