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561

REVIEWS

MR. CROCKETT'S LATEST NOVEL

The Men of the Moss Hags. Being a History of Adventure taken from the Papers of William Gordon of Earlstoun, in Galloway, and told over again by S. R. CROCKETT. London: Isbister.

'And what else are the Covenant men doing? We were none so fond o' the Kirk that I ken of—we that are of the Laids o' Galloway—when we could please ourselves when and where we would go. Was there one of us save, maybe, your father and mine, that had not been sessioned time and again? Many an ill word did we speak o' the Kirk, and many a glint did we cast at the soundglass in the pulpit as the precentor gied her another turn. But after all the Kirk was our ain mither, and what for should the king misca' or upturn her? Gin she whummelt us and payed us soundly till we clawed where we weren't yeuky, wha's business was that but our ain? But comes King Charlie, and says he, "Pit awa' your old mither, that's overly sore on you, and tak' this braw easy step-minnie, that will never steer ye a hair or gar ye claw your hinderlands."'

Putting aside all question of taste, who can thoroughly understand such a piece of dialogue as this—and it is one taken at random out of a vast number—except a Scot or a parcel Scot or a diligent student of the Scottish language? And is not this another illustration of that invidious supremacy of the Scot which has been aforesaid discussed in these columns? And why is a writer who takes up his pen in a language practically unknown to most Englishmen so popular? Or does it mean that England is so overrun with Scots that they make up the greater part of the reading public? One might go on with multiplication of questions, but assuming that Mr. Crockett's work and Mr. Barrie's *U. S. W.* appeal to purely English readers who cannot possibly understand more than half, if so much, of the dialogue, it is not impossible to answer the reviewer's self-asked question or questions. In the first place the man who can write such a description as Mr. Crockett has written in the twenty-fifth chapter of *The Men of the Moss Hags* of 'The Last Charge of Ayrsmoss' is certainly not, whatever faults may be charged to him, the first comer as a descriptive writer. The chapter is comparatively little burthened with dialect; every word concerning the fight goes straight to the mark; the whole thing is detailed, full, and yet concentrated. Further than this, it contains a fine, whether mistaken or not, appreciation of character. Richard Cameron, as Mr. Crockett likes to represent him, lives before us as a first-rate actor makes a personage live before an audience. So do David Hickstoun and Cameron's brother, and these last-named personages owe their vitality in the pages of the book rather to delicate touches than to such bold drawing as the author has given to Cameron himself. Readers may find out themselves the characterisation of Richard Cameron in the old sense that Fichte crystallised in a famous sentence, but perhaps a quotation from the mere description of the encounter may show how well Mr. Crockett can write in English when he cares to drop the Scots tongue.

'Yet, at the time, I seemed to ride through a world of empty silence, even when I struck the red broil of battle. I could see Cameron crying out and waving his sword before us as our horses gathered way but I remember no more till the shock came and we found ourselves threshing headlong among them. I fired my pistols right and left, and set them in my belt again, though the habit was to throw them away. [This is a good and accurate touch.] I had my sword dangling by a lingel or tag at my right wrist, for I had learned from Wat Gordon how to fight it upon horseback when it came to the charge. The first man that I came against was a great dragoon on a grey horse. He shouted an oath of contempt, seeing me so slender and puny. Yet, for all his bulk, I had him on the wrong side, so that he could not use his sword-arm with advantage. [This again is well studied.] And as I passed on my stout little nag, I got my sword well home under his armpit and tumbled him off into the mire. The stoutness of our charge took the enemy entirely by surprise. Indeed, afterwards they gave us all the testimony of

being brave, resolute men; and, like soldiers and gentlemen as they were, they used them that were taken very civilly. I could see Cameron before me smiting and slaying, slaying and smiting, rising in his stirrup at every blow and calling on his men. It was a wild fierce time, all too short, wherein I drank for the first time the heady delight of battle. All over the wild moss of Ayr that great day, the swords flickered like lightning-flashes, and the lightnings darted like sword-blades.' Here is an obvious echo of Stevenson and of Scott who, according to some critics, was Stevenson's Master (but that's another question not fit for discussion at this moment), but there is also something else. One finds in this passage the life, the power of throwing one's very self into a scene that has to be described which belong to the true romancer. It is his to get the things into his head and to transfer them from his own head to readers' heads as red or white hot as they come to him. That is the secret; that is why Dumas, in spite of the new school in France, has been, is, and will be a towering figure. When you match imagination and instruction you get a very fine result, and the fact that Mr. Crockett has done this, and undoubtedly he has accomplished that feat, is one answer as to the popularity of his work in despite of its *crabbedness*. It would be a 'dour' business to put more energy and fire into two paragraphs about 'Ayrsmoss' than have been put into the paragraphs which we have quoted. And, to carry it a little further, therein lies and must lie the success of your *narrative* novel. Action, well described by a man who understands men who are men in will and intellect, is the very essence of it. This, it may be judged from this one quotation of a battle-scene, Mr. Crockett can do, and this serves to explain his 'readableness.' There remains, on the assumption with which we started the problem, the question why readers who do not understand it endure his difficult dialect. And probably the very brief and simple answer to that is that they skip it. Mr. Crockett has the art of putting all his descriptions of great situations into very excellent and stirring English, and even a person unacquainted with the Scottish language can make out enough of the preceding scenes to get a tolerably clear idea of what he thinks is likely to happen. In other words the author has a dramatic instinct. His 'carpenter's scenes' are disfigured, to a purely English eye and ear, by being written in excellent Scottish; but when he comes to the really big scenes he puts on his English mask, and very well he masks in it. The final scene of the book is, in this and other senses, as it should be, greatly to be admired. It is touching, true, thrilling, and understandable. And if we cannot get away from the idea that Mr. Crockett owes much to Stevenson may we not on the other hand rejoice that Mr. Crockett possesses, with a distinct touch of original power, the advantage of having learnt a lesson from so marked and loved a writer.

EVOLUTION WITHOUT NATURAL SELECTION

Nature versus Natural Selection. By CHARLES CLEMENT COE. London: Sonnenschein.

Mr. Coe is one of a gradually increasing band of writers and naturalists who are not entirely satisfied with the theory of Natural Selection as an all-sufficient cause of evolution, and who have found recently emphatic expression in an article published in a recent number of the *Edinburgh Review*. Mr. Coe, too, has his say on the matter, and it must be admitted that he is well armed for the fray into which he has plunged. The book, however, is a little difficult to read on account of the multitudinous quotations which embarrass the argument and distract the attention from the thread of Mr. Coe's able discourse. The passages selected for explanation and contrast are of course mainly from the writings of Darwin, Wallace, Romanes and others among the recognised exponents of the Darwin-Wallace hypothesis; but our author has read widely and sometimes confronts us with Shakespeare, the Apocrypha, with excerpts from various magazines, and even on occasions with verses culled from one or two comparatively speaking minor poets. Mr. Coe has the greatest talent for confuting an author with two directly contradictory statements from his own writings: thus he has used unsparingly, and applied not only to Darwin and Wallace and others of their school, but also to St. Paul, two diverse and