

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1990

Stephen Crane's Father and the Holiness Movement

Christopher Benfey
Mount Holyoke College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Benfey, Christopher, "Stephen Crane's Father and the Holiness Movement" (1990). *The Courier*. 265.
<https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc/265>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Courier by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
C O U R I E R



VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1990

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES COURIER

VOLUME XXV

NUMBER ONE

SPRING 1990

- Intentional Omissions from the Published Civil War Diaries
of Admiral John A. Dahlgren
By Robert J. Schneller, Jr., Ph.D. Candidate in History, Duke University 3
- Stephen Crane's Father and the Holiness Movement
By Christopher Benfey, Assistant Professor of English, Mt. Holyoke College 27
- "I Want to Do This Job": More Margaret Bourke-White
Letters to Erskine Caldwell
By William L. Howard, Assistant Professor of English, Chicago State University 37
- The New School of Wood Engraving
By Edward A. Gokey, Advanced Graduate Student of Fine Arts, Syracuse University 53
- The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Four)
By Gwen G. Robinson, Editor, *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 85
- News of the Syracuse University Library and the
Library Associates 127

Stephen Crane's Father and the Holiness Movement

BY CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

Stephen Crane was the son and grandson of prominent Methodist ministers, and it is often assumed that his colorful life of excess and adventure was an understandable rejection of that legacy.¹ But his father's prominence during Crane's childhood was tinged with something close to scandal, and what the son rejected is not entirely clear. Indeed, Crane the novelist seems to have inherited certain traits of character from Crane the minister—tenacity of purpose, intellectual integrity, iconoclastic fearlessness—and adapted them to his own ends.

This article attempts to answer the question: Why did Stephen Crane's father, Jonathan Townley Crane (1819–1880), give up the prestigious position of presiding elder in the Elizabeth (New Jersey) district of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1876, and return to the itinerant ministry? The answer may turn out to have a bearing on issues central to Crane studies, such as the reputed differences between the conceptions of God held by Crane's father and his maternal grandfather, and Stephen Crane's own obsessive search for intense experience. It may also help to convey the atmosphere in the Crane household during the years when Stephen, born in 1871, was growing up. I propose, in short, to reveal a momentous and hitherto unsuspected episode in J. T. Crane's life.

Jonathan Townley Crane's strange fate was to find himself in the

© Christopher Benfey, all rights reserved. This essay is part of a study of Stephen Crane, to be published by Alfred A. Knopf next year. The author wishes to thank the staff of the Syracuse University Library, and especially Edward Lyon, for generous help with the Stephen Crane and the George Peck collections.

1. See, for example, R. W. Stallman's "standard" biography, *Stephen Crane: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 14: "Revolt against the fathers is the common lot of sons, but in Stephen Crane's life it is exemplified more clearly than in any other American writer".

midst of one of those awakenings of religious fervor that erupt periodically in American history. His life during the years of Stephen Crane's childhood must be seen in relation to what was known as the "Holiness Movement", which convulsed the Methodist Church in the United States, and especially its New Jersey wing, during the 1870s. As one chronicler of the movement grandly proclaimed in 1873, "It was in the divine order that New Jersey should be the place where this advance movement of the times should be made".² J. T. Crane's intellectual integrity was such that amid the ensuing doctrinal controversies he consistently took positions opposite to those of his influential in-laws, the Reverends George and Jesse T. Peck, his wife's father and uncle respectively.

J. T. Crane paid for his courage. From being the presiding elder of the Elizabeth district in 1876, a position of great responsibility and adequate pay, he was demoted to the itinerant ministry. By the time of his death from heart failure in 1880, he was living in virtual exile in the backwater of Port Jervis, New York, still trying to convince his opponents of the superiority of his views. The first eight years of Stephen Crane's life corresponded to his father's professional and financial humiliation. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the effects of his father's clouded last years lingered on in the family circle, to be discussed in whatever terms—shame, anger, desire to redress (we can never know)—in front of the growing boy.

