

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1994 Annual Oration
Crabtree in the White House

Professor John Salmond
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Living Witness, Mr. President, scholars and guests. It is a great honour for me, a relative newcomer to this august gathering, to have been chosen to address you this evening. I am, of course, conscious of the important contributions to Crabtree scholarship recent orators have made, and I refer particularly to our president's superb overview of the current state of our discipline, delivered two years ago, and to which I intend to make further reference. I can only hope my own disquisition, in large part the product of research undertaken while on study leave in the United States last year, will fit squarely into this proud scholarly tradition.

Let me start with the likeness, which we have recently contemplated in silence as we drank the Crabtree toast. Most of you, like me, doubtless were once more deeply moved by the extraordinary character of the face, the obvious intelligence, symbolized by the high—domed forehead, the strength of the law's set, and above all, the luminous intensity, as well as the sadness, of those all— seeing eyes. It is an extraordinary face, quite extraordinary, I feel Crabtree's power each time we gather here, and I'm surely not alone in this. The first time I saw the likeness however, I had another feeling, familiarity. This was a face I had seen before many times I thought. The questions then, and one which has tantalized me since, was of course, when where and how. Tonight, I offer you the answer.

To do so, I first must take you back to the year 1970, to the town of Memphis, Tennessee. So famous has Memphis become in recent years, containing as it does the mausoleum of one Elvis Aaron Presley, that few remember the town's other famous son, Senator Kenneth D, (KD) McKellar, one of the twentieth century's most corrupt, vengeful, personally unhygienic, misanthropic and probably pederastic political figures . He was also one of the United States' longest serving legislators being a member of either the House of Representatives or the Senate from 1913 to 1954, always totally without wit or distinction. No great piece of legislation bears his name, there are no monuments in his honour, and yet, because of the seniority system, he came to hold positions of great power and influence. During the course of his long political life, he also came to accumulate a vast array of files, which because of his general dislike of lust about everything and everybody outside his home town, he deposited, not with the Library of Congress, or even the Tennessee State Historical Society, but with the Memphis Public Library, a body of such catastrophic inefficiency that they could think of nothing better to do with them than to leave them to rot in a superseded urinal block. And there they were in 1970 when I came to use them, moulding, smelly, completely uncatalogued, impossible to deal with adequately. One simply put one's hands in the boxes, and took pot luck. I found many things there, the Senator's spare false teeth, some packets of condoms with a 1930 use by date, even an old Rudee Vallee record, as well as some material pertinent to my own work . One plunge, however, did unearth a quite mysterious find, the significance of which was totally beyond me in 1970, but which more recently hit me with stunning force. That was when I pulled from a box a leather bound

volume, diary-size, obviously very old, with a blank front cover, except for the likeness of an eighteenth century gentleman in the bottom right hand corner, a face vaguely familiar, but to which I could put no name. Inside were 60 handwritten pages, well preserved, but indecipherable, the form of words, but not words, clusters of letters grouped as words, but meaningless. Well, I had no time to deal with such things, so far from the dictates of my own work. I simply returned it to the box, and continued my search - the diversion totally forgotten.

Forgotten indeed, until August 1993, as I began to think about tonight's address. I had always planned to talk about an aspect of Crabtree's career in the new American republic, which as is well known, he visited many times. In particular, his friendship with Andrew Jackson has always intrigued me, and though many scholars have discussed this relationship over the years, I nevertheless thought I could find some new aspect of it that would engage this body. Perhaps it was because Jackson, like McKellar, was a Tennessean that I experienced something of an epiphany. For, as I sat at my desk in North Carolina, a vision of that long—forgotten diary floated before me. I could see it as clearly then, as when I held it in my hands in 1970; in particular, I could see the likeness of the gentleman in the right hand corner, and this time I knew exactly who it was. It was Joseph Crabtree. It was in fact, the same likeness as we have before us in this very room.

Can you imagine my excitement, ladies and gentlemen? I flew to Memphis immediately, went straight to the library, and demanded a key to the urinal. There they were, the McKellar papers, 23 years older and smellier, but still in the same steel boxes, essentially undisturbed. Feverishly I hunted through them, unmindful of the teeth, the condoms or even more unsavory devices, and at last I found it. It was Joseph all right, there was no mistaking those singular features.

But what did it mean? What did the seemingly random groupings of letters signify? One thing I soon decided, this was a code, not an unknown tongue. But I am no cryptographer, I can't even use a computer. Where on earth did I even start. Crabtree himself gave me the key. As I looked at these non-words, I noticed that the fifth one in the first sentence was Apyzrpcc - eight letters, the same as Crabtree. Moreover the seventh and eighth letters were the same, again like Crabtree. What if it were Crabtree. What if the key to the code was to move each letter forward 2 places. Thus A would become C, P would become R et etc. It worked, I had broken the code. I could now make sense of the document.

