

Four Voices, One Narrator: Narrative Structure and Style 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, framed as the journals of one Stephen Douglas, 'sometime of Culsharg in Galloway' — a Scots tutor travelling in northern Italy and the Swiss-Italian Alps with his English pupil. The story has received no sustained critical attention. It deserves a great deal.

The critical account of S.R. Crockett's fiction rarely gets as far as the European work. When it does, it tends to treat it as a departure from the Galloway ground that made his name — as if the European settings were a dilution of his real subject matter rather than a different arena for the same skills. That account rests on a chronology that does not survive scrutiny. *Bog Myrtle and Peat* appeared in 1895, two years after *The Stickit Minister* (1893) made Crockett's reputation overnight. But the Italian travel that furnished the material for 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' belongs to the early 1880s, when Crockett was working as a travelling tutor in Europe — more than a decade before fame arrived. The craft on display in this story was not a product of sudden success. It was already formed.

What that craft amounts to is the question the story poses for any careful reader. In fourteen chapters set across northern Italy, the Swiss-Italian Alps, and the Italian south, Crockett moves between four distinct narrative registers — lyric-meditative, comic-deflating, essayistic-discursive, and vernacular-oral — with a control and deliberateness that the standard account of his career cannot accommodate. The Galloway narrator is not left behind when he crosses the Alps. He is, if anything, more precisely himself for being elsewhere. And the prose he generates in each of those registers is not merely adequate to its purpose: it is, in each case, the right instrument for what the narrative requires.

The question is not how Crockett fails to hold these things together — but how, precisely, his structural command and stylistic range combine to make the whole work.

The Frame and Its Instabilities

Retrospective first-person narration is a characteristic Crockett technique. He returns to it across many works: the narrator who has survived an experience looks back on a younger self, holding the distance between the two selves with irony, affection, or both. What 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' demonstrates is how much that technique can carry when it is handled with full deliberateness.

The story's frame is specific and placed before a single event occurs: 'Taken from the Journals of Travel written by Stephen Douglas, sometime of Culsharg in Galloway.' The designation is doing several things at once. It presents the text as document rather than fiction — a journal, not a novel. It establishes Douglas's geographical origin as the first fact about him: he is a Galloway man, and that is the ground from which everything else in the narrative will be measured. And it positions him as a remembered self: the narrator is looking back from an unspecified distance at a young man he once was.

Crockett uses that distance with precision throughout. The narrating Douglas comments on the narrated Douglas with an irony that keeps sentiment honest. 'I was young then,' he remarks at the end of the Piz Langrev ascent, after recording his fierce pleasure at seeing Lucia's crimson shawl flying from the summit: 'It is so good to be young, and better to be in

love.’ The present-tense intrusion — ‘it is so good’ — momentarily collapses the distance between the two selves. Elsewhere that distance is held firm and used for self-mockery: ‘Many of the things I said to her then caused me to blush at the remembrance of them for many days after.’ The retrospective narrator never lets the reader forget that he has survived the experience and now, at some remove, gives an account of it that is knowing where the younger man was earnest.

But the most revealing moment of frame-play comes in Chapter Twelve, in the middle of the comic toboggan narrative. Douglas pauses to note: ‘The villain has remained, up to the publication of this veracious chronicle, unknown.’ The irony is layered with care. The narrator calls his journal a ‘chronicle’ that will be ‘published’ — which is precisely what the reader holds — while applying the word ‘veracious’ to an account in which he has just arranged for his pupil Henry to take the legal consequences of a toboggan collision that was entirely his own doing. The journal is not quite a journal. The chronicle is not quite veracious. Crockett is not quite writing fiction. This deliberate play on the genre border is not a loose end; it is a structural resource deployed at a comic high point, where the narrator’s self-exculpation from the page mirrors his self-exculpation from the scene.

Four Registers, Formally Separated

The sustained achievement of ‘Saint Lucy of the Eyes’ is its management of four distinct registers across fourteen chapters, each deployed for specific narrative purposes and — with one revealing exception — kept formally distinct. These are not merely tonal variations; they are genuine shifts in syntax, vocabulary, sentence rhythm, and narrative mode. Identifying how Crockett moves between them is the key to understanding both the structure of the story and the range of his prose.

The lyric-meditative register dominates the central emotional chapters: Six, Seven, Eleven, and Fourteen. Its signature is accumulated sensory detail carried in long subordinate-clause-heavy sentences whose very length enacts the experience of absorption or suspension. Consider the evening walk of Chapter Six, where the Countess takes Douglas’s arm for the first time by the lake:

‘Yet in Galloway of the hills it would have taken me weeks even to conceive myself offering an arm to a beautiful woman. Here such things were in the air. Nevertheless was my heart beating wildly within me, like a bird’s wings that must perforce pulsate faster in a rarer atmosphere.’

