

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1988 Annual Oration

Crabtree: The Erotica

Philip Martin

Mr President, Distinguished Guests, Gentlemen
(Ladies, for some reason, cannot be present with us this evening):

It is already clear to us all that Joseph Crabtree was a protean figure. We might almost apply to him the words of the poet Dryden:

*A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one but all mankind's epitome.*

Much of this many-sidedness is due to the accident of his date of birth and to his long life, which spanned so many years of change in men's minds (and, I would add, in women's minds), as well as in manners and morals. This partly explains the astonishing compendiousness of the individual (if individual is the word) whom we honour, yet again, this evening: 'this rag-bag of a man', as someone, not of our foundation) has called him, and no doubt with envy. But all this only partly explains the man who was Crabtree. It is known that he travelled widely. Mr Deakin has reminded us that Crabtree visited Lisbon (and indeed word has just reached us of a Crabtree poem recently found in Portugal) and that in 1791 he visiting the newly independent United States of America. Mr Deakin also sketches some of Crabtree's connections with Coleridge. It seems to me that beyond the actual, geographical voyages, there is something about Crabtree which Coleridge expresses in the words he puts into the mouth of his own Ancient Mariner:

*I pass like night from land to land,
I have strange powers of speech.*

Yes: there we have something of the essential mystery of Crabtree. He could not only pass from land to land but also from age to age. He was alive to the past, as if he had lived in periods before his actual birth, but to an even more remarkable extent his states of mind and of feeling sometimes suggest those of the future. Like many poets, Crabtree could anticipate what other men (and of course women) might not perceive or feel for several generations to come. He is an example of the poet as path-finder, as prophet.

In several senses, then, we may call Crabtree a man of many parts. Let us not be too quick to dismiss this phrase as a cliché. It is, in Crabtree's case, a phrase rich in meaning. The drift of my own meaning will be clear to you when you recall the title of this Oration: *Crabtree : The Erotica*.

This is an area of Crabtree studies which has received very little attention, as far as I am aware, though even now some scholar, in France for instance, may be exploring it

... if indeed there are any French scholars who are still ready to *explore* a text rather than to 'deconstruct' it, along with its author, whom the simple-minded still believe to have actually existed and actually written the work in question.

It is a little-known fact even now that there exists a *considerable body* of Crabtree's erotic writings, and in a surprising array of forms: some harking back to earlier literary periods, others amazingly modern in their forthrightness, ahead of their time. Again one receives the impression of one who could pass like night from one literary land to another, and who had strange powers (often very strange powers) of speech.

I imagine that this revelation, which I am probably the first to utter in this country, will fill many of you with joy: or at least with excited anticipation. Crabtree's *Erotica*: why (you will ask) have they been kept from us for so long? But we must remember the climate of opinion which spread like a miasma, fog, or smog through England and much of Europe during the years following Crabtree's death. We have a word for it: Victorian. Though it is important to remember too that very much earlier people were just as squeamish and disapproving. Consider, for example, that if the love poems of Sappho survive as only a collection of fragments, this is because the early Middle Ages tried to burn the manuscript: Christian morality, they thought, at stake.

In Crabtree's case there are signs of similar dirty-work. While some of his erotic writings have come down to us complete, others exist piecemeal on charred scraps of paper. Some person or persons believed that Crabtree had something to hide and that if he had not hidden it himself the sin of omission should be corrected *for* him. That this work was carried out badly, in every sense of the word (though at the same time all too well), we have reason to rejoice. The remaining lines, half-lines, phrases, give us tantalising hints as to the full poem and to what too many of our students still call the 'message' of the poem. Like Professor Bradley in his 1980 Oration, I imagine that future scholars will go to work, conjecturing, reconstructing (to the best of their well-known ability) the missing passages. How far their efforts will fall short of the work's original power I must leave you to speculate.

