

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)  
1998 Annual Oration  
*Joseph Crabtree: the military dimension*

Bill Breen  
11 February 1998

Mr. President, Living Witness, Elders, Scholars and guests. I feel deeply honoured to be invited to give the annual Crabtree oration this year. I am - in spite of my receding grey hair - only a recent and very junior member of this august body. I can only hope that fellow scholars will not be disappointed in my very modest contribution to the storehouse of wisdom and scholarship represented in the distinguished orations given to this body over the past 24 years.

I am by trade an historian. Mainly I teach and research in the history of the United States. However, in addition to U.S. history, I also have a longstanding interest in military history. It is this interest in military history that has led me to a startling discovery about the career of Joseph Crabtree whose memory we are gathered together to honour this evening. Tonight, scholars, I will reveal to you the true story of the Battle of Waterloo, that epoch-defining clash between the British army, led by Lord Wellington, and the might of France, led by Napoleon.

But, before I go further, let me first say a few words about the general state of military history in our universities. Typically, military history has been narrowly conceived as pertaining only to battles and to questions of leadership in battle, and perhaps to some technical questions relating to guns and armaments. Primarily, this is history that concentrates on the qualities of leadership - this is a branch of history that produces biographies of the Alexander the Greats, the Caesars, the Hannibals, the Napoleons, and similar figures. It has been contemptuously referred to (particularly by the feminists - I say this more in sorrow than in anger) as merely the history of "dead white males on horsback." This is, of course, distinct from the more sweeping, feminist criticism of traditional history which is mocked as merely the story of "dead white males" (with or without horses.) That older style of military history has, of course, been parodied in recent years as "Guns and trumpets history."

By contrast, the more recent, methodologically innovative, conceptually sophisticated, user-friendly, politically correct, "new" military history has aimed to incorporate social history. It has tried to broaden the focus of the older military history, with its emphasis on battles and leaders, and to provide a more social context - a more human dimension - to the history of warfare. Thus we learn about the eating habits of armies, the number of courtesans that travelled with the armies, the sexual proclivities of both officers and men, and such like. Indeed, my own research which I am about to share with you, is at the very cutting edge of this "new" military history. However, with sadness I have to report scholars (and with your experience, you would understand how this can happen in an academic environment) that this turn toward a military history with a social dimension has been criticized and even parodied by the academic equivalent of the members of the old "Bay 13" at the MCG. This new,

socially aware, military history is no longer referred to as “Guns and trumpets” history: instead, it has been labelled “Bums and strumpets” history. This is a sad state of academic affairs.

I now turn to the subject of my oration which is to explore the role of Joseph Crabtree at the Battle of Waterloo which took place on 15 June, 1815. Before I go any further, I would like to say that my research on Crabtree at Waterloo has drawn me away from my main study which is in American history and is concerned with the American Civil War and, specifically, with the Battle of Gettysburg which, of course, occurred in July, 1863, almost a decade after the death of our revered founder. Although this interest in a single battle may sound like the “old” conservative, military history, it is in fact at the very cutting edge of the “new” military history. I am exploring one key social dimension of the Union Army and its effect on the outcome of the Gettysburg battle. My formal topic is: “Why the North won the Civil War: Union army buttons and button holes with particular reference to the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment.” As scholars will be no doubt aware, it was the 20th Maine Regiment that snatched victory from the jaws of defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg and made it a Union and not a Confederate victory. The regiment was posted on the extreme left of the three-mile-long Union line and it held out heroically against the desperate attacks of the Confederate forces for a sufficient length of time to allow Union reinforcements to arrive and save the day. My question is a social history question: what was the role of buttonhole size in the military uniforms worn by that regiment in deciding the outcome of the battle?

Crabtree scholars will immediately understand the critical importance of this question. After all, who among us has not, in moments of desperation, wondered why buttonholes were not made larger (or buttons smaller) when trying to button up or unbutton? This is, of course, less of a problem in the modern era of the plastic zipper. However, I put it to you that, in a surprise attack, a large portion of the regiment would be, in various ways, more or less totally unbuttoned. With the enemy practically upon you, the issue of the speed of buttoning up - and hence the question of the size of the button hole - becomes a vital issue. We have all heard of the old adage that for want of a nail the horseshoe was lost, and for want of a horse the battle was lost, and for want of a battle the empire was lost. I am going one step further. I am suggesting that, because of the large size of button holes in the uniforms of the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment, the Battle of Gettysburg was lost by General Lee and, for want of that victory, the South lost the Civil War. It is a large question, scholars, but these are not times for the faint-hearted. These are times for scholars with vision who can seize a big idea, or a big buttonhole, and run with it. But I digress from my main theme which concerns the role of Joseph Crabtree in a battle that took place almost fifty years earlier than Gettysburg. However, as you will shortly see, this digression is in fact very germane to the main argument of this paper. This is not the rambling of a balding old duffer.