Jonathan Townley Crane was born in 1819 to Presbyterian parents on a farm in what is now Union, New Jersey, and orphaned at thirteen. His own religious conversion five years later was apparently more intellectual than emotional. Repelled like many of his generation by the Calvinist doctrine of infant damnation, he converted to the gentler creed of Methodism. To pay his way through the College of New Jersey (the Presbyterian forerunner of Princeton University), he worked in a Newark trunk factory. The Methodist ministry had had no educational requirements in the first half of the century, and its unlettered, plain-speaking preachers appealed to the heterogeneous population of the American West, where Methodism had spread rapidly. Peter Cartwright (1785–1872), a famous itinerant preacher known as "the Methodist bulldog", wrote with scorn in his *Autobiog-*

2. George Hughes, *Days of Power in the Forest Temple* (Boston: John Bent, 1873), 37.

raphy of learned ministers of other denominations, boasting that “illiterate Methodist preachers set the world on fire while they [the others] were lighting their matches!”³

But J. T. Crane was a Methodist minister of the new stamp. Well-educated, bookish, respectable in every way, Crane was of the generation of Methodist ministers who brought the post-Civil War church much closer to the other Protestant denominations. If, as Stephen Crane’s friend Harold Frederic was to say of these ministers, “they were not the men their forbears had been”,⁴ they were nonetheless proud of having brought Methodism up to date. Having purged it of its ruder aspects—by the 1870s the old Methodist “campgrounds”, where histrionic conversions took place under the trees, had become summer resorts where respectable Methodists vacationed together—they had made Methodism competitive in the civilized Northeast, a part of the country where its appeal had traditionally been weakest.

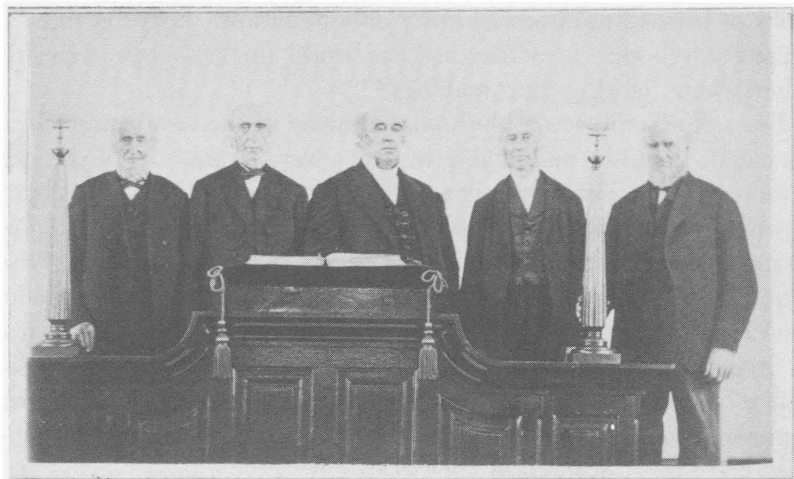
To all appearances J. T. Crane married strategically; if so, he soon learned that an alliance of love and ambition can have its own intrinsic constraints. Mary Helen Peck was the only daughter of the Reverend George Peck, editor of the influential *Christian Advocate* of New York, author of several much-admired books including an autobiography, and for twenty years the presiding elder in the large Wyoming (Pennsylvania) Conference of the Methodist Church. Peck’s four brothers were all ministers, among them the imposing Jesse T. Peck—he weighed three hundred pounds—whose career was to be even more illustrious than his brother George’s, culminating in his rise to the rank of bishop. (He was also one of the founders of Syracuse University.) These Pecks, who were much in demand as speakers, assembled yearly for family reunions, where they prayed together and listened to one another preach.⁵

J. T. Crane first caught the attention of the Methodist leadership with his *An Essay on Dancing* (1848), published in the same year as

3. Quoted in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977), 41. For information on the history of Methodism in the United States, I have relied on Douglas and on Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972).

4. Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896; New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 3.

