

CRABTREE COMES OF AGE: CRABTREE AND COUNTRY MATTERS

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I am going to give two Orations. The title of my first Oration is *Crabtree comes of age*, and it is more in the nature of a true story than an Oration. Last year Dr. Hall referred briefly to the coming of age of the Foundation, but this year two hundred years ago, and it was Tuesday in Septuagesima, Joseph Crabtree himself came of age, and I feel that the matter needs treating in some depth. This is a difficult period in Crabtree studies: between the time when he was sent down from Oxford in the Hilary term — indeed on his birthday, which in that year was Sexagesima Sunday — and his placing in the firm of Crabtree and Hillier, wine merchants of Orléans, ten years later, we know little of his whereabouts, except for his brief employment in the bindery of the Cambridge University Library. We can, I think, assume that he would have been, if at all possible, back in his home village for his coming of age. In Crabtree's case the day would have been no more than a ritual; he had come of age in all senses long before, but he would have been there to please his mother, if for no better reason. But what do we know of ritual coming of age in the County of Avon 200 years ago? In 1958, the late John Crowe of King's College gave an Oration entitled *Crabtree's periodical publication*. Like much work published in obscure journals, no copy survives. One phrase from it, however, has always stuck in my mind. Crowe spoke at the beginning of his Oration of 'the three keys to manhood'. He said no more, and assumed that we all knew what he meant. Of course, I know, indeed we all know, of the three keys edict of Henry II in 1166, and the supporting papal bull of Innocent III in the reign of John, but those keys referred to Crusade Church chests and the three estates of the realm — nothing at all to do with coming of age. What then could the three have been? The first was clear, the key to the door of the family home, a custom which survives to this day. In this case it was a metaphorical key because Crabtree, as we know, had been climbing out of the window of his father's study since his earliest teens, and he had no need of it. The second also presents no difficulties — the key to his father's wine-cellar — again metaphorical, because as Peake has told us, Crabtree had early acquired the key to the cellar — he was speaking of the Happy Valley Inn at Porlock, but we may be sure that the future vintner and author of the *Ode to Claret* would make certain of this key wherever he lived.

But what of the third key? Here I was stuck. I went to the Folklore library: there were plenty of books on the subject — *Coming of age in Samoa*, *Growing up In Guatemala*, that sort of thing — but not a word about Chipping Sodbury or about three keys. I tried the old ladies who infest the place, some of whose memories might well take them back to Crabtree's time, but all to no effect. There was nothing for it but that I must go to Chipping Sodbury, and to Chipping Sodbury I went. I had not been there since the year 1925, when I served behind a stall at the vicar's fete. Alas gentlemen, Chipping Sodbury is not what it was. My first port of call was the pub on the green, but there were spittoons in the bar and the landlord came from Leeds. He knew nothing of local custom, but was friendly, and in the end helpful, as we shall see. Refreshed, I walked across the green to the church, Holy Trinity, because men of the cloth are often the last repositories of the arcane secrets of village life; but the Vicar of Holy Trinity came from Wakefield and had a high collar. I asked him about Crabtree and about the keys. He told me that there had been another man enquiring about him, an American, and I sensed the presence of Professor Kemper T. Guggenheim, who hunts Crabtree so assiduously but to so little effect. It was clear that this vicar knew something about the keys, but all that he would say was that 'there were some local customs of pagan origin into which it was better not to enquire'.

I was walking disconsolately back to my car when I heard a pattering of feet behind; I turned and saw a little girl of some fourteen summers running towards me, and a very pretty little girl at that. 'Please Sir, my mother says I'm to tell you about the third key, but I don't rightly know as how I should.' It turned out that she was the daughter of the barmaid at the pub, Joan Downie by name. I jollied her along, telling her not to be shy, but she started to blush. It was Charles Darwin who, in 1867, sent a printed circular to a number of overseas missionaries asking them if members of their dusky flocks blushed and, if they did, please to observe how far down they blushed. He got some very dusky answers. Young Miss Downie suddenly blushed crimson, probably down to her navel, and blurted out 'Oh, please Sir, you see Sir, it's us'. With that she took to her heels and ran. And I had my answer staring me in the face all the time — a metaphorical chastity belt for the third key to open. But, alas, even this key must have been a mere symbol to Joseph Crabtree, for we know he was a precocious boy, and not for nothing was he called cuckoo at school.

