

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

George Crabbe and his Times
1754-1832

A Critical and Biographical Study

René Huchon



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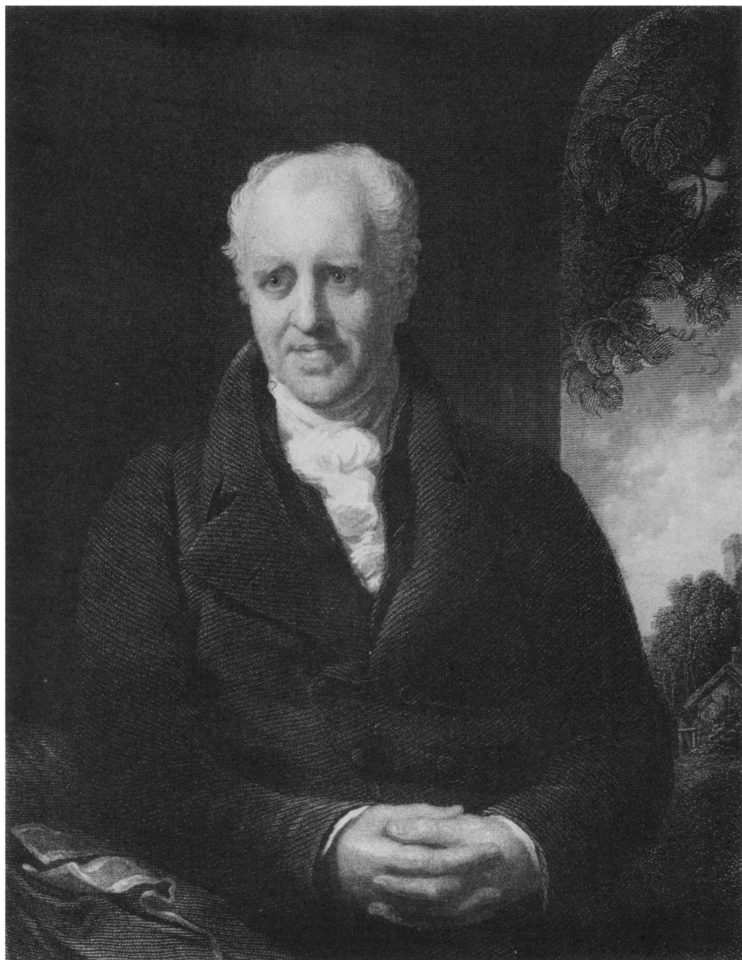
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GEORGE CRABBE

AND HIS TIMES

1754—1832



Painted by Tho^s Phillips, R.A.

Engraved by W. Holl.

REV^d GEORGE CRABBE.

From a Picture in the possession of John Murray, Esq.

GEORGE CRABBE

AND HIS TIMES

1754—1832

A CRITICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

BY

RENÉ HUCHON

Translated from the French by
FREDERICK CLARKE

To show virtue her own feature, scorn her
own image, and the very age and body of
the time his form and pressure.—*Hamlet* iii. 2



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TO
MONSIEUR EMILE LEGOUIS
PROFESSOR AT THE SORBONNE

THIS VOLUME IS INSCRIBED
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PREFACE

THE author of this work has endeavoured, firstly, to rewrite, with the help of all the original documents still accessible, the biography of Crabbe published in 1834 by his eldest son,¹ and secondly, to analyse and to criticise in detail the talent of the poet.

The first part of my task proved by far the more interesting one. I aimed at revising, by comparison with the originals, that *Life of Crabbe* which all contemporary critics, Mr. Kebbel and Canon Ainger among others, agree in considering as definitive, and which, however, they sometimes find fault with. Its mistakes had to be corrected, its gaps filled up, its

¹ George. See below, p. 189, n. 3, and p. 469, n. 1. He died at Bredfield in September, 1857. Besides the *Life* of his father, he wrote two theological works, *An Outline of a System of Natural Theology*, dedicated to Lockhart, 1840, and *Short Conclusions from the Light of Nature*, 1849. He is the "Radiator" of Carlyle, referred to in the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and in the *Letters of Edward Fitzgerald* (cf. *More Letters of Edward Fitzgerald*, ed. by Wm. A. Wright, p. 38, to T. Carlyle, from Woodbridge, Sunday, August 26th, 1855). In an article published by *The Monthly Review* (March, 1904, p. 117) I have accused him wrongly of having allowed certain manuscripts of his father to be sold in his lifetime. In reality these papers were put up to auction at the death of an employee of Murray, named Wright, and bought in by Murray at the request of the Biographer. He left five children, three daughters and two sons, the elder of whom, George, married, in 1851, his cousin, Emily Louisa, daughter of John Waldron Crabbe, became Rector of Merton (Norfolk), and died on August 9th, 1884, at the age of sixty-five. Fitzgerald, his intimate friend, expired at Merton in June, 1883 (cf. as to George Crabbe, the grandson of the poet, *The Norfolk Miscellany*, vol. iii. pp. 113-14. The younger son of the Biographer, Thomas Crabbe, studied law and practised as a solicitor at Uttoxeter.

useless matter eliminated ; in a word, a psychological biography of the poet, with a view to the interpretation of his works, had to be written, and everything sacrificed to that intention. If the plan has been carried out, even imperfectly, the labour will not have been in vain.

The *Life of Crabbe* by his son cannot be denied the merit of having handed down to us information and documents which would have been lost without it, in particular the "Journals" of the poet for the years 1780 and 1817. But its composition is not always above criticism. It is the biography of a poet-parson written by a non-poetical clergyman, who appears in too many places, with his characteristic reserve. The style, although straightforward, is not decided enough ; the tone, although sincere, sometimes becomes apologetic. It was necessary to restore the poet his rights and keep the minister in the background. Besides, the Biographer had parted with the control of his work. He had been commissioned to write it by John Murray,¹ but on two conditions : firstly, it was not to exceed one volume, and secondly, Lockhart, the editor of *The Quarterly Review*, and the future author of the *Life of Scott*, was to revise the manuscript, and make such corrections and excisions as he thought fit.² He

¹ A week after Crabbe's death, on February 13th, 1832, Murray wrote to George : "I hope the family have materials for communicating an interesting account of his life to the public, for he is allowed on all hands to have been one of the most eminent of British poets." For a year it was intended to publish, not only the work of the Biographer, but also the *Posthumous Tales*, preceded by a "memoir" from Miss Hoare, a friend of the poet (see below, pp. 471 *seq.*). This lady gave up her plan in May, 1833, and George remained the sole biographer.

² George did not submit without a struggle. But his first draft seems to have been very careless, for Rogers writes to him bluntly, on March 1st, 1833 : "As to the Memoirs, they are certainly now very unfit for publication." Lockhart consequently obtained permission to do as he liked. In November, 1833, he wrote to George : "I perceive that, as the work proceeds, the alterations to be suggested by me will be lessening gradually both in number and importance." The *Life of Crabbe* appeared on February 10th, 1834, and had a considerable success.

largely used, he even abused, this power. Not only did he cut out a great number of letters,¹ but he also often changed the dates of those which were retained, and ventured to correct the poet's epistolary style, which was not elegant enough for his taste. In short, he partly spoilt this *Life of Crabbe*, as later on his own *Life of Scott*, by small inaccuracies. He seems to have lacked the conscientiousness, the veracity, which is indispensable to every historian.

I should not have been able, seventy years after Crabbe's death, to write the history of his life, if I had not been assisted in my investigations by kindly help from numerous persons. Mr. F. J. Furnivall, Mr. Henry Bradley, and Canon H. Thompson have supplied me with useful information; the late Duke of Rutland gave me access to his library at Belvoir Castle; Mr. Dowden and Mr. Aldis Wright have, with extreme courtesy, communicated to me, the former, some interesting unpublished poems, the latter, some singularly suggestive manuscript notes by Fitzgerald. At Mr. H. Buxton-Forman's house I have been able to peruse a letter which is all the more interesting because it belongs to a period in which documents are rare. Mr. John Murray has entrusted to me, for months together, his Crabbe papers: sermons, letters,

¹ Miss Hoare, on Wordsworth's advice, refused to publish those which Crabbe had written to her. See Wordsworth's *Poetical Works* (Dowden, vol. v. pp. 359-60): "He [Crabbe] was upon terms of intimate friendship with Mrs. Hoare, and still more with her daughter-in-law [*sic*], who has a large collection of his letters addressed to herself. After the poet's decease, application was made to her (by Rogers, at Lockhart's request) to give up these letters to his biographer, that they, or at least part of them, might be given to the public. She hesitated to comply, and asked my opinion on the subject. 'By no means,' was my answer, grounded not upon any objection there might be to publishing a selection from these letters, but from an aversion I have always felt to meet idle curiosity by calling back the recently departed to become the object of trivial and familiar gossip." As if that was the point at issue! Now these letters have disappeared, with the exception of a few in the Broadley Collection. They are, as a rule, very interesting.

rough drafts of all sorts.¹ Mrs. Orr, of London, Mr. and Mrs. Rivett-Carnac, of Sweffling, descendants of the poet, placed at my disposal, at a time when they still possessed them, all the letters of Crabbe which had been bequeathed to them. Mrs. Mackay, of Trowbridge, gave my researches a most hospitable welcome, and I found unlooked-for treasures in her library. Above all, I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to Mr. Broadley, of Bridport, who has managed to get together, in a few years, a collection of Crabbe's autographs, which for excellence and completeness is without a rival.

¹ Among others a tale, published by me in *The Monthly Review* for March, 1904.

