

## HOMAGE TO CRABTREE

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I need hardly say how deeply I appreciate the honour of being invited to deliver the first Annual Oration to the members of the Crabtree Foundation, and with what a lively sense of my responsibilities I approach the task of celebrating that great and neglected man of letters. The neglect into which the poet Crabtree has fallen — amounting, it sometimes seems to me, almost to a conspiracy of silence — is a matter for wonder, but also, I venture to submit, for reproach. When I reflect that not one single copy of his various works is to be found in the library of University College — this famous College with whose foundation he was obscurely but none the less effectively associated — and when I remind you that although our great National Repository does fortunately possess copies of most of his works, they have been absurdly attributed in the catalogue to William Joseph Crabtree (1773-1829), author of a deservedly forgotten work on *Diseases of the Cow* — when I recall those facts to your attention, you will agree with me, I hope, that though Crabtree has long found 'an audience fit though few', it is not fit that they should be so few as they demonstrably are. No article on Crabtree in the *Dictionary of National Biography*; not a word about him in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*! Let us hope that the *Oxford History of English Literature* (whose General Editor we are happy to see with us here tonight) will make some amends when the relevant volume of that history comes to be published.

Of references to Crabtree in the first half of the twentieth century I have been able to discover only two. These are, however, sufficiently curious to deserve a passing mention. For the first of them I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. George Kane, lately Secretary to the Board of Studies in English in this University. Searching through the minutes of the Higher Degrees Sub-Committee one evening, Dr. Kane came upon the following minute, dated 1 April 1913:

Registration for the degree of M.A. External: Sarup Gopalachari, Second Class Honours in English, University of Calcutta. Registration approved. The candidate submitted as the title of his thesis: 'The Life and Work of Joseph Crabtree: 1754-1854'. The Committee were of the opinion that the subject proposed by the candidate was much too extensive for the M.A. degree, and recommended that he should limit his field to some particular aspect of Crabtree's work. They further recommended that he should consult the Advisory Service, and in the event of his so doing, Professor W. P. Ker agreed to act.

A careful scrutiny of the minutes failed to reveal any further developments; it can only be supposed that the candidate was discouraged by the Committee's report, and abandoned a project that might well have become a millstone in Crabtree studies.

The second reference to our poet occurs almost exactly ten years later, when a letter appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* above the signature of an Assistant-Professor in the University of Western Nevada. As every scrap of biographical information pertaining to Crabtree must have some value, I venture to quote this letter in full:

Sir,

I am engaged in collecting materials for a biography of the English poet, Joseph Crabtree (1754-1854), and would be grateful for any assistance from your readers in the way of family letters, contemporary references, or other documents that may have some bearing on his life. I am particularly anxious to trace the manuscript of his *Ars Salutandi*, which was sold by Maggs Brothers in 1903, but has so far eluded my search.

Kemper T. Guggenheim, Box 2986, Reno, Nevada.

Nothing appears to have come of Professor Guggenheim's researches, and one is driven to conclude that the English owners of Crabtree manuscripts were either unaware of the priceless treasures in their possession, or else, as seems to me more likely, were unwilling to risk sending them across the Atlantic to the deserts of Western Nevada.

Such, then, is the meagre tally of Crabtree scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century. In the past two or three years, however, the picture has been entirely transformed! Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the past three years have contributed more to our knowledge of Crabtree than the other 97 years that have elapsed since his death. Modest as have been my own personal contributions to the striking contemporary revival of interest in

Crabtree, I shall always be proud to reflect that this revival has synchronised with my occupation of the Lord Northcliffe Chair of Modern English Literature in this College. At least I can claim that I did nothing to stop it, and, if I may be forgiven what may appear to be an indecent vanity, I would like to think that I have followed up, not altogether unsuccessfully, some of the clues so generously and spontaneously placed at my disposal by the President of the Crabtree Foundation and by other Crabtree Scholars in this College, senior to me, if not in years, at any rate in Crabtree studies.

