

WHAT LETTERS KNOW: ST ANDREWS CONNECTIONS — THREE WAYS

S.R. Crockett, the archive, and the cost of five summers

*"The actual connections are never those which you think of." — S.R. Crockett, *The Adventurer in Spain* (1903)*

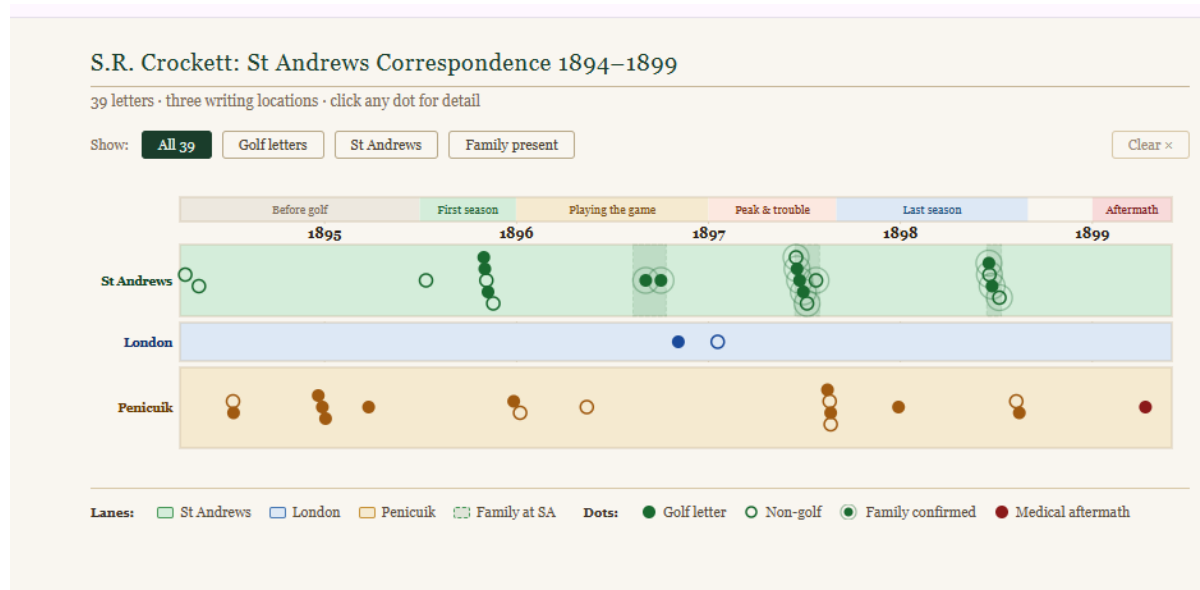
PART ONE: WHAT THE MACHINE HELPED US SEE

On AI collaboration in archive research

An archive is, by its nature, a collection of what survived. A key part of the S.R. Crockett Online Museum archive is a letter repository. Working with letters means accepting from the outset that what you have is incomplete, partial, and opaque in ways you cannot always identify. Our archive holds thirty-nine letters relating directly to S.R. Crockett and St Andrews. They represent correspondences with a publisher, an ex-Prime Minister, an American impresario, a Glasgow book collector, a literary critic, a relative of a deceased family member, a South African fan, and several figures whose identities are still being established. Each letter is a fragment. Each correspondent is a thread. Each thread leads somewhere, though not always where you expect.

So what can AI bring to the process in 2026? The first thing a computational approach offers is chronology — not obvious chronology, which any historian can establish from dates, but the kind that becomes visible only when you hold an entire corpus steady and ask: what was happening on all fronts simultaneously? For example, in September 1896, Crockett wrote to T. Fisher Unwin's employee, Mr Laurie, that he was "*as stupid as an owl*" and could think of nothing but how to play the long hole in four. Six weeks later he was writing to his friend Dan Mowat about beating Old Tom Morris, while in the same breath noting that *The Grey Man* had printed forty-five thousand copies before publication. Two realities, coexisting: the private athletic fixation and the public literary triumph, running in parallel, neither diminishing the other. The letters read individually give you one story each. Read simultaneously, mapped against each other, they give you the texture of a creative life.

