

39
CRABTREE'S VISION: AMBIVALENCE, ANGST, APOCALYPSE
Peter Armour
1992

A year ago I was given the truly awesome task of providing what in 1988 Harte called 'the long-overdue revisionist interpretation' of Joseph Crabtree's poetry. In attempting this task, I have come across some new findings and some re-interpretations which I put before you.

It is said that Joseph William Crabtree was born in Chipping Sodbury on 14 February 1754, but it is known that the parish registrar there had never really accepted the adoption of the Popish Gregorian Calendar in England two years earlier, and it seems very likely that the actual date of the rear-first delivery was eleven days before, namely 3 February.

Be that as it may, the child showed his poetic talent from a very early age, and his nickname 'Cuckoo Joe' was given to him. As his fame spread, the poet Michael Bruce was inspired to write his tribute *To the Cuckoo*, containing this delightful portrayal of the rapidly maturing Joe:

The schoolboy, wand'ring through the wood
To pull the primrose gay,
Starts, the new voice of Spring to hear,
And imitates thy lay.

Indeed, Joshua Reynolds was so moved at hearing of the young Sodburian's precocity that he painted a delightful allegorical image of our budding poet set against what is recognizably the countryside of Chipping Sodbury and identified as Crabtree by the C formed by the boy's hoop, of which I present a copy [to the Crabtree Archive this evening \(see page 322\)](#). The subject and attribution only came to light recently, when the Courtauld Institute moved from Portman Square to the Strand, and behind a radiator in the Director's office was discovered this photocopy with 'J. C. by J. R. ???' pencilled on the back in the unmistakable cryptographic hand of Anthony Blunt.

A crucial experience in the formation of Crabtree the poet and visionary were his contacts with Italy, and I am happy to contribute my meagre knowledge of the Italian connection in our poet's life. Dos Santos believes that Crabtree-Berti may have returned to Naples towards the end of 1787. I can reveal that there is the evidence of the scrap of paper found in a Neapolitan downpipe after the archives of the Compagnia Marittima delle Due Sicilie were destroyed by allied bombing in 1943. From this it appears that a mysterious Englishman, with a knobby cudgel and a trunk full of papers and bottles of a strange viscous liquid, disembarked at Alexandria in late 1787, where he hired a guide called Ali and a camel called Ahmed — or it may have been a guide called Ahmed and a camel called Ali — and disappeared into the desert.

One other occasion when Crabtree is known to have been in Italy is documented by this notice in the 'Foreign Varieties' section of *The New Monthly Magazine* of March, 1822:

A society of literary men and distinguished artists met together on the 14th of September last, to keep the anniversary of the death of Dante, in remembrance of that illustrious poet. The ceremony of the day was mingled with libations, and literary discourses relative to the occasion, in the manner of the Saturnales of Macrobius.

Obviously, Crabtree would not have missed a celebration such as this which involved libations.

Carter has demonstrated conclusively and exhaustively Crabtree's later support for the cause of Polish freedom, and it was in Italy above all that his lifelong dedication to liberty began. In Milan he associated with the major Enlightenment circles of the reforming period of the Emperor Joseph II, although he could never entirely accept a movement whose journal was called *Il Caffè*, for, as all Crabtree Scholars know, coffee was a drink much despised by the oenophile celebrant of claret. He read Cesare Beccaria's much-acclaimed work on crime and punishment, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, at a time, however, when his knowledge of the Italian was still somewhat rudimentary, and, confused on the number and gender of the article, he appears to have believed that the title meant, *On crimes and penises* — a simple and understandable error which was to bear fruit in later years in his meticulous penological studies on the correlation between the two factors, described by Hargrove in 1977.

In Italy, Crabtree would certainly have mixed with the revolutionary underground, which was to produce those early champions of Italian liberty, the Carbonari. Now the name 'Carbonari' is usually assumed to refer to the glowing charcoal from which great fires are born, but this explanation is so manifestly ludicrous that I was compelled to search the archive for any earlier mention of this movement in Crabtree studies. My search was rewarded, for in 1970 Peake convincingly identified the double Crabtree signature in the lines attributed to the despicable Byron:

Have Carbonaro cooks not carbonadoed
Each course enough?

