



# SAKI (H.H. MUNRO)

ORIGINAL AND UNCOLLECTED STORIES

EDITED BY BRUCE GASTON



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Notes and Introduction ©2024 Bruce Gaston. Original stories by 'Saki' (H. H. Munro).



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Bruce Gaston, *Saki (H. H. Munro): Original and Uncollected Stories*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0365>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-141-2

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-142-9

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-143-6

ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-144-3

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-146-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-147-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0381

Cover illustration: Postcard LL3612, the Leonard A. Lauder collection of Raphael Tuck & Sons postcards, Curt Teich Postcard Archives Collection, The Newberry Library.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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This book reprints—for the first time in over a hundred years—thirteen stories originally published in newspapers and magazines by Hector Hugh Munro, otherwise known as ‘Saki’. Three of these (‘Mrs. Pendercoet’s Lost Identity’, ‘The Romance of Business’ and ‘The Optimist’) are stories that have so far been missed by anthologists and editors. The other ten may seem familiar at first sight, but in fact are earlier—and, I would argue, better—versions of tales that later appeared in book form, first in the volume *The Chronicles of Clovis* and later in various “Collected” editions. In fact, few critics and even fewer readers are aware of the existence of these alternative versions.

Explaining why the stories ended up being rewritten requires some contextualisation. On 15 February 1911, Munro sent a letter to the publisher John Lane, owner of The Bodley Head: “I am sending you some of my collected sketches which you might like to publish in volume form. Methuen have published two previous books of mine, but they are dreadfully un-enterprising in the way of advertising” (Gibson 223, letter #1).<sup>2</sup>

Munro was referring here to *Reginald* (1904) and *Reginald in Russia* (1910), which reprinted stories published between 1901 and 1909, almost all of them in the *Westminster Gazette*. Writing for newspapers had been Munro’s principal source of income ever since 1900, when the *Westminster Gazette* printed a series of political satires he had written inspired by *Alice in Wonderland*. These were so successful that they

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1 This introduction is derived in part from an article published in *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, October 2021, copyright Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2021.1979929>

2 I am quoting the letters from Gibson 2014. The originals are archived at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. For a fuller discussion of Munro’s business letters, see Frost 2001.

were then collected in book form as *The Westminster Alice* (1902). With remarkable ease and speed Munro turned out journalism, short stories, political satires, humorous verse, one-act plays, and parliamentary sketches. He found a ready market, for literacy rates had risen steeply over the previous few decades, and there had been a corresponding growth in the number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals. Short stories—a relatively new genre—had developed in tandem with these societal changes and were perfectly fitted to the new media.

Lane's reply to Munro's inquiry has not survived but it must have been favourable since Munro then sent him a list of thirteen stories, all published since 1909, which could be included in the planned book. This letter also proposed a title: *Tobermory and Other Sketches*. Another letter followed on 26 April 1911, adding four recently published stories ('The Easter Egg', 'The Chaplet', 'The Peace of Mowsle Barton' and 'Mrs. Packletide's Tiger').<sup>3</sup> Perhaps aware that "[w]hile miscellaneity could be a selling point for periodicals, it was generally the opposite for books" (Zacks 14), Munro offered some suggestions for a general theme and a title: "Four or five of the stories deal prominently with animals, and perhaps 'Beasts and Super Beasts' [*sic*] would be a better title than 'Tobermory'" (Gibson 224, letter #3). In fact, the collection ended up being called *The Chronicles of Clovis* and Munro had to keep "Beasts and Super-Beasts" for his subsequent book (1914), which did indeed contain a good number of stories featuring animals.

