

The Complete Crockett

The Galloway Raiders

digital edition

Scottish works



MY TWO
EDINBURGHS

S.R.CROCKETT

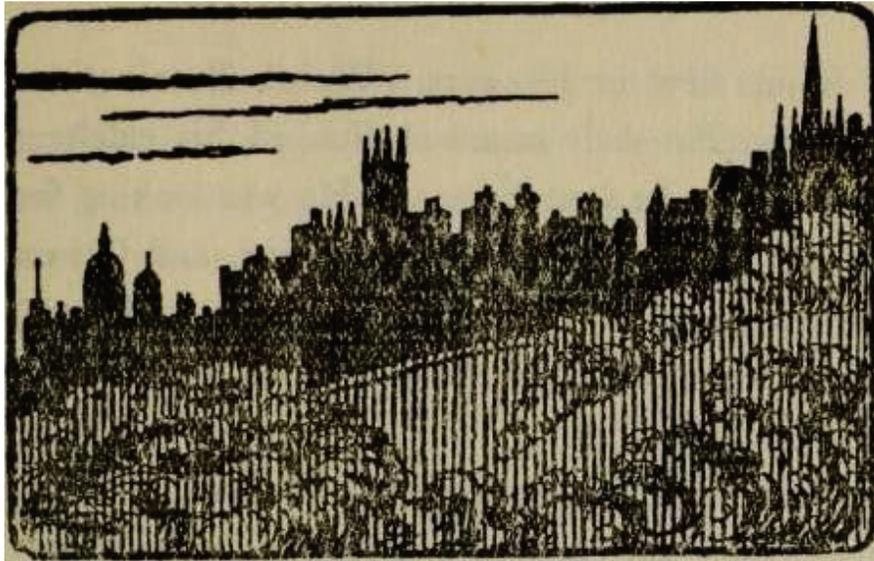
My Two Edinburghs

Searchlights through the mists of thirty years

By S.R.Crockett

(Drawings by Gordon Mein)

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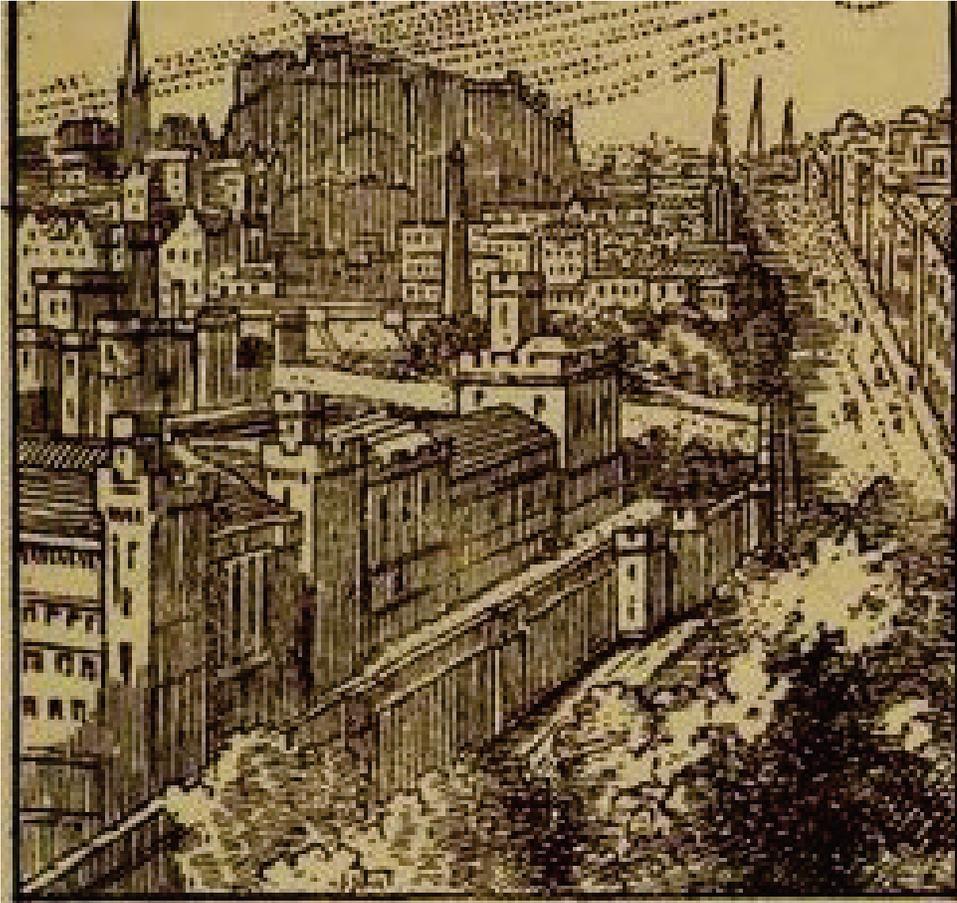
FOREWORD

Thirty years ago I knew a boy of fifteen, who had strange thoughts and made curious observations. I have never met him since and suspect him of keeping out of my way — or, if not dead, dead at least to me.

