

46
CRABTREE THE POLITICIAN
Tom McNally
1999

It is in response to Professor James Sutherland's exhortation in that first Oration forty-five years ago that we meet here tonight:

And when we die, who shall remember
Joe Crabtree of the West Country?

This room also has a memory which ties in with the theme of my Oration. In 1964 I was President of the Debating Society and invited, as guest of honour to the Foundation Debate, Lord Attlee.

By the time guests were asked to assemble for sherry, no Attlee. At 5.30pm, when the debate was timed to begin, no Attlee. At 5.45pm the Rt. Hon. Julian Amery opened the debate on the traditional motion of 'No Confidence in Her Majesty's Government'.

At five to six, through the arch came a stooped and frail Attlee accompanied by his formidable wife, Violet. Attlee did not drive and throughout his political life Vi had driven him everywhere, including up the Mall to the Palace to become Prime Minister in 1945. She had a not unblemished reputation as a driver. She greeted me with a note of exasperation in her voice, 'Sorry to be late; but how long has Tottenham Court Road been one way?'

I owe my degree to two men: Professor Joel Hurstfield of the Department of History and Professor John Spraos of the Department of Political Economy. Although I was in the Department of Political Economy and my degree was a B.Sc. (Econ.), my course was a hybrid of economics and social history. When I went to bid farewell to Professor Spraos, he said adieu with the following words, 'Tom, I will give you a reference for any job you apply for, so long as you never describe yourself as an economist'. It is a deal to which I have stuck steadfastly for over thirty years.

It is for that reason I opted for the Political in political economy by way of a career and why this evening, as my contribution to Crabtree scholarship, I intend to go in search of Crabtree the politician. Indeed there are so many clues about Crabtree's political proclivities strewn through previous studies that I am surprised that this aspect of his life has been so neglected.

Here we have a man known to be a regular imbibor, a seducer of women, felicitous with words, but given to impetuosity bordering on recklessness.

So Crabtree fits the emotional photofit of an active politician. Indeed, add to that photofit his known liking for foreign travel and one can readily imagine Crabtree today girding his loins for the forthcoming European Parliamentary elections and heading for Strasbourg rather than Orléans.

The question is where, when and how did this great man leave his imprint on British politics? I have studied closely the only known portrait of Crabtree to see if I can detect any facial similarities among any of my hereditary colleagues on the red benches. After all, a fair number of them ended up in the Lords thanks to Great Great Grand Mama being free and easy with her favours. It is quite plausible, particularly during those long Napoleonic Wars when Crabtree was at the peak of his sexual powers, that he pleased a few lonely members of the aristocracy and left his seed to bob along undetected down to the present day. Since we have a strand of Crabtree's hair, a little DNA testing among the Hereditary Peers might prove extremely interesting. Indeed, I saw a chap asleep in the Lords library the other day who looked like the spitting image of the Crabtree icon. I was about to try and extract a few drops of blood from his recumbent left hand to bring along for UCH to have a look at, when I was told that he was a night-club owner from Leeds who was a Blair creation. Apparently he was given

his peerage for a lifetime's contribution to the arts and a million-pound contribution to the Labour Party. I remain convinced that Crabtree is still with us somewhere on those red benches; but I leave the discovery of his progeny to a more qualified Crabtree Scholar.

But if my theory is correct that Crabtree was a political animal, how is it that no record can be found of him in either Lords or Commons? The answer is blindingly obvious. Crabtree was not a politician, but a political journalist. This, of course, leads me to clash with one of our most distinguished Crabtree Scholars, Mr. Fred Gee. A week ago I had the honour of addressing Convocation on the question of reform of the House of Lords. Mr Gee asked me a question about the future of the Bishops and I thought then, as I do again tonight, what an excellent adornment to the Prelates Bench Mr. Gee would be.

Incidentally, one of the suggestions for reform of the Lords in the future is that nomination to the Upper House should come from professional bodies and learned societies. It has already been put to me that the Crabtree Foundation would undoubtedly qualify if such a reform goes through and that the Living Memory would be the automatic choice for such a nomination. I am grateful to the Fourteenth Orator for that suggestion.

However, back to Mr. Gee and his theory that Crabtree was a spy. Gee, in the 1984 Oration, saw the major attributes of a spy as 'living above one's income', 'making impetuous journeys' and 'his insatiable curiosity'. But, Scholars, they are exactly the same attributes that one finds among political journalists and foreign correspondents. Indeed, even Crabtree's failure to speak a foreign language is matched by the memoirs of one of the most famous of foreign correspondents, Edward Behr, whose autobiography was called *Anyone here been raped and speaks English?*

The only concession I will make to the Gee theory is the possibility that Crabtree, like the late Mr Kim Philby, may have followed both professions.

However, tonight I hope to prove conclusively that:

- Crabtree was the Rupert Murdoch of his day.
- He was decisive in founding *The Times* in 1785.
- He worked and wrote for *The Times* for over fifty years, both as a political correspondent and as a foreign correspondent.

