

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1997 Annual Oration
The Darker Side of Crabtree

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February 1997

Introduction

Scholars - the field of human endeavour is not a pretty sight and tonight I will paint a landscape less pretty than most. There are some scholars who try to convince you of a world in which great men do great things with no unpleasant bits. These are false prophets and tonight I have refused the easy temptation to join them.

This oration is yet to be classified by the Board of Literature but I am able to say it contains medium level coarse language, inferred sex scenes, really quite special gratuitous sexual references, low level violence peaking on occasions to extreme violence, drugs, low level plagiarism, tolerable digressions and unsustainable inferences.

It is customary to begin orations with some comments on research methods. An original starting point occurred to me. I thought I would try to find Crabtree's diaries. I could not of course be sure that he kept diaries, but my intuition told me he did. I had early luck when I discovered the existence of Jonathan Crabtree, a great, great, great, great grandson of Joseph and asked about diaries. I received the most stinking reply from him: he asked not to be bothered by any more Australians asking for diaries and why was it, he wanted to know, they always wrote letters marked urgent which arrived toward the end of January each year.

This set back was meant nothing upon the discovery that almost everything I needed was to be found in my second year texts and the rest was on the internet. I think it would be reasonable, even modest to claim that this is the first oration of the new age: a fact I consider will be of significant satisfaction to the scholars.

I hasten to reassure the more moderate sections of the Foundation that I did not entirely abandon tradition. I also, it is only fair to record consulted the work of earlier orators. It is a corpus (in more ways than one) which I have heard described in this room in fulsome terms of admiration and respect. I would have to say I found it to be patchy. (The reader will note a the uncompromising approach in the new age of orations) Many orations were breathtakingly good. I am relieved to be able to say that all those orations delivered by orators here tonight were remarkably good..

But I must say a most interesting fact emerged from this reading which was that 23 of the past 24 orators claim to have discovered Crabtree's diaries. What I find almost as astonishing as Crabtree's ability to produce diaries is the strike rate of our scholars.

But of more significance than this was the difference which emerged between the English approach to Crabtree scholarship and the Australian.

The burden of the English work on Crabtree emphasises the darker side of the struggling individual - it deals with despondency, sexual restlessness, (a notable, indeed controversial oration given by Tattersall in 1978 even revealed that Crabtree underwent a sex change operation in 1816,) a claim which I am happy to say I am able to validate in my oration tonight.

Whereas the Australian work concentrates more on achievements in the affairs of man to the neglect of the study of the great man's psyche.

While I prefer the English approach, and have followed it myself, all Australian orators instinctively look for Crabtree's work under the name of others while the English look for unfound work bearing his name. I am now convinced that Crabtree did all his great work over the name of others and the explanation for that will be revealed tonight.

Now if this were a traditional oration, before beginning I would, perhaps a trifle turgidly, point out how I have found this area of research that no one has written about. I might even find emotion and language enough to go on for say 3 pages or so to describe my dismay at the stupidity of others and the shameful neglect. So here scholars you see the first of many advantages of the new-age orations.

And, breaking further with tradition, I will begin humbly .

Background

Young Crabtree suffered the curse of being born the son of a man who knew everything and felt instinctively and with great force the rightness of his own opinions. This was made so much the worse because in fact Crabtree's father was wrong in just about every view he held and non more so than the views he had of himself.

For example:

- He thought about himself as a right thinking person, presumably because he detested foreigners, free-thinkers, Catholics and women.

- He thought of himself as a mild compassionate person although he had a reputation for being the most creative and vociferous swearer in Gloucestershire. To experience one of his outpourings of emotional violence according to contemporary records was like leaning into the teeth of a gale - like biting into an onion. You would be wrong to think this was metaphorical. His outbursts would actually create in his victims a physical reaction.

