

The Unreliable Biographer: How Biographical Errors Accumulated Around S.R. Crockett

Most readers assume that the further we move from a historical figure's lifetime, the clearer their biography becomes. More distance means more research, more sources, more accuracy—or so the logic goes. But what if the opposite is true? What if later writers repeat earlier mistakes, inherit unverified assumptions, or silently smooth over inconvenient gaps? And what happens when those accumulated distortions are passed on again—into modern scholarship, cultural memory, and now AI systems that treat long-standing errors as established truth?

S.R. Crockett, one of Scotland's most widely read writers of the late nineteenth century, provides a compelling case study. His life is neither unusually obscure nor unusually complicated, yet the biographical record surrounding him has become a maze of contradictions: shifting ages, uncertain educational claims, misinterpreted letters, and confident modern statements built on surprisingly fragile evidence.

This essay examines how three generations of biographers—a magazine journalist, a memorial tribute writer, and an academic researcher—built upon one another's mistakes, turning interview miscalculations into memorial half-truths and, later, into confidently asserted scholarly "facts." Rather than focusing on Crockett's personality or supposed "unreliability," this analysis examines the methods of the people who wrote about him and how their choices shaped the narrative we now inherit. Each brought a different purpose and a different set of constraints. Each filled gaps in the record differently. And each, in doing so, introduced small inaccuracies that grew larger over time.

Understanding how biographical errors accumulate is not about assigning blame. Each writer worked honestly within the conventions and limitations of their time. The challenge is systemic, not personal: biography becomes unreliable when it builds on unverified foundations. When we distinguish evidence from interpretation—when we resist the urge to construct a neat story where none exists—we gain a clearer picture not only of Crockett, but of how biography works, how errors spread, and how easily they can harden into "truth."

Three Biographers, Three Methods

Sherard (1895): Interview Journalism With No Archive Checks

In 1895, T.P. Sherard published a lively magazine profile of Crockett in *The Idler*. His research method was typical for the genre: a single interview, handwritten notes, and no access to university records or documentary verification.

The consequence was a series of calculation errors that later writers repeated as fact. Sherard placed Crockett entering university at age 15 instead of 17, beginning theology at 23 instead of 26, and even moved his ordination from 1886 to 1885. He also compressed personal timelines, turning four months into "six."

These mistakes were not invented—they reflect the limitations of interviewing someone who was himself casual about dates. Nineteenth-century phrasing ("in my twenty-fourth year")

often creates apparent discrepancies today, making interview-based reconstruction especially fragile. Crockett himself was demonstrably vague about dates—in his October 1882 letter to Whittier, he described himself as being "for 15 of my 24 years," when he was actually 23 at the time. While this phrasing follows nineteenth-century convention of counting the year one is living in rather than completed birthdays, it demonstrates the kind of imprecision that would have made interview-based research difficult.

Sherard's article became foundational for later scholarship not because it was precise, but because it was early, vivid, and widely circulated. His error type was calculation mistakes stemming from an interview-based approach with no verification mechanism.

Harper (1907): The Friend Writing a Memorial Tribute

Malcolm Harper's 1907 biography was shaped by loyalty and affection. Harper relied on memory, personal correspondence, newspaper profiles, and previous articles—including Sherard's flawed account. He faced a different challenge: writing a memorial biography of his friend twelve years after Sherard, working from sources that were themselves incomplete. No single source could provide complete facts—Crockett had been the subject of numerous articles of varied accuracy, and no one could have accessed a complete record.

Harper repeated some of the earlier inaccuracies, such as Crockett's supposed age when studying theology. He also introduced his own ambiguities. Harper claimed Crockett stayed a student "until nineteen," though Crockett actually left university at 22. He suggested Crockett had "completed his University Course" and "passed all examinations for a degree" without addressing Crockett's own statement that he was "never capped."

This vagueness may have been intentional. Victorian biography often softened details relating to class and education. For a Victorian biography of a friend, acknowledging that Crockett came from humble origins and left university without a degree might have been deemed indelicate. Harper wrote a tribute, not a strict academic biography, and his selectivity reflects that intention. In correspondence, Crockett even thanked him for this. Victorian phrasing adds to the confusion. "Completing a course" often meant finishing attendance, not receiving a degree. Harper was smoothing the narrative, not altering facts.

