

**SELECTIONS FROM
THE POEMS OF
GEORGE CRABBE**

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Selections from the Poems of George Crabbe by George Crabbe & Anthony Deane

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GEORGE CRABBE & ANTHONY DEANE

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INTRODUCTION

“A POET of humble life, happily described as ‘a Pope in worsted stockings.’” Such is the description of Crabbe which every student of “English Literature” cram books has by heart, and until lately it was almost all that nine out of ten readers could tell you about him. There was a University Extensionist, indeed, who went further and fared worse, by adding a gloss upon Horace Smith’s not very brilliant epigram. “Mr Crabbe was a clergyman,” she wrote, “who earned the name of ‘a Pope in worsted stockings’ by reason of his eccentric dress and his High Church views.” Of late a decidedly increased interest has been shown in Crabbe and his writings. “I must think my old Crabbe will come up again, though never to be popular”—so, in a letter to Archbishop Trench, wrote Edward Fitzgerald, and it seems as if the prophecy were in a fair way to be fulfilled. Quite popular Crabbe is not likely to become; his are not the

rhymes for the reciter to get by heart, or for the young lady to copy into her album. But from his lifetime onwards he never lacked a band of faithful adherents. There must be something of more than average worth in verse which at different times has gained the enthusiastic praise of—to name but a few—Dr Johnson, Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, Jeffrey, Miss Austen, Cardinal Newman, Lord Tennyson and Mr Swinburne. To be sure, the reasons of this common taste have been various enough. Miss Austen thought him an ideal husband: "I could fancy myself Mrs Crabbe," she said—and an odd marriage it would have been! Byron eulogized Crabbe in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:—

"There be, who say in these enlightened days
That splendid lies are all the poet's praise,
That strained invention, ever on the wing,
Alone impels the modern bard to sing;
'Tis true, that all who rhyme—nay, all who write—
Shrink from that fatal word to genius—trite;
Yet Truth sometimes will lend her noblest fires
And decorate the verse herself inspires;
This fact in Virtue's name let Crabbe attest;
Though nature's sternest painter, yet the best."

All which, however, meant little more than that Byron welcomed Crabbe as an upholder of the "classical" traditions against the Lake school.

He confesses almost as much in a letter to Thomas Moore (February 2, 1818), wherein he pronounces Crabbe to be "the father of modern poesy," because he clings to the Augustan mode, with its pompous decasyllabics and its strained antitheses. The same motive was the source of Jeffrey's rather extravagant praise. That he honestly admired Crabbe's work we need not doubt, but we may suspect that his eulogies would have been much less fervid had not to praise Crabbe been, according to the canons of contemporary criticism, to depreciate Wordsworth. So, again, in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ* (September, 1825) we find "Christopher North" asserting that "Crabbe, with all his defects, stands immeasurably above Wordsworth"—a verdict not endorsed by a later generation. The art of English poetry had come at this date to the parting of the ways, in regard to manner as well as matter. No wonder that the Conservatives, the staunch defenders of the threatened classical stronghold, hailed Crabbe as their champion. "How foolish this cry for simplicity," they urged, "how insane this demand for new and unconventional rhythms. You aim at truth, you say; you want fidelity to nature, and pictures of things as they are. Well, here is a poet who can give them to you. Does he think it needful to write in feeble little stanzas or blank verse?

Not a bit of it! Here are poems which for unflinching realism put your Wordsworth to shame—and yet he is able to do this without departing in the least from classical traditions. Look at his well-turned heroic couplets, look at his beautiful antitheses, almost worthy of Pope himself! Away with your rubbish about Wordsworth and his love of Nature!" And so, oddly enough, it happened that it was precisely Crabbe's worst defect—his strained and clumsy style—which gained for him the warmest praise from the poets and critics of his own age.

His later admirers have based their liking for him upon surer ground. Crabbe's poems, apart from their intrinsic merits, have a two-fold historical value. Technically, as has been suggested, they form a meeting-place between the old school of poetry and the new. They provide at the same time a vivid and striking picture of English rural life at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. And thus his work, as Sir Leslie Stephen¹ remarks, possesses "an abiding interest." But further it has a charm of its own, independent of its antiquarian and technical significance. For when all is said, Crabbe at his best is a poet, not merely a writer of verse. His defects, to a modern eye, are obvious enough.

¹ Article "Crabbe," in *Dictionary of National Biography*.