Many of these works which survive intact do so because of Crabtree's use of a code (as Professor Bradley has noted), a secret language of his own devising. The work of 'cracking' this code is still going on in England (where, as we know, such work receives a good deal of effort and ingenuity when performed, however belatedly), but the next few years should see the appearance of an exciting body of 'new' Crabtree poems. I am reminded yet again of Professor Bradley's Oration, and particularly of its title: 'Something borrowed, something blue'. Let us for a moment take each of those phrases separately.

Something borrowed: in 1980 my alert predecessor drew our attention to the distinction we must draw, in the case of a poet, between plagiarism and that state in which 'all the literature from Homer to the present day [is] flowing in his veins.' Here he was paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, who on another occasion made an observation which can be

expressed more epigrammatically than the poet himself expressed it 'Bad poets borrow, good poets steal.' In other words, what they take they keep, they make their theft their own. So it is with Joseph Crabtree. As with Eliot himself, we no longer think to enquire where so many of his lines come from: they have become his. 'Finders keepers', as we used to say in the schoolyard, or if you prefer, 'Takers keepers'.

And so to *something blue*. I am not sure that my predecessor had in mind the colloquial meaning of this phrase, but I certainly have. If you care to describe certain kinds of humour, and certain kinds of film, as 'blue', than that is the colour of much of Crabtree's writing. Though I would have to concede that in the more substantial poems and fragments which I want to offer you tonight, the eroticism is of the milder sort. Subtlety is the keynote: the response is less that of the belly-laugh than the quietly appreciative smile if indeed either laughter or smiles are called for at all, which I rather doubt. The genuinely erotic is not, after all, a matter for mirth.

So to Crabtree's erotic writings themselves.

In the first place it seems that he had always before his mind the fact that he had been born on St Valentine's Day, and that he remembered the ancient traditions concerning young women and men at that festival. The so-called cleaning-up of certain old lyrics and songs has made it difficult to discern the true nature of Valentine's Day customs, whatever exactly these may have been. But we get a glimpse of them in the 'snatches of old songs' which Ophelia sings in the fourth act of *Hamlet*, when spurned love has crazed her wits. Especially in these lines:

*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine:
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,
And op'd the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.*

Crabtree, of course, would have known these lines, and I believe there is ample evidence that they left a profound impression on his imagination. In *his* work, too, the girl frequently offers herself to her lover: *he* is a comparatively passive though willing figure. We know from many Orations that Crabtree was not aggressive in his conduct, preferring to work behind the scenes to achieve his objectives. Surely there is a link between this trait of his character and certain recurring situations in his writings. We have a few lines of his free translation of a poem from Ovid's *Amores*, in which at siesta-time the lover is lying in his room when that 'not impossible she', that very forthcoming she, comes to him in the flimsiest of garments which are swiftly shed. All this is in the Latin original, but the point is that *Crabtree chose to translate it*. Again, we have a badly charred page which seems to record in verse an episode from Crabtree's second visit to America. His *second* visit? You will be startled. We know from Mr Deakin that he was there in 1791,

when he was 37. But in this fragment the poet's hair is white and he is approached by a stylishly-dressed, clearly much younger woman in a low-cut bodice, who makes her wishes known to him with that pleasant directness which is still a characteristic of spirited American girls today. The aging poet, though charmed, expresses doubts of his virility.

*She laughed. She glanced towards the bed.
'Why don't we try it? Know what I heard?
Last thing to go,' she said.*

But so far we are merely paddling. And I am delighted to be able to tell you that last year, while on study leave in England, I was lucky enough to come on a rich mine of far more substantial examples of Crabtree erotica: of the proportions, let us say, of a Rubens woman in full flower as compared to a mere slip of a girl.

