

# An American at Brede Place : Stephen Crane



*There was a man who lived a life of fire.  
Even upon the fabric of time,  
Where purple becomes orange  
And orange purple,  
This life glowed,  
A dire red stain, indelible;  
Yet when he was dead,  
He saw that he had not lived.*

From: 'The Black Rider & Other Lines' (Stephen Crane)



Stephen 'Stevie' Crane, one of America's foremost realistic writers, whose works marked the beginning of modern realistic and naturalistic writing in America, was born in a red brick house on Mulberry Place in Newark, New Jersey, USA on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1871. The last place he lived at before he went to Germany to die of tuberculosis on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1900 at the age of 28 was Brede Place.

He has been the subject of extensive biographies, which cannot be adequately précised here and to which the interested reader is directed to read in more detail about his undoubtedly

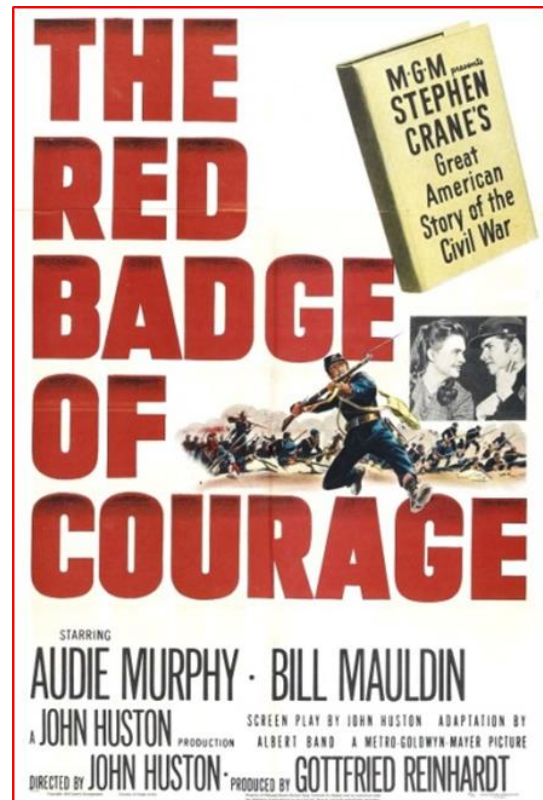
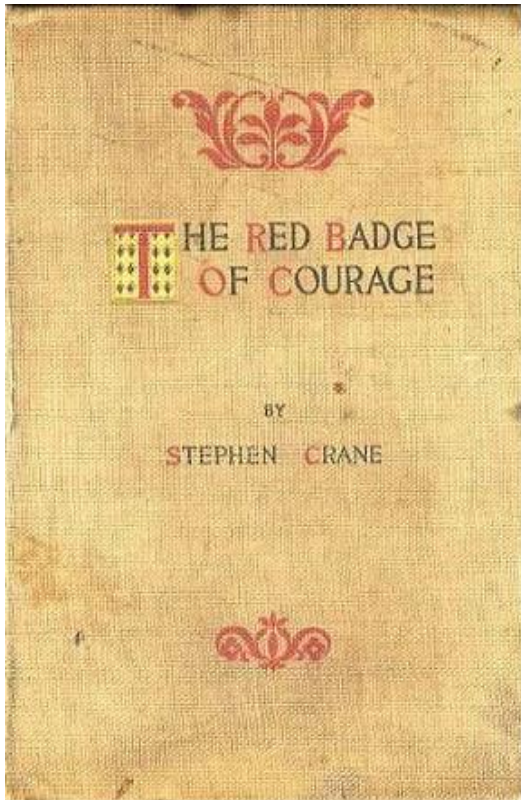
interesting and controversial early life. We are advised to avoid the early one by Thomas Beer, which as Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino demonstrated in 1990 unfortunately contains many errors of chronology, invented incidents and false letters. Beer's publication had coloured many descriptions of Crane's life before that time and as is often the case with history some continue to be repeated to this day. This makes early secondary sources difficult to use as Beer's words have been widely quoted and copied – so reader beware of details from all texts written before 1990! The biographies by the American poet, John Berryman (1950) which concentrated on Crane's literature, and the most recent one by Paul Sorrentino (2014) have been praised. His early life was complex, but here we are mostly interested in his later life in England, notably at Brede. To put later events into context the author of this paper has tried to extract the essence but not the detail of Crane's early life.