- He thought of himself as a circumspect man. Yet again a well document story casts doubt on this. At church the local vicar delivers a sermon in which he says:

We understand little of the works of God, either in Nature or Grace. We pursue False Knowledge and Mistake Education extremely. We are Violent on our affections Confused and

Immethodical in our whole Life so missing the Right Use of Life and way of Happy Living

He was interrupted at this point, though he was no way close to his conclusion, by Elias Crabtree who stood up swore mightily, declared himself never to have been so grievously insulted in all his life, dragged the vicar out of the church and thrashed him.

- Naturally, he thought of himself as a religious man. He was, probably deeply religious. He saw the hand of God in everything. How could he be so right about everything, Elias Crabtree reasoned, except that his mind was guided by God. The unerring correctness of all his views was for Elias Crabtree a clinching proof of the existence of God. If more proof were needed Elias would look no further than tinea and flatulence. This weird theologian saw in these afflictions God's protection against the sin of pride. And as he suffered these afflictions in such grievous degree he felt he had every reason to consider himself, as he did, the most humble of men.

Little is known of his mother other than she was frail. Evidence for this is found in the fact that she died at the age of 27 but balanced against this it should be noted that she worked from the age of 6, married at 16, and had eighteen children in 11 years. Her desire for life was possibly diminished by the fact that she lost three children. I don't mean that they died, just that she lost them. Special significance was read into one of these losses as the child had been inexplicably named Thomas Castaway Crabtree. A plan to call their next child Peregrine was abandoned.

Even apart from the occasional distressing loss of siblings, growing up must have been difficult for Joseph. I have said that Elias detested foreigners, free-thinkers, Catholics and women. With that perversity so noticeable in God's designs, Joseph was inexplicably attracted to all these. An unfortunate tension developed between father and son. There are two episodes relative to that tension I need to set out here as they must have been major shaping experiences in the maturing Crabtree psyche. They are crucial to an understanding of the great event in Crabtree's life which is the subject of my oration.

Joseph was wayward in religious matters. His study brought him in contact with the orgiastic aspects of early church rituals. He was attracted to these at the very time his father was listening to John Wesley touring through Bristol giving lectures and laying the foundation of the Methodist Sect which urged stricter observance of proper church practice.

But Joseph delighted in reading of the times when churches would sell Whitsun ale and he particularly experienced a disconcerting thrall reading about the details of the debauchery these occasions gave rise.

This interest was added to and deepened by contemporary reports he came across of English touring abroad, particularly in Venice and Florence, eye-witness reports of the Carnival. He read of, in the words of one traveller, "bull baiting, goose catching, fist fightings, whoring, drunkenness and other diversions too tedious to enumerate" - how the young Crabtree wished this traveller could have borne better the tedium. In Florence, Crabtree read with approval, of writers, poets and philosophers under the gentile encouragement of

Lorenzo de Medici raising obscene songs into an art form.

Revivals and religious experiments were in the air, it is not to be wondered at that an excess of youthful ardour led young Crabtree into what with hindsight is only too clearly a rash act.

It is hard to guess what that hardened humourless proto-Wesleyan congregation must have thought on the day they entered the church and saw young Crabtree, a garland around his head, a mask in the form of buttocks over his face, a sausage protruding from his breeches and singing with quite childish inaccuracy about sexual congress. What Mr Crabtree thought was fairly plain to all.

In the instant that it took for the congregation's fury to descend on him, Joseph saw himself not as a messenger bringing revival but just as a little boy in church with a sausage in his trousers. Sudden adjustments to reality of this kind have a powerful effect and Joseph's instinct was to run for it.

The furious congregation encircled him but he slipped away. Three times they encircled him - the third and successful time with his father staring him in the face swearing mightily at him in a great rage: locally reckoned as a high point in Mr Crabtree's performances. With the violence of his father's fury, Joseph's eyes watered and his soft hair floated on the wind of abuse.

All things in life have their positive side, I suppose, and we can perhaps think that some check to this wayward tenancy in Joseph was a good thing because the tome on his desk identified as next for investigation concerned the Feast of the Circumcision.