The stylistic choice is precise. ‘Nevertheless was my heart beating wildly’ inverts the expected syntax — the subject displaced, the verb suspended — so that the sentence formally enacts the breathlessness it describes. The simile then extends and slows the sentence further, the subordinate clause ‘that must perforce pulsate faster in a rarer atmosphere’ elongating the breath before it releases. This is lyric syntax, and it is chosen with full awareness. The same register governs the lakeside declaration scene in Chapter Eleven — ‘her hair thrilled me, quickening yet more the racing of my heart, and making me light-headed like unaccustomed wine’ — where the participial accumulation (‘quickening’, ‘making’) produces the same suspended, accelerating effect. And it governs the reconciliation in Chapter Fourteen, where Douglas wakes from his wounding with his head in Lucia’s lap and hears her voice ‘like the murmuring of a dove over its nestling’ — a simile of protective tenderness that would be sentimental if it were not earned by everything that has preceded it.

Set directly against this is the comic-deflating register, and the contrast in prose style is absolute. The Burgomeister of Bergsdorf enters the story in Chapter Twelve in three sentences:

'The Burgomeister of Bergsdorf was a great elephant of a man. He went abroad radiating self-importance. He perspired wisdom on the coldest day.'

Where the lyric register accumulates and suspends, the comic register strips and delivers. Three short declaratives; no subordinate clauses; no simile. The comedy of 'perspired wisdom' works through bathos — the incongruity of perspiration applied to an abstraction — but the syntactic vehicle for that bathos is a sentence of absolute economy. This is what we might recognize as Scots humour; the application of dry analytical precision to a situation of physical or social absurdity, the gap between the register of the description and the reality it describes being the source of the laugh. When the toboggan collision arrives, Crockett renders it as a problem in applied physics: 'There is but one way of halting a toboggan. It is to run the nose of your machine into a snow-bank, where it will stick. On the contrary, you do not stop. You describe the curve known as a parabola.' The pedantic exactness of 'the curve known as a parabola' is itself the joke.

The third register is essayistic and discursive. Douglas breaks narrative momentum entirely to address the reader directly on questions of general human experience, in passages that have no conventional plot function but claim a different kind of authority: the retrospective narrator speaking from earned understanding. Chapter Seven contains the most extended example, a sustained meditation on the nature of love:

'Again, even to a passionate woman love is rest... A man's, at his best, like a Monday morn when the work of day and week begins. For love, to a true man, is above all things a call to work.'

There is something almost eighteenth-century in this willingness to interrupt narrative with essay. The discursive passages in Chapter One (on the inbred self-belief of Galloway), Chapter Six (on the social geography of offering an arm), and Chapter Fourteen (on the 'domination of the Puritan base') all have the same character: prose that generalises from specific to universal, that reaches for the aphoristic, and that positions Douglas not merely as a character in a story but as a thinking man reflecting on what experience means. The register is not accidental. It is how Crockett gives his narrator a life that extends beyond the events he is recounting.

The fourth register is the vernacular-oral, appearing fully in the embedded narratives of Chapters Three and Four. Here the prose shifts to patterned, repetitive structures — short declaratives, sequential connectives ('So', 'Then', 'And'), direct speech carrying narrative weight — that reproduce the syntax of oral transmission. This is not incidental variation; it is formal register-switching, and it repays close attention.

Embedded Worlds: The Seven Dead Men and Father Philip

The embedded narratives of Chapters Three and Four are among the most formally accomplished passages in the story, and the most easily overlooked. They arrive in the early section of the text, before Lucia appears, and a casual reading might treat them as atmospheric scene-setting — two young travellers amusing Italian children at a village well. That reading misses what Crockett is doing, both structurally and stylistically.

'The Seven Dead Men' is a Venetian ghost story, told by Douglas and Henry to a gathering audience of children, mothers, and fathers. The moment the tale begins, the prose shifts

register completely. The syntactic pattern is deliberate and sustained: 'So the boy went out... Then the dead man turned to him... So the men laughed...' — the rhythm of oral transmission reproduced in print, each unit short and sequential, the connectives marking the beats of communal storytelling. Crockett has listened carefully to how tales of this kind actually move, and he writes a version that would work as well spoken aloud as read on a page.

