

THE BLACK DOUGLAS 120th Anniversary.

Crockett's novel *The Black Douglas* was published by Smith, Elder & Co in April 1899 (120 years ago this year) but the story started long before that. It ran as a serial in 'Queen' Magazine from July to December 1898.

Archive records show that on 17th February 1897 Crockett gave American serial publisher McClure a story outline which covered what would end up being two books, *The Black Douglas* and its sequel (1905) *Maid Margaret*. This early story outline does not mention the second half of *The Black Douglas* (ie the Gilles de Retz plot).

In October 1897 the Crockett's were in Stirling to tour Black Douglas 'places'. He was writing it through 1898 but also traveling abroad over the winter/spring of 189/8. Having planned to go to Italy to finish work on *The Silver Skull* (which ran in 'Pall Mall' Magazine from August 1898 to May 1899) it seems he visited La Granja in Spain instead, to prepare for *The Firebrand* (commissioned 1899 and published 1901). Letters from St Andrews show that he was still 'deep in *The Black Douglas* in June 1898 and he had not completely finished it by July of that year when it started serialisation. It is interesting to speculate what brought about the change, adding the second part of the novel mostly set in France and removing the Maid Margaret story.

There is quite a marked split between two parts of the story and Crockett may have been under pressure from publishers to write to a particular brief. Note that *Dracula* had been published in 1897 and so the 'red milk' part of the Gilles de Retz atrocities could be seen as in the same 'fashion' as that work. (Later Gilles de Retz would be used by Tolkien for his character Sauron). *Maid Margaret* itself would cause many problems for Crockett later on, when it was rejected by publishers James Clarke because of the 'racy' nature of the lead character, which he refused to change due to its historical veracity.

The price of popular success meant that Crockett had a lot of work due in 1898. *Joan of the Sword Hand* (serialised in 'The Windsor' December 1898 - November 1899) and *Little Anna Mark* (serialised in Cornhill Jan - Dec 1899) were due around June 1898 as was the first half of *Kit Kennedy* for serialisation in 'The Christian Leader' and 'The Peoples' Friend'.

Set in 1439, the action takes place in and around Castle Douglas and centres on Thrieve (now Threave) Castle. The novel begins with the domestic characters of Sholto and Laurence MacKim, sons of Malise 'Brawny' MacKim who provide the background to the historical figure of William Sixth Earl of Douglas (the Black Douglas of the title). William falls under the spell of a 'white lady' whom many consider to be a witch. She is in fact Sybilla, the niece of the novel's villain Gilles de Retz. France and the French are generally viewed with a certain superstition throughout the novel. This is of course a narrative device, reflecting historic opinions. Crockett himself was well travelled and spent a considerable time in France - dying there in 1914.

Traditionally the Douglases have been shown in a poor light in Scottish history – they stood up against the emergent Stewart monarchy- and Crockett’s novel offers an interesting portrayal for anyone wanting a fresh view of this part of Scottish history.

The Black Douglas offers a picture not just of Scottish medieval history but also that of Europe. We are not allowed to forget that it was a brutal and bloody period. The Douglas cry, ‘*let dog eat dog. Wherefore should the lion care,*’ comes back to haunt William. The Douglas badge of arms, a bleeding heart in front of a Saltire, is a significant image which runs throughout the novel. The Douglas clan literally bleed for Scotland.

And death is ever present. Sholto MacKim has to ponder the conundrum, ‘*to die like a man was easy, but how to die to some purpose seemed more difficult.*’ Death is inevitable but how one faces it is of supreme importance. *The Black Douglas* suggests that dying heroically is not all that life is about. The impact of death and treachery is shown very clearly and the importance of family loyalty and a belief in truth and honesty is highlighted. We see planted here the seeds of the father against son struggle which became commonplace in the Covenanting days some 200 years later, of which Crockett writes with such skill and passion.

Crockett’s medieval descriptions are redolent of, but more readable than Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and there is a strong element of the Arthurian myth going on throughout the novel. He does a masterful job of marrying the gritty world of medieval life with that of the mystical world. We get a sense of the superstition that underpins much of life at those times and the tensions between Christianity and ‘darker’ arts is also a running theme. Crockett paints a picture of the nobility of Galloway as being both superstitious but also well educated, well travelled people who spoke French and Latin. Galloway might be seen as something of a primitive place but France for all its culture is shown as perhaps the more dangerous place for the soul.

