

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
2002 Annual Oration
Crabtree in the Colonies: The Emerging Truth

Paul Rodan
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Mr President, Elders and Scholars, it is a privilege to stand here before you tonight as the Orator for the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation for 2002. As well as a privilege and an honour, it is of course, an escape. Like those who have come before me, I have concluded that twenty five minutes or so up here is infinitely preferable to being in even remote proximity to Elder McGrath, who insists on reminding all those within earshot that he was the greatest orator of them all. Indeed, he combines several of the qualities of Cicero, Mohammed Au and Gough Whitlam in a unique fashion.

But, enough of him. As scholars would be aware, the Crabtree Oration demands the finest traditions and practices of scholarship, in both orator and audience. These are taxing demands and, it is for this reason that the Orator has a full twelve months to prepare his remarks. Traditionally, at least eleven of those months are spent in quiet contemplation and reflection, often in establishments such as this one, pondering the essentials of Crabtree's life and wondering what particular aspect should be imparted to a learned audience such as this. Experience has always suggested that the earlier in the oration that such a message is conveyed to scholars, the better. This has now been confirmed scientifically. Recent research, jointly undertaken by Monash's Medical Faculty and its Centre for Viticulture, demonstrates a clear negative correlation between scholars' comprehension and the lateness of the hour. This is consistent with my own findings, based on interviews after the three most recent orations when nine out of ten scholars, asked to respond to a survey, couldn't.

I observed a moment ago that necessary preliminary research for a Crabtree oration can fruitfully be undertaken in establishments such as this. Unfortunately, recent developments provide cause for grave concern and suggest that this essential of traditional scholarship is under serious threat. The more widely read of Scholars here tonight will be aware that, at certain locations which purport to be centres of scholarship and learning, institutions such as this club are struggling or even closing their doors. It appears, and I find this almost impossible to believe, that so-called learned scholars are abandoning those habits so critical to scholarship because they are "too busy". What a state the academy has reached when such statements can be made and not instantly treated as satirical. As Crabtree himself once observed, in a remark borrowed from Samuel Johnson, "When a man is too busy for the Club, he is too busy for life".

In order to reverse this trend, which threatens all true scholarship and potentially even the future of these orations, I now call on the Vice-Chancellor of Monash

University (a man whose record of scholarship requires no elaboration from me) to lead a delegation of vice-chancellors to the Commonwealth government, demanding urgent grants for the restoration of campus-based clubs to their necessary role in promoting rigorous and disciplined scholarship. The new Education Minister, unlike his drab colourless predecessor, looks like a man after Crabtree's own heart and as one seeking to make an early impact, he should find this proposal appealing. I propose that at each club, a version of loyalty points be instituted for those making use of the facilities and that these points be convertible into study leave credits. At each institution, the member acquiring the greatest number of points in a calendar year should be awarded a scholarship to visit key sites in Joseph Crabtree's life. Naturally enough, this award would be known as the Crabtree Scholarship.

As a fall-back strategy, lest the new Minister prove as impervious to reason as his discredited predecessor, I suggest that disciples of Crabtree seek, within their own institutions, some form of local grant, many of which are dispensed under the wonderfully tautological title of "new initiatives". This is a sound approach, since old initiatives should always be resisted.

I turn now to what twelve months patient, and often sober, research has revealed to me about Joseph Crabtree. It will be obvious to learned scholars, familiar with the growing volume of literature in this field, that Crabtree led a rich and varied life, he was indeed ubiquitous. That, of course, is the more charitable interpretation, an error of charity into which gentle and honest scholars may fall. The more startling and more alarming conclusion, but one for which the body of evidence is growing, is that during parts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an organised band of Crabtree impersonators roamed parts of the known world (and possibly parts of the unknown). Their motives can only be guessed at, and the whole phenomenon calls for detailed investigation by a future orator, and perhaps even the creation of a Cooperative Research Centre. The results of this fraud are more clear- the diversion and misleading of previous orators, decent people acting in good faith, but who, alas, may now need to make some tactful adjustments to their CVs.

A previous orator (Robinson (or Robinson the Greater, as he is known in these parts), 2000] has traced the story of Crabtree's youthful infatuation with university administration, a passion he combined with onanism, although for some in our institutions today, the connection is necessarily seen as tautological. Ultimately, however, administration, while teaching Crabtree some useful skills, could not satisfy a young man increasingly attracted to politics and entrepreneurship, a combination which while not unusual now, was less common in the second half of the eighteenth century. Dissatisfied with opportunities in England, and eager to test himself in a younger, more challenging environment, he decided to sail to the American Colonies, or more specifically for one of them in the first instance, the one where the ship was headed, Massachusetts.

