

In Galloway's Woods and Trees with S.R. Crockett

A Literary and Landscape Study

"Nowhere, to my thinking, is the world so gracious as between the green woodlands of Earlstoun and the grey Duchrae Craigs."

Samuel Rutherford Crockett loved trees, and he wrote extensively about woods and trees in his fiction. Indeed, we might say they are root and branch of his Galloway fiction. His mixing of fact and fiction offers us a way to connect to Galloway's historic woodland, drawn for us by a man who knew his trees intimately. For Crockett, trees are there to be climbed, places to read books, while woods offer spaces for lovers' trysts and political refuge alike.

The question arises: why should fictional trees matter to our understanding of historical landscape? Because Crockett writes about the trees he remembers. His fictional stories are invariably drawn from personal memory and therefore can tell us something about the actuality of trees and woodland in Galloway in the mid to late 19th century. With more than 30 books all populated by trees and woods, Crockett's literary corpus represents an unparalleled record of how Galloway's people lived with, in, and through their wooded environment.

Named Trees: The Monuments of Memory

"There are many woods of pine and oak about the Duchrae"

Crockett's landscape is populated by specific, named trees that function as landmarks in both geography and narrative. These are not generic woodland settings but particular trees with individual characteristics, histories, and roles in the human dramas that unfold around them.

The Earlstoun Oak

The most architecturally significant of Crockett's named trees appears in the novel 'Men of the Moss Hags'. While the novel's hero Will Gordon observes that "there are many woods of pine and oak about the Duchrae," it is the Earlstoun Oak itself that dominates this novel. The outlawed Gordon Covenanters hide in it, but this is no simple refuge:

"the danger that some questioning spy might discover his lurking-place, that Sandy made himself, with the help of his brother William, a shelter in a great bushy oak in the midst of the home park wood... Sandy abode up there alone in the tree top. William and he had constructed a platform on which my distressed goodman could stretch himself at full length and yet be entirely hidden from observation, even should a soldier pass directly underneath. The oak tree, which is great and very umbrageous, stands in the thickest part of the woodland, and the platform or bed had a shelter over it sufficient to turn any ordinary rain."

This passage reveals trees functioning as more than landscape—they become architecture. The brothers have constructed a dwelling in the canopy, complete with weather protection and sleeping quarters. The tree serves as refuge, home, and sanctuary, demonstrating Crockett's understanding of how trees could provide essential infrastructure for survival during times of political persecution.

The historical context deepens the significance. Crockett was writing about the Covenanting period when religious dissidents faced genuine persecution. His detailed description of the tree-dwelling are drawn from oral tradition and careful historical research into how the persecuted Covenanters survived in woodland environments during 'The Killing Times.'

The Bogle Thorn

Perhaps no tree in Crockett's corpus better demonstrates the intersection of folklore, landscape, and family storytelling than the Bogle Thorn, which stood by the roadside between Laurieston and Little Duchrae. In 'Raiderland', Crockett provides its geographical coordinates: "I know a bank where the wild thyme grows... you will find it past Blates Mill, past the Bogle Thorn, just where the loch opens out." He describes its appearance with the eye of someone who passed it regularly: "Yet a little farther on, its branches bent by the furious blasts from the loch, stands at an angle of the road, the famous Bogle Thorn."

The tree's significance extends beyond mere landmark status. In 'Sweethearts at Home', it becomes the setting for 'The Little Green Man', a story Crockett invented for his daughter. The tale reveals his method of transforming landscape into narrative:

"In an incautious moment, once upon a time, I had informed Sweetheart that on the branches of that tree, in years long past, when I used to trudge past it on foot, there used to be seen little green men, moping and mowing. So every time we pass that way Sweetheart requires the story without variations."

The story transforms the thorn into an elaborate fairy dwelling: "He had the loveliest little parlour and bedrooms all in the inside of the tree, everything finished neat as cabinet-making, and the floor carpeted—you never saw the like—and there were little windows, too, with glass in them, and shutters that shut with the bark outside, so that you never could tell there was a window there at all."

