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JOSEPH CRABTREE AND *MATERIA MEDICA*  
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As a pathologist, I am more at home in the laboratory or by the mortuary slab than in the corridors of academic learning. I shall therefore confine myself largely to the medical aspects of Crabtree's life rather than to metaphysical profundities beyond my powers.

In the field of Crabtree studies, false delicacy must not be allowed for one moment to prevent us from examining any aspect of our poet, straight in the face — as it were!

Let us look at the portrait, for which we have to thank Professor Sutherland. Although some comments have been made already in Spencer's Oration, some medical observations are not without interest.

With certain exceptions, the process of natural childbirth involves one of two initial presentations to the world. Either the head appears first — or the breech. From a study of the head, even in later life, it is possible to determine which alternative took place. From the well-rounded dome of the head seen in this portrait, it is clear to the trained eye that our poet presented his breech. It is tempting to ascribe to this fact some of his more scornful attitudes towards his contemporaries, but I am no psychologist and will resist the temptation of making such inferences.

With the eye of faith, the early signs of *gouty tophi* can be seen. More certainly the complexion is pockmarked, the result of the *lesser* pox, possibly of congenital origin; so that when Jenner said to him in pique 'Pox vobiscum', he must have referred to the greater pox or *morbis Gallici*. In spite of its very great prevalence in those times, not a trace of it can be seen in the portrait.

It is true that in its secondary stages, baldness can result (one of the reasons why wigs were often worn then) and Crabtree is somewhat bald in the portrait. There are however (some may be relieved to hear) other causes of baldness, and it would perhaps be unfair to attach too much importance to this phenomenon in our poet.

It may not generally be remembered that among Crabtree's circle of poets and men of letters there were several who were practising physicians. Tobias Smollett, Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Bowdler were but a few. Erasmus Darwin was a founder of the Lunar Society, which included among its members Joseph Priestley, of whose writings, as Jones has made clear to us, Crabtree so strongly disapproved.

But with Erasmus Darwin he had some things in common. Both were pockmarked, but Darwin had also lost most of his front teeth early in life. He was so fat that a semi-circular hole had to be cut in his dining room table to accommodate him. Like Crabtree, he was fond in his youth of sacrificing to Bacchus and Venus, but he soon discovered that he could not continue his devotion to both these deities without destroying his health and constitution. He resolved to relinquish Bacchus, but his affection for Venus was retained to the last period of his life. There seems to be some doubt as to Crabtree's preference, but we do know that he outlived Erasmus Darwin by nearly thirty years, from which we may draw our own conclusions.

It is not difficult to imagine Crabtree listening to Erasmus Darwin expounding his views on evolution (formulated before his grandson Charles was even born). Crabtree, perverse as ever, produced a counter theory which we may call 'Evolution in Reverse', inspired no doubt by the retrograde method of his own birth. He even went so far as to initiate an experiment in which all the runts of the litter were selected and inbred up to four generations. He used greyhounds for this purpose, descendants of those bred in Carcassonne in 1792, and his aim was to produce dogs the size of mice.

It was about this time that Crabtree became interested in *materia medica* and abandoned this experiment. He had fallen out with Jenner, as Jones told us in 1957. I have followed this up and found that Jenner had been preceded in his discovery of vaccination by a Dorset farmer named Benjamin Jesty. An inscription on his headstone in the churchyard at Worth Matravers in the Isle of Purbeck reads:

He was born at Yetminster in this County and was an upright honest man, particularly noted for having been the first person (known) that introduced the Cow Pox by inoculation and also, from his great strength of mind, made the experiment on his wife, and two sons in the year 1774.

This was twenty-two years before Jenner first successfully practised vaccination. No wonder that Crabtree, scourge of the plagiarist, should have quarrelled with him. Perhaps because of this he was soured to the medical fraternity in general. Whatever the cause, he took to treating himself.

In his lifetime, infestation with lice was no uncommon thing, among the rich as well as the poor. Although our poet, apart from a few twinges of gout, was hale and hearty, he nevertheless found to his dismay that the more hirsute areas in the region of his pudenda were infested with these irritating parasites. He experimented with several medicaments and finally found that an unguent compounded of mercury in refined suet, to which it imparted a bluish colour, rapidly cured this distressing visitation. Although not mentioned in any official pharmacopoeia of the time, it was widely known as Crabtree's Butter. Later generations of the military dropped the eponymous title and to this day it is known as Blue Butter.

