

BROTHER CRABTREE

David Latchman

1997

In the course of my Crabtree researches, I have made discoveries so shocking and so threatening to the basis of Crabtree scholarship that I have hesitated whether to lay them before you. Finally, I have listened to the words of the twelfth Orator, Andrew Tay, who, like myself, was a simple pathologist, as he says 'out of place amongst literary men'. He said that 'false delicacy must not prevent us examining any aspect of our hero'.

Let me begin then at the beginning, at last year's Oration, when, to my great surprise, I found myself named or revealed as the Orator. I said on that occasion that the only reason I could perhaps account for this was that many more senior Crabtree Scholars, inspired by Peter McMullen's Oration, had already retired to pursue their studies of Crabtree at home in bed. Sadly, among them was my mentor in Crabtree scholarship, Professor Sidney Greenbaum, who has left us this year on a more permanent basis. We can only hope that in some celestial sphere he is even now sharing a spiritual cigar with Joseph Crabtree himself and telling him of the Oration that we will now never hear from Sidney on 'Crabtree and the Adverb'. A topic which actually is of great relevance since in the comments on the very first Oration it was stated that adverbs, words like 'surely' and 'possibly' and 'perhaps', were of great importance in considering Crabtree's life — and indeed you will hear more of those words this evening.

Bereft of my mentor, I turned to the tradition that the Orator frequently speaks about Crabtree as a contributor in his own subject and, such was Crabtree's polymathic nature that many have been successful in this. Peter McMullen as a mathematician last year spoke about Crabtree and Napoleon's theorem of triangles, whilst our present President, Professor Mullin, in his Oration for some reason spoke about Crabtree and the brewing industry.

In my own case, of course, I have a serious problem. My subject has always confused people and everybody who has ever introduced me has stumbled over the title of Molecular Pathology. Indeed, in contrast to those of you who profess subjects of great antiquity, molecular pathology was invented, I think, in the office of the Provost, Sir Derek Roberts, five years ago when he said, and I quote, 'If we are merging Molecular Biology and Chemical Pathology, that would make Molecular Pathology' — and so I became Professor of Molecular Pathology. I would still like to find out what it is, actually.

So it was somewhat unlikely, then, that Crabtree contributed to this fantasy of the Provost's, and I then fell back on the fact that what we do partly in our department is to clone genes. I well remember that when I first came here, my first Head of Department, Av Mitchison, said to me in his inimitable way, 'My dear, you're so busy you'll have to clone yourself', and the thought did cross my mind that perhaps Crabtree had discovered this secret well before anybody else and that that was the key to his polymathic nature and his apparent ability to be in two places at once. I dismissed this suggestion, I must say, out of hand but, as you will see, we may return to something not entirely unrelated before we are done.

So what did I do then? I retreated to the library and I began to read as much as I could — in desperation perhaps — about the period in which Crabtree lived, in the hope of some inspiration. I came across the story, and you have an excerpt of it before you, of Lieutenant Richard Brothers, who was a retired naval officer who conceived the idea that the British are the lost ten tribes of Israel. He went further than this, because he proposed to lead the British to the Holy Land and set up a state there and, based on his name of Brothers, he decided that he was descended from James the brother of Jesus and he writes "The Almighty said to him "Tell the King of England that I call you my nephew" '.

Now whether the King of England was interested in this is not recorded, but he certainly was interested in the idea of Mr. Brothers' that he was going to depose the King from his throne. Much to Mr. Brothers' chagrin, he was not tried for treason but he was incarcerated in Dr. Fisher's lunatic asylum in Islington. Whether this was run by an ancestor of one of the previous Orators I am afraid I'm not able to say, but it may well run in the family.

In any case, he was incarcerated there and whilst he was there, he conceived a passion for a certain Miss Cott, and you have in front of you a pamphlet which he wrote which is a letter to Miss Cott. Now when I saw this pamphlet in the list of Mr. Brothers' publications, something really clicked in my mind. It may have been desperation and probably was, but nonetheless it was the starting point for our researches, because of course many of you will know that the name of Cottle is not unknown to Crabtree Scholars.

Indeed Bennett in his Oration revealed the fact that Joseph Cottle was an early publisher of Crabtree whilst Foote researched Crabtree's connection with Amos Cottle, the elder brother of Joseph. Moreover, in the very first Oration, by the lamented Sir James Sutherland, he described the apparently false report of Crabtree's death which appeared in the *Morning Post* in 1800 and was accompanied by a report of the death of Amos Cottle.

So in my desperation, knowing of the frequent use of pseudonyms in Crabtree scholarship, I thought perhaps there is some connection here. It was really the only hope, time was running out and I had to have something. So I got a copy of this book from the British Library. Imagine my surprise when reading the preface, the first page of which you have in front of you, to find that Brothers revealed that the first twelve pages of his letter to Miss Cott had been stolen. The very part which deals with her ancestry was not available and could not be printed.