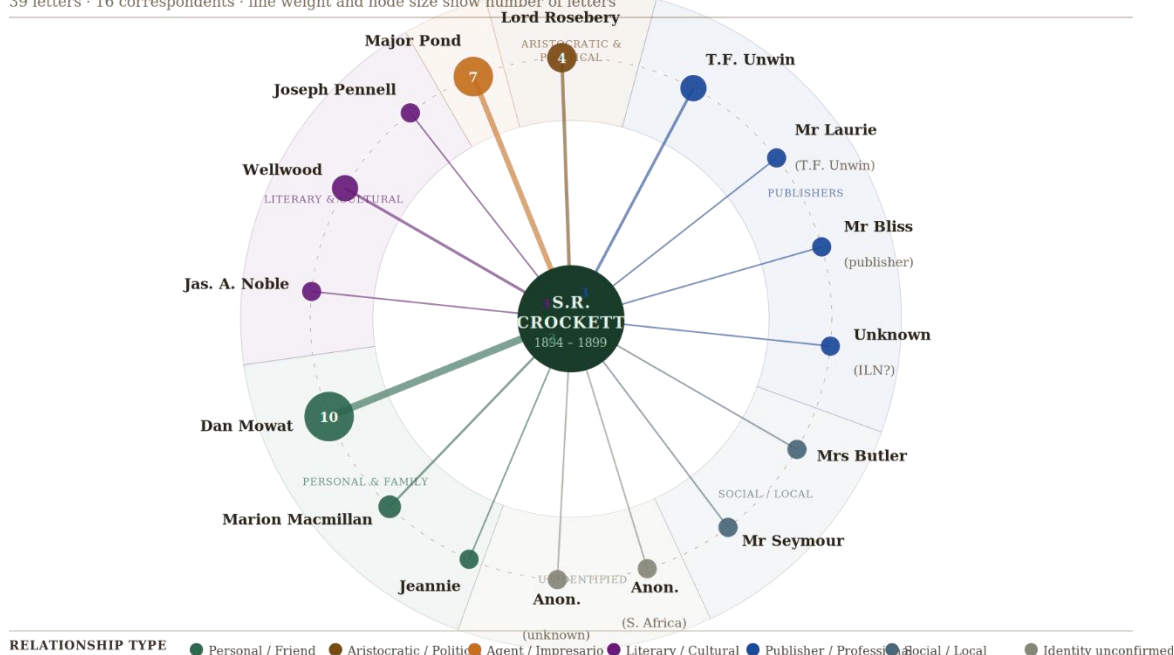
At its best, deploying an AI method is systematic rather than intuitive. In this case the corpus was catalogued into a spreadsheet: date, location, recipient, golf content, family presence confirmed, archive reference. Then a timeline, mapping all thirty-nine letters by writing location across the five-year period — St Andrews, Penicuik, London — so that Crockett's annual migrations became visible, the family visits distinguishable from the solitary autumn residencies, the London intervals identifiable as transitions rather than interruptions.



Then a network diagram, placing Crockett at the centre of his correspondence and weighting the connections by frequency and type. Each instrument answered a different question. Together they answered a question none of them could answer alone: what was this period, as a whole?

S.R. Crockett: Correspondence Network 1894–1899

39 letters · 16 correspondents · line weight and node size show number of letters



Based on 39 surviving letters. Further letters to Noble, Pennell and others exist in the archive beyond this corpus.

The second thing AI technology offers is a discipline of evidence. When you ask a machine to categorise letters — golf content, yes or no; family confirmed present, yes or no — you are forced to be precise about what you actually know versus what you are inferring. The October 1895 letter mentions Crockett at St Andrews while his wife is *"in the south"*: family presence coded as false. The autumn 1896 letters from the same

address: the family is confirmed there by Ruth's own letter about her husband's four o'clock starts. The distinction matters. Not because the coding itself is the research, but because the act of coding demands close reading. Every ambiguity becomes a decision, and every decision accumulates into a picture more precise than the one you arrived with.

The third thing AI offers is the surfacing of connection. When a letter from April 1899 surfaces in the sequence, the timeline has already suggested something of its contents. The last reference to golf is August 1898; then silence; then, some months later, correspondence about hospital. A single letter confirms what the sequence had implied — placing an injury, a silence, and a surgery into one unambiguous arc. The shape was visible before the confirmation arrived. This is what computational tools do at their most useful — they hold the shape steady while you look for what fills it.

What AI should not do (though sometimes it is overly keen to try) is interpret. That confirming letter is significant; the machine registers it as a data point. What the letter reveals (about the gap between what a body can sustain and what a creative life demands, about the silence that precedes it) is not a question the spreadsheet can answer. It is important for a researcher working with AI to remember that pattern recognition is not analysis. The timeline shows when the family was at St Andrews; it does not explain what those summers meant to the people who were there.

