

This is the text of the talk I gave at an Interdisciplinary Symposium on Covenanting in Edinburgh on June 21st 2017.

So just what is a Cameronian?

The standard biographical entrée to Crockett states he was ‘raised by his strict Cameronian grandparents.’ What does this mean? Essentially: No book but the ‘guid book’ can be read and why walk three miles to church when you can make a twenty mile round trip out of it.

It meant that despite having a Free Kirk just three miles away, the Crocketts’ regularly walked to not so nearby Castle Douglas to the Cameronian ‘Kirk on the Hill’ when Crockett was a boy.

The list of books he had access to *was* strictly monitored. You might conclude that this inevitably raises a small-minded, parochial fellow. Ah, but the resourceful Crockett did gain access to all the ‘greats’ of literature, as well as penny dreadfuls. And this set him on his path to success. He was a lifelong, voracious, omnivorous reader.

Are they Marginalised Radicals?

Cameronians are often seen as the hard-core fundamentalist descendants of the Covenanters, named for one of the central Covenanting martyrs, Richard Cameron who lost his life at the battle of Aird’s Moss in 1680. Today I want to explore Crockett’s novels set in Covenanting times and those which deal with the later (perhaps inevitable) demise of the Cameronians as a separate branch of Scottish Presbyterianism.

Cameronians are usually defined as a small but radical sect, sometimes also called Macmillanites (though the two are not entirely concordant) When they are not being portrayed as a dangerous marginalised group who preached extremism they are being lampooned as Barrie does in his ‘Auld Lights’ fiction.

In one sense I suggest that Radicals are always marginalised and more important a question would be whether and why they marginalised themselves? Even more important perhaps: What is the nature of their radicalism?

In this respect I think the fiction of S.R.Crockett has something interesting to offer. He is of no doubt that Cameronianism is a ‘fechting’ religion. From the beatings dished out to children at the back end of the byre to teach them right from wrong, to the outlawed hill folk who risk life and limb in order to worship according to their principles, they are tough and uncompromising folk.

Yet Crockett, illegitimate son of a dairy maid, was brought up in a house full of love, where (perhaps despite the Westminster Catechism) he learned the true value of community and religious tolerance.

I want to suggest that the influence and impact of Cameronianism on Crockett was profound but in some perhaps unexpected ways.

In 1901 Crockett wrote the foreword to a new edition of Patrick Walker's work *Six Saints of the Covenant*.

In it he quotes Stevenson 'Well, laigh in your lug, sir- the clue was found. My style is from the Covenanting writers.'

I don't want to tread on the toes of the next speaker – but I want to suggest that Crockett's 'style' is connected to his Cameronian 'world view'

As an aside we might note that Stevenson wrote a poem for Crockett, not unconnected to Covenanting:

And of course it was Stevenson who persuaded the young Crockett to give up writing poetry and write prose instead!

I would like to have a quick look at the beginning of Crockett's foreword to Walker's book, because I think it throws some light onto Crockett's perspective, attitudes and aims in his fiction. He writes:

*Like many another among the scions of Cameronian families throughout Scotland I can set no date to my acquisition of the little pamphlets... nor can I recall a time when I did not pore over **these delightful pages**.*

which in all honesty may not be our immediate contemporary interpretation of the work.

He continues:

In this I was assisted by their size – the format of the 'pedlar's pack' editions being so small that they could be concealed by day in the breast of a boy's blouse.

Now I think we start to see something 'fundamental' about Crockett, his writing and his views.

Perhaps we feel he's not quite giving religion its due respect as he continues:

*So, for years they accompanied me everywhere, and I do not doubt that many of the spots, specks, and splotches which alas! my editio princeps now discloses, are due to the fact that **I was wont to peruse it while crumbling 'farles' of cake***

high-perched in the branches of some beech, umbrageous and sheltering as 'Sandy Gordon's Oak,' in the plesaunces of Earlstoun.

As he goes on we may still wonder about the suitability of this as reading material for a child...

*At night they even accompanied me to bed, and were often had recourse to at earliest dawn, when sleep had refused my pillow, and the powers that be still delayed to clothe my body. It may seem a small thing, but it has always appeared probable to me that **I may actually have learned my letters from those massive and generous title-pages.***

May I suggest here we see a combination of humour and nostalgia?

