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CRABTREE AND THE EAST  
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I shall forever be grateful to you, Mr. President, for starting me out on my crash programme of research by drawing my attention to a hostelry in Erith Marshes known as 'The Crabtree'. I visited this inn but, owing to lack of consideration by the local justices, I was unable to refresh myself there. The inn lies near the Thames at the end of a long, almost deserted road known as Crabtree Manor Way. It is surrounded by poor fields wherein:

The hungry cows look up, and are not fed,  
But, swoln with wind and the rank mist they draw,  
Rot, inwardly and foul contagion spread.

Seeing no peasants in the neighbourhood, I took myself to the Erith Public Library, where I learnt from old documents that the name derives from this being formerly the manor of a disreputable trader named Crabtree, the word 'manor' meaning the area of operation of a gang — the obverse, as it were, of Edgar Wallace's use as meaning a police district. Was this perhaps the place from which the various nefarious trading activities of our hero were conducted? Allusion to these has been made in previous Orations but not much detail given. Perhaps I was on the verge of discovering a whole new chapter in Crabtree's life.

My hypothesis that the Crabtree of this manor was indeed our sublime poet was strengthened by my finding in Erith churchyard the following characteristic verse on a gravestone erected to the memory of the Rev. James White, vicar of that parish, who died on 26 September 1804 at the age of 65:

Farewell, vain world, I must be gone,  
Thou art no home, no stay for me;  
With faith and hope I'll travel on  
Until another world I see.  
Now up, my soul, the distance view.  
Thy outstretched pinions try;  
Quit the dull earth, thy Might pursue,  
And seek thy native sky.

Imagine, then, how my heart-rate (which is constantly monitored by radio telemetry by our Physiology Department) leapt (or is it leaped?) to 150 per minute when, a week or so later, returning to Hammersmith on a No. 11 bus after having had the satisfaction, a satisfaction which I am sure you, Mr. President, will forgive, of seeing Chelsea defeat Newcastle 1-nil at Stamford Bridge, I heard a fellow passenger say to his companion 'I'm just going to the Crabtree, see you there later'. The speaker got off at the next stop and I followed him. He went south down the Fulham Palace Road and soon turned off towards the river along an alley which bears the name Crabtree Lane. At its end I found a large late 18th, early 19th century building on which was painted in huge letters the legend CRABTREE WHARF. Beside the wharf I found a riverside inn called 'The Crabtree'. Naturally I entered it and after the publican and I had consumed several Watney's Stingos, he told me that there was formerly an older hostelry on the site and that he thought the name derived from a trader who imported spices and other exotic produce from India.

As soon as possible I therefore went to the India Office Library in the Blackfriars Road, where I had the good fortune to find a Mr. A.J. Farrington, a graduate of the Department of History of this College, who threw himself with energy — the energy, Mr. President, which is characteristic of our former students making up for lost time — into the search. Briefly, he found that Joseph William Crabtree and his cousin George Bernard Crabtree were from time to time in Calcutta between 1800 and 1820, conducting the business of import-export agents, in defiance of the monopoly of the Honourable East India Company. They were what was known in Calcutta society as 'box-wallahs'.

In the merchandise which they shipped to Calcutta was, of course, claret, with which Joseph was well familiar. They infiltrated their way into society and were protected from the wrath of the Company by bringing potable, nay even medicinal claret to Calcutta. Thus in the *Bengal Gazette* of 1802 we read that:

Sir John Royds had lain twelve days suffering under a cruel disorder wholly insensible, the doctors gave up

all hope. Dr Hare said 'It is impossible he can survive two hours more.' Whereupon all evening parties were cancelled and a Field Officer's party ordered to be ready to attend the funeral. But Sir John disappointed them all. He was indebted to claret for his very unexpected recovery: during the last week of the disease they poured down his throat from three to four bottles of the Crabtrees' generous beverage every twenty-four hours and with extraordinary effect.

Apart from gold, silver, silks and other normal merchandise, the Crabtrees shipped Indian hemp and powdered rhinoceros horn out of Calcutta to the West. As we know from Dr Tay's research, Joseph Crabtree was interested in *materia medica* and he determined to include rhinoceros horn in his contraceptive pills, so as to maintain the libido in the face of the assault on that part of the spirit by the croton oil and other medicaments in them. No doubt, out of respect for Malthus's cloth, his versifier never revealed this constituent to him.