The *New York Times* when reviewing the 2014 biography of Stephen Crane reminded readers that an image of Crane, 'America's first rock-star writer,' appeared on the album cover of The Beatles' 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' (squeezed in at position 46 on the relevant Wikipedia page, extract left) . Why? The answer lies in the biography – Crane, like John Lennon, was a questioning antitheist as well as a

humanist. More importantly Stephen Crane was one of America's foremost end of 19<sup>th</sup> century writers, and his works marked the birth of modern realistic and naturalistic writing in America. At the time of his death Crane was an important figure in American literature, although his general reputation in his home country had been significantly damaged by involvement in a court case defending an unfairly prosecuted prostitute called Dora Clark and also by many unkind parodies of his poetry and other works. He was also in ill-favour with the New York police after writing about them critically, but after his defence of Dora things got worse. He had previously been acquainted with Theodore Roosevelt who was at the time President of the New York Board of Commissioners and who had sounded Crane out to write about writing positively about the police; now they fell out.

His American Civil War novel 'The Red Badge of Courage' (1895) is a classic that realistically depicts fear and courage on the battlefield. It was made into a well-received film (poster below), directed by John Huston in 1951 the trailer for which can be seen on 'YouTube.' There was also a shorter less well received TV movie in 1974. A Guardian review of 2014 placed the book 30th in a list of the '100 best books' and HG Wells, who became a friend of Crane's, noted that 'The Red Badge of Courage' was welcomed with an 'orgy of praise' in England. His unconventional poetry (published in 'The Black Riders and Other Lines' and 'War is Kind'), journalism (for amongst other papers the 'New York Journal') and short stories such as 'The Open Boat' based on his personal experience of being shipwrecked have received more acclaim after his death than during his life. After his death he was nearly forgotten for two decades, after which critics revived interest in his life and work in the 1920s. Paradoxically it was Beer's work that probably triggered this.



**Cover of the first edition of *The Red Badge of Courage* published by D. Appleton and Company in 1895 and film poster for Huston's film of 1951**

From the 1950s there has been a regular flow of studies and papers about his works, unfortunately much of which was tainted by Beer's fictions. Fortunately much reliable post-1990s work can be found at the Stephen Crane Society's website.

We are told that his writing made a deep impression on 20<sup>th</sup> century modernistic American writers, most prominently Ernest Hemingway. Robert McCrum of *The Guardian* said in 2014 that his influence had also been noted in Mailer's *'The Naked and the Dead'*, Heller's *'Catch-22'*, James Jones' *'The Thin Red Line'* and Karl Marlantes' *'Matterhorn'*.

Particularly impressive were Crane's short stories *'The Open Boat'*, *'The Blue Hotel'*, *'The Monster'* and *'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky'* as well as the longer *'The Red Badge of Courage'* of which it is said there are some similarities in Hemingway's *'A Farewell to Arms'*. Curiously Stephen Crane had met and admired Hemingway's mother, Grace Hall, through friends at New York's Arts Students League when she was at the New York Metropolitan Opera as a novice opera singer.

Although esteemed in England, Crane (correctly) thought himself attacked in America:

'There seem so many of them in America who want to kill, bury and forget me purely out of unkindness and envy and—my unworthiness, if you choose'.

His early self-published book *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, was a gritty, realistic look at life in New York's slums and American puritanical objectors made many calls for censorship

against Crane. This refrain was picked up by the New York establishment which he scorned. So his life in America before he came to England had been very different to the life he established in England, where he came into close contact with other serious authors who were already established or would become famous in later years.

His youth had been turbulent with rejection of strong Methodist family values, but we can note that both his father and mother wrote copiously about the subjects that interested them. His happiest college days were at Claverack military academy (1888-90) and he toyed with entering the US army and West Point. But that was not to be and he moved on to Lafayette College's mining engineering programme. This lasted four months. His mother then got him into the Methodist-affiliated Syracuse University where he preferred baseball and other extracurricular activities to classwork and became more and more rebellious. He did not graduate, neither was he thrown out, but he left in May 1891.