These are some of his reflections, and the curious thing is that, though ‘as different as different,’ we yet bore the same name, that long-legged, stalking, wonder-stricken boy of fifteen — and I.

S. R. CROCKETT. February 19th, 1909.

MY TWO EDINBURGHS



FIRST GLIMPSE

October 20th, 1876.—A third-class carriage hurrying eastward from Carstairs, that black wild cave of the winds set on the moorland. Out of the window in defiance of regulations, a boy of sixteen was hanging to the risk of his neck and to the annoyance of sundry other fellow passengers less enthusiastic than he. That eager, impressionable nuisance of a boy, with poetry-filled head protruding Edinburgh-wards, was the present writer.

Smuts flew in his eyes. Weird illuminations from paraffin shale mines challenged his sidelong regard. But he saw them not. He was looking for Wallace, and Bruce, and John Knox, and Queen Mary, and Claverhouse (though him he hated) riding out of the West Bow with all his troopers behind him,

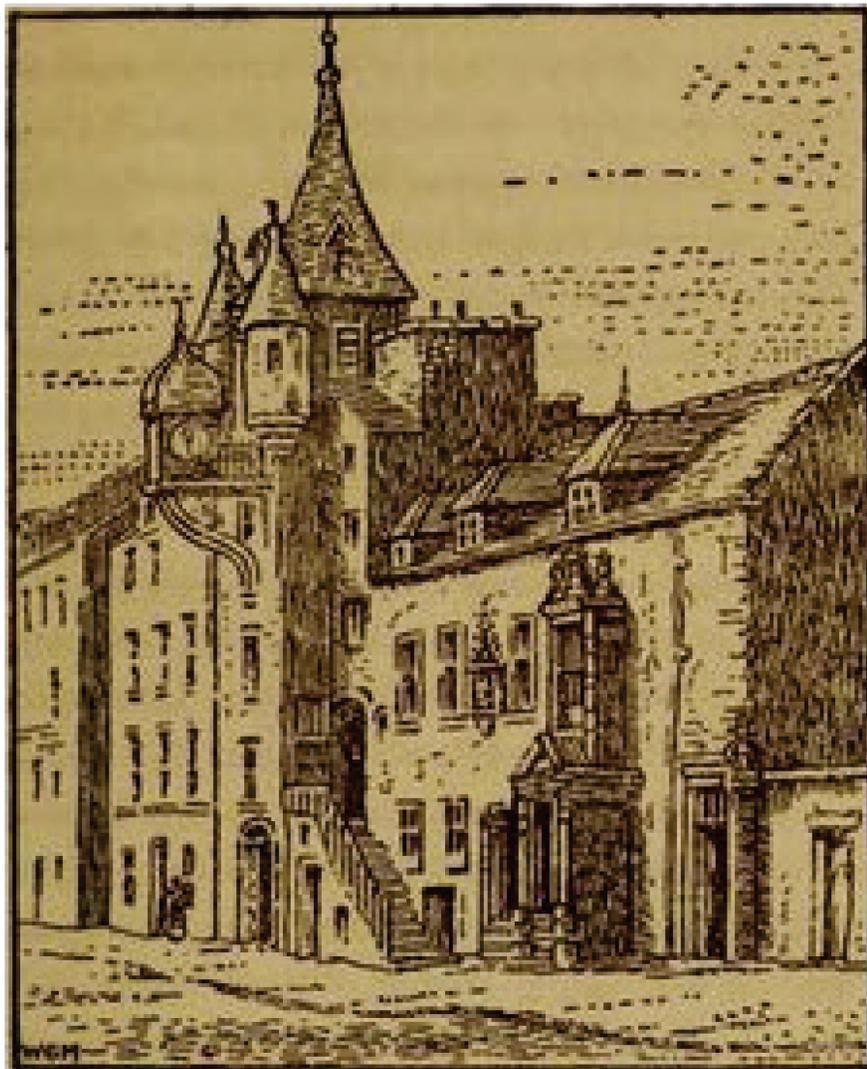
He watched long and the wind blew chill. Suddenly the train swerved and he saw, swimming in a pale green windy sky, the Castle Rock, tower-crowned, no bigger than a toy. It was purple of the deepest, but to the boy's eyes looked infinitely remote and solitary. Then he sat back in his hard cushionless bench with something like a sob, and his long-suffering neighbour told him, if he was quite done, to put the window up. But he did not care. He had seen.

