

Joseph Crabtree Dinner
1956

Speech by Professor Sutherland

Deputy President and Gentlemen I don't want to take up much of your time, but I do feel, in view of the future that perhaps I ought to say a word or two about the portrait which you see before you tonight. I do count myself very fortunate in having been the person who was lucky enough to discover this. I know we have all been looking for some years now for an authentic portrait of Joseph Crabtree, and it is very much a matter of good fortune that it fell to me to be the one who discovered it. As my memory is getting treacherous I should like to say now, in case in the years to come I may forget the actual details, just what happened.

As far as I remember I had run out of tobacco and I said to my friend, Dr. Spencer, 'Would you like to come with me to the tobacco shop in Gower Street?' and Spencer said, 'Yes'. We went out there – I know this sounds a little like Professor A.W. Reed – we went out there and we bought the tobacco, and I said, 'We might just look in this old junk shop' – Professor Coldstream will refresh my memory, I think it is Simmond's (cries of 'Yes, Simmonds) - we went in there and we started casually turning over one or two canvasses. I think the first was an Eruption of Vesuvius and the second was a queen or something – and then suddenly we turned over the third one and there leapt out - we both of us felt it once - there leapt out a portrait which both of us immediately realised by some curious instinct as that of Joseph Crabtree, And I said to the attendant 'How much would this be?', and he said 'Ten shillings and sixpence' and that seemed to me incredibly little.

Just at this point, unfortunately, Professor Smith who had been I think lunching at the Duke of Grafton, and some of his colleagues, came in, and he heard the man say 'Ten and sixpence' and he said 'Don't pay more than ten bob'; and I was terrified at that point because this was a mere assistant, and I was afraid that he would go into the back of the shop and get the director and he would come and he would realize the value of this portrait and we should have to pay much more for it. However, he said immediately 'Alright, ten bob'; and we brought it back. We showed it to Professor Coldstream and he immediately recognized it as a Raeburn; and Professor Coldstream, of course could not help us on the authenticity of the portrait, but we were in no doubt about that ourselves. But he recognized it as a Raeburn, and not only that, he said to me firmly 'This is a Raeburn of the best period'. Well, gentlemen, I am sure that you will agree that a Raeburn of the best period is not good enough – or at any rate is not too good – for Joseph Crabtree.

The only other thing I would like to say before I sit down is that we are delighted that Dr. Spencer is going to be the orator next year. He will have difficulty in giving us a better oration than Mr. Brown, whose words I listened to with deepest interest, but I do hope that Dr. Spencer will consider very carefully addressing us on a subject on which I feel we do all want more light and on which some light has been shown – I hope Dr. Spencer will consider talking to us on the 'Iconography of Crabtree'. He will not come to this field in any ignorance. Some of you may know that Dr. Spencer has spent some of his time – the time he takes from his work here – he has spent some of his time in lecturing in the National Portrait Gallery, and he is familiar with the portraits of our great Englishmen. He has carried little groups round the National Portrait Gallery and I feel that no-one is better qualified than Dr. Spencer to throw light on this subject which I think we all want to have more light on.

I do feel myself that this is not likely to be the only portrait of Crabtree: my old friend Mr. Ellis of the British Museum some years ago when our unique copy, I think it was, of Wycherley's 'Miscellaneous Poems' came into the market, I drew his attention to it and I said: 'Mr. Ellis we may never have another chance of getting this volume for the British Museum'; and Mr. Ellis said to me: 'Well, they're asking £30'. And I said, 'Well, that isn't very much'. And he said, 'Well, it's too much'. Then he said to me something I think is very significant; he said: 'When a volume of this kind comes into a second-hand bookseller's catalogue, we generally find that it produces other copies'. Now, I hope very much that will be so. Thank you.