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THE SECRET LIFE OF JOSEPH CRABTREE
Fred Gee
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Over the years many Scholars have come to this room to reveal for the first time that some glorious passage in a work hitherto ascribed to a lesser Master was either plagiarised from an original Crabtree composition or cribbed wholesale in the vernacular or translated to another language. Yet no folio has been found to authenticate the original and year after year we are left with the tantalising 'proof by induction' which is so popular with teachers of mathematics and so unreliable in the hands of policemen and lawyers. Clues there are in plenty but so there are in crosswords and, unless you can unlock the devious mind of the designer, you are better to register your answers with a pencil than a fountain-pen! 'Even Bacon left his mark in sundry codes and cryptograms although content to hide behind the mask of Shakespeare!' So said Peake in 1970. He searched deeply for the code which could betray the hand of Crabtree and imagined he had found it when he observed that four consecutive lines in Shelley's 'Hellas' began with the letters C, R, A, and B, but his doggedness was unrewarded: there was no tree! Confronted with what seemed an intractable problem, I remembered the advice of the Chief Constable of Essex and decided to take a deep breath and look for another vehicle.

Seeing that this is the 31st Oration, I am going to cheat a little and take advantage of the well-established 30-year rule and quote from a hitherto unrepeated statement made in this room by the very first Orator when he came to address the Foundation from the Presidential Chair:

Some weeks ago the Vicar of Chipping Sodbury received a cable from America, signed 'Hoffman', requesting permission to excavate the Crabtree family grave. Hoffman alleged that Crabtree had been in the pay of the English Government and had been a spy in France working against the young Republic.

Now it seems that the Vicar was more distressed at Hoffman's further allegation that Joseph Crabtree had had homosexual relations with the Younger Pitt and the matter of spying was not pursued. (Not for the last time in British history, a clear lead was allowed to dangle!)

In fact, the idea was not taken up again until Bromage suggested that Crabtree had been an undercover agent for the Bank of England — that is, until his cover fell in while he was creeping along a tunnel connecting the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street to a young lady in The Poultry: a lady he was about to impregnate with half the future Thomas Hood.

Nobody here is likely to rejoice at the thought of our revered poet being described as a spy. There was a book published in 1895 which expressed it rather well:

The very term spy conveys to our mind something dishonourable and disloyal. A spy in the general acceptance of the term is a low sneak who, from unworthy motives, dodges the actions of his fellow beings, to turn the knowledge he acquires to his personal account. His underhand dealings inspire us with such horror that we would blush at the very idea of having to avail ourselves of any information obtained through such an agency.

That, I suspect, is how you will feel about it. But, if in place of 'spy' we substitute 'heroic intelligence agent', it sounds a lot better. And, after all, gentlemen, he would be in good company among the poets of history: Daniel Defoe, Chaucer, Marlowe, Edgar Allen Poe... to name but a few.

On what evidence, other than that scandalous Tale of Hoffman, do I base the suggestion that Crabtree was a spy? Let us look back at the record. In the very first Oration, Sutherland spoke of a 'conspiracy of silence', a point echoed by many who followed. Nyholm spoke of 'the studied deliberation with which he refused to publish anything but an occasional gem under his own name'. Tancock drew our attention to the famous portrait which hangs again before us tonight: 'Could there', he said, 'be some hidden secret behind those passionate eyes?' One by one, clues have appeared which in retrospect we should have recognised to be indicative of the undercover man. I do not, of course, refer to Joseph's numerous amorous adventures which took place between the sheets, for they were merely what, in other circumstances, might be termed the 'tip of the iceberg'!

There are two tell-tale clues by which you can usually recognise a spy. And I do not mean a cloak and dagger! One is 'living above one's income', which Crabtree had been doing while he was at the Bank of England. The

other is 'making impetuous journeys' — and there has hardly been a year since our researches began when Crabtree has not turned up in some unlikely and hitherto unrecorded spot. Take, for example, his sudden dash in 1793 from the warmth of Mme. de Staël's *ménage* to the cold mist of a Scottish castle to rendezvous with the Sage of Pittenweem. Even M.I.5 would have thought that suspicious! Then there was all that name-dropping he did — dropping the Crabtree and calling himself McGreggor... de Pommeraye... Blacket... Batty... Tischbein...