But this is not just history, it is an historical romance and so we are drawn into parallel love stories: the one between Sholto and Maud which is destined to succeed and the other between William Douglas and Sybilla which is doomed to failure. There is treachery and betrayal in abundance and a cast of characters both real and imaginary enough to keep any reader entertained.

In *The Black Douglas* the Galloway countryside is described beautifully, and the colour, smells and sounds of medieval South West Scotland are brought vividly to life. Beyond Galloway, Crockett’s description of Edinburgh Castle is also very interesting to anyone who ponders on what the medieval version of this landmark might be like. And his descriptions of France are equally vibrant.

The supernatural element in *The Black Douglas* is ever-present but it builds to a crescendo in the second half, with werewolves and the most atrocious sacrificial acts of torture which had one contemporary reviewer warn his readership: ‘*The book contains much good fighting.... but no one who has weak nerves should touch this volume.*’

However, the supernatural element is not there only to shock. It shows that actions have consequences. There has always been this element of the 'fey' and mysterious and dark supernatural in the Scottish psyche and Crockett is like many other Scottish writers in drawing on this for his fiction.

REVIEWING THE BLACK DOUGLAS

The Galloway Raiders archive holds several reviews from 1899. It is worth remembering that reviews served several purposes, and are as reflective of the 'position' of the reviewer as instructive about the content of the work under review.

On April 29th 'The Athenaeum' reviewed it as follows:

The judicial murder of two young Douglases, William, sixth earl and his brother David, by Crichton and Livingstone in 1440, and the period of James with the Fiery Face, especially in its early days, are tempting ground for any historical novelist. Mr Crockett has realised this, but he has gone to the extreme in poetic licence. The ill-starred William was only fifteen or sixteen when he died, and having been knighted at the age of five, was already married at the time of his early death. His wife was Janet, or Margaret Lindsay, daughter of the second earl of Crawford, and has given Mr Crockett the idea of his heroine Maude Lindsay, adored by the gallant Sholto MacKim. The introduction of Sybilla de Thouars does not fall easily into the earl's environment as we know it; but a more audacious conception is the appearance of De Retz as ambassador from France. There are few vernacular lapses in Mr Crockett's diction. 'Wage' for wages is a solecism we suppose incorrigible at this day. 'Go his own gait' we object to because it spoils the sense. A man is told to go his own 'gate' or road, not his own pace. 'Tis a contract too great for one poor maid' is an utterance one would expect from a fair American, not a high-born maid of France in the fifteenth century. The introduction of supernatural machinery is not unjustified by precedent; but there is obvious exaggeration in the fiendish figure of Gilles de Retz, with his devil-worship, his she-wolf, his baths of blood, and his nameless debaucheries. Still, some wholesome and stirring chapters - notably that entitled 'Betrayed by a Killis' - remind the critic of Mr Crockett's earlier 'form.'

On May 6th 'Literature' Magazine wrote:

Mr Crockett is always picturesque. In his latest book that feature of his work is as pronounced as ever, but the effect is often produced at the expense of fidelity. His great fault is over-elaboration. He is never content to place his characters naturally before the reader; he must always dress them up in the exaggeration of the stage. Did woman ever live to whom the following description could be truthfully applied?

"Her skin was fair with a dazzling clearness, which even the gathering gloom only caused to shine with a more perfect brilliance, as if a halo of light dwelt

permanently beneath its surface. Faint responsive roses bloomed on either cheek and, as it seemed, cast a shadow of their colour down her graceful neck. Dark eyes shone above, fresh and dewy with love and youth, and smiled out with all ancientest witcheries and allurements in their depths. Her lithe, slender body was simply clad in a fair white cloth of some foreign fabric, and her waist, of perfectest symmetry, was cinctured by a broad ring of solid silver, which, to the young man, looked so slender that he could have clasped it about with both his hands.”

