

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
2003 Annual Oration
How Crabtree Created Camembert

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Mr President, elders and scholars, have I got news for you, as Field Marshal Paulus said to Hitler after the Russians took back Stalingrad. In a year of arduous investigations I have uncovered aspects of Joseph Crabtree's life and work that astound even me, a hardbitten reporter who formerly chased ambulances to the scenes of nasty accidents. I commend my revelations to you.

You will, I hope, forgive my academic deficiencies, for I am but a humble and simple journalist. Some, indeed, among us tonight, see me as infinitely more simple than humble. From my humility, however, I look back on that great raft of Crabtree scholarship – like Gericault's Medusa – with envy, respect and admiration rather than as an entity about to sink. Such rigour! Such sources! Not a line anywhere left unsubstantiated by the most disciplined pursuit after superlative, testable, primary evidence.

Was I to quake in the face of such intellectual horsepower? Would my efforts, indeed, be consigned to the shadows of Crabtree scholarship, seen to be not up to enough scratch, as they say, to sit with the great work already achieved? In short, called on to make my contribution, would I run to water? No, I'd run to France. I decided, a man had to do only what he could, and I fell back on the old-fashioned skills of the investigative reporter, hoping to crack a big one. And big it has been.

My research, which I have the greatest of pleasure in outlining this evening, has revealed, elders and scholars, that Joseph Crabtree was fundamental to Western gastronomy. That an Englishman might be so influential in matters of the palate is surprise enough. But for this person to be Crabtree – poet, criminologist, engineer, onomast, man of the mind – is truly sensational.

Being close to France and visiting my in-laws there regularly, I have naturally been fascinated to know more about our Master's early Gallic sojourns – from his first visit in 1783 to the false report of his death in the Morning Post on the third of October 1800. It seems increasingly, let me add, that these were the years that made our Joseph, that fertilised the blooming choirboy so beloved of the curate of Chipping Sodbury, that gave reason to the one-man front de refus that was Joseph Crabtree at Oxford until his sending down, that let off the leash the mature winshipper and poet who penned the immortal Ode to Claret. But I have learned that there were more to these years than can be imagined.

I am indebted to Elder the late Dr Leonard Tancock, who taught French long ago at University College London and presented the sublime 1960 oration Crabtree in France

1791-1800. It was Tancock who flashed a blinding light on Crabtree's "années perdues" as some have called them. He, it was, who blushing visited the Chateau of Coppet on Lake Geneva to recline semi-recumbently in the chambers of that clever woman Madame de Stael, who was so instrumental to Joseph — and he reciprocated, of course, being instrumental in her. There, Tancock discovered Crabtree's Pastoral under the hand of Joseph de la Pommeraye. But an infinitely more important revelation was his uncovering of the nature of Joseph's friendship with Anna Louis de Stael-Holstein, arguably the most important female mind of the revolutionary years, a woman not only said to be very bright but also "une vraie salope", which might be liberally translated as a "real little goer". Tancock discovered that Crabtree was virtually a foundling, sheltering on Madame de Stael's doorstep in 1792 after having been caught "sans culotte" by a jealous husband. The expression "sans culottes", of course, went into the language to mean a kind of political incorrectness manifest most famously in our times by Malcolm Fraser.

Anna took him in, instantly falling under his persuasions, not to mention his well-known cudgel. We are all aware that Joseph was, not for nothing, known as "Cuckoo Joe" in Chipping Sodbury. But most importantly, Tancock showed that part of Joseph's appeal lay in his phenomenal similarities to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, brilliant cleric, liberal, politician, diplomat and Anna's first root. Not only were Crabtree and Talleyrand born in the same year, but they shared the same dignified physiognomy. Tancock shows admirable delicacy in dealing with Joseph's precise role in Anna's household. We need only know that he entered it ignorant of French and left it capable of scribbling stunning Gallic couplets. He became, it seems, a student "à l'oreiller" or, on the pillow, as the French say. And when Talleyrand wasn't about, as Tancock puts it, Joseph must have "repaid his hostess's kindness by comforting her in her lonely vigils during short and unavoidable... absences of her gentlemen friends".

