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Elementary Ratiocination: Anticipating Sherlock Holmes in a Slovene Setting

Summary

The paper reevaluates an obscure, German-language crime novel from the nineteenth century and its better-known English translation: Carl Adolf Streckfuss's *Das einsame Haus: nach den Tagebüchern des Herrn Professor Döllnitz: Roman* (1888), translated as *The Lonely House* (1907). Although written in German by an author from Berlin, the novel is set on the territory of Slovenia. The paper situates the novel geographically and historically, while considering its place in the developing genres of crime and later detective fiction. Moreover, the novel's depiction of intra-ethnic tension in the Slovenian village where the crime occurs will be shown to reflect the ethnic tensions on the frontiers of Austro-Hungarian territory, and to align with later trends in English detective fiction towards the use of ethnic taxonomies in constructing and solving crime.

Key words: Streckfuss, Carl Adolf; Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, detective fiction, crime fiction

Osnove logičnega sklepanja: napoved Sherlocka Holmesa v slovenskem prostoru

Povzetek

Prispevek z nove perspektive obravnava manj znan kriminalni roman iz devetnajstega stoletja, *Das einsame Haus: nach den Tagebüchern des Herrn Professor Döllnitz: Roman* (1888), napisan v nemškem jeziku, in njegov bolj znan angleški prevod, *The Lonely House* (Samotna hiša, 1907). Čeprav je njegov avtor iz Berlina, se odvija v Sloveniji. Prispevek predstavi geografski in zgodovinski okvir romana in ga žanrsko umesti med nastajajoči kriminalni roman in kasnejšo detektivsko pripoved. Na podlagi zločina, opisanega v romanu, ki se zgodi v slovenski vasi, zaznamovani s spori znotraj iste etnične skupnosti, prikaže medetnične napetosti na robu avstro-ogrškega ozemlja, ki se ujemajo s kasnejšimi trendi v angleški detektivski pripovedi, kjer se zločini načrtujejo in razrešujejo s pomočjo etničnih taksonomij.

Ključne besede: Streckfuss, Carl Adolf; Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, detektivska pripoved, kriminalni roman

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1. Introduction

At a time in the 19th century when detective fiction in the English-speaking world was just getting started, a remarkable German voice entered the genre: Carl Adolf Streckfuss (1823-1895). His achievements have recently been acknowledged in a volume titled *Early German and Austrian Detective Fiction* (2007). Here, Tannert and Kratz discuss Streckfuss's novella "The Star Tavern" (*Der Sternkrug*, 1870). In the present article, however, we will focus on his later and longer work *The Lonely House* (*Das einsame Haus* 1888) as an early entry in the genre of detective fiction and a timely depiction of life on the Slavic margins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This novel's deployment of ethnic and linguistic binaries aligns the work with similar features in British detective fiction; the final section of the paper will examine similarities between imperial discourse in the two distinct settings.

2. Genre Background: Crime and Detective Fiction

Before the achievement of this Prussian writer in the 1880s can be assessed, it is useful to survey the field of early detective fiction in Europe. Accounts of criminals and their crimes had been around in European literatures for a long time (Rzepka 2005, 51; Wiener 1994, 217-19). However, the presence of crime in a novel or short story does not automatically make it into detective fiction. Before the concept of deductive detection, the plot of crime stories unfolded differently. In earlier crime fiction, criminal investigation used to be the responsibility of the magistrate (Tannert 2007, 2), the representative of the state; moreover, the collection of evidence functioned primarily as corroboration, not as detection of the identity of the criminal (Rzepka 2005, 55-56). During the Regency period in Britain and well into the early Victorian period, popular crime writing focused on the criminal himself, as in the Newgate novel (Wiener 1994, 218; Pykett 2003, 19-20). Fiction that glorified the robber arose in close collaboration with journalism (Pykett 2003, 33) and was suspected by the middle-class reader of too great a fascination with deviant social behavior (Pykett 2003, 20).

The first shift towards making the detective into the hero is visible in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, and marks a "shift of focus from crime to detection" (Pykett 2003, 34) and from deviance to order. Poe placed the act of detection at the centre of the plot rather than its margins. With his stories, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844), Poe created the heroic detective, pioneered the genre's combination of action and intellectual challenge (what Poe called 'ratiocination'), and set a high standard in style and suspense. Writing nearly 50 years before Streckfuss, Poe was an innovator in a genre that was still developing in Britain.

Crime stories in English began with ballad and broadsheet literature and matured into novels centered on bandits, highwaymen and general low-life. The genre came to be called the Newgate novel, after one of London's famous prisons. From the Newgate novel in the 1830s to 1840s, British crime stories moved into the sensation novel at mid-nineteenth century (Pykett 2003, 21-34): examples include successful novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). These novels featured scandals in middle- and upper-class families and several had a crime mystery at the heart of the plot.

Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is the best known sensation novel that centered on crime and its detection and featured named detectives (Sergeant Cuff). From this basis, the detective character and role began to develop in other mid- and late-Victorian literature, in parallel with the rise of professional police forces. Charles Dickens admired the new Detective Department of the Metropolitan Police in London (Wiener 1994, 218) and had already updated his plots to include admirable crime fighters such as Inspector Bucket of *Bleak House* (1852-53). With his advent in the 1850s, Bucket has a claim to be "the first police detective hero in English fiction." (Wiener 1994, 218-19). Unlike the bumbling street "Runners" in his earlier novel *Oliver Twist* (1838), Bucket is clever, capable and morally upright. He is also middle class and reflects the increasing professionalization of both real and fictional police forces in Britain (Wiener 1994, 218).