“Not far before them had ridden the Earl and the Lady Sybilla. Behind these two came the Marshal de Retz and the fat Lord of Avondale. They were telling each other tales of the wars of La Pucelle, the latter laughing and shaking shoulders, but at the end of every side-splitting legend the Frenchman would glance over his shoulder at Maud Lindsay and the little maiden Margaret.

As Sholto passed them on his return he stood aside, poised at the salute, looking meanwhile with awe on the great and notable French soldier. Yet at the first glimpse of his unvisored face there fell upon the young man a dislike so fierce and instinctive that he grasped his bow and fumbled in his quiver for an arrow, in order to send it through the unlaced joints of the Marshal's gorget.”

Such passages - and they are numerous - show a singular lack of self-restraint. They give an air of unreality to the whole book, and leave the impression of a fairy tale. Yet, apart from these faults, it is a good story of its kind. The Black Douglas, the sixth earl, is a fine character, and we are unfeignedly sorry to lose him when he is inveigled to Edinburgh by the treacherous Crichton and there done to death after a mockery of a trial. From an artistic standpoint, his disappearance at this early stage must be regarded as a blunder, for the story is only half told. The interest drops at once and does not revive again until the end is nearly reached. Sholto Maclise, we suppose must be considered the author's hero. At any rate, when the Black Douglas goes, he takes the leading role. He is a marvellously lucky youth. The son of a smith, he is taken into the Earl's household, finds the daughter of a baron ready to fall in love with him, is made Captain of the Castle guard and knighted, and speaks and acts as one to the manner born - all within a few months, and while he is still in his teens. This is rapid promotion indeed, and we can only say that he seems to have justified it. After the Earl's death, Sholto goes in disguise to France in pursuit of Marshal de Retz who has carried off two girls, one of them the baron's daughter. There we are introduced to devil workshop, and are invited to witness the sacrifice of children. This would be horrible enough if it were convincing, but it is so overwrought that it fails to stir the pulse. Still, Mr Crockett should know his public by this time. There is no reason why 'The Black Douglas' should not be as popular at the libraries as any of its predecessors.

Also in May, 'The Literary World' wrote on 'Mr Crockett's latest':

Mr Crockett's position as a novelist is now so secure, with a record of more than a dozen successful reviews behind him, that the reviewers task is greatly simplified. There is no need to waste space in placing the author among his contemporaries. The reader has already done that for himself.

*However closely we test these chapters, we altogether fail to observe any signs that Mr Crockett is wearier than he was three years ago. So far from this being the case, we really think that in *The Black Douglas* there is even more vigour, more swing, more pith than there was in 'The Red Axe.' The abuse is heartier; the lads have more swelling muscles; the thumps interchanged between person and person are such buffets as would have delighted Richard Coeur de Lion. In a word, Mr Crockett is in fine feather.*

It is manifest that hard work has now power to stale him. He remains buoyant throughout his labour, and tumbles adventure after adventure into his readers' laps. Few are the immaterial magnets that work more potently upon mankind than does the history of hard knocks, and certainly no novelist in the present day recognises this truth so constantly as Mr Crockett. In the very first chapter of 'The Black Douglas' Sholto and Laurence MacKim, son of the giant who was chief armourer to the Douglases, have a right valient bout of fisticuffs. Sholto has declared to Laurence his intention of telling his father that he meant to work at some fairer calling than hammering iron or blowing furnaces in a smithy. Thereupon Laurence dared him, wagering his velvet doublet, to go straight to his father's presence and there announce his revolt.

"The smith held his son a moment with his eyes.

'Well?' came in the deep low voice, more like the lowest tones of an organ than the speech of a man.

Sholto stood fixed, then half turning on his heel he began to walk towards the corner of the dwelling-house, over which a gay streamer of the early creeping convolvulus danced and swung in the stirring of the light breeze.

'You wish speech with me?' said his father, in the same level and thrilling undertone.

'No,' said Sholto, hesitant in spite of himself, 'but I thought—that is I desired—saw you my sister Magdalen pass this way? I have somewhat to give her.'

'Ah, so,' said Brawny Kim, without moving, 'a steel breastplate, belike. Thou hast the brace-buckle in thy hand. Doth the little Magdalen go with you to the weapon-show tomorrow?'

'No, father,' said Sholto, stammering, 'but I was uneasy for the child. It is full an hour since I heard her voice.'