What Peake appears not to have realized is that the very name 'Carbonaro' was adopted as a tribute to our indefatigable libertarian, with the anagram of 'Crab' mingled with 'arbor', 'tree', plus an extra few letters as a further necessary disguise. This discovery was confirmed for me when I walked along from the British School in Rome to the Pincio Hill. Along the pine-lined avenues and yew-hedges of this park, the founders of newly unified Italy erected busts of famous Italian artists, scholars, and patriots. My eye lit upon one such bust. Vandals had removed its nose and daubed its lips with red paint; graffiti obscured the inscription on the pedestal, which at first I thought read 'Gioberti', that is, the writer of the unreadable *Primato morale e civile degli Italiani*. But something in the noble lines of the brow and the visionary gaze of the piercing eyes called to mind a younger version of the portrait we see before us tonight, and a close inspection revealed to my delirious joy the name, 'G. G. Berti' – Giuseppe Guglielmo Berti, our own glorious Joseph William, hero of the Italian Risorgimento.

While in Rome with Goethe, masquerading as the engraver Tischbein, Crabtree the pre-romantic was curiously moved by life in the eternal city during the pontificate of Pius VI. He was particularly fascinated by such traditions as the *sedia testiculatoria*, on which, it was said, ever since the time of Pope Joan, a newly elected Pontiff was required to sit for the verification, and possibly gratification, of his manhood at the hands of the papal chamberlain; Crabtree was, however, refused permission to try out this device himself with the young and aristocratic Mother Superior in charge of the papal kitchens. However, his Methodist and libertarian spirit was somewhat shocked by the ostentatious wealth and self-seeking ambition of some of the Cardinals and prelates of the Church, and it was at a reception given by the Cardinal Duke of York on Boxing Day, which he and Goethe attended, that he picked up the malicious little verse about an ambitious Monsignore which he was to send, many years later, to Robert Browning. The verse ran:

Monsignore vorrebbe avere
La cardinalizia tonaca,
Ma prima gli daranno
La fica di santa Monaca.

Crabtree's version ran as follows:

Tis said they will give him a Cardinal's hat:
They sooner will give him an old nun's twat!

Poor Browning, despite or perhaps because of the fact that he was married to the sickly Elizabeth Barrett, concluded that a twat was something which a nun wore on her head and so was led to compose his delightful fantasy on 'owls and bats, Cows and twats, Monks and nuns, in a cloister's moods', and so on, with which you are all familiar. Critics have tried to excuse the blunder by blaming Furnivall. We, however, can easily recognise here the hand of Crabtree, taking an affectionately playful revenge for his persecution by Robert and Ruben Browning during the time he worked at the Bank of England.

It was in Milan, however, that I made a small discovery to contribute to the Crabtree Italian connection. This was while attempting to trace our hero's activities in that city where he was to sow the seeds of the later revolutions. Obviously, he would have found time to study in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, probably in his obsessive lifelong search to unearth a manuscript of Aristotle's lost writings on comedy. What actually happened, on that day in the autumn of 1786, is a matter for some judicious speculation, but the outline of the event is simple to reconstruct. Browsing, as one could in those days, through the bulky manuscript collection of that library, he must have taken down by chance the great Codex Atlanticus, those drawings by Leonardo da Vinci which had been glued onto pages by Pompeo Leoni in the 16th century. Now there is no reason to believe that Crabtree had any particular interest in Leonardo da Vinci, a genius so inferior to his own, and he must have

