ROOTS AND BRANCHES

Crockett's Galloway Trees in Life and Fiction

A Reading Room Collection

S.R. Crockett Cultural Legacy Charity

Supporting the exhibition: Reading Galloway's Trees

Crockett's Trees

Originally published as a Substack series; gathered here in sequence

These five articles were written for the Crockett Substack where they remain available individually. They are gathered here in sequence because, read together, they form a single argument: that Crockett's trees are not decoration but archive — a record of how people lived with landscape that formal history failed to keep.

Articles 1 to 3 move from the general claim (why fictional trees matter) through the biographical foundation (childhood formation) to the environmental argument (loss and consequence). Articles 4 and 5 form a pair: they take 'Night in a Galloway Wood' as a sustained case study in Crockett's nature writing, first examining its cast of characters, then following its full arc from dusk to dawn.

Why Crockett's Trees Matter (In Fact and Fiction)

There's something quietly persuasive about a writer who treats trees as characters. Not metaphors, not symbols, not scenery — but actual participants in the story. S.R. Crockett does this with such ease that you hardly notice it at first. You're reading along, caught up in the plot, and then suddenly you realise: the Bogle Thorn isn't just a thorn bush. It's a landmark, a witness, a kind of rural confidante.

Crockett's trees are named, remembered, and rooted in place. The Earlstoun Oak, the Drumglass Orchard — they're not invented for effect. They're drawn from life, then gently nudged into fiction. And in doing so, they become part of a literary landscape that's as emotionally textured as it is geographically precise.

His woods are full of life — sometimes romantic, sometimes mischievous, occasionally tragic. But always particular. His trees are shaped by memory, by childhood scrapes and adolescent wanderings, by the quiet drama of rural life. They're not there to impress; they're there because they matter.

Named trees, working landscapes

Some trees earn their place in fiction not by grandeur, but by familiarity. Crockett's named trees aren't ornamental — they're part of the working landscape, remembered in detail and written with the kind of care that comes from knowing where the roots actually lie.

Take the Earlstoun Oak, which appears in *Men of the Moss Hags*. It's not just a tree — it's a hideout, a makeshift home, a piece of woodland architecture. Crockett describes how Sandy Gordon and his brother build a platform in its branches, complete with shelter from rain and space to stretch out. This isn't romantic embellishment — it's practical detail. The oak becomes a place of refuge during the Covenanting persecutions, its branches offering both concealment and comfort. It's a tree with a job to do.

Then there's the Bogle Thorn, which stood by the roadside between Laurieston and Little Duchrae. Crockett gives it precise coordinates in *Raiderland*, and turns it into

the setting for a story he told his daughter — about a little green man who lived inside the tree, with bark shutters and carpeted floors:

> *'There were little windows, too, with glass in them, and shutters that shut with the bark outside, so that you never could tell there was a window there at all.'*

It's a moment of whimsy, yes — but also of transformation. The Bogle Thorn becomes a vessel for storytelling, passed from father to daughter, rooted in place and memory. And when the tree was felled for road straightening, Crockett didn't just mourn it — he wrote about it.

Not all named trees in this archive come from Crockett's pen. Some come later, named in response to absence. The Glenhead Yew, for instance, stood at the house of the Macmillans in Glentrool, where Crockett wrote part of *Men of the Moss Hags*. He didn't name it in fiction, but it stood in the landscape that shaped his work. A century after he stood beside it, it was felled — unmarked and largely unprotested. Whilst we have heard of the Sycamore Gap, there was no such outcry surrounding the Glenhead Yew.

Naming, in Crockett's world and ours, is a way of keeping trees in the conversation. Not as monuments, but as participants — in memory, in fiction, in the ongoing relationship between people and place.

An archive of behaviour

When a tree falls in fiction, it's rarely forgotten. But Crockett's stories preserve more than what trees looked like — they preserve how people lived with them: climbing into branches, reading on slates, carving paths with hatchets, swinging from ropes, and sheltering from rain.