This detailed interior architecture of the tree-house reflects both Crockett's imaginative method and his understanding of trees as potential domestic spaces. The precision of the description—carpeted floors, glazed windows with bark shutters—suggests someone who had genuinely considered how one might live within a tree.

The Bogle Thorn's fate provides a melancholy coda to the story. It fell victim to road straightening, becoming what we might now recognize as an early casualty of landscape modernization that prioritized efficiency over heritage. Crockett obliquely addresses this in 'Old Nick and Young Nick' with the story 'By Right of Salvage', acknowledging that progress often has little patience for trees with stories.

The Glenhead Yew

The Glenhead Yew stood at the house of the Macmillans in Glentrool, from where John Macmillan guided Crockett to many of the locations used in 'The Raiders' and where Crockett wrote part of

'Men of the Moss Hags'. This tree represented a direct connection between Crockett's creative process and the landscape that inspired it.

The tree's destruction in recent years—felled without ceremony or protest—represents a particular loss. While the Sycamore Gap tree received national attention when it was illegally felled, Galloway lost what was arguably a more precious tree, one with direct literary and historical associations, without public outcry.

Carlingwark's Silver Birch

In 'Raiderland', Crockett provides what may be his most nuanced exploration of how different people see the same tree. The silver birch at Carlingwark Loch becomes "Our Lady of the Woods" to young aesthetes who sketch it and write odes to its beauty. But this romantic vision meets practical reality when a clogger approaches the same tree:

"There was a tree, a silver-birch, which grew upon a point near the little grassy islet which fronts the Fair Island on its eastern side. We, the boys of twenty-five years ago, loved it. We sketched it after the manner of MacWhirter. We wrote odes to it. Mine I even printed. It was 'Our Lady of the Woods.' One day it chanced that the wandering trio who did all these things, came on a fourth youth also regarding the beautiful white birch. There was a kind of reverent joy on his face. Our hearts warmed to the fellow... 'That's a bonny tree,' he said, seeing us also gazing up at it. 'Yes,' we cried, rejoicing as the angels do over a soul saved, 'we think it is the loveliest thing all about the loch.' 'Aye,' he said, 'I was just thinkin' the same—it wad make grand clog-bottoms.'"

The encounter gives an insight into the youthful Crockett and his boyhood friend William MacGeorge (later a celebrated Galloway landscape artist) and perfectly captures the tension between aesthetic and utilitarian approaches to trees. Crockett doesn't dismiss the clogger's perspective but still mourns the loss of "Our Lady of the Woods." This nuanced understanding of competing claims on natural resources shows Crockett as neither naive romantic nor crude utilitarian, but someone who understood landscape as complex social space where different needs intersect and sometimes conflict.

The tree's eventual fate—"To clog-bottoms she came at long and last"—during the great windstorm of December 1883 adds historical specificity to the loss. Crockett's mention of the Krakatoa dust "reddening the skies of the world" during the same period connects this local loss to global environmental events, perhaps suggesting an awareness of how local and planetary processes intersect.

Childhood Canopies: The Formation of a Tree-Loving Mind

"The earliest scent I can remember is that of fresh pine chips"

Understanding Crockett's adult relationship with trees requires examining how that relationship formed in childhood. His autobiographical passages in 'Raiderland' reveal trees as fundamental to his earliest sensory experiences and intellectual development.

Sensory Formation Among the Pines

In the section "Duchrae of Balmaghie 1. Farm by Waterside," Crockett describes his earliest memory:

"The farm I know best is also the loveliest for situation. It lies nestled in green holm crofts. The purple moors ring it half round, north and south. To the eastward pinewoods once stood ranked and ready like battalions clad in indigo and Lincoln green against the rising sun—that is, till one fell year when the woodmen swarmed all along the slopes and the ring of axes was heard everywhere. The earliest scent I can remember is that of fresh pine chips, among which my mother laid me while she and her brothers gathered 'kindling' among the yet unfallen giants. Too young to walk, I had to be carried pick-a-back to the wood."

