

Before the Collection: Compositional Layers in Crockett's 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes'

'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' was published in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* (1895). It runs to approximately 24,000 words across fourteen chapters. No archival evidence of prior serialisation has currently been located. It is highly likely given Crockett's working practices, but as it cannot be firmly evidenced, for now the argument that follows is built from the text itself.

By 1895, Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859–1914) had been placing work in periodicals for the better part of a decade. Magazine publication was not, for him, a supplementary income stream or an occasional convenience: it was the primary medium through which a writer of his generation built a reputation, tested a readership, and accumulated the stock of material that would eventually be shaped into book form. *The Stickit Minister* (1893), the first complete published collection that made his name, drew substantially on work that had already appeared in print. The pattern was established and it was productive.

'Saint Lucy of the Eyes', collected in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* (1895), invites a question that has not yet been asked of it: does this text read as a unified composition, conceived and written as a whole, or does it show evidence of a more complex prior existence — episodes written separately, finding their current shape only when assembled for collection? The question cannot be answered from the archive, which has not yet yielded evidence of serialisation for this particular piece. But it can be approached through the text itself. What the fourteen chapters of 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' show, on close reading, is a narrative whose episodes bear structural, stylistic, and titling marks that are more consistent with prior separate existence than with composition as a continuous whole. That argument is offered here as hypothesis mediated by evidence. Where the evidence supports an inference, the inference is drawn. Where it does not, the gap is acknowledged. We have a lot of background knowledge but no facts to support them. It's possible that textual evidence can fill (at least partly) some of the gaps.

The Titling Pattern

The chapter titles of 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' are the first thing that demands attention. They are not summary labels of the kind that simply identify the episode contained: 'Journey to Vico Averso', 'Arrival at the Hotel'; nor are they thematic markers imposed retrospectively to give the collection coherence. They are, almost without exception, self-contained descriptive titles that could belong to freestanding pieces. Consider the sequence:

The Woman of the Red Eyelids. The Word of the Little People. The Story of the Seven Dead Men. The Sinful Village of Spellino. The Countess Castel del Monte. Love Me a Little — Not Too Much. The New Day. The Crimson Shawl. The Piz

Langrev. The Purple Châlet. The White Owl. A Night Assault. Castel del Monte. An Error in Judgment.

Each of these functions as a self-contained label: it names a figure, a location, a physical object, or a phrase associated with the episode, rather than a movement in a developing plot. 'The Sinful Village of Spellino' does not require the reader to know what comes before or after it. 'The Piz Langrev' names a mountain climb. 'The Purple Châlet' names a single building and the uncanny episode that takes place within it. These are titles in the tradition of the magazine sketch: the descriptive, attention-catching label that allows a piece to be lifted from a periodical page and read without its surroundings.

The contrast with chapter titles that do carry narrative dependency is instructive. 'An Error in Judgment', the final chapter, only makes full sense in context: the error has been carefully prepared for across the preceding thirteen chapters, and the phrase gains its weight from Lucia's ironic repetition of it at the close. It could not stand alone in the way 'The Sinful Village of Spellino' could. The distinction suggests that not all fourteen chapters were conceived with the same relationship to an imagined surrounding structure.

This is not conclusive. Chapter titles of the self-contained, descriptive kind are consistent with both serial and single-composition origins. Crockett was a practised writer who knew how to make his sections navigable, and the episodic nature of a travel narrative — which 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' broadly is, in its first half — naturally generates chapter titles of this character. The titling pattern is suggestive, not determinative.

The Episode Problem: Structural Self-Containment

The structural argument for prior separate existence runs deeper than the chapter titles. Several of the fourteen chapters have the character of complete, self-contained narrative units — episodes that achieve full closure within their own boundaries and do not require the chapters around them for their effect. The Seven Dead Men episode (Chapter Three) is the clearest case.

