

The Man and the Machine: S. R. Crockett and the Hammond Typewriter

I. The Photograph

In April 1895, *Cassell's Family Magazine* published an interview with S. R. Crockett under the title [‘A Novelist's Training: A Talk with Mr. S. R. Crockett at Penicuik.’](#) The piece ran to five pages and was illustrated with three photographs by J. Moffat of Edinburgh: the exterior of Bank House, Crockett's Penicuik home; his library; and Crockett himself, seated at his writing desk.

The first photograph rewards careful attention. Crockett sits in three-quarter profile, pen in right hand, apparently in the act of writing. But to his right, occupying a substantial corner of the desk, sits something that tells a different and more surprising story: a typewriter.

Not just any typewriter. The machine is, on close examination, a Hammond No. 1 with the original curved ‘Ideal’ keyboard — almost certainly a model 1b. It is the same make Crockett would explicitly endorse by name in a letter written six years later. Its presence on his desk in 1895 places him squarely among the earliest literary adopters of mechanical writing technology in Britain.

This article traces the evidence for Crockett's relationship with the Hammond typewriter: what it was, when he acquired it, how he used it, and what it tells us about the kind of writer he actually was — as distinct from the kind of writer his critics, then and since, have been content to assume.

II. The Hammond No. 1: What Crockett Owned

The Hammond typewriter was the invention of James Bartlett Hammond (1839–1913), an American journalist who filed his first patents in 1879–80, founded the Hammond Typewriter Company in New York in 1880, and brought his first commercial model to market in 1884, winning a gold medal at the New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in the same year.

Where the Remington — the dominant commercial machine of the period — bore the QWERTY layout of the office and counting-house, the Hammond No. 1 carried an arc of ebony keys arranged in a semicircle: the ‘Ideal’ keyboard, designed on ergonomic principles, with the most frequently used letters grouped at the centre. Its printing mechanism used an interchangeable rubber type-shuttle rather than fixed typebars, producing impressions of notably even quality and allowing the user to switch typefaces, alphabets, or special characters by exchanging one shuttle crescent for another. The company slogan — “*For All Nations and Tongues*” — was not idle boasting.

At around £20 sterling — a substantial sum when a working family might subsist on £1 to £1 10s. a week — it was priced for professional users. The choice of the Hammond over the more widely available Remington was itself a statement of intent.

III. The Evidence: A Chronology

The museum archive holds a body of typewritten correspondence by Crockett, including a number of letters to the Macmillans; work is ongoing to establish the earliest typewritten letter in the collection. This article looks at seven letters bearing directly on his typewriting practice, presented chronologically with a note on what each establishes.

[Letter 1: To the Macmillans, 22 September 1893](#)

An early typewritten letter currently identified in the archive is to the Macmillans, dated 22 September 1893. In it Crockett writes: *“I see that it has been more than a month since I put finger to typewriter.”*

The phrasing is telling. He does not write as someone trying out a new machine, but as a man to whom typewriting is an established habit, the interruption of which is something to be noted. This letter sets a firm *terminus ante quem*: he was already at the keyboard regularly by the summer of 1893 at the latest.

[Letter 2: To T. Fisher Unwin, 26 December 1893](#)

Writing to his publisher T. Fisher Unwin, Crockett mentions sending his manuscript to a ‘typewriter’ — meaning here not the machine but a *typist*: a professional copyist paid to produce a clean typescript from his draft. This dual usage was common in the 1890s.

[Letter 3: To Mr Gray, 21 February 1894](#)

A recent and significant addition to the digital archive comes from the private collection of Rev Dr John McNeill, and is a typewritten letter dated 21 February 1894, addressed from Penicuik to ‘Mr Gray.’ It is written entirely in Scots. It opens: *“I wish I could come, but it’s fair impossible. ‘Deed, ye hae to be nae better than the auld pictur’ o’ Giant Pagan in my auld Pilgrim, sittin in my den, an’ growlin’”*“No!” *when onybody asks me a ceevil quaston.”*

The apology winds through a vivid account of his situation — the Kirk pressing on his time, his literary work already outrunning his capacity to manage it, his mornings consumed before dawn:

“I hae mair leeterary wark o’ yae kind an’ anither than I daur own to mysel. Juist like a bankrupt that darena face his debts. ... I hae to rise a great while before day as it is to manage, an’ even ae mornin’ is precious an’ means a lot.”

The letter closes warmly and carries a postscript noting that Crockett planned to be in London the following month with Dr Nicoll (W. Robertson Nicoll (1851–1923, editor of *The British Weekly*) one of the most influential literary figures in late Victorian Scotland and an early mentor/champion of Crockett’s work.

