

TOWARDS A CRABTREE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arthur Brown

1955

Scientific bibliography is scarcely yet removed from infancy, and as far as Crabtree is concerned it is, if I may be permitted to extend the metaphor, still in a pre-natal condition, or has been until this evening, and the birth pangs are likely to be long and arduous. The story I have to relate of the search for an occasional discovery of items which we may legitimately suppose to have come from the pen of Joseph Crabtree is far from being one of unqualified success. Bitter disappointments there have been, as for example in the now almost inevitable rejection from the canon of the hitherto uncritically accepted *Ode to a Coral Insect*, a unique copy of which exists in the Morgan Library; for, as my friend John Crow has pointed out with his customary acumen, the imprint, *Printed by Amos White, S.J., Whimajoes St., East Romishwold. 1837*, is open to the gravest suspicion, since both *Amos White, S.J.*, and *Whimajoes St.* are in fact anagrams of Thomas J. Wise, and, still more sinister, *East Romishwold* an anagram of Thomas Lord Wise. Into what delusions of grandeur this unhappy man was led when he added Crabtree to his list of victims! We can ill afford to lose this work from the canon, yet the hard facts must be faced. My predecessor spoke with feeling of the conspiracy of silence which seemed to have surrounded hitherto the facts of Crabtree's life; I will add that as far as his bibliography is concerned, the conspiracy seems to have been not only one of silence, but also one of deliberate fraud, forgery, deception and downright theft, and I hope to be able to show this evening that in this particular aspect of Crabtree studies, as in so many others, little can be taken at its face value.

One or two previous attributions fortunately remain unchallenged, and should be mentioned before we pass to more controversial matters. Pride of place must undoubtedly be given to the *Ars Salutandi*, from which our past President has from time to time printed extracts, and it is earnestly to be hoped that an editor will soon be found capable of producing a definitive version from the four fragments of manuscripts — one apparently the author's foul papers, two presentation copies but unfortunately preserving different sections of the work, and the fourth a piece of printer's waste — and the three fragments of printed copies, none dated and all apparently consisting of a high proportion of uncorrected formes. It is a task which may well daunt a Bowers or a Greg, but without its completion we shall be unable to assess finally the full extent of Crabtree's contribution to English letters. It will be seen, incidentally, from the textual situation here outlined, how much progress has been made in the discovery of Crabtree items since Professor Guggenheim's reference, in his letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1923, to a single manuscript only of this work. The *Ode to Claret* and the sonnet written immediately after his liaison with Annette Vallon have already been referred to by my predecessor, and need no more than a passing mention here; their position in the canon is as firm as anything is ever likely to be. Nor must we forget the inimitable drinking song, 'We march we know not whither', with its haunting single-line refrain, 'Great unaffected vampires and the moon', which tradition has it was chanted by certain elements of Wellington's army at Waterloo. But when these have been mentioned, we have for all practical purposes come to an end of the material which has so far been generally available for the student of Joseph Crabtree.

To some extent Crabtree himself is to blame for this, for the habit of concealing all his out-of-business activities from his uncle, indeed from his family generally, led him either to disguise in some way or even to suppress entirely his name on any of his published works. And once this habit became known to a number of the less scrupulous members of the literary profession of the time, it was not long before they were taking for themselves credit for work which was far beyond their capacity. Crabtree, of course, was unable to protest, and the result has been catastrophic in all matters pertaining to the true attribution of poems written between 1763 and 1854. It may be objected that in 1763 Crabtree was, in fact, only nine years old, and therefore hardly likely to have been engaged in serious poetic activity. This, gentlemen, is seriously to underestimate the powers of our poet. My friend Charles Peake has kindly drawn my attention to an item which shows that in this very year no less a man than Dr. Johnson himself was already taking notice, and not altogether friendly notice, of this young versifier. On July 1, 1763, Boswell reports him as remarking of the poet Churchill: 'No, Sir, I called the fellow a blockhead at first, and I will call him a blockhead still. However, I will acknowledge that I have a better opinion of him now than I once had, for he has shown more fertility than I expected. To be sure, he is a tree that cannot produce good fruit; he only bears crabs. But, Sir, a tree that produces a good many crabs is better than a tree that produces only a few.' Boswell tells us that this was said of Churchill, and he may be right; but I venture to suggest that we are here faced with what I may call a confusion of layers of reference in the mind of the great Doctor, and that he was in fact thinking of the young Joseph Crabtree, whose fertility now, at the age of nine, as later, was to surprise so many people. For the bibliographer this remark by Dr. Johnson has great significance; it means that already by 1763 the young Joseph was startling the learned world with his tremendous output, and it

means too that his actual period of poetic activity was much greater than that of the majority of his contemporaries. The field to be gleaned is a vast one indeed.

We may well ask, then, what has become of all this material? I am of the opinion that most of it still undoubtedly exists, but has been either purloined by lesser poets, or attributed to them by scholars ignorant of the superior claims of Joseph Crabtree, or simply classified as anonymous by weary librarians. As a single illustration of some of the principles and methods involved and of some of the puzzles to be faced, I put before you now a group of poems hitherto completely misunderstood which I am able, with some confidence, to assert to be Crabtree's.