'Then,' said his father, 'finish your work, put out the fire, and go seek your sister.'

Sholto brought his hands together and made the little inclination of the head which was a sign of filial respect. Then, solemn as if he had been in his place in the ordered line of the Earl's first levy of archer men, he turned him about and went back to the smithy.

Laurence lay all abroad on the heap of charcoal of which the armourer's welding fire was made. He was fairly expiring with laughter, and when his brother angrily kicked him in the ribs, he only waggled an ineffectual hand and feebly crowed in his throat like a cock, in his efforts to stifle the sounds of mirth.

'Get up, fool,' hissed his angry brother; 'help me with this accursed hammer-striking, or I will make an end of such a giggling lout as you. Here, hold up.'

And seizing his younger brother by the collar of his blue working blouse, he dragged him upon his feet.

'Now, by the saints,' said Sholto, 'if you cast your gibes upon me, by Saint Andrew I will break every bone in your idiot's body.'

'The purple velvet—oh, the purple velvet!' gasped Laurence, as soon as he could recover speech, 'and the eyes of Maud Lindsay!'

'That will teach you to think rather of the eyes of Laurence MacKim!' cried Sholto, and without more ado he hit his brother with his clinched knuckles a fair blow on the bridge of his nose.

The next moment the two youths were grappling together like wild cats, striking, kicking, and biting with no thought except of who should have the best of the battle. They rolled on the floor, now tussling among the crackling faggots, anon pitching soft as one body on the peat dust in the corner, again knocking over a bench and bringing down the tools thereon to the floor with a jingle which might have been heard far out on the loch. They were still clawing and cuffing each other in blind rage, when a hand, heavy and remorseless, was laid upon each. Sholto found himself being dabbled in the great tempering cauldron which stood by his father's forge. Laurence heard his own teeth rattle as he was shaken sideways till his joints waggled like those of a puppet at Keltonhill Fair. Then it was his turn to be doused in the water. Next their heads were soundly knocked together, and finally, like a pair of arrows sent right and left, Laurence sped forth at the window in the gable end and found himself in the midst of a gooseberry bush, whilst Sholto, flying out of the door, fell sprawling on all fours almost under the feet of a horse on which a young man sat, smilingly watching the scene."

The young Earl of Douglas only survives as far as the middle of this story. It was while riding home after witnessing the Homeric chastisement dealt out to his squabbling boys by the armourer that the Earl met with the lovely lady who was destined to bring him to ruin. All that his friends could do was not enough to keep the head of the Douglasses from going to Edinburgh, where his enemies were as plentiful as sparrows in a harvest field, for had he not promised Sybilla, little guessing that she was under the dominion of the satanic Gilles de Retz, that he would repair to the Scotch capital? So he came by his death, though not before he had knighted Sholto MacKim and won the love of the girl who had been instrumental in betraying him. After Earl William's death the scene is for the most part laid in France, whither Gilles de Retz - a villain abnormal even in these days of disproportionate scoundrels - had fled with Sholto's sweetheart and little Margaret Douglas. Naturally it behoved Sholto and Laurence and their brawny father - all good men and true - to track Gilles de Retz in order to wrench from his keeping the girls whom he had so foully abducted. But Gilles de Retz was in league with the Evil One. Magic powers were in his control, and he raised up a pack of were-wolves against the rescuers as will be seen from the following extract:

"Your daggers in your left hands, they are upon us!" cried Sholto, who, standing with his face to the west, had a lower horizon and more light than the others. The three men had cast their palmers' cloaks from their shoulders and now stood leaning a little forward, breathing hard as they waited the assault of foes whom they believed to be frankly diabolic and instinct with all the powers of hell. This required greater courage than storming many fortifications.

Almost as he spoke Sholto became aware that a fierce rush of shaggy beasts was crossing the scanty grass towards him. He saw a vision of red mouths, gleaming teeth, and hairy breasts, into the leaping chaos of which he plunged and replunged his sword till his arm ached. Mostly the stricken died snapping and tearing at each other; but ever and anon one stronger than the rest would overleap the barrier of dead and dying wolves that grew up in front of the three men, and Sholto would feel the teeth click clean and hard upon the mail of his arm or thigh before he could stoop to despatch the brute with the dirk which he grasped in his left hand.