This was no luxury cruise for Crabtree. Of modest means at the time, he was

unable to afford the conventional fare and could only purchase a standby ticket with one of the fledgling budget operators, *Wench*, run by a gap-toothed, fun-loving entrepreneur of the day, Sir Fancy Branson. At the last minute, one of the passengers, still drunk from a farewell party the night before, fell overboard and effected a more permanent farewell, paving the way for Crabtree to make his way to the new world. The rest, as will be seen, is history.

Crabtree arrived in Boston in December 1774. He landed in a town seething with what would later be seen as revolutionary fervour, but which seemed at the time as just “the grog talking”, even if a few shots had already been fired in anger. Although only twenty, Crabtree was a man of the world, and a man who needed to make money quickly. With the strong military presence in the area, Crabtree hit upon a business which the history of humanity indicated, would be sure to turn a profit. Securing some premises not far from Boston Harbour, Crabtree opened a brothel.

Crabtree’s customers were predominantly British soldiers and American-born colonists, along with a small band of French military personnel. Given the tension in the air, Crabtree decided on a segregated approach to the operations of the brothel. Put simply, the three groupings would be accommodated in different areas of the establishment, so that, ideally their paths would not cross and hostile exchanges would be avoided.

With his emerging entrepreneurial talents, it was not surprising that Crabtree was soon turning a very handsome profit and virtually having to turn away customers. Thus, he was obliged to impose strict time limits on the clients and consider innovative ways to maximise turnover, if you will excuse the phrase. One such innovation was orgy night, every Friday, the precise details of which have been lost to history, but it is my expectation that an audience of this nature will quickly grasp the essentials.

The key revenue-related feature of orgy night was that it allowed Crabtree several “sittings” per night, although “sittings” seems an inadequate description of the geometry. However, lest clients overstay their welcome and prove reluctant to vacate, Crabtree hired a young Bostonian named Paul Revere to go from room to room, urging haste, and reminding patrons that there was a time limit: this was no carnal bottomless cup. Once a particular national group had concluded their pleasantries, it fell to Revere to announce this fact to Crabtree, who could then organise the admission of the next group of customers from those queuing in the street below. It gives me no pleasure to reinforce national stereotypes, but the historical reality is that, invariably, Revere’s first call, each Friday night, was “The British are coming, the British are coming.” It is one of history’s ironies that Paul Revere’s delivery of those lines, some months later, in a totally different context, were to be more remembered and celebrated than the circumstances in which he first uttered them.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some conspiracy of censorship was at work here. The image of Boston as a pre-revolutionary den of vice would not serve well

those trying to project the image of God-fearing colonists pushed to the limits of endurance by a tyrannical monarch and his punitive taxation policies. As is often the case, shocking as it will be to an audience of impeccably honourable scholars such as this, records were destroyed and loose lips silenced. It was only by means of extensive research and a close examination of documentation which escaped the censor's scissors and flame, that I was able to put this part of the Crabtree story together.

Crabtree knew that one of the first rules of business was to diversify, but he was astute enough to focus on those goods and services where demand was constant. A previous scholar (McGrath, 1992) has traced Crabtree's links with the East India Company and food, but I can now reveal that Crabtree was involved in another side of the food business. Again, as with his brothel, he pitched his business at a military clientele, now convinced that hostilities were inevitable and thus, that soldiers would constitute a ready market. Eager to escape the tensions of Boston, Crabtree opened a baked bean establishment in the small town of Lexington, not far from Boston, and his product quickly became standard fare in the region.

On 18 April 1775, when a group of armed colonists confronted British troops who were seeking to confiscate rebel-held munitions in the area, the Americans had already breakfasted, heartily, on Crabtree's baked beans. Nature, not unexpectedly, took its course and in the early morning mist, with visibility limited, sounds very much like shots were heard on Lexington Common. Panicking in the imperfect light, the British troops were convinced that they were being fired upon and, as they saw it, returned fire. Historians have long debated the question of who fired the first shot, but it is a prosaic reality that the "shot heard round the world", which effectively commenced the hostilities of the American War of Independence, was in fact, not a shot at all. Thus, Crabtree's connection with the American Revolution was a close and intimate one. Incidentally, as scholars of modern film will be aware, the scene at Lexington was rather shamelessly plagiarised, in part at least, by Mel Brooks in his 1977 classic *Blazing Saddles*.