Three things about this letter are worthy of specific attention. First, it is a personal letter — written to a friend in the relaxed register of private correspondence, not a communication to a publisher or editor. The typewriter here is not deployed as a professional tool; it is simply the instrument Crockett reached for when he sat down to write. Second, the letter is composed entirely in Scots: not Scots passages within an English text, but Scots from salutation to signature — the language of intimacy and literary imagination, rendered without apparent self-consciousness on the

typewriter's keys. Third, the letter bears visible handwritten corrections within the typed text, showing Crockett at work on the page, revising as he went. This was not a clean transcript; it was a document in process.

[Letter 4: To the Macmillans, 12th June 1894.](#)

In another letter to his friends, the formal typed body is followed by a handwritten postscript in which Crockett confides that the typed portion was “*dictated to A. G. Brown with other 67 letters!!*” — sixty-eight letters produced in a single session by dictation to a secretary. The typed formal letter and the intimate handwritten postscript sit on the same page, embodying in one document the two distinct registers of Crockett's correspondence. It also evidences that Crockett shared the typing burden with his researcher, Mr Brown.

[Letter 5: To Miss Cohen, 21 October 1896.](#)

This letter shows the professional dimension extended further. Crockett writes from his London workbase (Clevedon Place) to Miss Cohen c/o Mrs Petherbridge's Secretarial Bureau in London, telling her he is currently sick but is impressed by her work and will call for her services when better. As such it documents his use of professional secretarial support when working in the city.

[Letter 6: To George Watts, 31 March 1901](#)

Crockett explicitly endorses the Hammond typewriter by name and states that he has been using one for nineteen years. Nineteen years from 1901 gives a first-use date of 1882 — two years before the Hammond went on commercial sale. The discrepancy need not embarrass us: Crockett himself, in the *Cassell's* interview of April 1895, acknowledges that he is ‘*bad at dates.*’ The figure should be read as a vigorous approximation. From 1901, seventeen years back is precisely 1884 — the first year of the Hammond's commercial availability. The most natural reading is that he acquired one of the first commercially available models as soon as they could be obtained, and that by 1901 the arithmetic had gently blurred. While the question remains how did he get hold of such an expensive item, what the letter confirms beyond reasonable doubt is that Crockett was among the first British literary users of the machine, and that it had been central to his practice for the better part of two decades.

[Letter 7: To Malcolm Harper, 29 December 1906](#)

By 1906 the typewriter is a long-established and somewhat temperamental member of the household. Writing to Malcolm Harper at the year's close, Crockett reports that he will send more material “*when I get a typewriter that will go. Mine has ta'en the sturdy — weather, or Christmas festivities or something have affected its head.*” The Scots idiom ‘ta'en the sturdy’ — taken the sulks, taken the fit — is applied with the affectionate exasperation of long acquaintance. The machine is no longer a novelty; it is simply the tool without which work does not happen, and its breakdown a domestic inconvenience complained of in dry humour. We can't, of course, know whether this is still his original Hammond, or a replacement.

IV. A Question of Language: Writing in Scots

The Gray letter of February 1894 is remarkable not merely as physical evidence of typewriter use, but as a linguistic artefact.

Crockett's relationship with Scots as a literary medium is a substantial subject in its own right. His fiction moves fluently between Standard English and Scots dialogue, deploying both as registers appropriate to context, character, and tone. What the Gray letter establishes is that this command of Scots extended without interruption to his private correspondence, and that the typewriter — a machine whose natural idiom was the standardised written English of business and administration — was, in Crockett's hands, equally at home rendering the vernacular.

To type a letter in Scots — with its characteristic contractions, apostrophes for elided syllables, and phonological spellings — was to assert, without apparent self-consciousness, that the dialect of Galloway and the Lowland Scots literary tradition were as native to the modern page as English. That Crockett did this in a personal letter to a friend suggests that for him there was no felt incongruity between the machine and the language. The typewriter was not a formalising instrument; it was simply how he wrote.

The visible corrections in the letter reinforce this reading. A clean transcript sent off without revision would suggest a writer performing for his correspondent; a corrected working draft suggests a writer composing. The Gray letter shows Crockett at work in Scots on the typewriter, treating the page as a writer treats a draft: as something to be revised rather than merely reproduced.

V. Before the Ministry: An Early Investment

If we accept the 1901 letter's implicit suggestion that Crockett acquired his Hammond in the mid-1880s — most probably in 1884 or 1885, when the machine first reached the British market — it is worth considering what this means biographically.

Crockett was ordained to the ministry of Penicuik Free Church in November 1886. A Hammond acquired in 1884 or 1885 would predate his settlement there entirely. In the early 1880s he was working as a travelling tutor, supplementing his income with journalism and placing articles and sketches in the periodical press. He was not yet a minister, a novelist, or a public figure. He was, however, already a writer — or at least a man sufficiently committed to writing to invest deliberately, and at real cost, in the tools of the trade.