This is what makes Crockett's fiction an archive — not of botanical data, but of relationship. His trees are part of the behavioural landscape, and that's harder to recover than any map or photograph. Once the practices vanish — once no one climbs, swings, or reads amongst the leaves — the memory fades. Unless someone writes it down.

Crockett did. The Earlstoun Oak's platform with its rain shelter. The slate wedged between beech branches in 'Love Amongst the Beech Leaves,' becoming a seat for

reading and romance. The Bogle Thorn as a fairy house, passed from father to daughter in story. These aren't embellishments. They're records of how trees were used, understood, and loved.

Even the fate of 'Our Lady of the Woods' — the silver birch at Carlingwark — tells us something. Crockett and his friends sketched it, wrote odes to it, named it. And when it fell, he remembered it in prose. The clogger who admired it for its timber wasn't wrong. But Crockett's account preserves another way of seeing: aesthetic, emotional, relational.

This kind of preservation matters. As landscapes change, fiction can hold what's lost — not just the trees, but the ways of being with them. Crockett's stories offer a model for how literature can serve as archive: not distant or scholarly, but lived-in and specific.

And when a tree like the Glenhead Yew falls — unnamed in fiction, but part of the landscape that shaped it — naming it becomes an act of continuation. A way of saying: this story isn't finished. The archive is still growing.

ARTICLE 2 OF 5

Man and Boy: The Formation of a Tree-Loving Mind

Before Crockett wrote about trees, he lived amongst them. Not in the abstract sense, but quite literally — carried pick-a-back into pinewoods before he could walk, laid down amongst fresh chips whilst his mother and uncles gathered kindling. His earliest memory, as he tells it in Raiderland, is not of people or places, but of scent:

> *'The earliest scent I can remember is that of fresh pine chips.'*

It's a detail that lingers. The pinewoods east of Duchrae weren't just backdrop — they were battalions, 'ranked and ready' in indigo and Lincoln green, until one 'fell year' when the axes came. Even as a child, Crockett registered both the beauty and the loss. Trees were part of the family economy, but also part of the emotional landscape.

Childhood canopies

As he grew, trees became teachers. There was the sugar-plum tree, under which he first learned the difference between meum and tuum — either a moral lesson or the beginnings of Latin. At the Duchrae there was the oak with the swing, the brook that muddied him, and the beechwood slate where he read voraciously and secretly. It's worth remembering that his stern Cameronian grandparents did not encourage non-religious reading.

For Crockett, that slate — wedged between branches, legs swinging into space — was more than a perch. It was a library, a study, a sanctuary. He devoured *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, Hogg's Instructor,* and the two volumes of *Chambers's English Literature* from that elevated seat, absorbing not just content but context: how it felt to read amongst leaves, how wind and light shaped thought.

Later, in fiction, the slate reappears. In 'Love Amongst the Beech Leaves,' it becomes the setting for courtship, as Rab Christie entices Bess MacAndrew into the canopy with promises of ghost stories and leafy whispers. The tree becomes architecture again — not just shelter, but stage. Crockett understood how trees could hold people, not just ideas.

These childhood canopies shaped more than memory. They formed a method — a way of seeing trees not as distant subjects but as companions, confidantes, and collaborators. Crockett's fiction carries that intimacy forward, offering readers not just descriptions but invitations: to climb, to read, to remember.

Love amongst the leaves

In Crockett's fiction, trees aren't just places to hide or read — they're places to fall in love. Not in sweeping, operatic fashion, but in the quiet, practical way that rural life allows: a swing hung from an oak, a slate wedged between beech branches, a leafy nook where conversation can unfold without interruption.

