

Romance from Realism: Rediscovering S.R. Crockett's Scotland

Why was the 1890s such an exciting period in English literature whilst Scotland was supposedly enduring a 'dark age'? The decade that gave us Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy's controversial masterpieces, H.G. Wells's scientific romances, and the aesthetic movement has been characterised as a literary desert north of the border—a curious judgment that tells us more about critics than about Scottish writing.

To understand what went wrong, consider the humble Tunnock's Tea Cake. Scottish and English versions of this confection exist, and they're fundamentally different—not better or worse, but distinct products of different traditions and tastes. Judge the Scottish version by English criteria, and you'll miss what makes it valuable. The same applies to Scottish literature of the 1890s, and particularly to Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859-1914), one of the period's most successful yet most misunderstood authors.

The Kailyard Problem

In 1895, English critics grouped Crockett together with J.M. Barrie and Ian Maclaren under a dismissive label: the 'Kailyard School'. The term derives from 'kailyard', meaning cabbage patch, implying small-minded parochialism and sentimental attachment to an idealised rural Scotland that never existed. According to this narrative, these writers peddled nostalgia to readers unwilling to face modern realities.

The problem with the Kailyard label is that it was a critical invention rather than an actual literary movement. The three writers had different styles, different preoccupations, and different relationships with their material. What they shared was Scottish subject matter, rural settings, and enormous popular success—particularly with working-class Scottish readers. The London literary elite found this combination suspect.

More damagingly, the Kailyard label created a false narrative that persists today: that Scottish literature in the 1890s represented a 'dark age' of sentimentality and backward-looking provincialism, only rescued decades later by the modernists of the 'Scottish Renaissance'. This narrative conveniently ignores what writers like Crockett were actually doing, and why their work mattered so profoundly to their original audiences.

Beyond Binary Thinking

The conventional story about late Victorian literature suggests a simple progression: serious writers moved from rural to urban settings, from romance to realism, from regional to metropolitan concerns. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), with its protagonist's doomed trajectory from rural Wessex to the dreaming spires of Christminster, exemplifies this expected pattern.

Yet in 1896, both Barrie and Crockett published novels that reversed this direction. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* sends its hero from London back to Thrums (the fictionalised Kirriemuir). Crockett's *Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City* takes its urban Edinburgh street child to rural Galloway.

These weren't acts of nostalgic retreat but something more complex—an exploration of what happens when different Scottish worlds collide, and what each might learn from the other.

Significantly, Crockett keeps his narratives entirely within Scotland. Whilst Barrie's Tommy travels between London and Scotland, Crockett's characters move between Edinburgh and Galloway, between the Lowlands and the Highlands, within a nation that had lost political independence but retained fiercely distinct regional cultures. This matters. For Crockett, Scotland itself contained sufficient diversity, conflict, and modernity to fuel sophisticated fiction.

By 1899, with *Kit Kennedy: Country Boy*, Crockett reverses direction again. This time the trajectory follows his own autobiography: from rural Galloway to university education in Edinburgh. Kit Kennedy is an unashamed 'lad o' pairts'—a talented working-class boy winning his way through scholarships and determination. The story had been germinating for years; an earlier version, *A Galloway Herd*, was rejected by London publisher T. Fisher Unwin. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that a story centred on a rural Scots working-class protagonist—unashamedly Crockett himself—failed to find favour with the metropolitan publishing elite.

These shifts in direction weren't arbitrary. They reflect sophisticated engagement with questions that mattered urgently to Crockett's readers: What happens to Scottish identity in an age of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation? How do class and education transform individuals? What's lost and what's gained in the movement between rural and urban worlds? The 'Kailyard' label obscures these concerns entirely.

The Scottish Regional Novel

Here's where our tea cake analogy deepens. When English critics discuss 'regional' fiction—Hardy's Wessex, the Brontës' Yorkshire, George Eliot's Midlands—they describe regions within a politically unified nation. The 'regional' novel explores local colour, dialect, and customs within an understood national framework.

Scottish 'regional' fiction operates differently. Scotland as a nation produces regional fiction reflecting profound diversity within a country that had lost its parliament but retained separate legal, religious, and educational systems. Galloway, the Borders, the Highlands, Edinburgh, Glasgow—these aren't simply picturesque variations on Scottishness but distinct cultures with their own histories, languages, and social structures.

To many English critics, this distinction was invisible or seemed a mere distraction from 'real' literature. But to Scottish readers—especially working-class Scots—it mattered profoundly. Crockett wasn't writing a poor approximation of Hardy's Wessex. He was writing Galloway, a specific place with specific speech patterns, religious controversies, economic realities, and social hierarchies. His use of Scots dialect wasn't decorative; it was the authentic voice of his subjects, captured through careful observation and memory.

