

14
JOSEPH CRABTREE AND HIS PUBLISHERS
Bryan Bennett
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In choosing as my subject Crabtree and his Publishers I hoped to pursue, and possibly attain, three objectives — which might or might not be said to be correlative.

First I wished to view the poet against the background of his *accoucheurs*. Secondly I hoped to discover some of the reasons which might account for what an earlier Orator has so accusingly called 'a neglect amounting almost to a conspiracy of silence'. Thirdly I needed, partially at least, to vindicate those members of my trade who implicitly had come within the strictures meted out on those generations who had suffered the weeds of neglect to strangle and obscure for too many years the poetic blooms which sprang from Crabtree's fertile soil.

So far little is known of the poet's boyhood — it is particularly interesting then to find that one of his earliest friends was later to become his first publisher.

James Lackington (1746–1815), bookseller and publisher, was born in Somerset. In 1760 he was bound apprentice to a worthy shoemaker near Chipping Sodbury.

The Lackington family and the Crabtree family were very strict Methodists — in fact the Crabtree house was called Bethtappuah Lodge, a name which you will know comes from Joshua 15.23 and is nearest translated as the House of The Crab-apples.

Although Lackington was eight years older than Crabtree, the poet was, as we know, extremely precocious and the two became firm friends. Their friendship was cemented when both broke violently away from Methodism. This revolt was partly brought about because of the course of reading persuaded on Crabtree by Lackington which, in his own words, was:

Plato and Seneca, and Plutarch and Epicurus, and other of the old pagan philosophers, and all the modern ones such as Voltaire, Tom Paine, etc.

It was also partly brought about by a compound of high spirits and wine-bibbing, which gave rise to a series of clashes with the Minister and his Anglican counterpart, the Vicar of Chipping Sodbury. Such practices as keeping their angler's bait in the font might have been forgiven, but a succession of scenes of riot and dissipation caused the Methodist Minister to attack Crabtree and Lackington head on.

On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday the Minister, in a last attempt to drive the pair back on to more seemly paths, was preaching on Isaiah 5.11 and 28.7/8:

Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink.
But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all the tables are of vomit and filthiness.

At that same moment in the Anglican Church the Vicar was in mid-sermon. A shot was heard outside. 'Poachers! By God!', exclaimed the Vicar, and with vestments flying and followed by the entire choir and congregation, he raced out in pursuit.

It was poachers — their names Lackington and Crabtree!

All this was too much for Chipping Sodbury. Crabtree was packed off to Oxford and Lackington moved hurriedly to London, where he opened his premises in Featherstone Street. Apart from the bookselling side of his business, it was Lackington's intention to publish the verse of young unknown poets. He had already in 1774 accepted a number of Crabtree's early poems and bought others during the next few years in order to bring out what Crabtree described in a letter as 'a small duodecimo volume of 128 pages'. Lackington, who prospered quite quickly, bought the copyright of these poems in order to give immediate pecuniary assistance to his friend, whose way of life, first at Oxford and then in the metropolis, was not calculated to ease the estrangement between the poet and his family.

I am glad to say that Lackington was not ungenerous to his friend, although he could not expect any return until he had collected sufficient poems for the 128-page volume.

In one letter to Crabtree touching on money matters, Lackington writes:

Nothing is more common than to hear authors complaining against publishers for want of liberality in purchasing their manuscripts!

Crabtree replies:

I am of Dr. Johnson's mind in this matter, who once observed. 'Sir, I always said the Booksellers were a generous set of men. Nor, in the present instance, have I reason to complain. The fact is not that they have paid me too little, but that I have written too much.'

All was set fair then for the appearance of a slim volume in the mid-1780s when Lackington underwent a sudden and most untoward reconversion to Methodism. The dissipation of his earlier days, constantly called to mind by reports of Crabtree's present mode of life, rose spectrally before him. He began to preach, to visit the sick, relieve the poor, distribute tracts and expound the scriptures. Finally he began to endow chapels throughout the West Country — at Taunton, Chipping Sodbury and Buddleigh Salterton, where his remains now are.

If he had renounced completely his former riotous life, what was he to do about Crabtree's poems which treated so lyrically if almost exclusively of the pleasures of venery and vinery? Alas! We do not know. Certainly the duodecimo volume did not appear. Nor did Crabtree, as far as I can discover, ever ask Lackington to relinquish the copyrights. It may be that the poet thought much of the work was in the nature of juvenilia and not worth pursuing, or it may be that his new occupation in the wine trade gave him no time to negotiate with Lackington until it was too late. There is a story that Lackington, in his new religious frenzy, distributed the early Crabtree poems among the tracts thrust on the deserving poor, nor would this have been a bad thing, except for posterity.

Before setting out for France, Crabtree visited his home once more and spent some time in Bristol, where he soon found Joseph Cottle, who was to achieve fame later as the publisher of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Cottle opened his Bookshop in 1791 and on seeing some of Crabtree's poems, undertook to publish them when the poet had sufficient. It was odd that Crabtree should not then have pursued the Lackington poems, but if he did, there is no reference to them in Cottle's correspondence. It is important to remember, however, that Cottle had seen some of Crabtree's work and probably had bought certain pieces, for this fact is essential to the full understanding of the Vallon episode. An episode which Sutherland, with characteristic courage and wisdom, was the first to interpret correctly.