This passage reveals trees as integral to family survival rather than merely decorative landscape. The infant Crockett breathes pine resin while surrounded by the sounds of axes and voices of relatives gathering fuel. Trees weren't romantic abstraction in his world—they were essential, intimate, part of daily survival and family activity.

The military metaphor—pines "ranked and ready like battalions clad in indigo and Lincoln green"—suggests even a child's awareness of trees as organized, purposeful presence in the landscape. The colours specified (indigo and Lincoln green) indicate careful observation of how pine forests appear against morning light, the kind of precise visual memory that would later inform his fictional descriptions.

The reference to "one fell year when the woodmen swarmed" and "the ring of axes was heard everywhere" introduces the theme of loss that runs through much of Crockett's tree-related writing. Even this earliest memory contains awareness of destruction and change.

The Sugar-Plum Tree and Childhood Morality

Continuing in the same passage, Crockett describes the landscape of slightly later childhood:

"Beyond a little stile there was a group of oak trees, from one of which a swing depended. There was also a sugar-plum tree, under which I first learned the difference which exists between meum and tuum, a little brook that rippled across the road... at which the horses were watered night and morning, and where I gat myself muddied and soaking—but afterwards, upon discovery, also well warmed."

The mention of learning "the difference which exists between meum and tuum" (mine and thine) under the sugar-plum tree suggests this was where young Crockett first encountered questions of ownership and perhaps the temptation of taking fruit that didn't belong to him. The tree becomes associated with moral education, the place where abstract concepts like property rights became concrete through the experience of desire for sweet fruit. And of course reminds us of the central place of Latin in the Victorian curriculum even for the very young.

The "sugar-plum" designation itself raises questions about naming practices and cultural transmission. Crockett's childhood preceded Eugene Field's 1886 poem "The Sugar Plum Tree" but shows his personal awareness of the delights of the sweet treat and of the practical reality of distinguishing which plum trees were best for producing 'sugar-plums' a candied delicacy that the young Crockett with his sweet tooth, obviously appreciated – and remembered into adulthood.

The Slate in the Beechwood: Trees as Library

Perhaps the most significant tree-related site in Crockett's intellectual development appears in his description of Drumbreck:

"here, in the stillness which fell on the farm when the 'men' were out at work, I lived a life free as any bird. Meal-times marked not my life... They were ready in that bounteous house when I dropped in from the tree-tops—literally—or from among the tussocks and black hags of the moss... There is a huge slate, now deeply sunk in beechwood, on which, when that beech was young, I used to sit swinging my legs into space and reading every book which I could beg, borrow or steal—Chambers's 'Edinburgh Journal,' 'Hogg's Instructor,' the two volumes of Chambers's 'English Literature'—the last pored over to the point of illegibility and accounted a most marvellous treasure."

This slate in the beechwood becomes crucial to understanding Crockett's method and the relationship between his childhood experiences and adult fiction. The tree serves as library, study, and sanctuary—a private space elevated above earthbound concerns where intellectual development could proceed undisturbed.

The specific publications mentioned—'Chambers's Edinburgh Journal,' 'Hogg's Instructor,' Chambers's 'English Literature'—reveal the kind of educational material available to a rural Scottish boy in the 1850s and 1860s. These were not children's books but adult periodicals and reference works, suggesting precocious reading habits enabled by the solitude of the tree-top study.

The phrase "when I dropped in from the tree-tops—literally" emphasizes that this was not metaphorical language but physical reality. It suggests that (at least in memory) Crockett lived an arboreal childhood, moving through the canopy as naturally as walking on ground. This physical intimacy with trees profoundly shaped his understanding of their potential as human habitat.

The slate's reappearance in the fictional story 'Love Among the Beech Leaves' demonstrates how memory transforms into narrative. In the story, Robert Christie uses the same slate arrangement to woo Bess MacAndrew, suggesting that Crockett's tree-top reading nook may have served romantic purposes as well as educational ones, or at least that he recognized the romantic potential of such elevated private spaces.

Romantic Groves: Love Among the Leaves

"I wonder if it is as good to be in love as to sit in the tree-tops and eat pignuts?"