Despite the claims of Inspector Bucket and Sergeant Cuff, French literature has a strong candidate for the first real detective in fiction (Rzepka 2010, 17). Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857) was a real Frenchman, who bridged the transition from criminal to detective, since he started as the former and passed through an informer stage to become a leading crime fighter (Schütt 2003, 60). His career on both sides of the law was written up in a set of lurid memoirs. As both real and fictional character, both state law enforcer and private detective, Vidocq embodies in one person the entire later history of the genre of crime writing. Subsequent French writers such as Emile Gaboriau and Maurice Leblanc created highly intelligent sleuths who worked against the background of the French state police force—the Sûreté Nationale.

Writers in German had no Vidocq, but Tannert and Kratz maintain that German writers were early entrants in the field of detection: "German-language detective fiction had reached an early maturity that was not to be England's or America's for another fifteen to twenty years" (Tannert and Kratz 2007, 3). In their anthology of early German and Austrian detective fiction, Tannert and Kratz include one work that pre-dates Poe, and two more that anticipate the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Streckfuss's first crime novella (1870), which appears in this anthology, clearly pre-dates even the first Sherlock Holmes story by 17 years.

Streckfuss first ventured into crime writing in the 1870s, with 4 crime novellas appearing under his name between 1870 and 1873 (*Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon*) and 12 before his death (Tannert and Kratz 2007, 118). This prolific author of "Trivalliteratur" later turned his attention to longer fiction, producing novels in three volumes, before writing *The Lonely House* in 1888. Longer than his earlier novellas, *The Lonely House* shows Streckfuss combining the characterization and attention to setting that one expects of the 'roman' with the sensational crime (a murder in this case) common in the shorter, trivial works. If the generic outline of *The Lonely House* appears confused, one must remember that in 1888 a formula for detective fiction did not yet exist. It is not until Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories appeared in the *Strand Magazine* after 1891 – and doubled its circulation – that the English detective pattern became firmly established (Wiener 1994, 477; Thompson 1993, 61). In France, Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin would not begin to appear until 1907. Thus, when Streckfuss wrote *The Lonely House*, the pattern of detective fiction was still fluid; there was certainly no formula for writers – British, French or German – to follow. What Haynes describes as the "traditional puzzle mystery, with its circumscribed group of characters, mannered society, and emphasis on clues and brain power" (Haynes 2011, xii), was nonexistent in continental European literatures and embryonic in English literature. Even the subsequently popular stereotype of the amateur detective in opposition to the clumsy policeman had not yet crystallized in fiction, although the professional policeman or detective had already appeared in Dickens and Collins. This timing makes it all the more remarkable to find an exemplar of the genre from a German writer, only one

year after the appearance of Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story "A Study in Scarlet" (1887). *The Lonely House* (*Das einsame Haus*, Streckfuss 1888) echoes motifs from its author's earlier work "The Star Tavern" (the isolated setting, the central inn and the detective/entomologist); unlike the earlier work, the detective/entomologist is not a professional, but an amateur detective in a context more like that of the realistic novel: a complex social and geographical setting, against a background of nationalist political sentiment of the second half of the 19th century.

A glance at the biography of Streckfuss will reveal the complexity of the life that went into the creation of *The Lonely House*. Carl Adolf Streckfuss came late to fiction, having changed his career many times, in a surprisingly modern biography, details of which are sparse¹. Having started off as a student of agronomy, Carl Adolf took too close an interest in the revolutionary uprisings of 1848². The consequences seem to have sidelined him from study and writing, and he went instead into business. He sold tobacco in Berlin between 1851 and 1858, and then became a newspaper editor (*Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon*). However, writing and editing were in the family, since his father Carl Streckfuss (1779-1844) had also been a writer--of poetry, novels, drama, political articles and translations from the Italian, especially Dante³. In 1863, the younger Streckfuss added to his political writing about the 1848 revolution with the publication in serial form of a groundbreaking history of his hometown of Berlin: *500 Jahre Berliner Geschichte: Vom Fischerdorf zur Weltstadt: Geschichte und Sage* (1863-65). His attachment to home ground as well as his growing respectability show in his position on Berlin City Council between 1872 and 1884. Somewhere in this time, Streckfuss⁴, now a respectable conservative city politician, took up writing again, this time fiction. In 1870 the aforementioned crime novella "The Star Tavern" appeared (*Der Sternkrug*), featuring a salesman of tobacco products as a major character. Before his death in 1895, he would pen multiple popular novels and novellas, adding considerably to the emerging genre of crime fiction. Streckfuss's novels were translated into English and appear to have been popular in America, judging from their appearance in a series by Lippincott in Philadelphia⁵.

For Slovene readers and scholars, the most curious feature of *The Lonely House* will be its setting: the Vipava valley and the neighbouring karst in what was then the territory of the Habsburg Empire but that now forms part of Slovenia. *The Lonely House* could thus be, in a sense, Slovenia's first crime novel.

It is initially puzzling to consider why Streckfuss chose a locale so distant from his home of Berlin (and one that was part of an enemy territory: the Austro-Hungarian empire). A murder in an

¹ See the *Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon* for a brief life and a list of Streckfuss's publications, Tannert and Kratz (2007, 118-119) for a concise modern summary of Streckfuss's life and Dönitz (1895, 373-374) for a contemporary account written after Streckfuss's death. Dönitz's obituary is lavish in praise of his entomological colleague, but short in details about his life beyond science.

² See the *Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon*. Interestingly, the protagonist of *The Lonely House* also confesses to having engaged in "political imbroglios" (Streckfuss 1907, 15) in his student days. Streckfuss wrote an account of the uprising, *Die Staat-Umwälzungen der Jahre 1847 und 1848*.

