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## WILLIAM ROBERTSON NICOLL, THE KAILYARD NOVEL AND THE QUESTION OF POPULAR CULTURE

In his influential study *The Break-Up of Britain*, Tom Nairn states an opinion of Kailyard that can reasonably be declared axiomatic: 'the whole thing is related to the much larger field of popular culture.'<sup>1</sup> Whether it is used in discussions of Scottish literature, cinema, television, tourism, history or politics, the word Kailyard invariably stands as a synonym for kitsch. The widespread use of the term has resulted, however, in a general assumption that the works of literature most closely associated with it – the early fiction of S.R. Crockett, Ian Maclaren and J.M. Barrie – must also be understood (and in some senses dismissed) as popular culture. In discussions about Kailyard, these three writers are often lumped together with images from various media with which they are at best only tangentially related. There is little similarity between a Barrie novel and a strip cartoon in the *Sunday Post*, yet commentators regularly see such divergent texts as part of the same ongoing movement in Scottish culture; a movement that allegedly promotes a cheapening, evasive, stereotyped view of Scottish life.<sup>2</sup> Even if we narrow the discussion to the literary scene at the end of the nineteenth century, the assumption remains that the Kailyard novel represents a newly-emerging form of popular fiction which would come to flower in the early years of the twentieth century. In a recent essay, Beth Dickson has suggested that 'continuing confusions about the Kailyard in Scottish criticism' are caused by a failure to 'distinguish effectively between popular and literary writing'.<sup>3</sup> Once we 'understand the significance of the Kailyard as *popular literature*', she argues, we can 'cut the Gordian knot of the Kailyard' and see it at last for what it is – 'an outright Scottish success'.<sup>4</sup>

The easy identification of Kailyard with popular culture is, however, misleading in two important ways. Firstly, it misrepresents the artistic standing that J.M. Barrie held in the literary culture of the 1890s. In support of her argument, Dickson contrives to misread a review by Margaret Oliphant in *Blackwood's Magazine*, where *A Window in Thrums* is discussed within the context of popular fiction. In this review, Barrie's text is separated off from what Oliphant calls 'the host of little books which are finding their way to immense popularity in Scotland', not included among them, as Dickson claims. In contrast to the work of Annie S. Swan, Robina F. Hardy and John Strathesk, Oliphant sees Barrie as 'a disciple to whom Sir Walter would have held out his kind hand, and in whom we can take an honest pride.'<sup>5</sup> Like so many other things, proper understanding of the critical reception of Barrie's fiction has been obscured by his subsequent association with the work of Crockett and Maclaren. Another critic who argues for the identification of Kailyard with popular culture is Cairns Craig, who states that to compare Kailyard with 'high

art' is to make a 'simple category mistake', and points to the fact that Barrie's *The Little Minister* was three times made into a Hollywood film.<sup>6</sup> Yet when that novel first appeared in 1891 it was seen by reviewers as one of the two great literary events of the year, the other being *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. To his contemporaries, Barrie's work was always seen as serious literature. George Meredith wrote to him in praise of *The Little Minister* saying 'I am comforted in seeing that work like yours is warmly greeted by press and public' and seven years later Joseph Conrad listed Barrie with Kipling and Meredith as among 'the writers who deserve attention' on the current literary scene.<sup>7</sup>

It is not my intention, however, to use this essay offer a full account of the critical reception of Barrie's fiction. Instead, I want to focus on a second, more significant, way in which the identification of Kailyard with popular culture is misleading. Because that easy identification obscures one of the main reasons why the Kailyard became so notorious in the 1890s. As I will argue, a good deal of contemporary debate about the fiction of Crockett and Maclaren was prompted precisely because it was *not* seen as popular culture. What has never been fully appreciated is that because of the promotional strategies of the influential critic and reviewer, William Robertson Nicoll, the Kailyard (insofar as it consists of Crockett and Maclaren) was a *critical* as well as a popular success. Using Nicoll as the main focus of discussion, I want to consider some of the material conditions of the production and reception of the work of Barrie, Crockett and Maclaren. Greater understanding of these conditions will help to clarify the relationship between their work and contemporary debates over popular culture, as well as helping to explain why the Kailyard became so central to the critical understanding of Scottish literature in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

William Robertson Nicoll was once memorably described by Clement Shorter as 'the most successful Christian in history.'<sup>9</sup> Born in 1851, he had been Minister of the Free Church in Kelso, Aberdeenshire, for seven years when he met Thomas Stoughton of the firm Hodder & Stoughton in 1884 and agreed to become editor of the theological paper *The Expositor*. When, shortly afterwards, he resigned his ministerial position following a typhoid illness, Nicoll proceeded to become Editor and Literary Advisor to Hodder & Stoughton, a position in which he remained until his death in 1923.<sup>10</sup> One of the first of many achievements in his role with Hodder was to set up and edit a new penny newspaper, *The British Weekly*, which first appeared in November 1886 and soon acquired a six-figure circulation. Subtitled 'A Journal of Christian and Social Progress', the venture had a clear religious impulse but was also driven by an overt political aim – to reunite the Liberal Party which had become divided over the Home Rule question.<sup>11</sup> It soon became the main organ of Liberal nonconformist thought but as well as its political and religious impulses the paper had a strong literary emphasis from the outset, and was a major forum for reviews and articles on literary topics. This is an important point to note because it is often assumed, wrongly, that the Kailyard stories were first circulated in a context where religious writing, rather than literature,

was the principal, or only, focus. Early contributors to *The British Weekly* included such established literary figures as Robert Louis Stevenson and Walter Besant, and soon short stories and serial novels were appearing within its pages. Nicoll probably wrote well over half of the contents of every issue and advanced his views on contemporary literature in two review columns signed with the pseudonyms 'Claudius Clear' and 'A Man of Kent.'