Joseph Crabtree had always been a very reserved child: he became more so after this episode. His response to his shame which necessarily proceeded from this episode was to withdraw and try to redeem himself. But as with everything else this withdrawal was misunderstood and mistaken as a further sign of mal-adjustment. He sought to do good works but aware of how sceptical people were he waited for the best possibility and most public possibility to reveal his altered course, his serious and pious path.

His school wanted a motto and they wanted from that motto the things people normally want, elevation and a sense of useless superiority. Crabtree judged this to be his opportunity. Boys were invited to make suggestions for mottos at the annual founder's day at which the entire village was present. Much murmuring was heard of 'course when young Crabtree was listed on the program. This in a way could have pleased him. How much higher his elevation will be if people expect the worst.

The Latin language is a slippery thing to one not born to it and this was to be the second great occasion of Crabtree falling foul of context. He stood before the school and congregation and read out his Latin phrase. Looking back on it is obvious that Crabtree meant his motto to convey the sentiment, "We act in a manly fashion" but to those there on the day it sounded only too much like, "we indulge in sexual intercourse at the drop of a hat"

This last episode caused an almost total breach between father and son. Elias was heard to say to his wife, “Damn Me Madam it would be an act of grace if that boy were to turn to sodomy”, which, it has to be conceded, was an immoderate utterance for the times. But it was always Joseph of the fifteen remaining, locatable offspring, that Elias would take to the public hangings at Tyburn tree. They would set out on the three day journey to London, his father’s mind in a great state of anticipation the coach full of fellow spectators: their scarves out the window. The chatter was endless about hangings in the past. The practice in those days was that lamplighters would erect their ladders and charge 2 or 3 for a vantage point and Mr Crabtree was always anxious lest he miss a good prospect.

Old Crabtree perhaps thought that these outings would be good for his boy but in fact they deepened that fatal tendency to withdraw from the world. On the coach while Elias mused on Tyburn and death he would have been aghast to realise the mind of Joseph could not turn away from London and life. On hanging day this mere child of thirteen years, when the carts bringing the condemned and the coffins from Newgate Prison were in sight and the excitement of the crowd was at fever pitch, Joseph would slip away from his father and walk down to the river Thames observing the life of the city, the connection with the rest of the world the opening onto the great sea.

This is the experience which Joseph took into adulthood and with which he tried to deal with the world. He had experienced the liberation of living and thinking behind a mask on the one hand and the appalling disaster of owning up to his own most favourite private creations on the other. Let us follow him into that adult world.

The Great Event

Much has been written about Crabtree’s life in the years between 1767 and 1799 and it is clear that whatever achievements were his in that time they were all committed under assumed names.

The period from 1799 to 1816 is much more confused and this is because I am able to reveal in 1799 Crabtree was 45, unwed, living in London at the house of his friend John Wilkes where he had met Perdita von Paradis. She was, it would be fair to say, an experienced woman. She had travelled extensively, she had a rich circle of intellectual acquaintances all of whom seemed to Crabtree more accomplished than he. She apparently paid no attention to him. He thought she considered him clumsy, lacking distinction and intellect.

His soul was in torment. The passion that she stirred in him made him feel, not for the first time that the world counted for nought and that the inner-life was the only thing of importance. Once again he felt urgently that he had a great creative work to undertake. Something which would be a monument, not some temporal ephemeral thing such as the establishment of nationhood and democracy in the fledgling United States of America.

The thought of a great destiny through a great self revelatory work was one that would

not leave him He thought that he would produce his memoirs. He remembered his father made such an attempt. Although it is the silliest available option men often try doing what their fathers failed at. Its like some law of nature which operates to prevent things getting better. His father had bought an imposing bound book and wrote in the flyleaf, The Narrative of my Life and of God's Wonderful Dealings with Me, and underneath that he wrote, by Elias Crabtree, put it aside and never wrote more in it. Joseph's attempt was little better than his father's and he soon faltered at his attempt to render the episode in the church. His attempt at memoir writing in fact produced such a depression in him he even thought of giving up the rest of his life to a study of mathematics.