My family and I had taken a cottage close to Oxford in the village of Marsh Baldon, just off the road to Henley. One turned off (as the English say) at a sign reading 'The Baldons', and soon came to two quiet, pleasant villages: Marsh Baldon and Toot Baldon, lying close together. (The meaning of the name 'Toot', I may say, is lost in antiquity.) The old thatched cottage offered not only comfort but a virtual library of interesting books, and among these, one winter's night, a leather-bound volume, somewhat larger than the rest, caught my eye. It had been there, untouched, for many years: I had to blow the dust off it. Inside, I found manuscript in a nineteenth century hand, the first page bearing only the words:

Eclogues, Etc.
J.C.
1809

You can imagine my curiosity. I turned the pages and found several complete poems and two pages of prose: part of a work of fiction. Curiosity turned to excitement. The author, 'J.C.', could be none other than Joseph Crabtree. There was no mistaking what literary critics call the poetic 'voice'. And the prose too showed certain stylistic features which pointed to the same authorship.

So Crabtree, or some of Crabtree's writings, had found their way to Marsh Baldon! We all know, of course, that he was at Oxford in his youth, and that he had long associations with Chipping Sodbury. But that village is in the Cotswolds, on the other side of Oxford. Marsh Baldon lies to the south, in view of the Chilterns. And this manuscript bore the date 1809, far too late to belong to his student days. So Crabtree had passed like night from shire to shire; he had returned to his old haunts, or near them (Oxford is a mere five miles to the north). And his strange powers of speech, I found, were at their height. For most of the time left to me I would like to read three examples of the work I discovered that night in what I think we must henceforth call the Marsh Baldon Manuscript.

Crabtree, as we have seen, was a tireless traveller. Which of his visits to the Continent this first poem refers to, I can only hazard a guess: but the visit seems to have been made in Crabtree's youth, and the poem suggests, in the phrase of his friend Wordsworth, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', though the style anticipates that of Keats and later poets. The only thing that may need comment is the phrase 'to put out the flowers'. Today a woman who has done that would be said to be 'on the town'. Let this 'Song' speak for itself.

SONG

*In Paris, in the spring
(Those petal-scented hours!),
I met a girl of whom they say
She had 'put out the flowers'.*

*Her glances slid along
Her cheekbones; and her mouth,
Without words, said plainly
'See? I suffer drouth.'*

*She led, and I must follow
Into a tall house
Close by the flower-stalls.
Within, I watched her dowse*

*The lamp, and in the dark
Heard her silks rustling off her.
She made pretence to flee,
But I pursued and caught her.*

*All that warm night we lay
Close. In the dawn hours
I looked up from the street to see
Her wave **Adieu** to me,
And see her, at the shutter,
Once more put out her flowers.*

*Joseph Crabtree (1754-1854)
(From the Marsh Baldon MS.
Edited by Philip Martin)*

Here again we may notice the passivity, the compliance of the male lover, to which I have pointed as a characteristic. True, he says 'I caught her': but only after 'she led' and he 'followed'. And however you look at it, the fact remains that in the dawn hours the lover is dismissed. Life, above all in Paris, must go on: her life as well as his,

but on different roads. This is a minor poem but a pleasant one, marked by sensuous enjoyment but tinged by something close to melancholy.

We think of Crabtree above all as a poet: and rightly so. But even poets sometimes write prose. My next example is just that, but prose charged with some intensity: a fragment of a work of fiction, a Gothick tale, the only piece of Crabtree's fictional prose so far discovered. 'Gothick' fiction had become very much the vogue since Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Mrs Radclyffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* later became the rage. Later still the style was satirised by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, and by Byron. The novels were full of neo-medieval elements: castles, chapels, secret passages, tombs, lanterns, ghosts. Here is Crabtree's all-too-brief essay at this kind of writing.

