

CRABTREE, THE GODSON AND THE LEADING LADY

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My first foray into serious Crabtree scholarship was in 1997, when I was asked to review *The Crabtree Orations 1954-1994*. The review of that splendid volume appeared in the *UCL Newsletter* of September 1997, and in it I was delighted to be able to add to the dos Santos Oration my discovery of an Ms in Portugal that referred to an Englishman whose name was translated as *Senhor Maça Acida* ('sour apple'). Unfortunately, this precious document was used by a housemaid to prop up a leaking washing machine. It became papier-maché.

The honour of being 'revealed' as the 2003 Orator, the first woman Orator of the London Foundation — although there has already been one in the Italian Chapter — provides much anxiety, but also a wonderful occasion to add to our awareness of Joseph Crabtree.

We know from numerous Orations, including that of my immediate predecessor, that Crabtree loved foreign travel and that, as well as his involvement in business, he also pursued cultural, scientific and diplomatic ventures. Thus it will be no surprise that Crabtree spent much of the academic year 1834-35 in Paris. This was partly to act as a chaperone to a final-year Edinburgh medical student — his godson, the son of a Baptist surgeon family friend from Clifton in Wiltshire — and partly to pursue his own agenda. Like many foreign students at the time, including British and American ones, Crabtree's godson was to spend his final year gaining unique hands-on clinical experience in the great Paris hospitals.

The polymathic Crabtree had long been interested in medicine, and this is not surprising considering that he had suffered from a whole range of the then prevalent itchy and pustular skin disorders. For treatment of these conditions he had turned to the famous Yorkshire skin specialist, the Quaker Robert Willan (1757-1812), who, like Crabtree's godson, had been educated in Edinburgh. Willan's famous work *Delineations of Cutaneous Diseases*, published posthumously in 1817, includes a portrait of Crabtree with skin symptoms suggestive of another common condition regularly treated with mercury and generally given the name of one's enemy — in England's case 'the French disease', and vice versa. The simpler skin diseases were generally treated with vile-smelling pastes and powders — no wonder the family went in for toiletries. Crabtree, who admired French medicine, felt that Paris would be a more discreet location for checking on his worrying symptoms — in the event, false alarms — and in any case, he knew that just as his godson would find books — both in English and French — cheaper in Paris than at home, so his own medicines and medical treatment would be cheaper. He was aware that his godson had not studied syphilis in Edinburgh — it was not on the curriculum — and so he had not been able to impart to his godfather anything useful on the topic when Crabtree had attempted to show interest in his godson's studies. Crabtree was, though, aware of the high reputation of Philippe Ricord, the French-American physician, one of his godson's future teachers. He was carrying out research on venereal diseases and, with considerable prescience, was doubtful about the efficacy of mercury in the treatment of syphilis. Ricord worked at the Venereal Hospital, where foreigners gained entry to his Free Clinic, opened only in 1834, more easily than the French. They were also able to join the groups listening to Ricord lecturing outdoors beneath the linden trees in the hospital grounds during the summer. Crabtree also knew of Ricord's caution that 'syphilis is a disorder to be studied without being contracted' and of his witty expression of surprise that a colleague, also carrying out research on the topic, had difficulty in obtaining enough vaginal material for his experimental studies. Most people, declared Ricord, were familiar with the influence of Paris on vaginal hypersecretion.

One reason for Crabtree's admiration of French medicine — and Nigel Mason will be interested in this — is that during the wars he had managed, in disguise and incognito, to infiltrate behind the lines of Napoleon's army. Since he had also been free to observe Wellington's troops, Crabtree was able to compare the surgical work of the English with that of the French surgeons working on the battlefields and in the field hospitals. He saw how they dealt with bullet, cannon and sword wounds in the field and knew how they now, in civilian life, welcomed the occasional bullet wounds in wounded or dying victims of a duel (even though duelling was in fact now banned in France), or the numerous stab wounds from masked attackers during Carnival in Paris in the springtime. Crabtree had been most impressed by the amputations carried out in the field and was aware that the military surgeons also had to treat their soldiers for the 'English disease'. He knew, too, that some of them were now

working in the Paris hospitals, including the Invalides, established for the war wounded, and that they still carried out their ward rounds in full military uniform. This was to raise and maintain the morale of the veterans. Crabtree welcomed the opportunity of witnessing again the handiwork of these men, albeit in more tranquil surroundings in these post-Napoleonic days. His godson knew how Crabtree, who had worn many uniforms throughout his life, loved them and he thought that this was why his godfather wanted to visit Paris and the Invalides.