My research went in this direction because no Orator has to my mind explained why so prolific a writer should have left so little in the way of clearly attributable work. The answer is, of course, that for almost two hundred years, writers for *The Times* remained anonymous. But it is at the founding of *The Times* that the evidence of the Crabtree involvement becomes most conclusive.

Let us start at the beginning with Dr. Samuel Johnson. We know from the second Oration, given by Professor Arthur Brown, that even in 1763 Crabtree was known to the Great Lexicographer. Only six years before, in 1757, Johnson had written thus about journalists:

Of those writers who have taken upon themselves the task of intelligence, some have given and others have sold their abilities, whether small or great, to one or other of the Parties that divide us, and without a wish for truth, or thought of decency, without care of any other reputation than that of stubborn adherence to their abettors, carry on the same tenor of representation through all the vicissitudes of right and wrong, neither depressed by detection, nor abashed by confutation; proud of the hourly increase of infamy and ready to boast of all the contumelies that falsehood and slander may bring upon them, as new proofs of their zeal and fidelity.

Such a job description is enough to turn any young man's head, and it may well have been thoughts of journalism that caused Crabtree to abandon his Oxford studies rather than the satirical verses which Joseph Scott found to be the cause of his leaving Oxford prematurely.

What is clear is that at about the same time as Crabtree was arriving in London, the notorious John Wilkes was winning his great battle to enable journalists to report Parliament.

Wilkes was, in many ways, a soulmate of Crabtree's. As one historian observed, his life 'was among women of easy virtue and men of studied vice'. It was Wilkes who in 1762 had started *The North Briton*. When asked by Madame de Pompadour, 'How far does the liberty of the press go in England?' he replied, 'That is what I intend to find out'.

It was also Wilkes, when told by a voter he was canvassing, 'I'd rather vote for the devil than vote for you', replied, 'But if your friend is *not* standing, may I rely on your support?'

And it was Wilkes who in 1771 had defied the House of Commons on the matter of reporting. Wilkes was an active Alderman of the City of London and it is inconceivable that, given their shared proclivities, the young Crabtree and he would not have met.

So by the end of the 1770s we have a situation whereby Crabtree will have been influenced both by Samuel Johnson and by Wilkes just at the time when the House of Commons was losing its battle to keep its proceedings secret. We also know that from as early as 1773, according to Joe Scott, Crabtree had been in regular contact with Jeremy Bentham. So much so that by 1832, according to Negley Harte, Bentham could be described as 'an old friend'. But what was the nature of the Benthamite influence?

According to Scott, from the mid-70s Crabtree applied the Benthamite test: 'Is it complete? Is it correct? Is it useful?' to any manuscript he was offered. Such a cut-to-the-bone approach has always been the hallmark of a great editor and indeed of a great Prime Minister. It is best illustrated in the latter by a recent dinner at Number Ten when Mr Blair was entertaining the Cabinet. The Number Ten butler showed the Prime Minister the menu and asked for his choice:

'I'll have the beef,' said our great spiritual leader.

'What about the vegetables?', asked the butler.

'They'll have the beef as well.'

In a parallel universe to that of a Crabtree, radicalised and pointed towards journalism by his contacts with Johnson, Wilkes and Bentham, lived John Walter I. John Walter was of West Country birth. He had been a successful underwriter until bankrupted by shipping losses sustained by the American Wars.

Now we know from the Mullin Oration of 1993 that, although by 1783 Crabtree was based in Orléans, he made 'frequent visits back to England to keep in touch with his ever-widening circle of friends'. We even know, thanks to Mullin, that he attended a meeting in Westminster in 1789. From the early 1780s John Walters had determined to repair his fortune by investing in a new printing press. The question is 'Where would he look for help?'

I put it to this gathering:

- Would he look for help from a fellow West Countryman?
- Would he look for help from someone who knew about printing? This he certainly did, for he was in regular contact with Benjamin Franklin about developments in printing technology. We know, of course, from the Orations of R.V. Jones, Edwin Clark, Negley Harte and others, that Crabtree too regularly met Franklin in France.
- We also know that it was impossible to contemplate launching a newspaper without the support of the politicians of the day. To quote from the *History of the Times (1785-1841)*, 'During the Eighteenth Century there had been three recognised methods of directing the politics of a newspaper. It might support an administration in return for payment either directly from the Treasury, or in news or in advertisements; it might support the Opposition in return for cash contributions from the Party funds; or it might support an individual statesman in return for a subsidy

paid by himself or by his friends. There was no secret about these methods and no shame on the part of those employed by them except that journalism was regarded as, and despised as, a hireling trade.'

So John Walter needed a contact with William Pitt the Younger. One could describe Pitt as the William Hague of his day, having become Prime Minister at 24. However, Pitt was also famous for his consumption of port wine. 'Took Billy Pitt home drunk again last night' was how a contemporary recorded a night out with the Prime Minister.

We know from Nigel Bromage that Crabtree 'had contact at the highest level politically'. The contact with Pitt was essential because, as *The Times'* own history states, 'Pitt's press managers produced passages for the press, paid for contradictions and suppressions and paid regularly for coverage to support the measures of the Government'. I suppose we can only be thankful for the progress we have made in the last two hundred years.