He moved on to live an impoverished life of observed experience and experimentation with his writing style. He had a 'clinical' attraction to 'low life' frequenting bars and flophouses, gaining information for his realistic and socially uncomfortable writing. He loaned money to and protected prostitutes, and became a penniless hanger on. Then once he started into journalism he could be rebellious with his editors after seeking truths but then finding his reports sensationalised. In his time it was called 'yellow' journalism, now we would call it 'fake news' – with his fanatical love for the truth he hated it. Crane was not interested in personal glory and wrote of history as he saw it being enacted. During his journalist days, mainly as a war reporter, amongst his many adventures he was shipwrecked off Daytona and witnessed the development of an American enclave on Cuba at Guantanamo Bay. He caught malaria in the Caribbean initially misdiagnosed as yellow fever.

Finally he found and settled on the 'big blue eyed and reddish haired' Cora Stewart, estranged wife of Donald W Stewart and madame of a house of assignation in Jacksonville, Florida, as his partner. She was a figure who could have been in Shaw's *'Mrs. Warren's Profession'*, but a rather more complicated version. Much of Cora's life is a mystery but Gilkes has written a biography of her which is of interest, which also expands on her early life, life with and Stephen Crane and her life after his death.

Cora Ethyl Eaton Howorth was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1865. Her father John Howorth was a portrait painter who died when she was six years old. Her mother remarried and is believed to have died soon afterwards and Cora lived with her grandfather George Howorth who died when she was 15. When she was about 17 she became the mistress of a New York playboy and lived at a gambling club. She married in 1886 to Thomas Vinton Murphy, son of a New York state politician and a 'dry goods' dealer. Cora must have found being married to a 'dry goods' dealer boring, and they were soon divorced. Cora rapidly found and in 1889 married an Englishman called Donald William Stewart, whose father Field Marshal Sir Donald Martin Stewart was for five years army commander-in-chief in India, and afterwards member of the council of the secretary of state for India. They initially lived in England with Sir Donald, scion of the establishment, and became part of the English social

scene. Donald junior then entered the Colonial service. Cora apparently claimed that her new husband 'spent her money' and she had no taste to be an 'Empire widow'. They inevitably became estranged but he refused to divorce her.

The next few years are those of much gossip. Cora may have hitched a ride back across the Atlantic on a private yacht, one of a flotilla of led by a member of the Astor family. She became mistress of yet another New York playboy and travelled widely but the relationship inevitably ended. By 1895 calling herself 'Cora Taylor' she arrived in Jacksonville, Florida primed with money from an undefined source. With it, she bought a 'house of assignation' in the LaVilla District, near the city's main railroad terminal. The 'Hotel de Dreme' opened in 1895 and soon became the finest enterprise of its kind in Jacksonville. Stephen Crane probably first visited this establishment in November 1896. Cora had read and liked some of his work and it seems that they were immediately attracted to each other. He made her laugh and she wanted to look after the scruffy young man and he felt that she fulfilled his psychological needs and understood his literary objectives.

Crane left Jacksonville on New Year's Eve 1896 to travel to Cuba as a journalist on a ship called the *Commodore* which was gun-running during the Cuban War of Independence. The ship began sinking en route, off Daytona, further south down the Florida coast. Crane found himself on 2<sup>nd</sup> January in a small dinghy with three others. Somehow they reached shore after 30 hours or so, capsized in the surf but were dragged from the sea by residents of Daytona Beach. Cora took a train from Jacksonville to Daytona on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, then took him back to Jacksonville and nursed him back to health. The incident gave rise to a fictionalised short story '*The Open Boat*' one of Crane's best works.

Stephen Crane first arrived with Cora in England in early 1897 on his way to Greece, where he was to report for the *New York Journal* on the Greek-Turkish war of that year. Cora accompanied him and acted as a war correspondent in her own right. People assumed they were married and they were not disabused of this assumption, although some remembered her from her days as Mrs Stewart. Cora had tried to get a divorce, but her husband refused.

