

## CRABTREE'S PERIODICAL PUBLICATION AND ITS LESSON FOR US

John Crow

1958

Ordinary words are totally inadequate for me with which to express my feelings. I am in the first place awestruck at the solemnity of the surroundings and the importance of the company. In the second place I, the most recent and the least important of the Crabtree Orators, must necessarily look back with a feeling of particular inadequacy at the list of those who have occupied this onerous post. It is with singular delight that I see that the first of all the Crabtree Orators, Professor James Sutherland, has once again, despite the passage, the remorseless passage of the years, braved the elements and been able to be amongst us. I, Sir, am no chicken. And in fairness to myself, Sir, I should like to say that I've never claimed to be a chicken! But when I cast back my mind to the days when I was but a timid undergraduate in the University of Oxford, the name of James Sutherland was even then on every lip, and to me, young and foolish as I was, it seemed as if we were talking about one of the illustrious figures of the past: James Sutherland and Nichol Smith, we might say, or James Sutherland and Sir Walter Raleigh, or James Sutherland and Saintsbury. But we knew him to be one of ourselves, still spared to remain among us, as witness the ceaseless flow of quips, some no doubt fathered wrongly upon him, the flow of books of verse, volumes of criticism, novels, works of reference which go to swell the *Who's Who* entry of 1958. And since then Professor Sutherland has gone from strength to strength. I myself, one humble hearer, have, unless my memory is at fault, as well it may be, heard nine inaugural lectures from his honied lips and each one, Sir, differing in some degree, however slight, from its predecessor. Professor Sutherland is with us again today, in defiance of devouring time. Long, I say, may he continue to grace our meetings, until he is known among us as 'le Boaz de nos jours'.

It is not my intention to pay tribute in this manner to all who before me occupied this metropolitan rostrum. But I proceed to my 'in the third place'. In the third place, who cannot be with feelings of awe and a consciousness of personal inadequacy when he considers the magnitude of his task, the task of rendering fit tribute to the great man whom tonight we celebrate, Joseph Crabtree. When I received my invitation to deliver the 1958 oration, I replied, with modesty, that I would speak about *Joseph Crabtree's Periodical Publication and its Lesson for Us*. Joseph Crabtree, I discover, had no publication in periodical form. Its lesson to us is therefore nil and we must move on to another title, which is *The Rabelaisian Element in Crabtree*. Here at all events we are on firmer and more nauseating ground. The Rabelaisian element in Crabtree divides itself under two headings, the repeatable and the unrepeatable. Of repeatable I can find no evidence of any kind, and it is not for me to repeat the unrepeatable.

I therefore move on to my third title, which is: *The Year's Work in Crabtree Studies, 1957*.

1957 has been a lean year in Crabtree Studies. Dr R. Quirk's annual article has appeared in the woman's page of the *New York Times Women's Sunday Supplement*. It is headed *Joseph Crabtree and the Problem of Word Order*. It is interesting to note that some copies by an interesting misprint title the article *Joseph Crabtree and the Problem of World Order*. But the article is the same in both variants. There are three articles in the *Studies in Bibliography* of the University of Virginia. Professor Creighton Bowers writes on *Joseph Crabtree and the Variant Four*. Professor William B. Todd writes on *Press Figures in Crabtree's 'Food for worms, brave Percy'*. Dr. Kurt Bulow writes on *Crabtree and Caxton*. This seems to be another Crabtree if a cursory glance does not mislead me. The hearts of all of us must have risen when we opened our *Times* on Thursday November 17, and turning at once to the book page, saw that the hope of our hearts had been gratified, that there was a just and temperate assessment of the work of Crabtree by no less a pen than that of Oliver Edwards, a pseudonym which attempts all in vain, for style will out, to mask the identity of Professor Terence Spencer, of London, Belfast, Birmingham, etc. And that, apart from a meagre and discreditable article in *Notes and Queries*, in which a Mr. Sidney Race attempts to prove that all writings of Joseph Crabtree flow from the pen of John Payne Collier. All! I have no more to say about Mr. Race. That, I repeat, is all. And here, moved by a natural indignation, I must speak my mind such as it is. Are we conscious enough of our great heritage? Joseph Crabtree lived and moved amongst us, among these — in his own ringing words — 'dark satanic mills'. He is, as are Shakespeare and Milton, and the late Charles Morgan, a mighty thread in the vast tapestry that is English literature. And I chronicle six articles on the work of Crabtree as their total output for 1957. And four of these come from the other side of the Atlantic. And one of those four concerns a different Crabtree!

