The Minister's Pen: S.R. Crockett's Literary Voice Before Fame

A Reading Room Essay

Samuel Rutherford Crockett achieved literary celebrity with *The Stickit Minister* in 1893. Later critics categorised him amongst the "Kailyard School"—that supposedly sentimental tradition of Scottish rural fiction that supposedly offered readers a saccharine, nostalgic vision of parish life. There is much evidence to support the argument that Kailyard was a critical construst, misapplied to Crockett but still the ‘K’ label is hard to shift. A reappraisal requires evidence and a pamphlet from 1890, published whilst Crockett still served as minister at Penicuik Free Church, reveals something that sits entirely against the ‘Kailyard’ label: a writer already in full command of sophisticated literary techniques, wielding irony, satire, and psychological insight with considerable skill. *How to Discourage Your Minister* demonstrates that Crockett's literary voice was well established years before his fictional debut, and that even when addressing serious religious matters, he was no purveyor of sentimental piety.

The Ironist in the Pulpit

The pamphlet's very title announces its method. Ostensibly a practical guide teaching congregation members how to discourage their minister, it employs sustained dramatic irony to critique damaging congregational behaviours whilst appearing to recommend them. This is no gentle pastoral remonstrance but rather a calculated rhetorical strategy demanding considerable sophistication from both author and audience.

Consider the opening gambit. Having established King Josiah as the biblical exemplar of proper ministerial support, Crockett pivots sharply: "Mr. Andrew Lang has recently written a brilliant little book which bears the title, 'How to Fail in Literature.' It is necessary to preach to Christian congregations a sermon entitled, 'How to Discourage your Minister.'" The comparison is telling. Crockett positions his religious pamphlet alongside contemporary literary criticism, suggesting an audience comfortable moving between secular and sacred reading. More significantly, he openly declares his ironic method, trusting readers to navigate the gap between ostensible instruction and actual critique.

This is emphatically not Kailyard writing. The Kailyard mode, as contemporary critics understood it, offered readers comforting reassurance, gentle humour, and sentimental affirmation of traditional rural pieties. Crockett here offers something considerably more astringent: a diagnosis of congregational pathology delivered through sustained satirical performance.

The Taxonomist of Human Folly

Throughout the pamphlet, Crockett demonstrates the novelist's essential gift: acute observation of human behaviour translated into memorable characterisation. He catalogs seven distinct "methods" of ministerial discouragement, each embodied in recognisable congregational types.

The "Condescendingly Critical" parishioner receives particularly sharp treatment. Crockett captures both manner and motive with economical precision: "How calm, how serene, how lofty is the smile which says, 'Here is a young man who thinks he is going to turn the world upside down; let him alone for a little and his ardour will soon cool off; in a year or two we will see what he makes of it.'" The mimicked voice rings true—we can hear the patronising tone, see the self-satisfied expression. This is character writing of considerable subtlety, capturing not merely behaviour but the psychological complex underlying it: pride masquerading as wisdom, indifference clothed as prudence.

The "Candid Friend" receives even more devastating treatment. Crockett paints a miniature dramatic scene: "Then there is the CANDID FRIEND, who comes upon Friday or Saturday evenings, when the minister has the steam up, and his brain-machinery is working at high pressure upon the Sunday sermon, and feels constrained to put a little sand in the bearings by informing him what Mr. Such-an-one said of him in confidence, or what was the latest criticism upon his last week's sermon delivered by the parish oracle." The mechanical metaphor—sand in the machinery—perfectly captures the disruption caused by such ill-timed "helpfulness." But notice also the careful staging: the specific days named, the minister's mental state described, the Friend's self-justifying language ("feels constrained") gently mocked.

These are not the stock figures of sentimental fiction but carefully observed social types, rendered with the psychological realism and satirical edge that would characterise Crockett's later fiction. Reading stories from ‘The Stickit Minister’ (1893) with a knowledge of this pamphlet informs one’s opinion of his attitude to the clergy.

The Metaphorical Imagination

Crockett's pamphlet reveals a writer thinking habitually in images, deploying metaphor not as decorative flourish but as structural principle. Each "method" of discouragement receives its governing metaphor, extended and developed with considerable ingenuity.

The "Old Bottle Method" works through sustained biblical allusion. Congregations insisting new ministers conform to their predecessors' methods are forcing "new wine" into "old bottles"—an image any Presbyterian congregation would immediately recognise from Matthew's Gospel. But Crockett develops the metaphor beyond simple allusion: "A man's methods are as much part of him as his matter or spirit. They are the nature of the man working practically, and if they be hampered or altered against his will, he will never work up to the measure of his powers." The metaphor has become an argument about authentic vocation and the integrity of individual gifts.