Although it is widely recognised that *The British Weekly* provided an important forum for the production of Kailyard fiction – the work of Barrie, Crockett and Maclaren is often referred to as the British Weekly School – it is only really the career of Maclaren that is indelibly tied to this newspaper. Most of Crockett's early sketches were published in *The Christian Leader*, and it was not Nicoll but Edward Garnett who, in his position as manuscript reader for the publishing firm of T. Fisher Unwin, provided advice and support for Crockett in his early career.<sup>12</sup> So far as Barrie is concerned, only a very small amount of his work was ever published in *The British Weekly*. His novel of literary life *When a Man's Single* (which is not remotely religious in subject-matter) was first serialised in *The British Weekly* (1887-8) and earlier versions of about one third of the chapters in *A Window in Thrums* (1889) appeared between its covers. William Donaldson, although accurately capturing the purpose of Nicoll's venture, is wrong to lump Barrie together with its ideological framework:

The pietistic fiction of Barrie and Maclaren was intended as a contribution to the dilemma which called the *British Weekly* into existence, the acute crisis in English liberal nonconformism during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

It is certainly true that Nicoll had an important influence on Barrie's career and was responsible for encouraging the author to turn his Auld Licht articles into a book, but in truth Barrie operated apart from and beyond *The British Weekly* in his early career, writing on a much wider range of subjects in a variety of other newspapers and magazines.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, his longer novels were all published by the firm of Cassell.

*Auld Licht Idylls* (1888) and *A Window in Thrums* (1889) are nevertheless extremely important volumes in the history of the publishing firm of Hodder & Stoughton. They were published at a time when the firm's list was still dominated by non-fictional religious books. Nicoll had a determination to take Hodder & Stoughton beyond its rather limited concern with religious publishing towards a broader subject base, and it was undoubtedly the moderate commercial success of Barrie's early works and the considerable commercial success of Ian Maclaren's books in the mid-1890s that enabled him to achieve his goal. Nicoll's influence on the Rev. John Watson was more absolute than it was on Barrie, as he was almost singularly responsible for discovering, encouraging, publishing and marketing 'Ian Maclaren'. In his biography of the author, Nicoll records how he played a vital part in the writing and arrangement of Maclaren's

early sketches of Scottish life, which were published in *The British Weekly* and which later appeared in the best-selling books *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* and *The Days of Auld Langsyne*. At the time when he was first approached by Nicoll, Watson had been minister of the Presbyterian Free Church in Sefton Park, Liverpool for ten years. Nicoll had arranged for Watson to contribute a series of articles to *The Expositor* (which were later republished in a volume entitled *The Mind of the Master* in 1896), but his keen eye for the market soon turned in a different direction when the two men met for the first time in London:

I was so much struck by the racy stories and character-sketches with which Watson regaled us, that I suggested he should make some articles out of them. The idea had never struck him, and was at first unwelcome. But I kept on persuading him. I had no success till I was accompanying him to the station, when I pressed the matter on him. Just before he said good-bye he promised to try, and in a few days the first sketch arrived. It was clever but disappointing. [...] I returned this to Watson stating objections. He sent a second sketch, also more or less unsatisfactory. Then he sent the first four chapters of what is now known as *The Bonnie Brier Bush* complete, and I knew on reading them that his popularity was assured.<sup>15</sup>

*Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* was published in book form in October 1894 and was followed a year later by *The Days of Auld Langsyne*. Like Crockett's early works, the two books sold prodigiously. According to the *British Weekly* nearly 130,000 copies of *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* were sold in Britain and America within the first year.<sup>16</sup> A recently published article in *Book History* has analysed statistical tables of best-sellers published in the 1890s. From these statistics, we can infer that the fiction of Crockett and Maclaren was among the best-selling of its day.<sup>17</sup> In 1894 and 1895 *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* was topped in the lists only by George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (which John Sutherland considers 'possibly the bestselling single novel of the century.')<sup>18</sup> Maclaren's sales were certainly much greater than those of Barrie, whose early works, whilst moderately successful, cannot be considered best-sellers. Denis Mackail estimates that *A Window in Thrums* earned Barrie 'eighty pounds in the first year', which, based on a royalty of one shilling per copy (the book retailed at six shillings), meant that about 1600 copies of the book were sold.<sup>19</sup> *The Little Minister* was much more successful – around 24,000 copies at various prices were sold in the first fourteen months – but these figures hardly rank with Maclaren's.<sup>20</sup> What is noticeable, however, is that Barrie's works begin to sell more rapidly *after* the success of Maclaren and Crockett. *Sentimental Tommy* (1896) and *Margaret Ogilvy* (1896) generated much more immediate sales than *Auld Licht Idylls* and *A Window in Thrums* and featured prominently in the British and American best-seller charts. Nevertheless, it is wrong to conceive of Barrie as a best-selling author in the same mould as Crockett and Maclaren, just as it is wrong to look upon his critical reception as that of a popular author.