³ Works by the father, Carl Streckfuss appear in Slovene libraries, in German and Slovene translation; the son, however, does not currently appear in the Slovene COBISS database. Nevertheless, old listings from the Ljubljana public library do show that the younger Streckfuss's books were held in the early decades of the 20th century. The elder Carl Streckfuss also has an extensive entry in the *Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon*.

⁴ Hereafter, Streckfuss will be used to refer to Carl Adolf, the son; his first name is spelled *Adolf* in the front matter of the American translation of *The Lonely House*, but *Adolph* in the German editions of his novels and other publications. The *Deutsches Literatur-Lexicon* also records both spellings of his first names. Here, the spelling from the English translation will be used.

⁵ The English translation was made in 1907 by the prolific A. L. (Annis Lee) Wister.

isolated rural setting could have been arranged much closer to home—as, for instance, in “The Star Tavern.” However, research has revealed that Streckfuss knew the Vipava valley well. As a serious amateur entomologist, a collector of butterflies, Streckfuss made summer trips to southern Europe for the purpose of gathering specimens (Dönitz 1895, 374). His finds were presented at meetings of the Berlin Entomological Society (Entomologischen Verein zu Berlin), the members of which kept meticulous minutes and records, which are still available⁶. Research into these records confirms that Streckfuss visited both the Tyrol and what is now Slovenia in the course of his entomological collecting; in the minutes of meetings of the Berlin Entomological Society, he reports on trips to “Krain” (Carniola) and specifically to the Vipava Valley (*Berliner Entomologische Zeitschrift*). This valley has long been familiar to lepidopterists as having a diverse butterfly population. By 1854 Josef Mann had already published an extensive list of butterfly species found in the vicinity of Vipava (Verovnik 2011, 18). Thus, in the 1880s, Streckfuss would have had ample scientific reason for travel to this region.

Similarly, *The Lonely House* takes its protagonist on a fictional trip to the southern part of the Habsburg Empire. The professor’s destination is Krain in the German original, although the English translation gives this, confusingly, as “Ukraine”⁷. In English translation, these are the novel’s opening remarks: “Ukraine! Ukraine! For years I had longed to spend some weeks in Southern Ukraine” (Streckfuss 1907, 11). The translator’s mistake renders the geography of the translation peculiar in the extreme, since the professor’s fictional journey to Ukraine crosses the Carpathians only to terminate in Slovene Postojna! In contrast, the German original is realistic in its geographical and historical setting.

The novel’s first-person narrator, a Prussian professor of natural science, sets off from Berlin on what is, for the 60-year-old man, an exciting scientific adventure. He aims to spend several weeks collecting specimens in Krain. Streckfuss does seek to protect the identity of the village where he sets the main criminal action—an understandable precaution when one is attributing murder to a small community and planning to return there⁸. The village in which the main action of the novel unfolds is called Luttach (“situated in a deep valley in the midst of the Carpathians” (13; see Note 7) and called “Luttava” (20). Today, Luttach is a real place name from the Italian Tirol. Nevertheless, the surrounding geographical place names in the novel are not Tirolean but belong to the south-western region of Slovenia.

More textual proof of the novel’s setting emerges in city and town names. For example, “Adelsberg” and “Laibach” (the German names for Postojna and Ljubljana) are said to offer “the only tolerable accommodation for strangers” in this region (12). The valley containing Luttach is described as being “at the foot of a long spur of Mt Nanos on the road from Adelsberg to Görz” (13)⁹. The

⁶ In the early 1890s the association met on Thursday evenings at 8:30 in premises on Unter den Linden (*Berliner Entomologische Zeitschrift* 36 (1891), 37 (1892): verso).

⁷ A. L. Wister’s geography was deficient where it came to European place names. However, to be fair, one should acknowledge that the Austro-Hungarian Empire did cover an enormous swathe of central and eastern Europe, within which many regional names had been subsumed. Wister retains the city names, Laibach and Adelsberg, but errs when trying to translate “Karst,” which often emerges as “the Carpathians.” A reviewer of *The Lonely House* in *The Bookman* (1908) was certainly confused; the review confidently announces that “The scene is laid in the Carpathian mountains of Austria” (*Bookman* 27, 219).

⁸ Streckfuss made more than one trip to Vipava (called “Wippach” in the minutes); for instance, he reports on a visit in 1890 (*Berliner Entomologische Zeitschrift* 1892), a date that definitely post-dates the writing and publication of *Dan einsame Haus*. Later the minutes record his repeated visits (“wiederholt besuch”) to Krain.

⁹ Görz is Gorizia.

location of Luttach is further pinpointed by its relation to the mountain range: "From Luttach the topmost peak of Mt. Nanos could be reached in a few hours" (13-14) and to Adelsberg (Postojna), which is accessible after "four hours by a carriage road" (18). The fictional Luttach can most plausibly be identified with Vipava (called Wippach in German), based on geographical location and some resemblance in the sound of the name. Streckfuss makes Luttach the place where the river gushes directly from the rock of Nanos:

This is the Luttach. On the north side of Nanos the raging Voyna rushes through a savage rocky vale, suddenly vanishing without a trace; the mountain engulfs it. They say that the Voyna in the interior of Nanos forms a deep unfathomable lake and from this lake in the interior of the mountain it flows on, breaking through the rocks, to come to light again here as the Luttach brook" (Streckfuss 1907, 42-43).