As Crockett matured from boy to young man, his fictional treatment of trees evolved to encompass romantic possibility. This development reflects both literary convention and likely personal experience, as the same trees that provided childhood refuge and study space became settings for courtship and intimate conversation.

The Architecture of Elevated Romance

As already outlined, the transition from childhood to romantic use of trees appears most clearly in 'Love Among the Beech Leaves', where Crockett's alter ego Robert Christie meets Bess MacAndrew in the very beech trees where the author once read:

"When Bess reached home from school, next day she came into the yard swinging her green bag of books. There were three great beeches standing in the old courtyard, making a dream of rustling leaves, and sprinkling a pleasant shade... As she passed under the trees something fell at her feet, narrowly missing her head... There was something moving among the leaves, and that which had fallen at her feet was a book. From overhead came the voice of the new loon. 'Lassie fetch me up that book. It'll save me comin' doom' 'I daresay,' said Bess. 'Come doon and get the book. It'll save me comin' up.' 'Verra weel,' said crafty Rab, 'I can do without it; but it's juist ground up here!'"

The negotiation continues until Bess is enticed aloft:

"There's made a bonny seat up here where ye can sit and swing, and the wind rocks ye, an' the leaves birl about ye and tell ye stories, an' ye can sit an' read—splendid stories—ghosts and murders and fairies an'...' 'I'm comin' up,' said Bess... Soon Rab and Bess were seated side by side far up in the great beech tree. Rab had fixed a slate in a curious but perfectly safe position between two thick branches; and, with her back to the main trunk and her feet on a bough, Bess MacAndrew stated it as a fact that she would not call the Queen her grandmother."

This scene demonstrates memory becoming fiction as the childhood reading nook transforms into romantic meeting place. The slate provides continuity between boy and young man, between solitary study and shared intimacy. Trees don't merely provide backdrop for love—they create the architecture of intimacy, elevating characters literally and metaphorically above earthbound social constraints.

The physical details matter: the girl's back against the main trunk, feet on a bough, the carefully positioned slate between thick branches. Crockett understood tree anatomy and how human bodies could be safely supported in the canopy. This technical knowledge, gained through childhood climbing, enables convincing romantic scenes that feel grounded in physical possibility rather than literary fantasy.

Lovers' Walk and Landscape Modification

An example of romantic woodland appears in Crockett's description of Lovers' Walk in Castle Douglas (which he typically fictionalizes as Cairn Edward):

"I had no need to grow weary of the quiet glades of the Lovers' Walk, and the firry solitudes of the Isle Wood... Perhaps the lanes and paths we clove with hatchet and gardening knife, through the tangled brushwood of the small Isles, exist to this day—perhaps not. Still woodland glades, peeps of the little town across glassy stretches of water, a haunting murmur of birds, and the most perfect solitude to dream and work in—that was the Lovers' Walk. And is, I believe, unto this day."

This passage reveals young people as active shapers of their romantic landscape rather than passive consumers of pre-existing beauty. Crockett and his companions "clove" paths "with hatchet and gardening knife," creating the infrastructure for romance through deliberate landscape modification. This hands-on approach to environmental design reflects the practical relationship with trees and woods that characterized rural Scottish life.

The description combines aesthetic elements (woodland glades, glimpses of water, bird sounds) with functional considerations (solitude for dreaming and working). The romantic landscape serves multiple purposes beyond courtship—it provides space for creative work and intellectual development as well as intimate conversation.

Trees as Confidantes

In 'The Lilac Sunbonnet', Crockett explores how woodland settings enable authentic emotional expression. Ralph Peden and Winsome Charteris meet in the Long Wood of Larbrax, where trees provide the privacy necessary for revealing deep feelings:

"'I mean,' said Ralph, quickly, his pale cheek touched with red, 'that though I am town-bred I love the things that wander among the flowers and in the wood. There are the birds, too, and the little green plants that have no flowers, and they all have a message, if I could only hear it and understand it.' The sparkle in Winsome's eyes quieted into calm. 'I too—' she began, and paused as if startled at what she was about to say. She went on: 'I never heard anyone say things like these. I did not know that anyone else had thoughts like these except myself.'"