Between 1773 and 1782, precisely the period of Crabtree's life about which we know least, between his departure from Oxford and his venture to France with the wine shippers, were published the following poems by a man who called himself Malcolm M'Greggor (with two g's) of Knightsbridge: (1) *An Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers*, Controller-General of His Majesty's Works, and author of a late dissertation on gardening; (2) *An Heroic Postscript to the Public*, occasioned by the favourable reception of the Heroic Epistle; (3) *Ode to Mr. Pinchbeck* upon his newly invented patent Candle-snuffers; (4) *An Epistle to Dr. Shebbeare*; (5) *An Ode to Sir Fletcher Norton*; (6) *A Political Eclogue called The Dean and the Squire*. These poems were at first attributed to the Reverend William Mason — for no one, significantly enough, seems to have taken the name 'Malcolm M'Greggor' seriously — although Mason himself denied that they were his, and one of his biographers, asserting that they cannot be his, even suggests that they might be Churchill's, whose name, you will remember, was in Dr. Johnson's mind inextricably tangled with that of Joseph Crabtree. There the matter seems to have rested until now, and now I believe I am in a position to identify Malcolm M'Greggor as no other than Joseph Crabtree.

We know already that Crabtree was adept at disguising his name, and for very good reasons. I may perhaps be forgiven for reminding you of the discovery in Cambridge a few years ago of a manuscript bearing the enigmatic inscription 'Radix Chancer' (or 'Regula Chancer' as I believe some people prefer to read it); you will remember how one misguided Scholar was led into the rash proclamation that this had something to do with Chaucer. We, of course, knew better, and with silent satisfaction noted yet one more example of the light-hearted punning on his own name so characteristic of our poet, this time during the brief period of his employment as a binder in the Cambridge University Library. With this habit of his in mind, I would ask you to consider the third of the poems I have just mentioned, the *Ode to Mr. Pinchbeck*. It is in the advertisement to this that the poet first gives his name as M'Greggor and says: 'Ever since my first publication, the curiosity, not to say anxiety, of the world concerning my name, has been so great, that it has frequently given me pain to conceal what the world will now see it was not possibly in my power to disclose.' He then explains this by reference to the cloud under which the clan M'Greggor had until recently been, and goes on to make so much play with the notion that he is what he is pleased to call 'a Scotchman' that one begins very soon to suspect that this is all still more elaborate disguising. That his own contemporaries also suspected this is clear from their ascription of the poems to Mason and others. But had they looked more closely at the title, the very odd title, let me add, of the second poem, *An Heroic Postscript*, bearing in mind Crabtree's fondness for word play, they would have found that it was in fact a rough but none the less recognisable anagram of 'I Ioseph Crabtree No Scot'; the omission of two unimportant vowels and the easy substitution of *p* for *b* are, you will agree, perfectly legitimate and common devices of scholarship, and need offend no one's conscience. Now the true significance of the phrase 'it has frequently given me pain to conceal what ... it was not possibly in my power to disclose' is apparent; it really means very little for a name like *M'Greggor*, but young *Crabtree* knew that the revelation of his poetical activities to his family would have meant serious trouble. He disguised himself well; but he also left clues for those who were intent on finding them. The anagram is one, and a second is the somewhat unusual reference to a Cocoa Tree in a note to *The Dean and the Squire*, while it is surely not too fanciful to see a third in a further note which begins, 'Many trees, shrubs and flowers, sayeth Li-Tsong, a Chinese author of great antiquity, thrive best in low, moist situations'; the almost autobiographical touch here is too clear to be ignored. It is just possible that Thomas Wise worked out this identification, and that this tempted him into doing something rather similar in his attempt to pass off the *Ode to a Coral Insect* as Crabtree's, but he certainly left no record of it otherwise. The scholarly bibliographer, of course, will not take too much account of internal and stylistic evidence from the content of the poems, but it is hard not to believe that the opening couplet from the *Epistle to Dr. Shebbeare*:

O for a thousand tongues, and every tongue
Like Johnson's, arm'd with words of six feet long ...

is an attempt on Crabtree's part to avenge the slight cast upon his childhood precocity by the great Doctor. In

this connection, too, I am inclined to suspect the hitherto unchallenged attribution to Soames Jenyns of the well-known epitaph on Johnson:

Here lies Sam Johnson; reader, have a care,
Tread lightly, lest you wake a sleeping bear...

