

MEN WILL BE BOYS: Islands and identity in the work of J.M.Barrie and S.R.Crockett

**‘Many men, no doubt, become parents in order to give *The Coral Island* to their son.’
(J.M.Barrie)**

The Coral Island, though forgotten today, was extremely significant (and popular) in the formative years of Barrie and Crockett. As adults they also revered Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. But these were more than just boys own adventures. I hope to show that both Barrie and Crockett created their own island ‘maps’ in their writing and my aim is to lay out some of the markers here; suggesting that an exploration of personal and social identity are key to understanding the writing of both men.

Turning first to Barrie.

JMBarrie’s islands

The picture of Peter Pan on the Island and the story of the boy who would not grow up are more or less hardwired into our view of Barrie.

‘*To Die Will be an Awfully Great Adventure*’ is one of our best known quotations – there is perhaps only one more famous island quote: John Donne’s ‘No Man is an Island.’ It is the ultimate in anti-isolationism statements, and I have to confess when I first came across another Barrie island quote: ‘*to be born is to be wrecked on an island*’ (in his 1913 introduction to the Coral Island) I was caught up in the contexts of the *Peter Pan* image and Donne’s poem, and initially took it to be a negative (though intriguing) statement.

Then I looked more closely - and found Barrie had a theory of islands quite contrary to my supposition. I think this serves to remind us that it’s always wise to explore further, especially when we have deeply entrenched views or beliefs about a writer.

This is most relevant to the works of both Barrie and Crockett, as both have suffered from what I’ll call secondary source syndrome – and both are now largely hidden treasures, cast adrift from the mainland of Scottish literary history. Exploring their islands is, I think, a worthwhile endeavour. To find treasure, you have to be prepared for adventure – and to dig.

A key text with reference to Barrie’s views, is the article *Wrecked on an Island* from the ‘National Observer’ (1894) in which I’d like to point out a couple of lines:

There are some questions that no author seems able to resist. For instance, what is style? Why do you refuse to write a great drama? Which is your favourite word in English poetry? But these weaknesses have been discovered long ago, and played on ever since. I think I know a new irresistible. My theory is based on a profound conviction that all authors want to wreck themselves on a desert island. Corner them, and they will admit that they would rather be the author of even a second-rate tale of this kind than poet laureate or novelist laureate. And the less

*romantic are the works they produce the more do they thirst for that island. Approach the man who is at Book Two of his Metaphysics of Ethics for something about his island, and Book Two will progress no more that day. Ask the celebrated author of Another Glance at the Differential Calculus in four vols. 8vo, and you shall have a column in reply. This, of course, shows no peculiarity in the literary man; it rather proves him (after all) brother of the human race. **Every man has had at some time of his life (and the lucky ones have it to the end) an island in his eye on which he is wrecked, hurrah!***

Looking at the highlighted parts; ***My theory is based on a profound conviction that all authors want to wreck themselves on a desert island.***

In essence he is saying here that every man IS an island, in clear contradiction of Donne. This is no accident.

And the second highlighted part:

Every man has had at some time of his life (and the lucky ones have it to the end) an island in his eye on which he is wrecked, hurrah!

The developing theory then, suggests that in Barrie's eyes not only is every man an island, but that he believes this is a good thing.

Barrie's Island works present us with issues of identity including rites of passage (the transition from boy to man - and girl to woman) as well as exploring the conflict between personal and social identity. They offer an insight into Barrie's interest in the childish state of being and the psyche of the child. On Barrie's childish islands, altruism doesn't exist. Sentimentality is exposed and explored in this context. Barrie suggests that 'island' living represents or manifests a uniquely self-contained individual – a pre 'community', a sort of selfish state which he claims is natural to the child.

We see this later in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and we also see it through Barrie's own eyes in his *Black Lake Island*- a personal pictorial tribute to the Llewellyn Davies boys.