Woods function as spaces where conventional social masks can be dropped and authentic feeling expressed. Away from parlours and public spaces, elevated among branches or secluded in glades, Crockett's lovers discover they can speak truths impossible in more formal settings. Trees become confidantes, their presence somehow enabling the honesty necessary for genuine intimacy.

The quotation from 'Lochinvar' that serves as this section's epigraph—"I wonder if it is as good to be in love as to sit in the tree-tops and eat pignuts?"—perfectly captures Crockett's understanding of how trees provide both physical and emotional nourishment. The girl's question suggests that tree-top solitude might rival romantic companionship for satisfaction, an insight that could only come from someone who had experienced both the pleasure of arboreal solitude and the complications of human relationship. It also highlights Crockett's everpresent use of Scots humour.

Environmental Consciousness and the Woodsman's Lament

"I canna! Oh, I canna! It wad break my heart to see them comin' doon!"

'The Loves of Miss Anne' represents Crockett's sophisticated engagement with environmental themes, presenting what modern readers would recognize as ecological consciousness decades before such thinking became widespread. Through the character of MacTaggart the forester, Crockett explores the relationship between human economic needs and environmental preservation.

The Forester's Moral Crisis

The novel's most powerful environmental scene occurs when Sir Tempest Kilpatrick, the improving landlord, demands that trees be marked for cutting to raise money:

"once when Sir Tempest had need of money and called on my father to mark the worth of a thousand pounds of trees the forester cried out, 'I canna! Oh, I canna! It wad break my heart to see them comin' doon! And to ken that it was me that had condemned them to dee!' But when Sir Tempest took council with another, even the Cairn Edward wood-merchant, and when the two went to and fro with a pot of red paint among my father's

choicest growths, it is said that the old man wept aloud. 'Rayther than that should happen,' he declared, breaking in upon them, 'I will e'en mark them mysel'. But send that man awa' or I will no be responsible for the bill-hook in my richt hand!'"

This scene presents remarkable environmental psychology for the 1890s. The forester's response goes beyond professional attachment to trees—he speaks of them as living beings he would be "condemning to die." His willingness to mark them himself rather than allow an outsider to make the selections suggests intimate knowledge of individual trees and their varying significance to the woodland ecosystem.

The threat of violence toward the wood-merchant reveals the intensity of feeling that environmental destruction could provoke. This isn't gentle nature-love but passionate, even violent, attachment to specific trees and woodlands. The forester's emotional response anticipates modern concepts of environmental grief and the psychological impact of ecological loss.

Sir Tempest as Environmental Destroyer

Sir Tempest Kilpatrick represents everything Crockett despised about the "improving" mentality that characterized much 18th and 19th-century land management. He paints rooms in fashionable colours—chocolate and green—while remaining fundamentally ignorant of the land, environment, and people over whom he exercises power.

Crockett's critique goes beyond simple opposition to change. Sir Tempest's improvements are destructive because they're imposed from outside, without understanding of local conditions or consequences. His approach to land management reflects broader patterns of power that prioritize short-term profit over long-term sustainability and external fashion over local knowledge.

The novel's narrator observes that MacTaggart though an elder of the kirk, finds his real religion in nature: "this is God." This pantheistic element in Crockett's thinking suggests that environmental destruction represents not just economic or aesthetic loss but spiritual violation. True understanding comes from intimate knowledge of trees and woods, not from abstract improvement schemes imposed by distant authorities.

The Orchard as Contested Space

The detailed description of the (fictionalised) Drumglass Old Orchard in 'The Loves of Miss Anne' provides a case study in how environmental degradation affects both ecological and social systems:

"it may happen that you have never been there, and so do not know the Drumglass Old Orchard... there was a great law-plea about the Orchard between Sir Tempest and the tenant of the farm, whose name was McDougal. And I think the lawyers got so much out of it that the place itself was no good to anybody for years and years. At least the people of the farm did not seem to fancy the flavour of the jelly that came off the ancient crab-apples and woody pear-trees, the damsons with only one or two plums on each branch, the scrimpy gooseberry bushes with the leaves falling off early, and those that were left all spotted with blight and pierced in semicircles by leaf-cutting wasps. As for Sir Tempest, he had gone to law at first just for cantankerousness, caring not a doit about the Orchard one way or the other, and the tenant of Drumglass, because he was not going to be dictated to by Sir Tempest."

