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CRABTREE AND THE STATUE
David Wilson
1966

When faced with Joseph Crabtree's life and polymathic interests, it is difficult not to be embarrassed by the large field left to be studied. As an archaeologist, I might have turned to his influence on antiquarian thought in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for there is plenty of evidence of his influence on, if little of his direct contribution to, the muse of antiquity. I can find no record in the list of Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of the man from whom this Foundation takes its name, but I put this down to the influence of one of the Presidents of the Society of Antiquaries, the Earl of Aberdeen, of whom Crabtree had said 'Aberdeen, Sir, comes from a long line of maiden aunts', and who almost certainly removed Crabtree's name from the rolls. But definite evidence of Crabtree's membership of the Society is to be found in the more ephemeral publications of his day: I refer, of course, to that passage, well-known to all Crabtree students, describing a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries which appeared in *The Intelligence* for 31 October 1830. It records the minutes of the previous meeting and runs:

Presented — first a Bow and Arrow
Supposed the same with which the Sparrow
Cock Robin's bosom did transfix
(See Mother Goose, vol. 1, page 6)
Discovered underneath a Hay-rick
in Herefordshire — by Dr. Mayrick

Read the accompanying essay
Some forty folios as I guess a
Brief Statement, Luminous and Clear
Of how 'twas found and when, and where,
With arguments of greatest nicety
In favour of its Authenticity.

There can be no doubt in the minds of Crabtree students that this paper was read by Dr. Joseph Crabtree; German scholarship has examined the passage in depth at a recent seminar at the University of Göttingen and agreed that there can be little doubt that this well-known passage does, in fact, reveal the title of one of Crabtree's more important works. You will find a full and detailed synopsis of this in the symposium proceedings entitled 'Crabtree und früh — und vorgeschichte', published in *Göttingen Jahrbuch der Crabtree Studien*, vol.26, part 2, pages 782-833.

I should have liked to have expanded this theme tonight, but a matter of more serious moment has come to light which deserves closer and more immediate study. It is a matter which strikes at the very roots of our subject — in fact at the very roots of academic discipline. I refer to what might almost be described as a Crabtree forgery. The matter first came to my attention while browsing, as is my wont, through the pages of that splendid book with which every Scholar in this room will be familiar, *The Cambridge Tart*, which you will remember was published by James Smith, 163 Strand, in 1823. This *opusculum* was edited by a fellow of my own College, St. John's, Richard Gooch, under the pseudonym of 'Socius'. At p. 227 you will find 'LINES by J.C. in answer to some recommending an observatory instead of a statue of Pitt':

LINES
BY
J.C.

IN ANSWER TO SOME RECOMMENDING AN OBSERVATORY INSTEAD OF A STATUE OF PITT

Say, sons of Granta, will ye persevere,
Nor to that warning voice afford an ear?
That friend to learning, but no friend to Pitt,
Who an Observatory thought more fit,
With classic architecture to adorn
Some walk for study formed, or open lawn,
Than that the statue of our statesman dead

Should in the senate rear aloft its head;
 And what is worse, forewith, far worse than all,
 That fame for Pitt should from its basis fall.
 But see, she moves — the statue moves — behold
 She seems to speak — Hermione of old:
 'I yield,' she cries, 'to that respected form,
 Which pilot like, has weather'd off the storm,
 When fell democracy, on English ground
 Dared, like a mildew, spread its influence round;
 Or Frenchmen threaten, with a mighty band,
 To hurl destruction on our happy land.
 What, tho' no college rears its head sublime,
 To hail him founder in the lapse of time,
 Yet sure to prove it ask no scholar's art,
 That he who guards the whole must guard the part.
 Oft as his form shall meet the student's eye,
 The tears shall start, and heave the trembling sigh;
 Fir'd with the magic of the sculptor's art,
 The genial glow shall vibrate thro' his heart.
 Fancy shall almost learn with eager ear
 His matchless eloquence again to hear!
 Who, e'en when struggling in the arms of death
 Cry'd, 'Save my country,' with his parting breath.
 Then mourn not friend of science, at the zeal
 Which rears the guardian of the public weal
 In Granta's Senate-house — what place more fit
 To pay just honours to the *manes of Pitt*?