But Crabtree also had an emotional reason for accompanying his godson to France on what he feared might be his final visit to Paris. This was his desire to see Madame Mars, the leading French Comedy actress, who, although she would now be in her 50s, had been a real beauty in her late teens when he first knew her — well and rather closely at that.

Crabtree really loved Paris. He agreed with J. Rutherford Alcock — yes, that was his name — who, in his introduction to a translation of F. S. Ratier's work *Medical Guide to the Principal Hospitals of Paris* in 1828, stated:

It might be easy in London to select a hundred people that could not tell the boundaries or extent of an adjoining county, yet it would be surprising if ninety-nine of them could not descant most fluently on all the merits and demerits of Paris; the magnificence of its palaces, the danger and dirt of its streets, the beauties of the Louvre, and the horrors of the Catacombs; the grace of the women and the affectation of the men, and a thousand et-ceteras.

Thus he welcomed this opportunity for chaperoning his godson and for enjoying, even at eighty years of age, the delights of Paris. He definitely did not feel past it. After all, he had been on HRT, hormone replacement therapy for men, which was already being privately produced from monkey gland tissue as part of the wave of new scientific physiological investigations gathering such pace in Western Europe during the early nineteenth century. It was darkly hinted that the French physiologist François Magendie, who, like his English friend the neurophysiologist Marshall Hall also working on animals, was involved in this work. Those — excluding Crabtree — who had seen Magendie's demonstrations at the Windmill Street Anatomy School in London regarded him as the arch vivisector. (Stirrings of the incipient anti-vivisection movement in England.) A British medical journal of the time, also critical of this physiological research which threatened the supremacy of anatomy in the medical curriculum, reported that during one of his demonstrations in London, Magendie had grumbled about the restless and yelping animal with '*Ah mon Dieu, il ne comprend pas le français*'.

Crabtree and his godson crossed the Channel to Boulogne by packet ship in mid-October 1834 for the beginning of the medical course on 1st November. During the rough crossing his godson, unused to sea travel, vomited all over him. Crabtree's only remedy, since he could not get at his luggage to change his clothes, was to smother himself with 4711, on which his family had a franchise at home and which was liberally supplied to him by a travelling apothecary on board ship when Crabtree showed his passport.

In Boulogne, with its pure and invigorating air, Crabtree insisted on visiting, before they left for Paris, the establishment for sea-bathing opened only in 1825 and which had since attracted a great number of visitors. Crabtree loved watching the women emerge from the water with their pantaloons and — in those brave enough to plunge even deeper — their bodices too, all wet, clinging and in some cases deliciously transparent. Crabtree felt justified that here began his godson's useful as well as pleasant and memorable introduction to living female anatomy, an essential complement to his existing knowledge gained from his dissections in the dead house of the Edinburgh medical school.

From Boulogne, the two men travelled to Paris by carriages called *diligences*, squashed along with thirteen other passengers and three on top, each with their free luggage allowance of 40 to 50 lbs. Not Crabtree's scene at all. He soon regretted not having decided to take his own carriage to France, a not uncommon practice then. His only consolations were the overnight stops at inns where good food and fine wines were served with a clean napkin and a silver fork by pretty wenches who sometimes served even more.

Once they had arrived in Paris, Crabtree dropped his godson at the house of a rentier, Monsieur Fallon, who let rooms to students in Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, a little distant from the city centre. Crabtree himself proceeded to Meurice's hotel at No 323 Rue St Honoré in 'a fine and agreeable spot' near the palace and garden of the Tuileries. This central hotel was highly recommended to the English and Crabtree appreciated the fact that the hotel was good at forwarding letters and it provided confidential couriers. Crabtree planned to use these for transporting his medicines should his worst fears about his condition be realised.

Crabtree had warned his godson that when coming to join him in a restaurant for dinner, he was to avoid meandering in the subterranean haunts in the nearby area of the Palais Royal, a bit like the public entertainment area of the Vauxhall Gardens in London. This was because he feared him falling into the hands of courtesans and pickpockets who frequented the area. But taking seriously his duties as a godfather, Crabtree had contemplated taking him at a later date to the theatre in the Palais Royal, which presented farces of an indelicate nature. He thought such experience in a controlled environment might be morally useful.