What I have discovered takes this matter even further. I can baldly state tonight that, because of their likenesses, their identical ages, their predilections for things of the mind — poetry, literature and young women — Talleyrand and Crabtree became friends. Not a hint of jealousy was held by one for the other, even though they were interchangeable, so to speak, between the sheets. How do I know? Let me come to that later.

Through Talleyrand, Crabtree met the formidable magistrate and gourmand Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, whose book the *Physiologie du Gout* is seen to be the Bible of gastronomers. In those days, Brillat was decades off writing his tome, but we do know that he liked his food and drink and had very clear and refined views about them. I offer a brief deviation from my main thrust, recalling Brillat's famous anecdote — "Eggs in Juice", number two of the "Variétés" in *Physiologie* — about the English tourists in a small hotel in Melun. Brillat had arrived by stage coach from Paris with two female friends. The inn had no food other than fresh eggs, and Brillat and his companions wanted lunch. Brillat spied a roast of lamb turning on a spit in the fireplace. It belonged to a group of Englishmen who were busy getting sozzled in a corner. Brillat secretly stabbed the roast with his pocket knife and collected the juice that seeped from it, scrambling eggs in it to make a royal repast. The English lunched on dry mutton.

Several years ago now when I lived for ten months near Melun I checked the records of that hotel, the Relais de la Poste. It showed that a Joseph de la Pommeraye did indeed

spend three nights at the hotel among some “assorted English”, as the ledger put it, at about the time that Brillat mentions. But there is no record of complaints about tough legs of lamb or empty larders. By then Crabtree and Brillat were friends, and I suspect Joseph noticed a situation similar to that which Brillat recounts and passed it on to him long before he made a gastro-anecdote of it. It was certainly not in Crabtree’s character to be robbed of his joint’s juiciness, nor of Brillat’s to steal goodness from others.

To continue my narrative proper I need briefly remind you that France in that era was not just a hotbed of political clubs and accelerating guillotine blades. If you had any kind of political leanings or official responsibilities that failed to match whichever team was in power, France was simply not a nice place to be... You did what the king lost his head trying to do. You fled. It was a pursuit like yoga or martial arts these days – healthy and fashionable. Everybody did it, la mode to escape being so prominent – refugees so common – that fleeing France became the theme of popular novels in French and English from Dickens to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

You would think that the most direct way to England might have been the safest. Not so. One of the most popular coach routes took a long shallow arc to the west of Paris, stopping at Versailles, where several nobles would invariably get on, through Dreux and Argentan before swinging north to the great city of Caen, from which many barques without bite would ferry their human cargo of refugees down the river Orne and across La Manche to the great southern English cities of Portsmouth and Bournemouth. A word of caution. Be very careful how you say Caen. It is very close to “con”, which in French is a part of the female anatomy. In short, for non-francophones it’s a c— of a word to pronounce.

In those richly milked Normandy prairies, gastronomy was rife, especially cheese-eating, and by lunch on your second day out of Paris, provided your horses were lively, you could make Argentan. So it was at Argentan that I needed to refine my investigations, especially as I had found in official French archives while a student in Paris twenty years ago a clue presaging a real breakthrough. I used to frequent the Bibliothèque Nationale at its old rue de Richelieu address and had noticed the official government library’s inexcusable and almost total disregard for things gastronomic. Even today you may tap up its website and find no rubric of gastronomy, taste, palate or food. In official France! It’s a shame. By being there, walking in the library’s door, though, I eventually discovered in a dusty corner of the basement a shallow drawer marked “Sujets Insolites” or unusual subjects. I drew it open to discover subfiles, one of them entitled Talleyrand, dash, nouveau fromage, dash, Brillat, dash, de la Pommeraye. There followed a date – 11th of September 1792 – and the invitation to pursue further records under “Relais” at the town hall of Argentan.

