

'Crabbe's Tales'

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

'Describe the Conference' - our Romantic Tribe
May love Description, can we so describe,
That you shall fairly our proceedings trace
As if you had been with us at our base?
This cannot be; yet, moved by your request,
A short report I paint - may Fancy form the rest!

High o'er the watery banks of gracious Tyne
We gathered in a hall just after nine,
Intent from morn to eve our hymn to raise
To thee, Neglected Crabbe! And of thy days
Remote in Leicestershire and Suffolk coast,
And of thy tales of simple folk to toast.
The Borough and the Village and the lives
Of Peter Grimes and Gwyn and many more
Who made a humble living by the shore.

Fiona Stafford opened with a paean
To Crabbe's Originality as seen
By Jeffrey who in t'Edinburgh Review
Deemed Crabbe 'the most original' writer, who
'Have ever come before us'; Wordsworth too,
Loved George's stories of the humbler sort -
As poet of Lyrical Ballads, so he ought.
Fiona spoke of Crabbe's imag'tive Power -
Tho' Reynolds frowned on the Particular -
She mentioned his ambiv'lence towards the Sea -
Drawn to its Shores - yet from its Rage he'd flee.
Once landlocked seized with longing so intense,
He journeyed miles to see its Waves immense.

Next Andrew Lacey spoke of Epitaphs,
Of Wordsworth's dictum about misty paths,
Commemorations that should never shock
Or sorrowing hearts of mourners cruelly mock.
He instanced William's Dalesman's smiling lips:
'But where are Bad Men buried?' Lamb had quipped.
In contrast Crabbe's Old Jacob: 'Married thrice',
Who, 'dealt in Coals and Avarice was his Vice'.
Or Andrew Collett, old and blind and Fat -
The Landlord of the Old Crown-Inn he'd sat,
'Big as his Butt and for the self-same use:
To take in stores of strong fermenting Juice'.

Matt Ingleby next on 'fences form'd of wrecks',

Of brick-floored parlours and a butcher's neck
In turning his to house a paying guest -
Resourceful tactics of the sore oppress'd.

Then Gavin Edwards, scholar of renown,
Spoke of the frame by which the tales were bound.
'Who's the Narrator?' we, the audience, cried.
'Impossible to resolve!' good Gavin sighed.

Post-lunch, Professor Goodridge made compare
Between George Crabbe and fellow poet, Clare.
Clare's hate of clerics, hence animosity
Of Crabbe's allegiance to the C of E.
And yet Clare's 'Parish' bears so many signs
Of close attention to Crabbe's words and rhymes.

Then Thomas Williams made us all to see
How Crabbe refashioned Subjectivity
Of Rural Life - and he too spoke of Clare,
And Doubling and interclass Warfare.

James Bainbridge in John Murray's Archive found
In Crabbe's old notebooks, neatly writ and bound,
A damsel-fly twixt pages carefully pressed -
His joy at this discovery he expressed.
James told us of Crabbe's taxonomic Passion -
But why list Library Books in such a Fashion?

We had some Tea, and once we'd drained the Urn,
It was the hour for Michael Rossington's Turn.
Southey had spoke on eve of Peterloo
Of Crabbe's Poems' Value - and their lasting too.
Mike argued that in Tales of 1812
Tears in the social fabric Crabbe did delve;
That Gwyn was really Godwin! And like him
Stood for Perfectibilianism.

In closing, Claire Lamont in accents mild,
Told of how Crabbe's interiors had her so beguiled.
'The Smallest Circumstances of the Smallest Things' -
She loved the sceptic Tone in which he sings
His declaration that he'll paint the cot
In truth such as the older bards had not -
No varnish'd clock that ticked behind the door -
But oiled-paper windows of the Poor,
The 'Small Consoling Objects': little Things -
Like pencilled Wave and rugs' elastic Springs.

The sweet Day now towards its ending rac'd;
In Inn nearby its many sweets we trac'd -
From crimson curtains, mirrors, fossils, eels,

To Maggi Hambling's Scallop - oh! And Meals!
How shameful would it be if I forgot
The sumptuous Feast that we at Luncheon got.
The finest Conference Food in all the Land -
It will in all our Memories long stand:
The spiced Dainties (Keats has slipped in here),
The Salads, Pies and Puddings and the Beer!

We vowed to meet again before too long
To share our Thoughts on Crabbe's great Gift for Song.

Jane Darcy
14 July 2012