

Comparative Linguistic Analysis: Two Approaches to the Oxford Problem

Introduction

This document compares the language patterns in two scholarly treatments of S.R. Crockett’s Oxford connection:

- 1. **Donaldson (1989):** Chapter 2 of *The Life and Work of Samuel Rutherford Crockett* (full chapter, approximately 9,000 words covering Edinburgh period 1876-1886, with Oxford section at lines 62-78)
- 2. **Phillips (2026):** “Resolving the Oxford Problem: New Evidence and What It Reveals” (1,100 words, focused entirely on Oxford question)

Methodological Note: This analysis examines Donaldson’s complete Chapter 2 to demonstrate how she establishes a pattern of negative characterization early in the chapter (“Crockett always exaggerates,” line 34) and then applies this interpretive frame to the Oxford question. The pattern established across the chapter shapes how the Oxford material is read. Phillips’ article, by contrast, addresses the Oxford question directly without establishing any prior characterization pattern.

Note on Refinement Process: The Phillips article analyzed here underwent iterative revision using linguistic self-analysis. The refinement process demonstrates how linguistic analysis can strengthen scholarly writing during composition. A brief coda at the end of this document explains this process.

The analysis demonstrates how linguistic choices create fundamentally different scholarly outcomes: one constructs unreliability through rhetorical devices applied systematically; the other establishes facts through evidence-based analysis.

TABLE 1: CORE COMPARATIVE METRICS

Element	Donaldson (Ch. 2, full chapter)	Phillips (2026)
Scope analyzed	Complete chapter covering Edinburgh period 1876-1886 (~9,000 words); Oxford addressed in lines 62-78	Complete article focused on Oxford question (~1,100 words)
Direct character accusations	6 throughout chapter (“always exaggerates,” “untrustworthy”)	0
Citations for character claims	0	N/A (no character claims made)
Primary source quotations	Minimal, selective	Extensive (full Cassell’s quote)

Element	Donaldson (Ch. 2, full chapter)	Phillips (2026)
Speculation flagged as such	Rare (“could he have”)	Consistent (“may have,” “likely,” “beyond scope”)
Rhetorical questions	3 (suggest dishonesty)	0
Attribution verbs (negative)	5 (“boasts,” “plumes,” “regaled”)	0
Attribution verbs (neutral)	Some	Consistent (“states,” “explains,” “describes”)
Modal certainty for accusations	High (“always,” “was untrustworthy”)	N/A
Modal certainty for facts	Low (“seems,” “may have,” “could”)	Appropriate (high for evidenced, low for speculative)

Summary: Donaldson makes 6 unsupported character claims with zero citations. Phillips makes zero character claims, presents extensive evidence, and maintains clear boundaries between fact and interpretation.

TABLE 2: THE OXFORD PROBLEM - LANGUAGE COMPARISON

How Each Frames the Archival Gap:

Donaldson (1989)	Phillips (2026)
“in some completely unexplained and incomprehensible way”	“He had a formal introduction to a college head (likely through his church connections)”
“It is not clear why he went to Oxford, or for how long he stayed, or what he did there”	“This account directly addresses every question Donaldson raised”
“The Oxford sojourn is shrouded in mystery”	“The Oxford Problem is resolved”
“could he have visited her? Neither party records such a meeting”	[No speculation without evidence]
“The editors may have confused New College, Edinburgh with its older Oxford namesake”	[Addresses the actual evidence: unattached student status]

Analysis:

- **Donaldson:** Transforms archival gap into mystery through hyperbolic language (“completely unexplained and incomprehensible”), speculation immediately dismissed (“could he have visited”), and melodramatic conclusion (“shrouded in mystery”)

- **Phillips:** Provides evidence (Cassell’s interview), explains what happened (unattached student, redirected to tutoring), resolves the questions Donaldson raised

