

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
Second Meeting
Crabtree: The Obscure Decade and After

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Gentlemen, it is my great honour this evening, at this second dinner in Melbourne of the Foundation that bears his name, to give the oration on that most obscure figure in English Literature, Joseph Crabtree.

We are indebted indeed to Professor Arthur Brown for the establishment in Melbourne of a Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation and for conveying in safety to these shores the likeness we look upon tonight. What sensitivity there is in those eyes! What suffering that jaw tells! One cannot approach the life of this man without feelings of sadness for what might have been. Not to him came any intimations of immortality. Belatedly we shall try to bring him retrospective justice.

You will appreciate, I am sure, the difficulties under which a person researching the life of Crabtree from as far away as Australia, is obliged to labour. Furthermore, the conspiracy of silence against Crabtree in his own country doubles the difficulties of research. One must be alert to the most obscure allusions. It is here that I am conscious of inadequacy, for I do not possess the degree of scholarship displayed by previous orators, some of whose papers I have had the delight of perusing. But if I have brought inadequate scholarship to the task, I trust that, on the other hand, I have not drawn too heavily on what a previous orator termed the creative imagination (which) relieves the critic of the painful labour of producing facts and yet certainly permits the formation of splendid judgements.

As it is likely in this new Chapter that there are some who are still unfamiliar with aspects of Joseph Crabtree's early years, I shall take the liberty of recapitulating briefly from some of the papers of my predecessors.

Crabtree, as I am sure you are all aware, was born on St Valentine's Day 1754 of an ancient Yorkshire family. He obtained his early education at a distance from Yorkshire in the gentle Cotswold country, at the village school of Chipping Sodbury. His brilliance and, alas, some of his weaknesses were already evident even in those years. He went on to Oxford and was sent down in 1773. This date I shall later presume to query; I think the year might prove to be 1772, as I shall endeavor to show. There then begins what has been called one of the obscurest decades in Crabtree's long life. It is on this decade, and the next, that I have concentrated my research. For this reason I have taken as the title: *The Obscure Decade and After*.

Very little indeed is heard of the poet after he was sent down from Oxford until his Uncle Oliver found a place for him in Orleans in 1783 with Crabtree and Hillier, wine shippers. It is to this period that we owe his delightful *Ode to Claret*. His uncle was a morose man; a Methodist and a tee-totaller. Through fear of him Joseph was frequently given to disguising his name on

his poems - a practice that doubles the difficulty of tracing his work. That he knew Wordsworth closely in these years is, of course, well established; indeed, there is now little doubt that much more of Crabtree's verse than was previously realized, has been wrongly attributed to Wordsworth.

But another link with Wordsworth was traced only two decades ago by Professor James Sutherland. Crabtree was, in fact, the lover of Annette Vallon. She became of child by him at a time when his life was being rendered most insecure by his uncle. Professor Sutherland has it that Wordsworth, conscious of the literary debt he owed Crabtree, accepted paternity of the child.

Having outlined his earlier years from the research of others, let me return now to the obscure decade between 1773 and 1783, that is, between Oxford and Orleans. These were, you will remember, years of great expansion by Britain; of great exploration in the southern hemisphere. It would not be inappropriate to ask tonight: Did Crabtree display any interest in these developments? It strains credulity to believe that, in the course of his long life, he was oblivious to antipodean discovery. When Crabtree's life ended on St Valentine's Day 1854, it had spanned the whole recorded history of the East coast of Australia, from Cook's discovery of it in 1770 to the return to England of Victoria's first Lieutenant-Governor.

What had England's poets to say of these events? Surprisingly little. Certainly we have Goldsmith's lines written when Cook was about to depart to observe the transit of Venus:

*In these bold times when Learning's sons explore
The distant climate and the savage shore;
When wise astronomers to India steer,
And quit for Venus many a brighter here –*

Let me pause for a moment. When Goldsmith wrote these lines, Crabtree was a youth of fourteen. I do not think, when one considers these words, there can be serious doubt that, stylistically, the youth garnered much from Goldsmith's work. There are striking similarities between the two, both in technique and concept. If one takes the lines I have just read, one finds not only a similarity of iambics and of rhyming couplets, but also in nobility of language.

But to return to the theme I wish to pursue: was Crabtree, though only fourteen, aware of Cook's discoveries? I confess I had assumed not. I had previously found only two brief fragments from his pen attributable to these years, and both of these fragments suggest delicate love poems. You might well know them.

*In the garden, in the garden, on the first of June
I did see her, I did see her, oh, near came I to swoon!*

And the other:

*Softly stepped she, stepped she soft,
To my lonely room aloft,
Where I waited, heart abound,*

Praying we would ne'er be found.

But there is a perplexing trisich I have found in which Crabtree is looking back on earlier years. This warrants close attention:

*Oft when quiet upon my couch I lay,
A voice within my deeper heart would say:
Why art thou a child of Feb'ry, not May?*

These lines have puzzled students of the earlier Crabtree verse for many years. May I make so bold as to suggest that Crabtree was engrossed here with the riddle of time. To be more specific, he is pondering on the change to the Gregorian Calendar which had occurred just two years before his birth. You will recall that the combined effect of the judgment was to eliminate over three months from the former calendar. This, then, gives clear meaning to the lines. Why, he is asking was I born in February instead of May?

