Medicine and History

Closely observed pains

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Outside the groves of academe few people today read George Crabbe's trenchant rhymed couplets describing the life and landscape of his native Suffolk in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is a pity because Crabbe is a real original: an unpoetical poet who believed that it was his duty to instruct his readers as accurately as possible about the painful realities of human life, however disagreeable.

Painful realities were the stuff of Crabbe's own life from an early age because he worked for years as an impoverished medical student and country doctor before he managed, after a bitter struggle, to become a comfortably successful poet and parson. He disliked his first profession, but it strongly influenced his second. On his rounds of the grim workhouses, asylums, prisons, and slums of his period the sights he saw and the sad, strange tales he heard affected him deeply and provided the raw material for many of his poems.

Apart from his natural sympathy for the underdog, Crabbe had an excellent memory and acute powers of observation, including an almost photographic eye for detail. Writers wishing for verism to colour a dry account of the workings of the poor laws often trawl through his pages for a picture or two of what a parish poorhouse, for example, actually looked like. Here is one:

How would ye bear to draw your latest breath,
Where all that's wretched paves the way for death?
Such is that room which one rude beam divides,
And naked rafters form the sloping sides;
Where the vile bands that bind the thatch are seen,
And lath and mud are all that lie between;
Save one dull pane, that, coarsely patched, gives way
To the rude tempest, yet excludes the day:
Here, on a matted flock, with dust o'erspread,
The drooping wretch reclines his languid head.

That quotation comes from *The Village*, published in 1783, a chilling account of the harsh lives of the rural poor in which Crabbe deliberately satirised the fantasies of pastoral bliss fostered by "poetical" poets. It was his first great literary success, marking a watershed between his previous life as an obscure, impoverished country doctor and his future life as a poet. Dr Johnson, who revised the first draft, pronounced it "original, vigorous and elegant"; he and Boswell applauded the author for demolishing "false notions of rustic virtue and rustic happiness." Byron, another admirer, read the poem some years later and delivered his famous verdict on Crabbe: "Though nature's sternest painter, yet the best."

Other writers were hostile. They attacked Crabbe for concentrating on the seamy side of life instead of doing the proper job of a poet, which was to "elevate readers' minds above the vulgarities of everyday existence." Naturally enough, the leaders of the romantic movement stood in the hostile camp. Wordsworth described

Sketch of George Crabbe by Sir Francis Chantrey (by permission of the National Portrait Gallery).

Crabbe's verses as "the meanest kind of satire" that had about as much to do with poetry as "a collection of medical reports." Coleridge granted Crabbe "much power of a certain kind" but deplored his "absolute defect of the high imagination."

Peter Grimes

Today, as the dust settles thickly on such long forgotten literary wrangles, Crabbe is chiefly remembered, if he is remembered at all, for one of his later works, *The Borough*. This is a long portrait in verse of the people, manners, and institutions of his birthplace, Aldeburgh. From the section on "the poor of the borough" Benjamin Britten netted the strange tale of a sadistic fisherman called Peter Grimes, which inspired him to compose his first great opera of that name.

For lovers of the opera it is a solemn thought that the idea came to Britten only by the purest chance. In 1941 he and his lifelong friend, the tenor, Peter Pears, were staying in California. They had left England for America in 1939, and Britten was feeling homesick and wondering about going back. In an idle moment he picked up and flicked through a back number of *The Listener*, which happened to contain the text of a broadcast about Crabbe and his poetry by the

novelist and critic E M Forster. Britten was gripped by the opening sentence: "To think of Crabbe is to think of England," and went on to read Forster's description of Crabbe's early life on the Suffolk coast, where Britten also had been born, only at Lowestoft, a few miles away from Aldeburgh. One of the composer's biographers, Michael Kennedy, tells how the article "profoundly affected the increasingly homesick Britten. Pears went into a bookshop and found a copy of Crabbe's poetry, which Britten had not known."

Portrait of George Crabbe by H W Pickersgill (by permission of the National Portrait Gallery).