TABLE 3: TREATMENT OF CROCKETT'S STATEMENTS**Attribution Verbs and Framing:**

Source	Donaldson's Treatment	Phillips Treatment
Crockett to Sherard	"boasts that he read widely"	"Crockett's response is remarkably clear"
Crockett to Sherard	"plumes himself on daring to cut lectures"	"Crockett explains what happened"
Crockett to Sherard	"described his journey with relish"	"in his own words"
Crockett's memory of reading	"or affects to remember most prominently"	"Crockett stated a simple fact"
General pattern	"Crockett always exaggerates"	[No blanket characterization]

Pattern:

- **Donaldson:** Systematically frames Crockett's statements with verbs suggesting vanity, performance, or exaggeration

- **Phillips:** Uses neutral attribution, lets evidence speak, allows reader to judge

TABLE 4: EVIDENCE-TO-ASSERTION RATIO**Donaldson (Chapter 2):**

Type of Claim	Count	Evidence Provided	Citations
Factual (dates, places)	Multiple	University records, dates	Yes
Character accusations	6	None	No
Speculation about motives	5+	None	No
Oxford "mystery"	1 entire section	Absence of records	No positive evidence

Ratio: High citation rate for facts, zero citation rate for character claims

Phillips (2026):

Type of Claim	Count	Evidence Provided	Citations
Factual (Cassell's interview content)	Multiple	Direct quotations	Yes
Interpretive (what evidence means)	Multiple	Based on quoted evidence	Evidence shown
About Donaldson's method	3-4	Her own text quoted	Yes
Character claims about Crockett	0	N/A	N/A
Speculation	2-3	Explicitly flagged ("may have," "likely")	Boundaries set

Ratio: All claims proportional to evidence strength

TABLE 5: MODAL VERB PATTERNS - CERTAINTY LEVELS

Donaldson's Modal Usage:

High Certainty (for negative character claims): - "Crockett always exaggerates" (categorical) - "Crockett was vague and untrustworthy" (factual assertion) - "It must have been tempting to show off" (strong necessity)

Low Certainty (for actual facts): - "he went, it seems, to Oxford" (uncertainty) - "could he have visited her?" (speculation) - "may have confused" (possibility)

Pattern: Certain about unreliability, uncertain about facts

Phillips Modal Usage:

High Certainty (for evidenced claims): - "This account directly addresses every question" (after extensive quote) - "Crockett stated a simple fact" (supported by evidence) - "The Oxford Problem is resolved" (justified by evidence presented)

Appropriate Hedging (for speculation): - "may have been facilitated by this Lowell introduction" (acknowledges speculation) - "likely through his Free Church connections" (probable but unconfirmed) - "Crockett likely tutored this student during the 1884-1885 European tour" (uncertain timing)

Pattern: Certainty matches evidence strength

TABLE 6: RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Strategy	Donaldson	Phillips
Rhetorical questions to insinuate	3 instances	0
Speculation presented as mystery	Yes (“shrouded in mystery”)	No (speculation flagged)
Hyperbolic language	Yes (“completely unexplained and incomprehensible”)	No (measured language)
Passive voice hiding agency	Multiple (“is shrouded,” “unexplained”)	Minimal (active voice)
Concession-contradiction	Yes (“may well have attended” BUT “tempting to show off”)	No (straightforward statements)
Circular reasoning	Yes (exaggeration → looks like exaggeration → proves exaggeration)	No (evidence-based reasoning)

TABLE 7: TREATMENT OF PREVIOUS SCHOLARS**Donaldson’s Treatment of Harper and Sherard:**

Source	How Treated	Evidence Assessment
Harper (1907)	Generally accepted	Some claims accepted uncritically
Sherard (1895)	Used extensively	Simultaneously cited and doubted
Crockett’s own words	Systematically doubted	Characterized as exaggeration

Phillips Treatment of Donaldson:

Aspect	How Treated	Language Used
Her research	Acknowledged as thorough	“only scholarly biography,” “part of her research archive”
Her oversight	Fair, contextual	“research is a human endeavour,” “not about personal failure”
Her method	Critiqued	“methodological leap,” “working from incomplete information”
Her constraints	Acknowledged	“technological constraints of the 1980s,” “potential nightmare for any researcher”

Pattern:

- **Donaldson:** Differential treatment (other scholars accepted, Crockett doubted)
- **Phillips:** Fair treatment (methodological critique without personal attack)

TABLE 8: LEXICAL CHOICES - DESCRIBING THE SUBJECT

Donaldson's Vocabulary for Crockett:

Term	Frequency	Context	Connotation
Exaggerate/exaggeration	3	Reading, book-collecting, play-writing	Dishonesty
Untrustworthy	1	About dates	Direct accusation
Vague	1	About time	Unreliability
Boasts	1	About reading	Vanity
Plumes himself	1	About cutting lectures	Self-satisfaction
Show off	1	To Sherard	Performance
Affects	1	About memory	Pretense
Inexactitude	1	Marriage certificate	Euphemism for lie

Pattern: Consistent negative lexicon

Phillips Vocabulary for Crockett:

Term	Frequency	Context	Connotation
States/stated	2	His own words	Neutral
Explains	1	What happened	Neutral
Response	1	To interviewer	Neutral
In his own words	1	Direct quotation	Neutral

Pattern: Consistently neutral vocabulary

TABLE 9: THE CASSELL’S INTERVIEW - COMPARISON

How Each Uses Primary Sources:

Aspect	Donaldson (1989)	Phillips (2026)
Cassell’s awareness	Had access to source	Had access to source
Cassell’s usage	Not connected to Oxford question	Central evidence
Quotation length	Minimal	Extensive (full relevant passages)
Source privilege	<i>Idler</i> (briefer) over Cassell’s (detailed)	Cassell’s as primary evidence
Interpretation	Gap = mystery = potential invention	Quote = clear explanation = resolution

Critical Difference: Both scholars had the same source. One overlooked or disconnected it; the other centered it as decisive evidence.

TABLE 10: SCHOLARLY RESPONSIBILITY - LANGUAGE COMPARISON

When Uncertain:

Situation	Donaldson’s Language	Phillips Language
Missing evidence	“shrouded in mystery”	“raises other questions beyond the scope of this article”
Speculation	Presented as mystery or fact	Explicitly flagged (“may have,” “likely”)
Gaps in record	Interpreted as suspicious	Acknowledged as normal archival gaps
Uncertainty	Transformed into character judgment	Left as uncertainty

When Critiquing:

Target	Donaldson’s Approach	Phillips Approach
Crockett	Direct character accusations	No character claims
Methodology	N/A	Clear, specific, evidence-based
Previous scholars	Accepted or used selectively	Fair treatment, acknowledged constraints

TABLE 11: QUANTITATIVE SUMMARY

Metric	Donaldson (Ch. 2)	Phillips (2026)	Difference
Character accusations	6	0	-6
Evidence for character claims	0 citations	N/A	N/A
Negative attribution verbs	5	0	-5
Neutral attribution verbs	Some	Consistent	Improved
Rhetorical questions (insinuation)	3	0	-3
Speculation flagged as such	Rare	Consistent	Improved
Primary source quotations	Minimal	Extensive	Greatly improved
Modal certainty for accusations	High	N/A	N/A
Modal certainty for facts	Low	Appropriate	Improved
Fair treatment of previous scholars	Mixed	Consistent	Improved

ANALYSIS: KEY DIFFERENCES

1. FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH

Donaldson: - Begins with interpretive frame ("Crockett always exaggerates") - Reads all evidence through that lens - Archival gaps become suspicious - Absence of evidence becomes evidence of fabrication

Phillips: - Begins with evidence (Cassell's interview) - Lets evidence establish interpretation - Archival gaps acknowledged as normal - Presence of evidence resolves question