There, thought I, was the end of my mission. But no, Miss Downie was coming back — no blushes now but every inch a woman. 'Please Sir, Mum says I was to give you these,' and, reaching down to where young women used to keep their handkerchiefs, she produced a grubby piece of binder twine on which were tied three keys.

'Mum says that as I haven't got a brother, she won't be wanting them again.' I thanked her in the only way one can thank a pretty girl of fourteen summers, and returned to the pub.

The grubby piece of binder twine I have discarded, but here, gentlemen, are the keys, rusty as they came to me, and I give them to the Foundation as a remembrance of a small episode in the life of Joseph Crabtree which took place 200 years ago tonight.

My second Oration is entitled *Crabtree and country matters* — a quotation which one of our most distinguished Scholars has described as 'one of Shakespeare's asides to keep the pit happy, and later to gladden Dr. Bowdler's shears'. But it is to Dame Nature, and not to human nature, that I refer. In studying the works of Crabtree, and in reading what has been written about him, I have been struck often by the number of lacunae that there still are — whole periods of his life of which we know little or nothing. Where was he? — What was he writing? — What company was he keeping? — nothing. It is about one of these periods that I wish to speak — between his coming of age and his becoming a wine shipper. This is a period in which Coleridge was still in dresses at Ottery St. Mary, doubtless frilled with Honiton lace, and Wordsworth was a mere schoolboy. One thing that we do know about this period was that he became acquainted with Erasmus Darwin, and, if not a recorded member, at least a visitor to the Lunar Society and to the Botanical Society of Lichfield, a Society which had only three members, and helping no doubt in their major work, the translation of the *Sexual System* of Linnaeus into English. We know also that he had been at school with another distinguished natural historian, Edward Jenner, and the episode of the milkmaid had occurred at Chipping Sodbury in 1770. Crabtree may well have had smallpox, but the milkmaid had not. Furthermore he had the entrée to the salon of Sir Joseph Banks. Banks, only 32 when Crabtree came of age, and already a Fellow of the Royal Society for nine years, gathered at his house in Soho Square all the natural historians and antiquaries of Europe. Why then was the young Crabtree given a welcome there?

I can think of two reasons. For the first, a very personal one, I have little evidence — a possibility only; for the second there is something more. When Banks went, as a naturalist, on Cook's first voyage in 1768, he took with him not only artists and draughtsmen and his own personal valet, but two flute boys. They are not named in the ship's complement of the *Endeavour*, only their trade is given, but then no more was the valet. Is it just possible that they were Joseph and his young brother George? George, as Nyholm has shown us, was to end up in Botany Bay, a place named by Banks, in much sadder circumstances. Of course, Crabtree's instrument was the dulcimer, but, to be a flute boy on one of King George III's ships of war, it was not necessary to be able to play the flute. I have often been much surprised by the knowledge that Coleridge had of the fauna of southern latitudes as shown in the *Ancient Mariner*. It is usually attributed to his reading Shelvocke's earlier voyage, but I suspect that the information came from nearer to hand. Banks was asked by Cook to go on the second voyage in 1772, but the Captain stipulated no flute boys, so Banks refused and took his entourage to Iceland instead. The next person to be asked, curiously enough, was Jenner, but he refused on the grounds that he was about to invent vaccination. In the end, a couple of Germans, called Forster, went. It is perhaps relevant that on his return from this voyage, Cook was elected to the Royal Society, and received its highest award — the Copley — in the same year. But then Banks was not yet President.

