

JOSEPH CRABTREE AND THE CALIPH OF FONTHILL

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Among the unexplored areas in our poet's life, the year 1787 attracted my attention – the year 1787, when Crabtree, then in Naples, was entrusted with a mission to Portugal. But before I develop my main line of research, allow me to quote to you from two texts written by British travellers to Portugal, as this will enlighten you on the degree of reciprocal understanding between the natives of our two countries. James Bruce wrote in his still unpublished 'Journal', when in 1757 he visited Portugal with the professed object of being present at the vintage of the year:

There are many particular customs in Portugal, all of which may be known by this rule, that whatever is done in the rest of the world in one way, is done in Portugal by the contrary, even to the rocking of the cradle, which, I believe, in all the rest of the world is from side to side, but in Portugal from head to foot. I fancy it is owing to this early contrariety that their brains work in so different a manner all their lives after.

While George Borrow, in *The Bible in Spain*, published in 1842, gives the following suggestions to any of his compatriots wishing to learn Portuguese, 'Those who wish to make themselves understood by a foreigner in his own language should speak with much noise and vociferation, opening their mouth wide'. It was to this country called Portugal that Crabtree was about to arrive from Italy in the year 1787.

But why Naples? Why Portugal? Why the year 1787? In order to explain this sudden move from one country to another by our great poet, we have to go back in time to the year 1779, when in Weimar, and under the pseudonym 'Batty', Crabtree first made the acquaintance of Goethe. Larrett has demonstrated not only that Crabtree is 'Batty' in Germany, but also that under the pseudonym 'Tischbein' he and Goethe made the acquaintance of Sir William Hamilton and Emma Harte, the future 2nd Lady Hamilton, in Naples in the year 1787. The first stay of Crabtree in Naples lasted no more than two months, although it is possible that after his stay in Portugal, which lasted six months, he returned to Naples. We know that Crabtree/Tischbein decided to stay in Naples, after meeting Emma for the first time. If the friendship between Crabtree and his colleague Goethe has been proved past any doubt, I nevertheless question the suggestion that Crabtree and Emma carried on a less than platonic relationship under the very eyes of Sir William Hamilton, without the diplomat making at least a remark of reproach to express his displeasure and dissatisfaction with the goings-on between the poet and the actress. If the frenzied relationship between Crabtree and Emma was to be stopped, in order to ensure the proper flow of History, which in this case included a future marriage as well as a victory at sea for Britain, Sir William would have to act, and act fast. And so he did.

Meanwhile, a few thousand miles away and to the north-west of Naples, another great Englishman, William Beckford of Fonthill, the dilettante of dilettantes, the collector, the eccentric, the richest man in England, was leaving Falmouth on a planned visit to his plantations in Jamaica. The date of this departure? You guessed it right, gentlemen!! March the 15th 1787, the very same day that Crabtree was introducing himself to Emma Harte in Naples! A coincidence? No, gentlemen! It was in fact Fate preparing the ground for these two great Englishmen to meet in that most western of European countries, Portugal. At this point allow me to refresh your memories about William Beckford, also known as the Caliph of Fonthill. He was born at Fonthill on September the 29th 1759, which made him five years younger than Crabtree, and after a long minority, inherited one million in cash, as well as one hundred thousand a year. This made him by far the richest man in England, not to say the world. If from his father's side he could trace his ancestry to a Thomas Beckford of London, mentioned in Pepys's Diary, his mother Maria was the daughter of the Hon. George Hamilton, M.P. for Wells, and granddaughter of the 6th Earl of Abercorn. This means that Sir William Hamilton and Beckford were cousins!!

Like Crabtree, Beckford was a precocious child in the fields of artistic creativity, although our poet, by writing poems at the age of nine, was beating the dilettante by eight years, Beckford's *History of Extraordinary Painters* having been written in 1776. 1776 was also the year when Mozart was brought to Fonthill to instruct Beckford in five-finger exercises, and when the young composer took the opportunity of 'borrowing' from his pupil an aria that he had then improvised and which later Mozart used in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. So, we are facing a man with a wide range of interests, literary as well as musical, anxious to widen and develop these interests and with the financial capacity to do so. But was Beckford no more than a rich young man interested in the Arts? No, gentlemen! In fact, Beckford was the archetypal Romantic, a French decadent 'avant la lettre', with his Oriental

obsessions, which he so well expressed in his *History of the Caliph Vathek*, not to mention his earlier book *Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents*. If to Beckford's un-English attitude to life we add a heart as sensitive as a windvane in a Biscay gale, the notorious Lady Craven, who called him 'étrange arabe', and a long and scandalous relationship with young William Courtenay, which his marriage to Lady Margaret Gordon didn't stop, we can understand why, in spite of a marriage and two 'Grand Tours', his tutors, as well as his mother, were ready to despatch young Beckford to far away Jamaica.