Certain it now is that Annette Vallon's 'secret grief / the promise of a mother' was occasioned by Joseph Crabtree. But it is equally certain that Wordsworth's assumption of the responsibilities of paternity also carried the assumption of the paternity of certain of Crabtree's poems and ideas for other poems.

I am not saying that Wordsworth actually demanded such *quids pro quos*, but Crabtree's was a generous spirit and he would not suffer his friend to take the rough without a certain amount of the smooth, and apart from some choice bottles of pre-phylloxera Loire wines, he had only poems to offer.

Wordsworth *may* not have intended to use these poems, and indeed he *may* not have done, but there are many evidences to the contrary.

First, there was the curious if sad scene when Crabtree was persuading Annette to agree to Wordsworth's and his plan. Annette, as you know, at first refused; Crabtree grew agitated and in the argument meant to show that fathers, as well as mothers, have some rights in decisions affecting their joint offspring.

He meant to say that the *man* is *father* of the child. In his confusion he blurted out the Spoonerism, 'The Child is Father of the Man'; Wordsworth took out his note book!

Next, there is the too ready assumption by Wordsworth that others are guilty of plagiarism; transference of guilt is the psychiatric expression I believe. A typical example is afforded by Rogers:

I once read Gray's *Ode To Adversity* to Wordsworth; and at the line 'And leave us leisure to be good', Wordsworth exclaimed — 'I am quite sure that is not original; Gray could not have hit upon it.'

Then there is the very revealing manner in which Wordsworth writes to Cottle:

12 April, 1798.
My Dear Cottle,
You will be pleased to hear that I have gone on very rapidly adding to my stock of poetry.

Of course it is very rapidly: it demands little time to sift through the manuscript sheets left to him by Crabtree. Surely if such poems had been written by Wordsworth himself, he would have used some expression other than 'my stock of poetry'. He might have said 'written more poems', or he might even have said 'adding to the stock of my poetry', where the begetter identifies himself with the work. But '*my stock of poetry*' can only mean that the ownership of the stock is now his although the individual poems were not.

In June 1799 Wordsworth writes to Cottle about *Lyrical Ballads*:

If the volume should come to a second edition, I would put in its place *some little things* which would be more likely to suit the common taste.

Does 'some little things' sound like the Lyrical Poet writing of his own work? And did not Wordsworth recognize that Crabtree's poetry was much more successful than his own and that it would therefore suit the 'common taste' more?

Lastly, and irrefutably, we have the broadcast views of the publisher Cottle himself. In his *Epistle to Lord Byron* Cottle says:

Who, bold with Hell's vice regents war to rage,
Brands the 'Satanic school' to every age;
His visitings, Herculean, chief descending
Upon the 'Head and front of the offending'
Which verse shall Wordsworth ever blush to own?

Gentlemen, we can answer that question. Wordsworth never did blush to own Crabtree's verses!

Cottle then had discovered the truth and such was the traumatic shock that he immediately sold his entire copyrights to Mr. Longman, and so that the world at large should be given an unequivocal indication of the true situation, the valuation of the *Lyrical Ballads* was set down at exactly nothing!

As for the Crabtree poems in Cottle's stock and passed on to Mr. Longman, I can say nothing except that the present heirs and successors of Mr. Longman are fully conscious that in neglecting to publish these poems and even more in subsequently losing them, they have committed one of the gravest sins of all time against the cause of English Letters.

For the next few years Crabtree's contacts with publishers seem to have been exiguous partly because he was going through a fallow period and partly because he was trying an interesting experiment in that he was anticipating by some 140 years the activities of the present-day 'Barrow Poets'. To encourage young poets, Crabtree became a publisher and he, with one or two young fellows, would sell their broadsheet poems and ballads from street stalls. It was from this, perhaps slightly misguided, activity that the expression — later to be used pejoratively — the 'Cockney School of Poetry' sprang, although no reviewer in *Blackwoods* or in the *Quarterly* ever dared openly to link the revered name of Crabtree with these lesser versifiers.

It was in 1811 that, through Byron, Crabtree became acquainted with John Murray, an acquaintanceship which quickly developed into a firm and lasting friendship.

Crabtree became one of the most regular and most distinguished figures in those frequent gatherings of giants held at 50 Albermarle Street when such men as Byron, Scott, Moore, Crabbe, Southey, Lockhart and Washington Irving dined with John Murray.

You will recall that in his mock epistle to Dr. Polidori, Byron makes Murray say:

A party dines with me today
All clever men who make their way
Crabbe, Malcolm, Hamilton and Crabtree
Are all partakers of my Pantry

In one version of this a regrettable misprint occurred and instead of Crabtree it read Chantrey. It was this heinous sin which prompted Byron to exclaim that 'I do believe the Devil never created or perverted such a fiend as the fool of a printer'.