However that may be, it is certainly true that Crabtree, influenced by Erasmus Darwin, Banks and Jenner, was a serious naturalist at the time, and not only a love of nature, but a knowledge of it stayed with him for the rest of his life. Even well into his 90s, as Scott has told us, he was attending meetings of the Metropolitan Red Lion Club, and perhaps helping in the composition of their drinking songs. The Red Lion Club was one of those typically English sodalities, which had some slightly whimsy post-prandial customs. Theirs was for one member to stand on the table and sing some zoological ballad. The dredging song, which I will not sing, was the most famous. It was written by Edward Forbes, then Professor of Botany in the Strand, and even young Thomas Henry Huxley took to the table at times. The song, the ballad of the red tape-worm, slight though it is, seems to me to show the touch of a more mature hand.

The more important reason why Crabtree was welcome at Banks' table was that he was one of the few men in England who had met Linnaeus. Banks himself had not, although his secretary Solander, the inventor of the Solander case beloved of botanists, had been his pupil, and only the older generation could remember his visit to England in 1736. But the old man was still alive and honoured throughout Europe — except in Paris, where the great buffoon still held sway — as the complete naturalist and Prince of botanists; anyone who had spoken with him was an ever-welcome guest. It is not known, or at least not known to me, why, or indeed exactly when Crabtree went, but it must have been about 1776. Had Crabtree been a rich man, he would have made the grand tour, but a brief visit to Sweden and the Low Countries was probably all that he could afford at the time. His first thoughts on planning the trip must have been how to get a smattering of colloquial Swedish and what to

take the old man as a present. I am grateful to Professor Foote for pointing out to me that there was only one phrase book available at the time, and that unluckily was the wrong way round; clearly, however, Crabtree would have had to use it. This was Ifvar Kraak's *English Grammar for Swedes* of 1748. It is one of those books known to collectors of such things as a 'postillion book', from the famous command in a Russian-English one: 'Stop Coachman, the postillion has been struck by lightning'. My two favourites in this one are from the traveller's visit to Oxford — 'What will you drink? Anything that is wet' and 'You are the Warden, you will clean my boots'.

The question of the present and the answer to it are the reasons why we know that Crabtree went at all, for the present survives. Whisky was out, because Linnaeus' drinking habits were well known: beer only, which he drank in prodigious quantities, always draining his pot at one go. So was tobacco, for he never smoked anything except some revolting stuff with a strong whiff of reindeer which he imported from Lapland.

What he did choose was characteristic of his impish and sometimes slightly immodest sense of humour. Linnaeus gave a superficial appearance of hauteur and coldness, as became a Professor and a Knight of the Pole Star, but he too had the same style of humour, although he clothed it, for the sake of his four daughters, in the obscurity of the Latin tongue. If he had before him a plant or an animal whose form reminded him of those parts which modesty demands that we keep hidden, he would indicate the analogy in the scientific name which he bestowed upon it. The best known of these is that of the common beadlet anemone of our shores — he named it *Actinia equina* because of its resemblance at rest to the sphincter ani of the horse. *Priapus*, *Priapululus*, *Phallusia Mantula Mutinus* are amongst his more obvious, and, of course, he took over *Orchis* from the herbalists with pleasure. With the genera *Venus* and *Cypraea*, both shells, he made great play, *Venus mercenaria* and *Cypraea gigas* are amongst his more patent. But the clearest of all was that which he bestowed on the common stink-horn fungus of our woods. This handsome plant starts its reproductive stage as a fawn-coloured ovoid, about the size of a goose's egg, at which stage it is delicious eating, halfway between a puffball and a truffle. What happens next is well described by the Victorian lady botanist Margaret Plues in her *Flowerless Plants* of 1864:

The stalk elongates very greatly in the course of a few minutes, tearing the veil and carrying the cup upwards. It is a process of expansion rather than of growth. Later the cap liquifies, carrying the spores with it and finally the whole structure collapses ... The plant has a dignified and imposing appearance, and might well be accounted a desirable ornament for a gentleman's pleasure ground, but for its all pervading odour.

Whence its common name, the Stinkhorn.

Here then was Crabtree's choice. He had a model made in coloured glass. To carry it safely by packet and chaise must have presented some difficulty, but probably his clean linen and spare merkin sufficed, for get there it did, and it survives to this day in the collections of the Linnean Society of London — those same collections which Sir James Edward Smith bought from Linnaeus' relict. Thanks to the kindness of Mr. Roberts and his staff, I have been able to have a copy made, and present to the Foundation *Phallus impudicus* of Linnaeus.