Is it not reasonable to suppose that such a youth would take avid interest in questions of time? in chronometers? longitude? interest in the impending departure of Cook to observe the transit of Venus? And does not such a supposition clarify for us those other-wise enigmatic lines of his:

*O Venus, star of ev'ry panting Lover
In this our chilly northern clime,
Let no cloud thy sweet face cover,
Turn to Green that face divine.*

Green, after all, was the astronomer who sailed on that first voyage of Cooks. Crabtree is beseeching Venus to aid Green in his efforts to unlock the mysteries of time. So here, I suggest, we have a young man deeply immersed in the purpose of this great voyage to the Pacific.

Cook, you will remember, returned from his first voyage in 1771 and departed again in 1772. Crabtree would by then have been eighteen years of age. I believe that 1772 was the year that he was sent down from Oxford, not 1773. I ask you to give thought to my reasoning, With Cook on the Resolution sailed a mysterious young able seaman. He signed on under the name of Thomas Perry. At the end of the voyage, in 1775, Cook had in his keeping several verses written by

Perry; the originals may yet be seen in an album at the Dixson Library. I would ask you to listen to this extract

*It is now my brave boys we are clear of the Ice
And keep a good heart if you'll take my advice
We are out of the cold my brave Boys do not fear
For the Cape of Good Hope with good hearts we do steer*

Beaglehole, Cooks noted biographer, remarks here somewhat churlishly, "the muse overcame the otherwise able-bodied seaman."

Admittedly the lines I have quoted do lack the delicate craftsmanship we normally expect of Crabtree, but we must bear in mind that here is a young man writing to lift the spirits of common sailors long removed from home. And even in this somewhat centering verse, there are still traces of the skill we associate with Crabtree: the telling alliteration of "Brave Boys"; the rhyming couplets; the warmth of feeling.

Was "Thomas Perry", then, a pseudonym for Joseph Crabtree? Let us, examine the name. Perry: what is "perry"? Is it not a cider-like drink, made from the pear? And, if we examine Toff's eighteenth century *Historie of the Parish of Chipping Sodbury*, do we not find that this village of Crabtree's youth was noted for its perry? I quote a passage:

- - the perry on which young men do become unseemly drunk at festivals and turn their minds to wenching.

So would this not be a probable nom de plume for Crabtree to take?

But there is other, much stronger evidence, a quite neglected poem not in the album with the other, a poem which may be seen in the Forster papers held at Greenwich Maritime Museum:

*The ship rides shuddering down the moon,
The night wind cries, How soon? How soon?
And I below to my hammock creep.
To dream of these as I drift to sleep,
And oh, 'tis far and away thou art,
Far from my arms, tho' close to my heart,
But close to my heart is scarce suffice
When my all with thee I fain would splice
Ah, what is man without that boon?
The ship rides shuddering down the moon.*

What a different note this is! This, surely, is the work of a man writing from his heart, to his distant love. In form it is close to a *rondeau de Villon*; in imagery it is rich indeed. But chiefly my attention was caught by its title: *Malus Sylvestris*. The reason for my interest will be self-evident to those among you with horticultural leanings; *malus sylvestris* is nothing less than botany's name for the crabtree, the wild apple! Here, then is a clue thrown out for those with eyes to see! To whom was the poem addressed? I suggest that if we could learn why Crabtree was sent down from Oxford we might well have the answer.

But why should he have been attempting to conceal his identity aboard ship? I believe that this was an attempt to conceal his identity as a poet from the prying John Reinhold Forster, the eminent scientist who sailed with Cook. Forster you may remember was described by Beaglehole as "dogmatic, humourless, suspicious, censorious, pretentious, contentious, demanding." In the margin of this touching poem is the brief note: "Confiscated from Perry." One can envisage the scene: the young man, trying to conceal himself on deck, while pouring out his longings; old Forster coming upon him, and being outraged by the explicit words: - my all with thee I fain would splice.

On this voyage, Cook's second the great explorer did not return to the Australian coast, so we cannot claim that Crabtree – still assuming Perry to have been Crabtree - touched on these shores, but certainly he was closely associated with men to whom the discovery of Port Jackson, Botany Bay and the rest were common topics of conversation.

On his third voyage Cook was killed; this was some three years before Crabtree went to Orleans. Not until 1780 did England know of her great son's death. There can be little doubt that a brief poem marked "J.C. '80", found, strangely, among Wordsworth's papers, was written when Crabtree heard the tragic news:

*Savage hands my Captain smote
As he moved towards his boat,
No one heard his desperate pleas
As he fell upon his knees.
Bligh was there and Clarke there, too,
There was naught that they could do.
Through England now sounds deep lament
For our brave Cook whose life is spent.*

It is not among his more subtle poems," but it does not lack in immediacy and feeling. I quote it primarily to present further evidence that he had indeed been with Cook. Notice the, my Captain - Savage hands my Captain smote, and the deep personal involvement of the writer.