RETICENCES

That night I took my cousin's arm (he had been there a few weeks earlier than I) and he piloted me. He also helped me with my box upstairs. It had been made by a country joiner and even when empty was about as heavy as a piano. We lived next the sky in a many-storied grey house, but one of our two windows, by God's grace, looked up to the mural battlements of the Salisbury Crags and across the valley to the western shoulder of Arthur's Seat. That seemed in some far-off way to suggest home. But from the other window, looking down on the twinkling lamps receding into the distances by the city dusk—frankly, to go near them, they made me giddy. And what is stranger still, after years of mountain climbing and uneasy muleback, the giddy feeling of that first night comes back to me in dreams, always connected with my old lodgings and my first glimpse of the long lines of yellow Edinburgh lights. I had never been in a city before, so my cousin was very kind and compassionate. Specially he warned me against saying 'It's a fine night' to the policemen as I had done to the porter at the station. I asked him why. 'Because he would think it cheek and, as like as not, run you in!'

'Well,' thought I, 'tis maybe more cheery in a city. There are more lights certainly. But what for are the folk so unfriendly? It had been quite otherwise in Galloway.'

So each time I passed a blue coat crowned with a helmet, I had to bite my tongue to keep from asking after the wearer's health. But certainly I did not want to be run in. What would my people think? They took in the Scotsman and read it religiously. Thus was I taught to be reticent and self-contained, but I will allow it has never been natural.



THE CANONGATE TOLBOOTH

THE FOURPENNY BOX

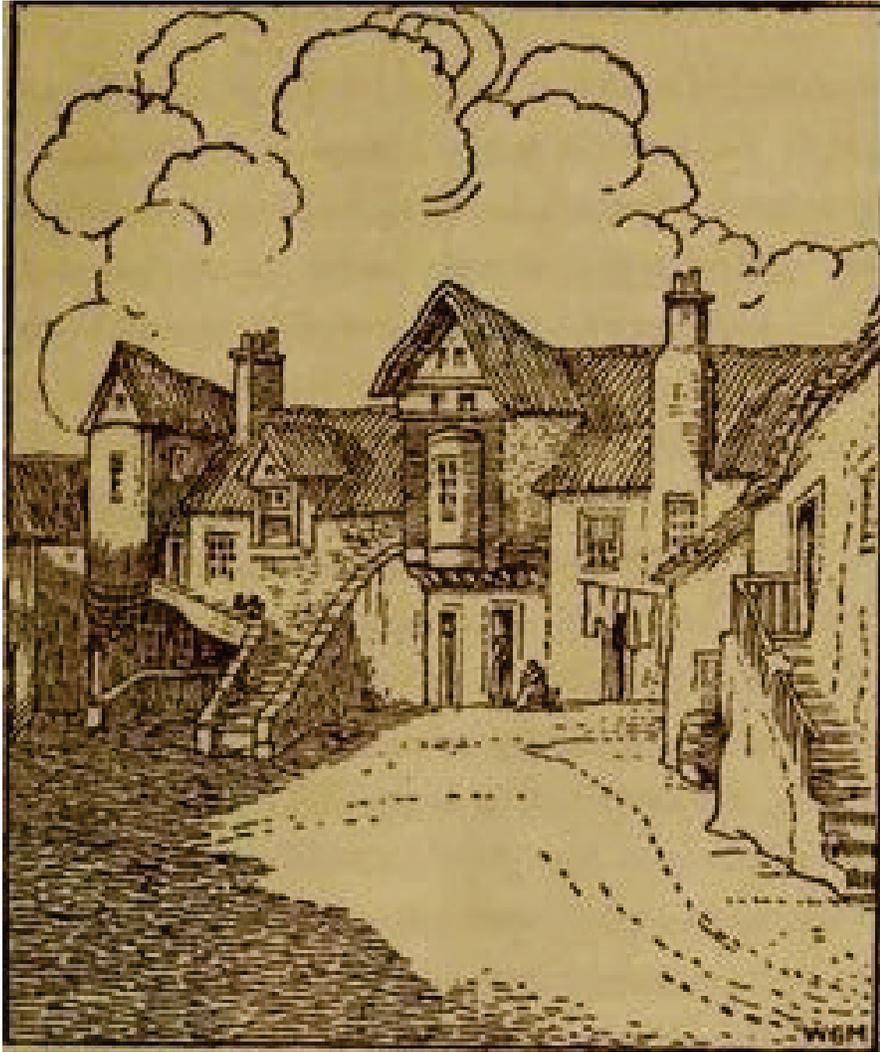
Barring two or three bookshops, I never visited the New Town. Later I possessed the friendship of one or two there, rare souls living unsubmerged. But if you live long in Edinburgh, you become Old Town or New Town by instinct, and the imposition of a High

