

'Crabbe's Tales'

A one-day conference at Newcastle University, 13 July 2012

This conference marked the bicentenary of the publication in 1812 of George Crabbe's *Tales*. Reviewing these, Francis Jeffrey claimed that George Crabbe was 'upon the whole, the most original writer who has ever come before us'.

The first keynote speaker was Professor Fiona Stafford (Oxford), whose most recent books are *Local Attachments* (2010) and *Reading Romantic Poetry* (2012), talking on "'Of Sea or River": Crabbe's Best Description'. She pointed to tensions in Crabbe's work, his sense of cultural isolation and uncertainty evident in his 'troubled awareness of the inadequacy of language'. Yet Crabbe was, she said, a poet of 'startling imaginative power'. His poetry was not aimed at seekers of the picturesque, however. She suggested he chose to write about the flat landscape of his native Suffolk in *The Borough* (1810) as a challenge to his critics. The sea was central to Crabbe's work, not as a 'consistent symbol' but 'rather as a perpetual presence'.

Andrew Lacey (Newcastle) discussed Wordsworth's *Essays on Epitaphs* in which he stressed the importance of attending to the 'sorrowing hearts of the survivors', offering nothing 'that shall shock'. But Wordsworth was aware of the irony of lapidary churchyard inscriptions, repeating Lamb's quip: 'Where are all the bad People buried?' Andrew then demonstrated Crabbe's far more robust approach to memorialisation, including his portrait of an old inn landlord:

Big as his Butt and for the self-same use:
To take in stores of strong fermenting Juice

Dr Matthew Ingleby (University College London) gave a paper entitled "'Fences ... formed of wrecks": George Crabbe and the Resource of Everyday Life'. He talked of John Barrell's argument in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* about Crabbe amending the pastoral world as depicted by Goldsmith. Matthew developed this, talking of Crabbe's interest in

urbanisation far from the city. As examples of Crabbe's 'complex and original tactics', he offered illuminating details of the resourcefulness and ingenuity of Crabbe's characters.

Professor Gavin Edwards (Institute of English Studies, London), whose book *George Crabbe's Poetry on Border Land* (1990) was described in 2004 as 'the fullest and most theoretically astute study of Crabbe's verse to date', spoke next on "'The Confidant": putting stories together'. He interrogated the narrative frame used by Crabbe, comparing it to *The Arabian Nights*. He pointed to the complications involved in taking for granted relationships between the characters, demonstrating the cryptic allusions to story-telling in Crabbe's Tales. Who was really the narrator of the Tales became the main point in the subsequent Q&A. Gavin concluded it was 'impossible to resolve'.

The second keynote speaker was Professor John Goodridge (Nottingham Trent), co-editor of *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon* (2006) and of *John Clare and Community* (2012). In his paper, 'Narratives of Common Life: Bloomfield, Clare, Crabbe' he addressed difficult issues such as the positioning of Crabbe in the canon and the fact of Clare's negative opinion of him. The latter John ascribed to Clare's instinctive distrust of clergymen. But he also pointed to evidence from *The Parish* that Clare had read Crabbe attentively.

Thomas Williams (Queen Mary, University of London) also spoke of Clare's antipathy to Crabbe in a paper entitled 'Crabbe's and Clare's Attitudes to Rural Life and Culture'. He considered Clare's autobiographical poem, 'The Village Minstrel' in relation to Crabbe's *The Parish Register*, talking of Clare's anthropological interest in tale telling and his determination to make the social function of this visible to readers.

Dr James Bainbridge (Liverpool) talked about his archival work on Crabbe in a paper on "'The Species in this Genus Known": Taxonomic Tensions in Crabbe's 1812 Tales'. Starting from his discovery of a pressed damselfly in one of Crabbe's notebooks, he discussed Crabbe's interest in natural science, particularly the taxonomy of Linnaeus. He pointed to the irony that Crabbe's intellectual interest in ordering was not matched on a domestic level: according to Crabbe's son, his library books lay 'in every direction but the right'.

Dr Michael Rossington (Newcastle) spoke on 'Crabbe's Times'. In 1819, Southey had pronounced Crabbe's poems would have a great and lasting value, offering a 'moral history of these times'. Michael discussed the unsettling nature of Crabbe's political outlook in such poems as 'The Gentleman Farmer' and 'The Dumb Orators'. The character of Gywn in the former may have been modelled on Godwin, the poem therefore challenging Godwin's decision to marry. In the latter, the radical lecturer Hammond is almost certainly a caricature of Thelwall.

The conference closed with a keynote speech from Professor Claire Lamont (Newcastle), editor of Scott's novels. Her topic was "'The smallest circumstances of the smallest things": Domestic Interiors in Crabbe's poems'. She quoted Crabbe's sceptical response to Goldsmith: 'I paint the cot / As truth will have it and as bards will not' and illustrated Crabbe's fidelity to his dictum. Although Francis Jeffrey complained that Crabbe wasted his 'graphic powers' on unworthy subjects, Claire showed us how attentive Crabbe was to poignant details, the 'small consoling' objects, such as a treasured bit of china in a poor cottage.

Thanks was expressed to BARS and the Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Newcastle research group for their support of the conference, which had allowed for the provision of a delightful lunch.

The conference organizers, Gavin Edwards and Michael Rossington, had originally stated that the aim of the conference was to test Jerome McGann's claim in 1981 that Crabbe is 'a writer whose true historical period has yet to arrive.' The conference has surely set Crabbe studies on a new footing.

Dr Jane Darcy
University College London