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Joseph Crabtree and Historical Hazards

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When the Living Witness rang to inform me that it had been revealed that I was to be the next Crabtree Orator, I regarded it as both a high honour and a desperate burden. Because of the latter, I would have declined the honour had it been possible, but revelation brooks no denial. With a kindly desire to assist me in my formidable task, the Living Witness provided me with copies of the preceding Orations but these only filled me with a profound sense of inadequacy and left me deeply depressed. How could a man of action, brought up in the rigorous but blunt and relatively inarticulate discipline of physics, hope to emulate the performances of the scholarly literati whose classical coruscations, polished perorations and resounding rhetoric have illuminated the prestigious pages of the records of this august body of intellectuals?

However, I was reminded one night of that biblical admonition “O ye of little faith” when, slumberless on a pillow of anxiety and apprehension, I received what I suppose can only be described as a “visitation”. In a confused sort of way, only dimly remembered, the Immortal Memory hovered above me, gently offering encouragement and advice. I thus fell into a deep sleep.

Awakening next morning astonishingly refreshed, I sprang out of bed, rushed to my desk, seized my quill (I can’t abide these modern ball-points) and began to write. Brooking no interruption, I bent to my task of composition, oblivious to my surroundings and the pangs of thirst and hunger, to say nothing of other demands of nature. Two weeks later I emerged from this state of activated euphoria with the completed manuscript that I now present to you. Revelation, having inflicted this task upon me, had then directed me towards its accomplishment.

Oh, I forgot to tell you that, when I awoke following the “visitation”, I found I was firmly clutching a roll of parchment. On this, to my surprise, was written (not with a ball-point pen) an account of the life and achievements of Joseph Crabtree. This I now circulate to members. But “revelation” is, apparently, not infallible - the record is that of the researches carried out by our British brethren and does not include any Australian contributions. But members will have grown accustomed to this kind of “error of omission” to which the British seem prone, so I leave you to fill in the additional material.

Crabtree’s record overall is amazing - 100 years of frenzied activity in numerous fields. Poet, inventor, engineer, barrister, musician, adventurer, academic - he was all of these, and others besides. However, reading this biography of Crabtree, I became puzzled by numerous inconsistencies, particularly those relating to the chronology of events.

There are occasional absurdities, and also several blank periods in Crabtree’s life that

lend substance to what some earlier Orators have hinted at, a “conspiracy of silence” resulting from the jealousy of highly-placed enemies. Altogether, the document presents a most confusing picture. Some future Orator might care to tackle the daunting task of searching through the archives and of endeavouring to straighten out the tangled skein of events. Time did not permit me to do this, nor did it lie within the ambit of the thesis suggested to me by the Immortal Memory.

Instead, I have been led to seek some explanation of why such confusion should arise. Diligent orators of the past have delved, burrowed, probed, reasoned, surmised and theorized and have produced substantial evidence to support their resultant deductions, yet the pieces don't fit — the jigsaw puzzle lies on the table as a heap of disconnected pieces.

I believe that the answer lies in the very nature of history itself. A single treatise can never be anything more than one man's interpretation of events.

From the available data, the historian has to select the facts he considers relevant. From the facts he must make certain deductions and, where the facts are inadequate, he must make various assumptions. The processes involved, the selection of the facts to be considered, the making of deductions from the facts and the formulation of assumptions, are highly subjective.

Imagine for a moment accounts of the history of aborigines in Australia in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries written by two eminent Australian historians. How is the reader to decide —except on the basis of his own personal prejudices - whether to accept the Blainey version or the Manning Clark version?

But the subjectivity of the writer is not the only problem. Patterns of contemporary public thought concerning current events become widely established as a result of the media's portrayal of them. Such treatment is generally shallow; distorted and emotionally coloured. It is the tradition of the media to dramatize events and time pressures for news releases militate against thorough research and investigation. Further, journalists generally are not noted for fine discriminations on subtle issues.

Thus, long before some historian comes along to write up the events, the real facts have become enveloped in shrouds of ignorance, error, emotion, sentimentality, chauvinism and exaggeration. Generally, too, by that time, original source material has become scarce — valuable records have been dispersed or lost and knowledgeable participants in the events have died.