5. Invitations and programs for these reunions can be found in the George Peck Papers, Syracuse University Library.



The five Peck brothers. Photograph from the George Peck Papers, Syracuse University Library.

his marriage banns. In the preface to this joyless and puritanical attack, Crane revealed (and apparently revealed in) the narrowness of his own experience: “The author is constrained to admit the charge of being wholly unacquainted, *experimentally*, with his theme”. He resorted perforce to a scholarly treatment, in which he established that dancing had declined in grace and morality since Biblical times:⁶

Our dances are performed by males and females mingled together, and arranged in pairs; that of the [ancient] Hebrews was performed by a band of maidens and women alone. The modern dance is regulated by the senseless whine of a violin, while that of the Hebrews was accompanied by a noble anthem of praise.

Crane worried about the effects of dancing on domestic order: “Young lady, by imbibing a love for the dance, you will almost necessarily acquire a distaste for the duties of everyday life”. His readers would

6. J. T. Crane, *An Essay on Dancing* (1848), quoted in Melvin H. Schoberlin, “Flagon of Despair: Stephen Crane” (unpublished manuscript, Schoberlin Collection, Syracuse University Library), I-5.

appreciate the delicacy of his implication that “imbibing” a taste for dance might be as dangerous as drinking hard liquor.

Crane’s concern for the morals of youth won him appointment to the Methodist seminary at Pennington, New Jersey, where he served as principal for ten pleasant years before returning, in 1858, to the active ministry. The expanding Crane household at Pennington seems to have been a cozy refuge for sentimental piety. His mother-in-law, Mary Peck, visiting at Pennington to care for her daughter’s latest baby, described the scene to her own husband George. One of the grandchildren, having spent the afternoon playing in the sand,⁷

was saying his prayers to his Mother [i.e., M. Helen Crane] one evening after which he asked her whether the Lord would take care of him down here or up yonder she said she thought he would take care of him down here but asked him if he would like to go up into the sky and be a little Angel He replied that he would rather be a little Angel down here in the dirt.

Though Crane opposed slavery like other northern ministers, he suggested that a period of serfdom “on the Russian model” might ease the morally treacherous transition from bondage to freedom, and prevent a civil war. The idea, however naive, so appealed to Crane’s audience that his sermon on slavery was published and widely distributed.

After the war Crane turned his attention to social issues. *Popular Amusements* (1869) and *Arts of Intoxication* (1870) departed in no significant way from Methodist orthodoxy; the latter was noticed in the religious press primarily for its “captivating style” and “true eloquence”.⁸ What struck his contemporaries as graceful and scholarly sounds merely pedantic today. He liked to mix scientific expertise with the narrowest fundamentalism; he defended Noah’s intemperance, for example, as a regrettable but not damnable lapse:⁹

7. Undated letter, George Peck Papers, Syracuse University Library.

8. The quoted words are attributed to the *Newark Journal* and the *Boston Nation* respectively, and appear in advertisements bound into Crane’s *Holiness the Birthright of All God’s Children* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874).

9. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. “Crane, Jonathan Townley”.

The Scriptures tell us that Noah planted a vineyard and on one occasion drank of the wine until he was drunken. Very possibly the process of fermentation had not before been noticed, the results were not known, and the consequences in this case were wholly unexpected.

Crane's anxious promotion of temperance and healthy forms of recreation reflects a change in the preoccupations of post-Civil War Methodism. The emotional and physical trauma of backwoods revivals had begun to yield to an emphasis on social reform. This taming of Methodism's "heroic" energies—part of the process that Ann Douglas has called the "feminization" of American culture in the nineteenth century—led to a diminished stress on individual religious experience. One searches in vain through J. T. Crane's writings for a sense of religion as intense experience, and finds instead a great deal about religion as social control.