We may well ask why? What are our Boards of Studies doing? Hordes of graduate students arrive in this country with every boat that docks from India and Pakistan. Are they directed towards the study of Crabtree?

They are not! And who can we blame? I will not answer that question. I can but say that the picture is a gloomy one, and one that will have to be taken into consideration when we come to plan handling the 'bulge' in our higher degrees in subcommittees.

The picture, as I have said, is a gloomy one — but there is light. When I turn from that black picture, which is the work of others, to that other picture — a picture of my own Crabtree research — it is a vastly different story. And I say this with all modesty. Sir, we read too often, these days, of parts of our great and noble English heritage being carried across the Atlantic to find their homes in, and to grace American libraries and museums. Only occasionally do we hear of movement in the opposite direction. I have found in an American library a large unwieldy folio album. I found it, as I shall later relate, almost entirely by chance. It is a vast collection of material in the hand of Joseph Crabtree. The manuscript was in the possession of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. It is now in my possession. And I can here and now tell you that it is my fixed intention that that manuscript shall remain in this country until the Morgan Library holds its next stocktaking.

I found this manuscript by the merest chance. I was wandering, my mind on entirely other matters, hardly seeing where I was going, about the cellar of the Morgan Library, having left my desk for a reason I don't propose to enlarge on here. Abstractedly I pushed open a door, turned on a light and there before me on top of a cistern was a vast book in what I believe is known as 'prayerbook binding'. I opened it, forgetful of my reason for entering the room. On the inside cover was written: *Poems — Joseph Crabtree*. I put the book under my arm and left the building. I may say that I never re-entered that more than historic room where I had made my find. The next time that I approached that door, I saw that it had written on it in stark simplicity the one word LADIES. As I say, I never entered it again. That was how I found my find.

Now let me speak of the contents. Alas, these must be something to me of a disappointment. I had hoped that this huge volume would be packed from cover to cover with the writings of the great man whose memory we tonight celebrate with reverence. It is on the whole, however, somewhat fragmentary material which is to be found in those mighty pages. The longest item in the book is a complete holograph manuscript of Crabtree's best-known and most tasteless performance: *On a Codpiece*. I do not propose to quote from this at all. This unhappy production, offspring of two dubious sources, Robert Burns and the pseudo-Byron, is alas only too well-known to all in this room. I must say no more about it than that it provides a number of readings which differ markedly from the Textus Receptus which circulates in grubby typescript among the boys of the lower forms of our great public schools. And it cannot be anything but a source of the greatest grief to me to have to say to you that when one compares the original with this nauseating Textus Receptus, a finding of which has always meant instant expulsion, even in the most struggling schools, the circulating version is considerably bowdlerised. This is an unhappy topic — parlons d'autre chose!

Many of the pages of the *Crow Ms* are devoted to little scrappy extracts from a presumably never-completed vast autobiography. Firstly it has written on it in rather scrubby writing with some tasteless flourishes the words: *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. The title is a striking one, and it is difficult to think of any other poet than Crabtree who could have thought of it. Most of the verses that follow are distiches. Occasionally there are quatrains, very rarely indeed there are poems of a length greater than these. The first runs thus:

I used to work in a fish shop and now that I am older  
I still have a chip on my shoulder.

I hope that all my hearers have observed the curious metrical anomaly here. We have a long line followed by a shorter line, thus giving a curious epigrammatic tone to the couplet.

This phenomenon is often repeated. It occurs again in another piece which made me at some moments think of the work of a later poet:

When I my lad was twenty,  
I was a proper bastard.  
I kissed the girls in plenty  
And got plastered.

And now my lad I'm thirty,  
I do the best I can,  
But the girls call me 'a dirty  
Old man'.

The tone of the poem seems to me to resemble strikingly that of A.E. Housman, but the later poet was evidently not as interested in metrical experiment as was the great man whom tonight we honour.

