

Sowing the Seeds of Kailyard: The Plagiarism Campaign Against S.R. Crockett, Autumn 1894

In the study of literary history, the temptation is always to begin at the beginning — to find the moment when a term was coined, a label fixed, a reputation sealed, and to treat that moment as the origin. The “Kailyard” school of Scottish fiction is conventionally dated to April 1895, when [J.H. Millar's caustic survey in the *New Review*](#) grouped Crockett, [J.M. Barrie](#), and Ian Maclaren under a single dismissive heading. But the mechanisms that made that label possible — the critical frameworks, the comparative diminishments, the circulation of damaging accusations — were already operational six months earlier. This article opens one small but revealing door on that prehistory.

In the autumn of 1894, Samuel Rutherford Crockett was at the height of his early celebrity. *The Stickit Minister* (1893) had made his name; *The Raiders*, *The PlayActress*, *Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills*, and *The Lilac Sunbonnet* were all before the public. He was giving talks on ‘[Scottish National Humour](#)’ and being treated, in many quarters, as the most exciting new voice in Scottish fiction. Robert Louis Stevenson was still alive — he would not die until December — and around Crockett's rising reputation there already circulated what can only be described as a febrile atmosphere of comparison, competition, and accusation. A Tablet advertisement controversy had generated friction in some quarters. It is a story that runs parallel to this one and remains to be fully told. Into this charged atmosphere, in October and November 1894, we can begin to dig up a specific and traceable critical campaign: a charge of plagiarism, repeated across multiple publications, that threatened to reframe Crockett's achievement as derivative rather than original.

The Reviewer and His Grievance

One key agent in this episode was [William Wallace](#), a Glasgow journalist and Burns scholar whose career trajectory deserves brief attention. Born in Culross in 1843 and educated at Aberdeen, Wallace joined the *Glasgow Herald* as assistant editor in 1888, eventually becoming its editor. He was the author of *Scotland Yesterday* (1891). In a letter to his publisher T. Fisher Unwin, written on 17 November 1894, Crockett was unambiguous about the significance of that coincidence: “Wallace wrote a book which never I suspect sold 700 copies called *Scotland Yesterday* at the time of the publication of the *Stickit* and he has never forgiven its success.” This letter, which also confirms Wallace as the author of the *Academy* review under scrutiny in this article, provides the only direct contemporary evidence of Crockett's private assessment of his critic's motives. It is evidence, not proof; but it is Crockett's own voice, and it ought to be heard.

[The review text](#) itself reveals a critic who consistently deploys Stevenson as an elevated standard against which Crockett is measured. (We might note that the Tablet Ad stooshie was on the back of Stevenson praising Crockett's *Stickit Minister*, something that upset various Stevenson Gatekeepers). Wallace praises "the distinction of Mr. Stevenson's" style and his eye "for the picturesque or for the virile in scoundrelism"; he uses *Catriona* as the benchmark for Crockett's female characterisation; he frames Crockett as someone who can "run with Mr. Barrie or hunt with Mr. Stevenson" but has not yet matched either. Whether this public deployment of Stevenson as a critical yardstick reflected Wallace's genuine private admiration, or a more complex form of professional positioning, current sources do not allow us to say with confidence. Stevenson's death just weeks after this exchange, created an event that inevitably reshaped how his work was discussed and by whom. What the review establishes clearly is the comparative structure: Crockett is always potentially significant, never actually so. His achievements "prove nothing as to the future." He may be a genius in preliminary canter, or he "may be the best work of a second-rate writer who has struck oil."

The Recycled Smear

Embedded within this review, almost as a secondary matter, is the charge that would generate the most controversy. Before leaving *The Lilac Sunbonnet*, Wallace noted that Crockett "would do well to deal with the serious charge of plagiarism which has been made against him in Scotland, and which, so far as I have seen, he has not hitherto attempted to meet." The charge concerned the chapter "The Cuif before the Session," which had allegedly been lifted from Dugald Graham's chapbook *Jockey and Maggy's Courtship, Part III* (1779, reprinted 1883). Wallace printed parallel-column extracts to make the case visible.

