

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
2000 Annual Oration
Crabtree Pulls It Off

Max Robinson
16 February 2000

Mr President, Elders and Scholars.

Coming here tonight from the cradle of civilisation, affectionately known within this University as Bulshit Castle, it occurred to me that being a Robinson might have caused some confusion. I am not that beacon light illuminating our path and “Leading the Way” towards an azonic institution but merely an aging scholar whose time has come.

When Hon Secretary Kilbride informed me just over a year ago that a gathering of Elders had a revelation during which they saw my likeness alongside an apparition of the likeness you see behind me I said “Strewth!”. Like many of you, I had little recollection of Foundation Dinners, Orations or even the taxi ride home. To be selected by a panel of pisspots gave me further cause for concern.

Having said that, I gathered the references and citations. Knowing the real Crabtree was not the issue, but how was I to deliver the revelation? I asked Kilbride how best to approach my task. “Simple Max”, he said. He always calls me Max because that is my name. “Max”, he said, “Just stay sober and tell the truth.” Bugger that I thought and almost tossed it in straight off. There was no way I was going to perform unnatural acts in public.

As luck would have it, later in 1999 our revered General Manager retired and I was fortunate enough to be chosen to serve at one of his farewell feasts. I think it was the eighth - late November. I had hoped to be selected to form part of the human carpet of General Staff on which the GM would process from his limousine to the banqueting hail. Unfortunately, my general lumpiness would not have allowed for an even surface.

However, my initial disappointment at not being chosen was swept away when I was given the task of waiting on High Table. Once the tureens of hummingbird tongues were removed and tumbrels of meat carved from the spit roasted oxen pushed away, I summoned up the courage to ask. “Master”, I said, “How should I speak of Crabtree?”. I occupied myself during the silence that followed by wiping goose fat from his chin.

Then, in that quiet caring way which made him so beloved, he held up an imperious hand. Staying the livened accounts clerks, who had just lifted him into the sedan chair in which he was to be shouldered for a final circuit of the dessert trolleys, he gave his advice. “Do as I have done” he said, “Treat all people as human beings, forgive any weakness, and above all, tread gently on the life of any person about whom you are privileged to speak.”

Scholars, let me begin this revelation.

Crabtree was born in Chipping Sodbury at a very early age. He never knew his

Father. It is unclear whether his Mother knew his Father either. She was a woman of unusual appetites but the laws of libel prevent me from speaking about this tonight. However, if Scholars wish to learn more they should send twelve guineas to our Hon Secretary. In return they will be sent, in a plain brown paper wrapping, a monograph I have titled "Making Hay - For Pleasure and Profit". The receipt will reference "Photocopying - Main Library" and can be claimed as a tax deduction. Suffice to say that while Mrs Crabtree sated her sexual gluttony, with its wide and varied diet, Joseph was left alone to play with himself. The child is father to the man, and this talk tonight will reveal how Crabtree was always able to take things into his own hands.

Crabtree was educated at Downside School which is located some twelve miles from Bath in the English West Country. The school was formed by the Benedictine Community of St Gregory the Great and has operated since about 1615. Crabtree entered the prep department St Oliver's House in the school's sesquicentenary year of 1765. He was at that time eleven. At the age of thirteen he entered Powell House and the following year moved to the Senior School and completed his time at Downside as a boarder. It was during his time as a boarder that Crabtree came into his own.

Joseph Crabtree was dormitory champion at One Hand Toss. Scholars who were fortunate enough to board during their school years would understand the need for boys to become self reliant when it comes to bed time activities. Whether playing with another or with one's self, the period between lights out and sleep will be full of satisfying memories. Getting a good night's rest was an important part of a young man's development at Downside and his House motto was - "Early to bed and up with the cock". For those who did not have the advantage of boarding at public school let me explain.

On going to bed, each lad would draw the counterpane over his head and form a tent under the covers supported by his knees. Holding a candle in one hand he would set out on a nightly ritual playing One Hand Toss with the other. There were risks. As things reached a crescendo the dripping of molten wax could burn tender skin. But if a candle was not used, boys risked blindness in the near darkness as they tried to finish things off as quickly as possible.

As the boys progressed through the Senior School and became more familiar, it was sometimes the case that they would play One Hand Toss with each other. Fiddlestick, the House Master, was right about boarding school. Once you chummed up with the other lads they would make sure that you had a fine time.

Success at One Hand Toss, a very popular form of solitaire, was enhanced by having your own set of playing cards, for while this game should rely only on the fall of the cards, it was easier to complete a successful hand if you knew where the next Ace was hidden. A quick shuffle of the unplayed cards could be jerked to a stop as soon as a familiar nick was felt between finger and thumb. So it was that each boy had his own deck and would play away each night.

Although it was against the house rules, kind old Mr Fiddlestick never begrudged the boys their nightly pleasures. He would sometimes peek from his next door room through a knot hole he had opened up for the purpose, and he would feel a sense of rising satisfaction as the lads had a final shuffle under the covers. "Boys will be boys", he used to say to himself.