So here we have this West Countryman who needed help with contacts (notably with Franklin and Pitt), who needed advice on new technology and patents (and we already know from Rowe that Crabtree had been instrumental in patenting the water closet), but who also (and I think here are the clinchers) wanted his new printing press to publish not only a newspaper, but the works of the leading literary figures of the day, and to have from its inception a European reach.

Fellow Crabtree Scholars, was there any man in London, nay in Europe, who had that combination of contacts and talents other than Joseph Crabtree? Then why, you are entitled to ask, does Crabtree not figure in the official history of *The Times'*? The answer is there in the history itself. I quote:

Comparatively few personal records relating to the earlier period of the narrative exist. An undertaking given by John Walter II (son of John Walter I) that public men of the day were safe with *The Times'* suggests that their correspondence was destroyed almost as a matter of principle.

So the Crabtree legacy has been lost. Yet clues to his influence abound. In the very first edition of *The Times'*, on 1 January 1785, on the front page it was announced, 'By the middle of January will be published in one volume miscellanies in verse and prose, intended as a specimen of printing types'. Now John Walter will have known about the printing types: but who could have composed for him this volume of verse and prose? There can be only one answer to that — Crabtree. When, in 1791, attempts were made to have George III declared insane, *The Times'* supported the King. Pitt paid for that support. Again the Crabtree connection.

From the very beginning, *The Times'* had a network of foreign correspondents and stated in its edition of 21 May 1792: 'Our communications will not be confined to the ordinary conveyance by the foreign mails only, as we have taken such measures as will enable us to receive letters from abroad'. Is this not a clear reference to the French letters which were the topic of Gordon Hall's oration?

There is no doubt that Crabtree acted as a foreign correspondent for *The Times'* during his many trips abroad. In that role, he would have exemplified the truculence which has become synonymous with that calling. That is probably best exemplified by the foreign correspondent who became exasperated by the constant stream of instructions coming from his nit-picking editor. Onto the editor's desk came the following dispatch:

Fuck off Stop
I resign Stop
Seriously rude letter to follow Stop

Then there is the interesting matter of births, marriages and deaths — the hatching, matching and dispatching column, as it became known. On 7 April 1792 *The Times'* announced:

Two marriages were sent to this paper on Friday, and were inserted in all other morning prints, which have since been contradicted. We rejected their insertion. In future no marriages or deaths will be inserted in this paper unless properly authenticated.

There are two salient facts that flow from that announcement: since that time, all members of the House of Lords have checked the obituary column of *The Times* first thing in the morning. If their name is not there, they go into the House. Second, it is of interest that the false report of Crabtree's death quoted by Sutherland in the first Oration was carried by *The Morning Post* but not *The Times*. In 1807 came an event which sent a tingle down my spine: Henry Crabb Robinson was appointed Foreign Editor. We understand from his contemporaries that his happiest hours were spent in gossiping with Lamb, Coleridge, Wordsworth and many other writers. *The Times* holds a portrait of Crabb Robinson and I would love to be able to report that it matched the likeness of our Crabtree portrait. It does not. Yet it is a more than spooky coincidence that, as J.A.C. Thomas revealed in his 1969 Oration, Crabb was a pseudonym which Crabtree from time to time used.

What is clear is that the Crabtree influence continued in *The Times* well into the nineteenth century. It resulted in *The Times* being against repression at the time of Peterloo, backing Queen Caroline against George IV, and becoming in the 1820s 'a thunderer for reform'. It did indeed back the Great Reform Bill of 1832 and then deserted the fading Whigs for the reformed Tories of the Tamworth manifesto.

If I am right about the influence Crabtree exerted on the development of our press, then what *The Times* said about its own development is the Crabtree Testament:

Modern England dates from the Reform Bill of 1832, the Tamworth Manifesto of 1834, and the recognition by politicians that their cause cannot be served by the secret manipulation of the means of communication by an occult press bureau.

If what I have said about the state of the media in which Crabtree had to work finds any echoes today, I would say this:

The Times is today part of a group which controls 40% of our media and is headed by a man not based in Britain, who finds his nationality as disposable as any other temporary encumbrance. That would have concerned Crabtree the patriot.

Our Press Complaints Commission is feeble in the face of tabloid excesses of personal intrusion and general xenophobia, and journalists themselves seem incapable of defending professional standards and professional pride. That would have outraged Crabtree the humanitarian.

Our Government stalls and prevaricates about a Freedom of Information Act. The culture of secrecy pervades Whitehall, whilst care over freedom of information is given to Mr Jack Straw, which is like asking Count Dracula to have oversight of the Blood Transfusion Service. That would have outraged Crabtree the libertarian.

Quality, diversity and choice in our media, protection of the individual from intrusion and persecution, open and accountable government — these create the tripod on which a free society rests.

I have tried in this Oration to avoid partisan political polemics and stick simply to researched facts. However, as the twentieth century draws to a close — in which the Conservatives have been in power for two years in every three — I detect a new dawning for utilitarian liberal democracy. The spirit of Crabtree is with us as we prepare for a new century and thunder once again the cause for radical reform.