

FRANCIS MARION CRAWFORD

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The last time I spoke to Russell Kirk I told him how delighted I was to find his appreciation of Francis Marion Crawford in the book John C. Moran devoted to that author. Kirk stressed Crawford's status as a Romantic, and perhaps interest in the once world- renowned author, now all but forgotten, can itself qualify as romantic.

Crawford was born in Italy of American parents in 1854. His father was a sculptor whose statue of Liberty adorns the Capitol dome in Washington; recently it was brought down and refurbished with little effect on the reputations of either the father or the son. Crawford was the nephew of Julia Ward Howe so that when he was in this country he moved in most interesting circles. Some of his schooling took place here, but it is difficult to think of the author as an American, save in a Jamesian cosmopolitan sense.

He spent a year at Cambridge, continued his studies in Germany at Heidleberg, and in 1877, twenty-three years old, returned to Rome. His father had died when Francis was three years old and his mother soon married the American painter Luther Terry; perhaps Francis fitted into the household only imperfectly. He studied Sanskrit at the University of Rome

-- Crawford was an extraordinary linguist, having some twenty languages -
- and, in 1879, sailed for India. Early in his Indian sojourn he converted to Roman Catholicism.

That an American Protestant born and raised in the shadow of the Vatican should go to India to become a Catholic is surprising, but doubtless his early years had disposed Crawford for conversion. After only a year in India, he returned to Rome, a young man without a clear plan of life. It was in 1881, while staying with the Howes in Boston that his literary career began almost whimsically. Asked to write down the stories of his Indian experience with which he had been entertaining his hosts, he produced his first novel *Mr. Isaacs* (1882). It was the first of over forty books which would bring him fame, wealth and vast cultural influence.

Crawford was thirty years old when he married Elizabeth Berdan and the question arose as to where they should live. Eventually, the decision was made for Sorrento where they settled into what was to be renamed Villa Crawford. Crawford was a remarkably fecund author who often wrote several novels a year. They enjoyed a remarkable popularity, enabling him to live in expatriate opulence on the Amalfi coast. Henry James was to visit him there and to feel an understandable resentment at Crawford's fame and affluence. It wasn't just that Crawford was prolific and James was not -- each author produced a flood of fiction -- but popular fame eluded James, though his critical reputation as the premier

novelist of his day is now secure. Crawford on the other hand seems fated to survive in footnotes to James' published letters.

Crawford wrote against the mainstream insofar as this was defined by William Dean Howells. Howells, a remarkable writer, urged his fellow authors to concentrate on the social and moral upheaval in this country a century ago. Write American. Like James, Crawford set most of his stories abroad, but places and plights and atmosphere were utterly different in the two novelists. For Crawford, fiction presented another world, not a snapshot of this one, but his plots involved external action far more than inner moves of the Jamesian kind.

The so-called Saricinesca trilogy makes use of the Rome of Crawford's youth, a Rome which was still the capitol of the Papal States, where old families combined in arranged marriages despite the promptings of romantic love, where duels were fought and mysterious characters operated under assumed identities, a Rome of art and architecture and opera. *Marzio's Crucifix* (1887) tells of a radical anti-clerical Socialist silversmith whose priest brother brings him a cardinal's commission for a silver crucifix. That such a man should spend his artistic life making religious articles becomes more than ironic when the silver crucifix becomes the means whereby Marzio is diverted from a nefarious plot.

Crawford did not use his novels to preach but the attitudes of many of his characters match his own. His views on the relation of art and

religion, and on the likely effects of atheistic radicalism, are of more than passing interest. Crawford became a historian of modern Italy, writing extensively on the papacy and the effect of the Italian Republic on the Vatican. During his extensive lecture tour of the United States, his most popular talk dealt with Pope Leo XIII, the reigning pope.

A Crawford who could be at ease with his Yankee relatives managed as a novelist to write naturally from a Catholic perspective in a way that won him readers of all faiths and none. His biographer attributes Crawford's universal appeal to the muting of his religious beliefs. This seems unlikely, given his themes and the treatment of them. He lectured in Washington and in San Francisco, in New Orleans and Chicago, and dozens of points between (he spoke at Notre Dame in November of 1897).

Crawford died on Good Friday in 1909 at Sorrento and was buried there. He was a somewhat more robust Robert Louis Stevenson (who admired Crawford's writing); sickly throughout his life he was nevertheless incredibly active, always on the move whether on land or water.

His career provides an occasion to reflect on the nature of literary reputation. His posthumous popularity was brief, perhaps done a mortal blow by the moral upheaval of World War I. None of the novels that made him famous is in print today. His works have become collectibles. He is something of a cult figure for a few -- the F. Marion Crawford Memorial Society was founded in 1975 -- but by and large, in a way both his religion

and his romantic outlook would have prepared him for, he has sunk into almost total oblivion.

Of course the same can be said of the vast majority of best-sellers of a quarter century ago, or of a decade ago. Novels are novelties that serve their purpose and then, for the most part, suffer the fate of periodicals. Nonetheless, you will find Crawford in any good library, certainly any Catholic university library, first editions marching along the shelves. Their titles may intrigue you. *Via Crucis*. *Zoroaster*. *Tale of a Lonely Parish*. *A Roman Singer*. *A Lady of Rome*. Certainly you will find *Saricinesca*. Maybe even *Casa Braccio*. Open it. A young nun flees the convent with her lover, employing a young woman's corpse to create the impression that she has died, not gone over the wall, and twenty years later the flown nun is dead and her husband and daughter Gloria live in Rome. The novel goes on to explore the intrigues and triangles and passions of Gloria and her circle. Eventually, she commits suicide and her father is left to contemplate how his sacriligious deed of long ago has ruined many lives.

Villa Crawford, on the other hand, became a convent in which one of Crawford's daughters was a nun. He could have written a novel about that.