Crane was warmly received in British literary circles during his short stay en-route and encouraged by this he returned to live briefly at Limpsfield then he and Cora settled at Oxted in Surrey at the end of June 1897. The Limpsfield-Oxted area was home to numbers of idealistic members of the Fabian Society and writers such as Harold Frederick, Edmund Gosse, Ford Madox Ford, H G Wells and Edward Garnett. Crane also met Joseph Conrad in October 1897 – 'the start of warm and endless friendship' said Crane.

He and Cora were running out of money by the end of 1897. In early 1898 he was offered a job to report on the Spanish-American war and he went back to the USA to do this. He still ran out of money and Cora who had been left at Oxted was also broke. Communication between them was poor, she might have thought he could be dead, but he arrived back in England in January 1899. At this point they moved with the help of loans from family and friends to Brede Place.

Colonel Edward Frewen of the Frewen family of Brickwall, Northiam, had sold Brede Place in 1898 to his brother Moreton (1853-1924), a man of great ability and connections but of spectacular financial failure, who was sometimes known as 'Mortal Ruin'. Brede Place had been empty for over a hundred years and was falling to pieces, but Moreton's American wife saw the possibilities. Clara, whom he met in New York, was the sister of Jennie Jerome who had married Lord Randolph Churchill and so Clara was an aunt of Winston Churchill. The deeds of the property were put in Clara's name to forestall Moreton's creditors, but she found that the house was much deteriorated. It had not been properly occupied for over one hundred years, and a priority for Clara was to bring it up to a habitable standard.

Brede Place had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing and its sanitary arrangements were dire and of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The whole building was in very bad condition, but Clara Frewen leased the place to Crane for a peppercorn rent, on the basis that he and Cora would make a start on re-decorating. Cora apparently struggled to make it liveable somehow furnishing a dozen or so rooms with old, very old, furniture and colourful blankets.

Crane wrote intensely during the first months at Brede, as his health worsened. In 1899 he published '*The Monster and Other Stories*', '*Active Service*' and '*War Is Kind*' his second collection of poems, was published in the USA. None of his new books sold well, and he bought a typewriter to help speed up output as he wished to write as quickly as possible in order to raise fees to pay debtors. In 1900 he worked on '*Whilomville Stories*' which are about childhood, '*Wounds in the Rain*' about the Cuban war, '*Great Battles of the World*' and 25 of the 33 chapters of '*The O'Ruddy*'.

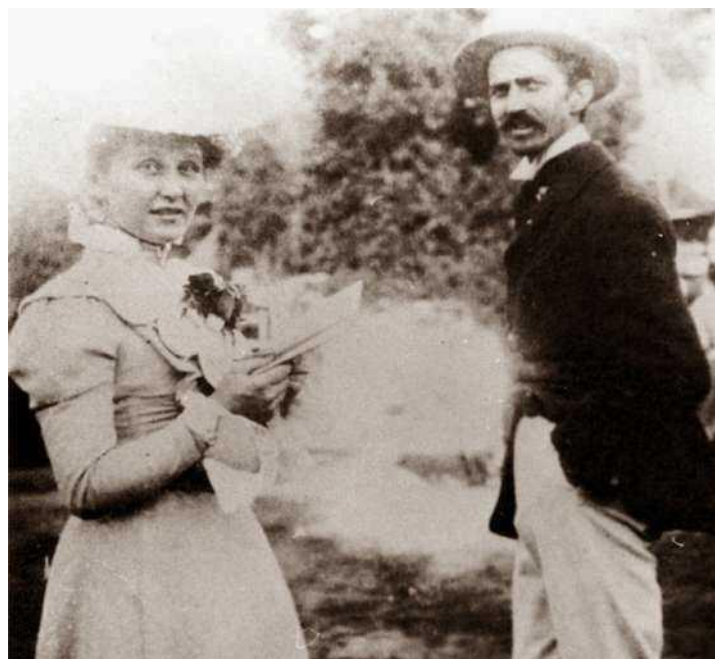
The Cranes appear to have liked living at Brede with horses, dogs and a rudimentary house staff with a cook who had to be bribed with brandy. They often found themselves with a house full of unwanted hangers-on, which will not have helped them financially. But a curious camaraderie of colleagues developed between Crane aged 28 and the writers who lived nearby. These were Henry James aged 55 (Rye), Joseph Conrad aged 43 (Aldington, near Hythe), H.G. Wells aged 33 (sometime at Sandgate near Folkestone), and Ford Madox Ford aged 26 (sometime at Bonnington south of Ashford then Winchelsea). An addition to this circle was Edward Garnett, visiting from Limpsfield, a sometime writer and later an important literary editor who would encourage Conrad and Madox Ford to collaborate on two novellas and a novel – and later promote Joseph Conrad's, T E Lawrence's and H E Bates's and many other's works. Three small books by Delbanco, Finlayson and Solomon each give different faceted and fascinating insights into this grouping.

