Oscar Slater

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In July 1928 Oscar Slater became a free man. Having spent nearly two decades in prison for a crime he had not committed - the brutal murder of the Glasgow pensioner and jewellery collector Miss Marion Gilchrist in 1908 - Slater had won a fresh trial. The questionable evidence that had been used to convict him in 1909 was challenged by the noted criminologist William Roughead WS who had not only attended Slater’s original trial but had published his concerns about the evidence of the case in his books for the Notable Scottish Trials series. Roughead continued collecting materials about Slater in his scrapbooks after the appeal including newspaper cuttings and correspondence. These are preserved in the Roughead Collection which was given to the Signet Library by the Roughead family in 1952.

Roughead and a group of fellow campaigners, who included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the Glasgow journalist William Park, and the Lord Advocate Craigie Aitchison, had worked to bring Slater’s case to public attention and then to court. But the appeal case generated legal costs and, despite donations from supporters (some of whom fully expected to be repaid in the event of a successful appeal), Slater was left with debts to pay. Conan Doyle thought that Slater should ask for £10,000 (about £1.5 million today) in compensation from the government for the time he had wrongly spent in prison. Slater, presumably eager to put a speedy end to a bleak chapter in his life, accepted £6,000 (about £902,000 today) from the Scottish Office in August 1928. He had not taken advice from his influential supporters and they saw the amount as too little since it did not include his legal costs. They were also horrified to learn that Slater would be required to pay income tax on the payment.

Slater meanwhile seemed diffident about repaying the money spent on his behalf. Conan Doyle, who hoped that the government would offer Slater more so that he could be reimbursed, wrote to The Times describing the lack of any forthcoming payment as “very unfair” in a letter to the editor of 17th September 1927. He went on to say that he was “quite ready to meet my own promises and guarantees – and the lawyers engaged have been most generous in their treatment – but it seems a shocking travesty of justice that, having worked so long to set this wrong right, I should now be asked to pay a considerable sum in addition”.

The House of Commons debated the question of Slater’s legal costs in November 1928. Inspired by this, Slater approached the House of Commons directly to request funds: “I should have thought that the
Government in common fairness ought not to expect me to bear the costs of this case”, he wrote from Ayr on 5th December. He went on, “I might add that as a consequence of my conviction I lost personal property and incurred expenses - prior to the appeal - amounting to about £1,000”. Slater argued that his payment only covered the cost of his compensation and pointedly reminded the officials of his “18 years 1½ months imprisonment”. Furthermore, the “payment of £6,000 was suggested and accepted merely as a consequence of my wrongful conviction and subsequent imprisonment”.

Slater claimed in the Evening Dispatch of 13th September 1929 that he had offered Conan Doyle money for his expenses after his appeal but had been turned down. He argued that Conan Doyle had in effect already been paid since “he made money out of me. He wrote eight articles about me for the Scottish newspapers, and was paid £400”. Slater said he had been vulnerable upon his release from prison and that “everything was done for me. My appeal was arranged by men who, I thought at the time, were my friends”.

Conan Doyle privately wrote to Roughead in an undated note to thank him for his support during these trying times: “Many thanks, my dear Roughead. Such things are more than money”. But there was a plan afoot that could resolve the conflict. In the same note Conan Doyle continued: “Slater has a libel action which he will win against a Scotch paper. £500 will be paid to settle it. I have a lawyer who proposes to intercept this sum in court and deduct £280 which is due to me. Rather a good scheme”.

Slater's libel award had been arrested at “the instance of Sir Arthur” and that “the action is now pending in the Court of Session” on 13th September. The action was eventually settled out of court when Slater paid Conan Doyle £250 towards his personal expenses.

Slater remained in touch with Roughead, even sending him a Christmas card in 1930, and Roughead continued to collect material about him for his Slater Case scrapbooks. He made the news again in 1936 when he married Miss Lina Wilhelmina Schad in Glasgow where he had settled. The couple later retired to Ayr where Slater died in 1948.

We are very grateful to Lord Cullen of Whitekirk for kindly drawing our attention to this sequel to the Oscar Slater trial.