Rab Christie, a character with more charm than tact, drops a book from the canopy to catch Bess MacAndrew's attention. She's unimpressed — at first. But Rab knows the terrain, and he knows how to make it inviting:

> *'There's made a bonny seat up here where ye can sit and swing, and the wind rocks ye, an' the leaves birl aboot ye and tell ye stories, an' ye can sit an' read — splendid stories — ghosts and murders and fairies an' …'*

It's not the book that wins her over — it's the tree. Soon they're seated side by side on the slate platform, feet on a bough, backs against the trunk. The scene is romantic, yes, but also physically plausible. Crockett knew how trees worked. He climbed them, read in them, and now writes them as spaces that can safely hold two people and a conversation.

Elsewhere, in *The Lilac Sunbonnet*, the Long Wood of Larbrax becomes a place where Ralph Peden and Winsome Charteris can speak freely — about birds, plants, and thoughts they hadn't dared voice elsewhere. The trees offer privacy, not isolation. They create a kind of conversational shelter, where emotional honesty feels possible.

Even Lovers' Walk in Castle Douglas (fictionalised as Cairn Edward) is described not as a romantic cliché, but as a place shaped by youthful hands: 'Perhaps the lanes and paths we clove with hatchet and gardening knife, through the tangled brushwood of the small Isles, exist to this day — perhaps not.'

Romance, in Crockett's woods, is not imposed on the landscape. It's carved into it. The trees are part of the architecture — not just backdrop, but structure. They hold swings, slates, secrets. They make room for intimacy. And they do so with a kind of quiet generosity. Crockett doesn't overstate their role. He lets the leaves rustle, the branches bend, and the stories unfold.

ARTICLE 3 OF 5

Environmental Angst

Crockett didn't write environmental fiction in the modern sense. He wrote about trees because they were part of the world he knew — part of the work, the weather, the stories. But in *The Loves of Miss Anne*, something deeper surfaces: a kind of grief, not for abstract nature, but for particular trees, in particular places, with particular histories.

The forester's dilemma

The forester MacTaggart is one of Crockett's most compelling voices. When asked to mark trees for felling to raise money, he balks:

> *'I canna! Oh, I canna! It wad break my heart to see them comin' doon! And to ken that it was me that had condemned them to dee!'*

This isn't sentimentality. It's moral conflict. MacTaggart knows each tree — its growth, its place in the woodland, its role in the ecosystem. To mark them for cutting is not just a job; it's a betrayal. And when the landlord brings in a wood-merchant with a pot of red paint, MacTaggart threatens him with a billhook. Crockett doesn't romanticise the moment. He lets it stand: raw, real, and rooted in lived experience.

In Crockett's fiction, environmental consciousness isn't declared — it's felt. Through foresters, farmers, and boys with slates in beech trees, he shows how trees shape lives. And when they fall — whether to axes, neglect, or storms — something more than timber is lost.

When arguments kill trees

But not all tree loss comes by axe. Some comes by argument.

In *The Loves of Miss Anne*, Crockett introduces us to the Drumglass Old Orchard — a place of crab-apples, woody pear trees, and gooseberry bushes with more blight than fruit. It's not a romantic grove or a childhood sanctuary. It's a legal headache. And Crockett, with his usual dry precision, shows how quickly a landscape can suffer when it becomes the object of dispute.

The orchard is caught between Sir Tempest Kilpatrick, a landlord with a taste for litigation, and McDougal, a tenant with no intention of being dictated to. Neither man seems especially fond of the trees. The lawsuit is pursued 'just for cantankerousness,' and whilst the lawyers profit, the orchard declines:

> *'The damsons with only one or two plums on each branch, the scrimpy gooseberry bushes with the leaves falling off early, and those that were left all spotted with blight and pierced in semicircles by leaf-cutting wasps.'*

It's a catalogue of neglect. The trees aren't felled — they're forgotten. And Crockett doesn't need to editorialise. He lets the description do the work: spotted leaves,

sparse fruit, wasps carving their way through what's left. The orchard becomes a kind of slow casualty — not of weather or disease, but of human stubbornness.

Crockett understood how social breakdown could lead to environmental degradation. When relationships fray — between landlord and tenant, forester and merchant — the trees suffer. Not because anyone sets out to destroy them, but because no one steps in to care.

