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CRABTREE'S CUDGEL
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Crabtree's Cudgel has been my labour this year and my discoveries in libraries and archives, the length and breadth of two countries, form the substance of my Oration. A cudgel, gentlemen, is defined as 'a short thick stick used as a weapon' and cudgel-play 'the art of combat with cudgels'. So how came Crabtree by his Cudgel — by this silver-bound, blackthorn stick, with its zoomorphic head that might have been modelled on the prow of a Viking ship?

In 1966, our then President, Professor Foote, suggested the following lines as Crabtree's own:

Long while this branch of Odin's stem
Was the stout prop of Norway's realm;
Long while King Olaf with just pride
Ruled over Westfold far and wide.
At length by cruel gout oppressed,
The good King Olaf sank to rest:
His body now lies under ground,
Buried at Geirstad, in the mound.

Might the Cudgel serve to authenticate this verse that purports to be a translation from the Icelandic? Might not Crabtree have brought the Cudgel from Norway to remind him of his meeting with Ibsen's mother in 1827, when he was aged 73. Tay has revealed how the early symptoms of gout were evident in our beloved poet's portrait — a portrait which curiously contains no Cudgel, significantly or otherwise as the case may be. It is also a fact that the one and only reference to Crabtree's Cudgel in the accumulated biographical revelations that constitute the hardcore of our Foundation's archive — the only reference is that of Jones in his description of Crabtree, 'in 1846, when an old man of 92, he sat with a venerable glare, in the front row of a Friday evening audience ... at the Royal Institution ... resting with clasped hands on his stick'. So there we would appear to have it, gentlemen, Crabtree's Cudgel, a Scandinavian souvenir and an asset to his old age, recalled by him in verse as 'this branch of Odin's stem' that was 'the stout prop of Norway's realm' before it became a comfort to his 'cruel gout'. But, gentlemen, I detect your disbelief and Professor Foote's in particular. How right you are, for there are insurmountable objections to such a facile solution to our problem.

We must let the Cudgel speak for itself. All in due course, however, for it is my duty first, as current Keeper of the Cudgel, to record such little information as is known of its history in the twentieth century. How came the Foundation by this priceless relic? It was to the Honorary Living Memory that I made my way to seek an answer. The Memory both knew and didn't know — you will recall, gentlemen, the occasional confusions that characterised his considerable contributions to our deliberations — but he was persuaded by me in the customary manner to recall, to recall the presentation of the Cudgel to the Foundation by Professor Smith, on the occasion of its third meeting in 1956. This much has been confirmed for me by the then Secretary, Kenneth Palmer. Mr. Palmer has, however, a sorry tale to tell of how his year of office ended: 'In March 1956 my room was entirely destroyed in the Foster Court fire, and any records I held went with that. Carlyle, Sir Isaac Newton, and the Librarian of Alexandria had similar problems.'

The lines of Crabtree quoted by Scott after the Oration in 1956 (when, incidentally, members dined off roast beef, which says little for some supposedly sacred traditions), are:

and hast
Thou crossed the Irish Sea to speak us thus?
Oh, but 'twas rarely done, my pretty boy!

Scott selected these words to honour that evening's Orator, Professor Terence Spencer, following the unveiling by Sutherland of Crabtree's portrait the previous year. But what was really in Crabtree's mind? I suggest to you tonight, gentlemen, that it was his Cudgel that had crossed the Irish Sea and that it was as a 'pretty boy' himself that he had been a 'rare' exponent of the art of cudgel-play. One has only to hold the Cudgel in one's hands to realise that the distribution of its numerous nodules bears a passing similarity to the disposition of the mountains of Mayo, so thus it can speak to us of its Irish origins.

The Cudgel has an encircling band of silver that forms a collar around the neck of its animal head, the head of some bog monster, no doubt, from one of Delaney's tales. This band is now graced with three initials in a fine late eighteenth-century Neo-Gothick hand, which read J.W.T. And 'Who', I hear you ask, 'is he?' It was this very question that the Late-Living Memory posed on that scrap of paper in 1978, the year of his Presidency — that question posed but never yet answered.