Chapter Three, 'The Story of the Seven Dead Men', contains a complete Venetian folk tale, told by Douglas and Henry Fenwick to an Italian village audience at a well. The episode has a precise architecture. It opens with the arrival of an audience, moves through the performance of the tale, gives the tale in full — with the boy in the boat, the dead man in the prow, the frozen fishermen, the fiery seventh at the table-foot — and closes with the success of the telling and the instant celebrity that follows. The chapter begins with a narrative transition from Chapter Two and ends with a comic complication as the village priest arrives. This framing is economical, but the tale itself is not dependent on it. 'The Seven Dead Men' could be excised from the surrounding narrative, given a brief contextual frame — two young Scots travellers tell a ghost story to Italian children — and published as a magazine piece. It has exactly the character of such a piece: a complete narrative arc, a specific setting, a self-contained moral structure, and a length appropriate to periodical publication.

The episode in Chapter Four, 'The Sinful Village of Spellino', has the same property, though its structure is different. Here the embedded content is not a folk tale but Father Philip's account of his arrangement with Pastor Gentinetta: the Catholic priest and the Protestant minister who pool their ecclesiastical income and scowl at one another in public. Douglas and Henry Fenwick are spectators and interlocutors, but they carry no dramatic weight within the episode. The comedy is Father Philip's, and it is complete in itself. The chapter opens with the travellers descending from Spellino and ends with their departure from presbytery. It requires only the lightest contextual shell. Like 'The Seven Dead Men', it could stand independently without structural damage.

The mountain-climbing episode of Chapters Eight and Nine — the wager over the Piz Langrev, the midnight ascent, the pennon planted at the summit, the return to the breakfast table — forms a further self-contained unit. Its internal structure is those of the classic adventure sketch: a challenge issued, the night preparation, the physical ordeal described with comic deflation (the frozen ear, the avalanche, the summit breakfast), the triumphant return. Douglas's relationship with Lucia provides the motivation for the wager, but the episode does not require that context to function as a narrative. A young Scots tutor climbs an unclimbed Alpine peak on a bet: this is a complete story. The Galloway comparisons introduced at the summit — the Clints of Minnigaff, Loch Grannoch, 'hunker-sliding' as the term for the glissade — feel, in context, like the marks of a writer establishing a consistent fictional persona across separate pieces: grounding each episode in a recognisable Scots identity that a magazine reader could locate and follow.

The tobogganing episode of Chapter Twelve, 'A Night Assault', makes the case most plainly of all. It is set in the separate location of Bergsdorf, enters the narrative to fill the waiting period after Lucia's departure, and exits without narrative consequence. The Burgomeister collision, the comic trial of Henry Fenwick, the narrator's self-exoneration through strategic absence — these are the materials of a pure comic sketch. The chapter's title carries double meaning (the toboggan striking the Burgomeister; the shooting incident of the preceding chapter), which is a sophisticated narrative joke. But the chapter's relationship to the surrounding narrative is otherwise loose. It could be removed and the emotional arc of the story would be unaffected. Conversely, it reads as exactly the kind of polished comic piece that a periodical editor in the 1880s or early 1890s would have welcomed: physically specific, culturally alert to the English reader's interest in alpine sport, complete in itself, and carrying a recognisable authorial persona through the narrator's dry self-aware commentary.

The Stylistic Evidence: Register as Unit

The four narrative registers identified in the companion article — lyric-meditative, comic-deflating, essayistic-discursive, and vernacular-oral — are, with one important exception, formally separated across chapters rather than interwoven within them. That formal separation has already been noted as a mark of stylistic control. It is worth now examining it as a possible compositional signature.

In a text composed as a continuous whole, register variation tends to be woven: the narrator moves between lyric and comic registers within episodes, modulating tone as the scene requires. What 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' shows instead is register concentration by chapter. 'The Seven Dead Men' (Chapter Three) is pure vernacular-oral. The 'Spellino' episode (Chapter Four) is pure comic-deflating in its embedded narrative, with dry essayistic observation in the framing passages. 'The Piz Langrev' (Chapter Nine) sustains the comic-deflating register across the whole of the ascent. The chapters devoted to Lucia — Six, Seven, Eleven — are predominantly lyric-meditative. Chapter Ten, 'The Purple Châlet', occupies its own Gothic register, distinct from all four.

