

## THE FAMILY CRABTREE

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It is the aim, the avowed duty, of each member of the Crabtree Foundation to bring his own discipline to the recovery of the life and works of Joseph Crabtree. It is of course recognised in some quarters that the creative imagination is as important a tool in criticism as it is in literature. It relieves the critic of the painful labour of producing facts, and yet it certainly permits the formation of splendid judgements. Whilst it would be false to the aims of the Foundation to admit the propriety of this view at least beyond the narrow limits of judicious illumination and inspiration, my own study must eschew it altogether. I confine myself to a brief and factual inquiry, topographical in its methods and documented from the best sources. I am encouraged to pursue this by the interest that my predecessors have from time to time aroused in the whereabouts of Joseph Crabtree and Joseph Crabtree's writings. I propose to make a deviation northwards from the now well-established Sodbury-Orléans line to Yorkshire, whence came the great and numerous line of Crabtree. I shall note some of the early circumstances which coloured Crabtree's mind, provided some of his earlier but essential experiences and perhaps conditioned his moral attitude.

The seed of several Yorkshire families multiplied greatly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the patterns of their territorial spread from their centres of origin appear as certain well-known geometrical figures such as the isosceles triangle, the acute angle or the asterisk. The Crabtree pattern, on the other hand, is that of a setting sun, or, if you belong to the stellar theorists, the better half of a Brunswick cross. The focus of the Crabtree figure is the little hillside village of Sowerby. Lying in the ultimate confines of Yorkshire between the deep wooded valley of the Calder and the heather-covered moors, it gives shelter to some 600 souls, whose backs are as resolutely turned on their degenerate neighbours in Lancashire as that of a Scotsman is on his native land when Fate and classical education direct his aspirations to a Professorship of English in the University of London. The district I take you to is, as John Crabtree wrote:

an evil beyond the reach of police regulations; pregnant with mischief, it is the resort of the idle and the dissolute; in its beer shops, the haunt of the poacher and the thief at night, are planned in the daytime the succeeding night's spoliations; such houses are too often made the receptacle of their plunder, and the tap is kept in a constant state of replenishment from the profit of their illicit depredations.

In this region, cold, wet, gruesome and inhospitable in its scenery, one giving home to an outspoken, quarrelsome, keen and astute people, its moors and wooded dales the scenes of the fiercest religious controversies and the most horrible crime alike, the Crabtrees originated, and here it was that a young Joe Crabtree appears to have arrived at the age of 12 in the year 1766.

Scholarship, like Joseph Crabtree's paternal grandfather himself, has shown a discreet wisdom in providing for the settlement of this branch of the family to which Crabtree the civil servant and Crabtree the poet were to belong, in the ancient parish of Chipping Sodbury in the southern Cotswolds of Gloucestershire, in a village far from the tribulations of a multitudinous family of inquisitive, critical, and disputatious uncles, aunts and cousins, as incisive in their language as the fruit from which the very family name was derived. Why the young Crabtree was sent on this 200-mile journey to find his early education in Yorkshire is a matter for conjecture, but certain facts of a general nature cannot be ignored. The family tie was indeed a strong one. As a civil servant in the Exchequer and one concerned with the Charities, Crabtree, the poet's father, was well informed of cheap educational resources and doubtless of the residential school established at Rishworth in the parish of Halifax by the will of John Wheelwright some 40 years earlier. By this will, the trustees were:

To pay the yearly sum of forty pounds to a schoolmaster for ever, sufficiently instructed in the Latin and Greek languages and of sound principles.

To teach and instruct such boys as should from time to time become fit to learn the Latin and Greek tongues.

To provide a lodging for the masters and the lodging, boarding and entertainment of the boys.

To pay for ever a sober, discreet and careful woman to be employed in the dressing of victuals, washing, bed-making and the other necessary looking after the boys.

At the age of sixteen each boy to have £5 for the fitting him for some trade or occupation in the choice of the boy and his parents, except that one of the boys that should best be capable of University education should at the age of eighteen years be sent to Cambridge or Oxford, and should there be maintained out of

the estate at the rate of £40 per annum for four years and no longer.