Barrie explores the concept of 'state of nature' in terms of child versus adult and also in class terms. The 'wrecked' article points to this through a series of questions and answers. They reveal that isolation is less physical and more psychological. And that hierarchy/power are important elements. Thus rites of passage and personal/social identity issues are explored:

Q1. Should you prefer to be wrecked alone?

Reply: the boy in you knows that the pleasure comes in when there are other boys to see you do it.

Q2. Suppose you are to have company, then, whom of all your friends should you like to have? This question goes to the root of friendship.

Reply: I am to some extent tied, for when I was twelve or thereabout I solemnly promised another boy that, if such luck were granted me, I should let him know before I started. He was to do as much for me.

Turning to more adult questions he then observes:

3. The sex question has to be faced if we are grown up. Before that, ‘away with them,’ answered it satisfactorily. Women, it is to be feared, are in the way on an island, though doubtless the best of them want to have one also. (There might be an island for women.)

A master of narration who is only second to Scott cast away a man and a woman on an island and as soon as that other boy and I heard of it we got the book, but, well, it was better than any book without an island. Yet they never sat round the watch-fire, and he would rather have kissed her (on an island, too!) than found a grove of sugar-canes, and she showed an adaptability for island work that we grudged her sex.

It is likely that this is a reference to Ballantyne (not *The Coral Island*, but one of the hundred or so other works that he penned – I confess I haven’t got the exact reference yet, since my knowledge of Ballantyne’s work is sketchy).

There are a series of other questions which suggest that, for Barrie, islands offer an escape from the commitment and responsibility (and reality) of adulthood.

Q4. At what age should you prefer to be wrecked?

Reply: Any age will do, but for choice give me fourteen.

Q5. What sort of an island?

Q6. Cave, tent, hut, tree?

Q7. Now the savages. Shall you have them fierce or tame?

And Barrie’s article comes to this ‘sad’ conclusion.

*But, alackaday, these joys are only for the imagination. Put on your silk hat, and off you go for your two shilling lunch. I must return sorrowfully to my last. **There is no island for you and me.***

Let’s pause to consider that: **There is no island for you and me**

In other words ‘we’ are destined to me MEN. In this statement we see the foreshadowing of the concept: ‘*All boys grow up... except one*’? And perhaps the beginnings of Never-land as part of Barrie’s theory of islands.

But if we look beyond *Peter Pan* we see that in Barrie’s writing there IS an island for authors (and readers). The first place to look is not second star on the right and straight on till morning,

but to the more adult island of *The Admirable Crichton*. This moves us from considering rites of passage to issues of social identity. In *The Admirable Crichton* (which pre-dates *Peter Pan*), Barrie looks at social identity from an adult perspective, exploring the relationship between class and social identity in the context of a contemporary debate around the ‘state of nature’.

The plays central motif ‘what’s natural is right’ explores Darwinism and its impact on society. In this play social class is upended, revealing Barrie as a clever social commentator from within the guise of drawing room drama. And it’s typical of Barrie’s plays to take the audience out of the drawing room into another world – and then return them changed along with the characters.

The Admirable Crichton focuses especially on the endurance of hierarchy as a system. The characters are jointly and individually ‘reborn’ on the island - and yet hierarchy remains significant. In this way Barrie shows the classes subverted and then re-established. Because it’s adults, the love theme is central. Yes, there are women on the island! In 2002 I updated *The Admirable Crichton* as *Down the Line* and it was performed for its centenary at Barrie’s old school in Dumfries by College Students, then again in 2003 as an outreach project in Oxford with school pupils. The themes of social class and hierarchy were brought up to date by establishing a world of celebrity footballers and popstars, where butlers had become bodyguards. Taking people out of their environment and subverting the social order, then illustrating how people fall back into the ‘old ways’ was an exploration (as Barrie’s original was) of the concept ‘what’s natural is right.’ Issues of personal and social identity were presented to and by young adults facing their own rites of passage.