This concentration is consistent with a compositional process in which individual episodes were worked up as distinct pieces, with each finding its appropriate register and holding it before being brought together under a unifying narrator. It would not be the method of a writer who sat down and wrote fourteen chapters sequentially, modulating his voice as he went. It looks more like the assembly of separately developed materials into a coherent sequence.

The inference from the register evidence is stronger than from the titling pattern, because it is a stylistic rather than merely a formal observation. But it must be held with care. An alternative possibility is that Crockett, writing a travel narrative with a sustained retrospective narrator, deliberately assigned different registers to different episode types — oral tale, comic anecdote, lyric encounter — as a structural choice, and that the concentration of register by chapter is the result of that deliberate assignment rather than of prior separate existence. The two accounts are not easily distinguished from internal evidence alone.

The Problem of the Structural Gaps

Structural analysis identifies three significant anomalies in the text: the Count's vanishing confrontation, the disappearance of Madame Von Eisenhagen after Chapter Two, and the death of Pietro reported without narrative consequence in Chapter Fourteen. These are worth revisiting in the context of the compositional argument.

Count Nicholas, Lucia's brother, explicitly demands an explanation from Douglas at the end of Chapter Twelve: 'I have the honour to ask you to explain all this!' He is then called to Milan, promises to return, and never reappears. No letter comes. No reckoning is delivered. Douglas, the retrospective narrator, does not acknowledge this as a loose end; the threat simply dissolves. In a carefully plotted novel, this would be a significant structural failure. In a collection of assembled episodes, it is the kind of join that becomes visible when separately developed material is stitched together: the Count's confrontation was raised when the materials that generated it were in scope, and the resolution was never written because the subsequent episode — the tobogganing sketch, the reunion in the south — had been composed without it.

Madame Von Eisenhagen presents a different but related case. She is introduced in Chapter One with considerable narrative intensity — the tiger's glance, the red eyelids, the mutual dislike that is 'to the knife' — and disappears entirely after Chapter Two, her

structural role as antagonist-foil to Lucia complete. The narrator's gloss: 'for youth, for the sake of change, turns as readily away from evil as from good', is offered as explanation but is, in narrative terms, a dismissal. It has exactly the character of a retrospective framing applied to material that was originally not connected to subsequent episodes: a figure who was important in the 'Vico Averso' sketch, whose role was complete in that context, and who then had no function in the Alpine and southern Italian material that followed.

The death of Pietro the muleteer in Chapter Fourteen — stabbing Douglas, killed 'by accident', reported by Leonardi without interrogation — is different again. It is not a structural gap so much as a narrative compression that suggests the ending was worked up quickly, drawing the various threads together without dwelling on consequences. Whether this points to the pressures of collection assembly — bringing separately developed materials to a shared conclusion — or simply to Crockett's characteristic willingness to leave certain strands unresolved is a question the text alone cannot answer.

Structural gaps of this kind are consistent with, though not proof of, the assembly of separately developed materials. They are the joins between episodes. They do not appear in the episodes themselves, which are internally coherent: they appear at the transitions between episodes, precisely where independently developed pieces would need to be connected.

The Narrator as Assembly Mechanism

If the compositional hypothesis is correct, the retrospective narrator; Stephen Douglas, 'sometime of Culsharg in Galloway'; is not merely a fictional persona but the mechanism by which separately developed episodes are held together. The frame designation, 'Taken from the Journals of Travel written by Stephen Douglas', is doing exactly the work that such a frame needs to do: establishing a continuous identity across materials that may not have been originally continuous.

The narrator's presence is distributed unevenly across the text in ways that are consistent with this reading. In episodes that may have had prior separate existence: 'The Seven Dead Men', the 'Spellino' chapter, the 'Piz Langrev', the narrator's retrospective voice appears mainly in the framing passages that open and close the episode, and in the comic-deflating asides that establish his persona. The episodes themselves are largely given over to direct representation: the tale told, the priest's monologue delivered, the climb described. Between episodes, the narrator becomes more active, bridging the gap between one location and the next with the kind of transitional prose that feels written to connect rather than to explore.

