

## **The Academic, the Administrator and the Author (Turned Curator)**

For most of the twentieth century the safe critical position was that S.R. Crockett (1859-1914) was a Kailyard author, filed alongside J.M. Barrie and Ian Maclaren, and promptly ignored. The Museum exists to make the evidential case for why that filing was wrong. In this article the question is: who are the people behind the Museum's work? Who has spent their working life bent over this particular case file, and why?

There turn out to be three of them: a scholar, an antiquarian, and a writer who came for the books and stayed for everything else.

### **Three Ways In**

The three researchers behind this project can be introduced (or catalogued), with only a little unfairness, as the academic, the administrator, and the author turned curator. It's a shorthand, not a verdict — each of them would probably object to being reduced to a job title, and each of them is more interesting than their job title suggests. But shorthand gets a reader in the door, and once you're in the door the detail can do its work.

### **The Academic: Dr Islay Murray Donaldson (1936–2014)**

Dr Islay Murray Donaldson wrote the first sustained scholarly challenge to the dismissive reading of Crockett that had settled in after his death. Her doctoral research, undertaken at the University of Edinburgh in the late 1970s, argued against the prevailing characterisation and for Crockett's place as a significant figure in late nineteenth-century Scottish literature. That research became her monograph, *The Life and Work of Samuel Rutherford Crockett* (Aberdeen University Press, 1989). It is still the only full-length literary biography of Crockett, and one that took over a decade to see print.

Clearly a biography that takes ten years to publish is not a biography anyone was clamouring for. Donaldson was making a case against the tide, for a writer academia had already decided it could safely ignore, and she did it anyway. Whatever the limitations of her methodology when read from a twenty-first-century vantage, that persistence deserves to be named as what it is: an act of scholarly conviction rather than fashion-following.

Following her death in 2014, Donaldson's Crockett library and research archive were gifted to the Galloway Raiders. In 2016 an updated edition of her biography was published by Ayton Publishing, including a restored chapter (on Crockett's children's fiction) that she had reluctantly agreed to cut from the original. That restoration in a small way contributed towards the bigger goal of re-appraisal of Crockett's work which is now the core of this Museum.

## **The Administrator: Dr Richard D. Jackson (1937–2024)**

Where Donaldson's instinct was literary, asking what does the writing do and how well does it do it; Dr Richard D. Jackson's approach was administrative and antiquarian. A graduate of the University of St Andrews and the University of Edinburgh, he built a career as a senior civil servant and HM Inspector of Schools, and brought that same documentary instinct to his research: his critical interests spanned Crockett, James Hogg, Janet Stewart and Walter Scott, but his particular focus with Crockett was the letters, the dates, the mechanics of a writing life rather than its literary judgement. He assembled, over decades, a substantial private collection of Crockett correspondence and biographical material. His research was aimed at a less literary, more historically grounded biography that was never completed. Gifted to the Galloway Raiders in 2016, his archive currently sits along with Donaldson's, boxes and folders together, in a bedroom study — not yet in Galloway itself, though it's heading there. The material itself hadn't changed since 2016. What changed in 2024 was Jackson's death — and with it, the last other person who had spent decades inside this material. From that point on, whatever authority the two archives carried rested with one person alone. That person is the third member of our trio, author turned curator Cally Wight.

The Donaldson and Jackson archives overlap heavily in the primary material each gathered but diverge sharply in what each researcher did with it. That divergence is not a flaw in either of them — it's simply what happens when two people who care about the same figure bring different training and different questions to the same shelf of papers. There are hints, in occasional private asides from both Donaldson and Jackson, that Crockett was not always an easy subject to warm to at close quarters, however much both researchers came to respect his significance. That's a small human detail worth keeping rather than smoothing away — scholars are allowed to be exasperated by the people they've devoted their lives to.

What both archives agree on, for all their differences of approach, is straightforward: Crockett mattered to the literature of his age, and the Kailyard label sits on him uneasily at best.