Feverishly I began my translation. It was not long before I realised that what I had stumbled on was without doubt one of the most important historical finds of the century. Not only did it solve for me, once and for all, the question of the familiarity of the likeness, not only does it answer all of those niggling questions about Crabtree's activities between 1788-96, his seeming remoteness, his lengthy absences from the public eye, ostensibly either ill or abroad, questions which, as McGrath points out, Crabtree scholarship has not satisfactorily dealt with. Incidentally, the Crabtree CV, so lovingly tended by our archivist, Mr. Ingham, dramatically confirms this mysterious lack of detail. For most of the time he is simply noted as being "abroad", either in France or Germany, but with nothing more specific than that. My discovery does all this, but also much more; what I am about to reveal goes to the very heart

of American history . Indeed It will, when revealed, shake the republic to its foundations .

For, the first sentence of the document, as I decoded it, reads thus, “We, Alexander Hamilton and Joseph Crabtree, in the year of our Lord 1797, must state what we have done, not for those who live today, for they must never know, but for those who come long after.” And then follows a lengthy account of what is simply the greatest deception in human history, about which you will soon be the first to learn .

But before that, a brief lesson in American history. By 1786, the men who had made the American revolution were sorely displeased at its outcome . They were all Republicans, that is true, they wanted no more of King George, but they were by no means democrats, they believed in elite rule, not the rule of the people, and yet democracy was where they seem to be headed. Moreover, though they had broken away from mother country, they had done so in the name of English liberties, which they believed the king had violated. They remained Anglophiles to the core, deeply connected to English law and traditions, deeply distrustful of the alien and democratic notions already filtering across the Atlantic from France . Desperately they began to lay plans to create a new constitution, one which would embody the best of their English heritage, which would enable relations with Great Britain to be normalized, and above all, one which would lead to the creation of an executive modelled on that of the English king . James Madison was in the forefront of this movement, so was John Jay, above all, so was Alexander Hamilton . George Washington, the most important single figure in the history of the early Republic was not, though the others stated publicly that he was, while privately admitting their despair. The reason was simple, by the mid-1780's, Washington was, to put it baldly, demented.

Confined to his estate in Mount Vernon, quite often having to be forcibly restrained, taken to hacking away at everything in sight under the misapprehension that it was a cherry tree, the hero for the Revolution was indeed a tragic, a pathetic figure. And yet without him as their figurehead; in particular, without him as the potential first President, those who wished to change the Republic's direction knew that these efforts would be doomed to failure. No wonder Alexander Hamilton's mood, as he sailed for an English sojourn in the summer of 1786, was somber one .

He returned, six months later, much lighter of step and heart, convinced that if he and his fellows kept their nerve, the cause could yet be won . For the dramatic events of the afternoon of September 17 changed Hamilton's life profoundly, and with it, the course of human history.

On that fateful afternoon, Hamilton had been invited to take tea with the beautiful Lady Hypothermia McGillicuddy, third daughter of the fourth Earl of Kerry, and as those who know McGrath's work would be well aware, friend and erst-while lover of Joseph Crabtree . He was disinclined to go, his disposition, he wrote, was “so melancholy[y],” so concerned for the fate of the young republic. Still, considerations of propriety overcame him, moreover he was feeling a tad randy, and thus he decided to attend . There, he was ushered into the presence of the fabled Hypothermia, whose “icy loveliness” as McGrath reminded us, we can still experience through the medium of the famous Gainsborough portrait . She greeting him coolly, as was her wont. He, for his part was so smitten by her beauty that he scarcely noticed the gentleman who stood attentively as her escort. When he finally forced his eyes away from the lady's famed cleavage, however, and turned his attention to her companion, he was so shocked he scarcely heard Hypothermia's words of introduction, “Mr. Hamilton, allow me to

present my dear, dear friend, Mr. Joseph Crabtree.” Automatically, he took the outstretched hand, and felt the man’s firm grip, muttering as he did so appropriate words of greeting. It was Crabtree’s face that had so unsettled him, he had, of course, never met him, never seen him before, and yet It was a visage so familiar, one that he had known for years . It was, in short, the face of General George Washington. The likeness was extraordinary, Joseph Crabtree was George Washington, not the senile demented old man of today, but the vigorous, dashing, resolute hero of the Revolutionary War, when Hamilton had been his aide-de-camp . Hamilton could scarcely believe his eyes’ own evidence .

Gathering his wits, Hamilton turned his attention to what Crabtree was saying to him . After they had got past the pleasantries, it was soon obvious that Joseph wished to talk seriously to the American about the parlous state of affairs in the young Republic. Soon, Hamilton discovered what we, lucky beneficiaries of years of dedicated research, know well, that Crabtree, though English and patriotic to the core, was also intensely interested In the affairs of the young Republic, and extremely sympathetic to the Hamiltonian vision of its future. Crabtree as a young man had, after all, been closely associated with Edmund Burke, serving as a time as his private secretary, and had absorbed the great orator and philosopher’s perspective on the need to allow the American colonies to seek their own destiny, hoping in this way to bind them even closer to the mother country, with those mystic chords of common heritage .

