

JOSEPH CRABTREE AND THE COURT OF THE POPES

Michael Crawford

2000

It might be thought that when the moment comes for the name of a Crabtree Orator to be revealed to — and by — a President in a haze of Dionysiac fumes, and the choice falls on someone who has already experienced the *rite de passage* of giving an inaugural lecture, that earlier occasion might somewhat diminish the terror of the new. Not so. The problem remains in all its intensity. An inaugural lecture must praise the succession of predecessors, while being at the same time an epideictic tour-de-force. Similarly, a Crabtree Oration builds of course on the glorious researches of the past, but is forced inescapably by the genre to reveal at any rate something of their failings. And there is indeed one aspect of the life and period of Joseph Crabtree that seems to have passed almost unnoticed by previous Orators, namely that the society in which he moved was one in which a knowledge of the Latin language was taken for granted by men, and perhaps even more by women, of culture, as my honoured guest to my right well knows. I am not sure whether she is delighted or regretful, by the way, that she was not called upon to help implement my plan to invite her in drag if the Crabtree Elders had not seen the light.

I said 'almost unnoticed', for it came as a great pleasure to note that, already in the Crabtree Oration by Professor Sutherland, there is a mention of a work of English poetry, with a Latin title, the *Ars Salutandi*, of which, alas, only fragments seem to have been found. For reasons which will later become apparent, the most likely resting place for at any rate an early version of parts of this work, which I was unable to find, will now for long remain completely inaccessible.

The Centenary Oration, I was also pleased to discover, drew timely attention to the riches of the British Library within whose portals is to be found in one form or another almost everything that anyone needs to know. Not quite everything, however, as we shall see.

There are indeed other occasional hints of Joseph Crabtree's familiarity with Latin: Orator Jones established that he made Jenner sit an exam in Classics; and Orator Foote records a speech in Crabtree's honour in Latin, by a Norwegian pastor, to which Crabtree replied. That occasion, however, seems to have been so alcoholic that it must be doubted whether any reliable memory survives. I propose to rely to a much greater extent on documents than on oral tradition.

Consideration of the Latin side of Crabtree, then, has not hitherto been seriously investigated, except insofar as vulgar paradigms about Latin lovers might be taken as describing certain aspects of his character; such an investigation requires of course the most careful and exact scholarship. Perhaps an example of the necessary attention to detail will help. While on the subject of attention to detail, by the way, I have to say that it is unfortunate that one of the previous Orations is omitted from the Table of Contents of *The Crabtree Orations*. To return to the issue at hand, a former Professor of this College, I regret to say, though not — I am glad to report — a historian, had occasion to refer to a cleric and scholar of the Renaissance, but unreformed Church, Tommaso Inghirami, Prefect of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. The catholicity of the tastes of this gentleman was captured for his contemporaries by the sobriquet Phaedra. The aforesaid Professor, I am afraid, always rather careless with his proofs, went into print referring to our friend as Phaedro, thereby, if I may put it that way, emasculating the point of the nickname. I have to say in passing that I was having dinner the other day with a Professor of the same subject in another university and mentioned to him the high charge that had fallen to me; the fellow immediately made a whole series of the most louche and improper suggestions as to the subjects that I might cover during my Oration.

What then of the Latin culture of Joseph Crabtree? Let me begin by illustrating the riches that await those willing to explore this field. Much work has of course been done on Joseph Crabtree's lesser near-contemporary Edward Gibbon. But it seems not to have been realised that there is a whole branch of the family that — unlike the branch which Englished itself — preferred to continue to be known by its Latin and true name of Lar. This family is revealed to us by the *Généalogie Historique de la Maison de Lar et de Lara*, by M.J. de Bourrousse de Laffore; the work was presented to the British Library on 7 June 1881, by Pierre Comte de Lara, last of his line, helpfully supplemented by a manuscript genealogical table which demonstrates that Queen Victoria was descended from Raymond I of Barcelona, via the family of Lar and a daughter of El Cid. The history of the

family reveals that Gibbon was spurred to compose his history, not by the singing of the monks of Araceli, but by deep atavistic urges. For his ancestors, along with the Aryans, first conquered India, then set out via Africa for Spain, where they fought a long and moving battle against the Romans who wished to enslave them. Lar Indibilis was killed in battle, Lar Mandonius was betrayed to the Romans and decapitated, Lar Belistagenes submitted to the inevitable and accepted Roman rule. Why, you are no doubt all asking — in particular the great friend of Orator Tattersall, whom I am delighted to have as a guest — is there no trace of this valiant Iberian dynasty? The answer is simple: the Romans changed the names of all the towns previously called Lar. I haven't invented any of this, by the way. The virtue of the family wins through and Flavius Isidorus of Lar emerges in about AD 440, to become the progenitor of Queen Victoria and of Edward Gibbon. Imagine the poignancy for one born of this stock in becoming the historian of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

