

21
CRABTREE AND FRENCH LETTERS
Gordon Hall
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No period seemed more inviting to me personally and to promise more interesting discoveries than the one which Crabtree spent in the city in whose main square stands a magnificent statue of *Jeanne la Bonne Lorraine*, to whom further reference will be made later, the beautiful city of Orléans, the period 1783 to 1792.

For the valuable — but, it must be admitted, scanty — knowledge of these 9, or 10 years inclusive, we are indebted to our first Orator, Professor Sutherland.

Now, I was greatly intrigued by a number of questions raised by Sutherland's rare facts. Was it only the gloomy atmosphere of his uncle's domicile which drove Crabtree 'chez Paul Vallon'? If so, why did it take him eight years to decide upon the move — or were there perhaps more efficient causes? Was his state of dejection due solely to the condition in which Annette Vallon found herself, or were there deeper, more personal and intimate reasons? Apart from his *Ode to Claret* and the sonnet which, we are told, he wrote immediately after his liaison with Annette, had nothing survived of the works which this most fertile and productive of poets must surely have composed during this period? Where, for example, were those poems of vinery and vinery, about which Bennett waxed so lyrical in his oration of 1967? What, in any case, did Crabtree have to do with hunting and greenhouses for grapes? Unless, of course, interpreting the word *venery* in its other sense, the reference here is to Crabtree's penchant, like Lloyd George's, for chasing women and seducing them in hot houses! And so, Mr. President, determined to find answers to these questions, I took the only possible course of action open to me: I went off to Orléans in the summer of 1973, there to do 'on-the-spot' research, and 'installed myself' — a delightful Gallicism — for an indefinite stay in a little tavern called *Le Petit Godet*, rue Mouffetarde.

I am sure you will be enchanted to learn that I had a stroke of great good fortune, a stroke which does not come by chance but as a result of persistent and assiduous effort: I found in the city of Orléans itself descendants of Annette Vallon, through whose kindness and willing cooperation I was able to make the kind of discoveries that I had been hoping for and which it will be my purpose to reveal to you this evening. I have come to the conclusion that whatever the content of this Oration is to be, it can have no other title than *Crabtree and French letters: anterior and posterior influences*.

First, I think that you should know that Annette Vallon's real name was Marie-Anne Vallon. The girl child of her union with Joseph Crabtree was christened Anne Caroline on the 15th of December 1792, and 24 years later, in 1816, Anne Caroline married a certain Jean Baptiste Martin Baudouin. The descendants of Anne Caroline and Jean Baptiste, and therefore of Marie-Anne (or Annette) and Crabtree, still live in Orléans. This I discovered after weeks of research in the *Archives départementales* — and also after consulting the local telephone directory, and I was thus able to trace the history of the Baudouin family from 1816, the year of the marriage, to the present day. An introduction to the great-great-grandson of Marie-Anne and Joseph Crabtree, a fine old man of some 70 years, M. Jean Guillaume Baudouin, brought me an immediate invitation to the family home, now at no. 23, rue Saint André, Orléans, and this house all you *amateurs de Crabtree* could certainly go and visit — provided, of course, that it is still standing. As elsewhere, there has recently been a great deal of property development in Orléans. With characteristic generosity, the Baudouins gave me the freedom of the establishment, permitting me to roam wherever I liked and to examine everything from basement to attic. And wonder of wonders — to the average Englishman, perhaps, but not to me who am accustomed to the hoarding habits of the French — I found in an attic room a number of ancient trunks containing the most extraordinary collection of odds and ends, for which the French have the delightful word *bric-à-brac*. I rummaged through them and I would not even think of wasting your time and mine with a long list of the things I found; suffice it to say that one article in particular caught my attention. It was an old frock-coat, in a state of total disrepair, I'm afraid, but what struck me about it was that it seemed to me to be of English origin in its material, cut and style. I examined it with the utmost care, then consulted my friend Ian Tregarthen Jenkin of the Slade School of Art, who promptly and most kindly sent on to me a magnificent volume entitled *A History of Costume in the West* by one François Boucher. I checked through it carefully, and to my intense delight discovered on page 322 a picture of an 18th-century English frock-coat. It was similar in every respect to the one which I had found in the Baudouin trunk. I went back to the coat to examine every square inch of it, inside and out, and came upon, picked out in silk on the right inside pocket, the initials J.C.