Crockett's response, published in the [Academy on 10 November](#), opened with a pointed observation that Wallace's readers might otherwise have missed: "The 'serious charge' has already been done duty in the *Glasgow Herald* and in the *Literary World*." He then quoted Lewis Carroll: "I have said it thrice: / What I tell you three times is true!", identifying the source as the Bellman from *The Hunting of the Snark*. In this precisely deployed literary allusion Crockett is not merely defending himself; he is naming a pattern. The same accusation, unverified and unsubstantiated, had circulated across three separate periodicals before appearing in the *Academy*. The Carroll quotation makes this visible without requiring Crockett to make an explicit allegation of coordination. Repetition, as he implies, can confer an authority that evidence alone does not. This is something we do well to remember in the context of the word "Kailyard".

A further anonymous attack — from a correspondent signing themselves only as "X." — made parallel-column accusations against *The Raiders* in the same period. This article is currently known only through Crockett's references to it. Its author remains unidentified. However, looking through many reviews of *The Raiders*, there is one by [W.E.Henley](#) which may, if not fit the bill, at least position Henley in regard to Crockett: Not. In. Favour. While avoiding confusing

interpretation with speculation is key to good research, the question of identity is not trivial. The period immediately preceding the "Kailyard" moment of April 1895 was one in which W.E. Henley (poet, editor, and fierce partisan of a particular vision of Stevenson's literary legacy) was actively engaged in shaping critical opinion about Scottish fiction. [In a personal letter in March 1894](#) he admits that his review of *The Raiders* was a chagrined broadside against Stevenson with whom he had fallen out. At the time Millar's "Kailyard" article was published, Henley was his editor. This gives us strong circumstantial evidence that Henley had a direct hand in the construction of the "Kailyard" label itself, perhaps 'hiding' behind Millar. Whether "X." was Henley, or one of his circle, cannot currently be proven conclusively but if (or when) it can be evidenced it would transform our understanding of the autumn 1894 campaign from a cluster of loosely related reviews into something far more deliberately orchestrated. Research which challenges generationally accepted constructs is challenging but has a value. In the process of such work, by building corroboratively we can start to appreciate the context in which "Kailyard" was born.

While we're in the realms of interpretive speculation, there is a quietly suggestive parallel here. [Crockett, in his 24 November response](#) refers pointedly to "*X. and his industrious clan*". This phrase implies he knew, or strongly suspected, more than he was prepared to say in print. He chose not to name his adversary. Interestingly for history, the same instinct for protective silence operated in another register entirely: those who knew the circumstances of Crockett's birth (that he was illegitimate) were equally careful never to say so publicly during his lifetime. Some things were known without being spoken.

Whether Crockett's reticence about "X." reflects the same social code, is indicative of his own awareness of his own 'secrets', or simple legal prudence, is a question the surviving documents cannot yet answer. It is, however, one of several threads in this period that suggest a much larger and more complex story still waiting to be fully investigated.

The Exchange in Full

The *Academy* correspondence ran across four issues, from 3 to 24 November, and repays careful reading as a complete sequence.

Crockett's 10 November letter demolished the specific charge against "The Cuif before the Session" with methodical precision. He had never seen or heard of Dugald Graham before his name appeared in the accusation itself. His own source was an anonymous chapbook — one of many he had studied — combined with "a familiar ingle-nook tale told in every farm-kitchen in Galloway." The shared reference to a "daft history book" for the Catholic origin of stools of repentance led both texts to the same source: the *Scots Magazine* for February 1757. These were

not plagiarisms; they were independent derivations from common material. In passing, Crockett noted that a charge "precisely parallel" had been urged against Thomas Hardy — who had allegedly "lifted" a description of military manoeuvres from a forgotten book about Georgia — and that Hardy had not dignified it with continued attention. Crockett announced his intention to follow the same course.

Wallace's reply of 17 November was a retreat that refused to acknowledge itself as such. He insisted that he had not made the plagiarism charge, merely reported it; that the charge had originated in the *Glasgow Herald*, not with him; [although various sources suggest Wallace had some editorial input to this publication between 1888 and 1909] and that he had "neither art nor part" in whatever campaign Crockett was implying. He demanded that Crockett retract the Hardy parallel, calling it "a meaningless impertinence."

