

25
THE CLEANSING OF CRABTREE
Arthur Tattersall
1978

Sir, I have sadly concluded that, after the purity of the scholarship which we enjoyed in the first flush of Crabtree studies, we have in more recent times been subjected to a growing coarseness, a salacious crudity, a shameful degree of innuendo and *double entendre*, unworthy either of our revered poet or of the College in which his portrait reposes. Let us once more raise the standard of morality, in Literature as well as life. It is for this reason, as well as for its subject-matter, that I have chosen as a title for tonight's offering *The Cleansing of Crabtree*. And I intend to live up to this title. Any *entendre* in this Oration is guaranteed single. Of course I have had to face the problem which has faced other Crabtree Orators — where does one go in the Quest for Crabtree, the search for authentic evidence about a man who, with really sublime modesty, covered his tracks so well, and allowed others, from Wordsworth down to Joseph Blacket, to take credit for his productions?

The task is not easy. The internal evidence of the poems themselves is scanty, and that field is now well tilled. In my own case, the only course seemed to be to consult the papers, published and unpublished, of Crabtree's known associates in literary circles. The names of, for instance, Leigh Hunt, Southey, Horace Smith, J.H. Reynolds, Keats, Shelley, Scott, beside the more obvious ones of Wordsworth and Coleridge, crop up in the records; and we have noted the Byron connection. Trails open up, but sometimes peter out. Hazlitt, in his *Essay on the Conversation of Authors*, writes:

Wordsworth sometimes talks like a man inspired on subjects of poetry — Coleridge well on every subject — Godwin on none. Mrs. Montague's conversation leaves a flavour like fine green tea, Leigh Hunt's is like Champagne, Crabtree's like his own claret, Northcote's like anchovy sardines. Haydon's is like a game at trap ball; Lamb's like snapdragon; and my own (if I mistake not) is not unlike a game at ninepins.

On reading this, one's hopes rise; but one searches in vain for further references by Hazlitt to our revered poet.

Nevertheless, Crabtree did move in literary circles, we know, aided no doubt by his friendship with Wordsworth and Coleridge and by the link with Annabella Milbanke. It was at one such party that Crabtree, having experienced a mental block, and unable for some months to do more than toss off some overblown *facetiae*, jestingly remarked that he was suffering from mental constipation. His inveterate enemy, Sir Humphry Davy, hearing of this, said 'Of course, those who suffer from cerebral haemorrhoids must find a big idea too painful to pass'. This in turn prompted Wordsworth to write the Sonnet which begins:

Open your gates, ye everlasting Piles.

One is tempted to seek amongst the papers of those who were clearly influenced by Crabtree. Keats, for instance: who could doubt that the *Ode to Claret* is the source of inspiration of lines such as:

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth?

Keats' papers yielded nothing. Fitzgerald was another possibility; among many stanzas in the *Rubaiyat* which proclaim his debt to Joseph Crabtree let us select but one:

The Grape that can with Logic absolute
The two-and-seventy warring Sects confute:
The subtle Alchemist that in a Trice
Life's leaden Metal into Gold transmute.

Again, no clue. The journals of Dorothy Wordsworth seemed promising, but were a little disappointing. They showed that in 1819 Wordsworth and Crabtree visited Austria, attracted by a country that could call a river the Inn. At Pörschach, on the Wörthersee, a favourite haunt of musicians, they met a young musician from Vienna called Franz Schubert, who shared Crabtree's passion for fly fishing. Together they went after trout; and Crabtree drew Schubert's attention to a poem *Die Forelle*, by Schubert, which Schubert at once set to music.

Crabtree then pointed out that the melody was eminently suited to the variation form, and suggested that Schubert should write an extended work for piano quintet, unorthodoxly including a Double Bass, with its main movement based on the song. We can thus thank Joseph Crabtree for one of the happiest works in the chamber music repertoire.

Next I thought of Byron. Now Byron, besides being almost every sort of four-letter word, was a very uncertain and erratic judge of poetry. He preferred the insipid Rogers to Coleridge and Wordsworth; he spoke of Keats' 'pissabed poetry' and called him 'the self-polluter of the human mind' and his verse 'drivelling idiotism'. Byron saw in Keats a greater talent than his own, and envied it. He saw Crabtree in the same light; characteristic of Byronic malice is the couplet:

The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Crabtree never deviates into sense.