The significance of the apparent digression concerning the Battle of Gettysburg is, of course, that it was my interest in American uniforms and buttonholes that first alerted me to the role of Joseph Crabtree in the Battle of Waterloo. As we all know, Lord Wellington is credited with the victory at Waterloo. It was a narrow victory. As Wellington was fond of saying “The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” I have myself found this a rather curious thing that he said in the light of his other famous saying that “Our army is

composed of the scum of the earth - the mere scum of the earth.” I had not realized until preparing this oration that Lord Wellington had such a low view of English public school education. But I digress again. My interest in military uniforms led me to London to view the uniform of Lord Wellington himself. I was surprised at the very small size of the buttonholes. By chance, on the same day, I was fortunate enough to view the Likeness in the original. I was immediately taken by the fact that Joseph Crabtree seemed to have a body size that would fit into Lord Wellington’s uniform. Realizing the uncanny ability of Joseph Crabtree to be in the right place at the right time, I rushed back to the museum to look again at Lord Wellington’s uniform thinking that I might have discovered yet another daring impersonation that Crabtree undertook for patriotic reasons.

Like you, fellow scholars, I had been alerted to the possibility of an impersonation because of the herculean research undertaken by my learned colleague and fellow Crabtree scholar, now an Elder, Professor John Salmond, who shared with this group in the annual oration in 1994, his discovery that Crabtree had actually impersonated George Washington twenty years before the Battle of Waterloo in order to save the infant American Republic from drifting back into chaos and anarchy after the American Revolution. Such devotion to the public weal, I thought, may have convinced Crabtree to impersonate Lord Wellington, who was well known for his mistresses and his drinking and who may have been suffering a severe hangover at the time of the Battle of Waterloo. It would have been the honorable thing to do: to seize the Duke’s uniform and impersonate Wellington, outwit Napoleon, win the battle, and then put the uniform back on its hook in the Duke’s clotheshanger - with the Duke still fast asleep and none the wiser - and allow the Duke to take the glory. Alas, this wonderful thesis lacked one crucial element: on careful second inspection, it was obvious to the trained historian’s eye that Joseph Crabtree could not possibly have used Wellington’s uniform. The buttonholes were so small that it would have taken half a day to get in and out of that uniform. Such a delay would have ensured that such a daring scheme would have been discovered.

However, although my hunch had led to a dead end, my curiosity was aroused. Had Crabtree been at the Battle of Waterloo? Had he played a role in that great victory? I wondered where I should look for evidence. I naturally thought of the Crabtree diaries, but realized that this was a lost cause. As our absent President, Richard Sebo, recounted so eloquently last year, Jonathan Crabtree, a great, great, great, great grandson of Joseph, may (or may not) have the Crabtree diaries. However the aforesaid Jonathan resents inquiries from Australians late in January and refuses, point-blank, to be of any assistance whatsoever to aspiring orators.

Sunk in gloom, and believing that I would never find the answer to my question, I happened to find myself in the small breakfast room at Buckingham Palace contemplating the famous Gainsborough portrait of the beautiful but remote Lady Hypothermia McGillicuddy. Scholars will recall that James McGrath, our Living Witness, first drew our attention to the existence of the Gainsborough portrait in his 1993 oration. McGrath, in his address, dwelt upon the “icy loveliness” of Hypothermia: by contrast, Professor Salmond in the 1994 oration, appeared to be fixated on what he described as the “famed cleavage” of Hypothermia. As scholars will be aware, Lady Hypothermia was the beautiful, if somewhat

wayward, third daughter of the fourth Earl of Kerry, and was reputed to have had a rather steamy affair with Joseph Crabtree - a product, no doubt, of the combination of his hot passion and her icy loveliness. My thoughts were wandering as I contemplated the Gainsborough portrait. Suddenly, it struck me that the "famed cleavage" of Lady Hypothermia - alluded to by Professor Salmond and so clearly visible in the painting - was of such substantial proportions that one could, in fact, easily lose one's ..... diary within its amplitude. Let me not exaggerate: I am not talking here of a large, one-page-per-day, office diary but rather a modest sized, personal diary. In short, it came to me, that Lady Hypothermia may have concealed her own personal diary within the abundance of that cleavage where its revelations would be safe from prying .... media representatives.