In 2026 there is a practical lesson here about the relationship between tool and researcher, and it runs counter to the current anxiety about artificial intelligence displacing human judgement. In archive research, AI collaboration is useful precisely where the researcher is most likely to fail: in holding simultaneous complexity, in maintaining consistency across a large corpus, in connecting details across time without losing track of which are confirmed and which inferred. It is less useful where the researcher is most necessary: in deciding what matters, in reading tone, in understanding what a letter withholds.

The thirty-nine letters from the St Andrews years produce, when worked this way, a picture that differs from the one you would have expected from Crockett's public reputation. The man who emerges is more cosmopolitan, more socially mobile, more physically driven, and more medically vulnerable than the Galloway novelist of popular memory. That the picture differs is not the machine's achievement. It is what careful attention to evidence produces, given time and a tool that helps you hold it all steady.

PART TWO: ONLY CONNECT

Literary and cultural connections in the St Andrews letters

To some degree all archival research is speculative, especially with letters, which often have a performative aspect and are usually taken out of the context of a whole conversation. The best we can do is piece together a narrative. Here we might see a problem in that an archive offers surfaces, while a researcher's work requires depth.

The St Andrews letters offer a perfect example of the conundrum of connections, actual or otherwise. The people Crockett was writing to, and the people he was writing about, reveal a man who understood very precisely where the centres of cultural gravity were in the 1890s, and had managed, through talent and calculation and the particular social leverage of literary celebrity, to position himself within reach of most of them. And the connections reach far beyond St Andrews.

Andrew Lang appears in the first letter to Dan Mowat as the man Crockett is staying with: host, mentor, the literary arbiter who had been calling his guest "*a heathen man and a publican*" for not playing golf. The affection is genuine, but so is the asymmetry. Lang by the mid-1890s was a significant critic in Britain, champion of romantic adventure against the realist novel, and the figure whose public endorsement Crockett was careful to record and circulate. The medieval historical fiction that Crockett was working on at this time — *Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills* (1894), *The Grey Man* (1896), and *The Black Douglas* (1899) — might be seen as in step with Lang's cultural programme. In this case a shared interest also offered an actual connection. That Lang is also a family friend, called "Mr Sagaman" by Crockett's young daughter Maisie, offers a different perspective on the relationship. So the Lang connection also provides a clear example of the blurring of lines between professional and personal life that is a writer's constant.

Then there are the four letters to ex Prime Minister Lord Rosebery in the autumn of 1895 — arranging, confirming, following up on a visit to Dalmeny House to examine an original Covenant document — which offer both actual and speculative connections.

Context tells us that Rosebery wrote to Crockett first. Crockett didn't receive the letter, as he was at St Andrews, and it was the University Principal, Donaldson, who eventually told him about it. The first archived letter, dated 31st October 1895, offers his explanation: "*I can only suppose that your letter must have gone astray — our house being in a semi-shut-up condition, with my wife in the south and I at St Andrews, driving the 'screevin' baa' at the links.*" The former Prime Minister, it seems, had pursued the novelist, not the other way around.

There is good reason to think why. *Men of the Moss Hags* had been serialised in *Good Words* magazine throughout 1895 and recently published when Rosebery made first contact. Rosebery, who declared to Crockett that of all parts of Scottish history the

Covenanters stirred him most deeply, had likely read and admired the book. Crockett, of course, knew good validation when he received it, and quoted it back to him in the same letter of thanks. Any image of Crockett as inveterate social climber is complicated here, at least, by a former Prime Minister doing the climbing first.

Less than a decade later, the Rosebery connection produced one of the great dinner-table stories of Crockett's life. When Lord Kitchener of Khartoum visited Edinburgh to receive the freedom of the city and an honorary degree, Rosebery hosted a dinner at Dalmeny House. Crockett was among the guests. According to *The Scotsman* (29 November 1899), he was seated near Kitchener himself, who reportedly leaned across and said: "*Good heavens! Are you the fellow who wrote The Grey Man? Let me shake your hand.*" The Field Marshal had seemingly read the novel the night before the Battle of Omdurman, and claimed it had steadied him. Considering Kitchener's reputation for brusqueness and literary indifference, the praise rang loud.

As usual with Crockett, that was not the end of the story. Kitchener appears later, fictionalised as "Lord Cairo" in *The White Pope* (published in the US as *Light out of the East*), alongside imagined versions of Nicholas II and Theodore Roosevelt. Crockett was always taking notes.