The tale itself earns its uncanny force through restraint. Six fishermen set a drowned man in the prow of their boat for a jest, sending the cabin boy to wake him. The dead man answers. The fishermen are frozen to silence at their table. The boy — the only one who remembered to cross himself — escapes. Crockett gives the tale's moral its full weight without once stating it: the single detail of the crossed self carries the whole. The ending is rendered in prose of genuine chill:

'But the seventh, who sat at the bottom in the boy's place, shone as though he had been on fire, leaning back in his chair as one that laughed and made merry at a jest. But the six were fallen silent and very sober.'

The structural relationship between the tale and the larger narrative in which it is embedded is worth noting, though it cannot be pushed too far. 'The Seven Dead Men' concerns the consequences of mockery and the survival of the one who kept faith. Douglas is himself a young man in the process of learning what keeping faith with Lucia will cost him. The thematic resonance is available to the attentive reader; it is not schematically imposed.

The tale's reception by its audience is narrated with a different kind of precision — Scots humour returning as the story's aftermath unfolds. The success is 'great, surprising, embarrassing': the children fetch their mothers, the mothers the fathers, until the whole village stands at the well, correcting Douglas and Henry if they deviate by so much as 'the droop of a hair on the wet beard of the drowned man.' The sudden celebrity and its fragility — 'a reputation so sudden and tremendous' that any deviation from the established text will shatter it — is gently comic, but it also registers something accurate about oral tradition: the community owns the story the moment it has heard it and will hold the teller to the version it has ratified.

Father Philip's account of 'Spellino' in Chapter Four deploys the embedded narrative differently. Where the 'Seven Dead Men' is a performance for an audience, Father Philip's monologue is delivered as a confidence — though the priest's evident relish in his own cleverness makes it closer to a performance of confidence. The arrangement he describes is sharp: the villagers of Spellino convert strategically between Catholicism and Protestantism depending on which religious collector is currently at the door, and Father Philip and Pastor Gentinetta have resolved the situation by pooling their income and presenting a public face of mutual antagonism. Crockett places Douglas's narration around the priest's first-person monologue, giving the embedded account the structure of transcribed testimony.

The comedy is precise in its target. It is not generic anticlericalism. Crockett is amused by the strategic religiosity of the villagers ('as soon as he appears, every family that is of the religion turns heretic'), and by the worldly pragmatism of two clergymen who have arrived at a functional arrangement across the sectarian divide. Father Philip is not cynical; he is practical, and he knows it: 'I, Father Philip, thank the saints — and Gentinetta, he thanks his mother, for the wit which makes it possible for poor servants of God to live.' But the joke is also on Douglas, and Crockett does not let it pass. The sight of the Protestant pastor walking by makes Douglas feel he 'ought to have been out there with him, instead of sitting in the presbytery of the Pope's priest.' Yet he stays for the Montepulciano. The scene is narrated by a man who would become a Free Kirk minister, sitting in a Catholic presbytery, drinking

the wine and laughing at a story he knows he should find theologically uncomfortable. Crockett leaves all of that in the scene simultaneously, resolved by nothing.

Both embedded narratives demonstrate the same structural and stylistic principle: Douglas steps back from his own prose voice to make room for a voice with different requirements. 'The Seven Dead Men' demands oral-vernacular syntax; Father Philip's confession demands the confessional-comic monologue. In each case, the shift is handled with the ease of a writer who has thought carefully about what different kinds of telling actually sound like on the page.

Galloway as Moral Anchor

Scots vocabulary and Galloway geographical reference are concentrated at specific moments: Chapter One, where Douglas establishes his identity and origin; Chapter Nine, at the summit of the Piz Langrev; and Chapter Fourteen, at the crisis of the final misunderstanding. In between, the narration moves into Standard English with European inflections — French phrases ('en avant', 'élan', 'déjeuner'), Italian terms, Latin tags ('nova dies', 'imprimis') — that register Douglas's absorption into his environment. The Scots resurfaces at the moments when he most needs to know who he is.

The pattern is stylistically significant because it is not decorative. Chapter One opens with an extraordinary lexical density of Scots: 'sib' (akin, related), 'dourness', 'canny siller', 'loup a moss-hag', 'whaup and the peewits', 'braxy'. This is not atmospheric colour. It is the linguistic equivalent of establishing shot: before Douglas has described a single Italian scene, the prose has placed him firmly within a specific cultural vocabulary that will mark the difference between who he is and what he encounters. Once that identity is anchored, the Scots vocabulary can recede without the anchor being lost.