I immediately jumped up from my chair, rushed to the phone, and rang the MacGillicuddy estates in Kerry. To my surprise and delight I was assured that a personal diary kept by Hypothermia had indeed been preserved, in spite of its rather curious shape, and, once I had explained my purpose, I was permitted to peruse it in the vast - but, alas, empty - wine cellars of the ancient MacGillicuddy castle in the midst of the vast MacGillicuddy estates in County Kerry.

In reading the diary, my mind wandered back to that earlier discovery of an unknown account of Joseph Crabtree's secret exploits in America. That other discovery was, of course, written by Alexander Hamilton and Joseph Crabtree himself in 1797, and discovered, by pure chance, in Memphis, Tennessee, by my colleague Professor John Salmond. Scholars will recall that Salmond revealed to us that the account he had discovered in Memphis was written in an elaborate, secret code which, rather to my amazement, he said he was able to break without great difficulty. I am happy to report, by contrast, that the Hypothermia diary was not written in code. It was however, written in haste and it was episodic. There were large gaps in the timeline and individuals were referred to obliquely, by initials only. Often those initials were difficult to decypher. As a consequence, one must accept an element of imprecision in interpreting the diary. Nonetheless, I was ecstatic.

Naturally, I immediately tried to find Hypothermia's view of the famous and steamy affair that she had had (or had not had) with Joseph that is alluded to in the 1993 oration of our Living Witness, Jim McGrath. Unfortunately, I regret to inform scholars that there is no mention of the affair ....which, of course, raises some questions about the scholarship underpinning that particular oration! However, the alleged affair was supposed to have taken place when Crabtree was a young man and perhaps discretion, on Hypothermia's part (certainly not on Joseph's), may have dictated that no mention be made of it in her diary. Hypothermia does mention Joseph frequently: there are, in the diary, many references to Joseph's keen wit, his dynamic personality, his vivacity as a dinner table companion, and to his command of the German language. His command of the German language should not have surprised me - he was, after all, a polymath. However, it proved to be an important clue to unravelling Crabtree's role in the Battle of Waterloo. Historical insights, as Crabtree scholars would know, are often the product of such serendipity.

Hypothermia, the diary makes clear, was physically present at the famous ball in Brussels, given by the Duchess of Richmond, on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo. That ball

was described in some detail by Lord Byron in his epic poem titled Childe Harold's Pilgrimage published the year after the battle. Scholars will remember these lines:

There was a sound of revelry by night,  
And Belgium's capital had gathered then  
Her beauty and her chivalry, and bright  
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men:  
A thousand hearts beat happily: and when  
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,  
Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again...

Given that the beauty and chivalry of a good part of Europe was gathered in Brussels at the time it is no surprise to you, scholars, to discover that Joseph Crabtree and Lady Hypothermia MacGillicuddy were also present. Indeed, I suspect, although I cannot verify this insight with certitude, that Byron's reference to "voluptuous swell" was, in fact, inspired by the vision of Hypothermia's "famed cleavage" - so artfully drawn to our attention by Professor Salmond in 1994.

Lady Hypothermia's diary, as you might expect, makes reference to various of the famous personages at the ball in Brussels. However, she also noted in the diary that JC (which I have translated as Joseph Crabtree) was at the ball and that he was acquainted with DOW (translated as Duke of Wellington). More important for our story is Hypothermia's passing mention that JC was on excellent terms with RPGB (translated - with considerable difficulty and only by using a historian's mastery of historical context - as Roly Poly General Blucher). Blucher, the Prussian general was a very large gentleman and Hypothermia noted that he was expected to arrive late at the ball after moving his army to Brussels to link up with the Duke of Wellington.

Perhaps, before going any further, I should briefly outline the Battle of Waterloo. As scholars will be aware, Napoleon, who had been defeated and deposed in 1814 and banished to the island of Elba, off the Italian coast, had returned to France in 1815. Supported by the French army, Napoleon had once again seized control of the country. The Allied coalition re-formed to defeat Napoleon once again. Before the allies could get themselves organized properly, Napoleon struck at the British and Prussian armies which were both near Waterloo, a village some miles to the south of Brussels in June, 1815. Wanting to prevent these two armies joining forces, Napoleon struck first at the Prussian army led by General Blucher which was moving to join the British army under Wellington. Napoleon defeated the Prussian army which retreated back in some disorder. In this battle Blucher's horse was struck by a bullet and rolled over on the quite portly, 73 year old, Field Marshal Blucher who was rendered unconscious. What follows is somewhat unclear. The next day, 15 June, Napoleon turned his full force onto the British army which was now drawn up at Waterloo. The battle lasted all day. In the late afternoon, when it looked as if the tide of battle was moving to support the final French offensive, when the fate of the battle and, indeed, of western civilization, was in the balance, Napoleon's army was unnerved by the arrival of the Prussian Army with Field Marshal Blucher, astride a new horse, at its head. The arrival of the Prussians demoralized the French who were then soundly defeated. The Allies won the

day. Western civilization had been saved by the timely arrival of the Prussians at Waterloo.