Crabtree came to be impressed by his godson's sensitivity to the architecture and to the music in the French churches, especially the organ playing in Notre Dame, which he had found sublime. At the same time, Crabtree understood his anti-popery harsh criticism of the smells, bells and processions which the young man, used to much simpler church practices, had described as hypocrisy. Crabtree also realised that the Irish question was causing political controversy back home. His godson regularly read the English newspapers in the comfortable Galignani Reading Room at No 18 Rue Vivienne (near the Palais Royal), where he paid a subscription of 5 francs per month and did much of his studying. The smart French also used the Reading Room. As a young Tory, the godson was irritated by the impact of the Irish issue on his party. Nevertheless, Crabtree realised that in spite of himself, his godson really did like the spectacle and drama. So on the 1st of January 1835, on one of the great French holidays, he determined to take him to the Opéra Français, which bore the official title of the Académie Royale de Musique.

On that New Year's Day the opera was a Mephistophelean piece, *Robert le Diable*, which had reached its 120th performance and contained a range of colourful characters. Mindful of the need for some economy, the godson had suggested that they should go into the restricted view area at 2 francs 10 centimes. But Crabtree was not prepared to slum it there so they took seats in the stalls at 10 francs. 'Dash it all,' thought Crabtree, 'I want to see the women close up, and in any case I'm paying.' Both godson and Crabtree were impressed by the lighting and the standard of technology for the scene changing, the fire precautions and crowd-control measures. (The impact of Descartes's mechanistic philosophy was clearly visible.) Crabtree was, though, ambivalent about his godson's somewhat naive observation that the small number of women present, as was usual, were all virtuous looking in comparison with many of those in English theatres, which actually encouraged *les dames de plaisir* to enter the theatres by setting aside a particular section of the house especially for their reception. In Paris, he thought, they just didn't enter. He was of course simply failing to distinguish the well-dressed high-class courtesans from the non-courtesans some of whom would not have been wives or daughters but mistresses. Crabtree realised that he had better, at some stage, do some godfatherly eye-opening on this one. At the same time, Crabtree definitely did not want to put his godson off women altogether.

Crabtree came to know that his godson was reading Byron. This delighted him. After all, according to Bennett, Crabtree was no mean poet himself, having written — so we were told — a substantial part of the work attributed to Wordsworth. Whilst he commended his godson's thrift in building up his personal library, including some non-medical books in English, from Galignani's press in Paris, at a lower cost, he feared his godson might be reading between the lines, seeking illumination of stories he may have heard about Byron's lifestyle and in particular that he favoured young men and boys. Crabtree was in no way judgmental but felt his godson might still be a little too young. In any case, Crabtree's concern was absolutely unnecessary. As his godson's diary later revealed, he was reading Byron's *The Bride of Abydos* — *A Turkish Tale* and was particularly touched by an episode between the hero Selim and his beloved Zuleika. Furthermore, entries in his diary later revealed, as Ratier had predicted, the godson's admiration of the French women and scorn towards the men.

For many overseas medical students in Paris at that time no period of study would have been complete without a practical course in obstetrics, or midwifery, as Crabtree's godson always called it. The

special maternity hospital called La Maternité had previously accepted both medical students — all male — and student midwives — all female. But in 1831 both sets were excluded because, as Velpeau, one of the godson's teachers, had pointed out, there were complaints that these two groups '*font plus d'enfants que d'accouchements*' ('make more babies than deliveries'). For this reason, Crabtree's godson was obliged to take a private course in *toucher* ('touching') and *accouchements* ('deliveries') with Madame Lachapelle, a famous midwife, at her private establishment.

Crabtree could not resist going along with his godson on his first session. There were three women to be examined, first by Madame Lachapelle herself, and then by the students, who had paid for the privilege. The godson, awaiting his turn and keeping his eye on the pregnant supine women, shared with Crabtree his amusement at how the moral people at home would be shocked if such a course were to be introduced there. The person proposing to introduce that kind of course would be hounded from society, whereas in Paris nothing was thought of it. The young man failed to notice just how stunned his godfather was by the spectacle. Intimacy and familiarity with a lover's anatomy and responses to certain explorations in the boudoir was one thing, but observing a group of inexperienced — or so he thought — young men prodding and probing three strange pregnant women was almost too much for Crabtree! At that moment, Madame Lachapelle started to demonstrate the use of the crochet instrument with a sharp hook for extracting a foetus in the breach position. Such violation! Crabtree fainted.

The visit to the *Opéra Français* had been but a prelude to taking his godson to the smaller and less elegant *Théâtre Français* on 15th January — the anniversary of Molière's birth — to see two of Molière's plays. One of these — *Le Malade Imaginaire* (*The Hypochondriac*) — would, he felt sure, with its medical context, appeal to his godson.

