

THE SCOTSMAN

Weds November 14th.

Mr Crockett at the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution.

Mr S.R.Crockett lectured to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution in the Queen Street hall last night on the subject of 'Our National Humour in Fiction.' There was a crowded attendance. Mr Crockett said the great body of popular humour in Scotland first found its way into the channels of our historic literature mainly in the form of ballads and songs. In time these rose to a higher strata in the poems of Lindsay, in some of Knox's prose, and in Dunbar and Henryson, but Burns alone caught and held the full force of our national humour, for he was born of the soil, and grew up near to it. So that to all time he must remain the finest expression of almost all kinds of Scottish feeling. As to prose, chap-books and pamphlets innumerable carried on the stream, which, for the most part, was conveyed underground, till, in the fullness of time, Walter Scott came to give Scottish humour worldwide fame in the noble series of imaginative writings by which he set his native land beside the England of William Shakespeare. (Applause.) Of Scottish historical humour they could distinguish four kinds. There was the humour that he would call by analogy 'polter humour' - which was a primitive kind, of savage origin. Of that 'polter humour,' the finest instances perhaps were to be found in the chap-books of the latter half of last century and the first ten years of this. The second species of humour he should call the humour of irony, which was akin to the polter humour in that it had chiefly reference to actions, but it was of a quieter variety. Of that sort an excellent example was the advice Donald Cargill offered to Claverhouse as he was riding from the field of Drumclog after his defeat as hard as his horse could gallop to 'bide for the afternoon diet of worship' (Laughter.) This, the method ironical, with an additional spice of kindness, was Sir Walter Scott's favourite mode of humour. It was, for instance, the basis of Caleb Balderston, especially in the famous scene in the house of Gibbie Girder. Of course, Scott was too great and many-sided a man to neglect any kind of humour; but, on the whole, perhaps that national humour of allowing circumstances to take their course, and the persons engaged to realise the rough underside of things was his favourite. At the same time nothing told them more surely of the essential greatness of the master than the way in which, but a few touches, he could so ennoble a humorous figure - as, for example Caleb Bladerstone in the last scene of the 'Bride of Lammermuir' - that that figure passed from the humorous to the pathetic, and touched the springs of the

readers' tears the more readily that up to that point he had chiefly moved their laughter. (Applause.) Passing on, they next came to the humour of about-the-doors as he called it. It was hard to say when this began, but it was probably with the first of the race, for the Scot had ever been noted for making the best of his man servant and his maid servant, his ox and his ass, and the stranger within his gates. (Laughter.)

He did not think anyone would succeed in setting down these things - the humours of his country, his lost years, his lost love - without finding tears as often in his eyes as the smile is on his lips. He would not do it because he set himself to do it. He must be purposeful but conceal his purpose, and write with his heart. **No great novel was ever written with a purpose.**

The purpose must emerge, not be thrust before the reader's nose, else he would know that he had strayed into a druggists shop, and all the beauty of the burnished glass, and all the brilliancy of the drawer labels would not persuade him that medicine was a good steady diet. (Laughter.) He would say and with some reason: 'I asked you for bread or at least for cakes and ale, and lo! You have given me Gregory's Mixture.' (Applause and laughter.) And so he would walk out and not deal any more at that shop save when he wanted medicine -for some other body. (Laughter.)

Scott did not write with any purpose, save with the primitive instinct to tell an entrancing story, and in spite of Gerviaus and cartloads of commentators, chiefly Teutonic, he did not believe Shakespeare did either. (A laugh.) For the 'novel of purpose' developed round some set thesis was not of the essence of story telling, but of preaching and pamphleteering. These things were of the world's greatest necessities, but he would not have them trench upon the place of creative imagination. Scott, their greatest, was as conspicuously free from moralising as HOMER, yet what infinities of actual good had arisen from the reading of his books. The goodness and the moral must be in the man himself - the writer, and there was no fear but that they would come out in his story wihtout spoiling one whit the artistic beauty of his conception. The romancer had best be a little more modest than he had been of late. If he told his story with his heart and soul, all that was good in him and in his message would emerge in the course of the narrative without being obtruded. It was better to stand by fiction as a branch of the world's art rather than as a department of pathology, and to look for its effect upon men's lives rather as an anodyne for sore hearts, a heartening of sorrows, a pathway of escape from the dullness or contrariness of the world into another and a fresher world. After all, for religion we still had our Bible, and we were not likely to better that as doctrine and

reproof for the conduct of our lives. We had our daily newspaper which told us, among other things. How to vote and how not to vote. He declined to believe that the great problems of religion could be adequately discussed and settled in the conversations of the 'novel of purpose.' He wanted to take his novel plain and his newspaper plain. He did not want to mix them and label them the Fiction of the Future. In fact, being a quiet and old-fashioned person, the fiction of the past was good enough for him, and if he could make half so good in the present he would be content.

I believe that this is the first reporting of Crockett's talk on this subject (previously given in Dundee in the October) and from which the whole Kailyard stooshie may have started. The following April, when J.H.Millar's Henley inspired diatribe on Kailyard came out in The New Review, Crockett's expanded version of this 'Scottish National Humour' came out in the Contemporary Review. Co-incidence or not, I think it shows something of the context of the time and the roots of the attempt to flatten Crockett's career by the creation of Kailyard as style or genre. A version of the same article was reprinted in 'Raiderland' in 1904.

Cally Phillips November 2019.