Streckfuss's Luttach is thus clearly based on the real town of Vipava, where the river emerges from the rock right behind the town inn (as in *The Lonely House*)¹⁰. Neither the Voyna nor the Rusina is a real river name in the Vipava Valley; in creating these fictional rivers, Streckfuss has deliberately conflated the Vipava, the Pivka and perhaps the Hubelj. The levels of visual and geological detail confirm that Streckfuss had experience gained from a visit to the region; when the Professor speaks of "the bare gray rocks of Mt. Nanos . . . against the sky" (19), even through the filter of translation, the dominant impression is of an eyewitness account. Streckfuss, therefore, collected more than specimens from his summer trip to the Vipava Valley: he also returned with the setting and idea for a murder mystery.

Nevertheless, Streckfuss is writing fiction, not autobiography, and he has a firm grasp on the atmospherics of the thrilling crime genre. For example, to increase the sense of adventure and foreboding at the outset, Streckfuss gives his protagonist several warnings against the trip; en route, a Viennese friend confides that he has never even heard of "this God-forsaken hole" (14) and advises taking a good revolver as defense against the "bears and wildcats in the forest on Mt. Nanos" (15). A second friend from Görz describes the hardships and discomforts of life in this wild, frontier country, a place of "impenetrable primeval forest" (17). It is clear that the destination of Streckfuss's butterfly collector is supposed to be on the periphery of empire (the "frontier" (16)), where the rules of civilization lose their hold and the wilderness impinges on human habitation. The fictional Luttach is, in post-colonial terms, a contact zone.

3. The Crime Plot of *The Lonely House*

A brief summary of the novel's events will clarify the text's relation to the detective formula. Professor Dollnitz arrives in Luttach and stays at the inn while rambling over the slopes of Mt Nanos in search of plant and insect specimens. Soon, he stumbles across a murder scene: the local usurer Pollenz has been robbed and murdered in his lonely mountain house on Nanos--giving the novel its title. Pollenz leaves behind a pretty daughter, Anna, who is being courted by both principal suspects: Judge Foligno and Franz Schorn. Professor Dollnitz discovers the body along with eyewitness and circumstantial evidence that points almost equally to both suspects. Judge Foligno, who is heading the murder investigation, pressures Dollnitz to swear an affidavit to Schorn's culpability and to suppress evidence incriminating the Judge himself, both of which Dollnitz reluctantly does. Then, on an excursion to a local cave, someone cuts the rope suspending

¹⁰ At the nearby Hubelj spring – above Ajdovščina – a river also gushes right out of the hill. However, there is no town around this spring to provide an equivalent for Streckfuss's Luttach.

Dollnitz over a chasm; he is saved by Schorn, who suspects Foligno of having plotted against the professor's life. While recovering at the village inn, the Professor opens a cabinet belonging to the judge and finds the stolen money and documents. Schorn is vindicated and marries Anna. The Judge is arrested and carried off to Ljubljana.

4. Relation to the Detection Formula

Professor Dollnitz is no Sherlock Holmes but a genuine amateur¹¹. Streckfuss gives his narrator a role, less that of detective than that of witness. All the evidence Dollnitz collects against the suspects has been acquired incidentally while searching for butterflies and plants, and the clinching discovery of the stolen goods happens by accident. Repeatedly, the old Professor appears naïve to the modern reader in his treatment of evidence. For instance, on finding Judge Foligno's bloody handkerchief not far from the crime scene, the Professor returns the handkerchief to its owner (118-119). Nor does he know what to do with the two cut ends of the sabotaged rope that Schorn gives him for safe keeping (200). In contrast to the earlier canny Inspector Werder of "The Star Tavern," this hero is too trusting, despite his training in scientific observation. In this early crime novel there is no arch-criminal, no plodding policeman and no "super-perceptive" sleuth (Wiener 1994, 471). Nevertheless, the Professor, while often invoking intuition, does apply rational, scientific methods in his deductions, and thus prefigures later developments in the detective novel.

Nor does Streckfuss split the detective character from the narrator (as in the later Holmes/Watson model). Instead, the novel is presented as the "Tagebuch" or journal kept by the Professor. As a man of science, the Professor is trained to keep exact notes, and this habit will help in both arousing and confirming his suspicions.

The clues with which Dollnitz works are not those of the urban crime scene from Poe or Holmes. Evidence involves a rare flower (*Ophrys Bertolini*) and its specific growing locations, as well as a moth (*Saturnia caecigena*) and the individual sites where it pupates and emerges from the cocoon¹². This is not forensics as we understand it today: for example, a blood-spattered murder scene at the lonely house is discounted completely as a source of usable evidence of the murderer's identity (Streckfuss 1907, 92-93). Nevertheless, the role of the professor's scientific training in gathering the evidence cannot be underestimated. It is because Dollnitz is a scientist that he exhibits the deductive logic that places Judge Foligno in the patch of *Ophrys Bertolini* and near to the murder scene at the Lonely House.

Streckfuss effectively limits the pool of suspects by locating the murder on the outskirts of a small village. As detective fiction developed in Britain, the country house would become one preferred site for murder, providing a circumscribed setting and a varied but finite slate of suspects. Long before Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers, Streckfuss achieves a similarly tight focus for the crime scene by choosing the confines of the village district. To get the correct balance between stability and mobility necessary for a good murder mystery, Streckfuss gives Professor Dollnitz a headquarters: "A naturalist cannot travel hither and thither like an ordinary tourist; he

¹¹ The hero of the earlier "The Star Tavern" exhibits many more of the Sherlock Holmes characteristics; he is a police inspector in disguise and adept at tracking, footprint evidence and logical thinking.