A counter-movement was perhaps to be expected, especially after the American wing of the Methodist Church celebrated its centenary, in 1866, amid a widely felt mood of spiritual torpor. Observers at the time blamed the malaise on the "demoralizing influence of our civil war", and some ventured sociological explanations for the Church's declining influence:¹⁰

Many of her members went forth to the sanguinary field. Removal from elevating home-influences and from sanctuary privileges had a tendency to loosen, and often to sunder, the bonds of fervent piety.

To reawaken that piety was the explicit goal of the group of prominent ministers who met at Vineland, New Jersey, in 1867 and formed the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness.

The Holiness Movement followed the pattern of other religious renewals by clothing its program for change in a conservative rhetoric that demanded a return to earlier values. Among the innovations its adherents condemned were Gothic architecture in church buildings, the new "operatic" style of church music, and modern sermons, with their "ornate" style and references to "science, philosophy, po-

10. Hughes, *Days of Power*, 10.

lite literature, poetry, and even *antique fables*'¹¹—an adequate description of the kind of sermons that J. T. Crane, with his fondness for examples from Homer and folklore, preached.

Promoters of Holiness called for a return to “the primitive simplicity and power of Christianity” and for the revival of camp meetings; tabernacles in the woods would replace Gothic churches to become scenes of violent conversion—the campsites were referred to as “battlegrounds”—and of that further spiritual cleansing that they called “entire sanctification”. Much emphasis was put on this “second blessing”, which Jesse T. Peck had discussed at length in his popular tract *The Central Idea of Christianity* (1865, revised 1876), while his brother George described his own experience of it in his autobiography of 1874. Despite its conservative rhetoric, the Holiness Movement, with its rejection of outer ritual and insistence on individual religious experience, found itself spiritually in step with such progressive denominations as the Society of Friends.

Given his family ties, J. T. Crane’s open hostility to the Holiness Movement, as expressed in his book *Holiness the Birthright of All God’s Children* (1874), was impolitic, to say the least. Two traits of Crane’s temperament are evident in his opposition to the promoters of Holiness, however: his compassion and his cautiousness—an apparent wariness of intense experience. He thought that the Movement’s insistence on a second stage of religious experience diminished the gravity of the first conversion or “justification” of the regenerate sinner. He was offended by the corollary claim that there lingered after conversion a “residue of depravity”, which put the convert right back to the risk of damnation at any moment. This view sounded cruel and Calvinistic to Crane, and challenged his reasons for embracing Methodism in the first place. In what constituted something of a compromise, he preferred a gradual “groaning” toward perfection, usually unattainable in this life, to the “instantaneous” experience of sanctity.

It did not escape the attention of Crane’s fellow ministers that he had launched a public attack on the most cherished beliefs of his own father-in-law. One must assume a measure of détente within the family; certainly there is evidence for it in the fact that an advertisement for J. T. Crane’s *Holiness the Birthright* appeared at the end of

11. *Ibid.*, 20.

Peck's *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck* (1874), a book that advanced contrary ideas. Furthermore, J. T. Crane had dutifully delivered a eulogy at his father-in-law's golden wedding anniversary celebration four years earlier.¹² But such civility was not to be found in all segments of the Peck camp. The Reverend Anthony Atwood of Philadelphia, a Peck associate and one of the original organizers of the National Association, published a particularly vicious, book-length response to Crane's arguments, adding the gratuitous observation that Crane's "natural manner" as a preacher was "dry and devoid of sympathy or feeling". Atwood quotes at some length from a Holiness tract by George Peck and concludes:¹³

Dr. George Peck, here quoted, is the venerable father-in-law (still living) of Dr. Crane. The father is sound, Methodistic [i.e., his arguments correspond to John Wesley's, a view disputed by Crane, who found Wesley's positions inconsistent] and scriptural; the son-in-law is neither. . . . The blessed Master said that "the father would be against the son, and the son against the father." Herein is this prediction fulfilled.