In their 1906 correspondence Harper was warned by Crockett that many printed details about him were inaccurate—yet those same inaccuracies were repeated in Harper's book, then picked up by later scholars. Thus Harper's error simply reflects the constraints and conventions of tribute biography: incomplete sources, personal discretion about sensitive matters, and the prioritisation of narrative propriety over documentary precision.

Donaldson (1989): Academic Research on an Unstable Base

Islay Murray Donaldson's 1989 monograph remains the only substantial academic biography of Crockett. She conducted real archival research, checking matriculation records and correcting some of Sherard's errors. A champion of Crockett's literary reputation, Donaldson was the first researcher to conduct thorough archival work.

But her approach was literary and her narrative shows how difficult it is to untangle inherited inaccuracies. Her research reveals methodological inconsistency. Alongside careful archival verification, she accepted certain claims from Harper without independent checking. Most notably, she states that Crockett completed "his MA degree in April 1879," drawing this directly from Harper without testing it against the primary evidence that Crockett "left uncapped." At times, she created interpretive problems where simpler explanations existed, using tentative language—"it seems," "may have," "probably"—whilst drawing firm conclusions from this speculative base.

Her writing blends solid archival rigour with moments of speculation which sometimes solidify into firm conclusions. Because her biography is still the "go to" source, these conclusions now appear authoritative, even when they rest on uncertain foundations. Donaldson's error type is mixed methodology: reliable archival work combined with uncritical acceptance of previous biographers and speculative interpretation. As the first systematic academic researcher of Crockett's life, Donaldson's work has been cited as authoritative by subsequent scholars, meaning her uncorrected errors and interpretive speculation have been transmitted as established fact.

The Error Cascade

Across these three generations of biographers, a pattern emerges: later writers trusted earlier accounts without fully verifying them.

- Sherard's interview errors became Harper's baseline.
- Harper's selective memorialisation became Donaldson's source.
- Donaldson's mixed-method scholarship became the bedrock for modern researchers—and for AI systems trained on secondary sources.

Thus, instead of being corrected over time, errors accumulated and grew more entrenched. Narrative polish increased; evidential certainty decreased.

The traditional assumption that later biographers are more reliable because they have access to more sources and greater temporal distance fails entirely in Crockett's case. Later is not necessarily more reliable; errors can compound rather than correct. We are now several removes from primary evidence: later researchers cite Donaldson, who relied on Harper, who used Sherard, who interviewed Crockett. At each stage, verification decreased whilst confidence in the narrative increased.

The Oxford Problem: When Gaps Become Character Judgements

One specific example demonstrates how biographical gaps can harden into damaging interpretations. The primary evidence is clear on one point: S.R. Crockett did have Oxford connections. What remains unclear is how deep—or formal—those connections were. And the uncertainty itself tells us something important about how biographical narratives get shaped, distorted, or over-interpreted.

What the Letters Actually Say

The surviving primary sources mention Oxford in two places.

In 1888, Crockett wrote to illustrator Harry Furniss about "College days at Edinburgh and Oxford," noting he had "a number of old Oxford friends in Edinburgh" and kept Professor Jowett's portrait on his study mantelpiece.

In 1885, Crockett wrote to John Greenleaf Whittier that he had been "sent to Oxford, to be with certain men good and true there."

These two references tell us several solid facts:

- Crockett knew Oxford men—likely through religious or literary networks.
- He had professional connections with Oxford circles.
- He travelled as a tutor, accompanying young men preparing for university.
- He maintained Oxford friendships well into his Edinburgh ministry.

These are not vague hints; they are explicit connections.

But crucially: there is nothing that states, directly or indirectly, that Crockett ever enrolled at Oxford.

What We Cannot Know

Here is the honest list of gaps in the record—the ones earlier biographers tried (and failed) to fill:

- No enrolment records exist for Crockett at Oxford.
- No contemporary statements claim he studied there formally.
- No diaries or letters expand on his time there.
- No documentary evidence clarifies which colleges he visited beyond Balliol—or how long he stayed.

This is not unusual. Many working young men in the 1880s were connected to elite networks through tutoring, church circles, or literary introductions. Oxford connections did not necessarily imply Oxford study.

The responsible scholarly position is exactly what the documents allow: Crockett had Oxford connections, but their precise nature is unknown.