I draw your attention to the fact that Crabtree, under the pseudonym M'Greggor, dedicated *The Dean and the Squire* to Jenyns, so that there is clearly ground for suspecting confusion between them; also that Crabtree was perhaps more than most people inclined to shoot at Johnson on all possible occasions, an idiosyncrasy which no doubt a child psychologist could easily explain; finally, and most important, that Crabtree was the acknowledged writer of tombstone verses and epitaphs at this time — I feel sure that Professor Sutherland will agree with me that Wordsworth's *Essay upon Epitaphs* is undoubtedly inspired by his friend's prowess in this respect. However, the possible theft by Jenyns of verses by Crabtree, or simply the wrong ascription of these by later scholars, are matters which I leave for more detailed study by others; but it is certainly a promising line of research. For the moment let us return to *Dr. Shebbeare*, and hear the interesting lines which follow the couplet I have just read:

... arm'd with words of six feet long
In multitudinous vociferation
To panegyricize this glorious nation,
Whose liberty results from her taxation.
O for that passive, pensionary spirit,
That by its prostitution proves its merit!
That rests on right divine all regal claims,
And gives to George whate'er it gave to James!

It may be thought that the addition of some half-dozen poems to the Crabtree canon is a particularly meagre contribution to his scholarship in the course of a year. I have had several factors in mind, however, not the least being the warning by my predecessor that in these affairs we must proceed with cautious speculation and scholarly deduction; so much damage has been done in the past to our poet's reputation that we to whom the sacred trust has now fallen must always beware of rushing headlong into rash conclusions. Furthermore, I have had in mind the fact that this is an oration and not a lecture in the narrower sense, an occasion upon which we pay tribute to the poet primarily, and only as a secondary consideration deal with some of the fruits of that research which is going on all the time. For this reason I hope I may be allowed in my remaining few minutes to digress a little from my main theme to bring to your attention some interesting aspects of the influence of Crabtree in America; although I speak of this as a digression, these aspects have, as you will see, some significance for future studies in the poet's bibliography. Much of the material has reached me through the generosity of Mr. Lansing Hammond of the Commonwealth Fund in New York. During his vacation in Maine, Mr. Hammond spent a good deal of time investigating (if he will allow the word) a family of settlers in that neighbourhood by the name of Crabtree; he had access to both published and unpublished material, and it is clear from what he tells me of these people that they were undoubtedly of the same family as our poet, although the exact relationship has yet to be worked out. The first permanent settler in the vicinity of Hancock Point, Maine, was Captain Agreen Crabtree, who arrived there in 1764, only a year, you will notice, after Dr. Johnson's reference to his precocious young relation. Agreen died in 1808 at the age of sixty-four, is known to have been a staunch supporter of the Mother Country, and during the War of Independence built a fort on his farm, and mounted there two brass cannons to defend himself if necessary against the rebels; it does not seem to be known whether he actually fired them. Agreen's son, Deacon George (1771-1862), served in the First Baptist Church at Hancock and acted as Deputy Collector of Customs. The poetical strain in him is exemplified by one brief remark, which I am sure will appeal to my predecessor, and which also links up with Wordsworth's reference to the Crabtree interest in angling; George, on being asked how the fish were biting, replied that 'trout went after his fly like an angry god after sinners'. Of George's son, Ephraim, it is significant that one writer, knowing nothing of his connection with Joseph, said that he was not a poet, but was the kind of man about whom poetry was written. He had a reputation for taciturnity. He spent many months courting his wife, Maria, who steadfastly refused to accept his proposals. One afternoon he drove her across what appeared to be a shallow ford, but which was in reality the tidal strip which makes an island of what is now known as Crabtree Neck. He then asked, 'If you and I were alone on an island, would you accept?' She guessed she would, and on being told the true situation capitulated with good grace. Once married, Ephraim said, 'Do you love me?' 'Yes', was the reply. 'Well, I love you too, and now we know that, let's say no more about it.' Tradition has it that they never did, and at the reading of Ephraim's will, which began conventionally 'I do give and bequeath to my dearly beloved wife ...', Maria is reported to have muttered, 'I guess it's all right, but that don't sound like Ephraim'. Surely we have

in Agreen, George and Ephraim blood relations of the poet Joseph; they are either poets themselves, however mute and inglorious, or they are the kind of men about whom poems were written. Their influence in the country of their adoption is apparent first in the place names of Maine, in Crabtree Neck, Crabtree Point, and the Crabtree Ledge Light at Hancock Point. More indirectly they have affected Folk Lore as far away as Los Angeles, where a strip cartoon in one of the Sunday papers, featuring the miraculous discovery of a new author, has him addressing 'Crabtree Corner's Literary Circle'. All these matters, gentlemen, are of the greatest importance in our future researches. For who knows what precious family manuscripts, or even the earliest printed works of the young Joseph, were lovingly smuggled by Agreen into his chest when he set out for the new world, later to be affectionately pored over in that log cabin in Maine? No efficient search has yet been made for them, yet there are signs here and there in the United States of an influence which could have come from nothing else but the communication to friends and neighbours of the magic lines inscribed in them. Slight progress has been made, and it has been possible to indicate some promising lines of research; but Crabtree bibliographers of the future must realise that their efforts can no longer be concentrated on one side of the Atlantic only. I do not know what Byron would have said, but we may say with Chesterton that:

There is good news yet to hear, and fine things to be seen

before we have accounted for all the work of Joseph Crabtree.