Nevertheless, the connection, not least through Annabella, is strong. Hobhouse knew Crabtree; Byron knew Mme. de Staël; and he had met Crabtree often. Now, a hoard of papers left behind by one Scrope Davies, a friend of Byron's, in a trunk in the vaults of his bank, and recently rediscovered, has proved to contain a veritable bonanza of material for scholars of early nineteenth-century English Literature. A hint from my colleague, Mr. Hugh Prince, put me on the track. What did I find?

Scrope Davies was a more than usually dissolute Fellow of King's College Cambridge, who was appointed his Executor by Byron in the 1811 will, and was Byron's companion in many an outrageous episode. For instance, in March 1814, at the 'Cocoa Tree', he and Byron drank a bottle of champagne and six bottles of claret between 6 p.m. and midnight. Byron, as we have noted, married Annabella in 1815, was promptly cuckolded by Crabtree, and soon turned savagely cruel to his young bride. One can only presume (it is a charitable presumption) that he had learnt of Crabtree's exploit at Wansford; any other explanation would presuppose an inordinate degree of sadism on Byron's part. Indeed, Byron's trouble really was more like masochism. About this time he wrote the lines:

I've seen my bride another's bride —
Have seen her seated by his side —
Have seen the infant which she bore
Wear the sweet smile the mother wore.

Commentators have always maintained that this passage referred to his first love, Mary Chaworth, his 'Morning Star', who rejected him and married another. Sir, we now know better, as I will shortly prove: the lines relate to Crabtree's intervention, and his fathering of Augusta Ada Byron. There were moments when Byron enjoyed the smart of self-inflicted mortification.

What, you will say, is the relevance of this? We pretty well suspected this much already. Sir, in the Scrope Davies papers I found a letter in Byron's hand, dated May 1821. Byron had made London too hot for him by 1816, and went abroad — followed, for slightly less disreputable but not too dissimilar reasons, by the Shelleys in 1818. In 1821 they met in Pisa, and the letter in question bears a Pisan address. I quote from it:

My dear Scrope,

I have been staying in Pisa some little time with Percy and Mary Shelley and Edward Trelawney, and re-living with them the old days. We have heard the chimes at midnight, have we not? Today, however, there reached us news of the death of young Keats in Rome last February, on the way to visit Shelley here. Shelley was much moved — he had known Keats well in Hampstead four years ago, and thought highly of him as a poet. There is no accounting for tastes! I found Keats namby-pamby and lacking the incisiveness one would have hoped for in a medical student. But Shelley was prompted by the news of Keats' death to tell me a story about him and that villain Crabtree which put me into an unconscionably good humour. It was as follows:

In 1816, when Keats was a medical student at Guys, he was just beginning to get a toehold in the literary monde. He met this fellow Crabtree in Hampstead (you'll remember Leigh Hunt printed some of Keats' early work in *The Examiner*?). Keats was rather good-looking in a romantic, effeminate sort of way, and a remark by one of the others present gave Crabtree the impression that Keats might be open to a suggestion or two. The impression was wrong — how could a young man whose sister and sweetheart were both called Fanny be that way inclined? Be that as it may, Crabtree made quite a nuisance of

himself to Keats, and tried the effect of strong drink on him, in a hostelry called the 'White Hart', in the Borough High Street. Alas, Keats had an even stronger head than Crabtree, for all the latter's apprenticeship as a vintner; and Crabtree was soon reeling. Keats, to escape, innocently said that he had to go on duty at Guy's; but that at half an hour before midnight, if Crabtree cared to visit him in his room at Guy's, he (Crabtree) could see his (Keats') etchings, of which he had a collection he was proud of. Keats was sure that Crabtree was so drunk that he would sleep where he sat till the morning. Crabtree however was a tenacious character. He sat in the 'White Hart', with another two bottles of claret, till the appointed hour; staggered to the Porter's Lodge at Guy's Hospital; announced thickly 'I've come to have it off with Mr. Keats' and collapsed in total stupor on the floor.