Hand—indeed just as your hair is light or dark. I was Old Town. It was the ancient unimproved Old Town of the seventies that I loved. Saturdays were my glad high days. All the forenoon I poked from Wynd to Port, and from Bridge to Raw, with a shilling to spend on a book, a pamphlet, or a rare print. There was no window so dingy that I did not flatten my nose against it, if there was anything literary to sell inside. I forgot to be hungry and incurred the hostility of my landlady by returning only when everything else was shut. But the memories of those ‘traipsings’—my landlady's word—were more to me than the University and its library—more than professors and their classes, better than the fellowship of man. Best of all it was to have, by favour, the run of Thin's University Bookshop.

Pavements blown clean, kerbs ringing under foot like stricken metal, winds that lay in wait at every corner and had another try at your hat, and if it failed whipped you most unchristianly on both cheeks whether you turned them or not! Ah, these were days when the blood had to run fast and full to enable a hungry boy to nose all day among boxes labelled ‘All these, Fourpence!’ After practising the book-chase for years in Edinburgh, I hold even the quays by the Seine in light esteem, and as for London—there never was anything worth carrying home.

But I must admit that this was my landlady's opinion even about my Edinburgh acquisitions. She challenged me to ‘come ben and lay them out,’ in the kitchen. I did so—on the lid of the coal bunker. She examined them with her hands behind her back, as if any one of them might bite. Once when I proposed laying them down on the dresser among the plates and dishes, I thought for a moment she would bite me, yet these were Jacobite pamphlets—a rare if odorous find.

I received little encouragement in these days— but then, I needed none.



WHITE HORSE CLOSE

SEARCHLIGHTS

During my first year at college, before I got any journalistic work of the humblest kind, I coached. Never was there any coaching like that of Edinburgh in the seventies. A pound a month for an hour in the evenings and find yourself in shoe leather. I had three of these with an average walk of three miles between each. I lived under the Salisbury Crags. My first engagement was near the new Episcopal Cathedral. Next I tramped to Leith Links, from which (these data are for experts) I returned to a house under the clock-face in Norton Place. Last of all, a weary wight, I made for home. Then I prepared my work for my classes, moving my sore feet on the threadbare carpet till I succeeded in making a yet more

napless place. After that I wrote verses—wads of verse, acres of verse, and was happy. I read them aloud and the others said they were.

Now I come to think of it, I was none the worse of these long peregrinations athwart the humming gas-lit city. I was hail-fellow-well-met (though I couldn't stop) with the Wednesday night riff-raff in the Grassmarket, the residue of the weekly market. In the Candlemaker Row I was known as 'the Laddie in a Hurry,' and I have been asked to deliver a parcel in Leith —'as I was going that way.' But at that time I seemed to be acutely miserable. Out every night, fair or foul, snow or birling blast from five till half-past- nine. I grew to hate the fellows who had nothing to do, but thumb their lexicons with their toes in their slippers.

Yet the regularity of the task, the high black pinnacled and gabled houses among which the wind shrieked, the kenned faces of the shop-keepers, the girls who came out of grocers and bakers with their purchases wrapped in their aprons, the rumble of the horse-cars—I could not take one for that cost threepence—the tang of salt in the air down by the docks—sometimes united to bring on a kind of giddy lightness like a boy's first glass of champagne. Once I carried an unknown girl's box from the Waverley Steps nearly to Leith, while she trotted alongside. When she asked me at the (area) door why I was so kind, I remember replying ' Because you come from the country!'

There is no sequel. Only I seemed to recapture something. That morning she had seen the gorse blooming and the rabbits popping out to feed along the edges of the wood. Poor lassie! And I believe that I skipped one of my scholastic engagements that night—thinking, maybe, on the gorse, and maybe on that area door in Leopold Place, third from the corner.