For the duration of the revolutionary war, Crabtree kept what would now be called a low profile, continuing to sell beans to both sides, but ever the pragmatist, leaning more towards the colonist side as the trend of the conflict became apparent. It is thought that the term "bean counter" had its origins in Crabtree's shrewd and innovative accounting methods while running this 'business'.

After the cessation of hostilities, Crabtree found himself in a position to influence history yet again. While exploring business possibilities in Philadelphia, without great success, he heard that the Constitutional Convention was in need of a record keeper/minute secretary and, as a former tertiary administrator, this was a craft that Crabtree knew well. He applied for the job and got it, quickly finding himself amongst that phalanx of American founders whose visages would later grace bills of various denominations.

The work was tedious and not particularly well rewarded. Discussion dragged on about what particular rights should be added as amendments to the constitution and in the hot Philadelphia summer, concentration was not easy. This was as true for the founders as for Crabtree and on one particularly sweltering day, James Madison saw fit to remove his jacket and roll up his sleeves, a breach of decorum that had the other delegates in uproar. A robust exchange ensued, with Madison, reaching the heights of oratory and insisting that, given the extreme temperature, he had the right to “bare arms”.

Unfortunately (for both history and sanity), at around this point, Crabtree had dozed off and thus, ceased to take the minutes. Prior to his slumber, he had recorded an observation about the need for a well-armed militia. Upon waking, aroused by the commotion, he heard Madison make reference to the right to bare arms, but, unaware that he, Crabtree, had been dozing, assumed one thing flowed from the other. Thus was born what became known as the second amendment to the United States constitution, viz

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Anyone who has ever written minutes knows that it is the height of arrogance to assume that they will be read by the members of the body in question: they rarely are. The delegates in Philadelphia were no exception and the words, as erroneously transcribed by Crabtree, were confirmed at the subsequent meeting.

By the time some of the more sober and thoughtful delegates realised what had happened, it was too late. For, one thing, the president of the local newly formed National Rifle Association, Hercules Heston, made it clear that those who would try to reverse the decision, as recorded, would be in big trouble. Moreover, focus group research, as commissioned by the founders, was revealing that far from being seen as insane (as it would come to be regarded by the rest of the civilised world), the ready access to weapons, soon to be guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, was going down a treat with the newly independent Americans who saw a great deal of attraction in being able to settle disputes through, as one put it “shooting the crap out of people”. To this day, meetings of the NRA commence with a toast to Crabtree. It was not his finest hour and it is no surprise that this role in history has remained unexposed until this evening.

Upset by this turn of events and his dubious contribution as a minute-taker, Crabtree retreated into hermit-like isolation and disappeared from the radar screen of American public life for over a decade. Finally, he decided that his time in this now ex-British colony was running out. He had left his mark, for better and worse, on American history, but increasingly, his thoughts were turning to the even newer world, namely Australia, or more accurately at that time, the colony of New South Wales. Using his frequent sailor points, he sailed for Sydney, by that well known and most popular of routes, circuitous, and arrived in 1800.

In his heart, Crabtree knew he was making the right move. He was British to his bootstraps and New South Wales was a British colony. Moreover, he was no puritan and the dominance of Puritanism within American Culture worried him. By contrast, there was much to be said for a colony whose tourist slogans, had such things existed in the early nineteenth century, would surely have made prominent use of “Rum, Sodomy and the Lash”, or RSL as the abbreviation of the day had it. In passing, I might observe that the first Australian PhD in the field of Tourism Studies owed much to that RSL tradition.

Almost nothing is known of Crabtree’s activities in the years between 1800 and 1806, although it is alleged that several History Honours theses at the University of Sydney were later devoted to this much under-researched topic. Sadly, my most energetic efforts failed to confirm or deny this, since it appears that some of that distinguished university’s earliest records were destroyed in a fire in quite recent times, apparently when a burning in effigy of their beloved then chancellor, Dame Leonie Kramer, got out of hand. In the absence of hard evidence, one can only speculate that given his extraordinary entrepreneurial talents and experience, Crabtree was able to make a living from the apparently insatiable demand for the pleasures of the flesh in the new colony and, given the principles of RSL, probably across a wider canvass than had been the case in America.