needed some paper to jot down notes on Aristotle, or perhaps he was suddenly moved to compose an ode or sonnet to freedom, or the like. At all events, with his pocket-knife he removed the two parts of folio 48 from the book of uninspired drawings. Then, with one of those characteristic changes of mood to which his genius was prone, as his pen was poised over the blank reverse side of the papers, he was suddenly seized by other preoccupations — the looming prospect of having to spend months in the company of Goethe, sex, and other matters. Gentlemen, you have before you copies of the results of that autumn [afternoon in the library at Milan \(see page 323\)](#). The fluidity of the artistic line and the plasticity of the elegant neo-classical composition could have come from no other than the skilled hand of Crabtree-Tischbein in the caricature of the insufferable Goethe and in the playfully animated versions of the Stone-Willeys which so preoccupied the annotator of the Anyon manuscript, as Dodgson revealed to the Foundation in 1973. And the mechanical problem on which the two inventors had been working was none other than the velocipede, which, with a sudden flash of inspiration, Crabtree sketched upon this paper which was so conveniently to hand. At this point, however, disturbed by the steps of the librarian approaching the Reading Room, he hastily turned the two leaves back into their original position and glued them back into the manuscript. Until the Library gives us permission to subject the folio to a chemical analysis, we can never be sure about this supposition. Crabtree's drawings remained hidden for nearly two hundred years until they caused a sensation during the remounting of the Codex Atlanticus in the 1970s. Scholars evolved the most truly crack-brained theories to explain the presence of these consummate designs on the reverse of some dull Renaissance doodles, and they eventually agreed that Leonardo's pupils must have executed them in the 1490s and that the name Salai written above the more forward of the willies referred to a pupil, model, and body-servant of that much-overrated *homo universalis*. Gentlemen, is this theory credible? The fact that 'Salai' is a simple anagram of 'alias' proves beyond all doubt that the drawings can only have been made by our own ever-modest and retiring Crabtree, the so much greater artist and engineer.

Having lost the result of his sudden inspiration, Joseph was never able to solve the problem and become the inventor of the bicycle. True, in about 1818, he introduced to the streets of his [native town the contraption \(see page 323\)](#), but the priapic design caused truly cyclical experiences of tumescence followed by pain to the riders, and the experiment was abandoned.

'In the midway of this our mortal life.' Crabtree had reached his thirty-fifth birthday in 1789, and from 1800, after his return from America, he assisted Henry Cary in the incomparable translation of *The Vision of Dante*, which earned Cary, but not Crabtree, a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

Poor Cary had been having trouble with his translating since 1792, when the abrasive Anna Seward wrote to him:

I confess I cannot perceive the high value of the simile you were so good as to translate for me from Dante. It is undoubtedly a natural description of the manners and habits of a flock of sheep; but what truth, what sublimity, what beauty can you see in comparing a crowd of spirits, or ghosts, to them, I cannot conceive ... I can discern no apposition in this vaunted simile, without which a simile is but on a level with his, who said, 'even as a wheelbarrow goes rumble rumble, even so that man lends another sixpence'.

All Crabtree Scholars will recognise here a barbed allusion by the bitchy Swan of Lichfield to one of the serene Swan of Sodbury's most acute and apposite verses. How Cary must have welcomed the assistance of Crabtree and how the translator and his mentor must have been amused by the sly self-referential version of the *Inferno*, canto 15, lines 65-66 ('for amongst ill-savour'd crabs / It suits not the sweet fig-tree lay her fruit'), and by the tactful pun with which Thomas Bowdler's future adviser solved the problem of the source of the devil-captain's bugle call at the end of canto 21 ('Which he with sound obscene triumphant gave'). Crabtree's dedication to Dante was to last for the rest of his life. In 1825 Crabtree contributed the entry on Dante to the *Universal Historical Dictionary* of his third near-namesake, George Crabb without an 'e'.

In 1828, of course, Crabtree gave his inaugural lecture upon his appointment to the Chair of Political Arithmetick at University College London, and although the lecture itself has been lost — or, more probably, suppressed — its title, 'Sex among the Dead', was discovered by the brilliant and courageous researches of Harte in 1988, from which it is clear that its subject was an examination of statistical and legal problems raised by Dante's examples of the souls of the lustful in canto 5 of the *Inferno*.

