

Is This a Method I See Before Me?

When looking at Crockett's non-fiction work, it is tempting to look for a method. He describes something of the kind in his letters, and the works themselves can be seen to fall into patterns that more or less fit what we might call an author's method. However, the danger is that we apply our own interpretation retrospectively. Not only is the information available to us partial and, of necessity, incomplete, but we may be taking Crockett's own comments out of context. Even looking at the works themselves for clues can produce the result we are looking for — we risk creating the evidence from what we choose to look at.

So what can be said about the works that are drawn on in the making of *Raiderland*, Crockett's uniquely 'different' work of non-fiction? And what does it really draw from the earlier non-fiction works we have as evidence before us?

This article aims to address these questions. It sets five texts — 'The Impartial Hand' (1897), 'A Romancer's Local Colour' (1900), the pitch letters for *The Adventurer in Spain* (1901), *The Adventurer in Spain* itself (1903), and the *Raiderland* Foreword (1904) — alongside each other, and alongside the correspondence that surrounded the book's slow path into print. It treats 'the method' throughout as a working term rather than an established fact. Crockett gestured towards something of the sort more than once, in his own words. However, whether that gesture amounts to a settled artistic programme, or to something looser that this article is helping to construct simply by looking for it, is not something the letters can settle on their own. Linguistic analysis might help but again, even this kind of pattern finding is itself partly constructed out of interpretive choices and risks invention rather than discovery of a true method. Fundamentally, this article suggests that publishing realities: contracts, agents, deadlines, and the cost of illustration are at least as significant factors for examination as any recognized 'method'.

1897: The Comic Apprenticeship

The earliest text in this sequence is 'The Impartial Hand', a four-page sketch published in *The Woman at Home* in August 1897 and subtitled 'A Leaf from the Diary of a Walking Tour'. It is diary-form, humorous, and entirely peopled by strangers: the unnamed narrator and his companion 'the Monk' (a young artist) trudge across the Norman plain, are refused hospitality by a farmer, are rescued by the accommodating Madame Lavenue, and are latched onto by a garrulous, opportunistic pork-dealer who calls himself, and is called by them, 'the Impartial Hand' — a piano tuner by his own (unreliable) account, who touches the narrator for a franc and invents a different tragic parentage every few minutes. Nobody in the piece is named beyond a nickname. The whole sketch survives on encounter, timing, and the comic rhythm of two travellers talking past a third. It makes no claim about how it ought to be read; any 'method' found in it is necessarily read back into it from later texts. It was a light article for a specific magazine. It might be deemed a classic case of writing to order. Bread and butter for a professional author.

Interestingly, when Crockett wrote to Joseph Pennell in April 1899 to propose the book that would become *Raiderland*, this is the text he pointed back to: 'My stuff would be light, personal, topographical, incidental, in the style of a sketch I contributed about a year ago for "The Woman at Home" called "the Impartial Hand."' The letter to Pennell asked him to approach Macmillans on the project's behalf. Macmillans never in fact contracted the book. But it fixes, at the outset of the whole *Raiderland* project, the comic, encounter-driven register Crockett had in mind, and it is the first of three occasions on which he returns to his own earlier work when describing what he meant to write.

1900: Photography as Method

'A Romancer's Local Colour', published in *The Windsor Magazine* in June 1900, is the fullest surviving statement of why Crockett used photography in the way he did. It opens by naming its subject directly: 'I sing photography — not of the stand, but of the hand — not of the studio, but of the larger canopy, the shifting crowd, the lonely tarn, the nesting bird.' The essay goes on to explain, at length and with self-deprecating humour, why: Crockett describes himself as possessed of a memory that forgets everything useful and retains everything trivial, personified as an 'Imp of Memory' and elsewhere as a 'Mnemonic Imp' — his own coinages, worth quoting exactly rather than merging, since he uses the two phrases in different sentences rather than as a single fixed term. Photography, for this fiction-writer working the 'importunate province of serial fiction', became the fix for an unreliable memory: a way

to carry ‘every fact and impression, indexed, arranged, and filed for reference’. However, Crockett’s memory was not as weak as he suggested. In a shorter article [‘When in Doubt, Observe’](#) over on our Substack platform, we see Crockett reflecting on memory in his later work *Rogue’s Island*. He writes *‘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!’*

These two comments on memory perhaps serve to remind us that writers’ performative claims about themselves and their ‘methods’, strengths and weaknesses, are also dictated by publishing realities.