The rest is musical history. Having caught his Crabbe, Britten made haste to return to England. From his home in Suffolk he used to walk out and plan the opera in his head as he tramped for miles across the salt marshes and commons where Crabbe, as a young apothecary's apprentice, had walked two centuries earlier, carrying medicines and planning verses in his head. Britten and his librettist, Montagu Slater, honoured the original begetter of the opera by including in it a silent part for Dr Crabbe. The real Dr Crabbe had a poor ear for music. In his youth he tried to learn the flute to please his sweetheart but had to give up the attempt "after many a painful hour."

Like his earlier poems, *The Borough* delighted some of Crabbe's readers and infuriated others because of his concentration on the extraordinary dramas and passions of ordinary people's lives. The old, the sick, the poor, the weak, and the wicked were for him a never ending source of fascination, much of it originating from his early dealings, as a doctor, with social outcasts of all kinds. The critics continued to deride Crabbe for "frequent lapses into disgusting representation." In his later *Tales* and *Tales of the Hall* he presented a more mellow set of characters, many of them drawn from his own circle of friends at a time when his life as a literary celebrity and country parson had long ceased to bring him into daily contact with the scenes of suffering that had filled his youth.

Crabbe the doctor

As a young man Crabbe was definitely something of a hero. The story of how he turned himself into a poet is as remarkable and strange as any of his tales. In 1754, when he was born, Aldeburgh was a wretched place consisting of "two parallel and unpaved streets, running between mean and scrambling houses, the abodes

of seafaring men, pilots and fishers." The surrounding country was desolate. As Crabbe was later to describe it:

Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,
Reign o'er the land and rob the blighted rye.

From boyhood he wrote verses, and he cherished very early in life the ambition of one day making his living with them, but his father pushed him instead into the more secure profession of medicine. Crabbe senior was a collector of salt duties with a warehouse on the quay at Aldeburgh and was determined that his clever eldest son should not inherit his dead end job as a minor clerk in the revenue department. At considerable cost to the meagre family income "our George" was therefore given some schooling and at 14 took up his first apprenticeship with a surgeon apothecary.

Early in the next century John Keats started the same work at the same age, but there the parallel ends. For Keats his early years in medicine were "the most placid period of his painful life." For Crabbe exactly the opposite was true. From boyhood into early manhood he was tethered by poverty and filial duty to a profession for which he had neither liking nor aptitude. An innate lack of manual dexterity made it hard for him to be swift in bleeding, bandaging, or bone setting, and his lack of competence often preyed on his mind during his seven apprentice years near Bury St Edmunds and in Woodbridge. His only consolation was that his medical duties left him plenty of time to practise his verse writing.

After a brief visit to London "to pick up what medicine I could on the cheap" Crabbe returned to Aldeburgh and took over the failing practice of a surgeon apothecary who had left because he could not make it pay. Crabbe, who was then about 23, found no joy in his elevation to doctor. All his old worries about his lack of skill returned to torment him. In *The Life of George Crabbe by his Son* his son recalls the doctor's despair:

The sense of a new responsibility pressed sorely and continually on his mind; and he never awoke without shuddering at the thought that some operation of real difficulty might be thrown in his way before night. Ready sharpness of mind and mechanical cleverness of hand are the first essentials in a surgeon; and he wanted them both, and knew his deficiencies far better than anyone else did.

Monument to George Crabbe in Trowbridge parish church (by courtesy of the Wiltshire Times).

Finding a patron

Fortunately for his patients and his peace of mind, Crabbe decided after a few years and much agonising to quit medicine and go to London to venture all as a poet. In 1780, after a difficult interview with his old father, he sailed in a sloop to London, took cheap lodgings in the city, and began to hawk his abundant collection of poems round the booksellers and literary patrons.

For a whole year there were no takers. Crabbe's money ran out as fast as the letters of rejection piled up. In order to eat he had to sell clothes, books, and a case of his redundant surgical instruments. Even so, the day came when "absolute want stared him in the face . . . the best he could hope for was, dismissing all his dreams of literary distinction, to find the means of daily bread in the capacity of a druggist's assistant." Characteristically, he tried one last fling for freedom. He sent a letter to the statesman Edmund Burke, from one "without a friend, without employment, without bread," enclosing an assortment of his poems and imploring the great man to see him. The happy outcome is best told in the words of Crabbe's son's biography:

Mr Burke . . . immediately appointed an hour for my father to call upon him at his house in London; and the short interview that ensued entirely, and for ever, changed the nature of his worldly fortunes . . . He went into Mr Burke's room a poor young adventurer, spurned by the opulent, and rejected by the publishers, his last shilling gone, and all but his last hope with it; he came out virtually secure of all the good fortune that, by successive steps, afterwards fell to his lot.