Before resuming my interrupted survey of Joseph Crabtree's prolific poetic vision, it is my sad obligation to announce to you that there has been a leak. Our precious Crabtree Archive has been plundered within the last few years by a previous member of staff of this College, a member, moreover, of the fair sex, or so I am led to

believe, and from this purloined material the lady in question proceeded to mount the most scabrous attack upon the sacred memory of Crabtree, for which a naive and illiterate jury awarded her the Booker Prize in 1990. Some of you may have had the misfortune of reading this pseudo-novel. In this so-called original book, Joseph William Crabtree appears thinly disguised under the name of Randolph Henry Ash, and much tiresome allusion is made to the names of other trees. He is provided with a wife almost as long-suffering as the reader, and with a mistress called Christabel LaMotte, a minor poetess, in whom is indubitably satirized Crabtree's metaphorically paternal relationship with the young and virginal Christina Rossetti. Various eminent Crabtree Scholars are mercilessly depicted, worst of all, the late, great Kemper T. Guggenheim, doyen of Crabtree scholarship at the University of Western Nevada in Reno, who is portrayed as a predatory American academic scalp-hunter called Mortimer Cropper. As for the rest, to discuss the endless pages of inept pastiche of Crabtree's poetry which constitute much of this embittered work is too painful, and it is with joy and relief that I turn back to the ineffable verse of the man himself.

The first decade of the new century was an immensely productive period for Crabtree, particularly with regard to his cobbler's role as Joseph Blacket (1809), and it is at this time that he must have refined and polished the most metaphysical of all his works, the drinking song, *We march we know not whither*, with which Wellington's army so confused the enemy on the battlefield at Waterloo. Indeed it is easy to understand how the poem's 123 tercets, with their virtuoso variations on rhymes with 'moon' (the terrifying 'We'll stick it up 'em before it's noon'; the plaintive 'We've boiled our eggs, but we have no spoon', and so on) encapsulate the *Weltanschauung* of the ordinary soldier's sheer grit and determination to stick it out, up, in, under, anywhere, 'he knows not whither'. At this point, I must unfortunately indicate a slight blemish in Graham-Campbell's magnificent Oration in 1990. You will remember that he ascribed Crabtree's immortal, nay proverbial, line 'Great unaffected vampires and the moon', to the *Ars Salutandi*, whereas it is, of course, the 'haunting single-line refrain' of the soldiers' song under discussion. Orators before me have lavished upon this supreme example of Crabtree's verse words of eloquent praise and passion with which I cannot compete. The echo of the almost as sublime Dante is clear to all readers, as is the wickedly intertextual back-reference to one of Crabtree's own earlier visionary odes:

The Leech drops off when saturate of blood;
The Vampire flies, gorged with the crimson flood;
But these when feasted more in hunger rave,
And their foul food with fiercer fury crave.

It is well known that Crabtree's ambivalent intertextuality led him to provide later variations on this unforgettable line: 'Great unaffected valkyrs and the moon', when he was going through his Nordic phase, and 'Great unaffected umpires and the gloom' in his magnificently moving series of poems celebrating cricket, published posthumously as *The Bat and the Balls*.

Throughout this period, as I have already mentioned, Crabtree was deeply engrossed in his indisputable masterpiece, the *Ars Salutandi*. Published by Lackington in 1820, it did not sell well, and a disastrous fire in the warehouse has made it virtually unobtainable today. The priceless manuscript was last heard of in 1903, when it was sold by the Maggs Brothers, after which it disappeared. The finger of suspicion inevitably points to the then Provost of University College London, remorselessly pursuing his institution's implacable vendetta against the genius who was simply too far above them to be accepted. Some fragments from canto I, stanzas 12 and 28, and from canto VIII, stanzas 3 and 84, have, of course, survived and are so well-known to you that I need not quote them here. The famous *Tombstone Verses* have been identified, though I think dubiously, as an appendix to the *Ars*.