In the case of Joseph Crabtree, awareness that he was also known as Giuseppe Maria Silvestri at last allows us to fill in some details of the obscure period around his time at Oxford. It also dramatically advances historical understanding of one of the most clamorous incidents in modern European history. Josephus Sylvestris is of course just the Latin equivalent of Joseph Crabtree; the insertion of the middle name Maria was merely a piece of camouflage necessary to the role that Joseph Crabtree was to play in his precocious involvement in affairs of church and state.

His presence in Rome at the turn of 1772 and 1773, when he should have been attending to his studies in Oxford, is revealed by the work which he dedicated to Pasquale Adinolfi, personal attendant on and doctor to the Pope. It is a work — and the College authorities will be pleased to know that Joseph Crabtree would have been entirely in favour of their strong line against smoking — it is a work devoted to cataloguing the noxious consequences deriving from the use of tobacco. Joseph Crabtree admits that tobacco *may* be used — I quote in translation, apologising in advance for the indelicacy of the original — in the desperate case of crystalline blisters of the genitals, i.e. syphilis. The only problem is that the cure may induce tetanus.

As Orator Cadwallader established, Crabtree himself had an interest in matters similar if not identical — for the latter we have to wait till we get to the duet of Orator Foreman and Constanze Mozart — after the encounter in the crow's nest at the age of nine. I have incidentally been able to discover that among Crabtree's reading matter in this period was a work called *The Matrons, Ephesian, Chinese, French, British, Turkish and Roman*, published in London in 1762: the copy in the British Library bears an anonymous annotation in a clearly contemporary hand, referring to a work to be found in the Public (i.e. University) Library in Cambridge. The annotation obviously dates from Crabtree's spell in the bindery of that library; and his devotion to scholarship emerges clearly from the fact that he gives the shelf-mark. Perhaps indeed the volume in question was bound by Crabtree.

Not only that, but the hand of Crabtree identifies the anonymous author of the work as Thomas Percy, who is of course the Bishop of Dromore, editor in 1765 of the volume *Loose and Humorous Verse*. It is a matter of public scandal — and something to which all Scholars must devote their energies to righting — that the pedestrian cataloguers of the British Library have not seen fit to act on the information provided by Crabtree.

We know of course that the remedy for the discomfort to which I have alluded, which Crabtree eventually favoured and diffused, was 'Crabtree's Butter'. It is nonetheless touching to find Joseph Crabtree at such a tender age so wide-ranging in his activities aimed at alleviating one of the plagues of the human race. It is also striking to find him, given the great medical traditions of this College, firmly committed to the experimental method: it is obviously by the conduct of experiments that he has established that the cure in question may cause tetanus. The whole episode chimes well with the later medical interests explored by Orators Datta and Clarke. The question is, experiments on whom? Not on himself, obviously, and one is left to hypothesise that the experiments were on his unfortunate fellow students at Oxford. I leave it to future research to establish whether there was a statistically significant rise in mortality among this cohort in the autumn of 1772. Furthermore, the decisive proof that tobacco is dangerous is that if one injects tobacco juice into the jugular vein of a dog, it causes convulsions. Well, frankly, I am not surprised. It would be comforting to know, though comfort may of course not be forthcoming, that the experiments being conducted in the terracotta mastodon that is bankrupting us all are both less cruel and more sophisticated.

The work on tobacco, however, while revealing something of Joseph Crabtree's capacities and concerns, was, as I

have hinted, camouflage for his real mission. As everyone knows, there is an Archivio Segreto Vaticano. But it is not really secret: it is open to scholars, subject of course, as our own Public Record Office, to the withholding of more recent material. But there is a real secret archive, which consists of records of what the Vatican has paid for certain material it has acquired. The sensitivity of the material is obvious, including as it perhaps does the receipt for the forgery of the document recording the Donation by Constantine of temporal power to the Church.