There is another, less obvious Rosebery connection. Long before his premiership, the young Rosebery had left university in order to enter a horse called Ladas for the Derby — a decision that cost him his place. Years later, a second horse named Ladas won the Derby for him in 1894, just months before his first meeting with Crockett. Years after that, in *Little Esson* (1907), Crockett introduced a racehorse called Ladas II into the narrative. He had his own articulation of the method, expressed in *Rogues' Island* (1926): "*When in doubt, always shut your head and... observe! Take my word for it, you are not wasting your time. They say in our country 'Keep a thing seven years and you will find a use for it.' But I say, '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!'*"

Thus a conversation in 1895 became a fictional detail in 1907. What else Crockett collected from that November visit to Dalmeny House, we can only guess.

Reflecting on how unlikely it was for an illegitimate farm boy to become a celebrity author, we might frame Crockett today as a natural networker. He was certainly a man who knew how and when to take his opportunities. But he also knew how to say no.

We can see this through a connection played out largely in the St Andrews letters. The American impresario Major James B. Pond, who had organised lecture tours for Mark Twain, Winston Churchill, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ian Maclaren, wanted to add Crockett to his stable. The letters, spanning 1897 to 1899, show Crockett politely declining with a variety of professional and domestic excuses. It was an offer he was

never likely to accept. But Pond offered a connection that did interest him: Mark Twain. Crockett sent a note via Pond proposing that Twain teach him Mumblety Peg in exchange for golf lessons. "*I guess he'd like me,*" he wrote, with the self-possession of a man not seeking Twain's approval but proposing an equal trade.

One further American name deserves a mention here, though his full significance belongs to the final part of this sequence. Joseph Pennell — illustrator, Whistler's chosen biographer — was among those Crockett encountered in London in the spring of 1894, possibly at the Cheshire Cheese gathering in March of that year around the launch date of *The Raiders*. Pennell was connected to Whistler, and archive letters confirm Crockett was painted by Whistler, though the unfinished portrait is currently lost. It is a tantalising gap in the visual record, and one of many threads the St Andrews letters pull at without quite resolving.

The contemporaries who appear in Crockett's letters without any formal correspondence of their own tell their own story. Conan Doyle, J.M. Barrie, Maarten Maartens all feature, revealing something of the literary marketplace he was navigating. A joke about Beardsley: Crockett drew a sketch of him in a December 1895 letter to his literary friend Ashcroft Noble. This places him in the milieu of European literary modernism and aesthetic decadence, an orbit not usually associated with the author of *The Lilac Sunbonnet*. The observation in the October 1896 letter to Mowat that the *Glasgow Herald* is "*believed to be coming out in a mourning border*" and Marie Corelli "*a permanent green*" in response to *The Grey Man*'s sales figures assumes a shared literacy about the literary marketplace that marks Crockett as a man very much inside his world. We do well to remember that labels and 'schools' are retrofitted and that Crockett himself lived and navigated a very different literary reality than fits neatly into the subsequent critical and cultural narratives. '*The actual connections...*'

And the golf itself offers the sharpest view into the cultural hierarchies he was navigating. Crockett's celebrity status saw him invited to join the Royal and Ancient. At the time the 'professionals' were the working men of the game rather than its gentlemen. Willie Auchterlonie was the 'professional' who had won the Open Championship in 1893. And when a member questioned why he chose to play with caddies rather than fellow R&A members his response was decisive: "*Find me as fine a gentleman as Auchterlonie and I shall be glad to play with him.*" This speaks to Crockett's refusal to embrace the conventional social distinctions. His origin, after all, was closer to Auchterlonie than to the R&A 'gentlemen'.

The fact that Auchterlonie made Crockett a set of left-handed clubs, which he kept in the shop rather than carrying home perhaps confirms two things: Crockett only ever played golf at St Andrews, and he was left-handed. Sadly, the clubs have since disappeared. Which again shows the significance of archival letters in holding on to past 'facts'.

