

Into the Fastnesses: Crockett's Galloway Wilderness Article of 1894

In July 1894, approximately four months after *The Raiders* transformed Samuel Rutherford Crockett into one of the most talked-about writers in Britain, *Leisure Hour* magazine published a non-fiction article that took readers directly into the landscape behind the novel. '[Galloway Fastnesses](#)' is a guided walk into the high wilderness above Glen Trool — and it is, on any reading, a fine piece of Galloway prose writing.

Leisure Hour was a long-established, mid-market, religiously-inflected family periodical, not a literary journal. The choice of outlet was deliberate: it placed the article before the broadest possible readership of educated middle-class families, precisely those who had responded to *The Raiders* earlier that spring. The byline printed beneath the title — 'Author of "The Raiders," etc.' — confirms that the connection was made explicit from the outset. Crockett was capitalising on his sudden celebrity, but the article he produced went far beyond a simple promotional exercise.

'Galloway Fastnesses' appeared alongside a companion piece, 'Galloway Bygones,' in the same issue. Where *Bygones* takes a historical and antiquarian register, *Fastnesses* is topographical and experiential, organised as a single day's excursion into the high wilderness and back. Together the two articles present Galloway from complementary angles to a metropolitan readership that may never have set foot in the region. Three illustrations by the young artist A. G. Denholm-Young accompany the text: Loch Trool, the Dungeon of Buchan, and Sunset over the Merrick — dramatic, chiaroscuro images already completed by January of that year. Crockett was an active champion of Denholm-Young, as correspondence in the Crockett archive with the Macmillans and with publisher T. Fisher Unwin attests; a comparable generosity towards young artists can be seen in his promotion of boyhood friend Willam MacGeorge in the *Illustrated Stickit Minister*. The illustrations are significant for what they show and what they do not: all three depict accessible, scenically composed threshold views. The deep interior — Loch Enoch, Loch Valley, Loch Neldricken — is rendered in words alone. The artist reaches the edge; only the prose penetrates the fastnesses.

A Journey Inward

The article is architecturally organised as a journey inward and a return. The route runs from Loch Trool up through Glenhead farmhouse, over Curleywee, past Loch Valley and the Murder Hole at Loch Neldricken, to the high plateau of Loch Enoch — and back by way of Craiglee, the Dhu Loch, and the Trostan Burn. It is a journey that can be walked today, and that is no accident. In the years following the publication of *The Raiders* and

'Galloway Fastnesses,' visitors began arriving in Galloway to walk precisely this ground. The region became known as Crockett Country, and so it remained for generations.

The title word 'fastness' does architectural as well as descriptive work throughout the article. A fastness is a stronghold, a remote and secure place — and the movement of the article is always inward, always toward greater remoteness and difficulty. Yet the article withholds its climax with considerable skill. Loch Enoch is named as the goal early, but is not reached until well past the midpoint. The Murder Hole, the eagle passage, the geological set-piece of the Garlin burn flood — each delays and intensifies the moment of arrival. The article's dramatic hinge is a single exchange: 'Bide a wee,' says John Macmillan, 'and I will show you a new world.' Crockett's response — 'He strides on, a very sturdy Columbus' — is exact. Macmillan does show him a new world, and the revelation of Loch Enoch from the plateau entirely justifies the claim.

John Macmillan of Glenhead

The guide is not a literary type but a specific, documented man: John Macmillan, shepherd at Glenhead farmhouse, above Loch Trool. His wife was Marion Macmillan. The Crockett archive holds approximately thirty letters between Crockett and the Macmillans — evidence of a friendship that extended well beyond a single excursion into the hills. Crockett, characteristically, often wrote to them in Scots.

Glenhead farmhouse is described in the article as looking 'so charmingly out over its little crofts down to the precipice-circled depths of Loch Trool': a place of hospitality, warmth, and — pointedly — good books. What Macmillan embodies in the article is total indigenous knowledge: every spring on the hillside, every rock that shelters fox or eagle, every story attached to the geological formations. His authority is natural and confirmed; that of the Ordnance Survey map, which wrongly shows Loch Enoch's outlet draining north-east towards Loch Doon when in fact all the water drains north-west towards Loch Macaterick, is official but wrong. Local knowledge exceeds institutional knowledge at a specific, verifiable point.