But there was a snag in the fulfilment. Nobody had told Crabtree that Linnaeus had just suffered a severe stroke. And, although, in the best traditions of Universities he still retained his chair and his emoluments, he was completely gaga. The unfortunate Joseph would have had to present *Phallus impudicus* to Fru Linnaea — a sour and prudish termagant who would ill have appreciated the joke, and anyway had no Latin. However it must have gone off somehow because he duly received his present in return. I have been surprised, indeed surprised more than twenty times, that Crabtree, a man of good taste in food and drink, should have been so fond of Swede turnip. The soused herring and the boiled mutton were, of course, the staple food of the Swedes, but a chance encounter with a history of agriculture showed me that the Swede turnip was first introduced into England from Sweden in about 1776 and first on the market here in 1781. Perhaps the seed that the parsimonious Fru Linnaea gave to Crabtree in return was amongst the first to arrive here, and tonight we have partaken of its lineal descendants.

Gentlemen, for the past twenty-two years we have been re-enacting the very supper to which sat down the beer-swilling Carolus, his wife, his pretty youngest daughter Sophia — the only one left at home — and Crabtree, almost 200 years ago.

Of Crabtree's relationship with Erasmus Darwin, I have little to add. It was Dr. Tay who brought their friendship to our notice and he suggested that the poetic teeth were perhaps first cut on heroic couplets. *The Loves of the Plants*, indeed the whole of the *Botanic Garden*, was anonymous and Erasmus never acknowledged it as his, for

fear it is said that, like Mark Akenside, it might damage his practice, but more likely because it was by several hands. *The Loves of the Plants* should, I feel, be studied by those better qualified than I am to recognize the hand of Crabtree when they see it.

But attending salons and visiting the famous, like the Committee work of today, is not in itself science. *Nullius in verba*. Have we any evidence that Crabtree actually went out into the field and observed, and having observed, published, or at least tried to publish? I think that we have. Life was much simpler in those days — no *Biological Abstracts*, no *Science Citation Index*, or other expensive toys — there was only one journal in England, and if you wanted to publish anything, you had it printed as a book or a pamphlet or you sent it to *Phil. Trans.*

Professor Jones has searched *Phil. Trans* for the relevant period and found nothing, and I have done the same and also drawn a blank. But what I have done, and Professor Jones has not, is to search a remarkable file kept at the Royal Society called RR — readers' reports. If the Society published a paper, they threw the RR away, but if they did not, then they kept the reports — and they go way way back. Luckily for some of us, there is a fifty-year rule on this file. I could not find any RR on why they rejected Jenner's paper on vaccination in 1798, but I did find one in the late seventies which is of considerable interest. It is signed W.P., D.D. — who else but the venerable if crippled Archdeacon of Carlisle, William Paley? He rejects the contribution out of hand on the grounds that if the facts are true, then they do not show the power, wisdom or goodness of God as manifested in the works of the creation, therefore the facts cannot be true, and he advises the writer to observe again. He also notes that the author cannot have the courage of his convictions since he hides his identity under the initials of 'the undivided middle of the triune God'. Fortunately the good Archdeacon summarizes the facts before he ridicules them, and it has been amply shown since that Crabtree was right, or almost right, and that God, or rather Paley's idea of God, was wrong.

The paper concerns some small flies which anyone can watch flying in thousands over every small ditch or pond in the summer. If you watch carefully, you will see that the males catch smaller flies and give them, like chocolates, to their mates. The females will not accept the males unless they get their chocolates, and reject them as soon as they have finished eating. Crabtree also observed that some of the males, actually belonging to another species, wrap the chocolate up in a thin web of silk before presenting it. The female has to unwrap the silk before she can start on the fly, thus prolonging his pleasuring. Further still, there is a third kind, and this I think is the bit which the Archdeacon did not like. This kind makes a very elaborate and strong silk chocolate box, which, like modern packaging, takes ages to open. But he fails to put anything inside.