Loss and consequence

Even the fate of Our Lady of the Woods carries this tension. When a clogger admired it, he saw something else: 'Aye — I was just thinkin' the same — it wad make grand clog-bottoms.' Crockett doesn't mock him. He understands the need. But he also mourns the loss. The tree eventually falls in the great windstorm of 1883, and Crockett links its demise to the global dust of Krakatoa. It's a quiet gesture, but it shows his awareness: local loss, planetary consequence.

Crockett's trees don't end with the page. They continue — in memory, in landscape, and in the stories we choose to tell now. His fiction doesn't preserve a sealed past; it opens a door to ongoing relationship with place.

ARTICLE 4 OF 5

The Butcher's Boy of the Woods: When Crockett Gave Birds Personality

Note: Articles 4 and 5 form a pair, reading Crockett's 'Night in a Galloway Wood' in two stages. Article 4 introduces the cast of characters; Article 5 follows the full arc of the night from dusk to dawn.

What if you looked at the birds in a Galloway wood and saw not just wildlife, but a cast of characters as vivid as any in Victorian fiction? That's exactly what Crockett did in 'Night in a Galloway Wood,' the epilogue to his 1895 collection Bog Myrtle and Peat.

Crockett's ten-part nature essay takes readers through a midsummer night in the Scottish countryside, and its uniqueness lies in how he describes what he sees. The missel thrush isn't just a bird — it's 'the butcher's boy of the wood,' a blue-aproned bully who 'proceeds to cuff and abuse all the smaller fry, saying, "Yah! get along! Who's your hatter? Does your mother know you're out?"'

A wood full of characters

Published two years after his breakthrough success *The Stickit Minister, Bog Myrtle and Peat* showcased Crockett's versatility as a writer. The collection contains twenty-nine stories ranging from Galloway to Europe, but it's the epilogue — subtitled 'In Praise of Galloway' — that reveals his sharp eye for the natural world.

Take the starlings. Rather than offering dry ornithological description, Crockett gives us personality: 'Now they have their dress coats off and their buttons loosened. They sit and gossip among each other like a clique of jolly students.' When one nods off, the others 'joggle him off the branch, and then twitter with congratulatory laughter at his tumble.'

The gap between poetry and reality

Crockett's wood-pigeons exemplify his technique perfectly. Romantic poets might write of 'the moan of doves in immemorial elms,' but get closer and you'll discover something different. 'You're shoving me!' says one angry pigeon. 'That is a lie. This is my branch at any rate, and you've no business here. Get off!' The wood-pigeon, Crockett declares, is 'a vulgar and slangy bird, and therefore no true Scot, for all that the poets have said about him.'

It's typical of his approach — puncturing sentimentality whilst maintaining genuine affection for his subjects. Even the early worm gets characterisation: caught in a tug-of-war with a blackbird, it 'resolves that if any reasonable proportion of him gets off this time, he will speak his mind to the patriarch of his tribe who is always so full of advice how to get "healthy, wealthy, and wise."'

More than just comedy

Crockett's nature writing contains darker notes too. The missel thrush is 'more than suspected' of sucking eggs, and 'even murder in the first degree — ornithologic infanticide — has been laid to his charge.' There's social commentary here as well. When a flash of blue reveals a jay, Crockett notes that gamekeepers 'kill off every one for the sake of a pheasant's egg or two. An old and experienced gamekeeper is the worst of hanging judges. To be tried by him is to be condemned.'

An invitation to experience

What makes 'Night in a Galloway Wood' so effective is how it combines accurate natural history with literary flair. Crockett knew his birds — their habits, their calls, their territories — but he presented that knowledge through character and story rather than scientific catalogue.

Yet these comic portraits and sharp observations serve a larger purpose. They're not just entertaining descriptions — they're invitations into a deeper experience of place and time. The missel thrush might be a bully, the starlings might be gossiping students, but they're all part of something greater: a night in the Galloway woods that Crockett wants us to truly inhabit. And that is where Article 5 goes — beyond the characters to the experience itself.