The statistical tables of best-sellers record that over the years 1891-1901 it was the works of Crockett that made the lists more often than any other author, including Marie Corelli, who is generally identified as the best-selling of all Victorian and Edwardian novelists.<sup>21</sup> Maclaren takes fourth place in this survey with Kipling third and Barrie ninth. Crucially, the analysis also indicates no discernible difference between Scotland and England in the consumption of the works of Barrie, Crockett and Maclaren. Their books sold as well in Glasgow and Aberdeen as they did in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Dublin; indeed, the evidence suggests that in Scotland sales of their books were greater than those of Corelli, Hall Caine and other best-selling English novelists. The oft-repeated statement that the Kailyard novels were shunned by Scots and consumed predominantly by an English audience cannot be sustained in light of this evidence.<sup>22</sup>

It is not just their considerable sales, however, that make Maclaren and Crockett typical among best-selling authors of the 1890s. Like Corelli, Du Maurier and Hall Caine, both writers acquired celebrity status, befitting the cult of personality that so characterised the age. As Peter Keating has summarised, this was an era when 'what anyone connected with books did or looked like became newsworthy.'<sup>23</sup> A letter from Barrie to Arthur Quiller-Couch brilliantly captures the tenor of the times. Writing from Kirriemuir in 1893 he remarks: 'I see from the papers that I am in Switzerland with Maarten Maartens. Hope I'm enjoying myself.'<sup>24</sup> *The British Weekly* was one of many papers to adopt this practice of literary gossip, and the reports of Ian Maclaren indicate how he was brought irresistibly before the public eye. Whether it be his opening a bazaar in Barrie's home town of Kirriemuir; his lecturing on 'Certain Traits in the Scottish Character' at Grindelwald; his speaking at Badenoch and Laggan, the YMCA in Stirling, or in any number of places and situations, the public were told about it. The same was true of Crockett. As David Christie Murray, a contemporary observer, noted:

The curiosity with which a section of the newspaper press has been inspired as to Mr. Crockett's personal whereabouts, as to his comings and goings, his engagements for the future, and his prices 'per thousand words', would have seemed to indicate that in him we had discovered a person of considerably more than the average height.<sup>25</sup>

Some novelists, such as James and Conrad, looked in scorn upon this aspect of contemporary literary life.<sup>26</sup> Best-selling authors, however, such as Maclaren and Crockett, revelled in it and eagerly lapped up the public interest in their lives. Both authors responded to the American innovation of the personal interview, which was a regular feature of British magazines in the 1890s. Raymond Blathway, 'the most famous exponent of the genre',<sup>27</sup> interviewed Maclaren for *Great Thoughts*, and further interviews with both Crockett and Maclaren were published in a variety of magazines.<sup>28</sup> In such articles there was little discussion of the writers' books, but plenty of background information

about their lives, ways and habits. Pictures of their homes, desks, libraries and gardens mingled with photographs of Galloway or Drumtochty. The contemporary cultural interest was thus vested as much in the authors' personalities as it was in their books.

Nowhere was the impact of the personality of Ian Maclaren felt more than in his visits to America. Thomas Knowles has shown how Barrie, Crockett, and particularly Maclaren were regularly at the top of the American best-seller lists in the 1890s, and has explored some of the likely reasons behind their transatlantic vogue.<sup>29</sup> One of these was clearly the volume of Scottish emigrants, and when Maclaren undertook a series of lecture tours throughout America the organisers played on the nostalgic strain of his work. A contemporary article on the author reported that 'the people, especially the settlers from Bonnie Scotland, thought it a very little thing to travel two or three hundred miles, to hear the man who could write so exquisitely of the land of Wallace and Burns.'<sup>30</sup> Maclaren himself noted that he was often introduced as 'an old friend, whom we all know well'.<sup>31</sup> Although most of his lectures consisted of readings from his work, Maclaren also preached, and spoke on Burns and on Scottish life and character. Giving lectures was a standard practice for the best-selling author and it is quite possible that Maclaren, emulating Dickens, made more money from his lectures and public readings than he did from the considerable sales of his books. Nicoll reported that the receipts of the three lectures he gave in Chicago were 'not below 8,000 dols.'<sup>32</sup> Major Pond, the organiser of the tours, was reported as saying that Maclaren was 'in greater demand than any foreigner who has ever come to America.'<sup>33</sup> Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that Maclaren even got to lunch with the President.

None of this is true of Barrie, who is often incorrectly lumped together with Crockett and Maclaren in this respect. Like Conrad and James, Barrie shied away from publicity. He refused to have his photograph published in magazines, frequently declined invitations to talk at public events and turned down several offers to undertake lecture tours of America.<sup>34</sup>

The reason why the Kailyard School became so notorious within contemporary debate cannot, however, simply be explained by the commercial success and status of Crockett and Maclaren. Commenting on Ian Campbell's book, *Kailyard*, David S. Robb posed a question that remains as pertinent now as it did in 1983:

The question seems to me to be, not, why is kailyard writing so poor and why is so much Scottish literature tainted by its tendencies, but why was it ever mistaken for really serious and important Scottish literature?<sup>35</sup>

The answer lies in the promotion of Crockett and Maclaren as high art and the subsequent reaction against this by contemporary critics. Without Nicoll's marketing strategies the term Kailyard would probably never have acquired the

lasting notoriety it has, and the books associated with it would have been forgotten – in the same way as many other Victorian best-sellers have been forgotten – as fleeting novelties.