It is therefore in no spirit of criticism of the illustrious and learned orators who have preceded me that I have developed this thesis. It is simply that, like them, I have been concerned with the fascinating process of discovering and exposing ultimate truths and, as a corollary, with questioning conclusions that appear to me to have been formulated upon less than reliable evidence.

Let me illustrate my thesis with examples from the field I know best, that of polar exploration. Polar history is astonishingly susceptible to distortion. Not only is it open to misinterpretation as a result of the factors I have mentioned, but it is vulnerable to deliberate falsification of events by egotistical explorers seeking fame and fortune through their adventurous exploits. Moreover, even reliable explorers generally suffer barrages of criticism

and scepticism from jealous competitors and sickle-wielding writers delighting in cutting down “tall poppies.

I shall begin with the famous U.S. Navy explorer, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, who, in 1838, set off with three ships to explore the Antarctic. His claims to discoveries continued to be disputed for over 100 years but, more hurtfully, he was court-martialled by the U.S. Navy, shortly after his return from a two-year voyage, on a number of charges, including “falsely claiming to have seen land”. (He was acquitted of all charges except that of “excessive punishment of his men”, for which he was reprimanded.)

An astonishing example is that of the discovery of the North Pole. You will all recall how Frederick Cook’s claim (in 1900) to have been first was generally discredited and he was almost universally branded as a liar, leaving Robert Peary the honour of priority. But there is a not inconsiderable body of opinion that still supports Cook’s claim. I have read the supporting arguments and must say they merit very serious consideration.

You will also recall the sensational announcement, only a few months ago, that Peary’s 80 year-old claim had been shown to be false. This time the explorer was not discredited by others - he was convicted of deception by his own hand! Notes he had written concerning the falsification of his records were finally made available by his descendants!

After 80 years of claims and counter-claims, of learned argument and historical dissertation, we have what was thought to have been the authentic version overturned and we still are not sure about the truth or falsity of the discredited one! You will excuse me, therefore, if I look a little sceptically at some of the ventures attributed to our revered Joseph Crabtree, ventures whose authenticity rests upon well-argued deductions from dare I say it - rather insubstantial data.

Moving into the 20th century, the ill-fated Robert Scott expedition to the South Pole in 1911-13 illustrates in pointed fashion the factors I have listed that may distort historical truth.

The fervour of British chauvinism arising from the “Race to the Pole”, Scott’s tragic death and the subsequent idolatry of the Scott public image discouraged any really critical evaluation of the Scott and Amundsen endeavours for over 50 years. It was left for Roland Huntford, in his recent book, *Scott and Amundsen* (1979), to tackle this task. He brilliantly exposes Scott’s weaknesses and mistakes and illustrates the professional competence of Amundsen.

But here again the ultimate truth is obscured. Huntford’s prejudice against Scott tipped the balance to the other extreme and spoilt the result of some very intensive research. I might add a small piece of extra information on the Scott-Amundsen controversy from another source. According to British history, Amundsen’s success was largely due to his having found a shorter, easier route to the Pole - up the Axel Heiberg Glacier. But a New Zealand adventurer, Wally Herbert, travelled in 1958 down this Glacier by dog sledge and proved it to present much more difficult terrain for sledging than Scott’s Beardmore Glacier.

For Australians, the Scott saga had an unfortunate result. Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition (1911-13) was contemporaneous with Scott’s, but it was overshadowed by the public impact of the Scott tragedy. Yet of all the expeditions of the so-called “Heroic Era”, Mawson’s AAE was the greatest. It has still not been adequately recognized in Britain,

where lists of important Antarctic expeditions often omit it.

The other expeditions that captured the imagination of the English-speaking world were those of Shackleton. In any list of the World's greatest explorers, Shackleton's name figures prominently yet Shackleton explored very little! A great adventurer, certainly one of the greatest. But explorer? No.

Strangely enough, he himself recognized the fact. He regarded himself as a failure. It was his run of failures, in expeditions and business ventures that kept spurring him on to further exploits.

He was with Scott on his first move towards the Pole in 1903. They were forced to return after reaching the foot of the mountains at the southern end of the Ross Ice Shelf, with Shackleton very ill with scurvy.

Then, with his own expedition in 1909, Shackleton was forced to give up when only 97 miles from the Pole.

In 1915, his ship "Endurance" was crushed in the Weddell Sea and he didn't even sight the Continent.