Just like the short story itself, book-length collections of short stories were a relatively new development. From the author's point of view, reprinting short stories in book form was a useful way of getting paid a second time for the same work (Baldwin 95). For the publisher, on the other hand, there was the problem that a short-story collection would have to compete against novels in the bookshops and lending libraries. The latter genre had the advantage of being longer established and consequently enjoying more respectability and popularity. Moreover, an axiom developed early among publishers (and persists to the present day) that books of short stories do not sell as well as novels (Lewis 115–16; Baldwin 99). Ever since Dickens many short-story authors had

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3 A full list of dates and places of publication of all Munro's stories can be found at <https://www.annotated-saki.info/first-publication>.

attempted to blur the lines between a novel and a short-story collection by using some kind of framing narrative or other device to give unity to what would otherwise be a series of independent and unrelated tales (Lewis 57–70). These considerations doubtless played a role in the choice of a title for the volume that Munro and the Bodley Head were planning. Munro's first two books had a clear focus: *The Westminster Alice* collected his *Alice in Wonderland* parodies and the stories in *Reginald* are given a unity by having the eponymous dandy as either the main character or narrator. The follow-up, *Reginald in Russia*, has a title clearly chosen to recall the previous work but it is in fact a misnomer, as only the first story involves Reginald, who then vanishes from the Munro canon for ever. Presumably *The Chronicles of Clovis*, an alliterative title suggesting the episodic adventures of another young man, was intended to aid sales by reminding potential readers of the previous two collections.

The letters strongly imply that the new title was the publisher's idea, while Munro remained sceptical. Even when the book was released, he could not resist having a dig at it, writing in another letter to Lane: "Of course the sale is going to be damned by the title. An elderly gentleman told me he could not read French history of such a remote period" (Gibson 227, letter #11). He was referring to the fact that there had been four kings of the Franks named Clovis in the pre-medieval period. (On the other hand, it is open to doubt whether the "elderly gentleman" ever existed.) Nonetheless, Munro fell in with his publisher's wishes and in response began to reorient the planned volume away from animals and towards the incorrigible young man Clovis Sangrail, the protagonist of four stories written over the last two years ('The Match-Maker', 'The Stampeding of Lady Bastable' under its original title 'A Modern Boy', 'The Unrest-Cure' and 'The Quest'). Now that the title had been decided upon, he penned another four Clovis stories in as many months: first 'The Peace Offering' (see Gibson 224, letter #4), then 'A Matter of Sentiment', 'The Recessional' and 'The Talking-Out of Tarrington'.<sup>4</sup> After all, a book with "Clovis" in its title would necessarily have to feature that character prominently.

The second thing the new title prompted Munro to do was to

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4 I am working on the assumption that Munro submitted his stories as soon as they were completed and that these were then swiftly printed. It would not have been in either his or the newspaper's interests to delay publication.

insert Clovis into some of the stories that had already been published in newspapers. In 'The Chaplet' and 'The Background', this was done through the simple expedient of adding a short narrative frame with Clovis as the narrator of the main story. Many writers have made use of this structure of a story-within-a-story, as it offers interesting possibilities in terms of characterisation, style of language, narrative voice and even unreliable narration. Munro, however, does not avail of these, and Clovis' presence is in no way essential, for all of Munro's humorous stories are narrated in what is essentially the same mannered and ironic style, no matter whether the narrator is an omniscient third-person one or a character such as Clovis, Reginald, or the Baroness (in 'Esmé'). In other stories, Munro has Clovis pop up for a sentence or two to make a facetious comment, then withdraw again (for example, in 'Mrs. Packletide's Tiger'). He is also sent far afield whenever the plot requires it, visiting the Swiss Alps in the company of Adrian and Mrs. Mebberley, and apparently getting to know Wratislav's family in Vienna. This last is a particularly clumsy example of these additions. The original begins: "The Gräfin's two elder sons had made deplorable marriages. It was a family habit". For *The Chronicles of Clovis* this became: "The Gräfin's two elder sons had made deplorable marriages. It was, observed Clovis, a family habit". There is no explanation of how Clovis has come to make this observation, nor do we know to whom it is addressed. He plays no further role in the story. This kind of thing is presumably what A.A. Milne was thinking of when he commented in his introduction for the 1926 uniform edition on how "Clovis exercises, *needlessly*, his titular right of entry" into 'The Background' and 'Mrs. Packletide's Tiger' (xiii, my emphasis).<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence of Munro's rewriting, *The Chronicles of Clovis* ended up containing twenty Clovis stories (out of a total of 28). This is a doubling of his participation compared to the originals.