Crabtree was a popular but less than average student, excelling more on the playing fields than the classroom. And I am not just talking Tug of War or a good pull shot in cricket. Many an athletic carnival ended with Crabtree rightly claiming he was Cock of the Walk. This was not altogether a bad thing. Scholars know that the world does not only require the academically gifted but also needs the involvement of people who interpret rule books and run around in circles. The symbiotic union of teaching and administrative staff at this great institution is a case in point. For Crabtree, there were two things he learnt from sporting competition. First, being able to handle himself in any given situation and second, that pulling together always gave a good result.

Chipping Sodbury is about as far North of Bath as Downside is South, and on finishing school Crabtree returned home. As it happens, Mrs Crabtree had given over his room to a rather tired looking young woman who it became clear had a particularly wide circle of male friends. They would turn up at all hours, sit for a while in the parlour and then speak with her alone in her room. While her regular intercourse with these fellows was a fascination to Crabtree he determined that it would be best if he tossed off the apron strings and struck out to make a life for himself.

Needing a job as well as a place to stay Crabtree took up lodgings in the Bulls Pissel, a lively country inn run by the family Kneetrembler. Kneetremblers were commonplace in the district and most of the locals could cite having at least one Kneetrembler adding a new bud on their family tree. In return for keeping the front bar Crabtree received board, lodgings, a small stipend and perhaps more importantly, time to come to grips with what was important to him, his future.

It was secure employment. For exercise, he did a bit of rabbiting on his days off hunting with a ferret he kept in a hutch at the back of the inn. Crabtree was no mean ferreter and rabbit pie was regularly available at the inn. On one occasion the Landlord set aside a couple of skins and took them to the Chipping Sodbury undertaker who had a little business on the side stuffing animals. I think skills as a mortician lend themselves to this sort of thing. The plan was to present Crabtree with a lasting memento of his successes at the hunt. Being sensitive to Crabtree's views on copulation, he asked that the rabbits not be mounted but just holding hands.

Local farm labourers would sometimes bring manglwurzels to feed the ferret and Crabtree would let them take it from its cage for a bit of exercise. On one occasion, when particularly brisk trade in the bar prevented Joseph from tending the animal, one of the labouring men went looking for a Kneetrembler out the back. Returning, a bit short of breath, he asked Crabtree for a pint of ale and said that he had just given the ferret a run. "This one's on me", said Crabtree, paying for the drink. He certainly appreciated such kindnesses.

There is a holy trust of keeping a confidence owned by those who serve in inns, hotels and bars even to this day. Most Scholars, and certainly all Elders, are grateful of it. It is a trust more sacred than the D Notice. This veil of secrecy is lifted to an art form when the barkeep is slipped a shilling to tell an inquiring Head of Department that not only are you not there, but that you have not been seen in the place for some weeks. I think this is known today as making an arrangement that is commercial-in-confidence.

Nevertheless, I am able to reveal that Crabtree marvelled at the drinking capacity of a group of men who daily occupied a snug in the front bar of the inn. They did not live in Chipping Sodbury but you could set your clock by them. Smack on noon they would arrive and select their ale for the day. And day it would be. No urgent downing of a tankard or two so usual for the men who laboured in the fields but a real session as they settled in for the duration. Membership of the group was fairly fluid although there seemed to be a hardened core of regulars. Crabtree would wonder at their communication skills. As day turned to night they would talk in strange tongues but yet each would understand the other. They were certainly men of great wisdom. Once, after a particularly long afternoon, constant nods of agreement greeted a lengthy dissertation by one of them who was actually speaking in braille.

Crabtree noticed that the group would be there for around thirteen weeks and then miss a couple. He kept records. He found that this cycle repeated three times each year followed by a break which coincided with the long school holidays. Their place in the bar was taken by lemonade drinking families with children waiting on the results of O-levels, A-levels or whatever other letter of the alphabet they had studied that year. Crabtree missed the patronage of those wise men, for while the labourers still took of their daily drink, trade dropped off considerably.

Having established a certain familiarity with the men, Crabtree asked what trade they plied. It turned out that they were Oxford Dons who were trialing a new pedagogical paradigm now known as distance education and flexible delivery. And wise men they were indeed. For rather than stay at Oxford while their students studied at a distance,

these very wise men determined that to allow their students to benefit from campus life, it should be the teacher who distanced himself from the University as much as possible. This practice continues today.

The casual observer might think that this tale of academic innovation was merely a cover for a group of drunken layabouts. However, their bonafides were established when they introduced one of their members as a bookmonger whose single purpose was to ensure that reference material could always be made available without an arduous trip back to college or the local library. If that was life in the fast lane of higher education Crabtree wanted to get on the bus and preferably into the driver's seat. Having made his career choice Crabtree gave in his notice and left the inn.

The journey from Chipping Sodbury to Oxford is about 320 miles as the ferret runs or 60 miles in a straight line. On foot this would take him some five days allowing for a number of stops along the way. The first leg of the journey took him to Little Badminton, just up the road really. It was a place of fond memories where he once enjoyed a bit of shuttlecock with the local lads. Crabtree arranged a final social wack as it was good to keep one's hand in.