For full literary analysis of 'Night in a Galloway Wood' alongside two other Crockett stories, see Three Galloway Stories (Library).

ARTICLE 5 OF 5

Standing Beneath the Elder: Following Crockett Through the Night

In Article 4, we met Crockett's cast of woodland characters — the bullying missel thrush, the gossiping starlings, the quarrelsome wood-pigeons. But those vivid personality sketches weren't simply comic observation. They were part of something more ambitious: a guided journey through an entire midsummer night in the Galloway woods.

'Night in a Galloway Wood' uses those character studies to draw us in, but its real achievement is making readers feel they've actually spent the night watching, listening, and experiencing the woods alongside Crockett himself.

'Let us stand beneath this low-branched elder'

That's how Crockett invites us to join him — not as distant readers of nature writing, but as companions on a nocturnal vigil. His approach throughout the ten-part epilogue is consistently intimate: 'Listen!' he urges. 'Did you see that flash of blue?'

The journey begins in late evening when ‘the curlew is saying good-night to the lapwing on the hill’ and progresses through what Crockett beautifully terms ‘the watershed of day and night’ — that point where darkness pauses before beginning to ebb. In midsummer, twilight lingers ‘till within an hour or two of dawn,’ creating ‘the high tide of darkness.’

A sensory immersion

By two o’clock, there is a distinct brightening in the east, and suddenly awareness extends beyond sight. There is ‘an earthy scent of wet leaves, sharpened with an unmistakable aromatic whiff of garlic, which has been trodden upon and rises to reproach us for our carelessness.’ Even in darkness, the woods speak. Violets confirm their presence through ‘a sense which the darkness does not affect.’ We hear sheep cropping clover in their distinctive rhythm. A barn owl crosses the hedge ‘soft, silent, and white.’

Dawn chorus as performance

As light strengthens, those individual bird characters become an orchestra. Wild hyacinths lie ‘in wreaths and festoons of smoke as blue as peat-reek,’ and dew in their bells swishes about the ankles.

Then the music begins. ‘The flute of the blackbird is mellow with much pecking of winter-ripened apples.’ When a rival appears, their competition intensifies — ‘the throats are strained to the uttermost, and the singers throw their whole souls into the music.’ A thrush arrives and ‘cleaves the modulated harmony of their emulation with the silver trumpet of his song.’

Those comic character sketches from Article 4 suddenly deepen. Yes, the blackbirds are competitive, but listen to the passion in their singing. Yes, the thrush is confident, but hear how his silver trumpet transforms the morning.

Why stillness matters

Here is where Crockett’s technique reveals its purpose. All those vivid personalities — the bullying, the gossiping, the quarrelling — exist because Crockett stood still long enough to truly see them. And he makes a crucial observation: ‘While we stood quiet behind the beech, or beneath the elder, nature spoke with a thousand voices. But now

when we tramp homewards with policeman resonance there is hardly a bird except the street-boy sparrow to be seen.'

To experience what Crockett offers requires patience, stillness, and the willingness to spend a night beneath that elder tree. The comic observations make us smile, but they're the reward for deeper engagement with place.

From character to experience

The epilogue ends with characteristic simplicity: 'The dew is rising from the grass in a general dispersed gossamer haze of mist. It is no longer morning; it is day.'

We've moved from meeting individual characters to experiencing the complete symphony they're part of. Crockett's method in 'Night in a Galloway Wood' lies in using personality and humour to draw us into something more profound: a genuine encounter with the living, breathing reality of a Galloway woodland through an entire night's cycle.

Bog Myrtle and Peat demonstrated Crockett's range beyond fiction, but this epilogue remains his masterclass in making readers not just read about nature, but feel they've experienced it. The invitation still stands: find your own elder tree, stand beneath it through the night, and discover your own butcher's boy thrush in the morning chorus.

For close literary analysis of 'Night in a Galloway Wood,' see Three Galloway Stories (Library).