Now it is important to the understanding of my argument that you know that in my own copy of this book there is a marginal note in pencil against the title which reads: 'Joseph Crabtree, S. Joh.' And at first reading it would seem reasonable to suppose that this was indeed one of the poems of our hero — the period is right, the style is right, we know, from Brown, that Crabtree was intimately connected with Cambridge. But, Sir, the sentiments! Could a Whig, like Crabtree, the friend of Brougham, have penned these lines? Could Crabtree have reached such heights on such a subject? The answer, Sir, is 'No', a thousand times 'No'. For Crabtree, Sir, was an honest man; he could not fawn, he would not kowtow to any party or any current favourite. Was it not Crabtree who, when accosted by the Duke of Wellington with the words 'Mr. Smith I believe', replied to the Duke 'If you believe that, Sir, you will believe anything'? It was a strong man — a bold man — who could say such a thing to the Duke. This poem, therefore, can hardly be considered to be the work of Crabtree. However, it is necessary to examine in some detail its authorship, for it is nevertheless a gem of English literature and has been, in the past, associated with the fair name of Crabtree. At first sight it would seem possible that Keats was the author of this great masterpiece. Let us not belittle Keats in our study of a greater man, Mr. President, for Keats could write poetry. Consider for example those splendid evocative lines full of the most complicated imagery which adorn one of his later sonnets:

My ear is open like a greedy shark
 To catch the tunings of a voice divine.

Or consider his more lyric and romantic qualities as revealed in those famous lines on Oxford which start:

The Gothic looks solemn
 The Plain Doric column
 Supports an old Bishop and crosier
 The mouldering arch
 Shaded o'er by a larch
 Lives next door to Wilson the Hosier.

These passages, I think you will agree, Mr. President, help to place Keats among the immortals and give him a claim to have written the poem in *The Cambridge Tart*. He cannot rank with Crabtree, Sir, but I think we may call Keats a great poet. But alas it cannot have been Keats who wrote these lines. Keats, you will remember, was a dresser at Guy's hospital, before he became too deeply involved with the Brawne woman; he was never at

Cambridge, never, as far as I know, visited it, and was not interested in either Cambridge or Pitt.

With Keats's claims must go those of Byron (a Trinity man, and, believe it or not, a Whig), Shelley (who was sent down from Oxford and was a Whig), Blake (who was ill at the time and in any case was the son of a hosier), Shakespeare (who was dead), Thomas Campbell (who was educated at Glasgow University and lived at Sydenham), Coleridge (who went to Jesus College — and that is enough to condemn him), and so we may go on dismissing in like manner the poets of the period who could have written this effusion: Crabbe, Lamb, Landor, Tom Moore, Walter Scott, and Southey.

We are left with the other immortal, whose name continually crops up in Crabtree Studies — William Wordsworth, M.A. of St. John's College, Cambridge, High Tory, friend of Crabtree and the Jeremiah of the nineteenth century. Who else could have written this poem than William Wordsworth, the plain strands of whose life are inextricably entangled with the technicolour of Joseph Crabtree's. It is in the works of Wordsworth that Crabtree is depicted as a fisherman. It is to Crabtree that Wordsworth's thoughts were continually returning in old age when:

Broken in fortune; but in mind entire
And sound in principle, I seek repose
... when vain desire
Intrudes on peace ...

Time and again references — albeit oblique or hidden — appear in Wordsworth's poetry to 'rare Joe Crabtree', as Isaac Mackenzie described him.

Sir, there seems little doubt that Wordsworth wrote *The Cambridge Tart* poem, but, although it at once leaps to the eye that Crabtree could not have written these lines, is it possible to understand why William Wordsworth borrowed Crabtree's initials and, further, is it possible to discover who it was who forged the pencil inscription in my own copy of *The Cambridge Tart*, together with the solecism of ascribing Crabtree to St. John's College? I will now attempt to answer these questions.