The most revealing moment of frame-play is in Chapter Twelve, where the narrator refers to 'the publication of this veracious chronicle'. This is the narrator stepping outside the journal frame entirely to acknowledge that the journals have become a published text — which is precisely what the reader is holding. The irony is layered with care. But it is also, in the context of the compositional argument, a writer's joke about

the very process under discussion: the transformation of travel notes and accumulated episodes into a published collection. Crockett knew what he was doing. Whether he was also signalling it is a question the argument cannot answer from this text alone.

The Galloway lexical anchor operates similarly. Scots vocabulary and direct Scottish geographical reference appear at predictable moments: the establishment of Douglas's identity in Chapter One, the 'Piz Langrev' summit in Chapter Nine, and the Puritan conscience crisis in Chapter Fourteen. These are the moments where a serialised persona needs to be confirmed for a periodical reader who may have encountered only one or two of the episodes, or where a collected text needs to remind its reader of the narrator's grounding. The distribution is too deliberate to be accidental; it is either the mark of a skilled author who planned its deployment across a unified text, or the mark of a writer who knew how to inscribe a consistent persona across separately developed pieces. If the individual, self-contained stories were published in magazines, it is not necessarily the case (indeed unlikely) that they were pulled together by a narrator at that time – they may, after all, have been in several different publications. It seems most likely that the narrator is brought in to provide a unifying thread for the *Bog Myrtle* collection. Only delving into the contemporary magazine archives may resolve this question. Equally, we may never know.

What the Hypothesis Explains — and What It Does Not

The compositional hypothesis: that individual episodes in 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' may have had prior separate existence before being woven by the retrospective narrator into a composite text, accounts for a number of features that the standard account of the story as a unified composition does not fully explain, specifically:

The self-contained character of several episodes.

The concentration of register by chapter rather than modulation within chapters.

The structural gaps at transitions between episodes.

The uneven distribution of the retrospective narrator's voice.

The titling pattern that places descriptive, freestanding labels on chapters that could stand without their surroundings.

What it does not explain; and what must be held as a counterweight; is the degree of structural planning visible in the text's most integrated features. The movement of the title phrase across the fourteen chapters, from involuntary murmur in Chapter Six through direct declaration in Chapter Eleven to narrative attribution in the final line of Chapter Fourteen, suggests the work of a writer who planned an arc across the whole. The Gothic interlude of Chapter Ten, placed precisely between the Alpine intimacies and the emotional crisis of Chapter Eleven, functions as counterweight in a way that suggests structural deliberation. And Chapter Eleven itself — the one chapter where the comic and lyric registers genuinely fuse, producing the accidental shooting in the middle

of the lovers' lakeside declaration — is too precisely engineered to be accidental or assembled.

These features are consistent with an author who, assembling separately developed materials, also worked to integrate them: adding or revising the occurrences of the title phrase to give them their accumulative effect, placing the Gothic interlude to serve a structural purpose it may not have had when the Châlet episode was first developed, and recognising that Chapter Eleven needed to be the moment where everything converged. What the text shows, in other words, may be neither pure serial composition nor pure single-composition, but the third thing: a text assembled from materials with different origins, and then worked on again to achieve the integration that the collected form required.

Without more archival evidence — contracts, correspondence with publishers, manuscripts — the argument cannot be pushed further on its own terms. What the text itself demonstrates is that 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' shows internal evidence consistent with a more complex compositional history than its collected form suggests. Whether that history is recoverable is a question for the archive rather than the text.

'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' was published in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* (1895) is available through the [S.R. Crockett Online Museum Library](#)

Companion articles: 'Never Mind the Quality' and 'Four Voices' are available in the S.R.Crockett Online Museum Reading Room <https://srcrockett.scot/thereadingroom/>