My excitement, as you can well imagine, mounted. With no little apprehension and anxiety, I showed the coat to

my newly-found friend M. Baudouin. 'Oh yes,' he said (in French, of course, but I thought I'd best translate his actual words into English for reasons of clarity and intelligibility). 'Oh yes, I've known about that coat (he called it *une redingote*, a charming French distortion of the English word *riding-coat*) ever since I was a boy and used to play up there in the attic on rainy days.' Then, with a twinkle in his eye and a broad wink, he added: 'There's a story in the family that it belonged to that famous English poet William Wordsworth, who stayed with us during the early years of the Revolution.' Obviously, whatever it was that the wily old M. Baudouin knew or suspected, it was clear that he had never happened upon the initials J.C. on the inside right-hand pocket of the coat, otherwise he might have asked some penetrating questions. For reasons of discretion, I refrained from disabusing him; it seemed to me that to explain the nature of my findings to him would take far too long and would, in any case, have probably been incomprehensible to him. As far as I was concerned, there could be no doubt as to the true identity of the original owner of the coat: it was our very own Joseph Crabtree.

Now, I do not regard the discovery of Joseph's coat as in any way remarkable; from the Bible onwards, history tells us such finds are frequently made. But what was remarkable by any standards was what I found stitched into the very pocket on which the initials J.C. appeared: it was a piece of paper which I was able to remove only with the utmost difficulty. On it I descried some very faded writing, which looked for all the world like a copy of a poem. Could it be by Crabtree? In a state of intense excitement, I rushed to the Bibliothèque d'Orléans, where I was furnished with special infra-red ray equipment and I proceeded as calmly and coolly as I could to decipher the words. Judge of my astonishment, gentlemen, when I realised that here was no poem by Crabtree but a poem from the quill of the 15th-century French poet François Villon, a poem known as the *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis*. But how on earth, I asked myself, as I am sure you are now asking yourselves, had Crabtree become acquainted with the work of the first great modern French poet, of the man who before any other had bared his soul for all to see in his lyrical outpourings, his intensely personal verse, how had Crabtree achieved this when I knew that it was not until the 19th century that any serious notice had been taken of Villon and his work? The answer did not take long to find. Though Clément Marot had made a brave attempt in 1533 at a critical edition of Villon, few people paid any attention to him, but then, in the late 17th century, an extraordinary man of letters called Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Fontenelle for short, extraordinary not only from the point of view of his literary interests and versatility but also because, like Crabtree, he lived exactly 100 years — from 1657 to 1757 — published in 1692 a book of poems entitled *Recueil des plus belles pièces des poètes français, tant anciens que modernes, depuis Villon jusqu'à M. Benserade* (A Collection of the finest pieces of the French poets, both ancient and modern, from Villon to M. Benserade). The collection opens with nine of the best-known *ballades* of François Corbeil, dit Villon. Now Crabtree may not have had at that time, nor indeed at any other time, intimations of immortality, but he most certainly had intimations of longevity and it would appear that when he obtained a copy of Fontenelle's book — in circumstances which I will explain later — he was greatly intrigued by the compiler, a writer who had lived a whole century; after all, was he not himself already secretly entertaining such an ambition? We have been told by earlier researchers that Crabtree had not troubled to learn French until his affair with Mme. de Staël in 1792, but I must at once correct this misapprehension, since a person as sensitive as he could not possibly have long resisted the linguistic atmosphere in which he lived, and after eight years in Orléans, where perhaps the best French is spoken — at any rate, the Orléanais claim it — it is inconceivable that he should not have been completely fluent orally and well able to understand and appreciate written French. Let us admit, gentlemen, that no-one could have acquired that mastery of the French tongue analysed for us by Tancock in his presentation of the Crabtree/Pommeraye poem *Pastorale* in the bedroom of that man-eater Germaine de Staël.

But whatever the case, one thing is abundantly clear: Crabtree was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the very first poem in the centenarian Fontenelle's collection, Villon's *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis*, that he did what only one other writer to my knowledge has ever done, that is, to have sewn into his clothing, for posterity to find, a certain piece of writing. The other man to whom I refer is the great 17th century French scientist, mathematician, religious thinker and writer Blaise Pascal. Crabtree did not do anything quite as remarkable as Pascal; religious fervour seems to have passed him by, and no wonder when one considers that he had kinsmen like his Uncle Oliver. No, all he did was to copy down a poem that had obviously affected him deeply, the first *ballade* in the Fontenelle collection, and as it is one of the most beautiful and most moving poems ever written in any language, and as I know that some of you will already have a vague but no real knowledge of it, and as I also know that you must all be by now extremely anxious to become acquainted with it and hear it no doubt as much as I, and as I am very concerned that I should have at least one bright jewel in the dull setting of my Oration, and at the same time reveal to you the kind of poetry that was influencing Crabtree at this stage in his life, I feel that I must now recite to you the poem which I can describe only in Crabtree's well-known phrase as 'a thing of beauty and a joy for ever'. What many of you will recognise is its oft-quoted one-line refrain 'Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?' — 'Where are the snows of yesteryear?' — a *procédé poétique* which Brown informed us in 1955 Crabtree used to such good effect in his inimitable drinking song, *We march we know not whither*, with its

haunting single-line refrain 'Great unaffected vampires of the moon'.