Most striking is the extended metaphor describing how persistent low-level criticism extinguishes ministerial enthusiasm. Crockett begins with personal anecdote: "Did you ever try to keep in a wood-fire on a pouring wet day in the open? We remember once struggling on a high mountain camping-ground to keep our precious fire alight. The heavy sullen rain came plumping solidly down, as it had been doing for hours, and in the hollow of a great tree we were nursing a little glowing spark to keep us in warmth." The scene is vividly realised—we feel the wet, see the huddled figures, sense the precariousness of that small flame.

He then develops the comparison: "Every time a gust drove round the corner we huddled closer to ward the drops from the precious flame. Every few minutes some of us would leave the shelter to find some dry sticks or moss further among the trees, only to return wetter and more disconsolate

than before. Bit by bit we drew closer, bit by bit the wet encroached on the weakening flicker of the flames, till at last we were left in hopeless misery, staring at the hissing embers."

Only then does he make explicit the application: "In just such a way, the fire of high youthful resolve and enthusiasm, which might have set a whole countryside on fire, is often extinguished by the steady drip of discouragement." The metaphor has done genuine intellectual work, making viscerally comprehensible the cumulative effect of seemingly minor discouragements. This is writing that trusts imagery to carry meaning, that thinks through metaphor rather than merely decorating with it.

The Comic Vision

Humour pervades the pamphlet, but it is comedy with considerable bite. Crockett writes in the tradition of Swift rather than sentimental Victorian religious literature. His wit serves diagnostic rather than merely entertaining purposes.

Consider his description of the "Grand Sermon Plan" of discouragement: "Once thoroughly indoctrinate your minister with the knowledge that whatever he preaches concerning duty or living, is understood by his people to be simply a pious opinion good to listen to on Sunday, and by no means to be thought of as worth any consideration upon Monday, and you effectually scuttle the gallant ship of his enthusiasm. Down down she will go in the deep sea of indifference—all hands on board! 'A grand sermon yon, but no practical'—no, because you won't practise it!"

The rhetorical performance here is remarkable. The mock-pedagogical tone ("Once thoroughly indoctrinate") maintains the ironic frame whilst the nautical metaphor provides comic exaggeration. The imagined congregational response—"A grand sermon yon, but no practical"—captures both idiom and attitude with economical precision. The final reversal—"no, because you won't practise it!"—delivers the satirical point with punch.

Similarly acute is his observation about ministerial public appearances: "Consider for a moment a minister, in a moderately large charge, has probably from 150 to 200 public appearances to make in a year. Just think of that, members of mutual improvement associations, debating societies, occasional political speakers, and remember how much time and labour your half-dozen or so exact from you. Let me tell you that it is a minister's greatest difficulty to keep his matter fresh and original, and his manner simple and natural."

The tone here mingles genuine sympathy with comic deflation. By inviting comparison with amateur speakers who struggle over half a dozen appearances annually, Crockett makes visible the extraordinary demands placed upon ministers—but the very precision of his accounting (150 to 200 appearances) and his matter-of-fact tone prevent the passage from tipping into self-pity or sentimentality. This is comedy in service of truth-telling.

The Psychological Realist

Perhaps most significantly for understanding Crockett's development as a writer, the pamphlet demonstrates sophisticated psychological insight. He understands human motivation, self-deception, and the complex dynamics of communal life.

His analysis of why young ministers lose their initial enthusiasm reveals genuine psychological acuity: "So the young man who came cherishing great hopes, and keeping a high ideal before him,

yearning eagerly for sympathy, gradually loses his warmth, and like most cooling bodies, he contracts within himself, till the narrow unresponsive apathy of his congregation may make him even as themselves. It is easy to say that a man should have an inner fire of the Spirit of Encouragement within himself, but even a man who can keep this alight needs the fuel of human appreciation and sympathy."

This is not sentimental piety but hard-headed analysis of how human beings actually function. The physical metaphor of cooling bodies contracting works because it captures a genuine psychological process. The acknowledgement that even strong individuals require external encouragement refuses easy moralism.

Equally acute is his observation about the minister's peculiar vulnerability: "A minister is told that every eye is upon him—in his quiet corner or limited circle he experiences a greater share of the fierce light which beats upon a throne than any other professional man. This is inevitable, and in some respects not unbeneficial, but it is well to remember that a true minister does not set himself up as being any better than any other humble Christian. He stands on no pedestal of superior sanctity; nay, his very position makes him (or ought to make him) exceedingly sensitive to his miserable shortcomings."

Here Crockett navigates between competing demands with considerable sophistication. He acknowledges the legitimacy of heightened scrutiny whilst refusing to endorse unrealistic expectations. He recognises that public position increases rather than decreases sensitivity to criticism. This is the novelist's understanding of how social role and private experience interact.