We know, from letters to [Major Pond in 1897](#) that Crockett took up photography around this time. By 1900 the scale of photography as practice was substantial. Crockett states in ‘A Romancer’s Local Colour’ that he possessed ‘some 6,000 “records” taken in half a score of countries’ — deliberately not calling them ‘pictures’, out of deference to ‘my good friend Mr. Joseph Pennell, who, truncheon in hand, is waiting round the corner to catch me in the act’ of claiming artistic merit for them. The word is important: each photograph is a *record*, a trigger for recall rather than an aesthetic object in its own right — ‘a trigger-pull, an “Open Sesame,” a keyword, the label on a full drawer which contains many rich things.’ Photography here is evidentiary and mnemonic in Crockett’s own account of it, not illustrative in any decorative sense.

September 1901: One Method, Two Contracts

This article treats September 1901 as the pivot point of its argument, and it is worth pausing on the coincidence of dates, because here the archive allows unusual precision. In that month, Crockett — writing to his agent, A. P. Watt, from Auchencairn — pitched a new project that reached back to the 1900 essay: ‘Twelve True Adventures in Spain of about 10,000 words each, personal adventures told in the First person’, with illustrations drawn from ‘my own photographs which may either be reproduced or given to the draughtsman to make a picture from.’ A second letter, from the Selkirk Arms, Kirkcudbright, makes the cross-reference explicit and is the second of the three occasions this article’s argument is built on: ‘photographs like those in “A Romancer’s Local Colour” of which I will send you a copy.’ A formal model is named too: the adventures should be ‘united like George Borrow’s by the personality of the writer — yet eminently self-contained and suitable for any respectable magazine’ — the travelling-narrator structure of Borrow’s *Wild Wales* and *The Bible in Spain*.

In the very same month, in the *Grey Galloway* context, A. P. Watt received word from W. Robertson Nicoll that Hodder & Stoughton wished to revise the terms of the *Grey Galloway* contract (APW→H&S, 26 September 1901). So in September 1901, Crockett is pitching a new Spanish travel book that reaches for the Romancer register to the same agent who is, simultaneously, fielding a publisher’s demand to alter the terms of the proposed *Grey Galloway* book. This article has incomplete evidence about what actually happened to *Grey Galloway* during 1901 and 1904, but the article [‘Building the Book’](#) goes into more detail of what the archive can reveal.

The pitch letters also contain a significant comment — a refusal of the conventional Spanish travel book, spelled out clause by clause: ‘No bull shall gore, no steed be disembowelled. Gipsies shall not dance for Cookist gold at Granada. There will be no complaints about the punctuality of design of the Alhambra.’ This is a deliberate, itemised anti-genre stance, naming the stock furniture of the Spanish travelogue — bullfights, flamenco staged for tourists, monument-going — and refusing each in turn. It is also a statement of editorial control that Crockett was able to make here and which he was not, on the evidence we have, able to make in the same way for *Grey Galloway*.

1903: A Method Delivered — On Whose Terms?

The Adventurer in Spain, published by Isbister in 1903, seems to have carried Crockett’s ‘method’ through to print largely intact. The prefatory note describes a half-plate Newman & Guardia camera, ‘battered on many a mule-back... twice apprehended and incarcerated for high treason by officers of the law’, carried ‘two thousand five hundred miles... upon mine own back’ over seven years. The book contains some 150 illustrations, the large majority Crockett’s own photographs, and the note insists on their evidentiary honesty over their technical polish: ‘None of the figures were posed... By no means the finest photographs, technically, have been chosen. But solely those which illustrate the text.’

It is tempting to read this as proof that whatever Crockett meant by his own account of his practice simply worked when he was left alone to pursue it. Isbister's suitability as publisher for this book was bound up with the quality of paper needed to reproduce photographic illustration well, (it was their specialty) and that this largely shaped where the Spain book ultimately landed. The choice of Isbister is therefore an obvious one. Put simply, production capacities of the publisher matched the author's requirements.

In terms of the human population of the book, it matches the 1897 sketch far more than it anticipates *Raiderland*. Crockett meets, rather than researches: a jesting miller at Deyrolles who has never before ridden behind three horses; Jean, the coachman, who goes in to view the mill 'while I held the horses' and 'came out wiping his mouth and smelling — apropos'; a barefoot, book-in-hand priest at Hospitalet demanding an English grammar lesson mid-conversation; and, later, the smuggling party of the Sebastian brothers — Don John, Mark, and the surly Luke — with whom Crockett crosses into France by night to watch a mule-train of contraband change hands on the pass.