The additions lead one to wonder whether Clovis was only added later as a narrator to two of the other stories in *The Chronicles of Clovis*. 'The Story of St. Vespaluus' and 'The Way to The Dairy' were not printed anywhere else before their inclusion in *The Chronicles of Clovis*, so the

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5 Milne may have known the originals: "It was in the *Westminster Gazette* that I discovered him" (*ibid.*).

question can never be answered definitively, but—just like with ‘The Chaplet’ and ‘The Background’—their frame narratives are largely superfluous and could be deleted without affecting the stories in any noticeable way.

It therefore seems likely that John Lane’s insistence on a change of title led to Clovis being promoted from only one among several *enfants terribles* in Munro’s work (Reginald, Bertie van Tahn, and later Comus Bassington in the 1912 novel *The Unbearable Bassington*) to Munro’s best-known character. Indeed, Clovis stories continued to appear even after *The Chronicles of Clovis*. The present volume reprints for the first time ‘The Romance of Business’ (originally published in the *Daily News and Leader* on 19 March 1914). This is not the same story as ‘Clovis on the Alleged Romance of Business’ (published after Munro’s death in *The Square Egg and Other Sketches*, date of composition unknown), though the similarity in title and theme suggests that the two were written around the same time. ‘The Romance of Business’ is unique among Munro’s short stories in having been written to order. It appeared within a special full-page advertisement for the department store Selfridge’s. Munro’s text only takes up a small proportion of the page, two thirds of which are filled by an elaborate illustration of laden men, trucks and even elephants passing through an ornate classical archway on their way to a dock with cargo ships. Selfridge’s commissioned several such illustrations from noted artists, complemented by short texts on subjects such as “The Dignity of Work”, “Imagination” and “Markets of the World”, and had them printed in a number of prominent newspapers as part of its fifth birthday celebrations. One can assume that Munro was assigned the phrase “the romance of business”. ‘Clovis on the Alleged Romance of Business’ may even have been a first attempt that was (unsurprisingly) rejected by Selfridge’s: it consists of a monologue by Clovis in which he emphatically rejects the idea and mocks businessmen for their methodical dullness.

In the *Daily News and Leader* text we can see Munro riffing on a number of familiar elements. The story features Clovis and an aunt (though not the same aunt as in ‘The Secret Sin of Septimus Brope’, whose surname is Troyle, not Sangrail; presumably he has several, like Bertie Wooster). The plot involves a trick played upon an objectionable third party, which is a common ‘Saki’ plot type. In this case, Clovis is a listener, just as he

is in the tale of 'Esmé', but he does get the final word, affirming that his aunt's actions have "brought the Romance of Business to an advanced stage of perfection". Whoever handled Selfridge's advertising account seems not to have noticed Clovis's (or Munro's) sly insinuation that the charm of business consists of misrepresenting facts and manipulating demand for one's own financial gain. The story is at any rate at odds with the rather earnest tributes in the other advertisements (and probably the better for it).

The second 'new' story printed here is 'Mrs. Pendercoet's Lost Identity', which has lain forgotten for over a hundred years between the pages of *The Odd Volume* for 1911. *The Odd Volume* was an illustrated anthology published yearly between 1908 and 1917 to raise funds for the National Book Trade Provident Society, a charity set up in the previous century to provide for "decaying [*sic*] booksellers and their spouses" (Wilson 2022). The main characters in this story are the aforementioned Mrs. Pendercoet and a youth of eighteen given to flippant comments and practical jokes. The story itself is reminiscent of those involving Reginald and the Duchess, or Clovis and one of Munro's self-important females such as the Baroness, Mrs. Packletide or Lady Bastable. Indeed, if it had been destined for *The Chronicles of Clovis*, it may even have featured Clovis, but it was not, and so Mrs. Pendercoet's young foil is called not Clovis but Rollo.

Finally, this volume also reprints 'The Optimist', which has unaccountably been omitted from collections until now. It is a fine example of another facet of 'Saki'. Although the scenario's starting point is similar to that of 'Esmé', with the protagonist getting separated from the pack while out hunting, 'The Optimist' shows Munro writing in a more naturalistic vein, slowly building an atmosphere of unease before springing a surprise ending on both the main character and the reader.