The Reformer's Edge

What definitively removes this pamphlet from the Kailyard tradition is its reforming intention. Crockett writes not to comfort but to challenge, not to celebrate existing arrangements but to critique them. His diagnosis of congregational pathology is unflinching.

Consider his warning about anonymous letter-writers: "The man or woman who writes an unsigned letter to hurt another, may depend upon it that the devil is at their elbow while it is being penned, nor will he trouble himself much about them afterwards either, for he thinks himself, in the long run, quite sure of all anonymous letter-writers—an opinion in which he does not stand alone." This is robust, even fierce, language. The theological claim—that anonymous critics are doing the devil's work—is stated without qualification or softening.

Even more striking is his extended discussion of ministers driven to breakdown by congregational pressure. He references "a good and able young minister of blameless character, who was clearly driven out of his mind by such diabolical persecution. He attempted to take his own life more than once, and finally became perfectly insane." This is not the comfortable world of Kailyard fiction but rather an unflinching acknowledgement of genuine suffering caused by communal cruelty.

The pamphlet's conclusion intensifies rather than softens its challenge: "If a sinner sit under our preaching and we warn him not, he shall perish, but of us will the Lord require his blood, when the great trump of Judgement upon the midnight throbs—" This is prophetic rather than pastoral rhetoric, warning rather than comforting.

The Literary Artist in Formation

How to Discourage Your Minister reveals Crockett as an already accomplished literary artist some four years before his first novel was published. The techniques displayed here—sustained irony, memorable characterisation, extended metaphor, psychological insight, and comic vision—are precisely those that would distinguish his later fiction. It is also worth noting that the stories collected in ‘The Stickit Minister’ (1893) were the ones he was writing and publishing in magazines contemporaneously with this penny pamphlet. He is laying out his stall quite clearly if one takes off the blinkers of Kailyard criticism.

Moreover, the pamphlet demonstrates that Crockett's literary mode was already established independently of his subject matter. He did not write sentimentally about religion and then adopt a different style for his other fiction. Rather, he brought the same sophisticated literary techniques to both religious and secular subjects.

This has significant implications for understanding Crockett's place in Scottish literary history. The Kailyard label, constructed by (envious?) English contemporary literary critics and enthusiastically applied retrospectively by modernist critics like George Blake and others, then lazily (or unknowingly) adopted by later critics who were themselves more than one step removed from the primary source materials obscures what Crockett's actual writing reveals: a sophisticated ironist, a sharp observer of human behaviour, a writer capable of comedy, pathos, and prophetic challenge, often in close proximity.

The pamphlet also suggests we should reconsider the relationship between Crockett's ministries and his literary career. Rather than a simple progression from preacher to novelist, we might better understand Crockett as a literary artist who happened to work first in religious contexts. The ironic mode, the satirical edge, the psychological realism—these were not techniques he acquired after leaving the ministry but rather skills he had developed within it.

Conclusion: Beyond Kailyard

How to Discourage Your Minister makes clear that even when addressing his Penicuik congregation on serious religious matters, S.R. Crockett was no purveyor of sentimental piety. His literary techniques—sustained irony, sharp social observation, extended metaphor, psychological insight, and purposeful comedy—were already fully developed during his ministerial career.

The pamphlet reveals an artist rather than merely a preacher: someone thinking visually and dramatically, constructing character through voice and gesture, deploying humour in service of serious argument, and trusting his audience to navigate sophisticated rhetorical performances. These are the skills of a literary craftsman, and they were evidently well established years before Crockett achieved fame as a novelist. It was also the publication of a brave man, given his employment at the time.

In all, the pamphlet offers much good evidence to challenge the conventional narrative that positions Crockett primarily as a Kailyard sentimentalist. Whatever the merits of his later fiction this early pamphlet demonstrates that Crockett possessed literary gifts of considerable sophistication. He could write with ironic detachment about subjects close to his professional life; he could employ humour without dissolving into sentiment; he could offer psychological insight without moralising; he could challenge his audience without alienating them.

The minister's pen, it turns out, was already the novelist's pen. Crockett did not learn to write when he left the ministry; rather, he found in fiction a more capacious form for techniques and sensibilities already developed in his homiletic work. To understand Crockett's literary achievement, we must recognise that his artistic voice was forged not in reaction against his religious vocation but through it.

***Read it for yourself. The Museum Library has a copy of* S.R. Crockett's "How to Discourage Your Minister" (Edinburgh: Gall & Inglis, 1890) freely accessible:**

https://www.srcrockett.scot/library/Articles/Discourage_Minister_1890.pdf