How, you are no doubt wondering, did it come about that I, a godless Englishman from the godless College of Gower Street, was allowed access to this material? It was of course a shared devotion to scholarship, common to the guardian of the archive and myself. After I had finished my researches, on an innocent and technical matter wholly unconnected with Joseph Crabtree, he and I fell to gossiping. It so happened that he was engaged in negotiation in relation to an exhibition to be organised in association with the Jesuits; there has been over the centuries little love lost between his order and the Jesuits, and the irony of the situation was not lost on my friend. 'I don't suppose you know', he said, 'that an obscure countryman of yours played a critical role in the suppression of the Jesuits.' 'Obscure,' I said, as the file was brought down and opened, 'you have obviously not been keeping up with Crabtree scholarship'.

As is well known, for reasons that would take too long to explore here, Clement XIV had decided to suppress the Jesuits. Now he is described in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* as having gathered round him a band of *amorosi discepoli*. I suppose that what was involved was similar to what was cattily implied by one Italian friend and colleague of another, when she remarked that he was given to *rapporti amorosi-didattici*. I hear incidentally that in the light of the adventures of the Chief Inspector for Schools, heads of department in universities in this country are instructed to look out for affective-experiential relationships. Be that as it may, Clement XIV needed someone with wide experience and fertile imagination, wider and more fertile than his own. Then, as in more recent times, the ancient universities have been excellent recruiting grounds for the agents of foreign powers, and Clement's messengers headed for Oxford. Between the crow's nest and the period as flute-boy on Captain Cook's first voyage, Joseph Crabtree was their man. He was spirited to Rome in the winter of 1772/3. His connection with Italy thus dates back some fifteen years before the dates established by Orators dos Santos and Armour. Crabtree did his work well, providing the Pope with a range of 'information' about potential opponents to the intended measure. Some of the documents looked to me, on a hasty glance, as if they drew on the same source for inspiration as the verse in the *Ars Salutandi*, though I fear that further research is now unlikely to be possible for many, many years. Anyway, as the opponents of the suppression of the Jesuits manifested their views, quiet hints were dropped about the sort of revelations that would follow any attempt to thwart the Pope. And on 21 July 1773, the Jesuits were duly suppressed.

But why was Crabtree not as a result at least comfortably off, if not rich? We know, in fact, that in the subsequent period he was desperately poor, even spending some time in the debtors' prison in 1780, a period of his life particularly illuminated by Orator Thomas. In the end, of course, Clement XIV was simply unable to bring himself to pay good money to someone who might, at any rate according to certain criteria, be described as an adherent of the Protestant faith and the payment was countermanded. I expect it was diverted to the above-mentioned *amorosi discepoli*, though I did not have time to pursue my researches far enough to establish this with certainty. Revenge had for the moment to be postponed, since Crabtree had to return to Oxford, though not for long, as it turned out. His visit to Italy in 1786/7 was presumably in part to prepare the ground for the action he intended, and we already know that it reinforced the views he already held. Shortly after that, however, it might have seemed that action was not needed: Napoleon came, and then he came again. In parenthesis, the evidential base for Orator McMullen's suggestion that Crabtree disapproved of Napoleon might perhaps be revisited, since they seem in many ways such kindred spirits. In parenthesis in parenthesis, I am delighted that one of my guests this evening is from Orléans, a city which played so large a part in the life of Joseph Crabtree, though he has expressed his puzzlement that it was there that the *Ode to Claret* was composed. Be that as it may, Napoleon went, and after he had gone to St. Helena, he did not come again. He was in fact a broken lance when it came to doing what was needed with the Pope.

Joseph Crabtree continued to plot. The revolution of 1849 in Rome was unsuccessful, but it showed that all that was needed was a slight shove. The position recalls that outlined to me over dinner by a friend in another College — I hope Scholars do not get the impression that I spend all my time gossiping over dinner — when he said *à propos* of his Head of Department that he was not sure whether to prop up a crumbling regime or mount a *coup d'état*. In 1851, Joseph Crabtree published, under the easily decoded pseudonym of Jane Christmas, a work called *Blots on the Escutcheon of Rome. A brief history of the Chief Papal Persecutions*; at several hundred pages, it makes one wonder what a full history might have come out as. The work had been compiled by the efforts of six Protestant ladies — I rather like that touch — and set in motion the chain of events that led to the unification of Rome with

Italy. In the spring of 1855, just after Joseph Crabtree's death — but we may be sure that he knew of the intention — Britain allied with Piedmont. The rest, as they say, like everything else you have heard this evening, is history.