The Isaiah passage — 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles' — crystallises the article's deepest claim for Macmillan. He understands that text, Crockett writes, better 'than he can obtain from any sermon or commentary in the round world,' because he has actually watched eagles strike a grouse on the wing, recover from the blow, and stoop again to catch the dead bird before it reaches the ground. Experiential truth exceeds textual commentary. This is a recurring device in Crockett's Galloway writing.

The Doubled Landscape

The excursion in 'Galloway Fastnesses' traces the geographical heart of *The Raiders*: Glen Trool, Glenhead, Loch Valley, Loch Neldricken, Loch Enoch. For any reader who had read the novel in the spring of 1894, the article offered something unusual — the chance to walk through the real terrain behind the fiction, guided by the real man whose farmhouse had furnished one of its central locations. The non-fiction article validates the geography of the novel; the novel gives the real landscape its emotional and narrative charge.

The Murder Hole at Loch Neldricken is the purest demonstration of this doubling. Crockett dispenses with it in a single sentence: 'It is the Murder Hole, of gloomy memory.' Nothing further is explained, because nothing further was needed. By July 1894, no reader of *Leisure Hour* who had read *The Raiders* required an explanation. The reader inhabits two landscapes simultaneously, and the article is written to sustain and exploit that double orientation. We need not worry that Crockett's Murder Hole is probably a fiction – re-sited from further north in Ayrshire. Any visitor to Neldricken can 'believe' in the Murder Hole as Crockett places it.

Geology and the Flood

Crockett studied geology while at New College in Edinburgh and his 1881 university notebook survives in the Crockett archive. That formation is directly audible in 'Galloway Fastnesses.' The geological passages are not decorative; they carry conviction because they reflect genuine knowledge. Loch Trool's granite and bluestone geology, the landscape 'planed down to the quick by the ancientest glaciers' into what Crockett calls the 'Galloway Cauldron,' the logan stone above Loch Valley balanced 'so delicately set as to be moved by the blowing of the wind,' the glacial moraines at Loch Neldricken described as 'jingling stones' constantly refilled as sand sifts between boulders — these are not the observations of a literary tourist.

The article's geological set-piece is the account of the Garlin burn's weir giving way. Loch Valley broke free: 'a six-foot breast, creamy foam cresting it like an ocean wave. Down the glen it went like a miniature Johnstown disaster.' The reference to the catastrophic Pennsylvania flood of 1889 — five years before the article — was live in the minds of contemporary readers. But Crockett's explanation of the aftermath is geological: the granite simply resumed the shape the last glacier had left it. Man-made interference with a landscape ground by glaciers over millennia has predictable consequences. The conclusion is an epigram: 'It takes a moorland Napoleon of engineers to fool with Loch Valley.'

Eagles

The golden eagle passage is remarkable for 1894. For years, a pair of eagles had nested at Glenhead, protected by the 'enlightened tenants' — among them the Macmillans. In the later 1870s the birds moved to the Black Hill of Buchan. Then the mate was shot, 'by some ignorant scoundrel with a gun, somewhere over in the neighbourhood of Loch Doon.' Crockett's response modulates between genuine anger and performative comedy: the shooter is a 'gunning idiot,' and Crockett wishes to present him, 'at our own expense, tight-fitting suits of tar and feathers.' The comedy does not diminish the outrage; it amplifies it.

The language of this passage — the bird's right to possess its ancient seat 'in peace,' the claim that 'surely so noble a bird has a soul,' the praise for enlightened tenants who did not grudge a stray dead lamb that the bird might 'dwell in his ancient fastnesses' anticipates the nature conservation discourse of the twentieth century. The eagle passage is simultaneously a piece of field-naturalist observation, a conservation polemic, and a meditation on the Isaiah text connecting the bird to the sacred. Crockett's field-observation is precise: typically one young reared each season, occasionally two; the old birds beat off their offspring as soon as they can fly.

Language and the Closing Sentence

'Galloway Fastnesses' is a tour de force of register management. Within its relatively compact span, the article sustains lyrical landscape description, geological exposition, comic anecdote, conservation polemic, historical invocation, and near-mystical conclusion, without incoherence or jar. The management of these shifts is one of the marks of Crockett's considerable prose craft at this period.