I could not, let me here interject, but be surprised to see how often Crabtree anticipated the style and often the matter of poets who came to maturity after his death. I have mused on this matter and found no solution. Can it be, I have asked myself, that later poets had some access to the *Crow Manuscript*? Or is it that Crabtree, by some strange prophetic alchemy, was given the power to feel and write in a way enormously in advance of his age? I cannot answer these questions. Here is another poem which one might, had one not found the poem in its setting, have suggested as the work of a later writer:

I sat beside the sad seashore  
And saw the grey waves breaking slow.  
I thought of one I used to know,  
I thought of one who is no more.  
I hold that man is born to die

After his little time on earth.  
I hold that virtue has its 'worth'  
And vision cometh through the eye.  
The eye is given us to see,  
The ear is given us to hear,  
And be it far or be it near,  
I hold that death will come to me.  
And as I sat beside the waves  
I knew that all was greatly planned,  
That living men still walk the land,  
Though all the dead are in their graves.

Here again is our author in different mood, yet once again anticipatory of something that was yet to come:

With the rush of the rowers in the river  
And the splash of the spray on the shore,  
Who doubts that dread death can deliver  
Firm friends who have followed before?  
I am mad for the music of melons,  
And the seeing of symbols and sin.  
I fret for the fury of felons  
To drown me in delicate din.

The anticipation is not always one of the clothing of a later bard. Sometimes we find a curious topicality. One wonders how Crabtree was to know about events which were not due to eventuate until he had long been in his grave. Observe the following quatrain and notice in it the final short line which I've already commented on, giving something of the effect of the sapphic stanza:

The sordid sappers stationed down in Wilts  
Are madly keen to hear the latest news  
Whether Scotch colonels are to wear the trews,  
Or kilts.

Here again is a piece that is to be regarded as straight autobiographical writing. The pathetic note is sounded:

Much to my mortification  
I was greeted with nothing but laughs,  
When I mooted the foundation  
Of the University of North Staffs.

Occasionally a Continental influence is seen in the verse. Here, for instance, we see that Crabtree's years in France were not totally wasted in the sum of his poetic progress. And it is a piece that cannot but move us and remind us of the writings of St Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though it be a mere two lines:

I was always perfectly happy  
When evil was on the *tapis*.

Most of the verses show no sign of revision. There is however one exception to this. There is the curiously null couplet:

I never had any money when I was twenty,  
But my Uncle Miles had plenty.

This replaces an earlier version, and I must acknowledge the assistance in the deciphering of it of the doyen of Crabtree studies, the Northcliffe Professor. The early version ran, and again you will notice the sapphic shortness of the second line:

I had no money when young, but Uncle Miles  
Had piles.

I am totally unable to suggest any reason for the revision. One short poem indicates, as though we needed any further indication, that Joseph Crabtree knew his Shakespeare and his Suetonius:

The world's a very dismal dump,  
I cannot stick it.  
O that mankind had but one rump,  
That I might kick it.

It's this spirit which is again evident in:

Do you remember an inn, Miranda,  
And all that happened on the verandah?  
Do you remember our foolish plans  
To people the isle with Calibans?

Keats, it may be suggested, is the main influence in the next poem. And in the present state of knowledge, who can tell whether Keats anticipates Crabtree or Crabtree anticipates Keats?

Heard melodies are sweet — O quite —  
But those unheard are sweeter,  
And the poet must reserve the right  
To muck about with the metre.

Another similar quatrain is to me extremely cryptic:

O cuckoo, shall I call thee bird  
Or but a wandering noise?  
I'm a bit of a cuckoo myself, I've heard.  
Boys will be boys.

One's mind turns to transatlantic poetry when one reads:

Wives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives discreet.  
Every evening you will find us  
Warming slippers for their feet.

I should have mentioned earlier one other extremely minor instance of revision. The poem, I must confess, does not betray its point at first reading:

Whether I'm only talking shop  
Or making a speech,  
I like to have a bottle top

Within my reach.

The two words 'bottle top' have been altered in paler ink to 'glottal stop'.

Some of the verses are even more fragmentary than others. One appears to be a sort of extract from a music-hall song. What Crabtree writes of it is entirely unrhymed. It runs:

O Professor Spencer, whatever shall I do?  
I wanted to go to Belfast,  
But the train has gone to Birmingham.