THE MIDNIGHT CEREMONY
(Fragment of a Gothick Tale)

Twelve strokes had tolled out from the church tower, and now all was still once more. Save that a dim white shape moved among the darkness of the trees, and approached the dew-soaked lawn in front of the great house. Fitz-Richard, unable to sleep, stood at the window, looking down; astonished to perceive below, clad solely in white, a figure whom he recognized as his hostess, mistress of the estate. Far off among her woods an owl called, and called again, its blood as wakeful, as alert, as his. He had not slept for thinking of the beautiful Arabella; and had risen from tossed sheets to find her gazing up at his windows. Now in the still air he heard her give a sigh, and then another. After a slight pause she turned away. She was already growing dim as she crossed the grass, with its shroud of rising mist, towards the trees and the dark shape of the ancient church.

*Fitz-Richard knew that he must follow. He descended quickly into the shadows of the house, and lit a lantern, then let himself out into the night, pursuing her who had driven all rest from him. She had, he perceived, lingered; but now, perhaps sensing his approach, quickened her steps towards the church. He heard the door creak; she entered; he followed. Within, he found no sign of her. A fit of terror seized him. Was it indeed **she** whom he was following, or a ghost? In his perturbation he upset the lantern, which went out, leaving him in darkness. But no, — not in complete darkness: from a tomb, which stood open, with steps leading down, came a faint glow, as from another lantern; but seeming, rather of unearthly light. Should he pursue it to its source? Trembling, he crossed himself, and then stepped forward and began to descend the steps.*

*She stood in a low underground chamber. She was clad, still, in the white robe in which she had appeared to him above, and, with a breath, had beckoned him down to her. And now, that sigh again. 'Ah,' she breathed. And slowly she began to reveal what the whiteness had, until now, kept hidden. He saw the other whiteness, that of her breasts, and the pink of those aureoles which encircled their culmination. She sank on to a stone ledge and raised her bare arms, summoning him
[Here the manuscript breaks off]*

Joseph Crabtree (1754-1854)

*(From the Marsh Baldon MS.
Edited by Philip Martin)*

But the eroticism is unmistakable. 'Summoning him': to what? Though we are apparently left in suspense, I think we can guess the answer. There are two points worth noting. First, the owl. In many authors, such details recur from work to work, and Crabtree is no exception: we shall meet Crabtree's owls again. Second, the strange name 'Fitz-Richard'. Here I think that although the writing is essentially serious, we may detect a touch of Crabtree's mischievous humour: what is the diminutive of Richard?

And more openly, a sense of humour, of the comedy of life, appears in my final example, where we return to verse: a narrative poem showing Crabtree's often-noted liking for feminine endings, and his sense, which goes back at least to Shakespeare, perhaps to Chaucer, of 'the comedy of errors', of 'love's labour's lost'. (Some of you may be puzzled by this talk of feminine endings. This is easily dealt with: 'birds' and 'words' are 'masculine' endings, 'notion' and 'motion' are 'feminine' ones.) Crabtree begins by talking of Art's debt to Life, the interaction of the two, and I shall have more to say of this. But first, the poem itself:

AN EROTIC ECLOGUE

*You've heard this tale before, you'll say.
I well believe it, sir. But may
Not Art draw on the funds of Life?
I found it there. Such things are rife
Where men and maids cast am'rous looks,
And poets put them in their books.*

*My rustic hero, lusty Tom,
Lived in Marsh Baldon, two miles from
Toot Baldon: sister-villages
Near Oxford's ancient spires. Of these,
Marsh Baldon drowsed below, and Toot
(With the other Baldon at its foot)
Slept higher on earth's billows. Thence,
One perfect summer's day, descends
The blooming virgin Sally Wells,
And takes Toni's breath away. 'Hell's
Bells!' he cries. In just a year
She's grown from girl to woman, near
— Nay, at — her full nubility.
Her ripe mouth, swelling breast, her eye
Livelier than the flight of birds
Flitting from bough to bough. No words
Can well describe her, or give notion
Of what Tom feels. He stirs: a motion,*

Which **his** parents, and **hers**, would never
Countenance, makes itself felt
Low down beneath the woven pelt
Which decency requires he wear.
And she, across the lang'rous air,
Sends him a look that tells him she
Responds. One look, but all that he
Needs to assure him that whenever
He comes to her, she's is. By river
Thames, nearby? Or in the wood?
No, better in her own soft bed.
She speaks: 'Of skill you're not bereft.
My window's second from the left.
And with a light touch of the hand she leaves him.