It returns at the Piz Langrev summit, alone before dawn. Douglas's thoughts go to the Clints of Minnigaff and Loch Grannoch; the descent becomes 'hunker-sliding' — which he glosses, with characteristic comic deflation, as the Galloway term for tobogganing, 'a favourite occupation of politicians.' These are not nostalgic references. They locate the achievement of the climb within Douglas's own formed experience: he is equal to the Alps because he has already been equal to the Galloway hills, and the prose shows this by mapping one landscape onto the other through Scots lexis.

In Chapter Fourteen, the Scots moral formation surfaces as explicit analysis. Douglas sits at Lucia's dinner table, alone with her in the great castle, and feels the pull of his mother's face and the 'ethic of the Sabbath nights' at precisely the moment when he most needs to be simply present. He names what is happening with exact, unsparing prose: 'It was the domination of the Puritan base, and most bitterly I resented, while I could not prevent, its hold upon me.' This is not Presbyterian guilt in a simple sense — Douglas is not morally opposed to being alone with Lucia. He is held by something older than his own conscious opinions: the formed, embodied conscience of the moorland upbringing, which persists as an involuntary claim beneath the European surface he has acquired. His mistake — the 'error in judgment' of the title — follows directly from it.

This is characterisation of considerable subtlety, delivered in prose of deliberate plainness. The abstract noun 'domination', the compound 'Puritan base': Douglas is applying the vocabulary of cultural analysis to his own psychological state, with a clarity about his formation that the young man in the story did not have but the retrospective narrator does. The Galloway lexis, in other words, is not simply used to mark identity; it is used to show how deeply that identity goes, and what it costs when it operates against the grain of the narrator's wishes.

The Gothic Interlude: Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten, 'The Purple Châlet,' is the story's most formally unusual episode, and the one most easily missed in any account of the narrative. It stands between the intimacy of the Alpine chapters and the emotional climax of Chapter Eleven, and it introduces a register that is neither lyric nor comic nor essayistic: it is Gothic, in the specific tradition of the architectural uncanny.

The châlet has been built to the commission of a German countess from Mannheim who, having lost her husband, 'conceived that the light of her life had gone out, and so determined to dwell in an atmosphere of eternal gloom.' M. Bourget, the Belgian architect who built it, takes Douglas and Lucia through its rooms. The woodwork is black as ebony, with silver lines on the panels. The floor is black. The hangings are the deepest purple, 'so dark as almost to be black.' The house, Douglas notes, 'seemed to be a great coffin.'

The stylistic management of the scene is careful. Crockett allows the Gothic accumulation to build through the movement between rooms, each darker and more funereal than the last, until M. Bourget's coup de théâtre: the final bedroom, flung open suddenly, hung with pure white. 'Instantly our eyes were almost dazzled. This furthest room was hung with pure white. The carpet was white; the walls and roof white as milk. All the furniture was painted white.' The repetition is structural — the insistence on 'white' piling up across consecutive sentences — and it produces its effect precisely because the white room is more disturbing than the black ones. Douglas articulates what the reader feels: 'The act of stepping from the blackness of the tomb into this cold, chill whiteness gave me a sense of horror for which I could not account.'

The chapter's emotional function is to reveal Lucia's inner life at a moment when she cannot control the revelation. Her response to the white room is immediate and involuntary: she clings to Douglas's arm, trembling, and asks to be taken away. Outside, recovering in the Alpine sunshine, she returns to the imagery: 'That terrible, terrible place! I felt as though I were buried alive — shrouded in white, confined in mort-cloths!' The language of the mort-cloth and the shroud, applied to whiteness rather than blackness, gives us a glimpse of what Lucia carries: a relationship to death and to the dead husband's world that the cheerful surface of her social manner conceals. The Gothic interlude discloses this without explaining it, and without Douglas being permitted to ask questions. It is over quickly, resolved back into the sunshine, but it has placed something in the reader's mind about Lucia that the lyric episodes alone could not have provided.

The chapter also functions structurally as a counterweight. Placed between the political discussion of the evening (the conversation about liberal movements in Europe, with Lucia and the Count restraining themselves under the company of reactionary landlords) and the emotional crisis of Chapter Eleven, it holds a darker note than either. It is the one moment in the story where something like genuine fear — not the stagey terror of the Seven Dead Men told in daylight to children, but the discomfort of a real emotional nerve touched without warning — enters the narrative.