I now turn to the period when Crabtree is thought to have been at Juniper Hall, near Dorking; in what capacity there seems some doubt, in spite of Dr. Tancock's researches. At the nearby parish of Albury, the Rev. T.R. Malthus held the curacy for some time and expounded his views on the evils of overpopulation. Although a great fire destroyed many of his papers and diaries, some few escaped. These were later offered to the London School of Economics and subsequently to the Family Planning Association, but both institutions declined the offer. Among them is one in which an entry in December 1797 reads:

Suffering these last four days from great stubbornness of the bowels, I was visited by a versifier recently returned from France, and interested in *materia medica*. He administered a clyster of oil of turpentine and molasses which gave much relief, and dispelled the tympanites. However, it removed all thought of study for some days, keeping me well occupied.

This reference to a poet 'recently returned from France', and who was interested in medical matters, must surely I submit be none other than Joseph Crabtree.

He can be said also to have anticipated the oral contraceptive pill by more than 150 years, for in a subsequent entry Malthus wrote:

This same versifier, following a discussion on overpopulation, propounded a remedy, a pill containing not only senna, calomel and colocynth but also oil of croton, the combined effects of which would, if taken at the onset of any feelings of desire to procreate, be so powerful as to sublimate those feelings into an entirely different channel.

Today the thought of such catharsis fills us with dismay and even awe. But let it be remembered that in Crabtree's time the armoury of the physician (as opposed to the apothecary) contained but four main measures: purgation, bleeding, blistering and sweating, all in heroic proportions.

It is little wonder then that his questing mind should be receptive to the new theories of Hahnemann of Meissen, and later called homoeopathy. In a nutshell *similia similibus curentur*. Note the use of the subjunctive, like *should* be cured by like, in contradistinction to the earlier use of the indicative — *curantur*, like is cured by like, an expression which Crabtree well knew from earlier days as the hair of the dog... But the homoeopaths advocated greater and greater dilutions of their cures, an idea abhorrent to the author of *Ode to Claret*.

I have given some thought to Crabtree's longevity, which owes nothing to homoeopathy. By the kindness of Mr. MacSherry, of the London Skin and Lock Hospital, I was allowed to examine some Mss written between 1790 and 1810. I little hoped to find anything concerning Crabtree, but I was struck by one paper which was curious for two reasons. First it was anonymous, which is very unusual in medical literature. Second, its title, which was *The Women of Bulgaria*, a study of their anatomy and physiology! Try as hard as I would, I could think of no possible reason why the anatomy or the physiology of Bulgarian women should be any different from that of other Europeans, or even Asiatics. I immediately dismissed a schoolboy theory concerning Chinese women. And so I read on.

There were some vital statistics of a revealing nature of no particular interest, followed by some doubtful physiological observations of even less interest, but then followed a section of such import that I was transfixed. The subtitle was 'The Nature of their Longevity', and there followed a description of how, not only the women of Bulgaria but the men also lived for over a hundred years by drinking a variety of fermented milk.

From the dawn of civilisation, man has made use of processes generally known as fermentation when the result was pleasant, or as putrefaction when it was not. In the case of milk acted upon by *Bacillus Bulgaricus*, I prefer the term putrefaction, even though the great Russian pathologist Metchnikov recommended it in 1894, long after Crabtree's death.

As a lover of the juice of the grape, Crabtree can hardly have enjoyed either drinking fermented milk or commending it to his friends. If he did indeed write this paper, that may be why it was anonymous, but surely here is the most rational explanation of his longevity.

It is a time-honoured custom of this Foundation that post-prandial comfort shall not be marred by an Oration unduly prolix. I will therefore pass by the ailments and afflictions of our poet's senescence. If he could by some miracle be with us here tonight and know that even one of his prescriptions I have mentioned would be used with good effect by some of his faithful adherents, he would I am sure, in his charming and modest way, flush with pleasure.