Wallace's narrowing of the Covenanting miracles objection into a theological distinction (he accepted popular miracle claims but questioned whether a trained theologian like the fictional Renfield would exercise such power) reads more as pedantry than genuine engagement. [Andrew Lang](#), writing alongside Crockett in the 10 November issue, had already dispatched the miracles question with the brisk authority of a man who knew his hagiology: such miracles were "as common as blackberries in Covenanting literature." Wallace's narrowing of the question to a single fictional character's credibility was perhaps a way of avoiding the concession.

Crockett's final letter of 24 November opened with a gracious apology for his misapprehension of Wallace's role and then delivered the most effective argument in the entire dispute. He listed his Galloway sources openly and without reservation — Nicholson's *Traditional Tales*, Trotter's *Galloway Gossip*, Mactaggart's *Galloway Encyclopædia*, the *Castle Douglas Miscellany*, the *Dumfries Magazine* — and added, with characteristic directness, that he made this list "a present" to X. and his "industrious clan." He then turned to [Scott](#).

In the preface to *Guy Mannering*, Scott uses material from the same *Traditional Tales* — concerning the smuggler Yawkins — in precisely the way Crockett was accused of doing. The parallel-column method, applied to Scott, would yield results just as striking. "Here," wrote Crockett, "is it not obvious that Sir Walter has also been plagiarising from the *Traditions* — perhaps also from Mr. Stevenson, as witness the suspicious use of the word 'press' (ordinary)?" The irony is deployed with evident pleasure; (especially if you consider the timeline between Scott and Stevenson) but the argument underneath it is serious. If drawing on shared Galloway traditional material constitutes plagiarism, then Scott is as guilty as Crockett. That the charge had never been levelled at Scott was not a literary-critical fact but a hierarchical one.

Transparency and Its Absence

One dynamic in the exchange deserves separate attention: the contrast between Crockett's openness about his sources and the anonymity of his accusers. Crockett named his sources, invited scrutiny, and declared his method publicly. "X." made accusations from behind initials. Wallace disavowed responsibility for the charge whilst simultaneously amplifying it across the most prominent literary weekly of the period.

This contrast is reinforced by [W. Robertson Nicoll's](#) corroborating letter of 20 November, which established a decisive timeline. Writing from Hampstead, Nicoll confirmed that in the *Bookman* for April 1894, seven months before the *Academy* exchange, he had published, on information supplied by Crockett himself, a full account identifying Nicholson's *Traditional Tales of Galloway* as Crockett's primary source. He had made a further statement to the same effect in October 1893. The *Bookman* article is unambiguous: Crockett's "*true Quellen may be found in a rough but precious volume of 'Galloway Legends,' published by William Nicholson at Kirkcudbright, about 1840.*" The charge of concealment, which gave the plagiarism accusation its moral force, was factually without foundation. Crockett had publicly declared his sources before anyone accused him of concealing them.

Six Months Before Kailyard

What this episode demonstrates, when the documents are set alongside one another, is not a single reviewer making a single mistake in good faith. It is the circulation of an unverified accusation through interconnected periodical networks, gathering momentum through repetition, deployed against a writer at the moment of his greatest visibility. The charge of plagiarism, as it functioned here, did specific cultural work: it questioned whether a writer of Crockett's background — a working-class Free Kirk minister from Galloway — was capable of original literary creation, or whether he must, by implication, be borrowing what he could not himself invent.

Crockett's responses to all of this; articulate, well-sourced, rhetorically sharp, grounded in the actual text suggests a writer who met his critics on their own ground and on the evidence, bettered them. The Scott parallel alone is a piece of genuine literary-critical argument that any professional reviewer might have been proud to make.

In April 1895, J.H. Millar 'created' a convenient label. The label stuck for generations.

Work is ongoing to 'dig up the Kailyard'. You can explore more of this for yourself through the [Reading Room](#) and the pop-up exhibition [PLAGIARISM: WHAT I SAY THREE TIMES...](#)