Since the seats were cheaper, they obtained a private box for 6 francs 6 centimes. What most appealed to Crabtree was the prospect of seeing in the other piece — *Le Misanthrope* — his once beloved Madame Mars (see page 143), the leading lady of the theatre, although she would, as mentioned earlier, be a woman of 56 years of age. She was playing Célimène, the young love of Alceste, the principal male role.

Crabtree, although excited, tried to settle down in the darkened theatre and looked forward to a period of quiet, private, personal indulgence to admire his love of long ago. Imagine his consternation when he heard his godson suddenly burst forth with a paean of praise for Madame Mars. I quote:

Her face is exceedingly sweet, pleasing and intelligent. Her forehead in particular is much superior to that of most females either in our own or other countries ... She does not look more than 25 years ... Not certainly what would be called beautiful — but her smile and method of speaking are absolutely enchanting. I might look at her the whole evening without understanding the language, and come away perfectly satisfied with the night's entertainment.

Crabtree's godson was, for Madame Mars, a toy boy for the taking.

Little did either of them realise that the leading lady's husband, who understood English well, was sitting in the adjacent box leaning against the Doric column dividing the boxes, anxiously watching this new first night of his wife's performance in this familiar role, but one for a much younger actress. At the end of the performance, he followed Crabtree and his godson out of the theatre. Following the French *Code d'Honneur*, he challenged the godson to a duel for daring as one so young and inexperienced — and an English youth at that — to even speak of his wife. The distinguished and prosperous-looking older gentleman — Crabtree of course — would, so he declared, have been tolerated as an admirer. In reality, the actress's husband, who actually depended on his wife's earnings, was heavily in debt and was an accomplished opportunist. He reckoned that this older gentleman would hardly be willing to substitute himself for the young man as the duellist; his own performance in the art would in any case, he realised, be none too polished by now.

As Monsieur Mars surmised, Crabtree suddenly preferred not to give the former military and still illustrious surgeon Dupuytren of the Hôtel Dieu — where he was also a specialist on syphilis — an opportunity to practise in such an emergency his old battlefield skills for dealing with bullet or sword wounds, depending on Monsieur Mars's choice of weapon. And whilst Samuel Cooper, a surgeon of the Napoleonic campaigns and later a

professor of surgery in University College London, might quote in his *Dictionary of Practical Surgery* the quip of Hennen, a fellow surgeon, that 'It is better to live with three limbs than to die with four', Crabtree still did not wish to risk losing a leg, however skilful and pretty the amputation. The Hôtel Dieu was probably the most ancient hospital in Europe and was then located on the Ile de la Cité, facing the porch of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Crabtree was also not keen on finding himself in a state of delirium, fancying that he was hearing the angels playing their harps and beckoning him from this world, when in fact he would be hearing the strains of the organ and the choir of the great cathedral.

Crabtree fell for Monsieur Mars's ploy. He paid up handsomely with a promissory note which, as an honourable man, he intended to honour. Just at that moment, Madame Mars herself appeared. She looked at the three men. Crabtree did not know if she had seen the exchange of the note. But she had certainly caught his godson's eye. She left with her husband. Crabtree, with a mixture of irritation and relief, decided that he would continue with his original plans for the evening by taking his godson to the Périgord, a very fashionable Paris restaurant in the Palais Royal. It was owned by a forbear of Boulestin, the famous Parisian restaurateur of the 1920s.

Crabtree and his godson decided to leave their theatre programmes and opera glasses at their hotel first, and Crabtree asked the concierge to order a carriage to take them to the Périgord. He had decided to ask for his favourite comfort food — mashed swede. At this, Boulestin's ancestor whispered in Crabtree's ear, 'Monsieur, the swede is used in France to feed the farm animals, and rarely for the human beings. But you are English. Of course I will serve it to you.'

Despite this jibe, the meal was enjoyable and Crabtree relaxed. Suddenly, Madame Mars appeared at their table with Crabtree's promissory note in her hand. She knew her husband well and had guessed that something untoward had happened. The hotel whose address was on the note had told her where they were dining. Crabtree was suddenly tingling with anticipation that she had recognised him from all those years ago and that she, like him, had wanted to renew their old loving relationship. But alas, Madame Mars' face showed not the slightest glimmer of recognition. As she handed back his promissory note with an apology for her husband's behaviour, she was in fact following up not the devotion of Crabtree, but the more recent admiration she had developed for his godson. She had noticed the young man at the theatre, had been immediately captivated by him, and was not going to lose him now.

Poor Crabtree — he had come to Paris for some 'va va voom'. But now he had to accept that, after all, (although he did not understand the underlying reason, not having had the advantage of reading Steve Jones in *Y: The Descent of Men*), if you have a Y chromosome, *age* matters.