Only last October I finally got to Argentan, one of those stifling minor French towns with a one-star church, two post offices, a little-used railway station, a Citroen garage and a five-star patisserie. Like so many Normandy towns, it looks as relevant as the many cowpats in the pastures beyond its crumbling walls. To the town hall I went, and after much bureaucratic bumbling, which was a story in itself, I tracked down the files marked

“Relais” and an entry for 11th of September 1792. The “relais” or staging post on that particular day of that particular year was an inn called Le Pierwige, and at the luncheon table were recorded the sires Talleyrand, Brillat-Savarin and de la Pommeraye accompanied by Madame de Stael-Holstein. They ate wood pigeons in the style “caprice d’ève” for main course and downed a clever little Saumur red with them. But I was more interested in the cheese. A certain Marie Harel from nearby Vimoutiers had brought her new cheese “with a white mould” in quotes for the delectation of the convives. Monsieur Brillat pronounced it “bon” with much promise but somewhat deficient in flavour, the sire Talleyrand did not eat cheese on account of his allergy to late-summer milk from cows grazing on wilting grasses, and Madame de Stael-Holstein was seen and not heard on the matter, as even the noblest of women were often wont to do in those days when it came to gastronomy.

We know that next day in Caen, Talleyrand was not so much fleeing France as being conveniently sent to Britain – as ambassador. Brillat tried to leave with him, but balked at the barque, realising its bite would be fatal – if he left France he would never eat again and die of starvation. (In fact he emigrated the following year, first to Switzerland.) And what was our Crabtree – de la Pommeraye – doing? He was seeing them off, no doubt reassuring Talleyrand that he would do everything required by Anna in his absence. The best-laid plans, though, go often awry, and we know that Anna de Stael left Paris two months later. She took up again with Talleyrand when they both returned to France five years later. With the departure of de Stael, was then our Crabtree at a loose end? Did he have a loose end?

To summarise, we know that he was on the best of terms with Talleyrand, Brillat and de Stael, a trio of the most important Frenchpersons in the most climactic of Gallic times. But was that all there was of the “années perdues”? Happily, no.

I flicked through the “Relais” notes for the months following September 11, 1792. Names at the Pierwige’s luncheon table tumbled at me. The aristocracy of France, it seemed, bestrode those pages and, as often as not, so did their companion, de la Pommeraye. But I smelled a rat, if not a strong cheese, because each time that Pommeraye appeared the lunch was regaled with a more refined version of Marie Harel’s cheese. Said to be a comely lass of 31 with squelching hips and pumpkin breasts, she would bring the cheese personally to table, talk to the gathering about its quality, its fermentation and maturation times, its acidity levels and keeping qualities. For those who wanted to know, she would provide tasting notes, a profile of the cheese according to the four basic flavours – salt, sour, sweet and bitter – and even name the cows whose milk went into the product. In short, she carried on as boringly as one of those fucking winemakers at a promotional dinner. All the while, I have it on good authority, Joseph was looking at her breasts.

Even smaller than Argentan, Vimoutiers has no church of note, one post office and a lovely Citroen garage. It was on the banks of the Viette river just a few kilometres outside town, that Marie Harel had her home. We know this because in the Musée de Fromage in Vimoutiers, a converted urinoir in the middle of town, there is a small glass

case containing a tiny diary entitled *Mes Jours à la Louche* and signed M. Harel. What a document! The reference to the “louche”, by the way, is to a ladle with which the best milk must be transferred to its mould to make the best cheese. After several hours of negotiating, I managed to get the curator of the museum – he owned the Citroen garage – to unlock the glass cabinet and confide in me Marie’s diary. I ravaged the pages, looking for clues of a Crabtree association.

And there they were! Not just one, but two, three, many... Page after page reflected what was clearly a deep affection between Joseph and Marie, nay, a devotion. Many entries reported that Joseph, whom Marie nicknamed “mon petit taureau”, my little bull, stayed overnight in Marie’s hut on the banks of the Viette. Joseph called Marie “my wetnurse”.