An island is a good setting on which to effect such a change. On an island, different rules apply. But it’s worth remembering ‘rules’ do still apply and the island of the adult has different rules from those of the child - because in the adult world ‘society’ and ‘community’ are important values whereas in the boyish island independence - or at least a sense of inviolable personal identity - is all that is important.

More than twenty five years after his ‘wrecked on an island’ article, Barrie was still engaged with his theory of islands and the question of emotional isolationism. In the play *Mary Rose* (1920) his island story has a man and a woman and... well it’s better than a play without an island!

It’s a strange play with a supernatural element. Some critics suggest it exposes post war angst but it explores the nature of personal identity and emotional isolationism/ completeness as well. Though it starts in Sussex, the real guts of the play happen on a Hebridean Island – known as ‘the Island that likes to be visited.’ The island is visited twice, in childhood and in adulthood. The tension between the real and the supernatural is palpable. Here the ‘lost child’ is a girl rather than a boy, and the rites of passage is as much about that between one world as between child and adult. Mary Rose disappears aged eleven for a month then eleven years later (a married woman) she is ‘lost on the island’ for twenty five years. When she reappears again (note the

similarity in time span from the article *Wrecked on an Island* to the play *Mary Rose*) she has not moved on. While Mary Rose never grows up in one sense, as a mother in Act 2 she observes that her dearest wish is to sit on her grown son's lap. And the play concludes with Mary Rose as a ghost, sitting on her grown son's lap. It's complex stuff behind a 'spooky' story. The play has many layers, for example the juxtaposition between trees (and their life cycle)– the apple tree of Sussex and the rowan tree of the island – which offer more psychological depth than I have time to go into here. It is a play about 'last times' and not knowing when they occur. There is a sense of Barrie visiting his own island for the last time in this play.



Moving on now to our second author, the lesser known S.R.Crockett. As Barrie is best known for *Peter Pan*, so Crockett is best known for *The Raiders* – which also features an island -Rathan Island.

SRC islands

Personal and social identity are just as embedded in Crockett's fiction as in Barrie's. He also uses islands as more than simply a physical setting to explore his concerns of rites of passage and social hierarchy. However, the depth and sophistication of his 'island' theories in story are even less explored than Barrie.

Both men are openly critical of dominant social hierarchy. Barrie's island works tend to focus on the English class system of the Edwardian drawing room, while Crockett deals with an older, Scottish sense of rural community where the island is perhaps less an expression of personal identity and more a place of refuge and realisation.

As Stevenson observed; *'Barrie is indoors and Crockett is out of doors.'*

To explore the place of islands in Crockett's mind, we can look at a letter written to his agent A.P. Watt in May 1893 in the first flush of success but before celebrity status fully kicked in. Here Crockett states in the highlighted section:

*If you could guarantee me – say as perspective of 'Rogues' Island and other work – it would keep my mind easy and enable me to put my best work into my books. **O that I could just for ever be a desert island and financed by Watt!** As soon as I get the 'Lilac' through hands I shall do three or four stories which are waiting to be written such as you asked for the P.M. Maga. And others about 5000 words; and then we will plunge into the adventure book – and see if I can't beat Treasure Island!! No Scot needs the 'couthy conceit' says my wife.*

Note **be** an island not be **on** an island.

Like Barrie, Crockett seems to see 'island' as a place he can be free from the constraints of society. Free just to write. And be a boy. Because writing is telling stories, and Crockett's stories tend to have a deep resonance to his own childhood.

Also note the title *Rogues' Island*. Later in the letter he states:

I hope to put the Herd in your hands in time for the Autumn. Rogues' Island as I said about middle of Sept; portions of it in August to submit to Lang.