Nicoll's role as literary editor to Hodder & Stoughton was a considerable one but it wasn't just his effect on the internal affairs of a publishing house that made him such a giant in the literary world at the turn of the century. His extraordinarily penetrative reviewing strategies enabled him to exert a remarkable control over the decisions of a section of the reading public and, consequently, over the reputations of countless authors. In the words of Dixon Scott:

Every Thursday, in the *British Weekly*, Sir W. Robertson Nicoll addresses an audience far more numerous, far more responsive, far more eagerly in earnest, than that controlled by any other living critic. He praises a book – and instantly it is popular. He dismisses one, gently – and it dies. He controls the contents of a bookshelves of a thousand homes – they change beneath his fingers like bright keyboards – and every alteration means the modification of a mind. What Claudius Clear reads on Wednesday, half of Scotland and much of England is reading before the end of the week.<sup>36</sup>

Nicoll's considerable industry made him a master of the art of multiple-reviewing, a famous case being the tremendous debunking of Arthur Conan Doyle's comic work of fiction, *A Duet*. When this book appeared in 1899 no less than six reviewers charged it as immoral. The six were anonymous writers in the *Daily Chronicle*, the *American Bookman* and the *London Bookman*; 'Claudius Clear' and 'A Man of Kent' in *The British Weekly* and 'O.O.' in *The Sketch*. All six were Robertson Nicoll, and when Conan Doyle found out he wrote in protest to the *Daily Chronicle*, precipitating an exchange of letters with Nicoll on 'The Ethics of Criticism'.<sup>37</sup>

In such ways Nicoll developed a much-respected if rather dubious reputation as a man who could single-handedly make or destroy a book. For some writers this made the prospect of an association with Hodder & Stoughton a lucrative one. Arnold Bennett found himself so tempted when seeking to find a new publisher for *The Old Wives' Tale* in 1909. He told his agent J.B. Pinker that 'it would not be bad thing to have some slight connection with H & S because such a connection would undoubtedly influence Claudius Clear's criticisms. I have the greatest contempt for them as an artist [...] but the effect of his criticisms is undeniable.'<sup>38</sup> Nicoll gave the book a good review and then, when Hodder duly issued an edition in 1910, had what Bennett called 'his sickly praise' emblazoned across the front binding of the book. Bennett was appalled.<sup>39</sup>

Nicoll's most remarkable and controversial log-rolling success, however, was his promotion of Crockett and Maclaren in the 1890s. There is no great mystery as to why Nicoll took such an interest in these writers. Shared religious and national characteristics undoubtedly fuelled the association but Nicoll would also have welcomed their stories for more literary reasons. He had a firm

belief that literature should have a moral basis and feared and distrusted the influence of naturalist developments in fiction.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, the sentimental technique of Maclaren, in particular, and its allied vision of a universal religious community based on feeling, rather than doctrine, appealed deeply to his values.

Nicoll sowed the seeds of the booming of *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* two weeks before the book was published, announcing in the *Bookman* that it was 'confidently anticipated by many competent judges that the book will place the author in the first rank.'<sup>41</sup> Then, when the book was published in October 1894, he devoted an entire front page of *The British Weekly* to reviewing it, claiming that 'from the artistic point of view it is an unquestionable and marked success', and declaring that Maclaren was 'unsurpassed by any living writer in the gift of pathos.'<sup>42</sup>

His review of Crockett's *The Stickit Minister*, published the year before, had been similarly outlandish, claiming that the book gave the author 'a very high place among his fellow artists,' and that 'one is tempted to say that Mr Crockett is a man of genius.'<sup>43</sup> Nicoll's determination to uphold Crockett's reputation led him some time later to insert a report in the *Bookman* that 'the criticism "The Lilac Sunbonnet" has been subjected to in London has not interfered with its sale. On the contrary, it has sold much more rapidly than any former book by the same author.'<sup>44</sup> When he reviewed another Crockett novel two years later he was still making extravagant comparisons, suggesting that 'if anyone wishes to understand why Mr Crockett is so popular, and why it is well he should be popular, let him do as I did – read "The Men of the Moss Hags" and follow it immediately with the last instalment of Mr Hardy's "Hearts Insurgent."<sup>45</sup> Nor was this simply a case of Nicoll being characteristically prudish about the serial that was to become *Jude the Obscure*; Frank Swinnerton recalled that Nicoll greatly admired Hardy and considered him 'the most winning literary man' he had ever met.<sup>46</sup>

Nicoll must have been aware that not everyone was likely to agree with his assessment of Crockett and Maclaren, and he attempted to validate their achievement further by repeatedly claiming that their work was difficult to produce. In one instance, he published a letter in *The British Weekly* entitled 'To a Writer of Scottish Idylls', which purported to be a reply to an author who had sent Nicoll some of his work. It is impossible to say whether the letter is genuine or merely a clever publicity gimmick, but whatever the case, Nicoll was clearly setting out to refute the claims that were now being made that it was all too easy to write 'Scottish idylls':

When you read in the newspapers of the immense circulation and fame which some Scottish Idylls have achieved, you are apt to imagine that the writers have found the easiest way to the top which was ever revealed to man. When the experiment is made, it will be seen that no kind of work is more difficult than theirs.<sup>47</sup>



The first critic to launch an attack on Nicoll's reviewing methods was the writer who first applied the term Kailyard – J.H. Millar, writing in the *New Review* in 1895. Among other things, Millar attacked the way Crockett was 'almost wholly the result of the modern method of reviewing':

Not only has he enjoyed the benefit of the ingenious system of log-rolling consistently practised by a portion of the so-called religious press, but many other newspapers and reviews have conspired to overwhelm him with fulsome and exaggerated flattery.<sup>48</sup>