It only remains to add that it is now generally accepted that Crabtree himself composed the *Ars Osculandi*, so unfortunately mistranslated by Peake, with its pungent epigraph, 'The longest way up and the quickest way in'. Crabtree indubitably derived his titles for both these works from his intimate knowledge of Cardano's *Ars Magna*, as attested by Lighthill in 1986. The *Ars Salutandi* marks a watershed in Crabtree's development from his neo-metaphysical phase into the full Romantic apocalypticism of his late maturity. From time to time, during his years of productive retirement in Devon, Crabtree visited University College London in disguise to give Italian lessons and instruction in Dante to Henry C. Barlow, who acknowledged his master by insisting on the C which preserved the anagrammatic 'crab' in his name. Gentlemen, the triennial lectures held in this College under the title of the Barlow Lectures on Dante should by rights be renamed the Crabtree Lectures forthwith.

Crabtree's cottage at Ashburton became a centre of pilgrimage for Italian exiles: for Antonio Panizzi, for whom Crabtree had been instrumental in obtaining the first Chair of Italian at University College London but who

repaid him so despicably by expunging his name from the catalogue of the British Museum Library; and for Gabriele Rossetti, who forgave Crabtree for supporting Panizzi when he landed a much more congenial professorship at King's, and who used to entertain the company with his renditions of Neapolitan songs. Precocious little Christina Georgina Rossetti was a particular favourite of Crabtree's, and she was clearly madly in love with the old man for a while:

You took my heart in your hand
With a friendly smile,
With a critical eye you scann'd,
Then set it down,
And said, 'It is still unripe,
Better wait awhile;
Wait while the skylarks pipe,
Till the corn grows brown.'

Despite this uncustomary abstinence on the part of our 99-year-old poet, the astute Gabriele refused to allow his daughter to return to Ashburton that autumn or ever again, and of course in the following year Crabtree went to pay court to the more mature Brontës, with fatal consequences.

It was in these final years that Joseph produced many of his most deeply personal works: 'For want of me the world's work will not fail'; 'Another year, another deadly stroke'; 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws'; the extended romance, *The Extra Inch*, rich in nostalgia and powerful masculine endings and rhymes ('falls', 'totem', 'lick', and so on); the intricate *Fishing Lines*, celebrating that love of angling which Crabtree bequeathed to his descendant J.R. Hartley, whose memoirs, *Fly Fishing*, show many features of the inimitable prose-style of his forebear.

It was time for him to sum up his life, which had produced all those masterpieces which had appeared under the names of others: *Kubla Khan*, sold to Coleridge; the chorus to *Hellas*; Crabbe's *David Morris*; Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*; and all the best bits of Wordsworth and of the treacherous scandal-monger, Byron (*The Prophecy of Dante*, *The Fanny of Rimini*, and so on). Crabtree spent the dying embers of his genius composing his songs for the Metropolitan Lion Club, which included *The Ballad of the Red Tape-worm*, but we know that to his mind images from his Methodist childhood, from the *Book of Revelation*, and from Dante kept recurring, and that he was struggling to body forth one final consummatory masterpiece, on the millennium of human achievement in the age of the woman clothed with the sun and the stars, and that he was held up in this daunting project merely by being unable to decide which European monarch or President could convincingly be represented allegorically in the role of Antichrist, and whether it was really poetically apt to cast the amply endowed Mrs. Throckmorton, the squire's wife, as the great harlot, the scarlet woman whose name is Babylon.

I can conclude in no more fitting way than to quote the last words which Joseph Crabtree ever wrote, from his great unfinished, indeed hardly started, masterpiece, *The Revelation of Joseph the Supine*, or *Crabtree Expos'd in terza rima*:

In this our mortal life's late afternoon,
Sleepless I dream and dreamless see.
Fate, undetected, scampers 'neath the moon...

'Qui', gentlemen, 'il maestro depose la penna'; here, the master laid down his pen. Fate, undetected, did indeed step in, for the next day he travelled to Haworth, and the vocal muse of Cuckoo Joe, now a hoary centenarian Swan, was cruelly cut off by a piece of tripe.