Perhaps the greatest connection one can have at St Andrews is with Tom Morris. When Crockett encountered Old Tom he was in his seventies, but could still play and beat most. In October 1896, Crockett wrote to his friend Dan Mowat in a tone of barely contained triumph: *"I've beat Tom Morris! Two up. Afternoon. Tom beats me four up. The barometer falls."* Laced with Crockett's Scots humour, the match may have only been a partial victory but a year later, the *Manchester Guardian* reported him playing in a three-ball match alongside Willie Auchterlonie and Mr J.J. Wilson, in which Auchterlonie shot a record round of 71. The paper noted, with a touch of editorial mischief, that *"perhaps Mr Crockett will see his way to an imaginative treatment of the event."*

Crockett did write, twice, of golf in his fiction: *The Grey Man* (1896) and *Sandy's Love Affair* (1913). But as to whether he ever played golf after 1898, the archive is silent.

PART THREE: THE BODY IN THE LETTERS

Work, health and the St Andrews years

It is easy when researching to create levels of significance. But we should remember that some letters are strictly personal and their connections hold a different significance — none the less important in contextualising a life. Ruth Crockett's letters to Marion Macmillan were not written to be read as evidence. They are domestic letters, the kind that passes between friends: news of the children, plans for September, an explanation of why S.R. Crockett cannot be considered to be on holiday even when he is at Seaton House for the summer.

"When we go to St Andrews," she writes, "you know, he gets up at four in the morning and works just as hard as if we were at home, so, although it is a change of scene, it is no holiday as far as work is concerned."

She is not complaining. She is explaining. The observation is fond, perhaps slightly exasperated, and completely precise. Read one hundred and thirty years later, it is as useful a sentence as any in the St Andrews correspondence, because it describes without interpretation the shape of the life being lived.

What that life looked like at its peak can be partly reconstructed from the letters and personal memory. Laurie Auchterlonie, son of the Open Champion, remembered the routine from Crockett's most intensive St Andrews years: two rounds of eighteen holes every day, the first at eight in the morning, the second in the afternoon. That's thirty-six holes of walking over links land. Before the first round: writing since four o'clock. Between and after the rounds: writing, correspondence, the management of a complex and prolific literary career. Four novels in simultaneous production across multiple publishers and serialisation arrangements was standard, not exceptional. The letters of

1895 and 1896 move from publisher to aristocrat to impresario to friend, each in a different register, each requiring a different performance.

The health claims in these letters repay careful reading. In December 1895, Crockett was writing to the literary critic Ashcroft Noble that he had been *"playing golf for nearly three months so I am in good health and spirits"*. This sentence does more than report wellbeing. By the mid-1890s Crockett was being commissioned years in advance, with royalty payments front-loaded and delivery schedules agreed accordingly. An author who seemed uncertain, ill, or flagging was a commercial liability. The golf, in letters to professional and literary contacts, functions partly as proof of productivity: I am outdoors, I am vigorous, I am writing. The same register appears in March 1896, to a correspondent at his publisher's: *"I'm as fit as a fiddle and have done nothing but golf since I finished The Grey Man in September."* Fit, finished, moving forward.

The contrast with the unguarded moments is instructive. In March 1895, writing to his friend Dan Mowat — a personal letter, not a professional one — the performance drops: he was *"still very weak and easily tired"* and illness had knocked his golfing plans on the head. Two letters, one performative, one honest. The archive, where both survive, holds both versions of the man.

We also know from letters that in the spring of 1897, Crockett was diagnosed with nervous exhaustion and prescribed six weeks abroad. By the time he is back at Seaton House in June, Ruth is writing to Marion with the account of a bicycle accident: a fall, a shin injury, an abscess that *"had to be lanced and then stitched and thus unstitched."* The letter is careful to end on recovery: *"he is now able for his round of golf in the day, which is five miles walking."* Interestingly, the measure of restored health is the ability to complete a round.

A month later Crockett writes to Major Pond that he is *"going round the links twice a day."* Recovery appears complete. The summer of 1897 which features six letters from Seaton House in six weeks, Pond's visit, the Kodak photographs, thirty-six holes daily alongside *The Black Douglas*; is the most densely documented period in the St Andrews record. The same summer there is a three-ball match played (and won) with Willie Auchterlonie and J.J.Wilson, reported in the *Manchester Guardian*.

But in December 1897 he writes to Major Pond noting he has *"little time for golf"* but has taken up photography — *"having perhaps caught the infection from your box Kodak which did such execution on the links of St Andrews."* By the spring of 1898 he is setting off for Europe and between then and 1901 we know he travelled 'over 2500 miles' in Spain with his Newman & Guardia camera taking pictures some of which were published in *The Adventurer in Spain* (1903).

