

A King in Galloway: How Crockett Made a Tradition His Own

This article is a companion to 'Sowing the Seeds of Kailyard: The Plagiarism Campaign Against S.R. Crockett, Autumn 1894,' which documents the critical attack on Crockett's use of folk sources and his forensic public rebuttal. That article deals with the argument. This one deals with the story — and with what Crockett actually did when he worked inside a tradition at full creative strength.

In November 1894, under public accusation of plagiarism, S.R. Crockett argued that drawing on Galloway folk tradition was what all writers did — Scott included. He made that argument in polemic and under pressure, and won it. Four years later, in December 1898, he made it again — in fiction. '[The Goodman of Ballangiech](#),' published in *The Lady's Realm* and never thereafter collected, is what that argument looks like when exercised at full creative strength. Published once in a popular magazine and effectively lost for over a century, it is now available in the S.R. Crockett Online Museum. Reading it carefully is the best answer yet given to the plagiarism charge — not because Crockett designed it as such, but because great work is its own argument.

The Tradition — and What Scott Did With It

The Goodman of Ballangiech was not Scott's property. The figure of James V of Scotland wandering his kingdom in disguise under the alias associated with the steep brae-path below Stirling Castle was in popular circulation long before Scott encountered it — collected by Robert Chambers and others from oral tradition, manuscript sources, and the kind of fireside knowledge that Crockett himself would later describe as 'a familiar ingle-nook tale told in every farm-kitchen in Galloway.' The tradition was communal. Its stewardship was shared.

Scott mediated it twice, in two entirely different registers. In *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), James V appears as 'James Fitz-James,' a wandering chivalric knight whose Highland adventures among the world of Roderick Dhu and Ellen Douglas belong entirely to the elevated register of romantic poetry. The Trossachs — Loch Katrine, the world of the broadsword and the pibroch — became, through Scott's poem, the definitive landscape of this king's romantic mythology. Then, in *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828), Scott returned to the same figure in prose, as popular history for a young reader: anecdotal, warm, historically grounded. The key episode relevant to Crockett is the account of John Howieson at Cramond Bridge. James V, attacked by a gang of ruffians, is rescued by a farm labourer named Howieson who runs out of a barn with his flail. The king introduces himself as 'the Goodman of Ballengiech, a poor man with a small appointment about the palace,' invites Howieson to Holyrood, and reveals himself in a hat-recognition

scene that concludes with Howieson receiving the farm of Braehead in perpetual tenure.

Scott himself, in the footnotes of *Tales of a Grandfather*, cross-referenced *The Lady of the Lake* explicitly — pointing his reader to Canto VI of the poem, and to the ballads of the *Gaberlunzie Man* and *We'll Gae Nae Mair a Roving*, which he described as founded on James V's amorous adventures travelling in the disguise of a beggar. Scott was consciously binding his two treatments together, signalling to any attentive reader that the Ballangiech tradition existed in multiple registers simultaneously: the chivalric and the comic, the elevated and the earthy, the poetic and the historical.

The structural skeleton Crockett inherited is clear: a disguised king falls into danger from outlaws; a commoner intervenes; the king is sheltered as a domestic guest; a dramatic revelation unmasks him. Scott had used this skeleton twice. Crockett took it and built something recognisably different in almost every significant particular.

Galloway as Counter-Geography

The first and most fundamental transformation is geographical. Scott's James V belongs to the Trossachs, to the high romantic Highlands of Roderick Dhu and Loch Katrine. *Tales of a Grandfather* places him near Stirling and in Stirlingshire. Neither text gave Galloway — the south-western upland country between the Merrick and the Solway — any claim on this tradition. Crockett gave it one.

The opening paragraphs of 'The Goodman of Ballangiech' establish the territory with the deliberate, accumulative specificity of a man who knows this landscape on foot. The story is set at Culsharg, a real shieling at the foot of the Merrick, the highest mainland hill south of the Grampians. Around it Crockett deploys, one by one, the features of his own literary country including: Ben Yelleray, the Lochs of Valley and Neldricken, the Silver Flowe, the Glen of Trool and the Fords of Cree. This is not the scenery of romantic convention. It is the landscape of *The Raiders* (1894) and many subsequent Galloway works — territory he had claimed as literary property to great popular acclaim, and which he here gives its own dynastic mythology, its own claim on the central story of a Scottish king. In doing so, Crockett is implicitly challenging the established cultural view of Scotland, which privileges the Highland and Jacobite version of its history. Galloway is not the Highlands. Its story is different, and Crockett insists on that difference.