At that moment, who should come by but the Senior Surgeon, a scalpel-happy person by the name of Sir Lancelot Pratt. 'What's this?' said Sir Lancelot, prodding Crabtree's recumbent form with his cane.

The Porter answered, simply and in good faith, 'He says he's come tae have it off wi' Mr. Keats, Sir'. 'Have it off, eh?' said Sir Lancelot. 'Well, we're always ready to oblige. Send for Mr. Keats, and get this fellow ready for the Table'.

Getting a patient ready for the Table was part of the Porter's duties, and consisted simply in getting a bottle of gin down the patient's throat in quick time. Crabtree had saved him a certain amount of trouble already; but the Porter got half a bottle into Crabtree, drank the rest himself, sent a message to Keats, and carried the totally insensible Crabtree up to the Operating Table. By the time Keats arrived, Sir Lancelot was poised for the act; and before one poet could come to the rescue of the other, Sir Lancelot's scalpel flashed brightly, and there, lying in the sawdust, was Crabtree's manhood. Stifling a groan, Keats did his duty as a dresser, and Crabtree was wheeled away.

Next morning Crabtree woke with an aching forehead and a throbbing groin. Keats sat with him, fearing that the revelation of this catastrophe might turn his brain. And indeed at first this seemed likely. However, one must admit that, whatever else Crabtree lacked, at this or at any other time, it was not courage and it was not resource. He had long been fascinated by the story of Teiresias, the seer of Thebes, who in middle life had been changed by the Gods from man to woman, and by the fact that Teiresias, when asked, as one who knew, which of the two sexes had the greater pleasure in sexual intercourse, had said, after brief reflection, 'The woman'. Crabtree pondered this long, and saw a way of turning the misfortune that had struck him into gain — of having it both ways. He got Keats to arrange a consultation with Sir Lancelot, and asked the surgeon whether he could complete for him a sex-change operation. Sir Lancelot Pratt, who had, as it happened, been studying this problem intensively, opined that he could. The procedure with the gin bottle was repeated; Crabtree was again wheeled up to the Theatre. A few deft slashes, a couple of neat folds, some stitches and dressings; and Josephine Crabtree was born.

You may imagine, my dear Scrope, that this was a fate that I would not readily have wished on my worst enemy — not even on the man who usurped my place in bed one night at Wansford six years ago, and gave Annabella more than she bargained for. But I swallowed my sympathy when I thought of what he had done to me. May I suggest that you keep an eye on Crabtree's career? I should be interested to know whether, while I have been abroad, she has continued to wear men's clothing or has acknowledged her change of life; I am so out of touch with the literary gossip. Write and give me the news.

Ever your devoted friend,
George Gordon Byron

As I brush away an involuntary tear, I can judge, from the horrified silence with which you have received this hideous recital, how deeply shocked you all are. When we have recovered from our consternation, we shall have to ask ourselves two questions. The first: is the story true? The second: if it is, what are its implications for the future of Crabtree Studies?

As to the first, well, Byron was of course a romancer by nature, and the story is his version of what Shelley said Keats told him. And Keats was dead, and his tale could not be checked. But there was no reason why Keats should have made up a tale like this, which in fact did not do him much credit. Shelley had no axe to grind. Nor did Byron, though he took a malicious delight, for understandable reasons, in Crabtree's misadventure, have reason to invent such a story, which surpasses in strangeness the Arabian Nights. As to the tale itself, it is in fact inherently probable. Sexual deviations, present from earlier days, tend to reassert themselves, so the psychoanalysts tell us, in late middle age. Keats was a young man of epicene elegance and beauty, as the Severn

portraits show. The chronology all fits exactly. I have gone over it with a toothcomb, and cannot fault it in any detail. The attendant setting, and the personal contacts involved — in fact, the whole literary ambience — tally precisely with the known facts. Hateful though one finds the story, it carries conviction.