¹² Both species are real. The *Ophrys Bertolini* would indeed be rare had Dollnitz found it on the side of Nanos, a location which is beyond its normal range. The moth, called *Saturnia caecigena* by Streckfuss is the Autumn Emperor Moth, nowadays classified as *Perisomena caecigena*. The *Berliner Entomologische Zeitschrift* praises Streckfuss for having reported this precise species in "Krain" a location where it had not previously been documented. (*BEZ* 52, 1907, 9 90).

must establish himself somewhere, and make excursions into the surrounding country, which he must investigate thoroughly . . .” (13).¹³ The Luttach headquarters for the entomological excursion is the village inn, the Golden Vine, from which the visiting butterfly collector may explore at will¹⁴. The fictional entomologist is thus cleverly provided with the right combination of mobility and home base, while gaining access to the barroom gossip at the heart of the community. This combination of intimacy and privileged mobility makes an ideal situation for amateur sleuthing and accidental discoveries.

The circle of suspects is thinner in *Lonely House* than it would be in the later mysteries. There are only two main suspects; however, the social circle in which Professor Dollnitz moves is carefully depicted and preserves much of the structure and atmosphere of village society in the 1880s. On the first day in Luttach, for instance, Professor Dollnitz finds the main players in the mystery gathered at the inn: “at a large round table near the tall stove, sat six or eight men, smoking long cigars, with glasses of wine before them” (24). Streckfuss thus adroitly introduces a stranger into the isolated community where the crime will take place. In his senior science professor, Streckfuss mirrored much of himself. He, too, was a butterfly-collector from Berlin and a visitor to the region¹⁵. In Professor Dollnitz, Streckfuss created a non-threatening character who receives everyone’s confidence.

Instantly befriended by the Judge, the chambermaid, and local officials Professor Dollnitz becomes the insider-outsider who negotiates the conflicts that divide the municipality and is soon being referred to as “the old gentleman” and “the kind old man” (241). With his firm, confidence-inspiring voice, the Professor forms a reliable narrative center. The tone of a scientist writing up his field notes is unmistakable; the narrator’s commitment to objectivity about the people he meets, even when they become murder suspects, allows Streckfuss to create suspense.

Narrative suspense is achieved by the careful balance of suspicion between the two suspects: Franz Schorn and Judge Foligno. Professor Dollnitz’s intuition tells him that there is something shady about the Italian Foligno, but since the Judge is the local representative of the law, cannot suspect him for long. Schorn is instinctively liked by the Professor but surrounded by a web of incriminating circumstantial evidence. Whenever the Professor becomes convinced of Schorn’s innocence, the Judge presents arguments that undermine that certainty, and the pendulum of suspicion swings once again. Along with the narrator, the reader moves repeatedly between certainty and doubt.

Streckfuss’s main innovation in the detective genre was the elevation of the man of science to the main role, a change from the minor role played by the earlier entomologist character in “The Star Tavern.” Though an amateur at crime, Dollnitz is a scientist, someone who seeks empirical explanations for observed phenomena. It is not impossible to see in this choice Streckfuss’s own early education in agricultural science, as well as the 19th-century Prussian emphasis on new technical knowledge. *The Lonely House* thus anticipates a long line of scientific criminologists, both amateur and professional.

¹³ As a naturalist, Streckfuss practiced what the fictional Professor preaches; in remarks at meetings of the Berlin Entomological Society in 1892, Streckfuss mentions his own stay of 6 weeks in the Vipava valley, while deploring the practice of generalizing about a place and its fauna based on one specimen or one short visit (*BEZ* 37 (1892), 5).

¹⁴ The building that inspired the fictional inn still sits on the main square (Glavni trg) in Vipava, although it is no longer an inn.

¹⁵ There is also a suggestive similarity between the character’s name *Dollnitz*, and the name of the author’s colleague and chair of the Berlin Entomological Society: *Dönitz*. Perhaps Streckfuss was having a sly joke at the expense of his Berlin colleague.

5. Ethnic and Linguistic Parameters

Although Streckfuss and other German writers of crime fiction placed at the heart of their mysteries questions about the nature of justice in a highly class-based society (Tannert and Kratz 2007, 7), class cannot be the only social parameter on the fringes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Instead of acting out a class hierarchy, the detective plot in *The Lonely House* enacts the struggle of nation and language, ultimately taking sides in the imperial debate. Nation and language are thus central, and the major interest of the novel, beyond its whodunit character, lies in its engagement with the ethno-nationalist tensions among what Stanley Kimball calls “the Austro-Slavs.” Streckfuss’s novel reflects both the linguistic hierarchy that prevailed at the time and the related socio-political groupings of pro-Austrian and pro-nationalist thinkers.

To begin with, part of the rationale for Professor Dollnitz’s choice of location is the hope “that there might be German elements mingling with the Slavonic civilization” (Streckfuss 1907, 14). Before setting out, the Professor receives stern warnings about the people of the region and the intra-ethnic tensions among which they live: “The unhappy strife between nationalities in Ukraine [sic] has so embittered the inhabitants there that all kindly feeling is extinct. The Slav considers hatred of the German his first duty; it is his greatest delight to annoy – even to maltreat – a German” (17). Expecting anti-German hostility, the Professor is pleasantly surprised to find matters much less volatile in Luttach. At the inn, for example, Dollnitz is invited to join the circle of local magnates, not entirely to his satisfaction:

I was amazed at so polite a reception in this notoriously hostile Slav country, and I was not quite pleased. I should have liked to observe the magnates of Luttach, who were apparently here assembled, from a distance, at my leisure, before making their acquaintance, whereas now, when I accepted their invitation, and introduced myself as a German, a Prussian, and worse than all, from Berlin, whose citizens are never popular, their amiability might decrease (25).¹⁶

The varying ethnic and linguistic loyalties of the municipal magnates will play a key role in the investigation of the crime and deserve closer analysis.