CONTENTS

FIRST PART

YOUTH AND EARLY POEMS

(1754—1781)

CHAPTER I

ALDBOROUGH (1754—1768)

	PAGE
I. THE FAMILY : THE GRANDFATHER AND THE FATHER .	4
II. ALDBOROUGH AND ITS SURROUNDINGS . . .	7
III. HOME LIFE IN CHILDHOOD AND EARLY YOUTH . .	14
IV. A "DAME-SCHOOL." EARLY CURIOSITY. AN EXCURSION ON THE ALDE	22
V. AT SCHOOL IN BUNGAY. FIRST LITERARY READING. THE STOWMARKET SCHOOL. RETURN TO ALDBOROUGH : THE SEA, THE RIVER, AND THE COMMON . . .	27

CHAPTER II

WICKHAM BROOK AND WOODBRIDGE (1768—1775)

I. APPRENTICED TO AN APOTHECARY AT WICKHAM BROOK. COURSE OF READING. VISIT TO CHEVELEY PARK .	38
II. AT WOODBRIDGE	43
III. MIRA : HER FAMILY AND THE LIFE AT DUCKING HALL	45
IV. LOVE AND FIRST POEMS : "HOPE" AND "INEBRIETY" .	53

CONTENTS

CHAPTER III

ALDBOROUGH (1775—1780)

	PAGE
I. ON SLAUGHDEN QUAY. THE ALDBOROUGH APOTHECARIES: RAYMOND, MASKILL, AND CRABBE. FIRST STAY IN LONDON. FAILURE AT ALDBOROUGH . . .	62
II. THE LOVER'S JOURNEY. POETRY AND RELIGION . . .	70
III. DESPAIR, POVERTY, AND DEPARTURE FOR LONDON . . .	78

CHAPTER IV

LONDON (1780—1781)

I. ARRIVAL IN LONDON. THE HAIRDRESSER VICKERY. A "DISTREST POET'S" JOURNAL AND SEARCH FOR EMPLOYMENT	83
II. THE TWO ASPECTS OF THE CAPITAL. THE GORDON RIOTS	99
III. THE UNSUCCESSFUL "CANDIDATE"	104
IV. THE LETTER TO BURKE	110
V. "THE LIBRARY"	115
VI. ORDINATION	125

SECOND PART

THE CHAPLAIN AND POET OF COUNTRY LIFE

(1782—1785)

SINGLE CHAPTER

THE CHAPLAIN; HIS "VILLAGE" AND "NEWSPAPER"

I. CURATE AT ALDBOROUGH	133
II. DUCAL CHAPLAIN. LIFE AT BELVOIR CASTLE	136
III. PASTORAL POETRY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND THE SOURCES OF ITS INSPIRATION: THE GOLDEN AGE, THE NATURAL MAN, THE MAN OF FEELING. ATTACKED BY CRABBE IN HIS "VILLAGE." DESCRIPTION OF THE REAL COUNTRYMAN	144
IV. MARRIAGE	172
V. "THE NEWSPAPER"	176

THIRD PART

THE CLERGYMAN AND HIS PARISH REGISTER

(1786—1807)

CHAPTER I

CRABBE AS A CLERGYMAN; HIS RELIGIOUS OPINIONS

	PAGE
I. CRABBE'S LIFE AT STATHERN, MUSTON, PARHAM, GREAT GLEMHAM, AND RENDHAM	187
II. A CLERGYMAN'S DUTIES : SERMONS, VISITS, AND TITHES. CRABBE'S RECREATIONS : SCIENTIFIC AND LITERARY STUDY AND COMPOSITION	199
III. CRABBE'S RELIGIOUS OPINIONS : REASON AND FAITH, FOUNDATIONS OF BELIEF, IMPORTANCE OF "WORKS." CRABBE RANKED AMONG THE LIBERALS	207
IV. HIS DISLIKE OF SCEPTICISM, OF ARMINIAN OR CALVINISTIC METHODISM, AND OF HUNTINGTON'S ANTINOMIANISM. CONCLUSION. IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICAL MORALITY	214

CHAPTER II

"THE PARISH REGISTER"

I. THE IMMEDIATE CAUSES AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PUBLICATION	220
II. THE MORAL THESIS OF THE WORK	223
III. RURAL SOCIETY IN ENGLAND AT THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY : THE ARISTOCRACY, THE MIDDLE CLASS, THE CLERGY	226
IV. THE AGRICULTURAL CLASSES : FARMERS AND LABOURERS	232
V. THE SMALL SHOPKEEPERS	238
VI. THE ODDITIES AND FAILURES. CRABBE AND THE "RUSTIC NOVEL"	240
VII. VERDICT OF CONTEMPORARIES AND CONCLUSION	246

FOURTH PART

CRABBE'S REALISM

SINGLE CHAPTER

"THE BOROUGH"

	PAGE
I. CRABBE'S REALISM, IN HARMONY WITH THE TRADITION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND, IS OPPOSED TO THE DAWNING ROMANTICISM	255
II. ITS ORIGIN AND ITS ELEMENTS: FIRSTLY, DESCRIPTION— FLORA, HEATH, SEA, HUMAN DWELLINGS	259
III. ITS ORIGIN AND ITS ELEMENTS: SECONDLY, SATIRE AND POETRY OF DISILLUSION	271
IV. ITS DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OUTCASTS	287
V. VERDICT OF CONTEMPORARIES. REALISM AND REALITY .	304

FIFTH PART

CRABBE AS WRITER OF TALES AND MORALIST

CHAPTER I

THE "TALES IN VERSE"

I. PATHOS	316
II. HUMOUR	342
III. RESIGNATION AND IDYLLIC LIFE	353
IV. VERDICT OF CONTEMPORARIES. GENERAL FEATURES OF THE WORK	368

CONTENTS

xv

CHAPTER II

PRESENTATION TO TROWBRIDGE AND JOURNEYS TO LONDON (1813—1818)

	PAGE
I. AN EXCHANGE OF LIVINGS	373
II. THE INDIAN SUMMER	381
III. CRABBE IN SOCIETY	389

CHAPTER III

THE "TALES OF THE HALL"

I. CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PUBLICATION	403
II. THE PLAN OF THE WORK. FAMILY LIFE	406
III. THE PATHOS OF MISFORTUNE	422
IV. VERDICT OF CONTEMPORARIES AND CRITICAL ESTIMATES	427

CHAPTER IV

CLOSING YEARS (1819—1832)

I. RELATIONS WITH SIR WALTER SCOTT. JOURNEY TO EDINBURGH	431
II. THE "POSTHUMOUS TALES"	440
III. POLITICAL OPINIONS AND SOCIAL IDEAS	449
IV. DECLINE AND DEATH	464

	PAGE
CONCLUSION	477

APPENDICES

I. BUNBURY LETTER	493
II. COMPARISON OF THE TWO TEXTS OF " THE LIBRARY " .	499
III. " NATHAN KIRK " AND HIS SERVANT	502
IV. SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF THE " TALES OF THE HALL " .	504
V. POEM IN HONOUR OF GEORGE IV. (1822)	513
VI. " THE DESERTED WIFE "	515
VII. LINES ON FRIENDSHIP	517
VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY	518
INDEX	531

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

GEORGE CRABBE	<i>Frontispiece</i>
From the Picture by Thomas Phillips, R.A., in possession of Mr. Murray (<i>Photogravure</i>)	
FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST LETTER ADDRESSED BY CRABBE TO EDMUND BURKE	<i>Facing p.</i> 112
From the original in possession of Mr. Broadley	
GEORGE CRABBE IN 1821	„ 432
From a Sketch by Sir Francis L. Chantrey, R.A.	

FIRST PART
YOUTH AND EARLY POEMS
(1754—1781)



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CHAPTER I

ALDBOROUGH (1754—1768)

- I. The family: the grandfather and the father.—II. Aldborough and its surroundings.—III. Home life in childhood and early youth.—IV. A “dame-school.” Early curiosity. An excursion on the Alde.—V. At school in Bungay. First literary reading. The Stowmarket school. Return to Aldborough: the sea, the river, and the common.

It has been very justly remarked that Taine's critical theory, which finds the adequate explanation of an author and his works in his race, his age, and his environment, applies more to talent than to genius. What likelihood was there that the son of a small burgess of Stratford-on-Avon, bred amid the peaceful country scenes of Warwickshire and in the dulness of provincial life, should one day prove able to breathe a soul into the old chronicles, and to resuscitate peoples and monarchs? The explanation is that genius, the highest form of human activity, is also the most unfettered and the most baffling. On the other hand, traces of some predominant and fruitful influence can generally be discovered in the early years, in the upbringing of a writer of talent. Did not Thomson and Wordsworth feel, from their childhood, the charm of the “native regions” to which, in varying degrees, they owed their best inspirations? True, they possessed a power of intelligence and of sensibility which remains an irreducible element for the critic and is the only possible explanation of their superiority over the little peasants their playfellows. But the materials which this intelligence and sensibility turned to account were, to a great extent, supplied them by the surroundings amid which their youth was passed. The writer of talent, whether circumstances have aided or thwarted him, whether he has had but to give free scope to his energy, or has had to struggle in order to overcome the obstacles piled up by destiny, is like

a plant whose roots plunge deep into the soil which has given it birth and has more or less generously nourished it. To understand and explain it, we must know the seed from which it has sprung, the soil on which chance has flung it, the atmosphere in which it has developed, the fruits which it has produced. Then and then only can we realise the vital force which it possessed. The analysis cannot be carried further. It is the duty of the biographer, as Goethe says, to "replace the individual in his age and his life, to show how far they have helped or hindered him, what idea of the world and of mankind he has formed under these circumstances, and, if he is a poet, a writer, or an artist, what outward form he has given to this idea." And this is more than ever the biographer's duty when the subject of his research is a poet whose gaze always remained fixed on his native soil, on the sights and the individuals familiar to his childhood, and who has described them with such faithfulness as George Crabbe.

I

BORN on December 24th, 1754, at Aldborough, a small seaport in the county of Suffolk, Crabbe belonged to a family which was too obscure to possess a history. It does not figure in any of the voluminous genealogical repertories in which the aristocracy and even the middle class have carefully inscribed their annals; and it would be lost labour to try to find a possible ancestor for our poet among the numerous "Crabbes" or "Crabs"¹ of whom the archives of the Middle Ages bear traces. These researches, however, cannot be abandoned without a feeling of regret: it would be so tempting to identify Crabbe, "the most Dutch of the English poets," with one of the descend-

¹ The two spellings were used indifferently, as in Flemish and Middle English. In a letter written on November 7th, 1822, the sculptor Chantrey regretted the presence of two useless letters at the end of his friend's name. "Many a letter," he says, "you must write weekly to friends who admire and esteem you, and the two superfluous letters at the end of your name have been as often repeated as would have enabled you to compose a poem as long and enduring as your *Borough*. Think, my dear Friend, what a noble work we have lost by so many BE's." And Crabbe replies, in a letter the original of which is in the British Museum, that he cannot in fact account for this whim of one of his ancestors. (The text is given in a note in the son's Biography, Murray, 1861, p. 2.)

ants of John Crabbe,¹ Flemish adventurer and pirate, an adept in plundering the subjects of Edward II., high-born ladies and Gascon traders alike. Would not the origin of his talent be better accounted for in this way? We might indulge in the supposition that among the numerous Flemish craftsmen who settled in England during the Middle Ages there happened to be a son or a nephew of the pirate; him we should prove to be the ancestor of the William, Thomas, or John Crabbe so often mentioned in the history of Norfolk² among the burgesses of Norwich or the inhabitants of the village of Kimberley, and we should have the satisfaction of throwing some light on the obscure origins of the poet's family.

The facts, unfortunately, do not justify such bold conjectures. We must confine ourselves to repeating, after the poet's son, his standard biographer, that the members of this family were "for many generations in the station of farmers," that they perhaps raised themselves to the rank of yeomen, and that their advancement stopped there. The southern part of the county of Norfolk seems to have been their favourite residence; at the end of the seventeenth century the Crabbes probably lived in the little parish of Seething,³ a few miles north of Bungay, and thence, it may be, Robert Crabbe, the poet's grandfather, moved when he settled at Aldborough.⁴ Here he gained a modest but

¹ Cf. the *Close Rolls of Edward II.* (1310-21), published by the Record Office, and the *Patent Rolls of Edward III.* (July 18th, 1332).

² Cf. Blomefield's *History of Norfolk*, *passim*, in particular vol. i. pp. 303 and 315; vol. v. pp. 223 and 326; also *The East Anglian* of 1869, vol. iv. p. 233.