In the Victoria and Albert Museum can be seen an example of the boxes in which the Crabtrees sold their powdered rhinoceros horn in London. It is of Benares brass, round, about one and a half inches in diameter. On the lid is represented in relief a tumescent horn surrounded by Cicero's line: STUPRUM IPSE VOLUPTAS. On the underside of the box itself can be discerned the words 'C & C, Erith, Fulham, Howrah' and the representation of a crabtree. Though Albert may have known of this holding, it is doubtful if Victoria ever did.

The Crabtrees were safe in Calcutta as long as the Earl of Mornington (Marquess Wellesley) was Governor-General of Fort William in Bengal. He was appreciative of the gifts of claret and just filed the complaints about the Crabtrees from his officers. At the end of July 1805, however, Wellesley was succeeded by the Marquess Cornwallis, appointed for a second term. Cornwallis, whose motto was VIRTUS VINCIT INVIDIAM, was a port and brandy man, believing that:

Claret is the liquor for boys; port for men;  
but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy.

This, as I have said, Mr. President, was the Governor-General's second term and he felt himself every inch a hero. The Crabtrees were low in brandy at the time and, most unfortunately, the only stock that they had at their disposal in Calcutta had been shipped in a second-hand rum cask. It was therefore tainted. As soon as the liquor touched Cornwallis's tongue, he shouted: 'Rum, Romanism and Rebellion'.

All the subadars and punkka wallahs came flocking to see what was wrong with the great sahib and the Crabtrees escaped in the confusion. They went into hiding and soon George Bernard Crabtree went on a ship to China to develop the business and Joseph took passage in an Indiaman for England, assuming the alias Joseph Blacket. He no doubt reached Erith but was advised to lie low since word had come from Cornwallis of his treachery.

We next find Joseph Blacket, from an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography, reaching Seaham in County Durham in a ship in 1807 and settling in the house of one John Dixon, gamekeeper to Sir Ralph Milbanke of Seaham and Halnaby in Yorkshire. Sir Ralph's wife, Lady Judith Milbanke, was the daughter of Edward Noel, Lord Wentworth of Kirkby Hall, where much valuable Crabtreeiana is preserved to this day. In 1807 the Milbankes had an only daughter, Anne Isabella, who was then 15 years old. Sir Ralph was MP for County Durham and therefore spent part of the year in London. He was fond of poetry, a liking which Anne Isabella shared, and they versified together. The daughter, whose other pastime was shoemaking, soon struck up an acquaintance with Joseph Blacket, who encouraged her muse.

Anne Isabella liked the country and the company of Joseph, so much so that in her diaries for 1809 we read: 'Arrived at the age of 17. I was anxious to postpone my entrance into the world.' We cannot be surprised at this because Joseph had infiltrated himself into Sir Ralph's household and spent most of the time he was not drinking with Sir Ralph versifying and shoemaking with Anne Isabella, so much so that he became known to the Milbankes' circle of friends as the cobbler poet. We cannot doubt that by this time Joseph was playing Mellors to Anne Isabella's Connie. This accounts for her not wishing to go to London. We cannot say what part wild flowers played in their passion but we may assume that Joseph was well provided with rhinoceros horn and that he had brought an illustrated copy of the *Kama Sutra* with him from Calcutta.

Through the good offices of Sir Ralph, Mr. Pratt was induced to publish a volume entitled *Specimens of the Poetry of Joseph Blacket* in 1809. The baronet was less than honest in this, substituting between Seaham and London some of his own inferior verses for those of Joseph. The book was adversely received by Byron, who, in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* wrote:

When some brash youth, the tenant of a stall,  
Employs a pen less pointed than his awl,  
Leaves his snug shop, forsakes his store of shoes,  
St. Crispin quits, and cobbles for the muse,  
Heavens! how the vulgar stare! how crowds applaud!  
How ladies read, and literati laud!

When, in 1810, Joseph heard what had happened and also that two further volumes of Sir Ralph's compositions were about to appear under the name Blacket, he thought it wise for Blacket to disappear. He therefore arranged to meet Anne Isabella in London in the next year and bribed the vicar of Seaham with the *Kama Sutra* to bury the next pauper who died as Blacket.