But this Oration is only about Beckford in as much as he crossed the path of Joseph William Crabtree, a man with a mode of behaviour and a lifestyle totally in opposition to that of Beckford. While Beckford was an extrovert, at least judging by English standards, and travelled across Europe with a large retinue and in an almost theatrical fashion, Crabtree moved across Europe and the world modestly and silently, like a 'light cloud by the moon', to quote a famous verse that Byron once stole from our great poet! This modesty, this avoidance of the limelight, if it is regarded as an attribute of the truly great, has nevertheless created such a vacuum of information that the Crabtree Foundation had to be created, to throw light into the darkness that to this day still fluctuates over our poet's life. Since that day, sparkling academic activity as well as controversy have been the hallmark of this House!

Before starting my research on this complex subject, I carefully studied Crabtree's *curriculum vitae*, which Carter compiled and which proved to be an invaluable tool in my research. I also approached the History Department on a promising lead, which unfortunately took me nowhere. But above all, I took note of the wise counsels of my forerunners on how to come to terms with the difficulty of finding the man behind the mask. In 'Towards a Crabtree bibliography' Brown said, 'he disguised himself well; but he also left clues for those who are intent on finding them'. Spencer stated, 'there is something unsubstantial about Crabtree', while Cadwallader goes even further, 'I came across an epic account of that grim saga, and bearing the unmistakable stamp of Crabtree — Anonymous'. And so, armed with these precious counsels, I started digging.

We are now finally back in Falmouth and on board the *Julius Caesar*. Beckford, surrounded by a large retinue of assistants and servants, says farewell to England. The *Julius Caesar* raises anchor and starts on the first leg of its long trip to Jamaica. By the time it arrives in Lisbon nine days later, Beckford refuses to proceed, having been seasick most of the time. And so he disembarks in Lisbon, and by doing so says goodbye to Jamaica. His stay might have been very short, for Robert Walpole, the British Minister, aware of his reputation and under pressure from friends in England, refused to receive him or present him to the Queen of Portugal. This automatically excluded Beckford from official functions and from English society. But, by one of those twists of Fate, he is introduced to the Marquis of Marialva, the Queen's favourite, a man twenty years his senior. And so Beckford stays in Lisbon, and close by Sintra, for eight months, on what was going to be his first of three trips to Portugal.

But news travels fast, and no doubt very soon after his departure from Falmouth, his cousin, Sir William Hamilton, with whom Beckford had stayed in Naples in October 1780, gets wind that Beckford is in Lisbon and already having problems with the local English residents. Was he going to behave in the same way as he had behaved in England, Sir William must have asked himself! Was he going to behave once again as the true libertarian he was, and by doing so, rock the boat of the English Establishment? What to do? Gentlemen, the answer to this question was transparently clear! By sending Crabtree to Lisbon, he would not only separate our poet from Emma, and by doing so redress the course of History, but also be able to control the behaviour of his rich cousin through Crabtree's powerful influence! And so in one stroke Hamilton would kill two birds with the same stone!

Predictably, Beckford started a diary, only two months after disembarkation in Lisbon. Meanwhile Crabtree must have arrived in Lisbon, and so the stage is set for one of the literary world's greatest pieces of censorship! But did Crabtree arrive in that fair city under his own name? Research on that line proved negative. Under an alias? Most certainly so, as this would befit not only the poet's modesty, but also an old habit he had evolved due to his Uncle Oliver's strictness towards him. And so with great thoroughness I studied the first completed and uncensored edition of Beckford's Diaries in the peninsula, published as recently as 1954 by Rupert Hart-Davis, entitled *The Journal of William Beckford in Portugal and Spain, 1787-1788*, with a very complete study on the subject by Boyd Alexander, based on the original Diaries which are in the Hamilton Archives.

Keeping in mind the recommendations made by Arthur Brown, I started looking for 'those clues' which he left 'for those intent on finding them'. I sifted laboriously through the 256 names mentioned in the Diaries, to find only one name not worth a biographical note by Boyd Alexander. The name, gentlemen, was that of Berti... Berti, the unknown assistant who appears suddenly on the 14th of June 1787, to be mentioned for the last time

on the 21st of November of the same year, just before Beckford departed to Madrid. Berti, 'tout court'!