So now to the *Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis*, the ballad to the ladies of yore, found in Crabtree's *redingote*:

Dictes moy où, n'en quel païs,
Est Flora, la belle Romaine,
Archipiades, né Thaïs,
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,
Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
Dessus rivièrre ou sus estan,
Qui beaulté eut trop plus qu'humaine.
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

Où est la très sage Helloïs,
Pour qui chastré fut et puis moyne
Pierre Esbaillart à Saint Denys?
Pour son amour eut cest essoyne.
Semblablement, où est la royne
Qui commanda que Buridan
Fust getée en ung sac en Saine?
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

La royne Blanche comme ung lys,
Qui chantoit à voix de seraine,
Berthe au grant pié, Bietris, Allys,
Harembourgis qui tint le Mayne,
Et Jehanne la bonne Lorraine
Qu'Anglois bruslerent à Rouan;
Où sont-ilz, Vierge souveraine?
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
Où elles sont, ne de cest an,
Qu'à ce reffrain ne vous remaine:
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?

To change one word in this poem, gentlemen, would be to destroy its perfect beauty; to change them all, and into a foreign language too, which is, after all, what translating means — no more and no less — would be an act of sacrilege. I will not translate. One question, I know, you are bound to ask: how did Crabtree obtain a copy of the Fontenelle *recueil*? And this brings us to the very heart and centre of my researches. These revealed that in order to escape from the gloomy atmosphere of his uncle's domicile, Crabtree, after a day's work in the wine-shipper's warehouse, found refuge in a near-by tavern known as the *Pomme de Pin*. This was not an uncommon name for a tavern in the 18th century, nor indeed in earlier centuries, for had not Villon, much to Crabtree's delight when he learnt it, frequented a 15th century *Pomme de Pin* in Paris, as he tells us in his *Testament*? And an interesting, yet cautious, speculation: do you not think that it could have been his affection for his local, combined with the obvious pun that could be made on his own name, Crabtree, that led him to choose, as Tancock pointed out 13 years ago, the aristocratic-sounding name Pommeraye for his poetic pseudonym? I certainly feel that the name Pomona in the opening line of his *Ode to Claret*, 'No more, Pomona, let they Vot'ries chaunt', is not entirely without significance here, but what I regard as of infinitely greater significance is Crabtree's extensive use of proper names in this very poem. As the distinguished exponent of stylistics, Leo Spitzer, pointed out in his study of Villon's *Ballade*, *Etude a-historique d'un texte: Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis*, published in 1940, proper names have a poetry of their own, for they are less ringed about with grammatical considerations than are other words. It seems clear to me that Crabtree must have felt, must have appreciated their poetic value, then like Villon in his *Ballade* and elsewhere in his work, exploited them as these well-known lines demonstrate:

No more, Pomona, let thy vot'ries chaunt
The praise of Cyder; no, nor Ceres bring
Her grain for beery clowns. Avaunt, avaunt!
Bacchus is our undoubted Lord and King!

But to get back to the *Pomme de Pin*. The *patron*, Pierre Brasseur, was a most engaging person, interested not

only in his trade, which meant his wine, spirits and his customers, but also in literature. He took a strong liking to the shy, somewhat lugubrious but always polite young Englishman, and wishing to assist him in his efforts to learn French and to interest him generally in aspects of French culture, he lent him a number of books, one of which was the Fontenelle collection. At the same time, he introduced Joseph to several of his regular customers, among whom was a certain Paul Vallon. Now you do not need to be reminded that as a writer Crabtree was passionately interested in words, and as a poet in the sounds of words, and he was particularly intrigued by the way in which speech sounds are produced and the mechanism that produces them. Was it not he, for example, who was the first to realise that production, of speech sounds I mean, was determined not only by the shape and size of the orifice through which they come but also by the slackness or tautness of the organs, the speech organs that is, an idea which one of the outstanding experimental phoneticians of the day, Professor George Straka of the University of Strasbourg, is still exploiting.