But then comes the sucker punch:

*I can see, of course, **all the narrowness and occasional bitterness** of the creed he expressed so admirably in the **most vivid and distinctive Scots***

And this I suggest is the nub of the matter. Crockett is certainly not a fully paid up religious zealot. He is completely aware of the shortcomings of Cameronianism – as he was of all religion. Note also that he values writing in Scots.

So when we consider the impact of a 'strict Cameronian upbringing', we might pause for a moment to realise that the lesson taught may often be less important than the lesson learned.

What Crockett learned from his Cameronian roots was history, adventure and romance. He learned about intolerance – and tolerance – he learned to defend his views robustly – he learned how to fight for what he believed in – and he developed his own theory of God as Love in Nature – more accordance with the Romance tradition - but then were the Romantics not also at one time a marginalised radical group?

And while it may be stretching a point to suggest that Crockett's fiction is in some sense a mash-up of Covenanter meets penny dreadful, there are both elements to be found. Boys and books perhaps more immediate influences. He writes repeatedly about the game of Wanderers and Dragoons, or Covenanters and King's Men. It was played by both his characters and himself as a child. It is no different than the games we played as children – Japs and Commandoes or Cowboys and Indians.

There is always humour. In 'A Galloway Herd' we are told of Crockett's youthful alter ego Wattie Anderson:

'Walter was, however, of the opinion that the map was a most imperfect production. He thought that the portion of the world occupied by the Reformed Presbyterians ought to have been much more prominently charted. This omission he blamed on Ned Kenna, the bookman, who was a Free. Walter looked for the time when all the world, from great blank Australia to the upper Icy Pole, should become Cameronian. He anticipated a time when the

black savages would have to quit eating one another, and learn the Shorter Catechism. He chuckled when he thought of them attacking effectual calling. He knew his duty to his fellows very well, and he did it to the best of his ability. It was when he met a Free Kirk boy, to throw a stone at him, or alternatively, if the boy were a girl, to put out his tongue at her. This he did, not from any special sense of superiority, but for the good of their souls.'

But we also frequently see the 'game' turned real – Crockett's fiction offers a repeated rites of passage scenario where his 'ordinary' herd boy hero is witness a brutal and bloody murder by 'the establishment' out on the hills which prompts him to take up arms with the rebels. Crockett himself was a version of the Galloway Herd in all the senses of the phrase.

Crockett brings an 'insider' perspective to Covenanting fiction, and that in this respect he is possibly unique amongst his peers.

While Cameronian radicalism is substantially seen in the refusal to accept any hierarchical authority on trust. But their relationship with God is also sought on what might be seen as 'interesting' terms. Again in *A Galloway Herd*, we are given insight into Crockett's childhood, since Saunders McQuhirr is a portrait of his own grandfather:

'Saunders was allowed to be highly gifted in intercession. But he was also considered to have some strange notions for a God-fearing man.

For instance, he would not permit any of his children to be taught by heart any prayer besides the Lord's Prayer. After repeating that, they were encouraged to ask from God whatever they wanted, and were never reprov'd, however strange or incongruous their supplications might be. Saunders simply told them that if what they asked was not for their good they would not get it—a fact which, he said, 'they had as lieve learn sune as syne.'

I suggest that it is the independent resilience at the core of the Cameronian 'belief system' that we see most clearly in Crockett's fiction – including but not exclusively – his Covenanting fiction. More than this, I suggest that he sort of 'photobombs' the Romance Tradition, using 'ordinary' feet of clay heroes to subtly subvert Romanticism. His chosen narrative style of 'backgrounding' 'big' historic events in favour of the ordinary perspective represents an interesting development along the spectrum of Scots Prose Romance and the emerging genre of historical fiction.

It's important to remember that he is not trying to be an historian. Crockett is often vague and unspecific in his dates, he often shifts and changes minor historic events in order to fit his narrative. On reading Crockett we should be fully aware, as he was, that he was not writing history but fiction.

Rather, his intention through what I suggest we might call his 'Cameronian style' was to explore the 'voice' that is lost – the voice that is marginalised when the victors write the history books! It is the voice of the underdog, the loser, the just plain

ordinary. But in Crockett, there is no such thing as a small character. In the process he forces us to reconsider the very definition of heroism.

Crockett published long fictional works which substantially deal with Covenanting or Cameronian issues or times. There are many more short stories but I don't have time to go into all of them. For today's purposes I have placed the works into three groups.