These sentiments were echoed by the young John Buchan in an article published in the *Glasgow Herald* in the same year. Again singling out Crockett, Buchan drew attention to what he saw as the inappropriate categorisation of certain works as serious literature:

Idylls of humble country life have lately grown upon us thick and fast; charming pieces of literature many of them; nigh perfect in their narrow sphere [...] But some gentlemen of the press, whose interest is to puff such books, do not let the matter rest here. These unpretentious and delightful volumes are gravely set above work with which they are scarcely even comparable.<sup>49</sup>

The criticism was not lost on Nicoll who responded in *The British Weekly* by combining notice of the article with a short review of Buchan's *Sir Quixote*, which he took to be little more than imitation Crockett. 'I hope Mr Buchan will some day do some good work', he wrote, 'and meanwhile he need not trouble his head about the Scottish school. The little finger of the least of them is as yet much thicker than his loins.'<sup>50</sup>

Buchan's article had concluded with a view of artistic production that was characteristic of its age. Calling Crockett at his worst 'only a boisterous talker,' he wrote: 'no man, however high his spirits and rich the life within him, can hope to be a great writer save by the restraint, the pains, the hard and bitter drudgery of his art.' The ease with which certain writers like Crockett and Maclaren seemed to be able to achieve popular success contributed to this alternative image of the 'true' artist compelled, like Reardon in Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), to labour on in financial ruin in the service of his art. Buchan had his revenge on Nicoll when he portrayed him satirically in one of his novels, *Castle Gay* (1930).

It is important to realise, then, that much of the contemporary attack on Kailyard fiction was to do with debates over high and low culture and with the etiquette of reviewing. Buchan's criticisms were repeated by the English novelist David Christie Murray, who in his critical book, *My Contemporaries in Fiction*, complained of 'the "boom" which has lately filled heaven and earth with respect to the achievements of the new Scotch school'. Like Millar and Buchan before him, he singled out Crockett, remarking that 'the unblushing

effrontery of those gentlemen of the press who have set him on a level with Sir Walter is the most mournful and most contemptible thing in association with the poorer sort of criticism which has been encountered of late years.' Murray added a further assault with regard to Maclaren, saying that 'here is another case where the hysteric overpraise of the critics has done a capable workman a serious injustice.'<sup>51</sup>

The most interesting of all these critics, however, was a writer in the *Glasgow Evening Times* signing himself 'Rix', who wrote an article published on 6 January 1897 entitled 'The Slump in Kail Runts'. 'Rix' declared the Kailyard to be in decline and proceeded to attack it on a number of counts. He was concerned about the future understanding of Scottish literary history and feared that a lot of second-rate material might become indelibly marked upon tradition. Posterity has proved him right. In a prophetic statement, he wrote of Kailyard that:

Most readers must be weary of the outworn word itself, as they are of the class of writing for which it stands. But the word has become part of the language, and will probably survive the books which it connotes.

Significantly, Rix was quick to exclude Barrie from what he understood as the Kailyard, considering him to have been 'brought, somewhat unfairly, into the same gallery.' But it wasn't so much the word that distressed him as the whole question of reputation. Of Crockett and Maclaren, he wrote:

their absurdly inflated reputations has been made by an ingenious system of log-rolling, whose perfect construction and success in working are without parallel in modern literary records.

Nicoll, clearly the target of this attack, replied in his column 'A Man of Kent' in *The British Weekly* a week later, quoting 'accurate and verified figures of sales for 1896' that amounted, when the 'three best known of these writers' were taken into account, to 'over half a million.' Given this, Nicoll argued that 'articles about the slump might perhaps in the circumstances be held over' and proceeded to offer a general defence of the Kailyard books:

Nobody says that these Scotch books have made anyone think less of Scotland; nobody can say that they have done anything to corrupt the minds of their readers. They have made everywhere for tenderness, for purity, for a higher standard of life.<sup>52</sup>

The response Rix gave to this reveals the clear difference in opinion between the two critics over what constituted literary success:

"A Man of Kent" asks if I "can tell him of anything in the least degree comparable in contemporary literature." I frankly admit I cannot tell

him of anything in the least degree comparable in contemporary bookselling. Why this perpetual dragging in of America? And why this continual harping upon sales, as if they formed the first and last tribunals before which all authors must come?<sup>53</sup>

In discussing whether good sales should be taken as an indicator of literary value, the debate between Nicoll and 'Rix' is characteristic of its age. What is perhaps surprising is that it is a writer in an evening newspaper who is adopting the cultural high ground. To many writers and critics of the time, good sales necessarily indicated artistic compromise, and this inverse relation between popularity and literary value became a fundamental part of Modernism.<sup>54</sup> It is in this wider context that we must place Nicoll's multifarious editorial and reviewing strategies and the critical reception of the Kailyard. Nicoll differed from the modernists in that he wanted to work with the new reading public, and was thus keen to find works of literature that were appealing to the masses but also serious-minded as well as ethically sound. The 'Scottish Idyllists' were, for him, the best example.