In his Oration in 1981 Larrett borrowed for our Foundation's never-ending work E.M. Forster's exhortation 'Only connect'. If Larrett had only made the connection himself in 1981, he would have recognised in this relic a vital piece of evidence in the establishment of his case that when Crabtree met Goethe in Italy, it was under the alias of 'Tischbein'. It was then in 1786 that J.W.C. became J.W.T. So it is clear that when Joseph William Crabtree became Johann Wilhelm Tischbein, he re-engraved the band on his Cudgel with the requisite initials that would lend support to his new identity (as well as serving to remind him of it on occasions of claret-induced confusion).

Larrett posed the question why 'Tischbein' — meaning table-leg — rather than some other name. By way of an answer, he suggested that Crabtree adopted it 'after an especially intense night of study devoted to claret, when a table leg was the first thing that his eyes lighted on, when regaining consciousness'. I have always felt this to be an inadequate explanation. Rather, I feel sure that it was Crabtree's fully alert eye falling upon his Cudgel (which is in appearance much like a certain type of rustic German table-leg) that gave rise to this idea in his fertile brain. The elegant initials on the silver plate had to be altered, but such presented Crabtree with no problem, for it was, after all, the role of artist and engraver that he was adopting in Italy, a role that proved his passport to Emma Hamilton. We can conclude therefore from the Tischbein episode that the Cudgel was in Crabtree's hand before he reached the age of 32; but how much earlier may that have been?

Here, I am most particularly indebted to our fellow Scholar, Mr. Peter Forster of the Malaprop Press, for the discovery of a large number of copies of a hitherto unknown wood-engraving by Thomas Bewick. In bringing this engraving to my attention, Mr. Forster wrote:

That this is a portrait of the Crabtree Cudgel, taken from life, can, on a count of the knobs alone, be hardly in doubt. The odds against there being two cudgels so exactly similar would be a coincidence remote beyond the wildest dreams of Crabtree scholarship. Yet it will be observed that the silver plate bears the initials 'S.J.', and not the existing 'J.W.T.'.

So, gentlemen, apart from this one detail, you can [now see on page 320](#) this relic of our poet and polymath, a rendering of Crabtree's Cudgel — his massive weapon that all too few of you have had the pleasure of taking in hand.

We must now consider the Bewick enigma of the original initials S.J. and his text describing the Cudgel's discovery on the Isle of Mull in 1773. I am indebted once again to Mr. Forster, who drew my attention in correspondence to the account by James Boswell of Samuel Johnson's loss on Mull, in October of that year, of a stick which he had brought with him from London to assist his progress during their Tour of the Hebrides. If final proof eludes us, as is usual in most branches of Crabtree studies, we have at least established a connection. Sometime after 1773, but before 1786, Crabtree acquired the finest Cudgel of his life (ex-Ireland, ex-Johnson, ex-Mull) — a Cudgel so treasured by him and revered by his contemporaries that it has descended into the care of our Foundation. It is a venerable relic indeed.

Today, St. Valentine's Day, is the anniversary both of Crabtree's birth in 1754 and of his death exactly one hundred years later in 1854. It is less well-known, although revealed to us by Freeman, that today is also the anniversary of the day on which Crabtree was sent down from Oxford in 1773 — that is on his nineteenth birthday — in only his second term, having followed 'drunken frolics' with the writing of 'satirical verses' on his tutor, Jacob Jefferson. Well, gentlemen, I know little of Oxford and would be happy to leave it that way, but, in accordance with the highest principles of Crabtree scholarship, I have forced myself on your behalf to ponder the question, 'Why did Oxford admit Crabtree in 1772, at the age of eighteen, if his formal schooling had indeed ended at the age of fourteen?' Precocious Crabtree undoubtedly was in all manner of things and, supposing that his Cook's tour had been intended by his parents to give him a year or so out between school and university, why did he not go up as soon as he got back — as a teenage prodigy?

Smith revealed that Crabtree's early education had been furthered at a boarding school at Rushworth, in the parish of Halifax, where he was sent aged 12, in 1766. This school was established by the will of John

Wheelwright, which made provision 'that one of the boys that should best be capable of University education should at the age of eighteen years be sent to Cambridge or Oxford'. But as we know, thanks to Freeman, it was only two years later that Joseph and his brother George went to sea as flute boys. But did he run away to sea? Or was he sent? If so, why should he have abandoned his formal schooling so young? However and whatever the arrangements that were then made, Joseph Crabtree set sail on Captain Cook's *Endeavour* — in August 1768 — at the ripe age of fourteen. He was to be back in England, according to Harte, in time to participate in certain events in Newington Green in April 1769, events that supposedly included what Harte was so bold as to identify as arguably 'the turning-point' in Crabtree's life.