And let's have another look at that idea of Charles Peake's about codes and cyphers. Did Crabtree perhaps use poetry as a form of cypher to convey messages across hostile frontiers? Suppose we start with the very first poem we know him to have written: his 'ODE TO CLARET'. Juggle with those letters, my friends, and you will find they spell out a stern command: CLEAR ODETTO. What, in fact, could be clearer than that? (Unless, of course, it meant 'CODE O' to be used by someone called 'RATTLE'.)

We can well imagine how Crabtree first came to be hooked by the 'craze of cryptography' as it was fast becoming at that time. It has already been established that his family were Methodists. To the young Crabtree, Methodism was a revolutionary movement about which he would have wanted some inside information. Once within their plain-looking meeting-house, he would surely have been convinced that this was, in fact, a front organisation which had nothing to do with religion. Then on seeing a series of numbers on a board by the side of the speaker, he would have recognised the cleverness of it all. Here was a code from which the indoctrinated would take their instructions from under the eyes of the congregation. We can guess at the fruitless hours he would have spent trying to uncover the meaning of those three-digit groups, and the irony of finding out that number 320 stood for 'Art thou weary, art thou languid?' Of course, he would soon have realised the usefulness of this ecclesiastical code: by merely saying '444', he could rouse his companion with the exhortation 'Beloved, let us love', and if he were lucky, he might get the reply '554', which meant 'O come and dwell in me'. It is difficult to believe that Crabtree would not have exploited such a system to the full!

This prompts me to recall to your attention what is probably the most often quoted of all the historical events in Crabtree's life: the occasion when Wheatstone ran out on Faraday at the Royal Institution because, as Jones told us, he saw Crabtree in the audience. What he did not tell us was why this should have provoked such a torment in the mind of a Professor of Experimental Philosophy at King's College, who would surely have been accustomed to finding strange-looking folk in his audience. At the risk of betraying what may still be an official secret, I will tell you. Sir Charles Wheatstone was a skilled decipherer of cryptograms and the sight of Crabtree, whom he recognised as a kindred spirit, reminded him suddenly that he was due to decode a message which had come in that afternoon for Lord Palmerston — a message that turned out to say the Americans and Canadians had just discovered the 49th Parallel.

Not all cryptographers were as good as Wheatstone. And just as today a machine is only as good as its operator, so it was in Crabtree's day! When Pitt heard that Napoleon was massing ships and troops along the Mediterranean, he ordered a signal to be sent to Nelson 'to look after the French'. Unfortunately there was a slight error in the coding or transmission and the message was received by Nelson as an instruction to look after the wench. Being a fine patriotic fellow, Nelson put his country first, as you well know, and pressed on to the Nile but on his way back he remembered the directive and put into Naples to find Lady Hamilton.

If you are doubting all this, let me read you a passage from Nelson's own diary on the day he arrived in the Bay of Naples:

A very clever young man came on board the Vanguard and was provided with letters recommending him to the British Consuls, Vice Consuls and merchants on his route to Bombay and authorising him to draw upon the East India Company for his expenses.

We can tell from Datta's revelations that this 'clever young man' was Joseph Crabtree ostensibly on his way to India. Yet that must have been a cover story because shortly afterwards we hear of him returning to Naples, where he had already made the acquaintance of Lady Hamilton in one of her 'Attitudes'. Fascinated, as others had been, by her — shall we say — exuberance, Crabtree resolved to see more of her. That he got there shortly ahead of Nelson was perhaps fortunate for England's destiny as much as Emma's, but he was soon to realise, as some present-day historians are beginning to discover, that Emma was not exactly a 'push-over'. In fact she made it clear to Crabtree that she was now a Lady and in waiting for Nelson. This led Crabtree, who was not usually rebuffed in this way, to sulk and to wonder if her enthusiasm for the one-armed, one-eyed hero of Aboukir might possibly be a blind. Might she, he conjectured, be angling to squeeze secrets out of the newly promoted Admiral in return for something like perfume from the French?