Well, of course we in Crabtree scholarship, even those as junior in it as myself, know of the many missing manuscripts and the missing links which have bedevilled Crabtree scholarship and so I perused the rest of the document in a fever of excitement. Would I find anything to link to Crabtree? I found the quotation that Mr. Brothers believed that Miss Cott, who was another inmate of the asylum, of course, was brought to Islington under a charge of insanity and as he says, 'very properly so because God made her appear as if she was, by making her do such things as fully justified the belief'.

Never fear, gentlemen, we shall hear what those things were later on. They are not unfortunately described in the pamphlet and indeed the pamphlet revealed no connection, as far as I could see, with Crabtree. So my desperation increased and then I realised that in the same way that UCL has taken over virtually every institution in the vicinity, the hospital has managed to swallow many smaller institutions. Many of the archives of these institutions, in fact, are stored in the bowels of the hospital, which are heated to a tremendous degree. As I walk through them to go to the library, I often think that if all the money spent on heating the bowels of the hospital was actually spent on the patients, we might be able to reduce the waiting-list somewhat.

But anyway they are there, and in fact you can imagine, gentlemen, my fever of excitement when I found there the records of Dr Fisher's asylum for the very period under discussion. Now unfortunately the mandarins of the National Health Service have not allowed me to reproduce these confidential records for you, but I am allowed to reveal to you their content. First of all, of course, and most excitingly, we have in fact an engraving of Miss Cott and Mr. Brothers. These are the pictures on the front of your menu, produced by an engraver who also sadly was incarcerated in the asylum. I'm sure you will agree that Miss Cott, as Brothers says in his pamphlet, was 'Beautiful to the eye, innocent in her looks and amiable in her manners'.

We shall discover how amiable in her manners very shortly because the record reveals, gentlemen, what I had been looking for, that Frances Cott was none other than an alias for Fanny Crabtree who was brought to the asylum by her brother Joseph, to whom it says in the records that she bore a remarkable resemblance. I am sure if you look at the portrait of Joseph, dimly lit as it is, you will see a clear striking resemblance to the drawing on your menu.

Now, gentlemen, I am sure you are waiting with anticipation to hear why Miss Crabtree was incarcerated in the asylum. What was it that brought her there? The records tell us very clearly. She was brought there due to the effects, as it says and I quote, 'of self stimulation with a variety of implements, most notably', I am sure the Crabtree Scholars amongst you can guess, 'most notably with a phallic model of a fungus'.

Clearly, of course, what is meant here is the model of the Stinkhorn *Phallus impudicus* which Freeman revealed that Crabtree presented to Linnaeus when he visited him in Sweden. In fact our record reveals that what Crabtree did was to confiscate this implement from his sister in order to prevent her using it and to take it to Linnaeus so that it would be placed out of her reach.

However, gentlemen, it was not out of her reach, because the record indicates that such was her desperation for the phallus that she travelled to Sweden and impersonated her brother. Whilst Linnaeus was out of town at his country house in Hammarby, she recovered the phallus from Uppsala and brought it back with her in 1777. Now you may say, 'But of course, did not Freeman find the phallus in the Linnaean collections located at the Linnaean Society in London?'. Well, in fact now we have a solution to the problems raised by Dr. Fisher in his Oration, in which he revealed that Crabtree took part in the theft of the Linnaean collections which were removed from Sweden after Linnaeus' death in 1784. What, of course, was Crabtree doing but trying to replace the phallus so that when the inventory would be taken of the Linnaean collections, the embarrassment that his sister had removed it would not be revealed.

But sadly, gentlemen, Crabtree failed to remove one vital piece of evidence, a scrap of paper which has remained in the Linnaean collections ever since, perplexing scholars who have tried to attribute it to the dying Linnaeus and to say that its incomprehensibility, until now, is evidence of him losing his mind. In fact, of course, it's written in a clearly feminine hand and perhaps in the corner we can make out the initials FC. Let me reveal the words which are written on it, words, gentlemen, which will return to haunt us later:

Farewell, I am brothers, brothers is mine, I am my brothers always until death.

What can this mean, gentlemen, other than being the calling card of Fanny, by which she revealed her deception and left it in the Linnaean papers? Subsequently of course, as we know, the phallus was confiscated again, returned to the Linnaean collection, and Fanny was incarcerated in the lunatic asylum, where she had to stimulate herself with Mr. Brothers. Mr. Brothers, of course, was open to this activity because he had actually married in 1776, gone away to sea immediately afterwards and returned to find his wife living with somebody else and the mother of several children. So he presumably, therefore, was also in need of stimulation.

So, what we are left with then at this point is Crabtree returning to the asylum, finding Fanny in these activities with Mr. Brothers and arranging the hurried removal of Fanny from the lunatic asylum to an unknown destination. Yet surprisingly Crabtree apparently continued to visit Mr. Brothers even after Fanny had been removed. I have been unable to find out why this should be. At this time, however, Mr. Brothers was occupied with his plan for the new Jerusalem, which was apparently a Nash-like town built in the Middle East, and he had the engraver drawing large numbers of plans for it and producing large numbers of costumes for the various officers of the new Jerusalem.