Wordsworth was a man of little self-assurance. Despite the fact that he liked to think of himself as a he-man — seeking adventure in a negative and unsuccessful fashion in those twin homes of democratic liberty, France and the Isle of Man — he was basically unsure of himself. He was constantly visiting fellow poets, seeking praise, comfort, balm to the spirit. He wrote more poems about the other poets than any other poet: Shakespeare, Burns, Milton, Lamb, Crabtree, Scott, Crabbe, Coleridge, Chatterton, Tasso, Petrarch, Spencer, and many more figured in his work. He had, one might almost say, an unhealthy interest in poets, derived undoubtedly from the most terrible inferiority complexes.

Although he over-compensated in his relations with Coleridge, this inferiority complex shows itself in practically every relationship he had with Crabtree. At all times Crabtree helped him — helped his virility in giving him a daughter, helped his purse by interceding with Lowther on his behalf to obtain his civil service position, helped his muse by writing the odd poem or two when Wordsworth had a sick headache. Crabtree, the grand old man of English letters, was always only too willing to give a helping hand to a young and struggling, semi-psychotic poet like Wordsworth, fifteen years his junior and doomed to be remembered as Poet Laureate and tax farmer. Crabtree could afford to do so. His reputation, made while Wordsworth was still on the roof of that itinerant vehicle, was well founded. The *Ode to Claret*, with its limpid, lambent periods, its evocative sensibility and its lyric achievement, stands as a monument to the genius of the man we honour today. Wordsworth's greatest poetry (for example his sonnet to the retired Marine officer in the Isle of Man) can hardly be said to achieve the haunting heights of Crabtree's most famous and most oft-quoted refrain 'Great unaffected vampires and the moon'. Crabtree then was generous, even to the parsimonious Wordsworth, and it is my contention that he was willing to lend his poetical reputation, his very name, to Wordsworth. For the letters J.C. in *The Cambridge Tart* can stand for none other than Joseph Crabtree.

Wordsworth, you will remember, had a brother. Also a rather unsatisfactory man, Christopher was a don and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Despite these drawbacks and social inconveniences, Wordsworth was always very loyal to his rather difficult brother and never failed to stay at the Master's lodge on his visits to Cambridge. They agreed on politics and particularly, according to Mrs Moorman, on University politics. This was, apparently, about the only thing they did agree on and talk about, for William once said of him, 'I am unacquainted with his pursuits and mode of life'. It was rather natural, therefore, that Wordsworth should volunteer to support his brother in Cambridge pamphleteering. Although a Tory, Wordsworth did not like Pitt

very much and he also felt that his (Wordsworth's) reputation was not sufficient to influence the voters of the University of Cambridge. Knowing, therefore, that Crabtree's reputation was second to none among contemporary poets and knowing also the high esteem in which Crabtree was held in the University since the time our hero had been employed as a binder in the University Library, he presumably threw himself on his friend's charity, borrowed his initials and wrote this major work, which I am sure was the chief reason for the marmoreal representation which delights all visitors to the Senate House to this day. Crabtree after all was a sage who had only to utter and a project would come to fruition. This is the only explanation which I can find for this poem's existence.

Who, then, wrote the pencil note in my copy of *The Cambridge Tart*? It would be easy to say that it was a dishonest bookseller, hoping to increase the value of the book. But it seems to me that it was a rather muddled admirer of the works of Joseph Crabtree, a man who took the not unreasonable attitude that almost all the most influential people in thought and letters had been at St. John's. We may never identify him, this lowly clerk who had at least seen some of the light and who, like the rest of the University, had been taken in by the poem. This simple man enabled me, however, to enlarge upon Crabtree's acknowledged generosity and stature.

In these days, when hero-worship is unfashionable, it pleases us to remember with old-fashioned gratitude that man who stands head and shoulders in generosity, piety, learning and appetite above his great contemporaries. It is fitting that we should meet tonight on the feast of Crabtree, to eat his favourite food, to drink his health and remember in solemn manner his contribution to our life. By his works our lives are richer, by his thoughts our scholarship is deeper, in his poetry can be seen all that is austere and proud in our national heritage. I should like, therefore, to finish my attempts to reveal part of the giant's work by quoting the final two lines of his *tour de farce*, the *Ode to Claret*, which epitomizes Crabtree's credo:

And so in brassy notes from our fair ALBION'S shore
The hymn, *in vino veritas*, resound for evermore.