The date of the story sharpens this. Crockett sets it precisely in the summer of 1531, the year after James V's hanging of Johnnie Armstrong of Gilnockie at Carlanrig. This is not a decorative historical detail. The outlaw characters who pursue the disguised king — Dick Armstrong and Will Armstrong, 'broken border-men, with whose chief Johnny the King had lately dealt so sharply' — are the direct human consequence of that judicial

act: the survivors and dependants of Johnnie's band, unanchored, dangerous, available for hire. Crockett is building causal history into his plot. The Armstrong threat does not exist as generic menace; it exists because James V's own border enforcement created it. The 1531 date locates the story in a specific, verifiable historical ecology — and that ecology is Galloway's, not the Trossachs'.

Three Things Crockett Did That Scott Never Did

The Alias as Downward Comedy

Scott's 'Fitz-James' is a chivalric alias — it distances the king upward into the register of romantic fiction, suggesting noble lineage and adventuring purpose. Even Scott's prose treatment in *Tales of a Grandfather* is vague and benign: 'a poor man with a small appointment about the palace.' The king's disguise, in both Scott versions, maintains a certain gentlemanly dignity.

Crockett punctures this entirely. His James V introduces himself as 'James Jamieson, the King's poulterer' — the man who supplies the royal household with eggs, butter, and birds for the table. The alias hides the king not in the vagueness of a domestic servant but in the most specific and mundane of domestic trades. He is the man who brings the king's own breakfast. The joke has a political edge: a monarch who dispenses patronage across the realm is here disguised as one of the humblest recipients of that patronage, reduced to the man who counts his own poultry.

This is very close in spirit to the tradition of the *Gaberlunzie Man* — the ballad of James V disguised as a wandering beggar, which Scott himself cites in his *Tales* footnote. The two traditions are distinct: the Goodman of Ballangiech stories are civic and heroic in register, the king encountering danger and dispensing justice; the *Gaberlunzie* ballads are comic and subversive, the king seducing farmers' daughters and running off into the night. But Crockett draws on both simultaneously. The poulterer alias sits between them — specific in the Ballangiech manner, comic and deflating in the *Gaberlunzie* spirit. He had inherited the full range of the tradition and chose to synthesise it, in keeping with his broader creative habit of foregrounding the ordinary rural working class and holding hierarchy up to gentle but persistent critique.

'James Jamieson, the King's poulterer' is also simply funnier than anything in Scott. The alias is the joke as well as the disguise — deployed with Scots humour throughout, as the king sits in a farmhouse kitchen listening to his hostess speculate about the wisdom of the current monarch while eating the man's own butter. Scots humour of exactly this kind — comedy derived from the collision of the grand and the domestic — was, after all, Crockett's stock in trade.

The Villain Inside the Court

In both Scott treatments of the Ballangiech tradition, danger is external. At Cramond Bridge it is generic ruffians; in *The Lady of the Lake* it is the wild grandeur of Roderick Dhu, a figure of noble antagonism. The king travels through danger into which he has placed himself; the danger is elemental or structural, never intimate.

Crockett moves the danger entirely inside the court — and in doing so changes the story's political register completely.

Sir Allan St. Clair, the King's favourite, is the real architect of the conspiracy in 'The Goodman of Ballangiech.' He is silk-clad, charming, apparently devoted to the royal interest; he arrives at the Kennedy farmstead trailing courtly compliments and the glamour of Stirling, and the household is dazzled. He is also planning to rob the father of the house, carry off the daughter, and murder the man they have been sheltering — using the Armstrong broken-men as hired instruments, with Harry Kennedy, the farmer's own son, as a willing accomplice. The betrayal is personal, political, and domestic simultaneously.

The name St. Clair carries weight that Crockett's readers would have recognised. The St. Clairs of Rosslyn were one of the great noble families of Scotland, with a long relationship to the crown across multiple reigns; William St. Clair, the last and most celebrated of the Rosslyn line, was close to the Scottish court in the early sixteenth century. Crockett's use of a changed first name — his characteristic practice in historical fiction, where he typically retains a family's surname while shifting the forename — suggests deliberate fictionalisation of a real connection rather than free invention. The villain is not arbitrary. He carries the weight of a family whose relationship with Scottish kingship was long and complex.

This is a far darker premise than anything in Scott's Ballangiech treatments, and more historically honest. James V was a king who moved decisively against his own nobility when it suited him — who had Johnnie Armstrong hanged in 1530 and whose relationship with his court favourites was known to be volatile. Crockett's disguised king does not simply experience the lives of his ordinary subjects; he discovers that his own court has become a source of danger to them. The threat does not come from the hills. It comes from inside the silk doublet.