³ In reply to a question from his nephew, Robert Crabbe, the brother of the poet, wrote on May 10th, 1833, that "Mr. John Crabbe, farmer at Seeden [evidently Seething], and my father were first cousins." Robert Crabbe, the grandfather, had probably left a farmer brother at Seething when he moved to Aldborough. This origin of the family is confirmed by particulars given by the poet himself to a Suffolk antiquary, the Rev. Dr. Jermyn, in 1827. They were published in *The East Anglian*, vol. ii. p. 259. I owe this piece of information to the kindness of Mr. Walter Rye.

⁴ Probably towards 1720. Mr. Casley, Town Clerk of Aldborough, has shown that on January 23rd, 1720, Robert Crabbe "was given his freedom as a favor," that on September 3rd, 1726, he was elected "inferior burgess," and "capital burgess" on August 25th, 1729. The parish register of Aldborough mentions an "Elizabeth Crabbe, wife of late to Mr. Robert Crabbe, formerly to Wm. Miller, who departed this life January the 22nd, 1721, aged 32 years." This inscription was copied in the Aldborough churchyard by the antiquary Davy, whose valuable manuscript collections were bought by the British Museum. Can Elizabeth Crabbe have been Robert's first wife? The point remains doubtful.

honourable position: on April 5th, 1732, he was appointed Collector of Customs, with a salary of £60 a year.¹ This official post brought him into notice: on September 8th, 1733,² his fellow-citizens elected him "Bailiff," or Mayor, of the town. Unfortunately, he did not enjoy these honours long, for in less than a year after his election death carried him off, when he was probably still young, on September 5th, 1734.³ He left a widow, whose Christian name, Rachel,⁴ alone is known, and a son George, baptised on November 15th, 1733, born no doubt a week before. We may suppose, with the Biographer,⁵ that Robert Crabbe's premature death placed his family in a precarious position, and that George, the poet's father, must have experienced, from his tenderest childhood, the humiliations and privations of want. He thus acquired qualities of activity and energy which made him conspicuous in later life; forced, from his early years, to earn his own living, he gave up trade, the career for which he was originally intended, and became a school-master. In the porch of Orford church, a short distance to the south of Aldborough, he assembled the "ragged lads" of the parish, sons of fishermen and of "men who heave coals or clean causeways,"⁶ and tried to teach them the catechism and reading. Improvised gatherings of this kind, in fact, were the only

¹ Cf., in the publications of the Record Office, the *Calendar of Treasury Books and Papers* for 1732, p. 355: "April 5: Robert Crabb, collector Aldeburgh, loco John Burwood, dismissed"; and also in the *Treasury Records, Customs Quarterly Establishment*, No. 174, Midsummer Quarter, 1732, Aldeburgh: "Robert Crabbe, to act as deputy to the Customer of Yarmouth, for his fees here, or 20*l.* per annum, and from the King 40*l.* per annum, per warrant 5 April 1732, to be paid from 29 do."

² According to Davy (cf. *Borough*, ii. 154) these officers were chosen annually, and he adds: "Their election takes place on the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, and they come into office on the Feast of Saint Michael." Hence the date given in the text, and confirmed by the records of Aldborough. Robert Crabbe had been elected "Junior Bailiff" on September 18th, 1731, "Chamberlain" (or Treasurer) on September 29th, 1732 (dates extracted by Mr. Casley).

³ Parish Register, Aldborough: "Mr. Robert Crabbe, bailiff of the Corporation, died Sept. 5th, mortuary 10 shillings (his emoluments exceeding 40*l.*), buried Sept. 8th, 1734." Besides his son George, he had a daughter, Mary, who died in infancy: "Mary Crabbe, inf^t. da. of Robert Crabbe, bailiff, buried February 2, 1733" (i.e. February 13th, 1734).

⁴ We may note that a "Rachel Crabb" was buried at Aldborough on May 2nd, 1765. Perhaps this was Robert's widow.

⁵ That is, George Crabbe, the poet's eldest son. I shall refer to him by this title throughout the book.

⁶ *Borough*, xxiv. 96-8.

schools of the Church of England up to the end of the eighteenth century : no special building was set apart for them ; the bishop merely empowered a master to collect his pupils in the porch or the aisles of the church. The emoluments of such a post must have been slender indeed, and George Crabbe soon left Orford to live near the cradle of his family. A few miles to the east of Seething is the little village of Norton ; he spent several years there as schoolmaster and parish clerk, and then returned to Aldborough. He was now nearly twenty years old. Wishing, no doubt, to settle in a place where his father's name was still respected, he obtained in the Customs the subordinate post of warehouse-keeper, and on February 2nd, 1754,¹ he married Mary Lodwick, the widow of a publican.² Of this marriage six children were born, the eldest of whom was the poet.³ Let us pause for a moment in his native town.

II

THE traveller who visits Aldborough to-day can hardly recognise the "village" or the "borough" described by Crabbe. Since the beginning of the last century the

¹ Cf. the parish register of Aldborough : "Marriages 1754, Feb. 2nd George Crabb, single man and Mary Lodwick Wid. both of this Parish, by license . . . were married."

² Mary Lodwick's calling appears from the following note, added by John Crabbe, the Biographer's brother, to a letter from Miss Hoare : "In the talk with Miss Hoare . . . she says by all means mention that your great-grandfather was parish clerk ; this truly describes station in life, but why say your Grandmother was Landlady of a public house : it leaves an unpleasant impression and is not absolutely called for" (December 19th, 1832). We have seen that Miss Hoare's excessive scrupulousness, added to Wordsworth's, has deprived us of a probably considerable number of the poet's letters.

³ Cf. Parish Register, Aldborough, for the exact dates of the baptisms (we can be almost sure that the birth precedes the baptism by a week) : George, the poet, January 1st, 1755 ; October 24th, 1756, Mary ; July 16th, 1758, Robert ; February 12th, 1761, William, who died in infancy, and was buried on June 11th, 1762 ; September 2nd, 1763, another William ; and lastly, March 25th, 1768, John. It may be observed that this simple inspection of the authentic documents enables us to correct some of the pretty numerous mistakes which have crept into the son's Biography : thus Mary is by no means "the youngest of the family" (B. p. 3), and William is John's elder brother. Moreover, it is amusing to note that Crabbe himself, in writing on April 16th, 1816, a poem entitled *Infancy*, the dated MS. of which belongs to Mr. Murray, speaks erroneously of the death "of a sister in infancy." It is evidently his "infant brother" William that he was referring to. The Biographer naturally follows his father (B. p. 3).

population has nearly trebled,¹ and the occupations of the inhabitants have changed. The fishing-boats moored to the shore are now few and far between; Slaughden Quay, on which the custom-house formerly stood and where Crabbe and his father toiled as simple labourers, still exists, it is true, but bereft of that noisy animation which the arrival of numerous sailing-ships gave it in former days. The direct line of railway between London and Yarmouth has monopolised the traffic of this part of the world; small towns like Aldborough and Orford, which in the eighteenth century served as intermediaries between London and the country districts of Suffolk, were unable to meet such a formidable competition. Little by little most of the fishermen departed,² and the seaport was transformed into a watering-place. Along the shore stand a few smart hotels, which are filled by visitors in the summer. The White Lion itself, although improved and enlarged, no longer possesses that supremacy over its rivals which the poet conceded to it. Instead of the modest "brick-floor'd parlour,"³ sublet by the butcher in Crabbe's time, almost all the small houses of the little town take in lodgers at the present day.

Nature herself seems to have become more civilised. As if weary of having stormed this luckless coast for so many years, of having insensibly scooped out the slight curve of the bay of which Aldborough occupies the centre, the sea has raised against its own fury a rampart of shingle, behind which the houses on the shore extend in safety. It restores to the land what it formerly wrested from it. At low tide the receding waves lay bare a strip of close, fine sand, which imparts its elasticity to the tread of the pedestrian. When walking on it one would never suspect that the sea has swallowed up the ruins of perhaps the most

¹ Cf. Davy's manuscript collection under the heading "Aldborough": "Population = 1801 : 804.—1811 : 1066.—1821 : 1212.—1831 : 1341," and at the present day 2159, according to Crockford's *Clerical Directory*. Davy adds: "This population [in 1831] is distributed into 12 families employed in agriculture, 156 in trade or manufactures,—others : 162." At the same date, out of 330 houses, there were only thirty-one rated at a (no doubt letting) value of £10 and upwards; seven only exceeded £20. It is clear that even in 1830 Aldborough was still far from its present prosperity.

² This is noted by Fitzgerald, writing from Aldborough on August 18th, 1873: "This place is duller even than it used to be, because of even the fishing having almost died away. But the sea and the shore remain the same" (*Letters*, ed. by Aldis Wright).

³ *Borough*, ix. 19.

populous quarter of Aldborough three hundred years ago,¹ and that the quaint old town-hall, an advanced sentinel facing the ocean, that solitary "Moot Hall," almost tottering on foundations of less breadth than its first and only storey, more like a large cottage than a public building, with its outside wooden staircase and its two disproportionate chimneys, at that time formed the centre of the little town and the south side of the market-place, which was separated from the shore by four rows of houses. These, swept away one after the other by the successive storms which burst over them, have sunk beneath the waves. To-day man has stepped backwards, the ocean has ceased its encroachments, and its tempests, although furious, no longer work such havoc on the reassured town.

But the environs and the configuration of Aldborough² have changed less than the character of the inhabitants and the aspect of the houses. As in Crabbe's time, the main street extends for nearly a mile, parallel to the coast and at the foot of a low hill surmounted by the church. In the eighteenth century this massive edifice, too wide for its length, with its square tower, which seems to have been built of shingle, stood outside the village. To-day it faces the most modern part of the little town, which rises in tiers upon the hillside and to the left of the road that, ascending towards the west, penetrates inland. If from this culminating point you look northwards, you see nothing but a vast, sterile stretch of country, dotted here and there with meagre clumps of fir-trees, whose gnarled branches and scanty dark foliage bend without breaking under the attacks of the fiercest gales. What are the aridity of the soil and the withering blast of northerly storms to these hardy offshoots? The short, fine grass which grows at their foot is of a pale, sickly green; it looks very poor beside the broad-leaved bracken or the gorse bushes which abound in the dry places, and sometimes develop into regular shrubs, rude and twisted, like brambles on

¹ According to a plan of Aldborough preserved in the Moot Hall, and dated 1594. Another plan exists, dated 1790, in which the town appears to us in its present aspect. Only the "Parade," the row of houses facing the beach, has changed considerably. In particular, the lime-kilns (cf. *Borough*, i. 98), built at the southern end of the town, have disappeared. Wilkie Collins has given some celebrity to this region by his description of it in *No Name*.

² This is Crabbe's familiar spelling. It is now written "Aldeburgh."

the top of knotted sticks. Such is the vegetation of the flat and desolate heath which runs along the coast at some distance from the shore. Near the sea there is nothing but extensive marshes, to which the aquatic plants, carefully noted by our poet, lend a dark brown hue, singularly monotonous and dismal under a too often overcast sky. This space is traversed by embankments, and the pedestrian is obliged to follow them, for the tide, trickling through the sand and shingle on the beach, floods the soil and divides it into a network of straight ditches,¹ sometimes fringed with reeds, and always full of slime and a stagnant, blackish water. Farther away, up to the hamlet of Thorpe which bounds the horizon, stretches the dull sheet of water called "The Mere," a sort of inland lake formed by the influx of the sea.