The most scathing attack on Nicoll came in T.W.H. Crosland's scathing attack on all things Scottish, *The Unspeakable Scot*. It seems certain that animosity towards Nicoll alone drove Crosland to his unflinching diatribe, but it is easy to miss the importance and specificity of what he is saying beneath the unabashedly racist rhetoric. His satirical attack on Nicoll's editorial characteristics is worth quoting in full as an accurate portrait of what really took place in the pages of *The British Weekly*:

Any author who is doing well – that is to say, any author whose record of sales entitles him to be considered a success – may always reckon on a large hospitality in Dr. Nicoll's journals, and will always find Dr. Nicoll and his merry men beaming round the corner and hat in hand. It is a matter of what would you like, sir? all the time. Are you spending your holiday cruising on the blue Mediterranean in the Duchess of Puttleham's yacht? Very good. Paragraph in the column signed "Man of Kent," with a delicate reference to your last great novel. Have you projects? Equally good. Mr So-and-So is, I understand, hard at work on his next great novel. Will your new book, 30,000 copies of which have been sold before the day of publication, make its appearance on April 1? Capital. Send us portraits of yourself at all ages from three months to the present day, pictures of the modest tenement in which you were born, and of your present town-house and little place in the country, and, bless your heart, we will do the rest. Do people say that the great novel, of which you have sold fifty million copies in England and America, is a pot-boiler and a failure? Dear, dear me! You have our heartiest sympathies sir, and if you would like to vindicate your character as an artist in a couple of pages in the British Weekly, why, my dear sir, they are at your service.<sup>55</sup>

Crosland went on to map out a clear reason for his resentment of Nicoll's methods by writing: 'I do not say that there is any terrific harm in this species of enterprise. That it pleases the mass of mankind and therefore sells papers goes without saying. On the other hand it is quite subversive of the best interests of letters.' It was as a result of the success of publications like those created by Robertson Nicoll that the question of what was 'the best interest of letters' became such a heated topic of debate in the final decades of the century.

There is, however, something more positive to say about Nicoll within this very context. It is easy to be too one-sided about his interests and tastes. However much he invested value in popularity, and however much he mistrusted naturalism and took the sentimental piety of Maclaren as his touchstone for literary excellence, he nevertheless admired, advised and wrote warmly of such diverse figures as Gissing, Hardy and Yeats. Nor did he acquire his exalted position on the contemporary literary scene by a fluke. He was enormously well-read and took an eager interest in the dissemination of literature and literary knowledge. Nicoll has received considerable attention for his political, religious and moral outlook. What has been less documented is the serious ambition he held in the literary sphere. Of course his morals, politics and religious beliefs affected his opinions on literature, but he was greatly interested in the history and development of literature in itself. Even within the pages of the *British Weekly* – a newspaper with a strong political and religious accent – it is clear that literature and writing were Nicoll's most favoured subjects. At Hodder & Stoughton he oversaw a number of ambitious publishing projects that sought to provide a grand history of Nineteenth-Century literature, and at the time of his death he was planning to write a single-authored history of that period himself.

In all of his publishing and editorial ventures Nicoll tried to be responsive to the new demands of the increased readership and mass markets brought about by the reforms in education. His most important and successful venture in this respect was the launching of *The Bookman* in 1891. This magazine remains a neglected landmark in Victorian literary publishing and represents a major attempt to shape the course of British literary culture. Set up and run by Nicoll, it soon took over from the *Athenaeum* as the main site of book advertising and reviewing and became not only 'the most widely read literary periodical in Britain'<sup>56</sup> but one which also achieved considerable status as a serious-minded literary magazine. It was the first successful magazine of its kind devoted entirely to literature, and Nicoll's aims were specifically to fill a gap in the market, as he wrote to Marcus Dods:

My experience is that there is a great class of literary aspirants whose wants are met in no way. Then a great many like to know about books and to be guided, but they don't wish it more than once a month, and they can't wade through reviews like the *Athenaeum* and *Academy*. Who can read a complete number of either?<sup>57</sup>

In the words of Frank Swinnerton, *The Bookman* 'united moderately serious literary criticism with gossip to an extent previously unknown in London journalism.'<sup>58</sup> Swinnerton was perhaps a little too cautious. Whilst *The Bookman* was never aimed at a scholarly or academic readership it acquired considerable literary respectability. Writers were not embarrassed to be associated with it like they were *Tit Bits* and other examples of the new journalism, and it boasted among its contributors some of the most important writers and critics of the day: Hardy, Swinburne, Pater, Chesterton, Barrie, Quiller-Couch, Lang, Lionel Johnson, George Saintsbury, and, most strikingly, W.B. Yeats, who contributed reviews and essays to all but the first of the opening ten numbers.

As easily the most widely-read literary magazine of the day, *The Bookman* was crucial in disseminating opinion, and Maclaren and Crockett were afforded as privileged a place within its covers as any other contemporary novelist, carrying their work still further into a paradigm of high art. Both were given full-length, six page articles and featured in the supplements that were issued with each volume on leading nineteenth-century authors. In this context they were grouped not only with near-contemporaries like Meredith, Ruskin and Hardy, but with Austen, Scott and Dickens as well, and were thus identified as an integral part of the British literary tradition. It was this inappropriate elevation of what was clearly second-rate work into the realm of high art that explains in part why these seemingly harmless books provoked such outrage among future Scottish intellectuals. Because the works of Maclaren and Crockett came to be seen as serious Scottish literature they became part of what was seen as the Scottish literary tradition, and the term Kailyard was fixed as the co-ordinate around which twentieth-century writers would understand their cultural heritage.