The first Group offers: A Cameronian vision of Covenanters:

Here I suggest the influences and impacts include Stevenson, Dumas, Gothic Romance, Scott, Hogg, Buchan

Mad Sir Uchtred is perhaps the weirdest of Crockett's books. It seems to blur the boundaries of Gothic Romance and Covenanting. It's Tennyson and Coleridge 'remixed' as prose. I don't pretend to understand the religious symbolism so I can't say how it stacks up as a piece of Cameronian propaganda, but for a short work it is both deep, and at times deeply shocking. I suggest it be read as an experiment in form and content.

MOMH and *Lochinvar* are essentially parts 1 and 2 of a story. It is the story of cousins Will and Wat Gordon who represent both sides of the issues of the Killing Times. They are unlikely bedfellows but both end up 'put to the horn.' (for which read, 'made marginalised radicals') one for the cause of religion and one for the cause of politics (or more strictly, romance).

Here, if we are expecting religious propaganda, we are to be disappointed. A key quote explains my point:

'We Gordon's never had more religion than we could carry for comfort.' – and that's a quote from the Covenanting Cousin. He continues: *'we always got our paiks for what little we had, on which side soever we might be. It is a strange thing that we should always have managed to come out undermost whichever party was on top, and of this I cannot tell the reason. On the other hand, the Kennedies trimmed their sails to the breeze as it blew, and were ever on the wave's crest. But then they were Ayrshiremen. And Ayr, it is well kenned, aye beats Galloway—that is, till it comes to the deadly bellyful of fighting.'*

Apart from the homage to the underdog, and the inevitable dig at Ayrshiremen, and plenty of Scots humour, often delivered in Galloway dialect, *MOMH* has duality as a central theme. Crockett uses the cousins to explore religion, politics and social status during the Killing times from opposing sides. His contention is that religion and politics are inextricably linked. Significantly, I think, these two novels also place Scotland in the context, not just of England but of Europe.

Moving on to the second Grouping of Texts. Here we look at Crockett's portrayal of some Covenanting 'heroes'. The influences and impacts in this group of books

includes Richard Cameron, John Macmillan, Alexander Peden the Prophet, and James Hogg.

Whereas in *Men of the Moss Hags*, Richard Cameron is the 'hero' behind the story, in *The Standard Bearer* Crockett offers a fictionalised story of John Macmillan, Minister of Balmaghie. The novel explores and explains his refusal to bow to hierarchical pressure. He's a kind of Galloway Gandhi.

But it's also a love story and a story of community. The goodness of the ordinary people is important (we see this again in *Banner of Blue*). Crockett plays with the 'history' but deliberately, to suit his narrative aims. That he knew the history is indisputable. Indeed he wrote an introduction to Reid's biography of Macmillan, '*A Cameronian Apostle*' published in 1896. Crockett was writing the novel at the same time as the foreword, and happily leaves 'the historic facts' to Reid. He is comfortable in his skin as a writer of historical fiction.

The Cherry Ribband was originally as Peden the Prophet. Again, Peden remains a strangely shadowy figure behind the main 'action' which is a love story. It is also a story about the split in families and communities and the duality of religion/politics. I'll admit I struggle with his novel, but wonder if perhaps the backgrounding of Peden is in some way deeply significant.

By contrast to *The Cherry Ribband*, *Silver Sand*, the novel published on the day he died does put the 'hero' centre stage. But what an unlikely hero he is. The character of SS was familiar to readers of the 1894 bestseller *The Raiders* and its 1902 sequel *The Dark o' the Moon*, and this novel effectively rounds off a trilogy; it is unfinished business, being a prequel which takes us back to the Killing Times and in the course of the story explaining how SS became the man he did.

Silver Sand is here revealed as John Faa: (aka King of the Gypsies) and the central theme of the novel is the exploration of and tensions between Royalty and Loyalty. It's pretty radical stuff if you read between the lines – suggesting that the Royal line of the Gypsies has more legitimacy than the Hanoverians.

If you've read the other novels in which Silver Sand features you will be aware of the connections with the 'Brownie' of Scots legend, also portrayed by Hogg.

SS is not a Covenanter by any means but, like many of Crockett's 'ordinary' heroes in Crockett's fiction, he is turned to radicalism by the iniquities visited on him by both church and state.