It was in the famous drawing room of Murray's house that Crabtree and Byron, as was the custom in those days, exchanged locks of hair. The present Mr. John Murray was kind enough to show me recently the silver casket in which Byron had placed his collection of such locks of hair. Each is carefully wrapped and documented, with one notable exception. It is a short brown curl and, as well as the date and the evidence of the oral tradition at Murray's, comparison of the curl with the Sutherland portrait is quite conclusive: it is Crabtree's. On the wrapping in Byron's hand is written, 'Whose this is I don't recollect but it is of 1812'. Of course the methodical Byron recollected exactly whose lock it was, but the author of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* could not resist a jibe even at a friend's expense. Byron fully appreciated the unfortunate concatenation of events which had resulted in the appearance of so little of Crabtree's work under his own name, and with this prophetic shaft Byron foretells the years of neglect and anonymity which Crabtree is to suffer. Crabtree, as you may suppose, readily forgave Byron and never lost his regard for the younger man.

During this period John Murray was at great pains to sustain Crabtree and his poetic genius. Crabtree repaid him with countless valuable literary services, although, contrary to tradition, it was not Crabtree who persuaded Murray to reject Wordsworth's proposal that he should become Wordsworth's publisher. We can guess that a major reason for Murray's refusing Wordsworth was his knowledge of Wordsworth's earlier dubious dealings concerning Crabtree, for it was this certain knowledge that also gave rise to Byron's intense dislike of the Lake Poet.

One surprising task that Crabtree did undertake for Mr. Murray in the early 1820s was to help with the editing of that august martial annual, *The Army List, Militia List and Imperial Yeomanry List*. And even here the sublunary genius of the poet cannot help but be at work. Open any of those Lists which Crabtree supervised and one perceives the quiddity, the 'thisness' of the poet. One looks at random at the 2nd Dragoon Guards of 1821 and everywhere is the taut economy and ordered rhythm of Crabtree's maturity:

Reginald Stretton Spurrier
Leslie St. Clair Cheape
Edward Arthur Wenholt
C. de Crespigny.

That, gentlemen, is surely the poetic marriage of those philosophical antitheses — nominalism and realism.

We are now approaching the final truly productive period of the poet Crabtree. It is a period which has been bedevilled, as earlier Orators have shown, from the palaeographic confusion between Crabbe and Crabtree. When going through the manuscript notebooks at Murray's which, for convenience only, are all in the Crabbe file, one is conscious that the truth can only finally be arrived at after the long-awaited *English Literary Hands* is published.

George Crabbe came to John Murray from Mr. Colburn in 1818 and Murray offered £3,000 for the copyright of his poems. It was thought to be far too generous an offer since, as Moore pointed out, 'even if the whole of the edition were sold, Murray would still be £1,900 minus'.

Allowing for publishers' endemic liberality, the explanation for this large sum also lies in the fact that Murray realised that Colburn had certainly mixed up some of Crabtree's work with that of Crabbe. It will be for the Scholars brilliantly and painstakingly to identify the complete Crabtree canon, and I hope that this work can find its centre of studies in this College. I would, however, urge any Scholar undertaking this great labour to study very closely those manuscript notebooks of poems not originally published with Crabbe's other works. Some of these poems were published in 1960 as *New Poems by George Crabbe* edited by Arthur Pollard who, in Manchester, has been denied the benefits of recent Crabtree scholarship. One can therefore forgive him for

perpetuating last century's injustices. But I ask any of you who undertake the re-examination of these manuscript poems — and surely this is a work of the first priority — to consider carefully the pencilled notes, written in the publisher's hand and completely overlooked by Pollard. Such phrases as 'Not in the list' and 'Suppress' are at the head of these poems precisely because Mr. Murray knew that they were not by Crabbe and should not appear under his name.

I would suggest that in these so-called 'new poems' there is a wealth of internal evidence which points to Crabtree's hand.

For example the poem *David Morris*, which can only be regarded as an anagogical allegory of the Crabtree/Wordsworth complex, contains these lines:

We know not what could lead him to despise
The humble Profits that from Office rise
But he contemptuous spoke of Customs and Excise.

Who is this if not Wordsworth, long suspected of contraband practices with Crabtree himself when in Orléans? You will remember Coleridge reports on the local inhabitants' view of Wordsworth when at Alfoxden. One local worthy speaks:

I know what he is. We have all met him, tramping away toward the sea. Would any man in his senses take all that trouble to look at a parcel of water! I think he carries on a smug business in the smuggling line, and in these journies is on the look out for some wet cargo.

Now Crabbe could not possibly have known of this period in Wordsworth's life, but Crabtree did!

But these speculations I must leave for others. What, you may ask, of the present? What are publishers doing today to ensure that the elusive greatness which is Crabtree's is no longer kept from the world at large?

As a beginning, may I present to the Foundation this anthology. An earlier Oration finished with the words, 'HE IS WITH SHAKESPEARE!' HE IS, and with Chaucer too, and Jonson and Pope and Blake — on pages 103 and 104 of *A Book of Poetry*!