If the spectator turns southwards, on all sides, from the foot of Aldborough hill to the sea and the village of Orford, the church and ruined castle of which can be descried in the distance, nothing is visible but a vast plain intersected by the same reedy "dykes," and flecked here and there by groups of black cattle. Here, it is true, the monotony of this landscape of a more than Dutch uniformity is broken by the many windings of the River Alde. Formed by the junction of two small streams, one of which rises near Framlingham,² and the other a few miles from Swesling, it suddenly widens on coming within sight of Aldborough, and, when the sun shines, expands in the midst of the plain into a silvery sheet which is really the "landscape's eye." But its glance is deceptive, and woe betide the rowers that venture along its sides at high water. They will be stranded on the mudbanks, which the tide re-covers at regular intervals, and between which the Alde has cut a narrow bed. Hither resort in winter flocks of wild birds—duck, geese, and teal—driven from the open sea by the violence of the storms, and hastening inland to find shelter and repose.³ Through its meanderings the Alde flows peaceably eastwards, about two-thirds of a mile from the south of the town, and one would imagine that it is going to

¹ Or "dykes," as our poet and the inhabitants call them.

² Celebrated for its ruins of the old castle of the Howards, Dukes of Norfolk, and for the church, which contains the tomb of the poet Surrey.

³ Cf. *Notes and Jottings about Aldeburgh*, by N. F. Hele, surgeon, 1870, p. 8.

mingle its waters leisurely and unregretfully with those of the German Ocean close to this spot. Nothing of the kind, however : at about two hundred yards from the shore it encounters a narrow strip of land, or shingle rather, which deflects it abruptly towards the south, and it has to flow alongside the sea for twelve miles, and below Orford to change its name of Alde into Ore, before it can find an outlet, barred, however, by a sandbank that prevents vessels of heavy tonnage from entering the river.¹ Others—fishing-boats or coasting craft—can easily ascend as high as Slaughden Quay, a sort of tongue of land, resting on stakes, which projects less than a hundred yards from the left bank of the Alde, at the very point where the river turns from the east to the south.

Slaughden is the "suburb" of Aldborough, so well known to the poet's readers, the centre of the commercial activity of the port in the eighteenth century, to this very day the most characteristic and picturesque spot in this part of the world. It is there that we must go if we want to form a correct idea of what was, on a larger scale, Crabbe's "village." Modern luxury has not crossed the two-thirds of a mile which separates Slaughden from the little town ; no smart hotel spoils the austere gloom which broods over this locality. Let the reader imagine, on a slip of land where the feet sink into the shingle, a group of houses imprisoned between the Alde and the sea : a small public-house, a timber-yard, some more or less humble dwellings, and close by, at the entrance of the "quay" described above, a cluster of ruins, gaping roofs, walls with great rents, whole pieces of them lying on the ground, bricks, scraps of old iron, and he will call to mind the havoc which the waves formerly wrought on Aldborough itself. He will reflect that a sudden shifting of the wind from south to north-west² is enough to let loose upon Slaughden furious storms in which the sea and the river, barely two hundred yards apart, unite, leagued together against the few human habitations cowering on their brink. Like serpents entwined around their prey,

¹ *Aldborough Described*, by J. Ford, Ipswich, 1819 (and not 1815, as the catalogue of the British Museum erroneously states), p. 56. The Alde does not flow into the sea at Orford, as the Biographer asserts (p. 3), but more than six miles farther south ; still less at Aldborough, as Mr. Kebbel has it, *Life of Crabbe*, pp. 12, 13.

² *Notes and Jottings*, p. 6.

the waves slowly but surely encompass the hapless walls, so stout in appearance, so frail before their irresistible enemy: too often they collapse before the tide recedes, and one can see, as in Crabbe's time, the wretched inhabitant of the hovel levelled by the waters "weep from door to door, and beg a poor protection from the poor."¹ The fisherman was wiser who, having dragged his tarred and probably worn-out craft up the beach, turned it upside-down, made two holes in its side, one to serve as window, the other as chimney, and settled himself very comfortably in it:

. . . View his boat,
With bed and barrel—'tis his house afloat;
Look at his house, where ropes, nets, blocks, abound,
Tar, pitch, and oakum—'tis his boat aground.²

The water glides harmlessly off it, and if the storm becomes too threatening, his other refuge is close at hand.³

Let us cross the Alde by the ferry which plies between Slaughden and the opposite bank; let us land with circumspection amid the plashing of a high tide and on the wet grass, let us climb the "wall"⁴ which protects the neighbouring meadows from the encroaching wave, let us walk along the narrow, muddy, and slippery path which leads to Orford. Let us not be discouraged by the too numerous stiles which we have to climb, nor by the dangerous stumbles which threaten to fling us down the bank, into the river, or into the meadow dykes. Let us observe the landscape which spreads at our feet: to the left, the Alde with its dull yellowish waters, edged with banks of slime and irregular rows of stakes, swollen in places by streamlets which flow from the plain through the wall, and whose clear, silvery sound cheers the pedestrian weary with so much silence and monotony; farther on, a desolate

¹ *Village*, i. 129-30.

² *Borough*, xviii. 270-3.

³ Cf. as to these storms, a letter from Fitzgerald to Professor Norton, dated March 7th, 1883 (ed. Aldis Wright): "A newspaper cutting ['ALDEBURGH. *The Storm*.—On Tuesday evening the tide ran over the Promenade, in many places the river and sea meeting. The cattle are all sent inland, and all the houses at Slaughden are evacuated'] will tell you what it was about on my very old Crabbe's shore. It [the sea] will assuredly cut off his old borough from the Slaughden river quay."

⁴ The "wall" of which Crabbe speaks (*Borough*, ix. 173). This "wall" is in reality nothing but a long mud-embankment covered with grass.

stretch of swamp and shingle between the river and the sea, studded with ships which seem to be sailing along the low sky ; to the right, meadows of a whitish green, dykes full of brackish water, on which sea-birds alight for a moment and where the "bittern gives its bellowing boom."¹ The whole beauty, the whole picturesqueness and impressiveness of this landscape, lie in the contemplation of the ruins piled up by the blind forces of nature. Here land and sky are "cruel" to man, to quote the favourite expression of the inhabitants. It is the "sad world" of which the poet speaks in his old age, "where he had never seen the earth productive or the sky serene."²

But few our acres, and but short our grass ;
 In some fat pastures of the rich, indeed,
 May roll the single cow or favourite steed ;
 But these, our hilly heath and common wide,
 Yield a slight portion. . . .
 No crops luxuriant in our borders stand,
 For here we plough the ocean, not the land.³

Such landscapes may inspire a Crome, or even a Constable, but not a Turner. What could suggest to the artist the idea of the grand in nature, the love of dazzling colours and infinite distances ? The horizon is narrow on all sides, even towards the sea ; grey or sombre tints predominate in the sky, almost always overcast, and on the ocean, often darkened by clouds or by the scouring of the sands. Even in summer, when a resplendent sun plays on the surface of the green and blue waters, a slight haze seems to rise from the shore and veil the brilliance of its rays. The mind would feel depressed, if the sight of the winged ships in the offing did not continually recall it to the contemplation of human activity, if this monotony of things did not force us to descend into ourselves and take cognisance of the innate strength which dwells in each one of us. In presence of an inhospitable nature, man feels his energy increase : he confronts it in a challenging attitude, reproaches it with its injustice, and asserts his superiority to it. He observes it as if it were an enemy, he studies it in order to criticise it. In a moment of revolt and despair,

¹ *Borough*, xxii. 196-7.

² *Posthumous Tales*, xxii. 195-6.

³ *Borough*, iii. 167-75.

he may flee from it ; but later on, his need of activity once satisfied, his dreams partly realised, he will remember with gratitude the hard and salutary education it gave him. The desolate heaths, the marshy wastes amid which his austere and needy youth was spent, will be revisited without bitterness, and, if he is a writer, he will describe them with a minute accuracy, a scrupulous fidelity akin to sympathy.

III

THE humble cottage in which Crabbe first saw the light and in which his early years were passed was among those which the waves have swallowed up. Too near the sea, it could not resist its attacks, and seems to have disappeared even before the poet reached manhood. "The chambers," the Biographer tells us, "projected far over the ground-floor; the windows were small, with diamond panes, almost impervious to the light"¹—a very vague description, which would have equally suited most of the old houses in the town. The home of Crabbe's parents cannot have been very different from that in which Burns, the peasant-poet, had his glorious "Vision": on the ground-floor one room, or two at the most, in which the squalls from the open sea and the common drove the smoke down the chimney; above, under a somewhat ill-fastened thatched roof, a garret approached by a ladder or an outside staircase. Let us picture the child, as yet indifferent to the humiliations of poverty, ignorant of the trials which life has in store for him, absorbed in the naïve pleasure of pursuing the receding waves or fleeing from their advance almost up to the threshold of his dwelling. On certain autumn and winter days, when, more encroaching, they demolish the neighbouring houses and flood his own, his childish glee gives place to terror. The sea already reveals to him "its variety and vastness, the sublimity of all its forms."²

In a few years the family moved into another cottage, which Stanfield thought he had sketched in a drawing reproduced by Bernard Barton³ during Crabbe's

¹ P. 2, n. 2.

² *Borough*, i. 165.

³ The quaker-poet of Woodbridge and correspondent of Lamb.

life-time, and afterwards by the Biographer.¹ Long and low, this hovel, of which the entrance is level with the street, seems to be also composed of two rooms on the ground-floor, with two attics overhung by the roof. On the shed which flanks it is a boat upside-down; inside are fishing-lines, ropes, and other tackle. "You would take it for the home of a poor fisherman."² And yet, according to Crabbe's own showing, his parents' real dwelling was even far more humble. "Bernard Barton's print," he writes to one of his sons, "is of my father's house many years after he left it; never very respectable, it was then a miserable building divided into three poor dwellings. I lived in it, as near as I recollect, on my return from school once or twice, when my father removed into that more southward, where we dwelled some years."³ The house sketched by Stanfield had disappeared in 1840; the curious visitor who asked about Crabbe was shown another not far off and rather like it,⁴ probably on the site of the house which is still called "Crabbe's house" at Aldborough. It is in the main street, nearly in the centre of the town, equidistant perhaps from the spot where the poet was born and from that where his father lived towards 1770. Let us bear in mind this fact: from his earliest childhood Crabbe was lulled to sleep by the monotonous and unceasing murmur of the waves breaking on the beach; he chased their light flakes of foam, as other poets have chased butterflies; the only flowers known to him were the seaweed; and all the poetry he saw and heard in nature was the sparkle of the calm sea under a summer sun, and the roar of the surf under the howling of the easterly gales in winter.

The existence of his parents was one of dogged toil; an ever-increasing family demanded constant care from the mother, and forced the warehouse-keeper to put forth all his energy, in order to augment his slender resources. He became, at what time is not known, collector of the salt duties, with the exceedingly modest salary of

¹ In the definitive edition of Crabbe's complete works, in eight volumes, Murray, 1834. This print serves as frontispiece to the first volume.

