S. R. Crockett: Hefted to Galloway

Cally Phillips (From the Galloway Raiders Archive, a talk given in 2016)

'Galloway is a wide, wild place where the raw edges of creation have not been rubbed down.' (S.R.Crockett)

Discovering Galloway's Literary Son

It is often said that Galloway is Scotland's best kept secret and, if that is so, I think S. R. Crockett is probably Galloway's best kept secret. My goal is to let the secret out of the bag on both counts.

For those of you who need an introduction, Samuel Rutherford Crockett was born Samuel Crocket on 24 September 1859 (the 'R' came later, as did the additional 't') at Little Duchrae in rural Galloway. He was the illegitimate son of dairymaid Anne Crocket. Brought up by his maternal grandparents, the family moved to Castle Douglas in 1867 and, in 1876, the young Sam won the Galloway Bursary, allowing him to study at Edinburgh University. He supplemented the Bursary through a combination of tutoring and journalism. He died in France on 16 April 1914. And, in between?

From 1894 until his death, he was one of the best known and widest read of the 'new' breed of writers who took advantage of the revolution in mass-market publishing. As well as hundreds of articles in magazines and periodicals, he had sixty-seven works published, was represented by leading agent A. P. Watt, and was one of the celebrities of his day. What a difference a century makes.

Crockett Country

As recently as fifty years ago, parts of Galloway were still referred to as 'Crockett country', and, a century ago, the network of railways and emergence of tourism saw people flock there in search of the places made famous by its native son. Yet, today few people even in Castle Douglas are aware that it is the setting for Crockett's fictional 'Cairn Edward' which features in more than a handful of his works. The railways are gone. The tourists are tempted back by Red Kites and Dark Skies, but Crockett barely gets a look in.

Yet Crockett, more than any other writer, puts Galloway on the map. As late as 1923, *The Scotsman* notes:

> "In his pages we seem to smell the scents of the seaside and the woods and the hills, the fresh airs of heaven blow upon us. We are aware of the magic of the moonlight and the heat and the glare of the sun at noon. We feel the sharp stinging cold of the early morning flow of the tide of the Solway; we know the black shadows under the cliffs and the silver of the reflected moon on the calm surface of Balcary Bay."

Crockett writes of the hills, the coast and islands as well as the villages and hamlets which scatter the rural landscape of Galloway. His landscape is populated by Covenanters, Gypsies and Smugglers as well as a fair panoply of 'ordinary' rural characters: herds, tenant farmers and dairymaids. The ministers, dominies and landowners are all lampooned where necessary, and the

bigger characters of history are placed firmly in the background, in favour of the ordinary 'bonnet laird' heroes and feisty heroines of his fiction.

Crockett made Stevenson homesick for Scotland. He was credited with doing for Galloway what Scott did for Tweed-dale and beyond. And yet, like the very landscape he describes, he has long been cast out into the wilderness.

Understanding 'Hefted': A Writer Rooted in Place

I first came across Crockett's writing some twenty years ago, over which time I have become hefted to him as surely as he is to Galloway. The word 'heft' perhaps requires an explanation in this context. Some may see it as an archaic term. It is certainly a distinctly rural term and I am using it deliberately to suggest that there is as vital a relationship between Crockett's places and people as there was between Crockett himself and Galloway.

Hefting is a traditional method of managing flocks of sheep on large areas of common land and communal grazing. It is a process which takes some time. Initially, sheep have to be kept in an unfenced area of land by constant shepherding. Over time, it becomes learned behaviour, passed from ewe to lamb over succeeding generations. Lambs graze with their mothers on the 'heaf' belonging to their farm, instilling a life-long knowledge of where optimal grazing and shelter can be found throughout the year. The sheep become so intimately connected to their territory that they know every fold of the land, every seasonal change, every resource and danger. They are not simply *in* the landscape—they are *of* it.

This agricultural metaphor captures something essential about Crockett's relationship with Galloway and, crucially, the relationship between his characters and their landscapes. Just as hefted sheep possess an instinctive, generational knowledge of their terrain, so Crockett's writing demonstrates an intimate, almost cellular understanding of Galloway that goes far beyond mere observation or description.

The Art of Place: Landscape and Season

Crockett's ability to describe the natural world comes not just from a keen observation but from something deeper, a sense of being part of the place he describes. Through a wide range of characters from smugglers to dairymaids, he offers us an insight into this world. As a contemporary reviewer noted:

> 'There is a sense of intimacy established between the reader and the author. The result is entirely pleasing.'

I believe that the full depth of Crockett's skill cannot be appreciated until one understands the 'hefted' nature of the way his characters and his places work together. Dismissed by urban modernists as escapist or worse, given the pointless and abusively constructed soubriquet 'kailyard,' in actual fact Crockett is a writer of sometimes radical rural realism.