This camaraderie was probably more a matter of individuals with a great deal in common living near each other and somehow being drawn to Crane rather than a close friendship group with shared viewpoints and loyalties. Some have tried to draw parallels with the Bloomsbury group, but this is very far from the mark. There was no sharing of lives, complicated relationships and affairs at Brede as there were at Charleston.

Individually the other writers were all fond of 'Stevie' in one way or another. The Conrads visited soon after the Cranes moved into Brede, and Crane gave their son a dog. Conrad wrote 'He liked me, even before we met, on the strength of a page or two of my writing, and after we had met I am glad to think he liked me still. He used to point out to me with great earnestness, and even with some severity, that "a boy *ought* to have a dog." I suspect that he was shocked at my neglect of parental duties.'



**A sketch of Brede Place circa. 1900**



**Cora and Stephen Crane at a garden party in the grounds of Brede Rectory in August 1899**

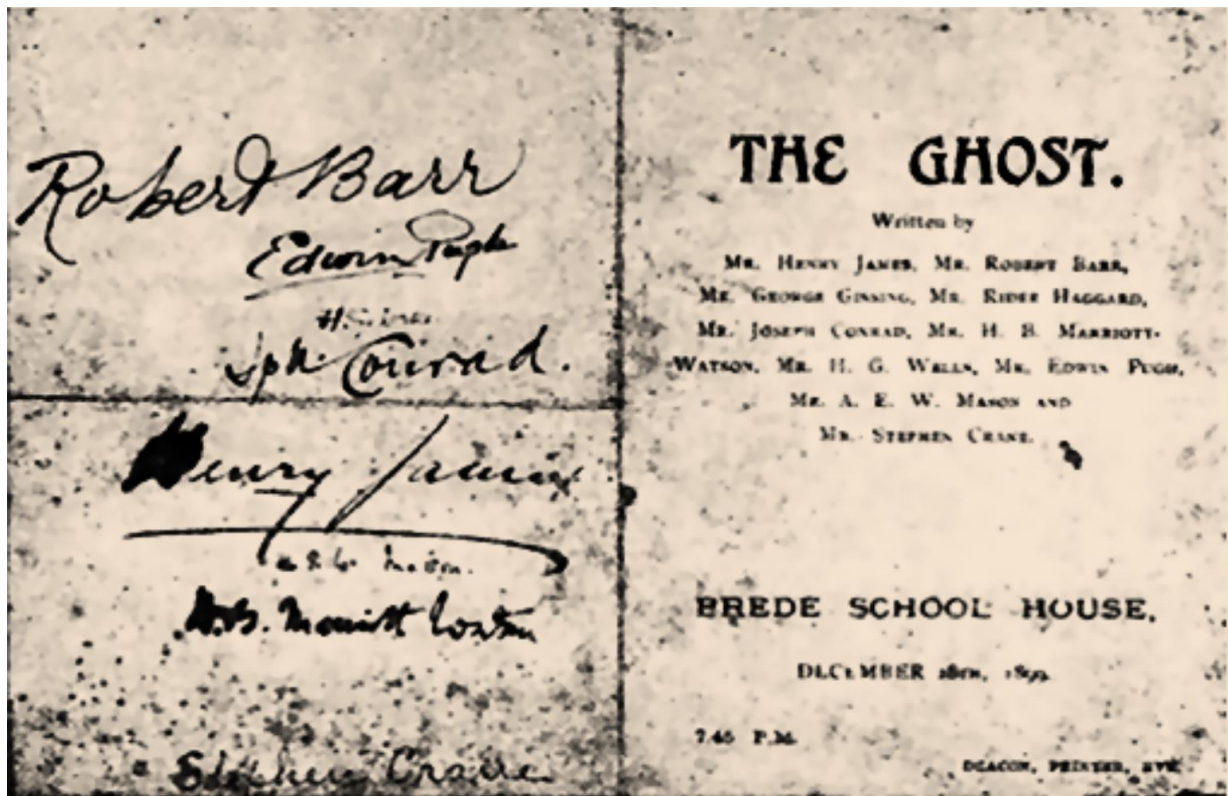
From: <http://jacksonville.com/community/shorelines/2014-08-15/story/sands-time-cora-crane-still-reigns-regions-celebrity-madam>