The trip would have been uneventful but for the unusually hot summer. Having travelled some twelve miles beyond Tockenham Wick by the middle of the third day, Crabtree was overcome by a particularly powerful thirst. His supplies were almost exhausted. He was out of beer and out of cider. It is true that he still carried with him some water but this was no time to think of cleanliness. Crabtree determined that for the remainder of the journey he would travel in the cool of the evening.

Night travel of course has its own perils, for while walking through the woods which formed Bradbury Hill just to the North of Great Coxwell he became hopelessly lost. Deciding to sit it out till morning, Crabtree dealt out a game of One Hand Toss. Curiously enough this was to be his salvation. He had barely shifted three cards but a voice behind him said "Put the red five on the black six". Isn't that what always happens? Armed then with directions, Crabtree struck out for Oxford and by early the next afternoon was scanning positions available on the Official University Noticeboard.

It soon became clear that there was more to qualification as a university don than being a hail fellow well met back slapping taverner of they type he had followed from Chipping Sodbury. Scholars will recall that Crabtree did not have a particular focus on the academic side of his education. Even his brief interest in Latin roots waned when he discovered it was more to do with syntax than sin. Nevertheless, there was an opening in the Finance Division for the Deputy Registrar, or Secretary of the Chest as the position is more properly known at Oxford.

This was a defining moment for Crabtree. If he could not obtain a teaching position he would devote his life to their service. So it was that Crabtree became a university administrator and embarked on a reform of university management. And for Crabtree, as it still is today, all decisions had to pass the Golden Rule - "Those who have the gold make the rules." Such was his vision, that his star still lights the path which made this University what it is today. Scholars will draw comfort in the knowledge that in the

business of decision making, when it comes to a hard one, administrators still ask “What would Crabtree have done?”

Crabtree’s first reform was to improve conditions for those who travelled daily by coach from digs in surrounding hamlets. The crowded conveyances were not only uncomfortable but a danger to life due to being overloaded. In a single stroke Crabtree arranged for all the administrative staff to be provided with university owned carriages. There was no longer any need for these staff to take up valuable seats on the public conveyances. When there were objections from teaching staff who now had to compete for space to graze their horses, Crabtree immediately banned university owned carriages from using the surrounding fields. He constructed special “Administration Only” stables. There was some off the top funding diverted for this purpose but by locating the stables as close to buildings as possible he was able to preserve the architectural integrity of that ancient institution. Scholars will note that even to this day administrator parking is restricted to limited space alongside their offices.

Crabtree then turned his hand to administrative efficiency. He concluded that if staff in the Chancellery were not to leave the building during working hours they would be more productive. To that end he introduced what is now known as the working lunch. Each day, litters laden with food and drink arrived. These were important meetings indeed for they addressed such high matters of state that no agendas preceded them and no minutes were produced. They were also popular with the academic staff. It is not as though members of faculty were invited, but the practice reduced crowding at pubs in the streets of Oxford. This tradition of senior administrators lunching around meeting tables is a Crabtree legacy which still endures. To this very day there is less jostling for service at Eagle & Child, Three Goats Heads and The Firkin Brewery in Cowley Road.

Scholars will know that the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century was a time of financial uncertainty for universities as wealthy benefactors could no longer be relied upon for endowments. To convince the Curators of the Chest who handled Oxford’s financial affairs that teaching staff were worthy of better pay and conditions, Crabtree arranged for each member of faculty to enter a Performance Management Scheme. Many Scholars here tonight would not be aware that the Engagement Profile in the current Monash University Enterprise Agreement was another Crabtree contribution benefiting university staff today.

However, in its original form the scope was much wider. Not just engagements but marriages and even one night stands could form part of the Annual Portfolio. “Propose or Perish” became the catchphrase of the day. Some wags even tried to get credit for a bit of slap and tickle in the common room. It was also a time when junior tutors benefited from their youth. They were capable of obtaining several refereed performances in the one night. Elders would appreciate that the scheme was not universally popular in the senior academic ranks for when it comes to doing the hard yards, youth is wasted on the young.

I have reached the end of my revelation but wish to share with you a final shard of Crabtree’s life. If you pass through the quadrangle of Christ Church, which is both a college of Oxford University and the Oxford Cathedral, there is a reflection pool and fountain known as Mercury. Around the sides of the pool you will be able to read a

quotation from the Registrar's farewell address the day Crabtree retired from Oxford. It is difficult to encapsulate a life of such service in few words. As a Scholar whose root has been in the Administration of this University for so many years, you will forgive me if I become a little misty eyed. It reads:

“When Joseph Crabtree was asked to stand up and be counted, he always pulled it off not for his own satisfaction, but for the benefit of the whole University.”

Mr President, Elders and Scholars - I thank you.

References:

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<http://www.davidcrabtree.com/>

Our Crabtree Family
<http://www.geocities.com/~osburn/crabtree.html>

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