Imagine my excitement, gentlemen, when I read that Mr. Brothers was gratified when Joseph Crabtree agreed to pose for the portrait of the King of the Hebrews in his robes; these prints in fact appeared in a work entitled *The New Covenant*, which Mr. Brothers subsequently published. I see some of you turning over the menu and indeed you are correct. I rushed to this volume and what did I find but a new portrait of Crabtree, but sadly for us only a back view.

So, by discovering the mad Fanny, I believe that I have solved various problems in Crabtree scholarship. Why did Crabtree participate in the theft of the Linnaean collection? How was it that between 1783 and 1800, when working for his miserly uncle in France, he was able to return to England on many occasions, as documented by several previous Orators such as Jones, Tay and Bromage? Of course he was returning simply to deal with Fanny and to place her in a new lunatic asylum where she might be removed from temptation. So clearly his uncle had to allow this. Indeed we know from the studies of Tay that one of these visits, when Crabtree cured Malthus of stubbornness of the bowels, took place in 1797, the very year when Fanny was incarcerated in Dr Fisher's asylum.

And so, gentlemen, were I to stop now, you might be kind enough to say, perhaps, that for a simple pathologist, I had made some small contribution to Crabtree scholarship, and perhaps you might not. However I am afraid that I must go further, I must reveal to you the end point of these researches. In doing so, I am aware that I risk the fate of Tattersall, who you will recall in his Oration nearly twenty years ago reported the most sensational discovery in Crabtree scholarship — a discovery which has indeed led to enormous controversy even to this day and which has resulted in large amounts of criticism and other matter being deposited on his head.

He, you will remember, discovered a letter from Scrope Davies to Byron, which revealed that Crabtree, having

drunk rather too much with John Keats, arrived at Guy's Hospital and said 'I've come to have it off with Mr. Keats', resulting in one of those enthusiastic surgeons removing Crabtree's male organ. This claim has led to enormous controversy, as I say, and perhaps it would have been better if Tattersall had never revealed it.

Nonetheless, gentlemen, I must continue, and the question which occurred to me then as I pondered this Oration and the fact that it was a bit too short if I didn't think of something else to say, was why did Crabtree cease to visit Mr. Brothers in 1800. Why was it that even though Mr. Brothers was incarcerated in the lunatic asylum until 1806, these visits ceased in 1800?

And now gentlemen, I am about to speculate, and I must ask you to hope that future Orators, who will be revealed in future, will investigate these possibilities further, but what happened to Crabtree in 1800? We know from the very first Oration, by Sir James Sutherland, that a report of Crabtree's death appeared in the *Morning Post* in 1800. Of course a false report — we know that Crabtree continued to flourish for another fifty-four years. But what if, gentlemen, that report was not false? What if the mad Fanny, who bore a striking resemblance to Crabtree, decided to impersonate her brother who had died?

I offer this only as a possibility, but consider the facts, gentlemen. What would one do in that situation if one were mad but clever? One would immediately go away for a long period to a place where Crabtree was not known so that when one returned, any slight changes in appearance would be accounted for. We know from the work of Datta that in 1800 Crabtree travelled to India where he, or she, traded in rhinoceros horn, another object which would have been of great interest to Fanny. Last year's President, Bernard Hargrove, who is responsible for me standing here this evening and will have to take his share of any criticism which is heaped upon me, in his own Oration described Crabtree's activities as Reader in Criminology in Oxford in 1809 — and what did he or she do there? He conducted a research project measuring the male organs of large numbers of undergraduates. Well, clearly this is a topic of more interest to Fanny than to Joseph.

Indeed Judge Hargrove also revealed how Crabtree was particularly preoccupied at this time with the bisexual syndrome. How could an individual be male and female at the same time? Again perhaps, if you were trying to impersonate a man, you might find that of interest. Even the revelation of Tattersall becomes clear to us. Clearly the male member was never amputated because it was never there in the first place. This becomes merely a rumour put about by Fanny to account for the absence of this appendage, perhaps revealed in an amorous encounter with Annabella Byron.

You may think I assume too much. But consider the alternatives: supposing Crabtree did not die in 1800, supposing he lived on, we still have a sister who bore him a remarkable resemblance and who impersonated him successfully on at least one occasion. We shall in any case have to re-evaluate the entire canon of Crabtree scholarship. How much of the activities were the activities of the real Joseph, and how much of the mad but clever Fanny? Clearly further research by future Orators is necessary. For myself, as I hope to retreat back to the obscurity of Pathology and the Medical School, I can only leave you with the chilling words that Fanny left in Linnaeus' study 220 years ago:

Farewell, I am brothers, brothers is mine, I am my brothers always until death.