Stephen and Henry James had first met in London at a party when Stephen rescued Henry's hat from being filled with champagne by a silly young lady. Being displaced Americans was about all the 55 year old bachelor and Crane had in common but they clearly liked each other. It may be that James saw in Crane a major talent that would ripen with age, but also Solomons argues at some length that James' fascination with war, and notably the American Civil War might have been a key. And how frequently did he and Crane meet? One author says that Henry James on a 'few' occasions rode over from Rye on his bicycle and on 'two or three occasions' entertained Stephen and Cora at Lamb House in Rye. But Edith Jones (née Richie) and an actor in the play below, who stayed with the Cranes between July 1899 and January 1900 as the 19 years old companion of Stephen's niece, Helen, says in letter of 1923 to Thomas Beer and repeated in an article that she wrote herself in 1954 that Stephen frequently visited James at Rye and that James bicycled over weekly. The story that James asked Crane to comment on five manuscripts comes only from the pen of Beer! James was very formal but liked talented young people. Stephen said that it was because he was so kind to everyone that you could not dislike Henry James. But apparently Cora was not quite to James' taste. He may have perceived something of her past but he was still courteous to her. However some years after Crane's death and her remarriage when she attempted to call on him he was 'unavailable'.

In December, Stephen and Cora invited a moderately large number of friends (50-60!) to a three day Christmas party. Those who attended were somehow accommodated (uncomfortably). It was attended by Conrad, H G Wells and other friends and it lasted several days. All the above authors and others listed below but excluding Ford had collaborated in writing a play. This play, called 'The Ghost' picked up on the theme that Brede Place was haunted, but was set in the future in 1950. This was Crane's idea but he managed to assemble as co-writers Henry James, Robert Barr, George Gissing, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, H B Marriott-Watson, H G Wells, Edwin Pugh and A E W Mason (who also played the ghost), all of whom contributed a little bit or maybe adding only a few words to the script – it seems very much as a game each adding in sentences or phrases and hoping that the whole made some sense. The play was performed with free admission on 28<sup>th</sup> December in the Brede School House in front of a packed house of locals and friends of the Cranes.

The actors were a mix of locals and visitors and Mrs Catherine Wells played the piano, with Cora acting as prompter. Only fragments of the script, apparently of seventeen pages including four of music, survive, but the author cannot track down the whereabouts or full words of these. But the plot ran: In 1950 a frustrated ghost bemoaned the lack of belief in ghosts of tourists visiting Brede Place. This was followed by a miscellany of characters borrowed from the works of all ten collaborators, interspersed with songs and dances, Gilbert and Sullivan style. In the last act a group of tourists are surprised by the appearance of the ghost who relates the story of his death. He then disappears and reappears to demand two shillings from each busload. The play then ended with a grand chorus.





**Autographed programme cover with list of the authors**

*Extract from Columbia Library Columns Vol II No2 (1953)*

Some words have been located. The play opens with the lines.