The term 'kailyard' (literally 'cabbage patch') was applied—often pejoratively—to a school of late nineteenth-century Scottish fiction characterised by sentimental depictions of small-town and rural Scottish life. Critics used this label to dismiss writers they deemed parochial, nostalgic, and lacking in literary sophistication. Yet this categorisation fundamentally misunderstands Crockett's

achievement. He writes about ordinary rural folk because he is one of them. He writes about the landscape from the position not just as one who inhabits it but as one who is 'of' it. He is in no way aspirational and he serves no master—even while writing for 'the market' he manages to retain his unique voice and hefted nature.

Under Crockett's pen, Galloway becomes a living, vibrant and extraordinary place. But, not in a romanticised or escapist way. Crockett was a romancer (in the Scots tradition) but he was a romancer of the ordinary people and their places. Landscape is always a key factor in Crockett and to read his work (fiction and non-fiction) is to experience all the seasons of Galloway, from the beauty of a May morning to the harshness of a November snow storm.

His best known novel, *The Raiders*, opens by taking us on a whistle-stop tour of the seasons:

> 'It was upon Rathan Head that I first heard their bridle-reins jingling clear. It was ever my custom to walk in the full of the moon at all times of the year. Now the moons of the months are wondrously different: the moon of January, serene among the stars—that of February, wading among chill cloud-banks of snow—of March, dun with the mist of muirburn among the heather—of early April, clean washed by the rains. This was now May, and the moon of May is the loveliest in all the year, for with its brightness comes the scent of flower-buds, and of young green leaves breaking from the quick and breathing earth.
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> So it was in the height of the moon of May, as I said, that I heard their bridle-reins jingling clear and saw the harness glisten on their backs.'

Notice how Crockett doesn't simply describe the months—he evokes their distinctive characters through carefully chosen details. Each moon has its own personality, its own atmosphere. The language itself mirrors the changing seasons: 'serene' for January's clarity, 'wading' for February's struggle through snow, 'dun' for March's muted tones, 'clean washed' for April's freshness. This is not the observation of a tourist or even a careful visitor—it is the deep knowledge of someone who has lived through these cycles year after year, who knows them in his bones.

He is just as eloquent at describing the local flora and fauna. This is a land of whaups (curlews) and bog myrtle. It is frequently called 'Grey Galloway', although those who know it better understand that there is no contradiction in also referring to it as 'Bonnie Gallowa". The grey is not drabness but a distinctive palette—the grey of granite, of winter skies, of mist on the moors—that makes the sudden bursts of colour (gorse, heather, the green of spring) all the more vivid.

People and Place: The Inseparability of Character and Landscape

However, we most fully appreciate Crockett's skill when we experience it in the company of his characters. Crockett writes in an episodic style (much of his work was serialised before novelisation) and his use of narrative voice is sophisticated and sometimes playful. He writes as easily from a female as a male perspective and he breathes as much life into his characters as he does into the natural world around them. Like Crockett, his characters are hefted to their landscape.

For Crockett, a sense of place involves people at least as much as it does landscape. The two cannot really be separated. It is impossible to give short examples of this but here is an attempt from his 1909 novel *Rose of the Wilderness*:

> "They tell you that nobody is really alive to the beauty of their birthplace. Well, perhaps not for some time after. But in the long run it depends on the person. For me, Rose Gordon of the Dungeon in the uplands of Galloway, from my earliest years I was glad of the large freshness of every breath I drew.
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> Solitary? Why should I be? I had my father. I had books. Men did not often come there, it is true, save our great Lob-Lie-by-the-Fire, Muckle Tamson, but on winter evenings a stray shepherd or two would look in, each with five or six miles of trackless moorland to cover when he left our warm ingle-nook."

Here we see how Crockett creates a female narrator who embodies that same hefted relationship to place. Rose isn't simply describing where she lives—she's expressing how the landscape is part of her identity, how it shapes her very breathing and being. The 'large freshness' she describes isn't just poetic language; it's the articulation of someone whose lungs have expanded with Galloway air since birth. Her rhetorical question 'Solitary?' challenges urban assumptions about rural isolation. She isn't lonely because she has what matters: family, books, community—and the land itself as companion.

The detail of shepherds travelling 'five or six miles of trackless moorland' to reach the ingle-nook grounds the narrative in practical reality whilst also conveying the scale and character of the landscape. These aren't decorative details—they're the texture of lived experience. The shepherds don't travel 'across' the moorland; they must 'cover' it, suggesting the effort and intimacy required. They know every inch of those trackless miles because, like Rose herself, they are hefted to this place.

The Shiel of the Dungeon: A Fictional Place Made Real

To read Crockett today is to go on an adventure into the past. In the process, you can find characters who become friends, and places that will stay with you forever. Anyone who has enjoyed Dickens or Stevenson or Scott can appreciate Crockett. I cannot give you advice on where to start your adventure—a unique relationship develops between writer and reader after all. My favourite place in all Crockett's fiction is a fictional one (but set firmly in a real landscape) and so I shall leave you with a description of the place I am hefted to, even though I have never been there outside of my armchair:

> "At the Shiel of the Dungeon of Buchan—a strange place half natural cavern, the rest a rickle of rude masonry plastered like a swallow's nest on the face of the cliff among the wildest of southern hills—this story begins."