Byron was in Malta when he heard of Blacket's death and composed an epitaph to him of which I quote a few lines:

Stranger! behold, interred together,  
The souls of learning and of leather.  
Poor Joe is gone, but left his all:  
You'll find his relics in a stall.  
His works were neat, and often found  
Well stitched, and with morocco bound.

Annabella, as she was now known, had her first season in London in 1811, during which she stayed at Lady Gosford's. Her letters give the impression that she had a quiet time but from some letters found in Kirkby Hall, we know that much of the time was spent with Crabtree.

In 1812, after reading the two extant stanzas of *Childe Harold*, she first met Byron at Melbourne House. After that meeting, she wrote to her mother:

I did not seek an introduction to him, for all the women were absurdly courting him, and trying to deserve the lash of his Satire. I thought that inoffensiveness was the most secure conduct, as I AM NOT DESIROUS OF A PLACE IN HIS LAYS.

We know why she wrote that: she was, Mr. President, without doubt assured of a constant place in another's lays and she had no desire to be the object of Byron's satyriasis.

We need not rehearse that long and complex story of her wooing by Byron, but just remember that they finally went through the ceremony of marriage at Seaham on 2 January 1815 and that a girl, Augusta Ada, was born to Annabella on 10 December of the same year.

Calculating back, using the usual astrological tables well-beloved of obstetricians, we find that conception must have taken place about 10 March. History tells us that after a short honeymoon, Annabella and Byron were staying in Sir Ralph's house in Seaham at the beginning of March 1815 and that they left there on 9 March for Six-Mile Bottom, the house of Augusta Leigh. Byron wanted to go alone, for reasons of his own which are too well-known to be discussed tonight. There was also the reason that Annabella was very bad-tempered, no doubt because Crabtree had taken offence at her marriage. In an attempt at a reconciliation, Annabella had written to Crabtree suggesting a meeting at the Haycock Inn in Wansford on 11 March and her letter included the following verse:

Let my affection be the bond of peace  
Which bids thy warfare with remembrance cease.  
Blest solely in the blessings I impart,  
I only ask to heal *thy* wounded heart;  
Then, with the wild horn that spreads its semen wide,  
Do graft a crab in Bella, and then, inside,  
Behold that scion from the tree of life  
Expand its branches and cause her belly strife,  
And hope — *believe*, its fruits will ripely bloom  
With the same sun that brightens o'er my womb.

Because of this assignation, Annabella insisted on leaving Seaham with Byron on that 9 March. It was not a happy party which set off in the carriage and Byron's temper grew worse and worse. They spent three nights on the journey and, according to Ethel Mayne, 'At Wansford, the last stopping place, she had her reward'. What a reward that was, Mr. President! Byron had not noticed the other guest at the inn and went to bed early after much brandy. Before retiring, he said to Annabella, 'I hate sleeping with any woman, but you may if you choose'.

She did indeed choose, not to sleep with another woman but with Crabtree. From a letter from Joseph to George, which Mr. Farrington found in the India Office Library, we learn that Joseph's pills had been stolen by a potman at an inn he stayed at on the way to the Haycock, but he had forgotten this loss until after he had partaken of the contents of the Benares brass box he always carried in his waistcoat pocket. It was, Mr. President, indeed a passionate night, and some feeling of its activity comes through in the letter found by Mr Farrington. Many years later, while yarning on the beach at Bondi with fellow non-Papuan migrants, cousin George spoke of the exploits of Joseph and, having picked up the local argot, used to comment 'he fucked her like a rattlesnake'. Thus it was, Mr. President, that Augusta Ada Byron's genes were determined, those of the future Lady Lovelace and, through her, of Lady Anne Isabella Noel, Mrs. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the only female among the queens of the Crabbet Club.

In his account of Lady Byron's campaign against Byron after the separation, G. Wilson Knight writes: 'Consideration for the child does not account for Lady Byron's actions. THERE WAS SOME SECRET which she and her advisers were terrified of coming out.' We, Mr. President, know that secret.

To conclude, I would like to give the Foundation a scrap found on the back of an order to Crabtree and Crabtree from the Prince Regent for bhang, or trodden Indian hemp. It is dated 1819 and is preserved in some commercial papers in the India Office Library:

I was a poet and she was a child,  
In that kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than due  
To the horn from rhinoceros hide.  
To the horn from rhinoceros hide.