1. The inhabitants of Streckfuss’s village of Luttach fall into four ethnic-national categories:
2. People of Austrian descent with Germanic names but local loyalties
3. People of Austrian descent with Germanic names who are resistant to localization
4. People of Italian descent, with Italian names
5. Local Slavic people with Slavic names¹⁷

As a spokesperson for the first group, Pollenz corrects the Professor’s error in expecting anti-German hostility: “That is unfortunately a widespread error which has brought our good Ukraine [sic] into ill-repute. We are all Slavs, and are proud of being so. Our ancestors were Germans, but we are not. . . Whoever is born here and lives here must feel himself a genuine Slav” (27). With this remark, Streckfuss constructs Pollenz as holding a rational position, between more extreme opinions. Nevertheless, this is the classic colonial position of denial, and a 21st-century Slovene reader might contest that narrative view.

¹⁶ Modern readers perhaps need to be reminded that Austria had recently (1866) been defeated militarily by Prussia.

¹⁷ Vodopivec (2004) confirms the existence of such ethnic taxonomies at the time, including the “true German” and the “Nemškutar” or Germanizer.

Pollenz also describes people of the second group, with some animosity: “Those only do we hate among us who are disloyal sons of their native land, who would rob us of our language, our customs, and make Germans of us” (27). According to Pollenz, this Germano-phile tendency is worse in the capital, Laibach, where it causes “constant strife” (27). However, Pollenz is quick to exculpate one side, claiming that the Slavs are “seldom the aggressive party.” If one can identify an authorial position in this dialogue, it seems to be sympathetic to the side of Germanic civilization, law, order and the German language, but careful to acknowledge the Slovene side of the issue.

All of Streckfuss’s main characters belong to the first three categories and are holders of municipal office or important positions in the village¹⁸:

District Judge Foligno, his Assistant Herr Einern, Burgomaster Pollenz, a retired Captain Pollenz, a landed proprietor, Gunther by name, Herr Weber, a merchant, and Herr Dietrich, a notary. Strange! All German names save that of the district Judge. Chance had surely brought me among Germans” (26).

His Slavic characters, in contrast, include many servants or laborers (e.g., Mizka, Rassak, Bela and Frau Franzka, the innkeeper’s wife.

Streckfuss’s narrator initially exhibits a Prussian disdain for other peoples and languages, for example, this account of his driver on his first trip into Luttach: “I should have liked to know the names of those giant mountains, but my driver was a genuine Slav, who could not understand a word of German, and who was too stupid to comprehend signs, so all intercourse with him was impossible” (18-19). This condescending attitude extends to estimation of local character; the people of the Luttach valley, for instance, are described as being “too indolent” to develop or exploit the tourism potential of their caves (43) – in contrast, presumably, to the people of Postojna. This judgment shows that the Professor is susceptible to the ethnic binaries of his world in a manner that grates on the modern reader; however, it conforms to similar constructions of ethnicity in the British detective story, as will be established in the next section.

There is only one character belonging to the third category (Italians), but he plays a major role in the perpetration and investigation of the murder. Foligno, Streckfuss’s Italian district judge, turns out to be the murderer; he is thus an early instance of the double role in the detective story: both perpetrator and investigator. Mizka, the servant, describes him as an “out-and-out Italian” a gambler and copious wine drinker, whose grandfather had settled in Luttach, but who could not himself speak Italian fluently (35). In the 19th century, the littoral area would have been inhabited by many people of Italian descent, although not as many in small villages as in the big towns, such as Görz. After the murder, the local people gathered at the inn are quick to suspect the Italians (105). The new post-1866 border with Italy had left thousands of Slovene-speaking people on the other side (Vodopivec 2004), and this could have encouraged the anti-Italian feeling in Luttach. However, Judge Foligno’s judicial title and community position make it unlikely that he should be the criminal, despite his alcoholism and general unpopularity. Suspicion and a trail of circumstantial evidence initially point equally to Judge Foligno and to Franz Schorn, the most “Germanic” of all the characters. Franz is described thus by Streckfuss:

¹⁸ The only local official missing from the story is a priest. Streckfuss completely ignores the institution of the Church, which is represented only architecturally, by a wayside cross and the Chapel of St. Nikolas. The real Church of St Nikolas still sits on the slopes of Nanos, providing an important clue about the site on which Streckfuss imagined the nearby “lonely house.”

The face was thoroughly German. Such deep blue eyes, such fair, close curls are to be found nowhere save in Germany. He was certainly handsome . . .” (Streckfuss 1907, 24)

The murder investigation thus acts out the intra-ethnic tensions that Streckfuss notes in the municipality. The crime even features in the Laibach newspapers and serves to incite further ethnic conflict:

The ultra Slavonic newspapers had hitherto triumphed in the announcement that the only German agitator in Luttach was nothing more or less than a miserable, ordinary criminal, and now they suffered a terrible blow in that the German agitator was no murderer; the criminal was a man who, although of Italian descent, had always labored in the Slavonic cause. The Slav party, on the other hand, were half-inclined to swear to the innocence of the Judge and to stake all on the guilt of the hated German (275-76)

Given their outsider status as Prussian visitors, it is not surprising that both Streckfuss and his character Professor Dollnitz remain blind to the merits of the developing nationalist position, if not to its existence. His plot sides with Schorn, the hyper-Germanic character, who is first demonized by the Luttach community and gradually rehabilitated in public opinion – both because he proves to be innocent and because he is revealed to be more closely committed to the land, workers and local language than had at first been evident. In making this choice, Streckfuss reveals an unsubtle pro-German agenda; that German-speaking Slovenes should lead and others follow is constructed as the common-sense, progressive opinion.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator and other characters freely express ethno-nationalist judgments about people. The village doctor, for example, rejoices thus once the murderer is revealed to be Foligno:

“Do you know, Herr Professor, what comforts me in this cursed affair?”