In 1790, of course, Crabtree's knowledge and understanding of linguistics were extremely limited but he was constantly on the look-out for material, especially in the field of phonetics, and he was very taken by the similarity of the sounds in the name Villon and the sounds in the name of his new friend Paul Vallon. Actually there is not the slightest connection between the two names but that did not really matter. What did matter was that a close friendship quickly sprang up between them and when Paul realised that, like François Villon, Crabtree could say 'Povre je suis et de povre extrace' — 'Poor am I and of a poor family' — he invited him to stay as a non-paying guest in his house. Crabtree had, in fact, remained with his uncle for eight years for the simple reason that he could not afford to move. A year later he met Annette, whom I prefer to call Marie-Anne since that was her real name, and we know what happened then. When Wordsworth came to Orléans in 1792, he noted Crabtree's dejection, first attributed it to the malaise that often affects poets, then learned from Crabtree that it was really due to Marie-Anne's condition. Gentlemen, this was only partly true. The facts are that he truly loved Marie-Anne, as we shall see in a moment, and he would have happily married her, had it not been for his poverty — he was paid only a pittance by his skin-flint of an uncle — and had it not been for his responsibilities to his family in England — he regularly sent them half of his miserable wages. And there was something else! Before he met Marie-Anne in 1791, he had become entangled in a clandestine affair with the rich but blousy widow of his Uncle Oliver's partner in Orléans, a lady — if one can call her such — who rejoiced in the egregious name of Eadie Hillier. Given all these circumstances, it was impossible for Joseph to extricate himself from Eadie's clutches: she would have created unimaginable difficulties for him. And so, with deep sorrow and regret, Crabtree accepted Wordsworth's offer to acknowledge himself the father of Marie-Anne's unborn child, and shortly thereafter he departed from Paul Vallon's house to go we know not where: to live with Eadie? to tour France? (was it not about this time he met Mme. de Staël?) or to return to England? We simply do not know what he did and some young and vigorous Scholar should set about finding out for us.

And what, gentlemen, you may well ask, is my evidence for all this? And the answer is the results of my research mainly from the *archives départementales*, backed up by a poem which I found in one of the trunks in the Baudouin household last summer, a poem signed J.C., a poem about which I would like to say a few words before reading it to you.

Crabtree's poetic greatness has already received far more meaningful tributes than I could ever pay. The depths of his emotions, his tenderness and universal sympathy, his never-ending wrestle with words, meanings and sounds, his constant striving after perfection, his versatility, in short, his complete mastery of his art and his craft, all these qualities of his have been highlighted for us by previous Scholars. But it must never be forgotten that Joseph Crabtree was a man, a mortal man with a mortal man's weaknesses, thank God, and though he could and did write like an angel, he was also capable of writing, and did write, some pretty indifferent stuff, especially a bad kind of confessional verse which Roy Fuller, lately Professor of Poetry at Oxford, in his lecture *The Two Sides of the Street* published in his recent book *Professors and Gods*, strongly condemns as 'maniac poetry'. The poem which I am about to read to you I regard as typical, and it reveals what even Crabtree could produce, regrettably not destroying it later when the mood had passed. Here it is:

Marie-Anne I truly love,
A charming blue-eyed beauty,
Sweet and gentle as a dove,
To marry whom it is my duty.
But sadly I'm involved with Eadie,
Who is as rich as she is seedy;
I simply do not have a chance
To rid myself of this romance;
I must despairing say goodbye

To Marie-Anne and all my joy,
For though I'll love her till I die,
It's Eadie with her gold alloy
Who'll call the tune to which I'll dance
Which Villon says 'vient de la pance'.

Crabtree is thinking here of the famous line in Villon's *Testament*, significantly numbered line 200 in modern editions, 'Car la dance vient de la pance', and it is interesting to observe that he believes that the English *dance* rhymes with the French *pance*!

There then, Mr. President, lies the true explanation of Crabtree's dejection. It was not so much a mistake, if mistake it was, that he was unwilling to repair. No, it was the harsh, cruel, financial facts of life which prevented him from fulfilling his heart's desire to marry Marie-Anne and, like Villon before him, in a fit of self-disgust and with bitter cynicism, he wrote that kind of trashy verse, surely as an act of penance.

At this stage in my Oration, it was my intention to give you another example of Crabtree's confessional verse, relating to that famous night in Norway, about which Foote spoke so eloquently in 1969, when Crabtree fathered Henrik Ibsen; I was then going to discuss the second part of my title, Crabtree's posterior influence, that is, the influence which his poetry had upon succeeding generations of poets, chiefly French poets, the Romantics such as Hugo, Lamartine, de Musset, de Vigny, Théophile Gautier, on Baudelaire and the Parnassiens, on Verlaine and the Symbolistes, and so-called modern, if not contemporary, poets such as Eluard, Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Péguy, to mention but a few. Finally, I had intended to present some aspects of Crabtree's achievements in Linguistics, to analyse the contribution which he made to our knowledge of phonetic change, especially on sound laws, and incidentally to demonstrate scientifically — and to your complete amazement — how, for example, by reference to perfectly normal sound laws, the name Crabtree is no more than a phonetic variant of my own Christian name, Gordon. But these matters I will leave to others to investigate and present to you, for my time has passed.