Tonight it is my privilege to address my remarks to a distinguished gathering of the *cognoscenti*. It therefore seems to me that it would be a work of supererogation to trace in detail the life history of Joseph Crabtree, which must be familiar to most of you here. I shall accordingly pass over in silence the boyhood years at Chipping Sodbury, the drunken frolics of the Oxford undergraduate, and the satirical verses on his tutor which led to him being first of all gated, and then finally sent down in the Hilary term of 1773. There followed, as you know, one of the obscurest decades in Crabtree's long life, when, after tasting the intoxicating pleasures of the Town, he appears to have retired to the country, and there for the first time seriously cultivated his Muse. It must be admitted, however (and here is one promising field for future Scholars) we are not at this period on firm ground with Crabtree, and his biographer must fill in the gaps as best he may with cautious speculation and scholarly deduction. In the year 1783, however, Crabtree emerges, at least partially, from the obscurity which had enveloped him. In that year his uncle, Oliver Crabtree, was persuaded to find a place for him in the firm of Crabtree and Hillier, wine shippers of Orléans. At the risk of appearing egotistical, I would like to dwell for a few minutes on this period of Crabtree's life. What little I have been able to add to our knowledge of Crabtree is mainly concerned with those early years in France, when, of course, there occurred that event which must always take a foremost place in the biography of our poet — his first meeting with Wordsworth. That they met in France is, of course, common knowledge. But how intimately the two poets were associated has not hitherto been realised, and I had myself no conception of the revelations that were in store for me when I followed up a hint dropped almost casually to me by the Provost of this College.

Briefly, then, the story is this. Arriving at Orléans in 1783, Crabtree set himself with his usual tenacity of purpose to master the details of the wine trade, and he not unnaturally considered that he was serving the best interests of his firm by sampling as many of its wines as possible and becoming thoroughly familiar with the various vintages. With his uncle, a morose teetotaller and Methodist, he seems never to have been on friendly terms; but as his livelihood depended on his uncle's good will, he appears to have suppressed his natural feelings, as far as was compatible with his mercurial and poetic temperament. To this period, however, belongs his fine *Ode to Claret*, with its well-known opening lines:

No more, Pomona, let thy vot'ries chaunt  
The praise of Cyder; no, nor Ceres bring  
Her grain for beery clowns. Avaunt, avaunt!  
Bacchus is our undoubted Lord and King!

Those and other convivial verses did nothing to endear the sprightly nephew to the severe and pragmatical uncle, and Crabtree always knew that his future in the firm was never better than precarious, and that one false step would lead to his dismissal. For some years after his arrival in Orléans he had stayed in his uncle's house, under the watchful and disapproving eye of that petty tyrant; but in 1790, tiring at last of the gloomy atmosphere of this domicile, he had found more congenial lodgings in the home of one Paul Vallon. There, in the winter of 1791, he met Paul Vallon's sister, Annette, and the young Frenchwoman appears to have fallen passionately in love with the English poet, now in his thirty-seventh year and at the height of his powers, both physical and spiritual. It was just at this time that the young William Wordsworth, hearing from an English acquaintance in Paris that the poet Crabtree was living in Orléans, determined to seek him out and pay his respects to one whose poetry he had long known and admired. The exact date of Wordsworth's arrival in Orléans is not known; but when he knocked at the Vallons' door and introduced himself to Crabtree, he found the poet in a state of utter dejection. Wordsworth at first imagined that this was nothing more than one of those sudden revulsions of feeling to which all poets are subject; but a few days later Crabtree confided to his young admirer the reasons for his melancholy: Annette Vallon, as Wordsworth himself was to put it in *Vaudracour and Julia*:

... wanting yet the name of wife,  
Carried about her for a secret grief  
The promise of a mother.

(I may remark in passing that Crabtree's sonnet, 'When I consider how my strength is spent', clearly refers to this event, and not, as used to be thought, to the advance of a general senescence.)