“What?”

“That Foligno is no Slav, but an Italian. Believe me, a Slav would be incapable of such villainy. Good night, Herr Professor.” (Streckfuss 1907, 247)

Behind this racist generalization, lies the unexpected solidarity between Austro-Slav and Slav, a point that Streckfuss has been foregrounding, perhaps with more wish-fulfillment than actual evidence.

In colonial and imperial contact zones, language often forms the root of such ethnic struggles for power. In this novel, the attitude towards language is consistently Germano-centric, with several impatient references to the deplorable tendency of subject peoples to prefer their own languages. Before embarking on his entomological trip, the professor is told that he will find “a poverty-stricken peasantry, speaking the dialect of the country, and understanding not one word of German” (12). It is implied that the Slavic tongue is inferior, garbled and not worth acquiring. These prejudices are revealed to be largely untrue, as the Professor finds that many people in Luttach are bilingual – the innkeepers, for instance. Moreover, the Professor himself undergoes a subtle shift in his attitude towards Slavic speakers; by Chapter 8, he is beginning to see the communication problem as mutual, not one-sided:

Intercourse with the country folk whom I met on my excursions was, of course, very limited; we could not understand one another’s language. . . . they found it very difficult to understand

the few Slavonic words which I had learned from Mizka and which I certainly pronounced very badly (134-135).

This apparently charming attitude on the part of the old Professor is still typical of the imperial situation: a pseudo-humility about pronunciation serves only to emphasize the gap between civilized and non-civilized tongues at the edge of empire.

If Streckfuss has an agenda, it seems to aim at proving the relative lack of animosity between Austrians and Slavs; real hard feeling is intra-Austrian, between the assimilationists and the purists. Any serious authorial distaste seems to be reserved for the Italian character. The Slovene characters are mostly treated with tolerant disinterest by both narrator and author. Professor Dollnitz does not dislike the Slovenes he meets: while recording the scarcity of any German-speaking peasants, for instance, the Professor ends by praising the “kindness and cordiality” of the Slavonic country folk towards him as a stranger in their region (135). In hospitality, they are compared favorably with the Swiss peasants that the Professor has previously encountered (135). Towards the end of the novel, however, one Slovene character is given an emblematic moment. As the vindicated Franz Schorn arrives back in Luttach from prison, the carriage is obstructed by the welcoming crowds, but Rassak takes charge:

It was impossible for the carriage to proceed through the crowded streets, when suddenly a stentorian voice exclaimed:

“Make way!”

It was the voice of the gigantic Rassak. He dexterously unharnessed the horses, and, seizing the pole himself, assisted by two savage-looking fellows . . . on they went to the “Golden vine” (282-83).

The incident is rife with contradictions: though physically powerful, Rassak can only use that power to take the place of a beast of burden. Despite having found his voice, the Slovene can only raise it in the service of his “German” masters. Streckfuss constructs Rassak as the classic postcolonial figure of the subaltern, whose voice must be forever coopted in the service of what oppresses him. In making this interpretation, however, we are reading against the authorial grain, for Streckfuss wishes us to feel only the joy of the moment and the justice of social restitution for Franz Schorn, who is borne on Rassak’s shoulders into the hotel garden (283).

Schorn’s complete vindication and his union with the desirable Anna both show Streckfuss’s tolerance towards the assimilative tendency among peripheral Austrians. To become localized in feeling – even in language (late in the novel, Franz demonstrates his command of both languages) is to be progressive. As soon as Franz is no longer a murder suspect, he becomes the book’s most positive village character, and the revelation that he can address his workers in their own language forms part of his complete fictional rehabilitation. His purchase of up-to-date farm equipment from the town of Görz also marks him as technologically progressive, in line with a modernizing Prussian tendency in Streckfuss’s voice.¹⁹

There is no indication, however, that Streckfuss was at all receptive to nationalist feeling among the Slovene inhabitants of Krain. It would seem improbable that characters like Rassak or Mizka should assert the right to anything more ambitious than fair payment for their work. This is despite the fact that at this time, the region was already enjoying the emergence of Slavic literature and

¹⁹ Dölnitz’s obituary tells us that Streckfuss studied agriculture (*Landwirtschaft*) in his youth (1895, 373).

cultural awareness (Vodopivec 2004). Slovenian reading rooms had been forming in major towns across Slovene Illyria, but it is difficult to picture any of Streckfuss's brawny Slavs profiting from their literary offerings.

In rehabilitating his chief suspect, the Germanic Schorn, Streckfuss enshrines the status quo, remaining satisfied with a social hierarchy that keeps Germans and German-Speaking Slovenes at the top. The outcome is similar to that in English detective fiction, where ethnic issues are similarly problematized, only to be socially re-inscribed in more extreme term, as Section 6 will argue.

6. Detection and Empire

Streckfuss's construction of ethnic and linguistic issues shows similarities with the imperialist agenda of English-language detective fiction of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the situation in Krain is one of "old" empire rather than new, the border area around the northern Adriatic could certainly be considered as an imperial contact zone and thus a prime area for the working out of dramas of hegemony.²⁰ When one turns to English-language fiction, one finds much evidence that imperial settings and issues were thus used in the 1890s and well into the next century. Detective fiction, one could say, developed in tandem with the expanding British Empire, partly because both the aesthetic and the political projects depended on an expanding scientific worldview, one that privileged European forms of knowledge and provided means of converting knowledge into power.