Where the Registers Touch: Chapter Eleven

The four registers are, as a rule, formally separated. Comic episodes occupy their own chapters; lyric episodes occupy theirs. The one moment where they genuinely fuse — and the chapter that shows most fully what Crockett's range can do at full stretch — is Chapter Eleven, 'The White Owl.'

The chapter opens in the lyric register. Lucia and Douglas stand in the dark niche of the terrace, wrapped in her scarlet cloak, while Henry and Count Nicholas promenade above them talking about guns. The comedy of the hunters' conversation — 'Forty-four brace', 'The lock jammed' — drifts down to the lovers as pure bathos, 'meaningless as the lapse of the waves on the shore, pattering an accompaniment above the soft sibilance of our whispered talk.' The prose of the lyric passages around this is at full stretch: the darkness fragrant, the cloak drawn round them both, 'the touch of her hair thrilled me, quickening yet more the racing of my heart, and making me light-headed like unaccustomed wine.'

Then, without transition, the comic and the lyric collide. Henry, thinking he has seen a white owl, clicks his gun-lock and fires. The pellets graze Douglas's arm. Lucia gives a cry. Henry's triumphant 'I think I got it that time!' is among the finest comic lines in the story: the oblivious sportsman, the smoking gun, the lovers flattened against the wall of their niche in the blissful dark — the gap between what Henry thinks he has achieved and what has actually occurred is perfect comic machinery.

What makes the scene remarkable is that the comedy does not cancel the lyricism and the lyricism does not neutralise the comedy. They coexist because Crockett manages the tonal transition with exact control. Douglas's response to being shot is to sweep Lucia behind him — 'bending my body like a shield over her' — and then to lie to her about the wound: 'No, I am not at all hurt,' he says, with the parenthetical gloss 'lying to her, as a man does so easily to a woman.' That aside is simultaneously self-aware, tender, and funny. It asks the reader to hold three responses at once, and Crockett's prose makes it possible to do so without strain.

The Title Phrase

The phrase 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' appears four times across the fourteen chapters, and its movement through the text is the clearest single index of Crockett's structural thinking. In Chapter Six it arrives involuntarily: Douglas, reminded of Italian poetry by the sound of the name Lucia, murmurs it before he is aware he has spoken. The Countess's response is immediate and unexplained: 'No, not that — not that. I am not good enough.' That resistance stands without resolution or revisiting.

In Chapter Eleven it becomes direct address, at the lakeside declaration: 'Lucia — little Saint Lucy of the Eyes, hear me.' The involuntary murmur has become a chosen name, a term of love given in a moment of full emotional commitment. In Chapter Thirteen, on the public bridge in the capital of the south, it becomes narrative designation: 'This morning I have met Lucia — my little Saint Lucy of the Eyes.' Douglas distinguishes explicitly between the formal 'Countess' he parted from the night before and the Lucia he has found this morning — the phrase marking the difference between the woman's public and private selves.

The fourth and final use is the story's last line. Lying wounded and barely conscious after the stabbing, Douglas gropes for words: 'Forgive me, little Saint Lucy of the Eyes! It was — it was — what was it that it was? — I have forgotten.' And Lucia answers: "'An error in judgment!'" said Saint Lucy of the Eyes, and forgave me, though I cannot remember more about it.' The title phrase has made its full journey. What began as an involuntary literary allusion, resisted by its subject, ends as the final narrative attribution: not 'the Countess,' not 'Lucia,' but 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' — the name Douglas gave her, which she first refused, and which she has now claimed in the act of forgiveness. The story's title is taken from its last line and earns that position across all fourteen chapters.

What the Story Demonstrates

A writer whose range is limited to the sentimental-parochial cannot produce the Seven Dead Men. He cannot hold the Gothic uncanny of the Purple Châlet alongside the sun-drenched comedy of Bergsdorf, or manage the ironic distance of a retrospective narrator who is simultaneously tender and self-mocking, or orchestrate four registers across twenty-four thousand words with this degree of structural deliberateness. Still less can he produce prose that is doing something precise and different in each of those registers: the inverted syntax of the lakeside lyric, the bathos-by-short-declarative of the Burgomeister's introduction, the oral-sequential patterning of the Venetian ghost story, the aphoristic generalisation of the essayistic passages.

What 'Saint Lucy of the Eyes' shows is a writer in full command of his technical resources — and it shows this a decade before the success that critical history has credited with making him. The craft visible in this story was not the product of fame. It was the precondition of it.

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

Companion articles on Saint Lucy of the Eyes: 'Saint Lucy: Composition' and 'Never Mind the Quality' are available in the [The S.R.Crockett Online Museum Reading Room](#)