Crabtree/Berti? I do believe so. Remember Crabtree/Batty in Weimar? Berti, Batty, very similar names! The same number of letters, the same B at the start! Using an English name in Germany, since he had arrived in Germany from England. Using a German name in Italy, since he had arrived in Italy from Germany. Logically using an Italian name in Portugal, since he had arrived in Portugal from Naples! But what about his mission? To act as a counsellor to the young Englishman, but also, if so required, to go further, and to delay, obstruct and undermine Beckford's plans — to be a spanner in the works, to be an inquisitorial censor. And this Crabtree did with intelligence as well as with grace. By the time Crabtree arrived in Lisbon, probably on board the brig *Voador* under the command of Lt. Daniel Thompson, Beckford was already entangled with one of the daughters of the Marquis, Dona Henriqueta, whom the Marquis was hoping he would marry, as well as with her younger brother, D. Pedro, aged thirteen; and of the two, he preferred the latter. Crabtree arrives, first mentioned in the Diary in an entry for the 14th of June. Beckford writes:

I was wondering at this Jericho fashion of besieging one's door, and starting at a rocket which shot up under my nose, when Berti entered with a crucifix on a silver salver and a mighty kind message from the nuns of the convent.

There is no question that Crabtree had positioned himself in such a way that, by living in the house, he was in an ideal position to observe and so control the goings on of the young aristocrat. As for the Diary, Crabtree started censoring it straight away, and turning a compromising but unquestionably lively piece of literature into a safe and emasculated one. And all this to pay for his sins with Emma! If in the quote that I just read, and which is from the original manuscript, the name Berti is clearly mentioned, in the first edition of the *Diaries*, published much later in 1834, Berti is simply mentioned as 'a servant'. Crabtree's meticulousness was such that even his own alias was omitted from the highly censored first edition! His name, which appears eight times in the manuscript, is totally omitted from the printed work! Not surprisingly, in his preface to the 1834 edition, Beckford makes a sardonic reference to 'some justly admired author'. Who else could this author be except Crabtree? The thoroughness of Crabtree at 'cleaning' the original manuscript went to such an extreme that even simple and inoffensive passages like the one I will now quote were absent from the first edition. Beckford, while visiting the great convent of Mafra, writes 'Two shabby-looking Englishmen, Mr. Burn, the codfish merchant, and Sir John Swinnerton-Dyer, confounded amongst the rabble, watched all my motions'. Why omit the name Swinnerton-Dyer just because he looked shabby, confounds me! In the entry for the 16th of October Beckford writes:

Berti, alias Twiddleman, is a severe clog upon active proceedings. He never gets up till half-past eight and diffuses his sluggishness and stupor over my whole family. Owing to this double-distilled spirit of slothfulness, the cook, instead of getting up at six, was only getting-up in order to depart at ten, so I am obliged to dine here instead of going to Sintra.

Crabtree, alias Berti, having gained from Beckford 'Twiddleman' as a new alias, was successfully slowing down Beckford's activities, and making any meeting difficult between his Master and D. Pedro, then in Sintra. On Saturday 11th of August the dilettante has to borrow Mr. Home's carriage due to 'Berti having taken his arrangements for my departure so wretchedly'. And next day he complains about Berti's 'indolence'. Crabtree's obstructionism of Beckford's activities was such that it was still remembered seven years later, at the time of Beckford's second visit to Portugal, by the mother of Dona Francisca, a young lady whose charms attracted Beckford during his first visit to Portugal. Speaking to Beckford, she provides us with one of those 'clues' mentioned by Arthur Brown. Beckford is walking along a back street of the convent town of Alcobaça when he hears a languid Brazilian tune being sung and played on a guitar: it only can be Dona Francisca! He shouts for her, and a latticed window is opened, 'by a lovely arm — a well-known arm'. Beckford runs up the steps, only to be confronted 'not by the fascinating songstress, but by her sedate though very indulgent mother':

I know whom you are looking for, said the matron; but it is in vain. You have heard, you are not to see Francisca, who is no longer the giddy girl you used to dance with; her heart is turned ... turned, I tell you, but turned to God. A most holy man, a saint, the very mirror of piety for his years — he is not yet forty — operated this blessed change. You know how light-hearted, and almost indiscreetly so, my poor dear heart's comfort was. You recollect hearing, and you were terribly angry I remember, that the English padre told the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting it was shameful how rapturously my poor dear girl rattled her castanets and threw back her head and put forward every other part of her dear little person, at the Factory ball — SHAME ON HIM, SCANDALOUS OLD CRABBED HERETIC!

Although with the passing of time Francisca's mother confused Crabtree with the English padre, as they both spoke English and dressed in black, do you want a more blatant allusion to our poet than the expression 'Crabbed heretic'?