There was, in fact, a vigorous and well-organized effort to suppress Crane's book and end his career in the upper ranks of the Methodist hierarchy. The editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, a magazine that had serialized Crane's temperance tract the previous year, ran a mildly critical review of *Holiness the Birthright*, only to find himself attacked for refusing "to join in a purpose to personally victimize Dr. Crane". The editor explained:¹⁴

12. A copy of the program for the event is in the George Peck Papers, Syracuse University Library.

13. Reverend Anthony Atwood, *The Abiding Comforter* (Philadelphia: A. Wallace, 1874), 40, 70. I am indebted to Melvin Schoberlin for this reference. Schoberlin was aware that Crane's *Holiness* book was controversial. Schoberlin writes in his "Flagon of Despair": "During 1875 Jonathan Crane was the focal point of unceasing conflict; he was attacked and defended, but he took no part in the battle that threatened to divide the Church" (II-9). Schoberlin suspected a link between the controversy and Crane's professional demotion: "Jonathan Crane was informed that his reappointment was impossible. At the Conference of 1876 he was returned to the list of active itinerants and assigned to the First Methodist (old Cross Street) church in Paterson" (II-10). But Schoberlin seems to have been unaware of the precise nature of the Holiness controversy, or of its extent.

14. *Methodist Quarterly Review* (October 1874): 663, 664, 677. The editor's name was D. D. Whedon.

By letter and by interview, we had been made to understand that Dr. C. had now destroyed “all his hopes of ecclesiastical preferment,” and we were urged to “speak out,” so that he should be put down reputationally and officially.

One reviewer quoted in the article had announced that he “felt so cheated by the book, that after a careful reading *I put it into the stove*, where I was sure it would do no harm” (his emphasis), while another referred to it as a “poisonous reptile”.

George Peck was indeed still living in 1874, as Atwood had remarked, though he would not live for much longer. He died within two years, in 1876—the same year that J. T. Crane was compelled to return (perhaps no longer protected by Peck family ties) to the itinerant ministry, and sent first to Paterson, New Jersey, then to Port Jervis. He spent the last four years of his life fretting about the controversial ideas that he had advanced. “He was rewriting [*Holiness the Birthright*] when he died”, his widow recalled, “and he expressed the hope that he would be able to ‘re-state his views in a manner that would commend them to those who differed from him theoretically’”.¹⁵

Oddly enough, arguments similar to J. T. Crane’s finally triumphed in the Methodist Church, but so long after his death that his own expression of them was forgotten. The idea of a “second blessing” (and sometimes a third, accompanied by speaking in tongues) took refuge in the various Holiness sects, such as the Assemblies of God, that split off from Methodism after the 1890s to flourish in the twentieth century. The reasons for schism were complex and involved issues of administration and ordination irrelevant to the difficulties of J. T. Crane. But he seems to have understood, twenty years earlier, that the future of Methodism in the cities would require a tamer, more social-minded set of religious practices than those offered by the Holiness Movement.

Crane’s doctrinal arguments, interestingly, have won a measure of recent respect. The historian J. L. Peters, in his lucid account of the controversies surrounding the concept of Christian holiness in American churches, offers an appreciative analysis of J. T. Crane’s ideas. Peters suggests that Crane was ahead of his time, and that his at-

15. M. Helen Crane, quoted in Thomas Gullason, ed., *Stephen Crane’s Career: Perspectives and Evaluations* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972), 34.

tempt at a “general synthesis”—of conversion followed by gradual growth in spiritual awareness—“was not heeded by an age absorbed wholly with thesis and antithesis”.¹⁶ A reevaluation of Crane as one of the major Methodist thinkers of the last century, while suggested in recent scholarship, seems yet in the future. But it would be a noteworthy reversal if the father of Stephen Crane, hitherto viewed as an intellectually timid and otherworldly divine, came to be seen as a path-breaking innovator.

16. John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 174. “Crane’s book was written . . . in the midst of controversy. And he frequently says more than he seems to mean. He is in specific protest against what he feels is a disparagement of regeneration which, he holds, brings one into the complete favor of God. Entire sanctification is not, therefore and strictly speaking, a requisite for a barely safe hereafter but a necessity for an abundantly satisfactory here and now” (171).