Scots dialect appears selectively, always attributed to Macmillan or other local voices, never to the narrator. The code-switching is ideologically precise: Macmillan's Scots (*quakin' qua'* for a trembling bog; *jaws o' water* for waterfalls; *straikes* for the Loch Enoch granite sand used to sharpen scythe blades; *wauchie wallees* for wet hollows; *lirk* for the fold of a hill) marks belonging and natural authority, while the narrator's standard literary English recognises and defers to that authority. The asymmetry is not condescension; it is Crockett's consistent method of honouring local knowledge while making it legible to a metropolitan readership.

Characteristic prose devices recur throughout: the long periodic sentence answered by a short emphatic one ('The weir was no more, and the Garlin burn was coming down in a six-foot breast, creamy foam cresting it like an ocean wave. Down the glen it went like a miniature Johnstown disaster.');

Turks, climb like goats, and run like hares'); the personification of landscape in which Loch Enoch 'glows,' the Merrick 'soars,' and the Dungeon 'swims' in misty vapour.

The article closes with 'Loch Enoch looking up to God, with a face sternly sweet, only less lonely than Himself.' The paradox of *sternly sweet* encapsulates the ruling quality of the Galloway uplands — harsh and consoling simultaneously. The claim that the loch is 'only less lonely than Himself' is theologically audacious: God is lonely; Loch Enoch shares but does not equal that loneliness. The capital on *Himself* names the divine without naming it, assuming a shared religious frame entirely natural within *Leisure Hour's* readership. Nothing in the preceding pages quite prepares for it, and it lifts the article clear of any conventional genre. Crockett would return to Loch Enoch in his fiction throughout his career, to the very end of his life — evidence of what the place meant to him. It retains that quality of austere wonder for the visitor today.

The Covenanting Layer and Grierson

The Killing Time reference — 'these Southern Wildernesses of Galloway, where was the very fastness and fortress of the Westland Whigs in the fierce days of the Killing' — gives the article its deepest historical dimension. The 'Westland Whigs,' the Covenanting communities of south-west Scotland, used precisely these upland fastnesses as refuges during the government persecution of the 1680s. The word 'fastness' carries this resonance throughout: these are not merely remote places but historically sanctified places of sanctuary. Crockett was raised in the Cameronian tradition, which traced its spiritual lineage directly to the Covenanting martyrs. Thus the invocation is personal as well as historical.

The article also cites a specific predecessor. Thomas Grierson — the Rev. Thomas Grierson, Minister of Kirkbean, author of *Autumnal Rambles Among the Scottish Mountains* (c.1850–51) — is named as the source for the account of Ordnance Survey engineers who had passed their idle hours hurling boulders down into Loch Enoch from the Merrick precipice. The citation is scholarly in its precision, and it places the article within a tradition of Galloway writing that stretches back at least half a century. A fuller account of what Crockett owed to Grierson, and what he transformed, is available in a Reading Room article on the intertextual relationship between the two writers in the context of Loch Enoch.

Conclusion

'Galloway Fastnesses' resists comfortable genre classification. It is not a conventional travel article, not nature writing in the tradition of Jefferies or Thoreau, and not straightforward topographical description. Its distinctiveness lies in the fusion it

achieves: a guided-tour structure animated by a real, named, documented friendship; geological seriousness rooted in formal study; a fiction and non-fiction interface that creates a doubled imaginative landscape; comic register alongside conservation polemic; Covenanting historical depth; and a near-devotional conclusion of genuine literary ambition. These elements coexist without strain.

Crockett's non-fiction Galloway prose has been largely overlooked by a critical tradition focused on novels. 'Galloway Fastnesses' is the strongest possible argument for looking again. The 1894 *Leisure Hour* text — the primary version — is the work of a writer at the full height of his powers, in complete command of his material, producing something that no previous writer had made from the same raw landscape.

The article was reprinted in *Raiderland* in 1904 as the second part of a chapter titled: THE RAIDERS' COUNTRY, II.—WHAT WE SEE IN RAIDERLAND. Work is ongoing at the museum regarding textual comparison between versions towards a deeper understanding of Crockett's considerable writing skill. But that is for future, deeper dives.