In 1806, New South Wales obtained the services of a new governor for the colony, the controversial William Bligh. Born in 1754, Bligh was a contemporary of Crabtree who, as all scholars would be aware, was born that same year. But, the connections do not end there, for my research has revealed that their paths had crossed in their youth. Quite simply, they fought over that most traditional of issues, a woman. Little is known of the details of the conflict, but available evidence suggests that the young woman in question, Elspeth Thistlethwaite, after initially pledging her eternal love for Joseph Crabtree, was soon thereafter swept off her feet by the dashing, albeit short, figure, in naval uniform, of midshipman William Bligh.

The conflict between Crabtree and Bligh was brief, but violent. It was not quite pistols at dawn, more a case of rapiers at morning tea. In the course of the swift exchange, Crabtree managed, more from luck than skill, to nick Bligh’s cheek, leaving a scar which was subsequently explained with an implausible story involving Bligh’s father and a horse. This version was accepted by historians and is even repeated in Manning Clark’s first volume (Clark, 1992: 210), suggesting that Clark was indeed under the influence of the Russians or some other equally undesirable group. It is somewhat surprising that Peter Ryan did not include this conspiracy to cover-up the facts in his litany of charges against Clark.

But, I digress. Crabtree didn’t, he egressed from the duel, beating a hasty retreat when several of Bligh’s naval colleagues appeared, eager to make less level the playing field on which their man was taking a beating. In all probability, Crabtree’s rejection by Elspeth played a critical role in his decision to head for America.

For Bligh's part, his romantic victory was short-lived. Elspeth soon ditched him as well, apparently to pursue an academic career in what would later become known as speech therapy. Bligh and Crabtree retained a hatred for each other which would survive the years. They were opposites in most senses, sharing only a history of similar treatment at the hands of Elspeth Thistlethwaite and an occasional reflection on how much more difficult courting her would have been had either of them suffered from a lisp.

Each man turned fifty-two in the year of Bligh's arrival in New South Wales. Crabtree was disgusted by the appointment of Bligh and envious of the status which his rival had attained. Bligh may have been governor, but was wary of what his erstwhile rival might get up to in order to undermine him. The stage was set for a dramatic showdown.

Unfortunately, neither time nor the available supplies of liquor in this region allow for a full account of the ensuing conflict, although those interested in more detail are referred to a variety of historical sources listed in the published version of this oration.

In summary, it is well known that Bligh's fall from grace in New South Wales was a rapid one. What is less well known is the role that Crabtree played in Bligh's undoing, for while he is not mentioned specifically in the relevant texts, he was a key adviser to the governor's nemeses, Johnston and Macarthur, in their campaign of opposition.

By the time Bligh was forced from office, Crabtree was fifty three years old. While not an old man, he had had his fill of politics and intrigue and was keen to find an activity which would be both satisfying and rewarding, but less stressful. More than most, Crabtree subscribed to the motto *In Vino Veritas*. Indeed, over the years he had managed to discover a lot more than mere veritas in the vino, a feature which persists in the traditions of the Crabtree Foundation to this very day, nay to this very evening. Using the proceeds from some creative consultancy work with elements of the rum trade, Crabtree procured property in the Parramatta area and established what was, in fact, Australia's first vineyard.

The more historically minded and alert amongst you (an admittedly implausible combination of qualities at this stage of the evening) will seek to correct me, citing various other candidates for the honour.

But, if you were to so correct me, you would be, to use the formal academic term, "wrong". Crabtree was the first Australian vigneron, but what has confused subsequent historians and alcoholics (and I apologise for any element of tautology) is that at some stage, which cannot be dated precisely, he could not resist the temptation of new horizons and transferred his wine-growing and wine-making activities to the new colony of South Australia. His departure made it easier for those who came after him in New

South Wales to claim that they, and not he, were the plonk pioneers of the colony.

But, tonight I have corrected that error and have restored Crabtree to his rightful place in this part of Australian history. And, uniquely amongst Crabtree orators, I am able to produce hard evidence. I now table before you a bottle of Crabtree wine, from South Australia, produced by the loyal and hard-working descendants of the man whose memory and achievements we celebrate tonight. Scholars may examine, but not partake of it after this oration.

Elders and scholars, this concludes the details of what I have been able to establish about Crabtree's contribution to life in the early stages of white settlement in Australia and in its more advanced stages in America. While Crabtree study groups have been established in the US, to explore his role in that nation's history, no such initiatives, new or old, have been forthcoming in Australia. Any reinvigoration of the study of Australian history, something long overdue in our schools and universities, must take account of the great man's role and I am confident that in this most worthy of tasks, I can count on your committed, vigorous and occasionally sober support.

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