It is only when we begin to take into account the material conditions of the production and reception of Kailyard texts that we can unravel their full significance to the subsequent history of Scottish literature. Indeed, criticism of the late-Victorian period in general would do well to pay more attention to the material conditions under which Scottish literature was produced, the forms in which texts circulated, and the means by which critical reputations were established. Such an approach would certainly help to release J.M. Barrie's work from the critical constraints of the Kailyard, and it would afford a greater and more accurate understanding of the contemporary significance of the fiction of Crockett and Maclaren, not to mention a host of other, more neglected, figures. Most significantly of all, however, a critical approach that situates writers and texts in what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'The Field of Cultural Production'<sup>59</sup> would illuminate the considerable influence that Scottish figures like Robertson Nicoll had on the shaping of British literary culture at the end of the nineteenth century. The effect of such an influence has yet to be seriously addressed, let alone fully considered.

## Notes

1. Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: crisis and neo-nationalism*, 1977, second, expanded edition (London: Verso, 1981), 162.
2. This was a connection put forward by George Blake, one of the most influential critics of the Kailyard. See *Barrie and the Kailyard School* (London: Arthur Baker, 1951), 85.
3. Beth Dickson, 'Annie S. Swan and O. Douglas: Legacies of the Kailyard', *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy Macmillan (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997), 329-46, 329.
4. Dickson, 'Annie S. Swan and O. Douglas', 334, original italics.
5. [Margaret Oliphant], 'The Old Saloon', *Blackwood's Magazine* (August 1889), 254-75, 266.
6. Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 107.
7. *The Letters of George Meredith*, ed. C.L. Clive, 3 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1970), 3 December 1891, II, 1051; *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Lawrence Davis, 5 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), I, 138.
8. My discussion of popular culture in this context refers to book culture and the book-reading public. William Donaldson's trail-blazing account of *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen: AUP, 1986) draws attention to the considerable readership for serial fiction in Scottish newspapers. It is undoubtedly true that such fiction had a wider readership than that of Crockett and Maclaren but the demarcation between the two forms of publication – newspaper and book – was not as clear as Donaldson makes out. Some of Crockett's novels were serialised in newspapers, both English and Scottish, as well as in metropolitan magazines. For example, *The Grey Man*, serialised in *The Graphic* in 1896, also appeared in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* and the *Glasgow Weekly Mail* (see Graham Law, *Serialising Fiction in the Victorian Press* [Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave], 107).
9. Quoted by Bernard Falk, *Five Year's Dead* (London: Hutchinson, 1937), 258.
10. Nicoll's role in the firm is described in full by John Attenborough, *A Living Memory: Hodder and Stoughton, Publishers, 1868-1975* (London, Sydney, Auckland and Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975).
11. see Attenborough, *A Living Memory*, chapter 3. See also Roisin Higgins, 'William Robertson Nicoll and the Liberal Nonconformist Press, 1886-1923', unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1995.
12. Fisher Unwin published most of Crockett's early works, by which he acquired his reputation, including *The Stickit Minister* (1893), *The Lilac Sunbonnet* (1894), *The Raiders* (1895) and *The Grey Man* (1896). For an account of the considerable role Garnett played in the production and revision of *The Raiders*, see Dorothy W. Collin, 'Edward Garnett, Publisher's reader, and Samuel Rutherford Crockett, writer of books,' *Publishing History*, XXX (1991), 89-121.
13. Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland*, 147. For a similarly fallacious argument, see A. Whigham-Price, 'William Robertson Nicoll and the genesis of the Kailyard School', *Durham University Journal*, 86:1 (1994), 73-82.
14. For an account of Barrie's early periodical writing, and the compilation of the Kailyard texts, see my article 'The Compilation of J.M. Barrie's *Auld Licht Idylls*', *The Bibliothek*, 23 (1998), 85-96. Herbert Garland's *A Bibliography of the*

- Writings of Sir James Matthew Barrie* (London: Bookman's Journal, 1928) is not entirely comprehensive or reliable, but is still valuable and reveals the sheer range of Barrie's early periodical publications.
15. William Robertson Nicoll, *'Ian Maclaren': life of the Rev. John Watson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 165-6.
  16. *British Weekly* (31 October 1895).
  17. Troy J. Bassett and Christina M. Walter, 'Booksellers and Bestsellers: British Book Sales as documented by *The Bookman*, 1891-1906', *Book History*, Volume 4 (2001), 205-36. The analysis is drawn from tables published in *The Bookman*, a literary magazine set up and edited by William Robertson Nicoll. The tables were a regular feature of the magazine and consisted of two types: 'Sales of Books during the Month' was drawn from information submitted by bookshops across the British Isles and appeared in the first number of the journal in October 1891. From 1894 this was supplemented by a further table entitled 'Monthly Report of the Wholesale Book trade' (restricted to England until 1898, when a complementary section was submitted from Scotland), which also included a summary of events in prose, compiled from information submitted by leading wholesalers.
  18. *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), 634.
  19. Denis Mackail: *The Story of J.M.B.* (London: Peter Davies, 1941), 156.
  20. *ibid.*, 185.
  21. see Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Best-sellers* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999).
  22. see, for example, William Donaldson's judgement that the Kailyard School 'dominated the Anglo-American book-market in the closing decade of the century' and that *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* was 'a major bestseller in England and America.' (*Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland*, 145-6). The choice of nations here is a touch wilful.
  23. Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), 74.
  24. 25 December 1893, *The Letters of J.M. Barrie*, ed. Viola Meynell (London: Peter Davies, 1942), 5.
  25. David Christie Murray, *My Contemporaries in Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897), 99-100.
  26. James provided the perfect rebuttal of the intrusive obsession with authors' lives and personalities in *The Aspern Papers* (1888).
  27. Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice: 1880-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 8.
  28. Raymond Blathwayt, 'A Talk with "Ian Maclaren"', *Great Thoughts*, XXX (January 1899), 288-90; James Ashcroft Noble, 'Ian Maclaren at Home', *Woman at Home*, III (March, 1895), 511-21; David Paton, "'Ian Maclaren" at Home', *Sunday Magazine*, XXV (1896), 37-42; 'Ian Maclaren at Home: Interesting Interview', *Glasgow Evening Times*, 28 September 1896; 'Dr John Watson - "Ian Maclaren"', *McClure's Magazine*, VII (October 1896), 387-400; 'A Day with Ian Maclaren', *Sunday Strand*, 1 (1900), 32-9; 'Ian Maclaren: A Character Sketch', *Young Man*, XV (July 1901), 217-20.
  29. Thomas Knowles, *Ideology, Art and Commerce: Aspects of Literary Sociology in the Late Victorian Kailyard* (Goteburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1983), chapter 3.