In 1799, the world was facing the uncertainty of a new century and Crabtree was facing the uncertainty of the rest of his life. On one side annihilation, on the other regeneration. He needed a starting point and he needed strength. In an understandable attempt to connect with some deep part of his being he went to Tyburn on a hanging day just so that he could, as he did in his youth, slip away from the crowd and began his walk to the Thames which took him to Westminster.

Political life never really interested him. He sided with Wilkes against Johnson, not on a matter of politics but on a matter of temperament, He did not hear the words of speeches but rather responded to the epic spectacle of leaders in great halls urging men to monumental decisions and great undertakings just as in Viking days men in great halls made plays for greatness. This day, Pitt was making a speech and there was a queue to be admitted. In this queue Crabtree met Coleridge who was holding a copy of Purchases Pilgrimage.

There is a well known law of nature, known as Wooster's Law which states, 'never have a third martini before lunch'. This is a very good law. I should say it is one of those very few laws more honoured in the observance than the breach. However, I am one of these few who has breached it and let me tell you what happens. One's gob involuntarily falls open and remains in that position for several hours, legs don't work at all, English language facility goes off the air and casual observers from a distance of 60 paces are able to detect a fixity or glazed expression in the eye.

This, I imagine, is precisely how Crabtree would have presented at this first meeting with Coleridge. Not through an intake of martini's but through astonishment at the workings of fate. Coleridge, naturally enough, took it as a symptom of admiration. He shared this one thing in common with his great opposite Dr. Johnson, they both found it easy to believe that others found them interesting.

But in this case, it was not Coleridge's conversation but the sight of Purchases Pilgrimage that induced the catatonic state in Crabtree. Coleridge talked incessantly to his new friend throughout Pitt's speech about his objective to write a poem on the subject of Kubla Khan. So much did he speak about this and so little did he attend to Pitt's speech that he was totally unable to report on it the next day and he was dismissed by the Morning Post

There is no evidence that Crabtree knew Coleridge before this meeting. Naturally Crabtree would have been in awe of this great man of literature. Perhaps some of the awe

faded as Coleridge spoke without rest for over an hour but what will not have faded for Crabtree was the thought of Kubla Khan. From the time that he had met Perdita it was just such an exotic inspiration he was looking for. In an instant all thoughts of memoirs had been cast out just as Toad discarded horrid yellow caravans. How he could have even thought of anything so puerile, self seeking and arrogant. We can take it that from that day on Crabtree was in a desperate race with Coleridge to write the great poem.

Does this not strike any of you here tonight as strange in the highest degree? Well, it bloody well should. We are talking about an episode in 1799 and the most erudite scholarly opinion holds it to be an incontrovertible fact that Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan was written in 1797!

You have to understand what this means. When a scholar asserts something as an incontrovertible fact, it is another way of saying no one knows the truth here, my view is this, anyone who suggests something different is talking rubbish.

This made me look at the poem more carefully. Even at my first re-reading I could not help but notice the final lines of the poem,

*And all should cry, Beware, Beware,
His flashing eyes, his floating hair
Weave a circle round him thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

and I could not help but recall the episode in the church. And although we must pass over this with extreme sensitivity, the lines,

*for he on honey dew hath fed
and drunk the milk of paradise*

suggests that he was more successful in his passion for Perdita von Paradis that my researches were capable of revealing.

Uncertainty began to form in my mind as to whether Coleridge really wrote this poem the world adores him for. I consulted the authorities. Did they have doubts. Indeed they did but not about authorship - their uncertainties were limited to the poems date of composition, its structure and its meaning.

But what is the evidence for Coleridge writing this poem. It is that he claimed to be the author, he was in possession of the text, he arranged for it to be printed over his name and a few references exist to him speaking about Kubla Khan from as early as 1799. Interestingly, the poem was not published until 1816. Notice that year - 1816.

Suspicion builds. No working notes for the poem exist - in all Coleridge's notebooks of

the time there is not one reference to it until the notebook of April-May 1811 - no preliminary manuscripts only the final so-called Crew manuscript which was conveniently found in 1934.