What then of its impact on our field of scholarship? First, of course, we have now to get used to speaking of Josephine Crabtree, of her and hers, not of him and his, in respect of any events after mid-1816. Byron's own question, of course, about transvestism, is answered by what we ourselves know; namely, that Crabtree, for reasons of her own, continued to wear male costume in public. No doubt it was simpler for her. But it is certain that her intimates were aware of her changed condition. Moreover, knowing what we do know of her, and of her unquenchable thirst for experience, we cannot doubt that she continued to live a full life. Indeed, one may add one's own speculations to Byron's. The Teiresias argument is convincing enough in itself; but it is probable that Crabtree's own male libido was flagging a little by 1816. He had not spared himself in earlier days and was, so to speak, heavily overdrawn at the bank. He had reached the Grand Climacteric. So the switch to femininity suited her well, and we may surmise that her account was soon back in credit, particularly as she was now on the receiving end.

Incidentally, there is the well-authenticated case of Dr. James Barry, who, after a long career as an Army Surgeon, died in 1865, and was then found to have been a woman all the time.

One who knew of, and welcomed, the change, of course, was Wordsworth. He had always looked up to Crabtree; and he had lost his own mother at the age of eight. At last he had a mother figure, in the form of his dearest friend, who could take the place of the parent whose loss he deploras so movingly, yet with such restraint, in *The Prelude*.

We have observed before the versatility of Crabtree: how he was all things to all men, and most things to most women:

A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one but all mankind's epitome.

The prolepsis and prophetic truth of this remark is enhanced by the fact that Josephine Crabtree spent her last 38 years as a member of the other half of humanity, seeing how it lived.

Perhaps we should now turn to our final speculation: how do these momentous events repercuss on the findings of other Scholars about Crabtree's life from 1816 onwards?

The first year of significance is 1821, when the bankruptcy occurred. Crabtree was at this time very hard up once more; she had written nothing for years, her literary inspiration having been lost along with her male drive. The *Ars Salutandi* had been published in 1820, but had of course been written before the watershed had been crossed; and alas, it did not sell. She faced the expense of acquiring a female wardrobe, for wear in the privacy of her own home and the presence of a few chosen friends like Wordsworth. Hence her involvement in slightly shady financial transactions.

More important is the trip to Norway in 1827, during which Foote claimed that Crabtree fathered Ibsen. This, Sir, becomes manifestly impossible. Yet the loss is not total. Foote showed that Crabtree's motivation on this trip was to do as her foe Humphrey Davy did, and 'to assuage his passion' under the midnight sun. When Crabtree had drunk the rest of the company under the table, and was the only person left standing, she was perfectly capable of going to bed with Fru Marichen Ibsen and assuaging the passion of both of them; and she did. Little Henrik, born about nine months later, was his father's son; but his upbringing owed much to his mother's memories of the passionate Englishwoman with whom she spent the most rapturous night of her life.

Of course, when she returned to Queen's College, Oxford, there was no problem at all, and nobody noticed any difference. The voyage to Newcastle in 1838, with Harriett Martineau, with whom she shared a cabin, takes on a new complexion, but a no more dubious one than the old.

Finally, Sir, what of the occasion when the 92-year-old Crabtree frightened Wheatstone out of lecturing at the Royal Institution? This is now easily accounted for: Crabtree had been dabbling in witchcraft since she reached the age of 80, and she had no difficulty in putting the evil eye on Wheatstone.

No one has yet shed light on the death of Crabtree. It happened in 1854, of course, and it happened like this.

Crabtree's tombstone can be seen, in the churchyard of Haworth, in Yorkshire just below the south door of the church — the Brontës' church. How did she come to be buried there? Well, in her new guise, Josephine Crabtree cultivated the society of female poets, seeing herself as the Sappho of Sudbury. You will recall the lines of Sappho:

As the sweet apple reddens on the bough,
Out on the farthest bough: the pickers missed it.
— Nay, they forgot it not, but could not reach it.

Crabtree saw any eponymous acerbity in her former character as having been dulcified by her transformation; and she set out to create a school of sweet singers — poetesses of genius — under her own leadership and matronage. Of course the three Brontë sisters were glad to join our revered poetess as members of this new school. The two younger ones predeceased Crabtree; but she visited Charlotte in 1854 at Haworth, a year before Charlotte's own death, having just celebrated her hundredth birthday. The wintry journey was too much for her: she choked on a piece of tripe offered to her by Charlotte, and died.