30. Cora B. Pearson, 'Ian Maclaren: A Study of the Man and His Work', *Temple Magazine*, V (1901), 659-64, 660.
31. 'Ian Maclaren's impressions of America: an interview', *British Weekly* (31 December 1896).
32. *British Weekly* (26 November 1896).
33. *British Weekly* (13 August 1896).
34. Critics continue to make this mistake about Barrie's visits to America, which never involved giving lectures. Thomas Knowles claims that Barrie and Maclaren both made 'overwhelmingly successful promotional visits' to America (*Ideology, Art and Commerce*, 66) and John Caughie links Barrie with Harry Lauder as someone who openly promoted the 'stifling "kailyard" mythology' through being 'almost as popular on the American lecture circuit' as was Lauder on the stage.' No doubt Caughie has simply mixed Barrie up with Maclaren. ('Representing Scotland: New Questions for Scottish Cinema', in Eddie Dick (ed.), *From Limelight to Satellite: A Scottish Film Book* [London: BFI Publishing, 1990], 16).
35. *Scottish Literary Journal Supplement No. 19* (Winter, 1983), 31.
36. Dixon Scott, *Men of Letters* (London, New York and Toronto: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916), 205.
37. The correspondence is reprinted in *The Unknown Conan Doyle: Letters to the Press*, ed. John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), 54-7.
38. *The Letters of Arnold Bennett*, ed. James Hepburn, 4 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1966-86), I, 140
39. *The Letters of Arnold Bennett*, I, 152.
40. For more on this see Knowles, *Ideology, Art and Commerce*, 35-8.
41. *Bookman* (August 1894), 133.
42. *British Weekly* (11 October 1894).
43. *British Weekly* (6 April 1893).
44. *Bookman* (December 1894), 72.
45. *British Weekly* (26 September 1895).
46. Frank Swinnerton, *Background with Chorus: A Footnote to Changes in English Literary Fashion Between 1901 and 1917* (London: Hutchinson, 1956), 53.
47. *British Weekly* (11 April, 1895).
48. J.H. Millar, 'The Literature of the Kailyard', *New Review*, XII (June, 1895), 384-94, 393.
49. John Buchan, 'Nonconformity in Literature', *Glasgow Herald* (2 November 1895).
50. *The British Weekly* (7 November 1895).
51. Murray, *My Contemporaries in Fiction*, 115, 100, 111.
52. *British Weekly* (14 January 1897).
53. *Glasgow Evening Times* (21 January 1897).
54. John Carey has shown how 'modernist literature and art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late nineteenth-century educational reforms.' (*The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* [London: Faber and Faber, 1992]). See also Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
55. T.W.H. Crosland, *The Unspeakable Scot* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 65-6.
56. Keating, *The Haunted Study*, 338.



57. quoted in T.H. Darlow, *William Robertson Nicoll: Life and Letters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), 98.
58. Swinnerton, *Background with Chorus*, 52.
59. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

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Sir William Robertson Nicoll (1851 - 1923) was a Scottish Free Church minister, writer, journalist and editor. He was editor of the British Weekly and literary adviser to the evangelical English publishing house Hodder & Stoughton. William Donaldson has described him as 'the Godfather of the Kailyard'. [â€¦more. \[close\]](#) Sir William Robertson Nicoll (1851 - 1923) was a Scottish Free Church minister, writer, journalist and editor. He was editor of the British Weekly and literary adviser to the evangelical English publishing house Hodder & Stoughton. William Donaldson has described Nash, A. (2004) William Robertson Nicoll, the Kailyard novel and the question of popular culture. *Scottish Studies Review*, 5 (1). pp. 57-73. ISSN 1745-3186. Full text not archived in this repository. It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work. See Guidance on citing. Official URL:

[http://sapiens.strath.ac.uk/ssr/vol5/vol5\(1\)/vol5](http://sapiens.strath.ac.uk/ssr/vol5/vol5(1)/vol5) Among the Kailyard's catalogue of recognisable plots, morals and characters is the figure of the woman in the home. Indeed, she is the epitome of Kailyard values, and thus became a focus of contention for transitional writers who more. Among the Kailyard's catalogue of recognisable plots, morals and characters is the figure of the woman in the home. The final section will return to the Kailyard to explore how its manifestations were not all polarised against the dysfunctional interiors of modernist fiction. In contrast to the view presented in the anti-Kailyard tradition, J.M. Barrie's and Annie S. Swan's works ambivalently express many of the same frustrations of those writers most critical of Kailyard writing, while still ultimately committing to Kailyard values. Save to Library.