Elsbeth Kennedy

She exists nowhere in Scott. Not in *The Lady of the Lake*, where female characters are the romantic objects of the narrative; not in *Tales of a Grandfather*, where the Howieson episode is a male commoner's tale with no domestic interior. Elspeth Kennedy, wife of Andro the shepherd-farmer of Culsharg, is entirely Crockett's creation — and one of the most alive characters in the story. Writing vivid female characters was one of Crockett's

consistent strengths, and a significant part of his appeal to the women who made up much of his readership in magazines like *The Lady's Realm*.

Elspeth is sharp-tongued and gossip-gathering, running the farmstead with the brisk authority of a woman who knows exactly what her household is worth. She is strongly reminiscent of Effie Tamson in *The Raiders* — the same type, deployed with the same affection and the same shrewd comic eye. In this story she subjects the disguised king to immediate domestic interrogation: where is he from, how much land does he hold, what is his purpose in their wild country? When Harry Kennedy arrives with Sir Allan St. Clair in his train, she is instantly dazzled by the fine doublets and the courtly compliments, her earlier scepticism dissolved in maternal pride. And when at midnight the lanterns flash and the soldiers fill the doorway and the man in grey homespun is revealed, it is Elspeth who drops to her knees before the king in what Crockett describes with quiet perfect comedy as her 'coronation robe of shawls.'

Elspeth does something structurally essential that Scott's treatments never require: she holds the heroic and the comic in the same domestic space throughout the story, without allowing either register to collapse. The world of the story is the world of Galloway farmhouse life, where a great king sleeps overnight and eats the family's butter and listens to the gossip, and where justice, when it comes, is dealt out amid the champing of cattle and the smell of the byre.

No imitator of Scott would have made Elspeth Kennedy. She requires a writer who knows this kind of woman from the inside, who can write comic-domestic Scots dialogue with precision and affection, and who has the technical confidence to run two tones simultaneously without losing either. She is the clearest single marker of Crockett's own distinctive hand in the story.

A Writer in Full Possession of His Territory

There is one further dimension to 'The Goodman of Ballangiech' that distinguishes it from any kind of imitation: the depth of the Kennedy-Cassillis historical world from which it draws.

Andro Kennedy of Culsharg is not a generic Scots shepherd placed in a generic Scots landscape. He is explicitly 'the liege-man and distant kinsman of Cassillis himself' — positioned within the specific dynastic network of the Kennedy Earldom of Cassillis, the dominant power in south Ayrshire and the northern Galloway uplands. Crockett had researched this world exhaustively for *The Grey Man* (1896), his novel of the Kennedy clan feud set approximately seventy years later, in the reign of James VI. That novel turns on the feud between the Kennedys of Cassillis and the Kennedys of Bargany, and

Crockett's grasp of the territory — its families, its landscapes, its loyalties and grievances — is total.

'The Goodman of Ballangiech' is, in the most precise sense, a prequel to *The Grey Man*: the same Kennedy country, two generations earlier, under a different king. The Armstrong broken-men of 1531 are the historical seedbed from which the border disorder of the James VI era would grow. The liege-man relationship between the Culsharg Kennedys and Cassillis in 1531 is the same relationship that structures the loyalties of *The Grey Man* in 1600. This is not borrowing; it is a writer extending his own deeply imagined historical world backward through time, with the confidence of someone who knows the territory well enough to populate two centuries of it.

The choice of the Kennedy family name is worth noting in its own right. The Kennedys were a real historical force in this part of Scotland, their story verifiable against the historical record. Crockett uses them as he uses the St. Clair name — grounding his fiction in genuine dynastic history while reserving the freedom to shape individual characters for narrative purposes. The result is a story that feels historically inhabited rather than merely historically costumed.

The Story and the Argument

In December 1898, in his own time and on his own terms, Crockett demonstrated in fiction what he had argued in polemic four years earlier. 'The Goodman of Ballangiech' takes the Ballangiech material from the communal archive of Scottish historical memory, remakes it in Galloway, gives it new geography, new historical grounding, a new kind of villain, and a new tonal register that is recognisably and unmistakably his own. The transformation is visible at every significant structural point.

The story was published once, in *The Lady's Realm* in December 1898. It remained outside Crockett's published canon — a consequence, at least in part, of the critical climate the 1894 plagiarism campaign had helped to establish. Today it can be read for what it is: a confident, historically grounded, tonally assured piece of fiction by a writer who understood both what tradition was and what a writer was for within it.

The invitation Crockett extended in November 1894 remains open. Here are the sources. Here is the work. Judge for yourself.

'The Goodman of Ballangiech' by S.R. Crockett is available in the S.R. Crockett Online Museum. The original publication appeared in The Lady's Realm, Vol. 5, December 1898, pp. 185–198.