As they talked on into the evening, all thoughts of drink or dalliance firmly put behind them, and as Hamilton became even more astonished at the closeness of the resemblance to the Washington of a decade ago, a daring plan began to form . What if Crabtree could be persuaded to be Washington, to appear in public as him, to make speeches, to take part in parades and other ceremonials, to receive dignitaries, even to govern, taking the part of the great man? Could it be done? No surely not, someone would soon find out . Yet, after the two men had parted, and as Hamilton reviewed the events of this extraordinary day In the course of a sleepless night, he became convinced that it could happen. Washington had always been a remote figure, the man on the white horse - though the father of his country, he had never been very close to his countrymen and women . There could be no expectation, therefore, that he would re—enter Into public life as a flesh-pressing Democrat. Moreover, though Hamilton could not have known this, the merciless attention of the press corps, that which exposes all public figures today, still lay far in the future .

The difficulties were nevertheless, huge. His colleagues, James Madison, John Jay Adams would have to be part of the plot. Would they agree? What of Martha Washington, the hero’s handsome, healthy wife - would she go along? Could they keep the hero’s arch-rival, Thomas Jefferson, currently in Paris urging on the potential revolutionaries, off the scene sufficiently long to give the plot a chance to work. Above all, would Joseph Crabtree be a participant. Would he be willing to risk his life in a bold endeavour to rescue a country not his own, no matter how great his interest nor genuine his sympathies?

The answer to that question came the next day, and, surely no surprise to we Crabtree scholars, was totally positive. Joseph’s great sense of adventure, his constant need to extend the boundaries of life’s experience, made Hamilton’s hesitant proposition simply too exciting to ignore - all the more so when he learned there would be money in it. He agreed to go with

Hamilton to the U.S., in the guise of his servant, and then, if the other plotters could be convinced, and if Martha Washington could be similarly persuaded, he would play his part for as long as he was able to do so. Provided, and this he made quite clear, he did so in the fullest sense. He would not be told what to do. He would be no one's puppet. Rather, he must become George Washington.

Well, there were few problems with Hamilton's colleagues, the uncanny likeness, the congress of viewpoints, their real desperation, and, of course, Crabtree's own power of persuasion, eventually assuaged their doubts. And so they set out for Mt Vernon to confront Martha, knowing that this was the true test. For her, the first sight of Joseph was simply too much, something akin to the appearance of Lazarus, and she fainted dead away. Crabtree rushed to her, cradled her head in his arms, and tenderly stroked her hair. When her eyes opened, her first sight, therefore, was the face of her husband, not the demented old fool in the next room hacking away at the chair legs, but the strong, handsome face of the man she had loved so well. Already she was, without even knowing it, a plotter, and as the scheme was outlined to her, its attractions grew. She could have a life again, the public life she had always craved, she could be loved again, something, of course, she had thought gone forever, given George's current state. And so, she, too, was enlisted. Crabtree moved in immediately, he became Washington. The real hero, false teeth removed and skin blackened, was dispatched to the quarters, where he chopped away happily, never knowing the difference. Martha, for her part, simply bloomed. She had never seemed so attractive, said the diarists. Well, we know the reason why. Manning Clark may have considered, again to quote McGrath, that Crabtree's fatal flaw was his predilection to lust. If so, in this particular phase of his career, it served both Martha Washington, and the fledgling United States, exceedingly well.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the rest is, as they say, history. It was Joseph Crabtree, not George Washington, who presided over the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, which gave the United States its Constitution, and who argued so vehemently for its ratification. It was Joseph Crabtree, not George Washington, who in 1789, was inaugurated the United States' first president, and who, together with his Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton set it firmly on its Republican, capitalist course. It was Joseph Crabtree, not George Washington, who normalized relations with Great Britain, and who resisted firmly the democratic blandishments of revolutionary France, and those, like Jefferson, who supported them. It was Joseph Crabtree, not George Washington, who, in short, defined the American presidency. Above all, it was Joseph Crabtree, not George Washington, who gave up the office after two terms, setting a precedent that has been broken only once, and which is now enshrined in the Constitution as its 21st Amendment.

It is possible that Thomas Jefferson hastened his departure. He alone may have suspected that all was not as it seemed., More likely, though, Crabtree simply wearied of the game, and having done what he set out to do, decided it was time to go home. Whatever, Crabtree duly gave Washington's famous Farewell address, and returned to Mt Vernon, where the old man was scrubbed clean, his teeth popped back in, and he was returned to the Big House, with no-one any the wiser. No-one that is, except Martha Washington. Ever the discreet one, Crabtree simply described their last night together as "active" but

“melancholic”. Abigail Adams rather acidly recorded that Martha became “a crabbed old woman” when she ceased being first lady, attributing it to her reluctance to leave the glamour and glitter of official life . Again, we, of course, know better.

Crabtree returned to London in June 1797. Acquaintances, remarking on his long period of absence, or of solitude, asked him where he had been, and what he had been doing. “Oh, wondrous places, and wondrous things, wondrous things indeed,” he would invariably reply, refusing to be drawn into further detail. “Wondrous things indeed”, he had founded a nation.

Living witness, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen. May we break precedent here tonight, may we charge our glasses, and may we drink a second toast to the man we honour this evening. But this time let us not do so in silence. Let us instead arise, face the likeness, raise our glasses high, and shout the Presidential toast, “Hail to the chief”.