The rush upon Sholto's side fortunately did not last long, but while it continued the battle was strange and silent and grim—this notable fight of man and beast. As the youth at last cleared his front of a hairy monster that had sprung at his throat, he found himself sufficiently free to look round the trunk of the blasted pine that he might see how it fared with his companions.

At first he could see nothing clearly, for the same strange and weird conditions continued to permeate the earth and air.

For a moment all would be dark and then flash on continuous flash would follow, the wild-fire running about the tree-tops and glinting up through the recesses of the woods as if the heavens themselves were instinct with diabolic light.

As he looked, Sholto saw his father, a gigantic figure standing black and militant against the brightest of it. His hand grasped a huge wolf by the heels, and he swung the beast about his head as easily as he was wont to handle the forehammer at home. With his living weapon Malise had swept a space about him clear, and the beasts seemed to have fallen back in terror before such a strange enemy.

But what of the Lord James? Overleaping the pile of dead and dying wolves which his sword and dagger had made, and from which savage heads still bit and snarled up at him as he went, Sholto ran round to seek the young Lord of Avondale. At the first flash after leaving the tree trunk he was nowhere to be seen, but a second revealed him lying on the ground, with four shaggy beasts bending over him and tearing fiercely at his gorget and breast-armor. With a loud shout Sholto was among them. He passed his sword through and through the largest, and in its fall the wounded monster turned and bit savagely at the fore leg of a companion. The bone cracked as a rotten branch snaps underfoot, and in another moment the two animals were rolling over and over, locked together in the death grapple.

Once, twice, and thrice Sholto struck right and left. The rest of the beasts, seemingly astonished by the sudden flank attack, turned and fled. Then, pushing off a huge wounded brute which lay gasping out its life in red jets upon the breast of the fallen man, he dragged James Douglas back to the tree which had been their fortress and propped him up against the trunk.

At the same moment a long wailing cry from the forest called the wolves off. They retreated suddenly, disappearing apparently by magic into the depths of the forest, leaving their dead in quivering heaps all about the little bare glade where the unequal fight had been fought.”

From this point Mr Crockett sets to work more earnestly than ever to pile Pelion upon Ossa. His revelations with regard to the character of Gilles de Retz are little less than appalling, and they will assuredly cause the hair of sensitive readers, especially if they happen to reach this part of the book late at night, to stand up more starkly than ever did quills upon the hedgepig when engaged in

a policy of inert defence. The chapter entitled 'The Red Milk' is among the most dreadful ever written by the author, which is saying a good deal. If ever hanging, drawing and quartering were too good for a criminal, they were certainly too good for this fiend and traitor. It is not an exaggeration to declare that these apparently severe measures seem to us positive luxuries when we remember the crimes of Gilles de Retz.

Surely no reader can fail to guess the conclusion of the whole matter. In his last chapter the novelist, as in duty bound, presents to Maud Lindsay and Sholto MacKimm the desire of their hearts. As they kiss in the foreground, rice and orange-blossoms are waiting in the near distance; or if not these modern adjuncts of matrimony, then such equivalents as were used in the year 1439.

And William Wallace wrote for 'The Bookman' in May 1899:

Mr Crockett's books come in such big battalions that it is not easy for anyone who has something to do besides reading them to keep pace with their production. His 'Red Axe' was the last of his romances that I read before 'The Black Douglas' reached me, but, for aught I know to the contrary, the period between them may have been marked by the appearance of half a dozen volumes as full as are both of them of that life and movement which will always and properly secure for their author a large public, in spite of the critical Amiels that are always proclaiming the woes of mon coeur fatigue. Still, one must do as one can and as one knows, and I am disposed to say that 'The Red Axe' indicate the road of romance along which Mr Crockett, giving his bridle rein a shake, should ride, and 'The Black Douglas' the road from which he ought to deflect. There was just enough of historical basis for the earlier book to make it something better than a mere castle in the air. Its successor - at least, its latest successor - exhibits its author hampered and indeed, fatally shackled by legend which is written as deep in the heart of Scotland as ordinary history, and is probably as authentic. One can quite understand Mr Crockett's desire to draw into his net the brilliant and luckless young Scottish nobleman - Duke of Touraine as well as Earl of Douglas - who was trapped and beheaded by the unscrupulous Crichton in Edinburgh Castle in 1440, and the Breton monster of iniquity and destroyer of children Gilles de Retz, who the same year was hanged and burned at Nantes. It enables him to reproduce after a fashion the old Franco-Scottish alliance. But his very effort to keep within the bounds of history has injured his plot in two ways. The death of Lord William Douglas, though true to history, is not true to fiction. He is really one of those heroes - heroes of the sort that Mr Crockett can draw successfully - who after adventures and hairbreadth escapes innumerable triumphs over all their enemies, including the weaknesses that do most easily beset them. His Lord William, having tarried but for a season in the Venusberg with the witch Sybilla, ought to have settled down with some Galloway Elizabeth after killing Crichton and Livingston. By way of compensation for the want of liberty allowed him in the Douglas 'incident' Mr Crockett has taken a great deal of licence in dealing with the De Retz atrocities. These were-wolves, Sathana, La Maffraye, and all the rest of it seem to me nothing more than sadly overdone melodrama. Mr

Crockett's talent undoubtedly demands elbow-room; but let him take it in stories which, like 'The Red Axe' give ample scope for imagination without trespassing on the preserves of history. At the same time, no falling off in literary or dramatic vigour is to be noticed in 'The Black Douglas.' The Mackims, father and sons, especially loyal, hard-headed and hard knocking Sholto, are boldly and successfully drawn. Mr Crockett is, as usual, very successful with his girl characters. One almost forgives Lady Sybilla for her treachery to her lover in consideration of her repentance. The saucy, courageous, yet loving and lovable Maud Lindsay is an attractive addition to his gallery of Scottish portraits. Mr Crockett is quite unrivalled as a painter of those vigorous women generally possessed of a tongue with a tang, whom the one Pope that visited Scotland - no saint either - considered too amorous forsooth because they were mentally and physically vigorous and born to be good wives and mothers.

In June, Andrew Lang, writing in his column 'At the Sign of the Ship' for 'Longman's Magazine' said:

Mr Crockett has lately introduced the odious Gilles de Retz into The Black Douglas. I don't know that the infamous Marechal was ever in Scotland, but it is quite fair business to bring him in, as he was a contemporary. He fought by the side both of the true and of the false Pucelle, which is odd enough. But some of Mr Crockett's critics seem to think he invented the Marechal.

M. Bossard thinks he was the original of Blue Beard. Charles Perrault, about 1698, only dressed up the traditions of the monster of history. I do not think so; analogous tales of the Forbidden Chamber occur all over the world. There is a Vendean variant, but the differences are little more than verbal. M. Bossard knows the world-wide variants, of which Blue Beard is only one. But he is not at the folk-lore point of view. The truth probably is that, in Brittany, the world-wide story of the Forbidden Chamber has been attached, by popular fancy, to the legend of the great traditional scoundrel of the country, Gilles de Rais. This is the usual course in such affairs. Gilles is not the original of Blue Beard, but with Blue Beard he has been confounded, history mixed with marchen in the popular fancy and memory. So marchen are attached to Charlemagne, or, as in the case of the spider, to Robert Bruce. This attachment of a conte to the actual personage prevents the Breton legend from being 'vague' as it is vague elsewhere. The Breton can show the very castle of Blue Beard; the room where he hung up the cold remains of his wife (which the Marechal never did), and so forth. But this lack of vagueness in Breton legend is not, as M. Bossard seems to think, a proof that the Marechal is the original, any more than Robert Bruce's case proves that the story of the spider was first told about him. The 'precision' is got simply by attaching a world-wide fable to a notorious real personage. M. Bossard is not at the point of view.

You can make up their own mind about the relative merits of these reviews if you read *The Black Douglas* and *Maid Margaret* for yourself.

Both are available in The Galloway Collection series as paperbacks from www.unco.scot online store. [The Black Douglas](#), [Maid Margaret](#).

Digital (and paperback) versions are also available from Amazon.

[The Black Douglas](#), [Maid Margaret](#).

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