This is why his work resonated so powerfully with working-class Scottish readers whilst baffling or irritating London's literary establishment. He was writing for people who recognised themselves in his pages, who heard their own voices in his dialogue, who understood the social nuances he depicted. Judge this by the criteria of metropolitan realism, and you'll find it wanting. Judge it as what it is—a working-class Scots high tea rather than a middle-class English afternoon tea—and its achievements become clear.

When Two Heroes Meet

The encounter between Cleg Kelly and Kit Kennedy in *Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City* dramatises this cultural complexity brilliantly. Cleg is an urban Edinburgh street child, a survivor, sharp-witted and feral. Kit Kennedy is a Galloway farm boy, country-bred, with different speech patterns and assumptions about the world. Both are authentically Scottish; both represent real social types Crockett knew intimately.

Crockett frames their meeting with characteristic wit. The chapter is titled "Adventure 43: Town Knight and Country Knight"—combining Horatian satire with Tennysonian romance to elevate a simple boyhood fight. The mock-heroic tone signals Crockett's sophistication: he's aware of literary traditions whilst remaining grounded in realistic observation. Two boys fighting over a girl becomes a clash of cultures, a meeting of worlds.

The railway brings them together—a potent symbol of the modernity supposedly absent from 'Kailyard' fiction. The railway connects rural and urban Scotland, enables movement between worlds, transforms the economy and social relationships. Crockett doesn't ignore these changes; he explores them through his characters' experiences.

Neither boy 'wins' their fight, because winning isn't the point. What matters is the encounter itself—what each learns about the other, how their assumptions are challenged, how they might understand Scotland's complexity more fully through collision with a different way of being Scottish. The following chapter, "Adventure 44: Cleg Relapses into Paganism", explores the aftermath through Scots humour and dialect, reducing religious differences to childish fisticuffs whilst simultaneously taking seriously the cultural forces those differences represent.

Here we find Crockett's central insight: **the romance comes from the realism**. He doesn't impose romantic conventions onto realistic material. Rather, he understands that ordinary people—especially children—naturally create romance out of their lived reality. They imagine themselves as knights, as heroes, as adventurers, transforming mundane experience through the alchemy of imagination. Crockett's genius lies in capturing both the reality and the imaginative transformation simultaneously.

Memory, Observation, and the Ordinary Hero

Crockett described his own method in revealing terms: "When in doubt, always shut your head and observe! Take my word for it, you are not wasting your time. They say in our country 'Keep a thing seven years and you will find a use for it.' But I say, 'Remember a thing... exactly, mind you... thirty or forty years and you will find a place expressly hollowed out for it, where it will grow and branch out and seed like a potted plant.'"

This isn't nostalgia speaking but a writer explaining his craft. Crockett used precise observation and memory as raw material, storing experiences and voices that would later find their place in fiction. The emphasis on exactness is crucial—he's not romanticising memory but using it as a form of research, trusting that authentic detail preserved over decades would prove more valuable than invented decoration.

Kit Kennedy exemplifies this method. Crockett himself was a 'lad o' pairts' who won a scholarship to Edinburgh University from rural Galloway. Kit's story follows this trajectory but isn't simple

autobiography. It's lived experience transformed through the fictional process Crockett described—planted, grown, branched out into something larger than mere memoir.

This creation of "ordinary heroes" became Crockett's stock-in-trade. His protagonists aren't aristocrats or geniuses but farm boys, street children, herding lads—people whose stories weren't usually considered worthy of literary attention. Yet Crockett treats them with full seriousness, granting them complex inner lives, moral agency, and the capacity for genuine heroism in their own contexts.

Crucially, this extends to his female characters. Crockett created what might fairly be called the most spirited heroines in Scottish fiction of the period. His engagement with the 'New Woman'—featured prominently in *Ione March* (1898), which explores issues of travel, mountaineering, and class—shows a writer alert to contemporary debates and social changes. These aren't sentimental fantasies but complex explorations of how women navigated constrained social roles whilst asserting their own agency.

Understanding Scots Humour

Scots humour is central to appreciating Crockett's work, yet it's precisely this element that English critics often missed or misinterpreted. Consider Barrie's title *Sentimental Tommy*. In Scots usage, calling someone 'sentimental' carries layers of irony absent from standard English—it suggests someone who performs emotion rather than feeling it genuinely, who mistakes affectation for depth. The title is simultaneously affectionate and critical, a joke that works differently depending on the reader's cultural position.