The fourth line of another poem is incomplete. It runs:

He asked the question courteous and polite:  
Who was that lady I saw you with last night?  
But I replied, before you could say 'knife':  
That was no lady, sir, that was ...

And as they say, *caetera diceat*.

Another fragmentary piece reminds me somewhat of a later poet, but I cannot call to mind his name. It runs, as far as it goes, thus:

O wonder wind, whistle,  
Wheeling with down dart,  
Dread damning, dark dashing  
Death draped with raw repose.  
Haste, haste, the hack horrible,  
Green, great he grows,  
Grim, grombling, grating,  
Muddled in madman medlied mart.

And then comes the solitary word 'buckle'. And whether the reference is to the historian of civilisation or to Mr Moneypenny's playmate I shall not venture to hazard a conjecture.

Late in the book is to be found a strange fragment written in what I believe to be prose. It seems at first to be descriptive of events in a curious Welsh village. But as one reads it to the end, one gets the impression that an English village is being described. It is headed *Under Crab Tree*:

The rag and boneman, Mr Rag-and-Bones Jones, is getting ready, old and cold to the marrow, the vegetable marrow, to sleep on his barrow, his long barrow with its pillow of rags and bones and other translations from the classics. The Roman Catholic priest, Father Alters Walters, is cleaning his one yellow Maynooth tooth with holy water. The angry young poet, solemn Dolan — broke his little fingers jammed inextricably in the necks of beer bottles — is already asleep. The dreaming breamings he is driving like a cross Maltese through the dark streets of Soho, while painted ladies push five-pound notes through the windows of his long red motorcar.

(May I interject that this anticipates by a very wide margin the first recorded use of the word 'motorcar' in the *New English Dictionary*.)

Mr Birch, the schoolmaster, is colouring the engravings in his extra-illustrated copy of *The History of the Rod*. But he stops, angrily stops. Where is the red paint? Where indeed is the red paint? Mr Birch little knows that upstairs with the stolen red paint, swathed in the bedroom rug in place of a sari his little daughter Hilda is painting a caste mark on her forehead. And tonight *The History of the Rod* must go uncoloured.

Round the corner in the big houses where all the Professors live, all the big houses in Academe Grove, there is darkness. All the Professors are away. Look through the letterbox where Uncle James lives. There is no sign of life. Dust is on the fishing rods, Uncle James is away lecturing in Baltimore, lecturing in Toronto, lecturing in California. Look through the letterbox where Uncle Hugh lives. Dust is on the beerbottles,

Uncle Hugh is lecturing in Scandinavia. Look at the notice on the door where Uncle Harold lives. It says: 'Back soon. Gone to Duke'. Look at the house where Uncle Terence lives. The notice on his door says: 'Back soon. Gone to Birmingham to look for a house on a six months' tenancy'. The notice on Uncle Geoffrey's door says: 'Back soon. Gone to India'. And the notice on Uncle Jack's door says: 'Back soon. Gone to London to lecture on the Third Programme on Frost and Eliot, and what they owe to me'.

And that alas, Sir, concludes *Under Crab Tree*. It is not for me to draw attention to its vivid imagery, its remarkable power of conjuring up a picture before the mind's eye of the hearer, its subtle rhythms, its close-knit texture, its sombre undertones, its ambiguities and ambivalences - or ambivalencies, as an old aunt of mine used to call them. Let that be the task of others, of younger workers in this field, this spacious but untapped field.

One word more, Sir, and I have done. I have described to you the finding of the *Crow Manuscript*, and I have described to you its contents. I have told how the finding of it was virtually speaking a mere matter of chance. Can it be doubted that a careful, well-planned search would bring to light other autograph manuscripts from the hand of a man whose span of life was no small one. May it not be that in some unexamined closet more of these albums may be found? May we not hope that the complete work of which the *Crow Ms* represents but the *disjecta membra* may be brought to light. May not *Under Crab Tree* yet exist somewhere in its mighty entirety? I leave these questions as posed and unanswered. The answers are obvious and our duty is obvious. Let me, as I thank you for the patient uninterrupted hearing which you have vouchsafed me, express the hope that searchers more able than myself will recover that which I have failed to find in the manuscript of the complete works of Joseph Crabtree — and will read them to us at a subsequent Crabtree dinner. That hope lives ever in me. May I still be alive to be present on that great occasion!