Tom's cattle-labour sorely grieves him:
Sheer drudgery! But now it turns
To a daze. Milking the cows, he burns
For night, and Sally, and those wells
He longs for her to bare.

Marsh bells

Ring out day's end to field and village,
Man and beast. An end to tillage.
At table, Tom but 'picks' at food.
'Eat up, lad!' But he's in no mood
For dinner or for company
Save what awaits him. Now the sky
Grows dark. 'Tis night at last. No cheep
Of birds. Warm night, all else asleep,
Only the owlet gives a hoot
As Tom makes way from Marsh to Toot,
And Sally! A bottle in his belt
For courage: he's already felt
On one hand her sire's glare, on the other
The basilisk eye of her strict mother.

But now, behold! the house in sight,
And in one window, a dim light.
Hers, surely! He creeps closer, climbs
Towards it, clenching strong young limbs
On stone and drainpipe till at last
He's almost there, his travail past.
High up the steep cottage wall
(The owl still warning from the Hall),
Tom makes his one, his fatal blunder:
He takes a swig, mistakes the winduh

*(I am a poet of my time:
Here I employ **bucolic** rhyme),
And, fortified, proceeds to clamber
Into Sal's grim **parents'** chamber.*

Crabtree 13.

*At once, oh what a caterwauling!
The father's shouts, the mother's bawling
Are heard ev'n below in Marsh,
And Sally's cries: 'tis true, less harsh
Than theirs, more piteous. All vain, all:
Poor Tom must tumble (dreadful fall),
Flee through the still and sultry night,
And lick **his** wounds, foresee **their** plight.
Oh when will he be up again
And welcomed in at Sally's pane?*

Joseph Crabtree

(From the Marsh Baldon MS.

Edited by Philip Martin)

An Oration is no place for the literary-critical 'close reading' of a poem. We are here to *honour* a poet, to celebrate him or let him celebrate himself and his powers, as we have just heard Crabtree do. Nevertheless, I must make one comment. Though Crabtree is writing here in a long tradition, he shows no trace of what the American critic Harold Bloom has called the 'Anxiety of Influence'. To give one example: Wordsworth was Crabtree's friend and when I read

*Only the owlet gives a hoot
As Tom makes way from Marsh to Toot,*

I cannot help remembering the lines from Wordsworth's poem 'The Idiot Boy':

*The owlet in the moonlight air
Shouts from nobody knows where.*

In each case, perilous lines, I think you will agree. But Crabtree, like his fellow poet, is intrepid, reckless of the dangers of using ordinary, one might say humdrum, speech.

There remain two more things to be said. Crabtree speaks of Art and Life. He claims to have drawn his story from Life's great bank. Like him I say

I well believe it, sir.

It happens that some weeks after discovering his manuscript at Marsh Baldon, I was told of a young man then living in the village, more than a century after Crabtree's time, who *in life* did precisely what Crabtree's Tom did in the poem. This suggests to me the deeply

human quality of Crabtree's work. His Art is rooted in Life, and Life goes on imitating his Art. What more can any poet ask?

Finally: a suggestion for further investigation. Mr Michael Cummins has kindly given me two samples sent to him at the Campus Pharmacy: Jojoba Oil Shampoo, and Sea Shell Soap containing Jojoba Oil. And very pleasant they are, arousing as they do the erotics of scent. Yes, you will say, but how are they relevant to our subject tonight? The answer is simple but tantalising. Both products come from the great English firm of Crabtree and Evelyn. Perhaps, led as it were by the nose, one of our members may track down the relationship of the Crabtree of that firm and the poet whose erotica we have been privileged to savour a little here this evening?