Soon Crabtree was to go to Orleans. Unfortunately his years there were to remove him from the orbit of the great British explorers. He descended instead into the depressing company of his Uncle Oliver. There the obscure decade ends. But I shall go on a little. In Orleans as we know he met Wordsworth and Annette Vallon. We must remember that Wordsworth at this time was only twenty-one, Crabtree thirty-seven. It should not surprise us that Annette, then twenty-five was drawn to the more mature and sophisticated man; moreover she was a Royalist, whereas the young Wordsworth was swept away by the Republican cause. For his part, Crabtree was flexible in his political views, though at times, owing to his refusal to learn French, he found it difficult to know which cause to espouse. Reports given him by Wordsworth were undoubtedly slanted toward the Republicans, those by Annette, toward the Royalists.

Wordsworth's acceptance of the paternity of Annette's child out of a sense of obligation to Crabtree is undoubtedly in keeping with the younger poet's nature. One might say that at this time he was intuitively seeking melancholy as the mainspring of his verse. But one suspects that Wordsworth had a more immediate motive as well. He had intended, you will remember, to be ordained into the ministry of the Church of England, but, but was beginning to doubt seriously that he could submit himself to the reactionary established church. In this connection you will recall the tenor of his unpublished letter to the Bishop of Llandaff and its attack on the British monarchy and aristocracy. Thus it is probable that he saw the acceptance of paternity of Joseph and Annette's child, as a way out of his dilemma. The church could hardly countenance his intention of marrying a Catholic.

Unhappily, the two men were not destined to remain long together in France. As soon as

Wordsworth heard that war had again been declared between England and France, he departed. Crabtree, loyal to Annette, remained by her for her confinement. Then it was that an English-speaking friend told him of the war. Reluctantly he escaped.

Friendship, it seems, led Crabtree on his return to England to seek Wordsworth out. He traced him at last to Bristol, to the home of Robert Jones, a school friend. Here Wordsworth was pouring out the poems he at first called Salisbury Plain. After the visit from Crabtree and their long discussion of Annette, he changed the title to the more satisfying, Guilt and Sorrow.

We can deduce that it must have been at this time that Crabtree was writing his splendid Ode on the Return of Governor Arthur Phillip from the Colony of New South Wales, an event of which he undoubtedly heard as he passed through London on his search for Wordsworth. I explained at the foundation dinner of this Chapter last year, the manner in which a copy of this ode was found in Melbourne among the papers of Arthur Charlwood, my great-grandfather, a bookseller printer of No. 7 Bourke Street East. It is fitting that I mention Bryan Bennett who identified the ode as Crabtree's work.

But let us return to Crabtree at the time we believe he wrote this ode. We can be reasonably confident that he was reunited with Wordsworth in October or November of 1793. Again, we know that early in 1794 both men were at the farm above Keswick called Windy Brow, a place that belonged to William and Raisley Calvert, William being another school friend of Wordsworth's. It was there that a sad falling out occurred, the shadow of which we still sense. One of the Calverts brought Dorothy Wordsworth over from Halifax, where she had been staying. One can deduce what happened. Almost inevitably, Dorothy would have exhibited morbid jealousy because of her brother's devotion to Crabtree. Crabtree, generous friend that he was, departed. In any case, he must by then have been nearing starvation, for you will remember Dorothy's diary tells us: "Our breakfast and supper are of milk, and our dinner chiefly of potatoes, and we drink no tea."

Among Wordsworth's papers two unfinished poems were found, written by Crabtree at this time on the one sheet. Would that we could divine the younger man's feelings upon reading them!

*Oh, Wordsworth, erst companion of my heart,
Where hast thou fled?
Better both thou and I be dead
Than driven by some jealous woman apart.*

And the other, bearing the title, Flight:

*Cold, cold am I and cast away,
Winter and hunger are upon my soul,
By Keswick's peaks no longer can I stay,
Dear God alone can make my spirit whole.*

*Can make my spirit whole again
And lend my heart good cheer*

*And lead me forth o'er hill and fen
Until my mind shall clear.*

*My mind shall clear, I say,
And this black night shall pass,
And on her pillow I shall lay
My weary head at last.*

Undoubtedly he was contemplating return to his beloved Annette, but it is doubtful that he ever reached her. It is sad indeed to reflect that Crabtree at this time again fades from our sight. It is my fervent hope that his movements will yet be traced.

I have been asked if it is likely that he ever visited our shores later in his life. I think not. Strangely, his supposed epitaph was sung around Sydney by that dubious minstrel Roger (*The Rhymer*) Walkhorn, to what air I do not know. But Walkhorn, I am informed, was given to claiming association with the great. He was a shifty individual, transported for theft of a jugged hare. The epitaph admittedly sounds like Crabtree. The Mitchell Librarian has suggested to me that Crabtree might well have written it on the death of a friend, or in anticipation of his own death as he fled from France. Certainly it was composed many years before his actual death in 1854. But as it would appear to be the work of him whom we seek, however inadequately, to honour tonight, I shall close by reading it:

*Lo, my mortal race is run
Higher Laurels I have won,
Rest my clay beneath this sod
While I wing up to meet my God.*