The final grouping takes us on in history to look at what I'm calling 'the last of the Cameronians' (with due reverence to Fennimore Cooper and Mohicans of course) The impact and influences here include William Alexander, J.M.Barrie and D.H.Lawrence.

We start with *The Banner of Blue*. I'll come clean and say I can't personally think of a duller topic for a novel than the Disruption of 1843. I wonder if perhaps Crockett was trying to counter the bleakness of Alexander's 1888 work Johnny Gibb.

But, against expectation perhaps, BoB is so much more than a novel about The Disruption. Indeed you could probably read it and pretty much avoid engagement with the historic event. Which is not to say it's a trivial novel. On the surface it offers a fairly trite perhaps verging on clichéd story but it is also an insightful exploration of the theme which exorcises so many Scots writers - duality.

In *Banner of Blue*, the ostensible 'ordinary' heroes are upstaged by an even more 'ordinary' character - one Anton Macmillan. Perhaps this Cameronian character actually suggests the path to resolution underneath the duality of the divided families of the Glendonwyns and Glendinnings?

Anton was modelled on Crockett's friend John MacMillan who should not be confused with 'the' JM minister of Balmaghie (earlier mentioned) This Macmillan is known as 'herd of the Merrick.' In the novel the clear but understated vision of practical Cameronianism, is offered thus:

'we wad rather spend the Sabbath day in readin' what we do believe than in listening to what we dinna'.

Last but definitely not least in our textual charge is *The Lilac Sunbonnet*. Again while somewhat hidden in the guise of a love story here Crockett explores the inevitable demise of the Presbyterian 'sects' in much the same spirit as *Barrie's Auld Lights* and more directly *The Little Minister* –which, incidentally played as a comedy to its contemporary audiences! It's easy to see the young Crockett in the 'ordinary' hero Ralph as in many ways they face similar practical and religious dilemmas.

LS has long been stigmatised as some kailyard fantasy version of Scottish life and religion, much like Barrie's LM. Careful reading and critical study reveals this to be a wrong interpretation. Rather, Crockett reveals a sophistication in his ability to tell one kind of story on the surface while offering something more challenging underneath.

As long ago as the 1980s the late Doctor Islay Murray Donaldson posited an interpretation of the novel, drawing parallels with D.H.Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. Yet it is still an overlooked and unexplored text. In *The Lilac Sunbonnet* Crockett explores the nature of religion and Romanticism.

So I contend that Crockett's Covenanting fiction in one important sense does offer a radical and marginalised stance - and that is its attempt to explore and develop the Scots Romance tradition. Crockett's theory of God is developed in his fiction along what I suggest is largely Romantic lines – God is Love and Love is to be found in Nature. Narrow religious doctrine and dogma have no place in his belief system, which exposes hypocrisy wherever it is found.

A humorous conclusion might be that Crockett's fiction shows that the writing was on the wall from early on as regards him sustaining a career in the ministry of any denomination.

We might also note it was writing about religion that actually gave Crockett his escape from the ministry. *The Raiders*, *The Lilac Sunbonnet* and *The Men of the Moss Hags* transported this ordinary hero from Free Kirk minister to bestselling author.

More seriously, I suggest that in his dissatisfaction with established church/religion and hierarchical structures in politics and society, Crockett's writing about Covenanting times does reveal something both interesting and significant about his Cameronian roots which is good enough reason to read (or re-read) it.

While Crockett is not an historian it does not mean he is of no interest to historians. His insider perspective allied with his keen observational skills and 'Cameronian style' are surely reason enough to engage with his writing.

I think that, certainly as portrayed by Crockett, the Cameronians can be seen to have more in common with Anarchists, Levellers or the Christian Socialists than the Taliban. Yes they were radical. Yes they were marginalised and, like Crockett himself, I'd suggest they have been misunderstood because of the stigma of the label or banner they have suffered under.

And as a fellow marginalised radical I can't help but throw in the final point –

In Crockett's fiction I find clear representation of the voice of the 'ordinary' rural working class, who are marginalised often less because of their radical nature and more because of their alternative views and experiences. I suggest that the cause of the Last of the Cameronians serves as an illustration that any notion of a 'canon' of Scots literature is a dangerous thing – because canons are hierarchical and privileging and therefore may unjustly marginalise those writers they see as 'radical' in terms of the accepted national narrative.

If you want to read any of the books mentioned in this talk, the best place to buy them is from www.unco.scot You'll find them all in the [Crockett Collection](#)