But the Harel diary is riddled with self-doubt, with anxiety, with a seemingly never-ending search for a sublime edge to her funny little cheese with the white mould that Brillat-Savarin had found so promising. For Harel, it was clearly still a work in progress, not yet a finished product, not so fine as she could yet make it. She must pay more attention to fermentation times, she repeatedly urged herself in these pages. The curds needed more attentive crushing. She admonished herself for not being able to get it right, for not being able to produce the perfect cheese. The secret to ultimate success would lie in control of her procedures. Super-control. She would persist. She would succeed.

And then, on the 27th of April 1793, the triumphant entry, “Ca y est!!” – I’ve done it. Cryptically, the entry continued that – let me translate as well as I may – “restless, my little bull was overcome three nights ago and misjudged his ardour into the curds. After, we both fell in. Now the cheese is magnifique”... a word that needs no translating.

The bull misjudging his ardour into the curds? Both falling in? I jabbed the little journal into my jeans and headed off for the banks of the Viette. With the help of a few stumbling peasants, I located what was left of Marie’s shack. No bigger than a suburban backyard shed, the frame for its thatched roof lay – a rotting trellis – in the dung-spotted Normandy pasture. Few of the oak slabs that formed the walls were left but enough remained to make out a perimeter. And there, occupying half of the shack was an enormous tub about twice the size of a normal bath constructed from hardwood slabs and chipped stone made tight by some form of natural grouting. Alongside it was a flattened space where once could have fitted only a bed. So, bed and fermenting vat were side-by-side. The pieces fell into place. On the night of the 24th of April 1793, the Cudgel of Chipping Sodbury, excitedly missed his mark, straying into the curds. In eagerness to rectify his error, our Joseph must have accelerated his enthusiasm for Marie, and her for him, and they both tumbled into the fermenting cheese.

We know that cheese is a living thing, that the best cheeses are made with raw unpasteurised milk and ladled by hand into their moulds. The best cheeses are all earth, all the fruit of human endeavour at its most raw, passionate and unbridled. You can taste these things in a good cheese. I suspect that Joseph and Marie were both stark naked when they tumbled into the vat. We can only guess at the quantity and variety of precious

bodily fluids, organisms, moulds on, in and around them when they took that milky bath. Not to mention the replication in the curds already of Joseph's matter.

We know also that within weeks, Marie was the toast of Normandy. In honour of the hamlet nearest her hut, a place of three houses with no church, no post office, no little-used railway station and not even a small Citroen garage, Marie Harel named her cheese camembert. The mother mould used in all camemberts from that day to this is called *Penicillium camemberti*. In honour of Crabtree's contribution some thought should be given, in my view, to modifying the germ's name to *Penicillium camemberti-pommeraye*.

White-mould cheeses are these days ubiquitous. In most cases, the boxes they come in are tastier than the cheese. Real camembert, though, made from raw milk and ladled by hand into its moulds, is the king of cheeses. It is rich, creamy, blooming with a dense complexity of bucolic and undefinable savours. Some believe it exudes a slight whiff of the feet of God himself. We know differently. We can be sure that whenever we eat a white-mould cheese – and especially a great camembert – that we are consuming a little part of Joseph Crabtree himself, participating in a kind of gastro-transubstantiation that resulted from an accident of enthusiastic and honest passion that had no expectations of greatness.

Lord Kenneth Clark said of the civilising quotient of civilisation, "There it is. You can't deny it". There's no denying camembert nor Joseph Crabtree's part in its creation.

And let us, finally, never forget the last words of Gaff, the cynical but caring cop, in the final scenes of *Bladerunner*, that marvellous movie. Harrison Ford as the hero, Deckard, you might remember, succeeds in his job of assassinating several out-of-control and quite nasty replicants in human form. But, in the process, he falls in love with Rachel, a good replicant, we may assume. Now, replicants usually die within four years. And Gaff, in congratulating Deckard on a job well done, while commiserating with him on the likely brevity of his romance with Rachel, says, "It's too bad she won't live. But, then again, who does?" I'd say Joseph Crabtree does. He is alive and well in camembert.