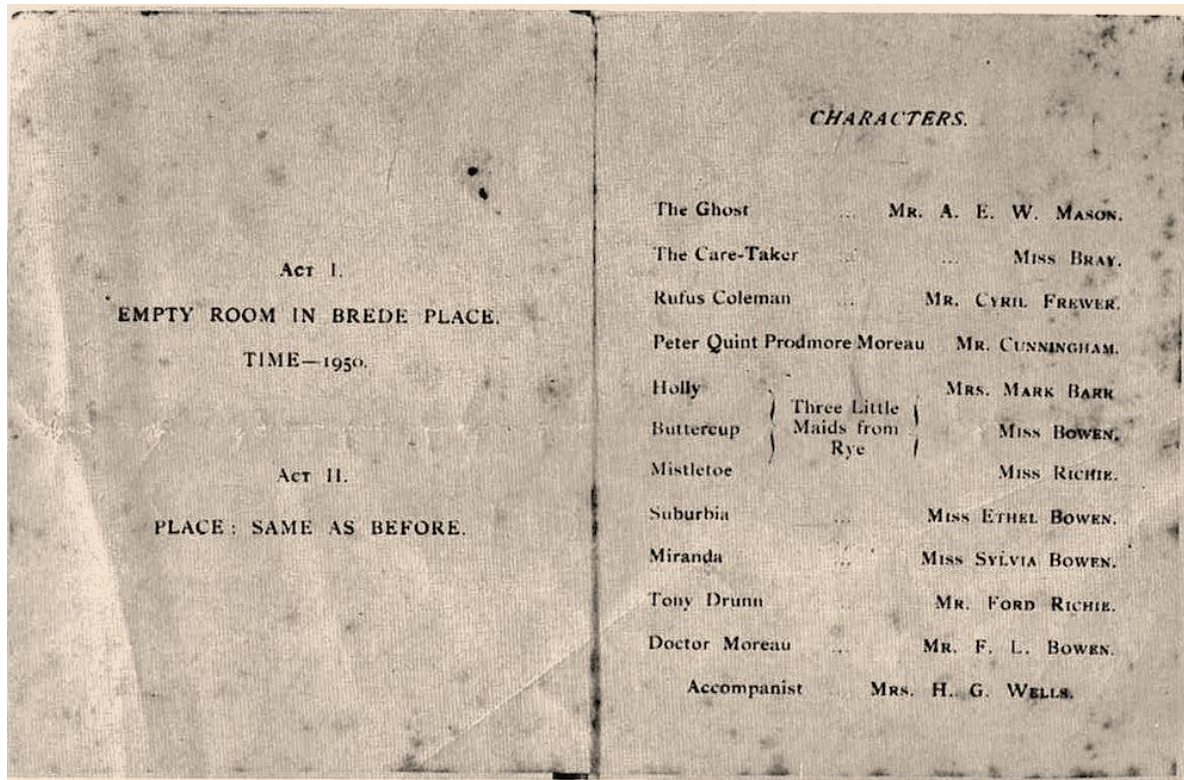
‘It is difficult to be a ghost here. I would like to have had an easier place. Tourists come here and never give me a penny, although I had my last pipe of baccy two hundred years ago and I drank my last pint of bitter in 1531 ....’

and the final chorus ends

‘then she says “Oh my honey, not today, don’t you be a foolish ghost, you are sure to love me most,” then she sighs, and she cries, “Oh!”’

An image of the inside of the programme with the acts and cast is below. A third act was added, not on the programme.

The date 1531 was a reference to Sir Goddard Oxenbridge, the ogre of Brede who could not be killed by metal and reputedly ate children – who died in February 1531 after drinking himself senseless at which time the children of the village sawed him in half with a wooden saw! This is believed to be a smugglers story about his ghost, to keep interlopers away. In 1952 a copy of the play’s programme, but not the script, was discovered in the Berg Collection in New York City Library. Wertheim says the only (and elusive!) comprehensive description of the text is by Crisler. Is a copy of the text hidden in some obscure collection? It was likely that at least one copy ended up in Cora Crane’s trunk of papers, much of which is now archived – but a lot of it was lost in the aftermath of her decline and demise in Jacksonville in 1910 when her belongings were auctioned off.



**Acts and cast.** A third act, not on the programme was added

from: <http://jot101.com/2014/04/stephen-crane-and-sussex-ghost/>

The play was not intended to be memorable, but the Hastings and St Leonards Observer of Saturday 1st January reported the event, the text of which must have been syndicated from a national daily as the identical report (minus the section in italics) can also be found as far away as in the Sheffield Evening News and Worcester Journal and other local newspapers. The report reads:

'A London daily says - Probably the most amazing play ever produced was the play 'The Ghost' presented a few evenings ago to an audience of Sussex yokels leavened by the visitors of Mr Stephen Crane, at Brede Place. It was sketched out by Mr A E W Mason and then sent round to be filled in by a number of eminent hands. The hands were those of Mr Henry Jones (sic), Mr Robert Barr, Mr George Gissing, Mr Rider Haggard, Mr Joseph Conrad, Mr Marriott Watson, Mr H G Wells, Mr Edwin Pugh and Mr Stephen Crane. One wonders what the Sussex peasantry think of the work of Mr Henry Jones, who is now settled among them at Rye. It should be added that no London manager need apply for 'The Ghost'. It is laid. *Our readers will perhaps object to the apparently slighting references to Sussex. Surely the authors of the piece must have had a high opinion of the 'yokels' intellect in submitting it to them.*

The Southeastern Advertiser of 5<sup>th</sup> January wrote of the play:

'a combination of farce, comedy, opera and burlesque'

A fortnight later the Manchester Guardian (with a minor disparagement of Sussex again) earnestly lamented the non-publication of the play writing:

‘A remarkable piece of literary patchwork has lately been allowed to waste its sweetness on the Sussex air. This is a play which has been written for an amateur performance by a string of our most popular novelists... One is deeply sorry that it is not to be published.’

Its non-publication was a deliberate decision by Crane who knew it was a nonsense bit of fun with some plagiarism. He wrote ‘... the whole thing was a mere idle string of rubbish ...with music frankly stolen from very venerable comic operas such as *‘The Mikado’*....’

On 29<sup>th</sup> the party continued with a ball in the hall of Brede Place. That evening Stephen Crane suffered a severe pulmonary haemorrhage. Poor H G Wells was sent off on a bicycle in the early hours of 30<sup>th</sup> December to call Dr Ernest Skinner from Rye. By January in the new century Crane had recovered enough to work on and complete 25 chapters of a new novel, *‘The O’Ruddy’* but at the end of March and in early April he suffered two more haemorrhages. Cora took over most of Stephens's correspondence and the couple made plans to travel to seek a cure elsewhere in Europe – having rejected return to the USA as too arduous in Stephen’s debilitated condition. They travelled to Dover and stayed in a hotel before going on. Stephen was visited in Dover by many friends for the last time and he briefed Robert Barr on how to finish *‘The O’Ruddy’*. Joseph Conrad wrote:

‘He had been very ill and Mrs. Crane was taking him to some place in Germany, but one glance at that wasted face was enough to tell me that it was the most forlorn of all hopes. The last words he breathed out to me were: “I am tired. Give my love to your wife and child.”’

Cora managed to get him to a clinic in Badenweiler, Germany for ‘a cure’. A few days after arriving there he again had severe pulmonary haemorrhages and from the descriptions of his care thereafter it became terminal care with morphine injections. He died on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1900.

Crane's reputation was developed and enhanced after his death by his writer friends, all of whom either published recollections or commented upon their time with Crane. Ford wrote that Henry James grieved deeply over:

‘My young compatriot of genius’

Henry James himself wrote to H G Wells

‘You will have felt, as I have done, the miserable sadness of poor Crane’s so precipitated and, somehow, so unnecessary extinction.’

Later writers have called Crane one of the finest creative spirits of his time. Hemingway in *‘The Green Hills of Africa’* wrote that:

‘The good writers are Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain. That's not the order they're good in. There is no order for good writers.’

Cora and his niece Helen Crane took his remains back to America; they were buried at Evergreen Cemetery, Hillside, New Jersey near his parents’ grave. Cora then went back to Jacksonville where by 1902 she was once again operating a house of ill repute. She re-

married in 1905 after Donald Stewart died, divorced again four years later in 1909 after her new husband shot a presumed lover, and died in 1910 aged 45 following a stroke.

'*The O'Ruddy*' was finished by Robert Barr and published in 1903. '*The Red Badge of Courage*' is still in publication. Crane published five novels, two volumes of poetry, three short story collections, two books of war stories, and numerous works of short fiction and reporting.

*The episode was closed.*

*And you can depend upon it that I have told you nothing at all,*

*Nothing at all,*

*Nothing at all.*

From: '*War Memories*' (Stephen Crane)

**Keith Foord, February 2018 ©BDHS**

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A number of Stephen Crane's works including some audiobooks are available for at Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/55>