² Hermann Pesta, *George Crabbe*, p. 2.

³ Unpublished letter to John Crabbe (without date). B. Barton had sent the vignette in a letter to Crabbe dated June 26th, 1829 (Fitzgerald notes).

⁴ Cf. Wodderspoon's *Historic Sites of Suffolk*, with Introductory Verses by Bernard Barton: Ipswich, 1841.

£10 a year.¹ He took an active part in the deliberations of the vestry, as the registers show.² On November 8th, 1761, for instance, he was among those who decided that an umbrella should be purchased for their Rector, the Rev. Mr. Benet, at the expense of the parish; and in 1764 he voted for an expenditure of ten shillings from the same fund, to enable the board to have a jollification in a local public-house. This was one of the traditional perquisites of the office. In 1763 he goes to London to protect the interests of the parish, and on several occasions the vestry is indebted to him for relatively considerable sums. We are therefore not surprised to find him, five years later, raised to the dignity of churchwarden.³ He discharged his professional duties with great zeal. "He was a man of short stature, but very robust and powerful." His "highly marked" countenance reminded his son of that of the illustrious philanthropist Howard, with less serenity.⁴

His duties at the custom-house took him every day to Slaughden Quay, and he did not hesitate to undertake, when occasion required, long rides in pursuit of the smugglers who abounded on the coast and throughout the country: "In *The Public Advertiser* of April 7th, 1767,⁵ we read that on Sunday last were seized near Martlesham⁶ by Mr. John Church, Mr. Geo. Crabbe, and Mr. Samuel Aldrich, of Aldeburgh, three bags containing near 1,000 yards of muslin, upwards of 600 yards of lace, 130 yards of silk gauze, some tea, and other goods from three foreigners who were set on shore from a Dutch hoy at or near Sizewell,⁷ and the above-mentioned Mr. Church and Mr. Crabbe, with the

¹ See in the Public Record Office, "An Account of the Offices and Employments existing in the Salt Duties on October 25th, 1705 (compared with January 5th, 1779), distinguishing the time when any increase in the number of such officers or their salaries was first made: Assistant Searchers and Boatmen—Aldborough: George Crabbe—salary per annum £10."

² Cf. Vestry Book, Aldborough. These registers, as well as those of births, deaths, and marriages, were very kindly placed at my disposal by the Rev. H. Thompson, Rector of Aldborough in 1902.

³ From April 17th, 1768, it would appear, and up to 1775, according to Canon Ainger (*Crabbe*, English Men of Letters, 1903, p. 11).

⁴ B. p. 3.

⁵ Copied by Davy (MS. collection in the British Museum) under the heading "Crabbe" in his *Pedigrees Alphabetically Arranged*, in 43 vols. (Add. 19114-19156).

⁶ A mile and a half south-west of Woodbridge.

⁷ On the coast, six miles north of Aldborough. It is about twenty miles, as the crow flies, from Sizewell to Martlesham.

assistance of another officer, have seized the said hoy near Harwich and carried her to Aldeburgh, where the goods are lodged in the Custom-House." We may be sure that this capture was a considerable event for the family, and that the child was never weary of hearing his father describe to him the ways of these bold adventurers, their wary manœuvres before landing, the feverish haste with which they loaded their horses, their hurried start and the perilous pursuit across the commons which extend to the south-west of Aldborough in the direction of Woodbridge. The personal interest which he took in these tales redoubled the curiosity of the future portrayer of the vices of the *Village* and the *Borough*; on his lively, imaginative mind scenes of this kind remained engraven for life.

When his business did not keep him at the custom-house or send him in pursuit of smugglers, George Crabbe turned fisherman. "He possessed a share in a fishing-boat, in which he not unfrequently went to sea."¹ In his mode of life he much resembled his neighbours, who dwelt in huts or cottages along the beach; his activity was mainly physical; sometimes he moved chests or rolled casks from Slaughden Quay to the customs warehouse, sometimes he stored sacks of salt in the sheds used for this purpose, and of which there is still a faint recollection at Aldborough, sometimes again he proved, like the others, "skill'd to take the finny tribe."² He too belonged to that amphibious race³ which his son excelled in describing. In short, he was a man whose aptitudes made him fit for very different kinds of work, and who soon became the "factotum"⁴ of the place. For he had as much intelligence as vigour, and in that respect was far above most of his fellow-citizens. When he came home in the evening, he liked to resume his early studies: he would take up the poetical works "of Milton, of Young, or of some other of our graver classics," selecting passages "with much judgment," and reading them to his family "with powerful effect"; and now and then he would try his hand at rhyming.⁵ Many years

¹ B. p. 4.

² *Village*, i. 113.

³ *Ibid.* i. 85.

⁴ B. p. 2.

⁵ Cf. in *The Correspondence of Sir Th. Hanmer . . . and Other Relicks of a Gentleman's Family*, edited by Sir H. Bunbury (1838, Moxon), pp. 384-95,

afterwards his son still remembered these readings, which had no doubt so much contributed to awaken in him the poetic vocation and impress on his ear the music of verse.¹

But George Crabbe's favourite relaxation was the study of mathematics. Having, it appears, "an extraordinary faculty of calculation,"² he sent problems for solution to Benjamin Martin's *Miscellaneous Correspondence*, and answered his own questions as well as those of others.³ So far as an outsider can judge, he had extensive acquirements in geometry, and was acquainted with the elements of astronomy and trigonometry. These were very remarkable scientific attainments for the age; and in a man who had received an elementary education only, which moreover had been very soon interrupted, they prove an uncommon intellectual activity and power of assimilation.

Robust in body and mind, George Crabbe evidently possessed a rich nature. But this wealth of vital energy, so precious when its owner remains master of it, may become a source of danger when it overpowers the will and is not subject to a firm moral guidance. This was the rock on which the existence of our poet's father was shipwrecked. He was "a man of imperious temper and violent passions."⁴ He was liable, even in his best years, to fits of sombre rage which terrified his son, still quite young. The child was barely eight years old when his brother William died (in June, 1762), at the age of about eighteen months.⁵ This bereavement plunged his parents into profound grief, and Crabbe, fifty-four years later, still remembered the distressing time which he had then gone through. It was not the sudden apparition of death so near him

a very interesting and quite unknown letter from Crabbe to Burke (see Appendix I). Its existence has since been pointed out by Canon Ainger (*Crabbe*, 1903, pp. 35-6). Among other things, it is said that "my Father was a rhymer himself."

¹ B. p. 4.

² B. p. 2.

³ Cf. Benjamin Martin's *Miscellaneous Correspondence*, in *Prose and Verse*, October, 1760, pp. 521-2; December 9th, 1760, pp. 575, 576. As to this miscellany, see below, p. 29.

⁴ B. p. 3.

⁵ Cf. above, p. 7, n. 3, where it is proved that it was a brother and not a sister, as the Biographer wrongly states, p. 3, following the poet himself (*Infancy*, l. 58, p. 261 of the one-volume edition of 1861).

THE ELDER CRABBE'S INTEMPERANCE 19

that touched him most, nor the sorrow caused by the death of a little playfellow; it was rather "a mother's tears and a father's terrors," the poignant anguish of the over-strong man wrestling with grief, the dread with which this anguish inspired his wife and his sons. And the poet adds:

Though greater anguish I have since endured,
Some heal'd in part, some never to be cured,
Yet there was something in that first-born ill,
So new, so strange, that memory feels it still!¹

George Crabbe had not tenderness enough to try to shake off his depression and console his family. Worse still, he had not enough strength of will to resist the temptations which, in that country of fishermen, carters, and smugglers, met him on all sides. He became a more and more constant frequenter of the public-house. In the eighteenth century drunkenness, as is well known, was rife in every class of English society, and perhaps it is not necessary to attribute to the election of 1774,² in which George Crabbe is supposed to have acted as agent, the bad habits in which he now habitually indulged. True, the meetings in public-houses, necessitated by the purchase of votes and other electioneering operations, were bound to develop this fatal propensity, but they were not the cause of it. Violence of temper increased in a nature whose moral side had been neglected. His wife, whose health was precarious, began to dread his return home; domestic scenes became more and more frequent. If his food did not please him, "he would fling the dishes about the room."³ Robert Crabbe, writing in 1833, relates that during the terrible inundation of January 1st, 1779, when the water flooded the ground-floor

¹ *Infancy*, 61-4.

² Cf. B. p. 9, who says that in 1774 there was a contested election at Aldborough, and that George Crabbe was an active supporter of the Whig candidate, Mr. Charles Long. It must be noted that this statement is borne out only by the testimony of Robert Crabbe, the poet's brother, in answer to one of the Biographer's queries. *The Public Advertiser* of Tuesday, October 18th, 1774, says, on the contrary, that "On Friday last, Thomas Fonnerau, Esq., of Christ Church, and Richard Combe, Esq., of Earnshill in Somersetshire, were both returned for Aldborough, in Suffolk, without opposition." According to *The Ipswich Journal*, the election of September, 1780, was as uncontested as that of 1774. The Biographer (cf. also Kebbel, *Life of Crabbe*, p. 23, note) has doubtless fallen here into one of the many small mistakes that to a certain extent mar his work.

³ B. p. 9.

room up to a height of three or four feet, his father hastily carried a cask of gin upstairs, while his mother, not less eagerly, put her tea-kettle in a safe place.¹ A hard drinker, at home and abroad, George Crabbe was bound to lose gradually the respect of all, even of his children. "My father," the poet wrote to Burke in 1781, "has a large family, a little income, and no œconomy."² And when in later life he wished to depict the insensible deterioration of a mind ravaged by vice, he must sometimes have thought of the father from whom he had inherited his energy and his intellectual strength, but whom he had seen a prey to the degradation of drink. He had witnessed heart-rending, wellnigh tragic scenes, caused by drunkenness, in his own family and among his neighbours. Thus his father remained for him the type of the inhabitants of the "Borough," fishermen and others, of those "men of masculine and robust frames, rude manners, stormy passions," who spent their days in toil, and their nights occasionally in noisy orgies.³

There is no trace, in these stern natures, of the tenderness and sensibility indispensable to a poet. His father's influence therefore might have been fatal to the young man, if it had not been corrected by that of his mother. Born in 1725,⁴ Mary Lodwick was twenty-nine when she took for her second husband George Crabbe, eight years younger than herself. This disparity of age, added to the repeated fatigues of maternity and of daily toil, early deprived her, I fear, of the affection of a husband who became more and more estranged from his home. She was not happy. Conscious of her intellectual and physical inferiority, she often had to suffer in silence with that meekness and resignation which gained her the love of her eldest son. "She was a woman of the most amiable disposition, mild, patient, affectionate, and deeply religious."⁵ She cared little, the Biographer tells us, for the theological

¹ Letter quoted above (p. 5, n. 3).

² Letter quoted above (p. 17, n. 5, and Appendix I).

³ B. p. 4; and cf. Wodderspoon's *Historic Sites of Suffolk*, 1841: "There is still that recklessness of conduct to be perceived inherent in the race he [Crabbe] so justly condemns, and the same disposition to excite unruly passions and feelings."