The respectability was guaranteed by the rule that no child was admitted or retained 'who should be evil or wickedly disposed or of lewd conversation'. Entry to this excellent establishment was by nomination of the local trustees, no fees were payable, doubtless the most encouraging feature in the Crabtree arrangements; and there was a very fair chance of the adequate pupil proceeding to a university.

The evidence upon which Crabtree's entry to this school is based is the copy of a communication to a North Riding gentleman who had apparently objected to the veracity of the picture of a Yorkshire school in *Nicholas Nickleby*; in his enthusiasm this gentleman, Captain Ghaistrill, had asserted that such schools as Dotheboys Hall did not exist in North Yorkshire and Dickens must surely have had in mind as his model an infamous West Riding school called *Rushworth*. The Ghaistrill document, imperfectly preserved, lacks the opening lines and much else of the text, but is endorsed 'Mr. Ghaistrill'; the subscription too has been badly mutilated by rats, presumably whilst stored with the Viking Society papers in a warehouse in Kendal, but the letters 'Jos. C' can clearly be deciphered on a sunny April day with the aid of an electron microscope. I shall not weary you with a summary of this long document, which in the main is a record of the aged man's memories of his schooldays and life in the parish of Halifax, supplemented by some interesting adaptations of the journeys of Taylor the water poet and others. Indeed, the brief though moving account of the lonely journey by coach of this twelve-year-old boy through Cheltenham, Tewkesbury, Birmingham, Matlock and Buxton to Oldham, and his long and uncomfortable ride over the wild moors of Blackstone Edge with the badgers or packhorse man bears some verbal if not factual resemblances to the journeys made by Pickwick and other Dickens folk — or is it the other way round?

His short stay with a cousin of his father's at the village of Sowerby gave young Joe his first view of his northern relatives. What he thought of them we do not know except that for a time their hard speech was incomprehensible, and the rough games, football, knurr and spell, and the like, in which the girls also joined, appeared to him wild and savage compared with the gentler pastimes of the Cotswolds, all-in wrestling, shin-kicking and back-biting.

The new criticism, if I have been rightly informed of its methods, would restrict this Foundation to the close analysis of the very works of Crabtree — a task which we know and even Dr. Leavis himself would readily allow to be an almost impossible one despite the bibliographical advances made to us by the learned John Crow and the wily Arthur Brown. Our Orators in turn have demonstrated the futility of the new methods through their imaginative use of traditional scholarship in determining the achievements of an original and scientific mind. The missing canon, the lost quires, the burnt books, the shifted leaf — what are these but an unassailable protection for Crabtree's poetic virtue against the feeble pricks of the new critics, against the puny proings of these auto-coprophagous autopists.

Let us not, however, overstate the other case. The history of literature does not reveal the persistence of genius as a family trait. What it does reveal is the importance of the early cultural milieu. It may not matter that other writers appear in the family Crabtree; it does matter that the family setting was one of active culture and one that provided rich and varied experiences to an observant and gifted youth.

The Foundation will not wish to be wearied by a history of the family Crabtree. Its members, who are mostly likely to have moulded the mind of young Joseph, were as varied in character and occupation as they were prolific in generation.

The probity of Crabtree scholarship debars one from suppressing mention of the deplorable Dick, as reported in *The Leeds Mercury* of 21 February 1738. The cloth-dealers of Yorkshire warned their fellows by public advertisement against a group of swindlers who called themselves 'the Clay lads', downright cheats who practise a cunning confidence trick on the dealers in Broad cloths, Shalloons and Calimancoes. Their leader was Richard Crabtree, cousin of the poet's father.

Nor should I spend time on another cousin, the Reverend William, that 'burning and shining light' of the Baptist chapel at Bradford. His biographer's words incidentally strike a pertinent warning note in Crabtree studies:

Some apprehensions have been entertained that many of Mr. Crabtree's friends may have expected more particulars of the good man than are now laid before them. To such the author would say that Mr. C. kept no diary and but few district memorandums of what passed in his course through life, materials were far from abundant. Many accounts have been given from the memory of his friends, yet it is dangerous to

venture on reports in a work which ought if possible to be in all particulars authentic.