This suggests *Rogues' Island* as the original title for *The Raiders*, as the dates match up. The title was later revived for his semi-autobiographical rites of passage novel which was published posthumously in 1926, mostly it has to be said out of a sense of duty from publisher to widow. I have not yet managed to confirm when the story of *Rogues Island* was originally written. Like many writers, Crockett was not averse to repurposing, or developing a theme. The previously mentioned serialised *Galloway Herd*, was not considered suitable for publication in 1893 but was substantially repurposed and can be seen in parts in the novel *Kit Kennedy* (published 1899) It was also (ironically) pirated in America and published against Crockett's wishes in 1895.

The two islands are set side by side in reality. For comparative purposes, if we set the two works together, we find that *Rogues Island* is 'purer' boys own adventure/rites of passage than *The Raiders* – or at least a more personal version. But it is not a less mature (or interesting) work. However, by the 1920s the 'genre' had moved on. I suggest that *Rogues' Island* is to *The Raiders* much as Charlotte Bronte's *The Professor* is to *Villette*.

Crockett's writes about many islands but I shall restrict myself to the three main islands on the Solway. Commentary and analysis of these is found in Volume 2 of my work *Discovering Crockett's Galloway*. This acts, among other things, as something of a treasure map into Crockett's island works. I have been studying Crockett for over 20 years (and 'hard' for over 5) and the *Discovering Crockett* series is designed in part as 'adventures' into his extensive oeuvre.

The three main Crockett islands on the Solway are Hestan, fictionalised as Rathan Island; Rough fictionalised as Rogues' and Meikle Ross, fictionalised as Ross Island. All three illustrate aspects of 'identity' in Crockett's writing.

In *Rogues' Island* he writes:

'One thing is certain Never will we have such a holiday as we had on Rough Island –nor any flounders so good (though there will be trout and gypsies and Murder Holes!)

Which clearly references *The Raiders*.

While Crockett doesn't have a theory of islands as such, there are some interesting comparisons to be explored on these islands. Crockett is a master at writing from the position of the retrospective narrator. (man/boy and sometimes woman/girl.) The 'hero' of *Rogues' Island*, one

Jonathon Laurieston is even more recognisably Crockett than *The Raiders* hero Patrick Heron, in whom many see Stevenson's David Balfour.

Crockett came from near the village of Laurieston and in *Rogues' Island* his humorous aversion to the name Jonathan, perhaps hints to Crockett's relationship with his own name, Samuel. Both are old testament names, invested with history. And Crockett grew up with the weight of Cameronianism on his shoulders. His own identity was flexible as he became transformed from 'Galloway Herd' to Celebrity Bestseller. While it's always dangerous to 'read into' works, sustained study confirms that nothing is there by chance in Crockett's fiction. *Rogues Island* favours exploring identity primarily as rites of passage whereas *The Raiders* explores identity primarily as social hierarchy and I suggest this is reflected in the names of the 'heroes.'

And Jonathan Laurieston is an eminently suitable name for a novel which is primarily about personal identity as rites of passage while Patrick Heron's name is plucked from local history. Patrick is a symbol as well as a character. As a 'bonnet laird' he has a place in the hierarchy. The novel is about his rites of passage and his place in a Scotland struggling with the Acts of Union. As with all Crockett's writing, it works on more than one level. For those interested in social history, tramping flounders is still a local pastime peculiar to the Solway.

If we consider how Crockett and Barrie shared a version of the rags to riches life-story; we might reflect that as Barrie is hoist on the petard of *Peter Pan*, so Crockett is generally hoist on the petard of *The Raiders*. For many he is stuck on the fictional Rathan Island. Of it he writes:

'If there be anything bonnier or sweeter in this world than a May morning on the Isle of Rathan by the Solway Shore, I have yet to see it.'

Rathan Island is if not unique, then unusual in fiction in that it is explored in several more novels and short stories, offering us a picture of a place over time – from the 17th century through to the 20th. We can therefore explore a landscape which remains more or less constant, while 'history' and society change around it. Yet Crockett observes in *The Raiders*: '*Rathan is but a little isle - indeed only an isle when the tide is flowing*'. But there are no small islands in Crockett's world. He writes from the perspective of the underdog, the 'ordinary' and his islands are no exception to this perspective.