The Publisher Takes the Reins

Raiderland's departures from what came before are substantial: thirty-two organised chapters in place of the 'travel papers' (Crockett's own plural, paratactic word for the form in the 1899 letter) that had structured both 'The Impartial Hand' and *The Adventurer in Spain*; some fifty drawings by Pennell rather than Crockett's own photographic 'records' and a register that is nostalgic and historically weighted rather than light and encounter-driven.

The Foreword itself states that Pennell's involvement was something Crockett had 'long desired': 'I have long desired that Galloway should be interpreted by Mr. Pennell's pencil and brush. And I resolved that till my friend could undertake the work, I should not publish this book.' That preference was Crockett's own, sustained over years, and this article does not read it as a substitution imposed against his wishes — wanting Pennell involved and being able to afford him on acceptable terms are two different things. It is the terms, not the presence, of that involvement that the correspondence shows being fought over for years. Again, for more detail of this, refer to the ['Building the Book'](#) article.

Crockett's own later account of his working relationship with Watt, in a personal letter of 1907, states the relationship directly: 'You lifted all cares financial from my shoulders... The Literary Agent has been much, but the man and the friend have been more.' Crockett recalls being told, at the relationship's outset, to 'write what you like, and as you like. Leave all the trouble to me.' That arrangement protected Crockett's writing time, and there is no evidence he resented it. But it also means that decisions about deadlines, contract terms, subscription editions raised and dropped twice, and illustrator's fees were at times settled by Watt and the publisher without Crockett's close, documented involvement — which is precisely the mechanism by which a book's final shape can be set by commercial negotiation without ever appearing, in the surviving letters, as an authorial choice at all.

Whether the specific decision for *Raiderland*'s final format came from Hodder & Stoughton, from a commercial decision to gather previously published material, or from Crockett himself cannot be settled from the correspondence that survives. It happened during the period of contract negotiations for which our archive is currently silent.

The Foreword's Borrowed Vocabulary

What survives most clearly into the finished *Raiderland* is not structure or illustration but language. Crockett opens by disclaiming exactly what the book's published form might suggest: 'I am not making a guidebook, but rather a garrulous literary companion to the guide-books which already exist.' The phrase 'I am not making a guide-book' recurs almost verbatim from the 1899 Pennell letter and from the Spain pitch notes — the third occasion on which Crockett's own words return to his earlier work, five years and three separate projects after the first. He goes on to write, in language close to the earliest of these texts, that he has 'no purpose before me, save that of saying what I wish to say in my own way, acknowledging no law save my own fancy.'

Read against everything above, that claim to acknowledge 'no law save my own fancy' sits uneasily beside a book whose format, illustrator's fee, deadline, and subscription arrangements had all, by 1904, been negotiated, revised,

and settled by other people. The words may or may not describe a method Crockett actually held to; what they demonstrably do is recur, in his own hand, across a five-year gap in which very little else about the book stayed the same. They are words written by a man describing the book he had set out to write, at the moment of handing over one that had, by a longer and more contested road than his Foreword admits, become something else.

A Further Avenue

The works considered here can loosely be classed as non-fiction. The archive also holds a substantial number of contracts for Crockett's fictional writings, which yield much interesting information about the practicalities and constraints of the publishing 'deals.' To study them closely is a huge undertaking. His non-fiction output is far smaller than his fiction, and so perhaps seems more fruitful a path to pursue in search of a 'method'. But with Crockett, perhaps the most interesting aspect to explore is the relationship, actual and methodological, between his fiction and non-fiction writings. In the fiction, history and contemporary social commentary are manipulated in the process of invention. In the non-fiction we also see an author playing with — and sometimes breaking — genre boundaries at a time when those boundaries were not yet fixed. Exploring the range and depth of how Crockett's work often rests in a liminal space between fact and fiction is another possible path to follow.

A Method Between the Rock and the Press

Macbeth asks of the dagger before him whether it is 'a dagger of the mind, a false creation'. Whether Crockett's 'method' is any more than that is not a question this article can conclusively answer. What can be said is that on three occasions across seven years, in his own words, Crockett pointed back to his own earlier work when describing what he meant to write next, which is at least suggestive of something more than coincidence, whatever that something amounts to. What can also be said is that whatever it was, in terms of his non-fiction, it reached print largely intact only once, in *The Adventurer in Spain*, when Crockett was able to influence the publishing process. For *Raiderland*, the same aspiration met five years of contracts, agents, deadline extensions, and a fee dispute over the very illustrations Crockett had wanted — and what survived the passage from pitch to print was the vocabulary, not necessarily the practice.

A writer may hold something he calls a method. Whether he keeps it in print depends on who publishes him, and on terms he does not always get to set.