Alas, poor Harte, for he has failed to check his Crabtree sources. Not even Crabtree could have been delivering letters in London in April 1769 when still in the South Seas. For it was only on the thirteenth of April 1769 that the *Endeavour* sailed into Tahiti, for the observation of the transit of Venus — an event that Crabtree would never have missed. Indeed, she was not to reach England again until the twelfth of June 1770, by which time Crabtree was past his sixteenth birthday. So what became of him then? It is no secret that Banks was himself an Oxford man and there is little doubt in my mind that it was he who arranged Oxford admission for his *protégé*, but something first had to be done about Crabtree's Latin and Greek, in which he can never have been well-grounded whilst in Yorkshire and which had in any case grown rusty on his world tour, much though his sciences had benefited. Banks was an Old Etonian (having given up on Harrow at the age of thirteen), and had been a boy at Eton under the headmastership of Dr. Edward Barnard, who had subsequently become that College's Provost. This suggested to me an avenue of exploration and, accordingly, I took myself off to Eton's College Library.

I was, at first, spurred on by the discovery that Crabtree was not mentioned in Edward Creasy's *Memoirs of Eminent Etonians*, even though published in 1850, towards the very end of Crabtree's life. For Edward Creasy was then Professor of History, here at University College London, an historian better known for his once popular *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (1852). Negley Harte has described, in his history of history teaching at this College, just how casually Creasy treated his duties — whilst practising at law. But there is no doubt that Creasy would have belonged to that 'orchestrated campaign to marginalise Crabtree' which had begun, according to Harte, in this very College. Creasy would have been obliged to participate in that 'conspiracy of silence' which is the burden of successive Orators. In addition, it was more than likely that Creasy, in researching his *Eminent Etonians*, would have struck the name of Crabtree from all the records in order to further the obliteration of his life and achievements. I feared to find my way forward already closed a hundred and forty years ago.

I was left with one hope — supposing Crabtree had adopted an alias at sixteen (for he was certainly using that of M'Greggor at nineteen). If so, my way forward was clear after all, for then it only remained for me to scrutinise the school records for 1770 to 1772, bringing to bear on them the full knowledge of Crabtree's behaviour, accumulated so assiduously by my predecessors, to see if I could detect the presence of a boy whose academic career and extra-curricular activities would reveal that Crabtree had indeed then been at Eton. It was not long before my labours bore fruit and there was Crabtree rising once again before me — and a cudgel not far behind. Such revelations may surprise you, gentlemen, but wait — wait please until you have heard the full, unedifying story and then make your minds up for yourselves.

The 1760s and 1770s represent one of the lowest periods in Eton's history. In 1765, through Barnard's influence, a young assistant master, Dr. John Foster, was appointed his successor as Head Master. In Barnard's time there had been several attempts by the boys at rebellion, but these he had overcome 'with the vigour and tact of a statesman' and in his days the number of boys at Eton rose from 326 to over 500. Foster lacked his discretion and in the autumn of 1768 there took place 'the most serious rebellion that is ever known to have occurred at Eton'. It has been said of Foster that 'being unable to control the boys by his personal influence, he had recourse to terrorism, which soon rendered him extremely unpopular'. Not surprisingly, the number of boys fell by more than half in eight years; it would not have been difficult for Banks to have obtained a place for his sixteen-year-old *protégé* by 1770. By 1773, Foster was so 'broken down in health and spirits' that he resigned, aged only forty-one. It would appear that Crabtree played no little part in the breaking of Foster.