Back at Seaton House in June 1898, he is *"playing better than last year,"* and the ambition about the High Hole is still alive. Then, in August, from Penicuik: *"I have had a fine summers golf and am now again at work."*

This is the last mention of golf in the archive. The trail, for us, runs cold.

There are no more letters from Seaton House after 1898. No more thirty-six-hole days. A connection to St Andrews continues. Both Crockett's daughters, Maisie and Margaret, attended St Leonards School in the early years of the twentieth century, so Crockett presumably visited, but the sustained annual presence is over.

The final St Andrews connection the archive offers us is a letter of 12th April 1899. It would not normally be catalogued as a St Andrews letter but deep research allows us to find the connection. In a personal letter written to a professional colleague Crockett reveals a private, significant matter. Joseph Pennell, American illustrator, Whistler's chosen biographer, had worked with Crockett on the Illustrated Stickit Minister and Crockett was now proposing book on Galloway (which would eventually become *Raiderland* in 1904, with some fifty Pennell drawings). Writing from Bank House, Penicuik, he has been out of hospital for six weeks explaining: *"I had a nasty (and ugly) semi-cancerous growth on my jaw which the butchering doctor fellows excised six weeks ago."* He explains the origin with characteristic directness: *"It wasn't anything congenital, praise the pigs, but begotten years ago by the stroke of a golf ball which caused a plate of bone to grow outwards. However it was ripe and beginning to send shoots southwards into my throat. So it was time to do for him."*

The letter continues with energy: jokes about whisky and fruit salad, a sketch of the Pulitzer Building inserted into the text, a book proposal advanced, publishers discussed. The sentence about the golf ball is remarkable not for its drama but for its precision. Crockett is not being melodramatic. He is explaining what happened and roughly when — *"begotten years ago"* — placing the injury in the intensive golf of the St Andrews years without being able, now, to pinpoint the moment. A ball struck the jaw. A plate of bone formed. The growth was slow; the diagnosis was delayed; the surgery, when it came, was successful.

The body that was restored through thirty-six-hole days was also, somewhere in those same days, damaged. This is not irony. It is simply an actual connection; the kind of thing that happens to people living at full stretch, who do not necessarily know, at the time, the cost of what they are doing.

The St Andrews correspondence offers not just an insight into Crockett's working and recreational life during the first five years of his literary success, but detail, minutiae, reality and the appreciation that St Andrews was just one part of a much bigger life.

"I can send a very successful Gulf Stream (of whisky and soda) past it now," he tells Pennell, of the Gulf of Mexico in his jaw. In these letters we find a Crockett who drank whisky, made jokes, played golf and took photographs - and who lived a real life in both personal and professional arenas. His own words, as it turns out, are entirely correct: the actual connections defy what we might think to find if we speculate too much. Even if everything is in the archive, we do well to remember the archive does not hold everything.

An attempt to offer direct citations to the letters is appended below. It may not be comprehensive but it should help speed progress into the archive for particular letters for the interested reader.

Date	From / To	Museum Link PDF
12 Jul 1894	SRC → Dan Mowat	item/382
26 Mar 1895	SRC → Dan Mowat	item/482
31 Oct 1895	SRC → Lord Rosebery	item/504
5 Nov 1895	SRC → Lord Rosebery	item/506
8 Nov 1895	SRC → Lord Rosebery	item/507
18 Nov 1895	SRC → Lord Rosebery	item/510
27 Dec 1895	SRC → Ashcroft Noble	item/1403
4 Mar 1896	SRC → Lawrie / T. Fisher Unwin	item/522
3 Sep 1896	SRC → Mr Laurie (TFU)	item/548
2 Oct 1896	SRC → Dan Mowat	item/552
18 Jan 1897	SRC → Major Pond	item/563

Date	From / To	Museum Link PDF
11 Feb 1897	SRC → Lord Rosebery (Reform Club)	item/564
18 Jun 1897	Ruth Crockett → Marion Macmillan	item/576
23 Jun 1897	SRC → Major Pond	item/577
30 Jun 1897	SRC → Major Pond	item/619
18 Jun 1898	SRC → Wellwood (R&A Club House)	item/1408
24 Jun 1898	SRC → Major Pond	item/600
12 Apr 1899	SRC → Joseph Pennell	item/614
21 Aug 1897	SRC → Major Pond	item/585
28 Dec 1897	SRC → Major Pond	item/595
15 Aug 1898	SRC → Clement Shorter	item/603
28th Dec 1896	Ruth Crockett → Marion Macmillan	item/1268