⁴ She was fifty-five at her death in 1780 (Aldbrough Parish Register; cf. Davy MSS. under the heading, *Aldeburgh Churchyard*).

⁵ B. p. 2.

doctrines of her clergyman:¹ her simple faith, of a practical turn, was satisfied if she took her seat in her pew regularly every Sunday, with all her children beside her;² if she imparted to her life and to her disposition something of that goodness and humility which she heard inculcated in the sermon; above all, if she brought up her children by her example. A little of this tender piety early sank into the mind of her son, and unsealed the fountain of sensibility which the roughness of his father and his companions would inevitably have dried up; he knew—

How feelingly religion may be learned
In smoky cabins, from a mother's tongue—
Heard while the dwelling vibrates to the din
Of the contiguous torrent, gathering strength
At every moment—and with strength, increase
Of fury; while the wind,
A sightless labourer, whistles at its work. . . .
And piety is sweet to infant minds.³

Later on, when dark hours came, Crabbe remembered that he had been the beloved son of his mother, that on his return from long excursions she had always welcomed him with open arms,⁴ and he rewarded her affection by protecting her against his father. Seeing that she was suffering from dropsy, "he became her friend and her physician." He took pleasure in catching some small fish, which were the only food that she could consume. He consoled and supported her valiantly;⁵ very often, no doubt, angry words were exchanged between the indignant son and the father inflamed by drink after a hard day's work.

Such was the home life of Crabbe as a child and youth, an unhappy and dreary life, devoid of that comfort which enhances the value of existence by lifting it above petty cares, troubled by the quarrels of his parents, exalted only by the example of laborious activity and intelligence which his father had set him during his first ten years, and also by the feelings of piety, affection, and devotion with which his mother had inspired him.

¹ B. p. 30.

² *Parish Register*, iii. 625.

³ Wordsworth, *Excursion*, iv. Cf. also *Posthumous Tales*, i. 146 seq. Silford Hall is partly autobiographical.

⁴ *Tales of the Hall*, iv. 485.

⁵ B. p. 9.

IV

IN the absence of regularly installed primary schools, every English village in the eighteenth century had an "old matron," generally a "deaf, poor, patient widow," who was called the schoolmistress, and who boasted "unruly brats with birch to tame." In return for a trifling sum, she ensured the too busy housewives freedom throughout the day by undertaking to look after the children and teach them to read. The little ones at Aldborough, about thirty in number, met every morning in her "lowly shed":

Her room was small—they could not widely stray;
Her threshold high—they could not run away.

The old "dame," looked upon as the mother of the street, was respected by all, especially by her little pupils. They could not see without admiring "her cap, far whiter than the driven snow," her apron as blue as the hare-bell of the fields, her "russet stole over her shoulders thrown," her "russet kirtle," woven by her own hands. And then she was so quick-sighted, so wide awake. "Spells, or tell-tale birds" always ready to whisper in her ear, enabled her to divine the slightest mischievous intention, the smallest attempt at a trick. Then woe to the culprit, who was sure to feel the mistress's dreaded sceptre—the birch-rod so relentlessly wielded—descend upon his "dainty skin, fair as the furry coat of whitest ermine," unless she preferred keeping the rogue pinned to her gown for the rest of the day. From time to time she would stop knitting and solemnly give the order to resume work: forthwith the boys would take up their books, their little primers guarded on one side by a piece of "pellucid horn," and adorned on the other with a fine picture of the doughty deeds of St. George, the conqueror of the dragon. Thus were the first steps in the path of learning taken in that day.¹

Crabbe "was a great favourite with the old dame who taught him,"² and did not fail to pay her a tribute in his poems:

¹ Cf. Shenstone's *Schoolmistress*; Crabbe's *Borough*, xxiv. 1-18; Cowper's *Tirocinium*, 119-24; and Tickell's *Hornbook*.

² B. pp. 4-5.

Shall I not think what pains the matron took,
When first I trembled o'er the gilded book?
How she, all patient, both at eve and morn,
Her needle pointed at the guarding horn;
And how she soothed me, when, with study sad,
I labour'd on to reach the final zad?
Shall I not grateful still the dame survey,
And ask the Muse the poet's debt to pay?¹

In the hours when the "noisy, joyous troop" recovered its liberty, the child took in instruction through his eyes and his imagination. He lingered in front of the little shops, and, if he found the door open, hazarded a question suggested by his curiosity. He was answered kindly; his gentleness, his boldness mixed with timidity, inspired sympathy, and almost enforced attention.² He crept into the inns, and, drawing near the fire, listened to the talk of the customers sitting round the chimney. No one turned him out, for he "had patrons" who thought he was harmless and incapable of noticing what went on.³ Involuntarily, his attention was already attracted to the manners and customs of his fellow-men; sitting around him were certain personages whom he afterwards described with minute accuracy: the portly innkeeper, the deep drinkers, boatmen and petty traders concerting a nocturnal venture with smugglers, and, towards the evening, the poor "dredger," wet to the skin, who tried to sell the fruit of his hard toil. Or he walked along the beach, observed curiously all the refuse and wreckage thrown up by the tide, and now and then went into the cottage of some sailor, whose wife welcomed him "like a son." She would make him a confidant of her anxiety and wonderment; she loved to tell him what storms endangered the precious life of her husband, the marvels to be seen in foreign parts—"lands without bounds and people without law."⁴ She would show him and obligingly explain the prints on the walls: some historical, like that in which Charles I., taught by misfortune, draws up his twelve Golden Rules of conduct; others, legendary or fanciful, representing the "kind" Lady Godiva, or

¹ *Borough*, xviii. 25-32.

² *Tales of the Hall*, iv. 411-16. The character of Richard is autobiographical.

³ *Ibid.* iv. 417-26.

⁴ *Ibid.* iv. 309-12. Cf. also *Tales of the Hall*, v. 11-73.

"the magic mill that grinds the gran'nams young."¹ She would let him examine at leisure the books on the "shelf of deal beside the cuckoo-clock," and the child would devour marvellous stories about ghosts, witches, and fairies, which were the favourite literature of young folk in that day:²

Ballads there were of lover's bliss or bale,
The kitchen story, and the nursery tale.
His hungry mind disdained not humble food,
And read with relish keen of Robin Hood;
Of him, all powerful made by magic gift,
And giants slain—of mighty Hickathrift.³

He was interested in the adventures of the Wandering Jew, of Tom Thumb the Great, and especially in Hickathrift's rival, Jack the Giant-killer, whose arm, "by wizard-power upheld," had done wonders:

His shoes of swiftness on his feet he placed;
His coat of darkness on his loins he braced;
His sword of sharpness in his hand he took,
And off the heads of doughty giants stroke;
Their glaring eyes beheld no mortal near;
No sound of feet alarmed the drowsy ear;
No English blood their pagan sense could smell,
But heads dropt headlong, wondering why they fell.⁴

Happy moments for a credulous imagination, always prompt to forget the reality and to wander into dreamland after his heroes; precious moments, too, since these stories awakened in the child the creative faculty, without which the choicest gifts of observation would have remained unfruitful! Crabbe retained, up to the close of his life, a half-ironical gratitude and a strong partiality for marvellous tales of this class.⁵ He liked to give them to his grandchildren,⁶ whom he wished to share the pleasure he had taken, perhaps still took, in them. Like Wordsworth,⁷

¹ *Parish Register*, i. 51-60.

² B. p. 5.

³ *Posthumous Tales*, i. 96-101.

⁴ *Parish Register*, i. 119-26. Cf. a passage in the *Prelude*, vii. 274 seq., in which Wordsworth notes the illusion produced by the same hero on a popular audience at the suburban theatre of Sadler's Wells.

⁵ B. p. 5.

⁶ B. p. 86.

⁷ *Prelude*, v. 341-7, and Legouis, *La Jeunesse de W. Wordsworth*, pp. 37-40.

he wanted to develop disinterested imagination, fancy even, at an early age; he preferred stories of fairies or giants to the "utilitarian" tales of Mrs. Trimmer, or even of Miss Edgeworth, long narratives written to point a moral, or object-lessons with plot and dialogue. He remembered his own childhood, and the books which he had read of winter evenings to the old blind women in his native village.¹

However varied the spectacle of the sea and of the activity of the port might be, young Crabbe's life remained narrow and monotonous. His horizon therefore seemed all of a sudden to expand on the day when, at the request of "his fond mother," his father promised to take him to Orford in a "newly purchased" sailing-boat. A fine excursion was planned, and a large party expected. They were to sail, as usual, down the Alde, and pass near Orford and the island of Havergate, whose bare, isolated mass divides the river into two arms; farther on they would see, to the right, the green meadows, to the left, the long strip of shingle, the Beach,² which dams the ocean on one side and the river on the other. They were to stop for luncheon either at Orford or on the beach, where they could enjoy themselves for part of the afternoon, and towards evening they were to return to Aldborough along the right bank of the Alde. A day full of pleasing anticipations for a child who had never been so far from home! About fifty-five years afterwards the poet reproduced from the depths of his memory the impression which it had left on him, and noted it in a fragment entitled *Infancy*. If we put aside the moral lesson which Crabbe, too didactically, draws from his recollections, if we try to distinguish, beneath the old man's lament, the naïve voice of the child who relates his first disenchantment, we shall penetrate deeply into the secret of his nature:

Sweet was the morning's breath, the inland tide,
And our boat gliding, where alone could glide
Small craft—and they oft touched on either side.
It was my first-born joy. I heard them say,
"Let the child go; he will enjoy the day."

¹ B. p. 5.

² Cf. Ford, *Aldborough Described*, p. 58.

For children ever feel delighted when
 They take their portion, and enjoy with men.
 Give him the pastime that the old partake,
 And he will quickly top and taw forsake.

The linnet chirp'd upon the furze as well,
 To my young sense, as sings the nightingale.
 Without was paradise—because within
 Was a keen relish, without taint of sin.

A town appear'd,—and where an infant went,
 Could they determine, on themselves intent ?
 I lost my way, and my companions me,
 And all, their comforts and tranquillity.
 Midday it was, and, as the sun declined,
 The good, found early, I no more could find :
 The men drank much, to whet the appetite ;
 And, growing heavy, drank to make them light ;
 Then drank to relish joy, then further to excite.
 Their cheerfulness did but a moment last ;
 Something fell short, or something overpast.
 The lads played idly with the helm and oar,
 And nervous women would be set on shore,
 Till " civil dudgeon " grew, and peace would smile no more.