This single sentence demonstrates Crockett's mastery of place-making. The Shiel is both real and mythic, practical and romantic. The detail of it being 'half natural cavern' grounds it in geological reality, whilst the comparison to a 'swallow's nest' gives it a quality of organic belonging—as if the human habitation has grown naturally from the cliff face rather than being imposed upon it. The 'rickle of rude masonry' suggests both impermanence and harmony with the landscape; this is not grand architecture dominating nature but humble construction working with it.

Most significantly, Crockett locates this dwelling 'among the wildest of southern hills'—a phrase that captures both the remoteness and the character of the terrain. These are not the Highlands—they are the 'southern hills' of Galloway, wild in their own distinctive way. The Shiel becomes

emblematic of Crockett's approach: his characters, like this dwelling, are both of and from the landscape, shaped by it, belonging to it, inseparable from it.

Why Crockett Matters Today

Understanding Crockett's hefted relationship to Galloway helps us appreciate why his work deserves serious critical attention rather than dismissive categorisation. His writing offers something increasingly rare and valuable: an authentic representation of rural life that is neither romanticised nor condescending, neither nostalgic nor apologetic.

In an age when rural communities and cultures are often misunderstood or overlooked, Crockett's work provides insight into a way of life, a relationship with landscape, and a community structure that has largely vanished. Yet his characters are not museum pieces. They are complex, flawed, passionate individuals whose lives are shaped by—but not limited by—their environment. His heroines, in particular, demonstrate agency and independence within the constraints of their time and place. Rose Gordon's contentment in her moorland home isn't presented as limitation but as choice, as a positive assertion of rural values and pleasures against urban assumptions.

Moreover, Crockett's episodic style, which some critics have seen as a weakness born of serialisation, actually serves his purposes well. Like the changing seasons he describes so vividly, like the varied aspects of Galloway landscape, his narratives unfold in distinct yet connected episodes. This structure mirrors the rhythm of rural life itself—the seasonal cycles, the pattern of communal gatherings and solitary labour, the interweaving of individual lives within a community.

The Question of Literary Reputation

Why, then, has Crockett's reputation declined so dramatically? A writer who could make Stevenson homesick for Scotland, who was compared to Walter Scott, who drew tourists to Galloway by the trainload—how did such a figure disappear so completely from the literary landscape?

Partly, the answer lies in broader shifts in literary taste and critical fashion. The twentieth century saw a decisive turn towards urban, experimental, and psychologically complex fiction. Writers who focused on rural communities and employed relatively traditional narrative structures fell out of favour. The 'kailyard' label, however unfairly applied, was damaging and persistent.

But there's another factor, more insidious and more significant: the metropolitan bias that has long dominated literary culture. Writing about rural communities has frequently been dismissed as provincial, parochial, or nostalgic—particularly when that writing celebrates rather than critiques rural life. Crockett's authentic representation of Galloway, his genuine affection for its people and places, his refusal to apologise for or explain away rural existence—all of this worked against him in a critical climate that increasingly valued sophistication, irony, and urban consciousness.

Yet this is precisely why Crockett deserves reassessment. His hefted relationship to Galloway—his deep, generational understanding of place—produces writing of remarkable authenticity and power. In an age of increasing disconnection from land and community, his work offers something valuable: a vision of what it means to truly belong to a place, to be shaped by it and to shape it in turn.

An Invitation to Adventure

I can heartily recommend Crockett's Galloway works for anyone who enjoys finding a sense of place in their fiction. Whether you begin with *The Raiders* and its moonlit seasons, or venture to the Shiel of the Dungeon with Rose Gordon, or discover any of his other sixty-seven works, you will find a writer who can transport you to a specific time and place with remarkable vividness.

But more than that, you will discover a writer who understood something fundamental about the relationship between people and landscape, about how place shapes identity and identity shapes place. In Crockett's Galloway, you will find characters who know every fold of the hills, every turn of the seasons, every tradition and story of their community—not because they have studied them but because they are hefted to them, because that knowledge is passed down through generations and inscribed in daily life.

The secret is out—if you're looking for history, adventure and romance, look no further than Crockett's Galloway. But you'll find more than that. You'll find a landscape so vividly rendered that you can smell the bog myrtle and hear the whaups. You'll find characters so authentically drawn that they become your companions. And you'll find a writer whose hefted relationship to his native place produced some of the finest fiction in Scottish literature.

As recently as a century ago, visitors flocked to Galloway to walk in Crockett's footsteps, to see the landscapes he described, to experience the places that shaped his imagination. That pilgrimage has largely ceased, but the invitation remains. Whether you travel to Galloway itself or simply open one of Crockett's books, you can still discover what made this 'wide, wild place where the raw edges of creation have not been rubbed down' so vital to one writer's imagination—and why his celebration of it deserves to be rediscovered by new generations of readers.

Galloway is Scotland's best kept secret. S. R. Crockett is Galloway's best kept secret. But secrets are meant to be shared, and this one is too precious to remain hidden any longer.