Crockett deploys similar complexity through dialect and humour. His use of Scots speech isn't merely colourful or quaint; it's a vehicle for social commentary, for managing difficult subjects through indirection, for creating solidarity with readers who share the cultural references. When Cleg Kelly and Kit Kennedy fight over religion and class differences, the humour doesn't diminish the serious issues at stake—it makes them bearable, transforms potential tragedy into something survivable.

This requires what might be called cultural intimacy. Without understanding the lived reality of rural Scottish working-class life, readers remain "critically distanced"—like someone who's never tasted a Tunnock's Tea Cake trying to describe it from appearance alone. This doesn't mean Crockett's work is inaccessible to outsiders, but it does reward readers willing to meet it on its own terms rather than expecting it to conform to metropolitan English literary conventions.

The humour also serves another function: it's how Crockett's characters make sense of their worlds. Romance emerges from realism through the transformative power of imagination and humour. Difficult lives become bearable, even meaningful, through the stories people tell about themselves and their capacity to find absurdity and joy amidst hardship.

The Publishing Context

Understanding Crockett's career requires acknowledging the material realities of late Victorian publishing. By 1894, the year after his breakthrough collection of short stories, he had four works published by the prestigious T. Fisher Unwin—extraordinary productivity that established him as one of the most sought-after authors for serial fiction in the 1890s. His work appeared in magazines

read by hundreds of thousands, was serialised in popular publications like *The People's Friend*, and sold well enough that pirated editions appeared in America.

This success came through networking, hard work, and genuine talent. Crockett was friends with Barrie—*Cleg Kelly* is dedicated to him "with the hand of a comrade and the heart of a friend"—and both men understood themselves as part of a literary scene, in conversation with each other and with wider publishing networks. These weren't isolated provincials churning out rustic tales but professionals navigating the increasingly lucrative market for serial fiction whilst maintaining artistic ambitions.

The later trajectory of Crockett's career and reputation was significantly affected by relationships between publishers, agents, and critics—feuds and alliances that had little to do with literary quality. A court case following complications around *The Black Douglas* (1899) damaged his commercial prospects. Changes in literary fashion, the rise of modernism with its suspicion of popular fiction, and the crystallisation of the 'Kailyard' label as shorthand for everything supposedly wrong with Victorian sentimentality all worked against his posthumous reputation.

The traditional narrative suggests declining quality in Crockett's later work. More accurately, we should recognise how cultural and commercial forces shaped which authors were remembered and which forgotten. Crockett's commitment to working-class Scottish subjects, his use of dialect, his blending of romance and realism—all these became unfashionable as literary culture increasingly privileged experimental urban modernism over popular regional fiction.

Recovering Crockett

Samuel Rutherford Crockett deserves recovery from critical neglect not through special pleading but through honest reassessment of what his work achieved. He has been marginalised through a combination of cultural prejudice, class bias, and critical frameworks unable to accommodate what he was attempting.

The 'Kailyard' label did lasting damage, creating a false narrative about Scottish literature in the 1890s as a 'dark age' of sentimentality before modernist rescue. This narrative needs challenging. Crockett's fiction shows sophisticated engagement with modernity, class, identity, and nation. His exploration of how different Scottish worlds related to each other, his creation of "ordinary heroes" drawn from careful observation of real people, his understanding that romance emerges from rather than opposes realism—these represent genuine literary achievements.

Moreover, his work mattered profoundly to its original readers. Working-class Scots recognised themselves in his pages, heard authentic voices, saw their experiences granted literary dignity. This popular success shouldn't count against him but should remind us that literature serves multiple functions, creates various kinds of value. Not all worthwhile fiction aspires to experimental difficulty or metropolitan sophistication.

The recipe for appreciating Crockett requires three ingredients. First, understand the complex relationship between romance and realism in his work—how one emerges from rather than contradicts the other. Second, recognise Scots humour as a sophisticated tool for social commentary and emotional management rather than mere decoration. Third, reconsider the prejudices—about class, about region, about popularity—that led to his marginalisation.

Crockett's fiction offers us authentic voices from 1890s Scotland, stories that resonated deeply with their original working-class audience, and literary craftsmanship that rewards careful attention. His work is a working-class Scots high tea, not a failed attempt at a middle-class English afternoon tea. Judge it by appropriate criteria, and its value becomes clear.

The 1890s weren't a 'dark age' for Scottish literature. They were a period of creative ferment, of writers exploring what it meant to be Scottish in an age of transformation, of fiction that served real communities whilst achieving genuine artistry. Crockett stands at the centre of this achievement. He deserves not special pleading but fair assessment—recognition as a significant writer whose marginalisation tells us more about critical prejudice than about literary merit. The task now is to read his work afresh, on its own terms, and discover what generations of working-class Scottish readers already knew: that here was a voice that spoke for them, about them, with authenticity and art.