In this extremity Wordsworth apparently suggested that Crabtree should marry the girl, but Crabtree explained that this was impossible. Should his uncle find out what had happened, he would undoubtedly dismiss him immediately from the firm and turn him on the streets; and as Crabtree — with that manly English independence which always characterised him — had never troubled to learn French, he would have found himself not only a stranger in a country already rent by revolution, but a stranger unable to speak the language of the country in which he was now destitute. Wordsworth retired to consider the situation and to feed his mind for some time in a wise passiveness. When he returned, it was to make a remarkable and generous proposal. This was nothing less than an offer to acknowledge himself the father of Annette's unborn infant, and to accept all the responsibilities of paternity. This offer — after some equally generous hesitation — Crabtree accepted. But it was not so easy to persuade Annette, who had taken an intense dislike to Wordsworth from the first moment she set eyes on him — it was not easy, I say, to persuade her to agree to the proposed solution; and it was only after Crabtree had patiently explained to the foolish girl that she would not have to live with Wordsworth that she consented to the arrangement. The subsequent events are sufficiently well known to make it unnecessary for me to carry the story any further. But I like to think that Wordsworth was able, in this unconventional way, to repay something of the great literary debt he owed to Crabtree, even though he never acknowledged it in any of his published verse.

I said advisedly in his *published* verse. It had long seemed to me surprising — and I know others have been as puzzled as myself — that there is not a single reference to Crabtree in the whole of Wordsworth's writings. It was therefore with feelings which I will admit bordered upon excitement that I came across, only a few days ago, in a manuscript copy of one of Wordsworth's best known poems, *The Leechgatherer*, two cancelled passages that referred to Crabtree, once actually by name. The copy in question had been made by Dorothy Wordsworth for Lady Beaumont, and is now in the possession of Adolphus Blake, Esq., who is apparently a direct descendant of Goody Blake. (I may be permitted to add that the family appears to have flourished since the early nineteenth century, for I found Mr. Blake very comfortably installed in a large flat in Portland Place. I am sorry he cannot be with us here tonight but he begged to be excused, as our proceedings coincided with *Henry Hall's Guest Night*, a programme which he has not missed, I think he said, for over ten years.) The manuscript copy of *The Leechgatherer* in his possession apparently represents an earlier stage in the composition of the poem than any hitherto known. Apart from one or two minor changes, however, it corresponds closely to the *textus receptus*, except for the all-important Stanzas VII and XVII.

It was Stanza XVII that first caught my eye, owing to a marginal annotation that fairly leapt from the page. You will recall how Wordsworth, after hearing the Leechgatherer's story, felt his former unreasonable depression returning as strongly as ever:

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;  
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;  
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;  
And mighty Poets in their misery dead.

Opposite that last line there appears in the margin the single word 'Crabtree'. It is written in a different hand from Dorothy's, and Miss Darbshire, to whom I was unable to submit the manuscript, has tentatively identified it from my description as that of Sir George Beaumont. You can well imagine the thrill that ran through me at the unexpected discovery of this reference to our poet. But, I am prepared to be told, there is nothing here to show that Crabtree was in the poet's mind when he thought of 'mighty poets in their misery dead': all that the annotation tells us is that Sir George Beaumont made a plausible guess at what was in the poet's mind. If that were all, I would still claim that the annotation is of the greatest interest; for, as I have already insisted, owing to the paucity of references to Crabtree, any mention of his name by a contemporary is of value. But fortunately that is not all. You will, I am sure, believe me when I say that I now turned back to the beginning of the poem and started to read it through with an increased attention. And when I came to Stanza VII, there was the confirmation I had been looking for, and, indeed, more than half expecting. In the printed version, you will remember, the first four lines of Stanza VII run as follows:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,  
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;  
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy  
Following his plough along the mountainside.

In the version that I was now reading there was a startling variant:

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,  
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;  
Of Crabtree wrapt in glory and in joy  
Casting his fly along the river side.

If I may venture upon an expression of my own personal feelings here, it is a matter of deep satisfaction to me that in his sole reference to Crabtree, Wordsworth should have recalled him as an angler.