## **The Author, Turned Curator: Cally Wight**

As 'last man standing', the third figure in this account is the one currently doing the telling. For her, Crockett is far less frustrating than the wrongs that have been done to him. She sees her role more as championing than chastising. Perhaps being a fellow author manifests a different mindset from academic and administrator. Perhaps a closer personal knowledge of Galloway allows a deeper understanding of his motivations. Certainly the responsibility of preserving and developing the work of those who have gone before demands new perspectives and new methodologies.

Cally Phillips ( now, in her institutional role, Cally Wight) came across Crockett by chance in the mid-1990s, after moving to Galloway. She came to him first simply as a reader, and found that the standard account of Scottish literary history she'd absorbed elsewhere didn't fit what she was actually reading on the page. That mismatch is, in the end, where all of this started: not a research programme, but a nagging sense that the map didn't match the territory.

Cally holds an MA Hons in Moral Philosophy from the University of St Andrews, an MSc in Applied Psychology from the University of Portsmouth, and a BA Hons in English Language and Linguistics from The Open University, and her professional life before this: in theatre, screenwriting, and prose publishing, including a period as Dramatist in Residence for the Dumfries and Galloway Arts Association (2002–2004); is not incidental background. A career built on close attention to how narrative and voice work is not a bad training for noticing when a writer has been badly misread.

Later, away from Galloway, Cally found herself drawn back to it. She describes it as embodying a kind of "hefted" attachment to a place, the sense of belonging to particular ground that doesn't loosen just because you've left it. The feeling is, she believes, something she shares with Crockett. In his case he wrote about Galloway. In her case she set herself a task simple to state and enormous to complete: read the whole of Crockett's (long out of print) published work. The digital transcriptions available by the 2010s made the texts technically accessible but the quality of the OCR often made them close to unreadable, so the task became transcription and re-editing as well as reading. The result (in 2014), marking the centenary of Crockett's death, was the publication of The Galloway Collection, comprising thirty-two volumes of his Galloway writings, with introductions by Cally Phillips.

That work made her, almost by default, the person the archives came to. Donaldson's material arrived in 2014; Jackson's followed in 2016. The Galloway Raiders, the loose community of interested readers established by Phillips in 2014, was never really intended to be a repository for two substantial research collections, and the question of what to do with them sat unresolved for several years. After the death of Jackson in 2024 the question became more pressing. The answer, eventually arrived at in 2025, was to stop being merely a custodian and become a curator in the institutional sense: to found a charity built specifically to carry the legacy forward, and to give the combined archive somewhere proper to live.

The name change that runs alongside this — Phillips for the earlier published research, Wight for the charity and Museum now — marks that same shift from independent author to institutional curator. Both names belong to the same person and the same body of work; the shift in name simply marks the shift in role.

### **Where the Three Meet**

Put these three people together and a shape emerges that none of them would have produced alone. Donaldson supplied the first serious literary argument for taking Crockett seriously, made against the critical fashion of her time. Jackson supplied the documentary density — the letters, the dates, the connections — that any literary argument eventually needs to stand on. And Cally, the author turned curator supplied a fresh perspective and skillset which has become the beginnings of an institutional home as living legacy, so that the first two contributions don't simply stay boxed up in a bedroom study indefinitely, the way most private research archives eventually end up. The ongoing work is to curate the digital archives and find a home for the physical materials.

### **One Name Standing Just Outside the Three**

There is a fourth name worth naming here, even though he isn't one of the three researchers this piece is about. Dr Andrew Nash's *Kailyard and Scottish Literature* (2007) clearly demonstrated that Kailyard was a construct rather than a description. His focus was chiefly J.M. Barrie, but the chapter he gives to Crockett is one of the few pieces of academic writing to treat the label itself, rather than the writer, as the thing needing explanation. His book is now close to twenty years old but represents independent academic confirmation from outside Galloway that something in the standard account didn't add up. Sadly, academia has remained all but silent on the subject of Crockett ever since. Clearly, there is still work to be done. That work, begun in the 1970s is now firmly on the shoulders of one woman. The charity and museum exist to facilitate others to 'find' Crockett and embark upon their own explorations. Academics, Administrators, Authors, Curators, Antiquaries, Readers... all are welcome. Bring an open mind and a fresh perspective and start your reading journey at the S.R.Crockett Online Museum [www.srcrockett.scot](http://www.srcrockett.scot).