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CRABTREE'S CHEMICAL AND COLONIAL CONNECTIONS
R.S. Nyholm
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As a scientist, I am specially grateful to Professor R.V. Jones, Orator in 1957, for the careful study which he made of the impact of Crabtree upon some men of science who were working during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Professor Jones dealt in particular with the relationship between Crabtree and certain famous physicists. I decided to examine in a little detail the connection between Crabtree and some of the chemists who were known to him. This has led by pure chance, and indeed how many discoveries of importance in science are made other than by pure chance, to certain information which I modestly suggest will prove of considerable importance for our understanding of the work and importance of our great poet. For me personally it has been doubly exciting to find that Crabtree had some connections with Australia.

When one examines much of the life of Crabtree, as has been painfully elucidated by my predecessors, one is struck by the following problem. First of all, Crabtree was a highly intelligent creative individual, especially as a poet. The brilliance of his creative power was fully demonstrated in the all-too-small amount of published work found so far in various libraries, albeit frequently under the names of other authors. But perhaps the most obvious example of his abilities was displayed during his stay in France. You will recall that with appropriate encouragement from Annette Vallon, these creative powers were fully demonstrated. But one is tempted to ask whether Annette was entirely justified after receiving the seed of his genius to let it go forth into the world under the name of Wordsworth. The second important feature of Crabtree's life was the studied deliberation with which he refused to publish anything but an occasional gem under his own name. Why did he display this reluctance to allow his name to be recognised in public — for excessive modesty can scarcely be considered as part of Crabtree's makeup? This is a subject about which I feel we need to know a good deal more and which warrants far more study in the future. One of the reasons may well have been the episode with his cousin discussed below.

Jones refers in his Oration to the contact between Crabtree and Davy and to the deep antipathy between them. It has been my good fortune, with the help of the library of the Royal Institution, to unearth certain details which perhaps help us to understand these feelings. There appear to be at least two main causes. Firstly, Crabtree was gravely offended by Davy in 1799 when the latter said in a public lecture, 'One good experiment is worth more than the ingenuity of a brain like Newton's'. Now Crabtree could have forgiven Davy for his partiality for experimental work; he was not averse to light-hearted experiments in the biological field himself, although he was frankly not very keen on the conceptions involved. However, he was pathologically devoted to Isaac Newton and he believed not only all that Newton wrote, but also, he took as *ex cathedra* all the tentative speculations of Newton. Therefore, any criticism of Newton was taken as a personal insult. Thereafter, he lost no opportunity of criticising Davy and, in particular, he pilloried him mercilessly whenever he detected a real or imagined experimental slip. He was present at the Royal Institution the night when the Safety Lamp for mines was announced by Davy. Now he was well aware of the fact that the Admiralty had been in close touch with Davy in connection with a new lamp for Nelson's ships of the line. Crabtree claimed that the Safety Lamp was a fraud, being foisted upon the mine owners because of its total rejection by the Navy. He composed the following few lines on the spot and horrified the audience by quoting them in public:

The experimental genius Davy
Has invented a lamp for the Navy
The performance is fine,
In the calm depths of a mine,
But quite hopeless if windy or wavy.

The second reason arises out of Davy's relationship with Coleridge. Dr. Beddoe, a former Professor of Chemistry at Oxford, used to invite Davy to his home at Clifton, where he got to know the poets Southey, Wordsworth, Tobin and Coleridge, as well as the publisher, Cottle. Davy became very friendly with this group and, in due course, mentioned to them his discovery of nitrous oxide or laughing gas. Indeed, they were given practical demonstrations.

Davy enjoyed walking and shooting in the countryside. He sometimes walked on the more sublime parts of the hills at Clifton, composing verse while breathing nitrous oxide from a bag, hoping that the gas might improve his poetry. One typical result was:

Not in the ideal dreams of wild desire
Have I beheld a rapture-wakening form;
My bosom burns with no unhallow'd fire,
Yet is my cheek with rosy blushes warm;
Yet are my eyes with sparkling lustre fill'd;
Yet is my mouth replete with murmuring sound;
Yet are my limbs with inward transports fill'd;
And clad with newborn mightiness around.

The physiological interest of this composition is clearly greater than the poetical. You will recall that Coleridge has described how he composed *Kubla Khan* after taking opium to relieve pain; it appears that Davy hoped for a similar inspiration from nitrous oxide. As might be expected, Crabtree lost no time in writing a biting review of Davy's gas-inspired literary efforts. The gist of his comment was that if this was the result of experimental inspiration, thank God the Greeks, the Romans and the more distinguished English poets had no time for experimental work.

Davy and Coleridge became close friends; on one occasion, Davy wrote the following concerning his colleague:

His eloquence is unimpaired, perhaps it is softer and stronger. His will is probably less commensurate with his ability. Brilliant images of greatness float upon his mind.