Several critics have explored the connection between detection and empire (McBratney 2005; Brantlinger 1988; Harris 2003; Keep 1999; Reitz 2000; Thompson 1993), and although some critics consider later periods of colonialism (e. g., Seshagiri), much attention is given to the last decade of the 19th century and to the Sherlock Holmes stories. McBratney finds that the discourse of racial type underlies the Sherlock Holmes canon (2005, 151) and has specified how Doyle's novella *The Sign of Four* harnesses colonial racial taxonomies from India to enact a "deeply conservative" drama of social control over undesirable atavistic tendencies at the heart of the British Empire (McBratney 2005, 163). McBratney draws upon historical and anthropological material, as well as theory by Foucault and Said, to argue that Doyle's detective formula is neither transgressive nor subversive of imperial certainties, despite the potential of Holmes's individualistic, deductive method.

The Sign of Four unfolds in London, so the empire is brought back to the center, unlike the action in *The Lonely House*, which occupies the edge of an old empire. Doyle, however, clearly bases his plot on the identification of racial and criminal "types" (150); the racial other in the novella is the Andaman Islander, Tonga. By inserting Tonga into the imperial construct of racial hierarchies, Holmes solves the mystery. The engine of imperial science provided the schema into which new species and peoples could be classified; to collect and classify was to understand, and to exert control, especially given the demographic diversity of colonial India. This takes us back to Streckfuss's Professor Dollnitz, who is himself a collector – not an ethnologist, but certainly an entomologist. His job as a scientist is to collect and classify. Dollnitz's interest in the ethnic divisions of Luttach overlaps with his scientific entomological practice. Moreover, his scientific approach converts directly into power, simply because it allows him to undermine a false alibi with exact observation. Dollnitz thus forms part of that "emergent nineteenth-century culture of knowledge" (Thompson 1993, 44) to which Holmes and other detective figures of the era belonged and which functioned to exclude from power those of "unsuitable" culture, languages and ethnicity.

²⁰ K. E. Fleming has even considered the relevance of Said's theory of Orientalism to the Balkans (see Fleming 2000, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography").

For some theorists, the detective story enacts social paranoia about ethnic subversion (Cawelti 1977, 31), whether at the edge of empire in India or Africa, or imported to the urban heart of empire. By constituting dangerous criminal forces with an ethnic component and then exorcising them, the detective plot affirms the social status quo (35). If the criminal embodies some problematized ethnicity or Other, then his defeat becomes a victory for social consensus. Although *The Lonely House* has no “bestial” Andaman Islanders, Streckfuss does demonize one element in Vipava Valley society: Foligno the Italian, and through him Italians within the empire, but most significantly, anyone with nationalist sympathies. Late in the novel Streckfuss reveals that Foligno sides with those agitating for greater regional political power, in short, for the Slovene nationalist cause (1907, 275-76). With this identification of criminal and political activity – common in British detective fiction (McBratney 2005, 151-56), the reader is positioned counter to any expression of cultural or ethnic nationalism.

It must be re-emphasized that both Streckfuss and his Professor Dollnitz are not Austrians but Prussians from Berlin and thus have no political stake in the exercise of imperial power. Streckfuss’ identification with existing power structures could then reflect a combination of linguistic and ethnic loyalties. By criminalizing the nationalist and rewarding the pure German, Streckfuss enshrines the status quo, remaining satisfied with a social hierarchy that keeps Germanic peoples at the top, and identifying heavily with the centralized government system represented by the court officials who come from Ljubljana to prosecute the case. In so doing, the plot of the novel serves, however incidentally, to withhold political agency from Slovene characters such as Mizka and even the giant laborer Rassak. As in the case of the British Sherlock Holmes, detection fails to challenge social or political ideology, even while it employs the new ideology of deductive science.

7. Conclusion

Our research has thus revealed an early crime novel that anticipates the scientific methodology that would come to dominate detective fiction for 120 years. As a piece of realistic fiction, *The Lonely House* reflects the social milieu of the Vipava Valley with considerable accuracy; however, the novel also anticipates detection’s reliance on reductive ethnic taxonomies and stereotypes. It is therefore conceivable that this novel has been lost to the contemporary Slovene reader on account of its characters’ unpalatable opinions about Slovene ethnicity and nationalist empowerment. The condescending pronouncements of Professor Dollnitz and his friends about what to expect from the primitive, illiterate, inarticulate local population of the valley under Nanos could make for uncomfortable reading. While these opinions align with other imperial attitudes in literature of the era, even with the Sherlock Holmes stories, they provide a reminder of the biased perspectives and unquestioned ideologies of imperial powers in general. Plot, character and dialogue confirm that Streckfuss was no extreme lobbyist for pan-Germanic identification, let alone Prussian hegemony. Nevertheless, his plot engages with local ethnic hierarchies only to confirm their validity. Despite Streckfuss’s approval of bilingualism and support for agricultural modernization, *The Lonely House* demonstrates that its author was no longer the revolutionary firebrand of 1848. The best that can be claimed for Streckfuss is that his linguistic, ethnic and cultural positions could be seen as relatively enlightened for a Berlin writer in an era so close to the Austro-Prussian war.

It remains for a Slovene historian to consider the accuracy and relevance of this novel’s depiction of ethnic attitudes and tensions at the edge of empire and in a region that would later be a battleground twice over and a hub of partisan resistance. Moreover, as both an early (perhaps the earliest) murder mystery and a realistic novel of municipal life in 19th-century Slovenia, *The Lonely House* deserves to be made available in a good Slovene translation.

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