For Crockett, where there are islands there are caves - and where there are caves there are smugglers. Indeed smuggling is a 'constant' for Rathan Island. But in Crockett's stories smuggling is less *Treasure Island* and Captain Hook, and more about economics, politics and social class.

The Raiders was published in 1894. In his later novel *The Smugglers*, (1911) set in the early 20th century, Crockett focuses more on the coastal caves than the island proper and explores the dark side of life from a more modern perspective. In the earlier book the 'heroine' is kidnapped off the island by gypsies, but in the later novel 'people smuggling' has a darker economic

significance. In *The Moss Troopers* (1912, set in the Napoleonic War), ‘people smuggling’ as ‘press-ganging’ is also central. In this novel Crockett also manages to deal with the Barrie-esque ‘problem’ of a man and a woman on an island. Let’s just say, it’s an interesting view of an island honeymoon!

Both in historic ‘fact’ and Crockett’s fiction, smuggling is split between the ‘black’ and the ‘white’ trade. His novels often explore economics and particularly the consequences of free trade on the ‘ordinary’ Scot. As regards the personal ‘rites of passage’ aspect - the boy hero in *The Smugglers* is partly based on Crockett’s own son Philip – going through his own transition to adulthood at the time the book was written. Crockett always invests more than one dimension in his novels. The map of his narrative is as complex as the reader wants to make it.

Moving along the Solway Coast, Crockett’s other son George (who got the family nickname Toady Lion from a childish inability to pronounce the name Richard Coeur de lion) features in a book which seems to take us full circle, back to the ‘purer’ world of boys’ own adventure. The title is *Toady Crusoe*, which is pretty self explanatory! It is a very humorous example of Edwardian children’s literature.

It is worth remembering that Crockett was contemporary with the likes of E. Nesbit and that he was commissioned to write abridged adaptations of Scott’s novels for young people which were hugely successful in their day. We should also remember that when Crockett, Barrie and Stevenson were writing the demarcation between adult and youth fiction was still in its infancy (pardon the pun).

But boys will be men. So I move away from the books and back to the authors. Or rather, on to a real life boys’ own adventure. Like some boys wish to run away to the circus, Stevenson ran away to an island – and that was appealing to Barrie and Crockett, both of whom he invited to visit him. In a letter to Barrie in 1892 RLS wrote:

*It is never hot here – 86 in the shade is about our hottest – and it is never cold except just in the early mornings. Take it for all in all, I suppose this island climate to be by far the healthiest in the world – even the influenza entirely lost its sting. Only two patients died and one was a man nearly eighty, and the other a child below four months. I won’t tell you if it is beautiful, for **I want you to come here and see for yourself.** Everybody on the premises except my wife has some Scotch blood in their veins – I beg your pardon – except the natives – and then my wife is a Dutchwoman and the natives are the next thing conceivable to Highlanders before the forty five. We would have some grand cracks!*

RLS

Come, it will broaden your mind, and be the making of me.

In response, in 1893 Barrie and Crockett planned their own boy's own island adventure – a writers' pilgrimage to visit Stevenson in Samoa - which had it happened, might have substantially changed the future of all three men for whom the boundaries between man and boy were never fully resolved.

I think as Scots, islands are perhaps an inevitable part of our life and psychological makeup. In this brief glance at the treasure map of Barrie and Crockett's islands, I hope I have shown that for both writers, islands are places of creativity as well as adventure. They offer something more than straightforward settings and are woven into some complex narrative themes. As such, I think that for readers and scholars, the islands of Barrie and Crockett are well worth exploring. And personally, I am convinced there are few better men to be wrecked on an island with than Barrie, Crockett and/or Stevenson.

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