What new land did Shackleton explore? His contribution was to find a route up the Beardmore Glacier and to map the 250 miles of mountains and glaciers en route to the South Polar Plateau. All the rest of the Ross Sea coast had been mapped by Scott.

Men of Shackleton's party carried out two important achievements - the first ascent of Mt Erebus and a long man-hauled journey of 1800-odd kilometres to the South Magnetic Pole; but these were not done by Shackleton. They were led by Professor Edgeworth David of Sydney and included, as a major contributor, Douglas Mawson.

Upon Shackleton's return to England there was controversy over his claim to have reached a point only 97 miles from the Pole. There were accusations that he had falsified his results. I can add here that, in the 1950's, before I knew anything of this, Mawson told me he believed Shackleton had faked the astronomical determinations of his daily positions. Personally I do not believe the calculations were falsified, but again, where does the truth lie?

Now, how has history treated Mawson? I can only say that the record is inaccurate and quite unbalanced.

Mawson's greatest journey - with David and Mackay to the South Magnetic Pole - was one of the greatest sledging journeys ever made yet it has never received adequate recognition and Australians know nothing about it.

Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-13 was, as I have already stated, possibly the greatest of all those of the "Heroic Era", and the exploration was first class. One of his parties mapped Macquarie Island; another, the Western Party, mapped 300 miles of coast in the vicinity of the Shackleton Ice Shelf. Mawson's party at Commonwealth Bay mapped 450 miles of coast and made some long inland sledge journeys over the featureless plateau. A great amount of important scientific work was carried out and the party made the first radio contact between Antarctica and the outside world. It is upon this expedition that

Mawson's true reputation rests. And it was during this expedition that Mawson returned alone from a sledging journey on which his two companions died. As a sledge journey or an achievement in exploration this was of no great account, but as a dramatic story of survival it is superb. Its emotional impact on public opinion did more to make Mawson famous than his valuable scientific achievements.

However, Mawson was to organize a second expedition, the British-Australian-New Zealand Antarctic Expedition (BANZARE) of 1929-31. And it is here that history has gone right off the track.

The BANZARE work set in motion the legal moves that were to lead to the establishment, in 1936, of Australia's claim to Antarctic territory, and the work itself formed an important part of the basis to this claim. Universally acclaimed as great exploration, the two voyages of BANZARE, in 1930 and 1931, were in fact remarkably unproductive. The two voyages resulted in only three new landings, and those lasted only a few hours each.

Although the two voyages encompassed the great expanse of coastline between Adelie Land in the east and Enderby Land in the West, only a few distant sightings of unexplored land were made from the ship and from its aeroplane, except for the stretch of coast between the three landing points I have mentioned. Over a period of more than fifty years, no publication has mentioned the disappointing nature of the exploration carried out and the overall accomplishments have continued to be greatly exaggerated.

Mawson's Antarctic Diaries, edited by my old colleague, Fred Jacka, and his wife, have just been published. They make remarkable reading from a number of points of view, but I shall dwell upon only two.

First, the lack of results can be seen from the diaries to have been not entirely the fault of Mawson. On both voyages Mawson was forced to cut short exploration, which had reached the point of offering rich rewards, by captains who had become apprehensive, unjustifiably, about the stocks of coal remaining for the return trip to Australia.

Further, they had, during the voyages, been reluctant to push into the pack ice where Mawson wanted to go.

But the fault was partly Mawson's. The most surprising disclosure from the diaries is that, for a man famous as an Antarctic explorer, Mawson showed surprisingly little evidence in his diaries of any interest in the cartographic work. Yet cartography is essentially what exploration is all about!

The cartographers (Moyes on the first and Kennedy on the second voyage) are hardly ever mentioned in the diaries. No cartographer was taken ashore at the first landing and there is no mention of one in the third. The diaries give little detailed information of new features seen and do not mention what astrofixes were taken (if any). There are no sketches of the exciting mountain features of the MacRobertson and Enderby Land regions. There are no records of the airmen having been briefed before their flights or of having been debriefed after returning to the ship.

And, at one point in the diaries, Mawson himself writes, "Commander Moyes heard Captain Davis on the bridge grumbling aloud that I took no interest in new land".