Where the Problems Begin: Filling the Gap With Narrative

The trouble arises when later writers interpret the two letter-phrases—"College days at Edinburgh and Oxford" and "sent to Oxford"—as evidence of something Crockett never claimed.

Islay Murray Donaldson, writing in 1989, interprets the information as Crockett implying he studied at Oxford. Without proof she moved from uncertainty to an inference about Crockett's character. She concluded that he had possibly "invented" parts of his Oxford past.

This is a methodological leap.

- The letters themselves make no claim of formal study.
- The phrase "College days at Edinburgh and Oxford" is grammatically ambiguous. It could mean: college days at Edinburgh and time spent at Oxford; college days at Edinburgh whilst also having Oxford friends; or simply a conversational pairing of two familiar places.
- The 1885 reference "sent to Oxford" describes networking, not enrolment. It's possible aspiring tutors were literally sent (by sponsors and/or connections) to Oxford to meet potential employers.

Nothing here supports a narrative of invention.

But once Donaldson framed the uncertainty as evidence of unreliability, later scholars repeated the interpretation as fact. A small archival gap became a character judgement. A character judgement became a scholarly consensus. A consensus now influences AI outputs and modern criticism. It all serves to undermine Crockett's reliability and therefore, honesty.

The Real Lesson: Accept the Gaps

The Oxford connection tells us nothing about Crockett's literary talent, cultural role, or intellectual life. It does not affect his novels or his influence on Scottish writing.

What does matter is how easy it is for scholars to turn uncertainty into narrative—and narrative into judgement.

- No evidence exists that Crockett claimed Oxford credentials.
- No evidence suggests intentional invention.
- The letters confirm connection, not formal study.

The real Oxford Problem is methodological. The advice to avoid such methodological errors? When evidence is thin, don't build a biography on the holes. Gaps in the record must be accepted, not patched with speculation dressed as fact.

Mind the Gaps: When Missing Records Indict the Subject Instead of the Method

Biographers love to present themselves as detectives—but what happens when the clues simply aren't there? When the historical record is incomplete, contradictory, or ambiguous, scholars face a choice: acknowledge the gaps honestly, or fill them with narrative.

In S.R. Crockett's case, the same missing information has supported two contradictory interpretations: Crockett was unreliable about his own life, or his biographers were unreliable

about their methods. Looking closely at the evidence, it becomes clear that the second explanation fits far better.

The Tutoring Gap: Too Large for Certainty

We know Crockett worked as a travelling tutor. Harper mentions it, including the famous anecdote of Crockett meeting Bismarck in the Tyrol. Sherard also refers to Crockett's tutoring work. And the archive holds a 1978 Marsden-Smedley letter which confirms at least one pupil, though the reminiscences from a descendant are not reliable for dates. Crockett fictionalised his tutoring role and wrote many works derived from his travels—he is clearly dressing fact up as fiction (as is the job of a fiction writer!)

At present we do not know:

- Where and when exactly Crockett travelled between 1879–1881 (twenty undocumented months),
- how many pupils he taught,
- how tutoring work was arranged,
- how it balanced with university attendance, or
- how much income it generated.

This is normal for Victorian informal employment. Private tutoring generated no institutional records. The travel happened. The rest is irretrievably lost.

Trying to fill this gap with narrative isn't biography—it's projection. And it reveals more about the biographer than about Crockett.

"Did He Graduate?" A Case Study in Contradiction

Crockett's educational record has been held up as evidence of his supposed personal unreliability. But the contradictions come not from Crockett—but from later biographers.

Here's what the primary record actually shows:

- Matriculated at Edinburgh (1876–1880)
- Library use until April 1881 (suggests he completed that academic year)
- Matriculated at New College for Science/Geology (1881–82)
- Matriculated again December 1883 (subject unclear)
- Abroad in 1884
- Matriculated for Divinity in December 1885
- Graduated in April 1886 (Bachelor of Divinity)

The contradictions arise only when later writers weigh in.

- One source says he "left uncapped"—i.e., left Edinburgh without an MA.
- Harper says he "completed his University Course" and "passed all examinations."
- Donaldson claims he completed his MA in April 1879—a date flatly contradicted by the primary evidence.

None of these statements originated with Crockett. They are interpretations layered onto the record. Crockett himself in a letter to Whittier in 1885 says "we graduated not long after" (1883) but this can be interpreted many ways from context. This does not help clear up the "facts."