2. TREATMENT OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Donaldson: - Uses primary sources selectively - Privileges *Idler* over Cassell's (both from 1895) - Quotes minimally - Interprets through negative frame

Phillips: - Centers primary source as decisive evidence - Recognizes Cassell's as more detailed - Quotes extensively - Lets source speak for itself

3. SCHOLARLY GENEROSITY

Donaldson: - Harsh on subject (Crockett) - Accepting of other scholars (Harper, Sherard) - Differential standards

Phillips: - Fair to subject (evidence-based assessment) - Fair to previous scholar (acknowledges constraints) - Consistent standards

4. LANGUAGE PRECISION

Donaldson: - High certainty for unsupported claims - Low certainty for actual facts - Hyperbolic language (“completely incomprehensible”) - Melodramatic conclusions (“shrouded in mystery”)

Phillips: - Certainty matches evidence strength - Measured language throughout - Clear distinctions between fact and interpretation - Evidence-based conclusions

THE CRITICAL CONTRAST

The linguistic analysis reveals that the difference between these two approaches is not simply one scholar being “better” than another. It’s a difference in fundamental methodology:

Donaldson’s Method: (possibly subconscious) 1. Establish interpretive frame (unreliability) 2. Read evidence through that frame 3. Gaps support the frame (mystery = concealment) 4. Speculation hardens into assertion 5. Pattern becomes self-reinforcing

Result: Rhetorical construction of unreliability

Phillips Method: (intentional) 1. Search for primary evidence 2. Present evidence extensively (full quotes) 3. Gaps acknowledged as normal 4. Interpretation follows from evidence 5. Boundaries clearly marked

Result: Evidence-based resolution

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis demonstrates that scholarly rigor is visible in language patterns. The contrast between these two treatments of the same historical question reveals:

What makes scholarship unreliable: - Character claims without evidence - Negative framing through attribution verbs - Speculation presented as mystery or fact - High certainty for accusations, low certainty for facts - Rhetorical questions substituting for evidence - Circular reasoning (pattern proves pattern)

What makes scholarship rigorous: - Claims proportional to evidence - Neutral attribution allowing reader judgment - Speculation explicitly flagged - Certainty matching evidence strength - Direct statements based on evidence - Linear reasoning (evidence → interpretation)

The Oxford Problem demonstrates this contrast perfectly: both scholars had access to the same archive. One constructed a mystery through rhetorical choices. The other resolved it through evidence.

The difference is not intelligence, diligence, or even access to sources. The difference is methodological: how language is used to present what we know, what we don't know, and what we can legitimately claim.

CODA: The Refinement Process

The Phillips (2026) article analyzed in this document underwent iterative revision using the same linguistic framework applied to Donaldson's work. After drafting, the following refinements were made:

Areas Strengthened: - Vague references made precise ("Her critique is more than literary" → "Her critique extends beyond literary analysis to character judgment") - Passive attributions made active ("[He was later revealed as...]" → "[Sherard's *Idler* interview identifies him as...]") - Broad claims qualified ("seldom read or researched" → "modern scholarship has largely overlooked") - Minor passive constructions made active voice

What This Demonstrates: These were not methodological failures—there were no unsupported character claims, no speculation presented as fact, no negative framing without evidence. The linguistic self-analysis sharpened precision and strengthened defensibility.

This iterative process shows that scholarly rigor isn't about perfection on first draft. It's about having a method for continuous refinement and being transparent about that process. The contrast with Donaldson's work isn't that one scholar is "better"—it's that applying linguistic analysis to our own writing keeps us honest about what we can actually claim.

The Key Difference: - Donaldson's chapter contains systematic patterns requiring fundamental methodological revision (unsupported character claims, negative framing, speculation as fact) - Phillips' article required minor refinements for precision and clarity (strengthening attributions, qualifying claims)

The first reflects underlying methodological problems. The second reflects normal scholarly editing.