These are well-known historical facts. What is not known at all, but is revealed in Lady Hypothermia's diary, is the role of Joseph Crabtree in that famous victory. In fact, in her diary, Hypothermia recounts that Crabtree was an old, childhood acquaintance and great admirer of Marshal Blucher. She adds that Crabtree was somewhat agitated at the ball and had left early because he had heard a rumour that the French were about to attack the approaching Prussian army. He had mounted his horse and galloped in the direction in which he expected the Prussians to be approaching Brussels in the hope of warning General Blucher of the French plan. After several hours of hard riding he heard the sound of cannon fire and spurred his horse forward. He arrived just in time to see Marshal Blucher's horse fall and roll over on the poor marshal and render him unconscious.

Immediately recognizing the danger of panic seizing the Prussian army, of the desperate need for the totally demoralized Prussian army to reform and to join the British Army, and the mortal danger menacing western civilization if Napoleon won, Crabtree had the unconscious general placed in a convenient peasant's abode, and changed into his uniform.

It was at this juncture that I was able to confirm the veracity of Lady Hypothermia's diary. It was because, scholars, of my understanding of the "new" military history and the overarching importance of buttons and buttonholes both for individual soldiers and for entire armies. General Blucher's rotund shape presented Crabtree with a major problem. The general's uniform hung on Crabtree like an empty sack of potatoes. Remember that Blucher was 73 years of age and quite obese, whereas Crabtree was only 61 years of age and still cut a fine figure even if a little chubby.

Ever quick-witted and known in London as a lateral thinker, Crabtree recognized that by sewing on a few extra buttons in strategic places, he could utilize the existing buttonholes in the uniform, and make it fit his slightly plump figure admirably. It was no sooner said than done. His familiarity with the German language (alluded to in Lady Hypothermia's diary) enabled Joseph to impersonate Marshal Blucher exhorting and encouraging his troops and thus he was able to prevent panic and demoralization in the Prussian army. Seeing what they assumed to be their leader, the Prussian soldiers rallied around and were inspired to resume the fight. Thus it was that Marshal Blucher, alias Joseph Crabtree, led the Prussian army down to Waterloo and arrived in the nick of time to save the day. As the Duke of Wellington himself said of the battle: "It was a damn fine run thing." What he did not say, of course, was that Joseph Crabtree had saved his bacon.

The rest, of course, is history. Once it was clear that victory was secure, Joseph slipped back to the still unconscious Blucher, took off the uniform, changed back into civvies, and went off to tell Hypothermia of his adventures. She dutifully noted them down in her diary before depositing it, for safety, in that famous cleavage - noted in Professor Salmond's 1994 oration.

Crabtree scholars will be interested to know that further evidence has survived which corroborates the amazing tale contained in Hypothermia's diary. Scholars who have had the

opportunity of seeing Marshall Blucher's uniform in the military museum in Berlin will no doubt have observed on it a veritable plethora of buttons. Those of you who have wondered why General Blucher needed so many buttons will have had your curiosity slaked by this oration with its revealing insight into the role of buttons and buttonholes in the Battle of Waterloo and in the military history of western civilization.

One final note. I feel sure that no scholar present tonight would underestimate the significance of Crabtree's achievement at Waterloo. That battle ended French militarism and the threat of French hegemony over all of Europe and perhaps over all of the world. It ushered in the long era of the Pax Brittanica which lasted for a hundred years with Britain as the world's workshop and the world's banker. The Second Treaty of Paris, signed some months after Waterloo, redrew the map of Europe and consolidated Britain's position: Britain gained Malta, the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, and Ceylon to add to her existing empire which, of course, included the colony of Australia. Political freedom, common sense, and human dignity had triumphed. And all because of the cool head and quick thinking of Joseph Crabtree. After all, without Joseph Crabtree's inspired and heroic intervention in the Battle of Waterloo, Australia might have been part of the French rather than the British empire. The consequences would have been unthinkable. Indeed, this oration might have been given in French, and been heavily influenced by abstract French postmodernist philosophy rather than painstaking, empirical, historical research. Moreover, we might have been dining on frogs' legs, croissants and quiche lorraine instead of roast lamb and boiled potatoes. Worst of all, we might have been toasting the French republic rather than drinking the loyal toast!

Thank you.