This passage demonstrates Crockett's understanding of how legal and social conflicts can devastate environmental resources. The orchard suffers from neglect while lawyers profit from the dispute between landlord and tenant. Neither party particularly values the orchard itself—Sir Tempest pursues the case from "cantankerousness" while McDougal fights on principle rather than from attachment to the land.

The detailed catalogue of the orchard's decline—spotted leaves, blight, wasp damage, sparse fruit—reveals careful observation of how agricultural systems deteriorate without proper care. The fruit trees, caught between competing human claims, receive neither the attention nor the investment necessary for health and productivity.

Historical Research and Environmental Awareness

Crockett's environmental consciousness in 'The Loves of Miss Anne' draws on historical research documented in Chapter 32 of 'Raiderland', titled 'The Diary of an Eighteenth Century Galloway Laird'. This chapter presents excerpts from the private diary of Mr. Livingston of Airds, providing authentic period detail about land management practices and environmental attitudes in 18th-century Galloway.

By grounding his fiction in historical documentation, Crockett demonstrates that environmental destruction wasn't a recent phenomenon but had deep roots in the power structures and economic pressures of earlier centuries. The novel's environmental themes gain authority from this historical foundation, suggesting that Crockett's concern about tree-cutting and landscape modification reflected genuine historical patterns rather than romantic nostalgia.

Contemporary Connections and Continuing Loss

The environmental themes in Crockett's work resonate powerfully with contemporary experience of landscape loss and environmental destruction. His prescient awareness of how economic pressure and political power could devastate woodland ecosystems anticipates modern environmental conflicts.

What We've Lost

The fate of Crockett's named trees provides a melancholy catalogue of losses that continue into the present. The Bogle Thorn fell to road improvement—progress prioritizing efficiency over heritage. The Glenhead Yew was felled more recently, indicative of the lost legacy of its, and Crockett's significance to Galloway.

These losses illustrate patterns that Crockett identified in his fiction. Trees with stories, trees connected to human memory and meaning, receive little protection when they conflict with perceived practical necessity. The disconnect between literary heritage and landscape preservation means that sites crucial to understanding important writers often disappear without public awareness or concern.

Preservation Through Fiction

Crockett's detailed descriptions become invaluable historical documents as the landscapes they describe continue to disappear or change beyond recognition. His fiction preserves not just what trees looked like but how people interacted with them—climbing, reading, courting, sheltering,

working. This behavioural landscape is as important as the physical one and much harder to recover once lost.

Conclusion: The Continuing Conversation

Crockett's trees matter because they preserve something essential about the relationship between humans and the natural world—not the relationship of distant observation or abstract appreciation, but of intimate daily interaction. Every boy climbing in his stories, every reader settled on a branch, every lover meeting in a woodland glade, was once himself. His fictional trees preserve ways of being with trees that we're in danger of losing entirely.

The conversation between literature and landscape that Crockett began continues in every effort to understand how writers' environments shaped their work and how literature can inform our approach to landscape preservation. His model of intimate, respectful, yet practical engagement with trees offers alternatives to both exploitation and distant admiration.

In our era of climate crisis and biodiversity loss, Crockett's work provides both historical perspective and emotional guidance. His trees remind us that landscape isn't backdrop but participant in human story, that our relationship with the natural world shapes who we become as individuals and communities. The invitation to explore Galloway's woods through Crockett's eyes remains open, offering both connection to a vanished past and inspiration for environmental relationship in the present.

Perhaps most importantly, Crockett's trees teach us how to love landscapes not from distance but through engagement, not as resource but as companion, not as object but as participant in the ongoing story of human and more-than-human community. In this sense, every reader who ventures into Galloway's remaining woods carrying Crockett's descriptions as guide continues the work he began—keeping alive the conversation between story and place that gives both literature and landscape their deepest meaning.