Two Possible Interpretations

Reading One: Crockett Is Unreliable

This view (largely endorsed by Donaldson) argues that Crockett gave conflicting accounts of his education, perhaps out of embarrassment over leaving Edinburgh without an MA. She generalises this into a broader claim that he was unreliable about his own life. But this is surely a later academic value judgement.

Reading Two: The Biographers Are Unreliable

This interpretation fits the documented evidence:

- The "left uncapped" comment is correct.
- Harper's phrasing—"completed his University Course"—comes from Victorian tact, not deceit. Tribute biographers avoided dwelling on class-based disadvantages.
- Donaldson's MA claim is incorrect, drawn from Harper without verification.
- Crockett's own statement "we graduated" plays down his own personal situation in a letter where he wants to impress a "hero". Context offers an explanation for vagueness.

Victorian phrasing adds to the confusion. "Completing a course" often meant finishing attendance, not receiving a degree. Harper was smoothing the narrative, not altering facts. As for the December 1883 matriculation at New College, this is simply a gap we cannot fill. And it's a gap in documentation—not in Crockett's integrity.

Who, Exactly, Is Unreliable?

Crockett lived a full, busy life: writing novels, serving his parish, travelling, raising a family. He did not keep precise autobiographical records, nor did he correct every error in the dozens of magazine profiles written about him.

In 1906 he admitted as much to Harper: if he stopped to correct every mistaken detail about his life, he'd do nothing else.

This is not unreliability—it's humanity.

The unreliability emerges when biographers:

- lean on flawed secondary sources,
- fill gaps with speculation, or
- convert ambiguity into character assessment.

When this happens, biography becomes fiction dressed up as fact.

The Scholarly Responsibility

Across this analysis a pattern is unmistakable:

- Sherard introduced calculation mistakes through interview journalism.
- Harper shaped his tribute with understandable discretion.
- Donaldson combined excellent archival work with less critical reliance on flawed earlier accounts, creating contradictions now treated as "truth."

The consequences are real: speculation becomes narrative; narrative becomes "fact"; and future scholarship—even AI systems—inherits the distortions.

Good historical method requires that we resist the temptation to fill gaps with invention. Instead we should:

- acknowledge uncertainty,
- read sources in their relevant context,
- separate evidence from interpretation, and
- avoid turning documentary gaps into character judgements.

When we ask *who is unreliable?*, the answer determines whether we are writing history—or manufacturing it.

Conclusion

No one in this cascade was intentionally false—not even Crockett himself, whose vagueness about dates was entirely human and typical of someone busy living his life rather than fact-checking the myriad articles written about him. Sherard made honest calculation errors using interview methods appropriate to magazine journalism. Harper wrote a tribute with appropriate discretion about sensitive class issues, working from incomplete sources and personal memory. Donaldson attempted the first systematic academic correction but relied too heavily on flawed foundations, even whilst conducting valuable archival research.

The problem is not individual fault but systemic failure. When biographical research builds on previous work without returning to primary sources, when gaps in information go unacknowledged, when speculation hardens into accepted fact—the result is a narrative that cannot be trusted.

Today, Crockett's biographical record illustrates a larger issue: how repeating narratives—human or machine—can embed uncertainty so deeply that it begins to look like fact. When AI tools produce confident but incorrect biographies, they are often drawing from the very same missteps made by earlier writers. In an age when AI tools repeat whatever the historical record contains—accurate or otherwise—understanding how that record was built has never been more important.

Reassessing these sources is not about defending Crockett; it is about defending good historical practice and figuring out how to use AI to support this. Understanding each biographer's method and intention helps us read their accounts critically. When we distinguish evidence from interpretation, when we resist the urge to construct a neat story where none exists, when we treat gaps as gaps rather than opportunities for speculation disguised as certainty—we gain a clearer picture not only of Crockett's life, but of how biography works, how errors spread, and how easily they can harden into "truth."

The S.R. Crockett Online Museum exists to provide the widest possible range of primary sources, contextual materials, and interpretive perspectives so that readers and researchers can see the evidence for themselves. Its mission is to broaden scholarship by placing multiple viewpoints side-by-side and to challenge long-standing biographical errors by showing clearly how those inaccuracies arose in the historical record and how they can be corrected through transparent, well-grounded research. You can explore and examine sources for yourself through the museum search function.