On the other hand, Coleridge said that: 'If Davy had not been the first chemist, he would have been the first poet of the age.' — a comment which does more credit to Coleridge's friendship than to his acumen as a critic. Such praise disgusted Crabtree, who innocently commented that 'Davy and Coleridge are well suited to one another and clearly have much in common. No doubt they fit together well.'

The bitter antagonism between Crabtree and Davy continued until Davy resigned his post at the Royal Institution and travelled abroad. He died in Italy in 1829.

I mentioned earlier a connection between Crabtree and Australia, which I stumbled on by chance at the Fisher Library in Sydney University last October. I asked the Librarian for permission to browse through the set of works presented by Jeremy Bentham to the University in the early 19th century. Apologetically, he mentioned that there were included in the volumes a number of unsorted papers concerning Australia's illiterate past. Amongst these papers, I found several scribbled sheets, on one of which was the barely decipherable signature 'George Bernard Crabtree'. The writing appeared to be the ravings of a very bitter man, but it was just possible to piece together a coherent story. It appears that George Crabtree was a cousin (on his father's side) of our illustrious poet. Born within the sound of Bow Bells, he was clearly a ne'er-do-well but whether that was the reason for, or the result of, his receiving a free passage to Australia, is not easy to decide. Joseph Crabtree was wont — in defence of his cousin — to say later that, like so many of the earlier migrants, his cousin had been chosen by one of the finest judges in England to play his part in the development of the colony. It appears that the two cousins were partners in an ill-founded import business, and between Joseph's lack of business acumen and George's lack of honesty, the business foundered in 1821.

The two cousins were charged with conspiracy to defraud by the Duke of Bedford, who appeared to consider that he had been robbed of the actual sum of £2,500, being capital invested, and deprived of the potential sum of £25,000, being profit expected on the enterprise so enthusiastically advertised by George. With a characteristic self-effacing act, Joseph arranged that all responsibility fell on George's shoulders. The worthy Duke was persuaded not to press the action for fraud on both partners, if George was sent to New South Wales for life. This great opportunity for George was accepted with alacrity on his behalf by Joseph; in any case, George was not at all keen that his other enterprises should be looked into. He died in Australia some time after 1850. It is of interest to note that a Joseph Crabtree graduated in science from Sydney University in 1925. I intended to look up Mr. J. Crabtree but was deterred by the fact that the average Australian is a shade modest about his ancestry. Many a new-rich Sydney merchant has discovered that, whilst it costs a mere £50 to look up his ancestry, it may then cost him more than £5,000 to hush it up! But I must return to George's writings. There was a curious combination of irrelevant, irreverent ranting with some beautiful prose and verse. As an example of the former, I read where Joseph had mentioned that Bentham had urged that the age of consent be raised to sixteen. George had scribbled in pencil 'And then let's make it compulsory'.

The so-called great Australian adjective figures prominently in his comments, and in particular its insertion in

the middle of words is noteworthy. When, amongst the papers, I found a copy of the *Ode to Claret*, I was tempted to guess what had happened. Although he was reluctant to publish under his own name in England, Joseph had been sending copies of some of his work to George — no doubt to cheer him up. George records these in between furious ramblings on his own fate. Two lines excited me immensely:

By channels of coolness the echoes are calling,
And down the dim gorges I hear the creek falling.

Just two lines, no more! My mind went back at once to my schooldays and to the poem by Henry Kendall (1859-1882). Now Kendall could only have been between ten and fifteen years of age when these lines were written. Even allowing for the stimulating environment of Australian sunshine and primaeval bush, it is difficult to believe that the juvenile Kendall was responsible for this beautiful couplet. What must we conclude? More competent investigators than this year's Orator are required to find the answer, but I am tempted to suggest that George's record of Joseph's work must have led in whole or in part to the masterpiece now attributed to Henry Kendall.

But there is a darker side. George lived in London and was much influenced by the cockney expressions which have enriched the Australian accent. Frequently, one finds in his writings bitter phrases such as 'Gird yer bloody loins up', and similarly 'Upper cut and out the cow to Kingdom — bloody — come.'

Now these were clearly seized upon by C.J. Dennis (1876-1938) as the basis for his famous ballad which attempted to stir up an Australian nationalism in the early 20th century. As you well know, Australians are famous for their inherent sense of modesty and capacity for self-effacement. The poem shows how the effect of the cockney background of George influenced C.J. Dennis' thinking.

But I must apologise for having posed tonight more problems than I have answered. Might I presume to hope that the University of London will, in due course, see fit to establish a fund for Crabtree Studies to enable distinguished Scholars to visit the places likely to yield information concerning Crabtree? This would be a fitting recognition for the tenth anniversary of our Foundation.