JOHN KNOX'S HOUSE

SUPPERS AND A BANJO

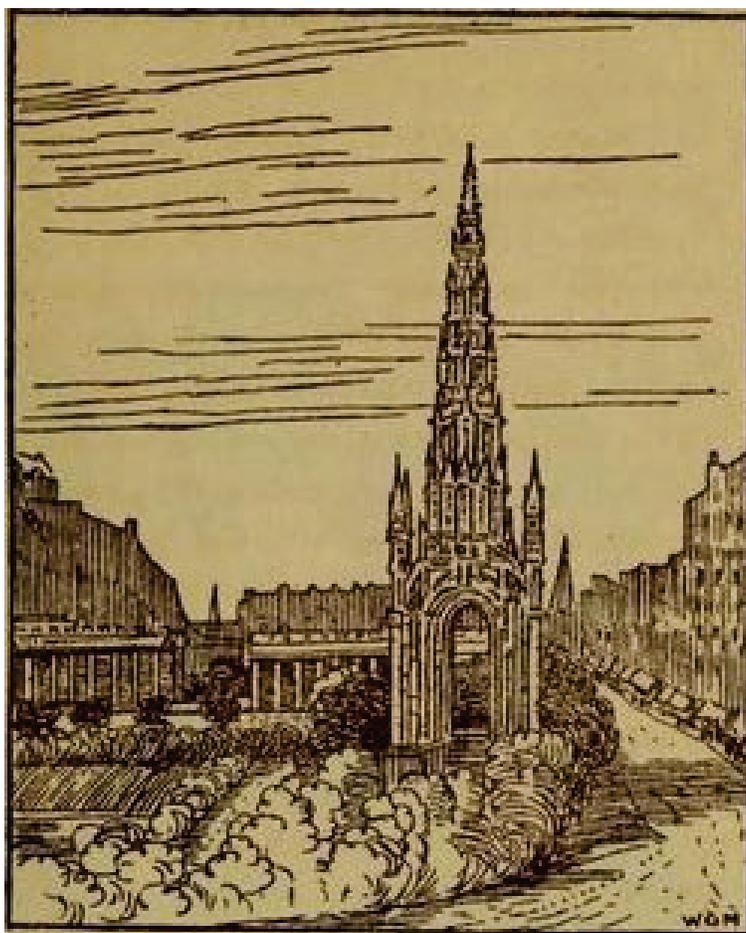
After the first sight I did not care so much for the Castle, never going higher than the Esplanade, whence as it were, all the world and the pomp thereof may be seen. But I haunted Holyrood on non-paying days and at other times it haunted me. Indeed all the Canongate did, with the Wynds and Sooth Backs and Pleasances thereto annexed.

I dwelt among the smaller fry of artists, some of whom have grown very big indeed since. We had no idea that we were Bohemians of a very quaint species. We only knew that we were poor, that we worked hard, and that some day we meant to be great.

There was generally, however, somebody who had a little money, which meant a good supper, eaten at curious hours, while between times the banjo said 'Tink-a-tank' by way of grace after meat.

HOW I KNEW THE LANGUAGE

This is no long 'screed,' no say-away of un-needed praise. A few boyish memories only which have cast themselves up out of many. For I saw in those days the underside of the City-which-is-set-about-with-Hills. For those who wish information, let them go to them who sell. And as for her beauty, uncontested and uncontestable, why, are not photographs, plain and coloured, for sale at every street corner. I have been offered one myself. But I answered in the best 'Cleg Kelly' accent 'Haud oot o y the road, ye wee Keelie ye!' At which, thus addressed in his own tongue, the seller stood at gaze, his mouth open with amazement, as though he had seen 'the de'il' or, as it might be, the Scott Monument had spoken to him.



THE SCOTT MONUMENT

A LITTLE SUMMER COLOUR

Yet there are golden August days, memorable to the heart for ever, when if you keep to the un-touristed parts, the sun sinks slowly, softly, stilly, (there being nothing to prevent it) the voices of children in parks and squares come gently upon the ear as far-heard sheep bells, and the Castle rock changes colour once every five minutes by the clock. The show culminates in a crown of glory all along the ridge of the High Street. Then out of the valley the gloaming creeps up bluish-lavender, scaling the rock with circumspection, and the lights begin to twinkle from the Castle downwards to the ancient Palace ha'.

To see this, however, you have to cross the Bridges or tramp down the Mound, before facing about.

And this, no doubt is what Princes Street and the New Town are for—that, and to afford your wife an excuse for going to 'Jenner's.'

THE TWO CITIES

Now-a-days it is different. I sit aloft and see Edinburgh smoke her pipe from afar. For she is still Auld Reekie. And on clear nights the glimmer of her lights against the sky, makes a steady kindly loom under the brisk snap of the Northern Lights. It is chiefly on such nights that I am conscious how that only a few miles away, lie the two Edinburgh^ I know—the one bright as a milled shilling, the other grimed, rusty, half effaced as to image and superscription.

But, if you are her true lover, and faithful— you will find, like me, that 'The Old is Better!'

FINIS