Now on the colder water faintly shone
 The sloping light—the cheerful day was gone ;
 Frown'd every cloud, and from the gather'd frown
 The thunder burst, and rain came pattering down.
 My torpid senses now my fears obey'd,
 When the fierce lightning on the eyeballs play'd.
 Now, all the freshness of the morning fled,
 My spirits burdened, and my heart was dead ;
 The female servants show'd a child their fear,
 And men, full wearied, wanted strength to cheer ;
 And when, at length, the dreaded storm went past,
 And there was peace and quietness at last,
 'Twas not the morning's quiet—it was not
 Pleasure revived, but Misery forgot :
 It was not Joy that now commenced her reign,
 But mere relief from wretchedness and pain.¹

Thus ended a day so radiant, when viewed from afar, and so well begun. Is it not singular that the expedition should have left in the heart of the child a painful impression, persistent enough for the old man to remember it ? Other children would have forgotten everything except the pleasure of having seen

¹ *Infancy*, 72-114 (p. 261 of *Life and Works*, 1861). Cf., as to this poem, *supra*, p. 7, n. 3, and also B. p. 4.

something new, of having felt the breeze waft the boat along the glittering stream. They would have been overjoyed at the possibility of running about freely in the streets of Orford; even the rain and the storm at the end would not have put them out—they would have almost delighted in it. Think of young Wordsworth launching forth boldly upon his lake, climbing the rocky paths of the mountains, with the ardour of a child starting to discover unknown regions. His joyous activity is so great that at certain moments he forgets his own existence, and, lost in ecstasy, lets the outside world penetrate into him. He opens his soul to nature, receives life from it and imparts life to it.¹ Crabbe, on the contrary, coils up and retires into himself. Full of confidence, he sets out one sunny morning in quest of happiness; at midday the first clouds appear on the horizon: he grows uneasy, anticipating the storm which is about to darken the sky. He stops, and indulges in his gloomy reverie. A sort of homesickness makes him retrace his steps, for he lacks the fearless confidence that great enterprises require; too careful in calculating his strength, he ends by questioning its existence. He will never make a good sailor, as his father, annoyed at his clumsiness, has often reproached him.² Far from attracting him, the sea rivets him to the shore. He already prefers observation and reflection to action. The stern and sterile nature which surrounds him, the dull life which he leads, have already, it would seem, checked his aspirations and implanted in his pensive mind the germs of pessimism. However, he is an uncommon child, of a gentle disposition and lively intelligence, for whom some sacrifice should be made. The father therefore, in spite of his poverty, determined to send him to school for a time.

V

THE place chosen was Bungay, a small town on “the borders of Norfolk,”³ about thirty miles to the north of Aldborough. It is impossible, however, to fix the date on which this change occurred, or the time spent by the child in his first absence from home. He must indeed have been very young if it is true, as two of

¹ *Prelude*, ii. 340-52.

² B. p. 4.

³ B. p. 5.

his biographers state, that on his arrival there he was unable to put on his collar or even his shirt without help¹—an additional reason for the abrupt change from home to school life being distasteful to him. The discipline was severe: the story goes that one day Crabbe and some of his schoolfellows were punished for playing at soldiers in forbidden hours by being thrust into a large dog-kennel called the “Black Hole,” in allusion to a well-known recent event at Calcutta. Crabbe had got in first, and was farthest from the door, which was tightly shut. The poor child in vain shrieked out that he was being suffocated. At last, in despair, he bit the hand of the boy next to him, whose roars gave the alarm, and the sentinel at length decided to let out his prisoners. “A minute more, and I must have died,” said the poet afterwards to his son.² As regards the teaching, it was very elementary—a little reading and writing and ciphering, no doubt.

On his return to Aldborough, Crabbe resumed the life described above. He once more ransacked his father's books and those of his neighbours. Tales of fairies and giants no longer satisfied him; he added to them—

Romance in sheets,
Soft tales of love, which never damsel read
But tears of pity stain'd her virgin bed.

He became interested in “Jane Shore and Rosamond the Fair,” and “in humbler heroines frail as these”: one of them, in particular, forsaken by her lover, had “till her death the work of vengeance stay'd.” When the fatal hour arrived, the faithless man was at sea, surrounded “by a dauntless crew.” Suddenly—

. . . The angry ghost pursued.
In a small boat, without an oar or sail,
She came to call him, nor would force avail,
Nor prayer; but, conscience-stricken, down he leapt,
And o'er his corse the closing billows slept.³

¹ Cf. B. p. 5, and the same anecdote in another form in Kebbel's, *Life of Crabbe*, p. 14.

² B. p. 5. It appears that the room in which Crabbe slept is still shown at the Bungay Grammar School; at least, this is so stated by Mr. Kebbel, and the fact has been confirmed to me by a trustworthy informant. But I do not vouch for the identity of the room shown.

³ *Posthumous Tales*, i. 79-91.

Nothing could be more moral or more sentimental than such a tale. The child's imagination had a craving for marvellous adventures and "wild fictions." "At your age," he wrote in 1830 to his granddaughter Caroline, "I read every book which I could procure."¹ *The Arabian Nights* delighted him, as afterwards they did Wordsworth; the *Persian Tales*, Quarles's *Emblems*,² *Æsop's Fables*, with "the coats in tatters, and the cuts in wood," pleased him as much as *Robinson Crusoe* in his "delightful isle," or Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Nothing came amiss to him; his curiosity devoured everything, just as it fell in his way. He learned the history of England in the sixpenny numbers of "Dr. Cooke and other learned men." His father's mathematical books alone repelled him: "fluxions, sections, algebraic lore, he left for others to explore." But what joy when he became engrossed in *The Monthly Magazine*—that is, the collection in which Benjamin Martin, month by month, retailed the most varied information to his readers. In the fourteen volumes of his *General Magazine of Arts and Sciences* might be found a philosophy for young people of both sexes, the natural history of England and Wales, a complete system of all the philological sciences, a "corpus" of the mathematical sciences, and last, and not least, a miscellany containing, not "scraps from sermons, scenes removed from plays," as the ungrateful poet irreverently asserts,³ but the most tasty morsels of the whole collection: a varied correspondence, problems solved or to be solved, a chronological narrative of the events of the month, and—supreme bliss!—the "Poet's Corner." The mathematician in Crabbe's father had a poor opinion, it would seem, of the innocent odes and innumerable prologues, epilogues, and occasional pieces which encumbered this "corner." He had the problems bound, and the verses sewn into a paper cover.⁴ While the volumes were carefully placed on the shelves, the papers were "left to the chance perusal of the children,"

¹ B. p. 83.

² Francis Quarles (1592—1644). The *Emblems* appeared in 1635, with very numerous illustrations (cf. Pope's allusion in the *Dunciad*, i. 140: "And Quarles is saved by Beauties not his own"). His works have been reprinted in three volumes by Grosart in his *Chertsey Worthies Library*.

³ *Posthumous Tales*, i. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.* i. 79, "poetry unbound."

who were at liberty to read them, "if the eye of any of them should be attracted by the view of words placed in parallel lines of about the same length." This was the very direction which young Crabbe's eyes took, "and he read, scarcely knowing what, pleased with the recurrence of similar sounds and with his ability of retaining a vast number of unmeaning verses in his memory."¹ Poor models in fact, very unsuited for giving the child an idea of great poetry, in which vigour of thought is allied to perfection of form! Who knows if Crabbe does not owe some of his slovenliness to his premature acquaintance with the platitudes of these rhymesters? No doubt the reading of Shakspeare, of Spenser, and of Milton² partly corrected the effect of such bad examples; perhaps too these indifferent poems, being within easier reach of the child's mind than great masterpieces would have been, were more calculated to inspire him with a wish to imitate them and to become a poet himself.

He was in his twelfth year when he was sent to school again, this time to Stowmarket, a small town about five-and-twenty miles to the west of Aldborough, where the woollen industry was then in a thriving state.³ A certain Richard Haddon kept a school there, in which Crabbe spent two years.⁴ This was not the happiest time of his life, to judge by his poems, in which he evidently recalls his impressions. School seemed to him a "world" in which boys indulge in brutal passions, untamed by culture or by adversity. He saw a master whose "dull labour and laborious life" brought him but "small compensation," and whose "power was despised."⁵ Like Cowper at Dr. Pitman's, he had to submit to the persecutions of a brute, "the stout, tall captain, whose superior size the minor heroes view with envious eyes."⁶ He was under

¹ See the *Autobiographical Sketch*, given by Crabbe to *The New Monthly Magazine*, published on January 1st, 1816, and several times quoted by his son. It is in vol. iv. of the British Museum Collection, pp. 511-7, *Memoirs of Eminent Persons*.

² *Posthumous Tales*, i. 140.

³ Cf. Arthur Young's *Tour to the East of England*, 1771, vol. ii. pp. 178-85.

⁴ B. p. 5, and *Bunbury Letter* (Appendix I): "He [my father] kept me two years at a country boarding-school."

⁵ I quote these and the following passages from *The Borough*, xxiv. 240-340, and from *Tales of the Hall*, iii. 1-22 and 55-70.

⁶ Cowper's *Tirocinium*, 220-30.

the sway of a bully, a sort of "proud viceroy, ever near," more respected than the real master. In other words, he shrank beneath the blows of an older school-fellow, reproached himself with cowardice, and felt profoundly humiliated. He was one of the poor little "fags," servants of the big boys, doomed to a slavery which, before the reforms of later days, was a blot on English schools. He had to cower before the redoubtable captain, of whom he has drawn a lifelike portrait :

Hark ! at his word the trembling youngsters flee,
Where he is walking none must walk but he ;
See ! from the winter fire the weak retreat,
His the warm corner, his the favourite seat,
Save when he yields it for some slave to keep
Awhile, then back, at his return, to creep ;
At his command the poor dependants fly,
And humbly bribe him as a proud ally ;
Flattered by all, the notice he bestows
Is gross abuse, and bantering and blows. . . .
How hot the vengeance of a heart so cold !
See how he beats whom he had just reviled
And made rebellious—that imploring child :
How fierce his eye, how merciless his blows !

His stupidity equals his brutality :

Learn he could not ; he said he could not learn,
But he profess'd it gave him no concern :
Books were his horror, dinner his delight,
And his amusement to shake hands and fight ;
Argue he could not, but in case of doubt,
Or disputation, fairly box'd it out.

One day, the master asking him how much six times five make, he was puzzled, shut his eyes and heaved a sigh :

"Come, six times count your fingers—how he stands !
Your fingers, idiot !"—"What, of both my hands ?"

In school, painfully conscious of his inferiority, he asks his victims to correct the blunders in his exercises. Yet his tyranny renders the school "odious." He makes—

The soft, ingenuous, gentle minds endure
Ills that ease, time, and friendship fail to cure.

This abuse of brute strength increases the timidity

of a naturally shrinking boy. But young Crabbe remains an observer, and the bully is not the only type which attracts his attention. He sees another schoolfellow pass with a longing look in front of some fruit exposed for sale, then ask the price in a low voice, and finger the pennies in his pocket for a long time, unable to take his eyes off the "sweet seduction," or to make up his mind to buy. Suddenly a "spendthrift" rushes up, money in hand, and carries off the fruit. Whereupon the young satirist smiles at the satisfaction with which the little miser drops the pennies one after the other into his pocket, pleased at this enforced economy, and saying to himself that the "spendthrift," once he has satisfied his appetite, will no doubt give away the rest of his purchase. Then there are sons of farmers, whose shouts astonish the much quieter Crabbe:

They who, like colts let loose, with vigour bound,
And thoughtless spirit, o'er the beaten ground, . . .
Their minds are coursing in their fathers' fields.