Here, then, was a notable proof of the sentiments which Wordsworth cherished for his old friend, Crabtree. But, of course, my discovery only raised a fresh problem. When the first flush of excitement had died down, I realised that however welcome Wordsworth's allusion to Crabtree might be, it was in its way inexplicable. 'Mighty poets in their misery dead.' But in 1802, when this poem was written, Crabtree was very far from being dead. Had it been otherwise, we should not be sitting round this table tonight honouring the first centenary of his death, and the second of his birth. The more I thought of it, the odder Wordsworth's allusion to a Crabtree who had apparently passed on appeared to be. Not unnaturally (though I hope I succeeded in concealing my suspicions from Mr. Blake) I began to doubt the authenticity of the manuscript. But as it seemed to me equally inexplicable that anyone choosing to forge a Wordsworth manuscript should insert the name 'Crabtree', my faith in its authenticity was quickly restored. And then suddenly I had a glimpse of a possible explanation. Could Wordsworth have been misled by a false report of his friend's death into believing that he was in fact no more? There was only one thing to do, and I did it. If Wordsworth had seen a report of Crabtree's death, it must almost certainly have been in a contemporary newspaper, and I must make a search at Colindale. Fortunately, the composition of the poem is fully documented in Dorothy's *Grasmere Journal*, and I was quick enough to see that the relevant date for me was not that on which Wordsworth began to compose the poem — in the spring of 1802 — but the day on which he actually met the Leechgatherer — Friday, 3 October 1800. And I had still another clue to facilitate my search. Just before recording the meeting with the Leechgatherer, Dorothy entered in her Journal the words: 'Amos Cottle's death in the *Morning Post*'. So Wordsworth had just been reading a recent number of the *Morning Post*. Would there perhaps be something — dared I hope? — about Crabtree in that same number? I am not here, gentlemen, to garnish or embellish a tale. I am addressing scholars, and I will respect the idiom of the scholar. Was there anything about Crabtree in that number of the *Morning Post*? There was! I found it just under the report of Amos Cottle's death. Let me quote the actual words:

And we hear from Orléans that Joseph Crabtree, Esq., of the well-known firm of Crabtree and Hillier, wine shippers, is lately dead in that place of a pleuritic fever.

That, as we know, was a false report, but poor Wordsworth must have accepted it as genuine — and on him the distressing news must have fallen like a thunderbolt.

'What various ills', as Dr. Johnson observes, 'the scholar's life assail'. And yet, at long intervals, we have our rewards; and, for my part, I will confess that in a life devoted to the slow and unspectacular labours of scholarship, nothing has pleased me more than the finding of this one small piece in the curious jigsaw that constitutes the pattern of Crabtree's life.

Hitherto, I had always tended to associate the otherwise unaccountable depression which suddenly overtakes Wordsworth:

Dim sadness — and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name —

with the death of Amos Cottle. But without seeking to displace poor Cottle entirely, we may surely be permitted now to attribute Wordsworth's distress to a more efficient cause. Much as he liked and respected Cottle, Wordsworth could never have thought of him as among the 'mighty poets in their misery dead'. But Crabtree he could, and Crabtree, on the evidence of this first draft, he evidently did. Crabtree, as he must have believed, coughing out the last hours of his life in a foreign land, Crabtree the friend of his youth and in a peculiar sense his master — the death of such a brother-poet must have stirred Wordsworth to the depths.

I confess, gentlemen — and I hope I betray no unmanly weakness — that one hundred years after the real death of the poet Crabtree, on this memorable anniversary, I find my own heart charged with emotion. With Pride, when I let my thoughts dwell on one of the greatest of England's poetical sons; with Joy, when I reflect that the clouds which have so long obscured his unique achievement have at last parted, and the sun of his reputation now shines in full meridian splendour. And yet, mingled with these pleasurable feelings, there is an element of

Fear: fear lest, as the years roll on, Crabtree may be allowed for a second time to slip back into that shadowy region of oblivion from which he has so signally emerged, and — if I may be permitted to adapt the words of a modern poet:

And when we die, who shall remember  
Joe Crabtree of the West country?

But I would not end upon a note of sadness: I would close rather upon one of assured confidence. Crabtree is with the immortals, in that serene country where the fluctuating winds of literary fashion die upon the listening air, and where, in the words of his great Augustan brother-poet:

Still green with bays each ancient altar stands  
Above the reach of sacrilegious hands.