But in spite of all this, the relationship between the two writers must have improved as in his last mention of Berti, on November 8th, Beckford writes, 'wax torches that Berti had set *most loyally* a-blazing'. What led to this *volte face* on our poet's part? I believe the answer to this is clear. Imagine, gentlemen, two aristocrats together: one the aristocrat of the 'Belles Lettres', the other the aristocrat of poetry, more precisely of underground poetry. This common platform, this natural understanding between two people with a dedication to literature and writing, was bound to be a cause of 'rapprochement' between the two great men. Add to this the need that Crabtree had of some help with a translation from the German, as we shall very soon see, as well as a common interest in the by-products of the vine, and it will be easy for us to understand why, by the end of his stay in Portugal, Beckford employs the word 'loyal' when referring to Crabtree.

There are strong reasons to believe that Crabtree, assisted by Beckford, translated into English, while in Portugal, Johann Karl August Musäus' collection of folk stories *Volksmärchen der Deutschen*. As you all know, Musäus was born in Germany in 1735 and by 1763 was Master of the Court Pages in Weimar and was accepted as Professor at the Weimar Gymnasium in 1769. He was the author of a number of books, including *Physiognomische Reisen*, written in the manner of Sterne during the years 1778/9. 1779 was of course the year when Crabtree was in Weimar. Would it be conceivable that in such a small town Goethe wouldn't have introduced Crabtree to such an important person as Musäus? A man who had been Master of the Court Pages! They *must* have met! Later on, Musäus published in eight volumes (remember that he was German) his *Volksmärchen der Deutschen*; the years of publication were from 1782 to 1786, the year that Crabtree met Goethe in Rome. Suddenly the pieces of this puzzle fall together!

Crabtree is asked to translate into English the *Volksmärchen*, the request being made via Goethe, who hands over to Crabtree the eight recently published volumes. Crabtree goes to Naples, and from there to Lisbon for reasons already explained. There he meets Beckford, who was an expert linguist, as he spoke six languages fluently including the German language. And so Crabtree, who only spoke his own language well, not an unheard-of phenomenon among the citizens of the British Isles, uses Beckford's expertise to translate the work of his friend. The English translation was published by Murray in 1791. The translation is anonymous and has traditionally been attributed to Beckford. Zillah M. Watts, in his *Talisman, or English Keepsake*, which he published in 1832, writes, 'A considerable degree of curiosity has attached to these volumes in consequence of them having been attributed ... to the pen of the author of *The History of the Caliph Vathek*'.

And Guy Chapman in his *Travel Diaries of William Beckford*, after quoting Zillah M. Watts, adds: 'Sir John Murray was kind enough to turn up the records of his house for me but was unable to discover any trace of the book'. Obviously, this remarkable translation is not the responsibility of Beckford or he certainly would have claimed its authorship. Instead, everything, even its anonymity, points to the translator being the same man who later on in 1791 wrote the immortal 'Ode to Claret'. What could be more natural than that the two friends entered into joint ventures in the discovery of the local wines? Especially the famous 'Colares', a wine with characteristics similar to Claret and produced in the Sintra area, and the ports also to be found in the cellars of the Marquis of Marialva?

Was the experience gained by Crabtree at his uncle's business in Orléans going to be wasted? Certainly not, gentlemen! And proof of this lies in two separate pieces of information which until today never have been interpreted in their true meaning. First: Don Jose de Sousa Botelho, Lord of Mateus, invited Beckford on the 4th of September 1787 to visit his properties in the North, but Beckford declined and asked Crabtree to go in his place and it was due to Crabtree's expertise and flair during a wine tasting which lasted until sunrise, and which is still remembered in the neighbouring town of 'Vila Real' as the 'Night of the Englishman', that Don Jose Mateus first realised the potential of his Estate's Rosés as suitable for the English palate. Also, Crabtree, by advising on the practical way of removing some obstructing rocks from the upper Douro river, as mentioned in *The Wine Trade* by A.D. Francis, helped to increase the export of port to Britain from 31,770 pipes in 1787, the year he was there, to 48,136 in 1792. Second: the limerick still recited today by the descendants of eighteenth-century English families during the cold nights in Sintra, when they warm themselves with bottles of Colares and port, doesn't refer, as tradition suggests, to the visit of Lord Byron to that town in the year 1809, but instead reminds us of a visit over two centuries ago of the greatest of English poets:

There was a young poet from England
Who came to old Sintra disguised.

His favourite sport
Was Colares and Port.
He was happy but no more the wise.