The Hammond was an American machine, manufactured in New York. To obtain one in Britain in the mid-1880s required knowledge of its existence and the means to acquire it. The *Cassell's* interview mentions that Crockett received regular parcels of American publications sent by a friend — suggesting transatlantic connections that may have brought the Hammond to his attention before it was widely known on this side of the Atlantic. It might even have been a gift from one of his rich students — he notes his first student was from Chicago. He observes that they *travelled 'en princes'*.

To be clear. Without firm evidence we cannot know how he laid hands on the Hammond typewriter. However, we can know it was the machine favoured by

American journalists and writers. Hammond himself had been a war correspondent for the *New York Tribune*.

Also significantly, the machine, on this reading, preceded the novels, the ministry, and the fame. It was there at the beginning — a professional writer's tool, acquired by a man who had perhaps already decided, whatever his other occupations, what he principally intended to be.

VI. Crockett in Context: The Literary Typewriter

To appreciate what the Hammond on Crockett's desk represents, it helps to understand how exceptional typewriter use was among literary writers in the 1880s. The typewriter entered commercial life in 1874, when E. Remington and Sons began selling the first commercially available model. Its early adopters came overwhelmingly from business, law, and journalism. The association between typewriting and literary authorship developed slowly and was not without resistance: there were earnest debates in the literary press of the 1880s and 1890s about whether the machine's mechanical regularity might blunt the personal quality of a writer's style.

The most celebrated literary engagement with the typewriter in the period is Mark Twain's. He purchased a Remington in 1874, but his relationship with it was famously ambivalent and ultimately delegated: *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) is generally regarded as the first book manuscript submitted to a publisher in typescript, but Twain did not type it himself — it was prepared by a secretary from his handwritten draft. His verdict was that he had 'entirely stopped using the typewriter' because it bred unwanted curiosity in his correspondents.

The contrast with Crockett is instructive. Where Twain's engagement was fitful and delegated, Crockett's was committed and personal. The Macmillans letter of September 1893 — "*I see that it has been more than a month since I put finger to typewriter*" — describes a man at the keys himself. The Gray letter of February 1894, typed in Scots and actively corrected in his own hand, reinforces the point: this was his machine, his practice, his instrument, used for intimate personal correspondence and professional copy alike.

VII. A Speculative Digression: The Question of the Pen

The *Cassell's* photograph raises another question that cannot be answered but cannot quite be left unasked. Crockett is shown holding a pen in his right hand. We know from independent evidence that the golfer Willie Auchterlonie built Crockett a set of left-handed golf clubs. If Crockett played golf left-handed, it is at least possible — perhaps probable — that he was naturally left-handed. In the late nineteenth century, natural left-handedness was routinely suppressed in Scottish schools: children were corrected, sometimes forcibly, to write with their right hand. Crockett's handwriting, by all accounts, was notably poor — consistent with someone never entirely comfortable with the hand in which he had been trained to write. A posed magazine photograph in 1895 proves nothing about his actual working habits. But the question invites itself: might the typewriter have been, in part, a practical liberation from an uncomfortable relationship with the pen? A keyboard requires no fine motor control of a nib, and no preference of hand. We cannot know. But it would add a quietly human dimension to the story.

VIII. Conclusion: Reassessing the Picture

What the Moffat image of 1895 captures is a writer at the height of his powers, surrounded by the tools through which his professional life was organised. The pen in the right hand catches the eye, as it was designed to. The Hammond on the desk tells a different story: that this was a writer who had adopted one of the most advanced writing machines commercially available, who had been doing so since before his ordination and his first novels, and who used it for the full range of what writing meant to him — from formal correspondence dictated to a secretary, to intimate personal letters composed and corrected in Scots.

The letters corroborate what the photograph suggests. By September 1893, typewriting was an established habit. By February 1894, it was the instrument of his most personal and linguistically uninhibited correspondence. By 1901, he had been using a Hammond for the better part of two decades — long enough to have lost precise count of the years. By 1906, its breakdowns were complained of with dry domestic humour.

None of this settles the larger literary questions. But it complicates, usefully, the caricature. The critical construction of Crockett as a provincial, backward-looking figure rests implicitly on a picture of a writer out of step with his age. The Hammond typewriter on the desk at Penicuik in 1895 — acquired, on the best available evidence, among the first in Britain to do so — is a small but precise rebuttal to that picture. A man who wrote in Scots on his typewriter, who drafted and corrected at the keys, who maintained that practice for more than twenty years: this is not the portrait of a man behind his times. It is the portrait of a writer who was, in his quiet and undemonstrative way, thoroughly modern.