To follow the very intricate events which follow we must for a while take two paths. First travel with Coleridge for a bit before picking up Crabtree again. Coleridge was still a young man. He was friend of the great poets, rightly considered a great poet himself and was more intelligent than any human had a right to be. But he had his weaknesses too.

He had, for example, enlisted in the 15th. Light Dragoons under the preposterous false name of Silas Tomkyn Comberbache and had held high positions in the civil service and colonial office and so it must be assumed he was not a stranger to duplicity and mendacity. In 1801 it is recorded by Coleridge that he was taking increasing amounts of opium for what he described as "irregular gout" and frequent nephritic attacks. He fought with his friends and we can tell he was in the right on these occasions because we have his own word for it. About one breach he writes, *on his side wicked calumnies, infamous lies, the conduct of a madman, on my side, patience, gentleness, ever giving good for evil.* And then a period of barrenness.

By 1810 Coleridge was living in London in a state of complete despair. There had been another breach this time with the Wordsworth's and he wrote, *I have experienced the worst, the worst the World can wreak on me, that can make life indifferent.* The major cause of this despair was the progress of his addiction and the destructive effect it had on his talents. It was now a decade since he had written anything of greatness.

Now to Crabtree. During the period 1799 - 1810 he had combined the performance of his great achievements revealed in this place with part time employment in the recently established Bank of England (Exeter Branch) and all the while had been working on his poem to which he gave the working title Kubla Khan.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Crabtree had effectively completed his great poem, then, with that characteristic juvenile misjudgement took the poem to Coleridge in 1810 expecting the great literary man to greet him as a fellow poet, to see the poem for what it was and to join with him in bringing the poem into the world. One can only surmise what happened in that meeting but Coleridge must have seen a power of poetic invention. There was probably a fight over the manuscript and Coleridge was left with two fragments of the original poem and the episode obviously rekindling for Crabtree the worst of childhood memories rang into the night.

It becomes clear that in the months that follow Coleridge conceived a desperate plan to pass the poem off as his own. First, he constructed a few passages aimed at linking the fragments into a whole. These are pathetically obvious once you know this background and then he tried it out on people. The first attempt is recorded by John Collier Payne that in 1811-12 Coleridge recited some lines written many years ago upon the building of a dream palace by Kubla Khan.

I know as an incontrovertible fact that Crabtree wrote to Coleridge in 1813 imploring him to return the fragments of the poem that he had tried to recall it in a frenzy and that a

visitor from Porlock had interrupted him. This gave Coleridge the basis of the fiction for the fragmentary nature of the poem.

Yet another year goes by. It is now 1814 and in that year alone Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Lord Byron, Maria Edgeworth, Sir Walter Scott all publish. Coleridge last published in 1798. Coleridge writes to a friend that he is living in hell. But Coleridge is suffering not only because of his loss of creativity but also because of the dastardly plan he is living with daily.

In 1815 Wordsworth again publishes. This proves to be too much.

In 1816 the desperate Coleridge takes his final preparatory step before launching on this despicable fraud and reads the poem to Lord Byron. The great chronicler that he was Leigh Hunt turned up late and later wrote that he knew certainly the poem had been read because he had just missed it. Coleridge had got it past Payne and now past Byron. If Byron accepted it as a poem and as his work - the world would. Coleridge published a month later.

What was published was a butchered version of Crabtree's great poem and the critics hated it. One can only imagine Crabtree's torment. Tattersall revealed that Crabtree went to Guy's Hospital one dreary evening in 1816 and left the hospital a pioneer of sex change surgery. After my research, I can well believe that Crabtree was driven to a pitch of desperation and despair. All his failures will have been racing through his mind going back to that fateful day in the church as a young man with a sausage protruding from his trousers. It is reasonable to say that the phallus is a powerful symbol. I believe that on this fateful evening in 1816, the phallus became for Crabtree the symbol of all his failures - all that he wanted to turn away from. It is from this extremity. I believe, that Crabtree appeared in the foyer of Guys and uttered those now immortal words, "I want to have it off with Mr Keats"

Scholars and Elders
Thank You.