Born in Wadsworth in 1720 and living, like so many of the Crabtrees, to a great age — he died in 1820 — William was orphaned at 8 years. To use his own words:

At 17 I became my own master; I was boarded in a wicked village, next door to hell itself; given to Sabbath-breaking, drunkenness, profane cursing and swearing, I learned all manner of wickedness.

His conversion soon followed, flowering from 'that tincture of early puritanism' which is from time to time seen in the family of Crabtree through its long history. Nine years before the arrival of the young Joseph Crabtree in the district, William was established as pastor of the Baptist Chapel in Bradford.

I pass quickly by another cousin, John Crabtree, gent., also a contemporary of Joseph's, whose *History of the Parish of Halifax* appeared in 1836, to an earlier member of the family, Henry Krabtree, in whom of the Crabtrees there first appeared those qualities of mind, that independence of judgment, that scientific curiosity and authority, that literary skill, and that avidity for experience that formed the basis of Crabtree's culture, all this in a region where, to quote John Crabtree, 'the march of intellect ascends but slowly up these mountain valleys'. Henry Krabtree was born in Sowerby and went to school with Tillotson (the Archbishop), but no more is known of his early life; he was admitted to the Chapelry of Todmorden at the Restoration, and there he lived for the remaining 30 years of his life. He married a rich local widow in about 1675. His relevance to this Foundation is not as a contributor to the family Crabtree, but for the range of his other activities. Henry Krabtree's famous *Merlinus Rusticus* appeared in 1685, a country almanack, embodying a great deal of rural love, scientific and theological observation, and a mass of contemporary astrology. Amongst many items of advice for the promotion of good are these:

March.	This month's for mutton; old sack no less. Always provided you avoid excess.
October.	The time now requires that you consult with your Taylor as well as with your Physician. Therefore a good suit of warm cloath is worth 2 purges and one vomit.
November.	The best exercise is hunting or tracing hares, but be sure that the park or lordship be your own, and then you need not fear an indictment nor a fine at the next sessions.
December.	The best Physick this month is good meat and the strongest drink you can get.

But this first man of Crabtree letters must ever attract admiration for his superb and acute necrologues. His register of the chapelry of Todmorden is the official record by law appointed of the births and deaths of his parishioners, but its unique interest springs from his commentaries upon the arid entries of such a document. Think of them as you will, the assessment of a man at his death, whether coloured at times by laboured humour, astrology, rustic love or prejudice and at others by high moral and intellectual standards, is a Crabtree custom and in Henry Krabtree's register we may seek and find the germ of Joseph Crabtree's splendid funeral verses. Let me cite but one of Henry's from his register for 1667:

John Bairstow of Hollow Pin, seeing both his daughter and his wife departed in peace, presently began to offer sacrifice unto Bacchus for joy. But he continued so long adoring of him that Apollo, the God of Wisdom and Physicks, was enraged at him and struck him with a pestilential feaver, which thing when John felt it raging violently in him confessed his sin and humbly implored Apollo to cure him, which ye ingenious God presently did with I know not what cooling kinds of purging, and he cleansed his body of ye jugs of old ale and his throat of ye mutton stakes that stuck in it. But lo, as soon as he felt himself cured, he forgot to return thanks to Apollo and began again pelmel day and night to worship Bacchus in honour of whom he sacrificed sheep and swallowed an ocean of old ale. But Apollo, seeing ye magnitude of his ingratitude, caused ye Sun to dry up all ye rivers, fountains, springs and streams of strong drinke, and then was all the Liquor-ladys, Ale-nymphs and Beer-brats lamentably left upon dry ground and so remained in a most pitiful posture, weeping and wailing. Which, when John Bairstow saw and heard and could find none of the decoction of malt to comfort ye cockles of his heart withall, he returned home to Hollow pin, being situated in barren and mountainous ground. It is to be supposed that being overcharged with immoderate sorrow, his heart burst for very grieffe and he died in a rage for Want of Ale and came to Todmorden to be buried ye 1 May 1667.

Can we not see in the life and writings an unbreakable link in the chain of literature, a bridge from Sir Thomas Brown to Joseph Crabtree himself?