Returning to the subject of changes Munro made for *The Chronicles of Clovis*, one story remains to be discussed, for it represents a special case. In a letter dated 19 June 1911, Munro rejects John Lane's suggestion that he write something "of an immediately topical nature, such as a story dealing with the Coronation [of George V on 22 June 1911], as it gives the book an air of out-of-dateness almost as soon as it [*is*] published" (Gibson 225, letter #6). In the end, he capitulated to his publisher on this, writing 'The Recessional', which basically recycles the main idea

of 'Reginald's Peace Poem' (1902) but with Clovis instead of Reginald and the coronation instead of the end of the Boer War. Nevertheless, Munro's expressed reluctance here makes his silent acquiescence to the inclusion of the story 'Ministers of Grace' in *The Chronicles of Clovis* more surprising. Although published in 1910 in the *Bystander* magazine, it was not one of the stories Munro had suggested for inclusion in a book collection when he first approached John Lane. 'Ministers of Grace' is a piece of political satire which can only be understood properly if one knows something about the public figures being lampooned. The longer book version only compounded this problem by giving them false names, such as Quinston for Winston Churchill and Halfan Halfour for Arthur Balfour. It is unlikely this was done out of fear of complaints from those mocked in the story, as it was already clear from the periodical version who was meant. (The *Bystander* version even had illustrations.) Although the aliases Munro chose are far from being impenetrable, he still seems to have felt the reader might need some extra cues, such as when he glosses "Cocksley Coxon" (the liberal theologian Canon Herbert Hensley Henson) as "one of the pillars of unorthodoxy in the Anglican Church" (Saki 2000: 221). This is just one example of a sort of ambivalence or half-heartedness in Munro's changes to this story. It might have been more logical to have cut the topical references entirely and given the story a more universal application, but apart from one timeless joke about the London public being less concerned about a *coup d'état* in Scotland than about the cricket being postponed, Munro did the opposite. In his new version, he widened the scope of his satire, including references to the Conservative MP Hugh Cecil and political hostesses and adding a section about the recent attacks on George Cadbury (a Quaker and supporter of the Liberals) by the *Evening News*, *Spectator* and other right-leaning publications. In rewriting, Munro nearly doubled the length of the story: it is the longest by far in *The Chronicles of Clovis* (just over 3600 words, as against its nearest rivals 'The Secret Sin of Septimus Brope' and 'The Story of St. Vespalluus', both of which come in at just under 3000 words each). Surprisingly, less than half of this increase is due to the added story elements mentioned above. The rest can justifiably be described as padding. This is principally achieved through additional incidental details ("The two men disappeared in the direction of the bun stall, *chatting volubly as they*

*went*" [my emphasis]) and paraphrases of the sort whereby "probably" becomes "in all probability". Such prolixity was unusual for Munro; many of his most anthologised stories are a third of the length of this one. The correspondence suggests that John Lane was pressing Munro to reach a specific page target: in several letters Munro refers to "long" or "longish" stories (Gibson 224–26, letters #4, #5, #6, #7, #10) and one ends "Please let me know if you think you have now enough material" (Gibson 225, letter #6). Modern readers—who now have the chance to compare the two versions—may be reminded of the saying that "brevity is the soul of wit".

Taken as a whole, the history of these stories illuminates the interaction of freelance author, newspaper editor, book publisher and reading public. Munro's principal interest in his stories was to make money from them as quickly and easily as possible. He changed publisher in the hope of better sales and agreed to alter his works to make them fit a format that his new publisher deemed easier to sell, but he apparently was not motivated to put much effort into tailoring his stories to meet these demands. Instead, his revisions were cursory, aimed at satisfying John Lane (in terms of length) and "non-literary" readers who (publishers believed) wanted some predictability in a book of short stories.

The main motive behind this publication is to allow readers to read these stories without their later distortions and thereby gain an idea of the skill, imagination and versatility that made Munro successful in the first place. It makes available the stories as originally composed, as well as the three forgotten tales already mentioned. The parts of the texts that Munro changed are printed in grey, which makes them discernible but not distracting for the reader. The variants can then be found at the end of the book. In the electronic version they are linked so that the reader can easily jump from story to variants and back again. I have also included information on the place and date of first publication, and provided notes to explain references and allusions that may not be readily understandable to a twenty-first-century public. In so doing, I hope to give readers the opportunity to enjoy the stories as their first readers could.

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