After his short talk with the starving poet Burke wrote to his friend Joshua Reynolds, "He has the mind and manners of a gentleman." Crabbe was immediately asked to stay at Burke's country home in Beaconsfield, where he was treated as one of the family, provided with rooms and books, and introduced to Charles

James Fox and Reynolds, who later invited Crabbe to meet Dr Johnson. The literary networks had begun to operate.

Poet and churchman

Burke continued to treat Crabbe as a favourite son. With the great man as his friend and adviser, Crabbe rapidly got into print. He also got into the church, that useful refuge for writers in need of a secure income and light duties. His first appointment was to a curacy at Aldeburgh, and after many moves round England he spent his final years as rector of Trowbridge in Wiltshire, far from the harsh landscape of his youth. The year after his death in 1832 a monument was erected over his grave in the chancel of the parish church, with an inscription including the words:

Born in humble life, he made himself what he was. By the force of his genius, he broke through the obscurity of his birth yet never ceased to feel for the less fortunate.

Literary genius would certainly not be claimed for Crabbe today. He lacked the true poet's ear, and even his most fervent admirers have to admit that his jogtrot couplets often degenerate into mere doggerel. But if he is far from being a great poet, he is certainly a brilliant craftsman on the narrow canvas that he chose and above all a passionate humanitarian. His best testimonial is that of John Simon, the pioneer health reformer, who praised Crabbe, Cowper, and Burns for their poetic gift of awakening "tens of thousands who had never troubled themselves to read argumentative works of divinity or politics to new sympathies with their fellow men."

The painting on the front cover, by Anne Bruce, is of Blythburgh Hospital, formerly a workhouse in the part of Suffolk where George Crabbe worked.

The fortification spectra of migraine

GORDON T PLANT

When I was a medical student on holiday in Holland I visited the town of Naarden, an aerial view of which is shown in figure 1. A single glance at the photograph of these remarkable fortifications made me realise why one of the most common varieties of visual aura in migraine is referred to as the "fortification spectrum."

Although a number of authors have correctly stated the origin of the expression,¹⁻³ I have found considerable confusion among medical students and practising physicians about its meaning. When asked, most will suggest that the term refers either to the castellated or crenellated appearance of battlements or, less convincingly, to the intense ("fortified") visual sensation. Even more confusion surrounds the term "teichopsia," which has the same meaning as fortification spectrum but is usually taken to mean "flashing lights."

There are a few instances where the general misunderstanding has resulted in published errors. For example Duke-Elder states: "The usual visual disturbances, however, are very striking, consisting of the appearance of brightly coloured, shimmering spectral lights (TEICHOPSIA)." The definition of teichopsia in the *Oxford*

English Dictionary (1971) as "Temporary blindness sometimes accompanying ophthalmic headache" is, I think, off the point and sufficiently vague as to be misleading.

Sacks states that fortification spectra are so called because of their similarity to the ramparts of a walled city.⁵ Sacks also repeats Singer's suggestion that certain illustrations of the visions of the nun and mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1180) may have had a migrainous basis.⁶ Both authors show, as evidence for this assertion, the occurrence of "typically migrainous fortification figures" in some of the illustrations. These are of the form , which in my experience is never reported in migraine.

My interest in this topic has grown into a crusade since a colleague (a visual physiologist) recently described to me his first attacks of classical migraine. He was particularly interested that his aura had consisted of zig zags and *not* fortification spectra.

Origin of the term

I was aware that most authorities quote Hubert Airy's paper of 1870 as the origin of the term.⁷ A little further research showed that the term had been used independently by no fewer than three distinguished people.

The earliest was Dr John Fothergill (1712-80), the eighteenth century London physician who formed a Society of Physicians and published its proceedings at his own expense. He was responsible

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