

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

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