Public birchings formed part of Foster's reign of terror and one such is recorded in the *Reminiscences* of Henry Angelo, who was a celebrated fencing master at Eton between 1766 and 1774. One Sunday evening after Church, the boys were assembled in Upper School and the block brought in. Then, 'in an imperative voice', the Doctor shouted 'Burke!' A burly Irish boy of about eighteen came forward and knelt down to be flogged, amid solemn silence. When the Doctor had administered three cuts, he bade him stand up again and said — 'Now I expel you the School'. He immediately retired with his Assistants, without explaining any further. Had the boy

known he was going to be expelled, he would never have suffered himself to be flogged. It appeared afterwards that Burke had been 'lampooning the Head Master in the London newspapers'. Gentlemen, do you not detect a pattern here? Crabtree sent down from Oxford for writing scurrilous verses about his tutor; Burke expelled Eton for lampooning his Head Master. Could Burke be Crabtree? Was anything known of this Burke that might prohibit this identification?

I consulted *The Eton College Register, 1753-1790*, wherein there is recorded only one Burke, who entered the school some years earlier, in 1759, and of whom nothing more is known; it cannot have been him who Angelo saw birched and expelled. There is only one conclusion left for us to draw: all records of Burke the lampoonist have been deliberately suppressed. So, despite 'the conspiracy of silence', Crabtree stands revealed to us once more. It is not surprising that Crabtree sought anonymity at Eton, in an Irish alias, for had it been known to his contemporaries that he had sailed the world as Banks's bumboy, it is not hard for us to imagine the fate that would have befallen him — or why, even then, he would have needed a cudgel for his protection.

Whilst dipping the other day into Fanny Burney's diary, I came across this account of an Old Etonian being presented to George III at Windsor:

'You were an Etonian, Mr. Bryant,' said the King, 'but pray for what were you most famous at school?' We all expected from the celebrity of his scholarship, to hear him answer, his Latin exercises; but no such thing! 'Cudgelling, Sir: I was most famous for that.'

Who can but doubt that Fanny's memory played her false as to the Old Etonian's identity that evening; for surely only Crabtree could have boasted so of his cudgel-play.

Games-playing of many kinds formed an important part of an Etonian's life in the 1770s, even if most of his time was spent in the study of Latin and Greek, including of course verse composition. It is interesting to note, however, given Lighthill's revelations concerning Crabtree's mathematical prowess, that Fifth Form boys were taught Algebra (and might move on to Euclid) for this was a subject, together with Geography, held to be 'indispensably necessary in making a scholar'. French, on the other hand, was only available as an 'extra', deemed merely 'a polite accomplishment', along with drawing, dancing and fencing. It is scarcely surprising then that French is known to have been a language with which Crabtree was never to bother himself. On the other hand, ancient and obscure languages seem to have retained an abiding interest for Crabtree, and his researches formed part of his general influence on the muse of antiquity, influences noted but not enlarged on by Wilson, my only archaeological predecessor as Orator. Wilson observed, however, how Crabtree's name had been removed from amongst those of the Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of London, although the reason why eluded him. On this, I would like, Sir, to make you a suggestion tonight.

Is it not sufficient, gentlemen, that our founder Orator, Professor Sutherland, should have selected to be no. 155 in his *Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* an account of a medieval forgery in 1789 by that Shakespearean annotator, George Steevens? Steevens had engraved some Anglo-Saxon letters on a block of marble and passed it off as 'the tombstone of Hardecanut'. It was engraved by Basire and published in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*.

Samuel Pegge, falling into the trap, read a paper on the inscription before the Society of Antiquaries on 10 December 1789, but the deception was discovered before the disquisition was printed in the *Archaeologia*. An acrimonious correspondence between Steevens and those he had hoped to dupe followed in the daily and monthly journals. Steevens finally committed the stone to the custody of Sir Joseph Banks, and it was regularly exhibited at his assemblies in Soho Square.

As sure as night follows day, the Banks connection reveals to us the hand of Crabtree in this delicious deception of the London Antiquaries, who were so clearly not amused that Crabtree was no longer welcome to their Fellowship. In order to pursue his linguistic and antiquarian interests, Crabtree had perforce to direct his attentions north of the Border, where he was to travel in pursuit (amongst other things) of 'Stone-Willies' — a concern of Crabtree's revealed, but not definitively explained, by Dodgson in his Oration.

So many other areas of Crabtree's life remain to be explored, but time runs out. Let me finish with Shakespeare's injunction: 'Cudgel thy brains no more!'