Crabtree decided to put his theory and Nelson's security-rating to the test. To do this, he concealed himself on the canopy over a four-poster bed which Emma and Nelson were sharing and watched through a hole in the tapestry as Emma set about the act of seduction. Now, gentlemen, what Crabtree had reasoned was this: if, after their moment of ecstasy had passed, Emma were to roll her lover over on to his left side he would have neither an eye to see her with nor a hand by which to steer. He would therefore be entirely at her mercy for whatever mischief she might have in mind. I need hardly tell you, of course, that both Emma and Horatio passed their test, with Nelson coming out on top. As Sam Weller might have said: 'He got a positive vetting'!

Another characteristic of the spy is his insatiable curiosity. We have ample evidence that Crabtree was inquisitive: his quest for knowledge led him to practise as vintner, banker, locksmith, proctor, binder, dog-handler, opium-taker, even alleged rapist. It was curiosity that led him to follow up a report that a young German gentleman had been discovered using numbers in such an unorthodox manner as to be suspected of inventing a new cypher. It turned out that the German gentleman was called Carl Friedrich Gauss and that he was working on a new theory of 'complex numbers'. Since every schoolboy in England has instinctively regarded all numbers as complex, it was difficult to persuade Crabtree that there was nothing sinister in the letter T and that it did not stand in some way for something to do with intelligence.

No spy would survive for long without the protection of a 'safe-house' and a 'dead-letter box'. That the houses of Uncle Oliver, the Vallons and Mme. de Staël were 'safe' should not be doubted. But what, I can hear you say, is a dead-letter box? No, it has nothing to do with the Post Office or a Sanitary Basket! It is simply a place to which one party in a conspiracy brings an article or message for another to pick up later, so that the two parties don't meet and can't compromise each other. There is a bizarre example of how Crabtree came to use a dead-letter box in the year 1796. This I found at the bottom of an old water butt in the courtyard of a Tyrolean monastery when I was looking for somewhere to throw our Coca-Cola tins while on holiday with the family last summer. It was a report in code from a British agent in Austria addressed to the British Ambassador in Berlin, who some years previously had personally spied on the American revolutionaries trying to win support from the Emperor of Prussia.

Using my special 'infra-red' apparatus, I was able to decipher the report, and what I am about to disclose will probably shock and surprise you. It should certainly explain why the report was censored and consigned to the bottom of the barrel.

Napoleon had just married Josephine. France was at war with almost everyone. Russia, Prussia and Austria were more interested in carving up Poland than taking on Napoleon. Pitt was at the helm in England, wondering whether his allies weren't more trouble than his enemy. Anxious, therefore, to know if his old allies, the Austrians, were more likely to attack Prussia, his new ally, than defend themselves against the French, Pitt called for a special agent to collect some 'on-the-spot' intelligence.

The British spymaster in Vienna at that time was a Count Pishtov. (The 'h' was often silent, and so, frequently, was one of the 'o's.) The Count, as we had better call him, had arranged for a message from the Emperor's court to be left with the Baroness von Liechtenstein by a courier known only by the code name Fritzie. Unfortunately, Fritzie and the Baroness were in the habit of communicating their secrets in the only place where the Baroness felt secure, her bedroom. On this particular occasion, unknown to either of them, the Baron von Liechtenstein decided to seek an audience of his wife before going to his own room for the night. Such was their consternation on being caught *in flagrante delicto* that the first place Fritzie could think of to hide the offending capsule with the secret message was the avenue that had just been opened to him for a rather different purpose. And there it remained after the luckless Fritzie was thrown out by the furious Baron.