The second point of outstanding interest in the diaries concerns Mawson's relationships with his captains. It has been generally understood that Mawson and Davis had disagreed but the full extent of the discord has only been exposed by the publication of these diaries. Mawson sought relief from his frustrations by expressing his feelings at length in these records. The effect of the relationship on Mawson is shown by the fact that, in the 136 pages of the diaries that deal with BANZARE, more than 40 have critical comments by Mawson concerning Captain Davis.

On 1 January 1930, Mawson wrote:

8 a.m. ... Captain Davis still in cabin ... By 10 a.m. . . I feel that cannot wait longer for Davis to appear so knock on his door and find him sitting in his chair. I ask him what he is doing or waiting for. Ask him whether we cannot go west or northwest. He is very ill-tempered and most rude, evidently spoiling for a row. I then spend 1½ hours with him, as tactfully as possible allowing him to blow off steam and hoping to let him see reason. The sum total has been that he appears hopeless - he is definitely mentally unbalanced. It is a great pity, for all else is going well on board. I listened to the most utter rubbish, fiction and impudent assertion that it could well be possible to hear and not ask the perpetrator to stand down forever.

But what is the truth of this relationship? Davis's papers carry an embargo that, I have been informed, expires in 1990. Not until his Captain's diaries have been made public will we be able to make a reasonably fair and balanced assessment of this whole matter.

And what of contemporary history? After all I have said, you will hardly be surprised when I tell you that, a few weeks ago, a series of publications on the Antarctic was issued for use in schools in the pan-Pacific area - in Australia, New Zealand and Japan principally. When I was shown the first drafts, I found that all accounts of Australian Antarctic exploration stopped at the Mawson era. There was no mention of the post-war Australian work that explored 3000 miles of coastline and roughly a million square miles of territory. Only for my intercession in the matter, this distortion of history would now be in the schools.

To conclude my Antarctic illustrations of problems with history, I must say something about nationalism and chauvinism. Antarctic literature is nationally compartmented. The British tend to sneer at Byrd, largely ignore Mawson, and take no notice of the Russians. The Americans accept Shackleton, play down Scott and ignore the Russians and Australians. We in Australia rank Scott, Shackleton and Mawson as roughly equal, but know nothing of the Norwegians or Russians or Japanese.

I should like to see some historian study the relative contributions of Norwegians, Americans, Russians, Britons and Australians to the exploration of Australian Antarctic Territory. He would find that Lars Christensen's efforts in the 1930's were much more impressive than Mawson's BANZARE, although no Australian seems to have heard of him.

And in Antarctica generally, may I ask what you know of the post-war Russian explorers Mikhail Somov and Andrew Kapitsa, of the American Charles Bentley and of the Japanese Masayoshi Murayama? Outside their own countries, history does not record their existence, let alone their achievements. These illustrations from my Antarctic folio explain

my cynicism about the history of bye-gone events .

I sense that some of you are already saying, “The Orator states that he has been puzzled by inconsistencies in the chronology of events in the life of Joseph Crabtree disclosed by the diligent researches of earlier Orators, but he has given no instances of such inconsistencies. In vague general terms he has cast doubts on the very foundations of the Crabtree edifice.”

Let me therefore give just a few examples of what I have discovered to be inconsistencies — even inaccuracies and errors — in the chronology that has been put before you this evening. The chronology states:

- (i) “1792 — Met the Comtesse de Blaque in Carcassone”.

It just so happens that the Comtesse was in Venice in 1792, as so charmingly described in de Ligny’s diary *Gondolas and Gigolos*.

- (ii) “1827 - Employed at the Bank of England”.

Hewas Then aged 73. Yet the Regulations of the Bank of England at that time are quite explicit - “All persons, regardless of position, class or sex, will cease employment with the Bank on attaining the age of 68 years .

- (iii) “1776 — Met Linnaeus in Sweden”.

This I must say is extremely doubtful. Linnaeus was at Upsala, very ill, two years before his death, and there is no record of Crabtree venturing beyond Stockholm.

- (iv) “1773 — Sent down from Queen’s College, Oxford”.

Actually he left Oxford in 1772, but he was not “sent down. The fact is that he found the academic atmosphere of Oxford oppressive and moved to Cambridge where, even as a lowly binder in the Library, he found greater intellectual stimulation.

Whoever attempts at some future date to straighten out the jigsaw of Joseph Crabtree’s biography might well be in for some surprises. May the Immortal Memory look down kindly upon his tasks as he has done on mine.