Work is a torture to them, dancing lessons a bore, and they have such a voracious appetite that they could not wait for their meals,

Did they not slyly to the chamber steal,
And there the produce of the basket seize,
The mother's gift ! still studious of their ease.

Brutality or greediness, these are the very defects which Taine, thirty years ago, found in the English schoolboy.¹ Crabbe had suffered from them, and had not forgotten them.

Like so many other poets, he held aloof. His work, of a higher order than at Bungay, filled his time. He made progress in mathematics. His father, who, it would appear, already destined him for the medical career, was highly pleased to receive occasionally from the pupil a solution of the "difficult" problems which he propounded to the master.² Greek was not taught at Stowmarket, and Crabbe was never very familiar with the language of the gods.³ On the other hand, he learnt the rudiments of grammar, read no doubt some

¹ *Notes sur l'Angleterre*, pp. 143-9. ² B. p. 5. ³ Cf. below, p. 206, n. 1.

easy pages from Latin authors, and this rapid initiation enabled him later to pursue his classical studies and take orders.¹ It should not be forgotten that he left school for good in his thirteenth year, and that he never went to a university; all the culture which he gave himself is therefore his own, and testifies to his strength of mind and character. Signs of this originality showed themselves as early as the Stowmarket days. Like the "elder brother"² in the *Tales of the Hall*, he was "a still, retiring, musing, dreaming boy. He relished neither sudden bursts of joy nor the tumultuous pleasures of a rude, noisy, careless, fearless multitude." He had his own pleasures, his unexpected amusements. He tried to write down from memory the very indifferent poems published by B. Martin; if certain passages escaped him, "he supplied the defect by his own invention, and thus at a very early period of his life became a versifier."³ Less precocious than Pope, he was also less well trained. He remembered the fairy tales and stories of adventure which he had read, "the religious and moral principles" which his mother had instilled into him, and with them he—

Wove the wild fancies of an Infant-Muse,
Inspiring thoughts that he could not express,
Obscure sublime ! his secret happiness.
Oft would he strive for words, and oft begin
To frame in words the views he had within ;
But ever fail'd : for how can words explain
Th' unform'd ideas of a teeming brain ?⁴

Or he turned to real life, and practised the art of satire. According to the Biographer, his first victim was a little damsel who came to the school in the evening, and was too proud of a new set of blue ribbons in her straw bonnet. Vanity or simple coquetry deserves correction, thought the future moralist, who expressed his ironical disapproval in some doggerel lines.⁵ The vices and failings of human nature struck him already, either in his playfellows or in ridiculous outsiders like "Neddy," "the mimic for a schoolboy's pay," and afterwards a quack doctor.⁶ Thus it may be said of Crabbe,

¹ Cf. Burke's remark, B. p. 27.

² George. Cf. *Tales of the Hall*, ii. 98-102.

³ *Autobiographical Sketch*, see above, p. 30, n. 1.

⁴ *Posthumous Tales*, i. 166-73.

⁵ B. p. 5.

⁶ *Borough*, vii. 233 seq.

as of Wordsworth, and no doubt of each one of us, that "the child was father of the man."

The end of 1767 and the early months of 1768 were spent at Aldborough, where Crabbe waited for a place to be found for him. His recovered liberty and his mother's affection must have seemed sweet indeed to him after the apprehensions inspired by the rule of the stronger. No more lessons of arithmetic or grammar; his life was now a long holiday, of which he took advantage to read over again his precious notebooks of verses, and to venture beyond the limits hitherto set for his excursions. From his own statement it appears that at this time he led the same kind of life as his Richard in the *Tales of the Hall*.¹ He walked through the town:

Where crowds assembled I was sure to run,
Heard what was said and mused on what was done;
Attentive listening in the moving scene,
And often wondering what the men could mean.

The masts of the ships seen from a distance attracted him to Slaughden Quay:

Strange sounds to hear, and business strange to me,
Seamen and carmen, and I know not who,
A lewd, amphibious, rude, contentious crew—
Confused as bees appear about their hive,
Yet all alert to keep their work alive;
I saw their tasks, their toil, their care, their skill,
Led by their own and by a master-will.

He helped them sometimes, when his father required his services, which he willingly gave, I believe, not being old enough to "abhor manual labour,"² but rather glad to be thought able to assist grown men in an important and urgent task. More gladly still he turned to the ocean and gave it "his mind and thoughts, as restless as the wave." When the ships at sea made signals of distress, he followed with curiosity the prompt manœuvres of the sailors and of the ever-watchful pilots:

Mix'd in their act, nor rested till he knew
Why they were call'd, and what they were to do.

One day, when squalls and calms succeeded each other, he had climbed the hill and was gazing on the troubled waters. Suddenly a gun is heard, two

¹ iv. 287-485.

² B. p. 6.

sailing-boats appear, racing each other, sometimes one and sometimes the other ahead. One of them, seeing itself distanced, hoists a sail which had been kept in reserve—a fatal piece of imprudence: the wind sends the boat ahead like an arrow, but it capsizes, and all the anxious inhabitants, massed on the shore, see it sink before their eyes. “Then were those piercing shrieks, that frantic flight;” . . . “all ask, all answer, none attend, none hear.”¹ Crabbe notices a young girl who stands apart, her eyes fixed on the waves “meeting and clashing o’er the seamen’s graves.” ’Tis a poor maiden betrothed—“a few hours more, and *he* will lie, a corpse, upon the shore.” Tears of pity rise to the child’s eyes; he returns to his mother, who feels alarmed and distressed by such a keen sensibility. He has so much curiosity and sympathy that even painful emotions have an attraction for him:

No ships were wreck’d upon that fatal beach,
But I could give the luckless tale of each;
Eager I look’d till I beheld a face
Of one disposed to paint their dismal case;
 . . . and suffering in their fate
I long’d the more they should its horrors state.

If sailors returned from the polar regions, he interrogated them and heard with terror of “boats uplifted by enormous whales,” and this perilous pursuit appeared to him cruel, criminal almost.

On fine summer days he left the little town, and going in a northerly direction, wandered over the heath. There he met the shepherd, the only denizen of these solitudes, and stopped to speak to him, for “shepherds love to talk.” The superstition of this man astonished him: “he with tales of wonder stored my mind, wonders that he in many a lonely eve had seen himself, and therefore must believe.” In Crabbe’s eyes he was simply an untutored peasant, in an arid and monotonous landscape, and by no means a well-nigh supernatural being like that which Wordsworth sometimes descried on the Cumberland hills, “in size a giant stalking through thick fog,” and “glorified by the deep radiance of the setting sun.”² Regardless of

¹ Cf. a similar scene on the Alde, *Posthumous Tales*, xviii. 195-235.

² *Prelude*, viii. 262-70.

hunger, and sure of finding "crabs" or "brambles," "cress embrown'd by summer sun, in the dry bed where streams no longer run," and a "crystal spring,"¹ Crabbe, like Cowper,² continued his walk :

I loved to walk where none had walked before, . . .
 Or far beyond the sight of men to stray,
 And take my pleasure when I lost my way ;
 For then 'twas mine to trace the hilly heath,
 And all the mossy moor that lies beneath :
 Here had I favourite stations, where I stood
 And heard the murmurs of the ocean-flood,
 With not a sound beside except when flew
 Aloft the lapwing and the grey curlew,
 Who with wild notes my fancied power defied,
 And mock'd the dreams of solitary pride.

The child felt the peculiar attraction of these vast expanses, which the spectator's eye seems to take in at a glance : he stepped out more quickly, for he fancied himself one of the heroes whose romantic adventures he had been reading, "an abdicated king, driv'n from his state by a rebellious race."³ When he reached the environs of Dunwich, he turned towards the shore, which is fringed by cliffs at this point only ; in one of their recesses he discovered the smugglers' refuge, the hut in which "poor, pious Martha served the lawless tribe," whose good and bad points she obligingly described to her young visitor, adding . "I talk, my child, to you, who little think of what such wretches do." And Crabbe returned to Aldborough, tired out, but ready to start the next morning in an opposite direction, to explore the banks of the Alde, to "visit every creek and bay, made by the river in its winding way," on which the seagulls float listlessly, with folded wings.

Thus, at the early age of fourteen, Crabbe already possessed some of the gifts to which he afterwards owed his fame. Impelled by the instinct of imitation, he was beginning to learn to write in verse ; he had unconsciously accumulated, in the course of his childhood, a multitude of observations on his natural surroundings, his fellow-countrymen, and his companions ; he had made in fairyland and dreamland the

¹ *Posthumous Tales*, xxii. 103-15.

² *The Task*, i. 107.

³ *Posthumous Tales*, xxii. 115-18.

sojourn which is indispensable to every poet. His character was taking definite shape : reserved, almost timid, possessed of an energy more fitted for resistance than initiative, keenly observant, with a turn for satire, endowed at the same time with a sensibility which might have easily become sentimentality. His existence and that of his parents had remained humble and poor, but he had suffered little from this, being ignorant of any other. He had also tasted the delights of solitary reverie and of much unrestrained reading. He was liked for his naïve tenderness, he was respected for his "learning"¹ and his intelligence. The "fair seed-time"² had passed for him ; he was now about to serve the rude apprenticeship of life.

¹ B. p. 5 : "Walking one day in the street, he chanced to displease a stout lad, who doubled his fist to beat him ; but another boy interfered to claim benefit of clergy for the studious George. 'You must not meddle with *him*,' he said ; 'let *him* alone, for he ha' got larning.'"

² *Prelude*, i. 301.

CHAPTER II

WICKHAM BROOK AND WOODBRIDGE (1768—1775)

- I. Apprenticed to an apothecary at Wickham Brook. Course of reading. Visit to Cheveley Park.—II. At Woodbridge.—III. Mira : her family and the life at Ducking Hall.—IV. Love and first poems : *Hope* and *Inebriety*.

I

It was with a Mr. Smith,¹ an apothecary at Wickham Brook, that Crabbe made his start in life. He thus passed from one extremity to the other of the county of Suffolk, from the shores of the German Ocean to the plateaus which extend south of Newmarket and Bury St. Edmunds. Wickham Brook is a tiny village, little more than a hamlet, nestling in a hollow, about twelve miles south-east of Newmarket. Low hills, here and there crowned by a windmill, enclose it on every side except one, by which penetrates the streamlet that gives its name to the place. A poor church at the end of a cemetery, a few scattered houses, some built by a charitable hand, others, somewhat smarter, clad with creepers and surrounded with flower-beds, a rustic bridge, a modest inn ; then, on the crest of the slope which ascends northwards in the direction of the village of Lidgate, a newly built school—such is at the present day this neat and unpretending little spot, which seems to slumber peacefully in the shade of its trees, at the foot of its hills.

To cross the whole breadth of Suffolk was not an easy or a pleasant journey in the year 1768. It was a trying experience for Crabbe, who performed the greater part of it in the company of two farmers returning from Aldborough, and the last ten miles alone. Let the reader picture him, exhausted by a long tramp, his clothes bespattered with the mud of

¹ Cf. letter quoted above, p. 5, n. 3. "I recollect my brother went as an apprentice to a Mr. Smith at Wickham Brook," writes Robert Crabbe.