Distraught at the loss of so useful an agent, and unsure what the Baroness would do with her precious contraband, Pishtov quickly sent in another courier to recover the capsule. This time the courier met the Baroness in a haystack on the outskirts of Innsbruck and quickly got to grips with her predicament. Unfortunately — and here I must warn any of you who may have a sensitive disposition, or be of a squeamish nature, to turn off your imagination for a moment — the courier's reach fell a little short of what was required to retrieve the article and he had to be replaced by a bigger fellow.

It was at this point that Crabtree came to the rescue! Armed (if that is the right word) with a lady's silk handkerchief, he presented his credential in a firm and confident manner and was received with the utmost pleasure by the reclining Baroness. It was a ticklish problem for which Crabtree had the perfect solution. What the adhesive was that he used on the end of the handkerchief must remain a trade secret! Tay, in 1965, claimed that Crabtree had anticipated the use of the oral contraceptive. I submit, Sir, that we can now believe he also

anticipated the condom!

It was probably the recollection of this incident that led to the rumour which Byron put about and deceived Tattersall into believing Crabtree had been 'emasculated' at Guy's Hospital in the year 1816. What actually happened, according to unpublished records which I was shown on my first day in the Foreign Office, is that in that year news of Pitt's intention to repeal the law on income tax was leaked to *The Spectator* and Crabtree was suspected of being a Mole. His rooms were searched and, when no incriminating evidence was found, it was thought he might have used his famous Tyrolean trick to conceal rather than retrieve a missing document. He was subjected to a vigorous body search by the Matron of Guy's Hospital. She reported to Sir Lancelot, the surgeon, that he had stood up well to her examination but had failed to produce anything of importance. Perhaps it was then that Jeremy Bentham coined his famous phrase, 'What use is it?'

Gentlemen, it has been my good fortune to uncover some hitherto unsuspected skills of the man who was clearly much more than an ordinary poet — you might even say, a prototype Walter Mitty. But I would not have you believe that all my researches over the past year have led to successful discoveries. Alone among your Orators, I will freely admit that I have had my failures. Knowing that Thomas had told us of Crabtree's retirement to Devon in 1832, I set out to Ashburton, overshot, and found myself in Cornwall. I had not long been in Cornwall when I came upon Truro Cathedral and a glance in the give-away Guide Book led me to believe for one glorious moment that I had stumbled on yet another of our poet's hiding places. But it was not to be. A second reading of the page which had caught my eye told me that it could not possibly have referred to our Mr. Crabtree. 'The small organ,' it said, 'in the East Wing was donated by Isabella Crabtree in memory of her husband'.

Thanks to the diligence of Professor Sutherland, and 29 others who have followed him, there is no longer any danger of the memory of Joseph Crabtree being diminished and I sincerely hope you will not interpret my disclosures this evening as damaging to the integrity of this man we so admire.

That I have called him a spy must not offend you! He did not spy AGAINST us. He was recruited at Oxford in 1773 not at Cambridge in 1933! Rustication was only a ruse to confuse! Far from leaving the upper reaches of the Thames in disgrace, he was floated away to embark upon a career of poetic patriotism, pioneering many of the methods and devices by which espionage was to progress from the ignominious to the glorious, from the disreputable to the respectable, from the crude 'double-cross' to '007'. His methods may seem to us now to have been at times indecent but we judge them with hindsight, 200 years away, and hindsight, gentlemen, is often not a pretty sight!

On the evidence I have put before you tonight, I suggest that we can recognise the work of a man who covertly worked for his Kings, as some of you may have done for University College. If, on the way, he improved himself a little financially, and added to his pleasures and comforts in life, who are we to cavil? I submit, Sir, that the works of Joseph Crabtree were concealed from his contemporaries quite deliberately in the interests of national security and now that his self-sacrifice — like so many more of his qualities — has been exposed, we should rejoice in his liberation and find for him a place among the giants of our literary heritage — in that part of our great cultural cathedral at Westminster known as Poets' Corner.