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CRABTREE AND THE EASTERN BLOC

(CRABTREE ORATION, 2007)

For more than a half century, scholars in at least three countries have been tracing, analysing and unearthing the extraordinary range of activities, ideas and achievements of that remarkable polymath, that combination of Leonardo and Zelig, the great Joseph Crabtree, to honour whose memory we are gathered here tonight. In this year 2-007 it is fitting that we should consider his remarkable activities in the Eastern bloc, more particularly in Russia. A survey of the doings of the 007 of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, let us hope, should help to strengthen the bonds of Crabtree scholarship in the wider world.

The collapse of Communism in Europe and, before that, the advent of *glasnost* (which may be translated as “an acute shortage of barbed wire”) have opened up new possibilities in investigating the activities of Joseph Crabtree, secret agent. I was fortunate enough to be able to undertake some research in Russia at that time but I must here record my indebtedness to my associate, Dr. Natalya Anatolyevna Stolichnaya, who embodies – and, to my delight, dispenses – the spirit of true scholarly collaboration. She has convinced me that the old Marxist shibboleths of class struggle have much less appeal than the prospect of an evening’s glass struggle.

As we proceeded to booze, we broke several taboos. We were aware that access to archives on *Soviet* history was often difficult and a matter of caprice, but found that some aspects of Russia’s pre-Soviet past, even its distant past, also remained politically sensitive. Not even the writings of Karl Marx himself, such as

those on Russian expansionism, were exempt from suppression. In such a climate, information on Crabtree's activities in the rude and barbarous kingdom of Russia, even in its more superficially Westernised Petersburg variant, would not be easy to obtain. It was here that Dr. Stolichnaya came to my aid.

As we strolled through the city's Summer Garden one afternoon, I espied a rather gnarled, asymmetrical and obviously ancient tree in one of its beds, whose shape and condition led me to think it a victim of the terrible Northern climate. Closer inspection revealed a small plaque with the inscription *Dikaya Yablonya*. This *Yablonya so dikaya* made me shout "Eureka!", for this, I realised, was a crabtree, and not just a run of the mill crabtree (an oxymoron if ever there were one), but very likely the then tender plant brought to Russia long ago by none other than Peter the Great, creator of that Venice of the North.

Some five years before the foundation of his eponymous northern capital, Peter had undertaken a lengthy "Grand Embassy" to Western Europe in an attempt to acquire the skills and the experts needed to modernise, though by no means to liberalise, his country. With a retinue including six pages, four dwarves, five trumpeters, musicians, a pastor, physicians and a company of well-equipped soldiers, Peter, who was over two metres tall, sought to travel incognito and avoid attracting too much attention to himself. During his stay in England he rented a house in Deptford from the English diarist John Evelyn, whose servant wrote to his master: "There is a house full of people, and right nasty." According to Christopher Wren, Peter and his friends caused damage worth 150 pounds, an enormous sum in those days. Being principally concerned with Evelyn's house and contents, however, Sir Christopher omitted to take full note of the depredations to the garden, from which several plants, shrubs and seedlings were removed. These were taken, along with skills, technical experts and inventions, back to Russia in Peter's quest to achieve at least some emulation of the West and enhance his new capital. The botanical booty was carefully husbanded and then used in creating some of the gardens beautifying

the northern capital. It was at that period that the newly laid out Summer Gardens acquired their first crabtree and, given its provenance, the way was paved for the creation of the partnership of Crabtree and Evelyn.

Half a century after Peter's death in 1725, another Russian ruler continued her predecessor's interest in expanding contact with the West. Though German by birth, Catherine II (r. 1762-1796) displayed an active interest in French letters and philosophy, besides pursuing a vigorous love life. She corresponded with such writers as Diderot and Voltaire, taking to heart the latter's injunction: "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*" Under Catherine, who generally liked the superior position, Russia provided attractive openings to skilled gardeners as well as to plants of a non-botanical variety.

Previous Orators in the Crabtree Foundation's English Chapter (Richard Freeman (1975), Bartolomeu dos Santos (1985) and Tony Smith (1994)) have referred to Crabtree's meeting

Carl Linnaeus, the great Swedish naturalist whose 300th birthday falls on 23rd May this year. My distinguished predecessor, Dr. Phillip Law (1989), doubts that such a meeting would have been likely in 1776, but Freeman (1975) is cautious enough to date it taking place in "*about 1776*" (my italics). It could not have taken place any later than 1776, for two good reasons, namely that Linnaeus was extremely ill and died in January 1778 and secondly that Crabtree was by then headed for Saint Petersburg.

My English predecessor, Fred Gee, devoted his appropriately dated 1984 Oration to the Secret Life of Joseph Crabtree, considering Crabtree as either spy or intelligence agent. What I wish to consider tonight is Crabtree's place in the gallery of undercover agents. You know of Goldfinger and Greenmantle, but are you aware of their formidable precursor – Greenfinger? Being initiates in the Crabtree cult, you

can well imagine who this Greenfinger really was. Suffice it to say that he was an agent of deep penetration: after all, Catherine liked it that way.

After meeting Linnaeus and presenting him with a model of the Stinkhorn (*phallus impudicus*), Crabtree spent a little more time in that region of snow, bears and reindeer, before returning home via the Low Countries, where he chose to swan around Flanders for a while. On returning to England, he soon encountered that remarkable adventuress, the bigamous Elisabeth Chudleigh, Duchess of Kingston and Countess of Bristol, a promiscuous and opportunistic gold-digger if ever there were one. Secretly married in 1744 to Augustus Hervey, heir to the fabulously wealthy Earl of Bristol, her craving for publicity reached its apotheosis at the Venetian Ambassador's Masquerade in 1749, when she appeared, almost naked, in a see-through dress, as Iphigenia the Sacrifice. She is reputed to have seduced George II himself, who presented her with a watch costing 35 pounds, paid for out of his rarely opened purse. Having long been mistress of the ageing Duke of Kingston, she married him bigamously shortly before he died, leaving a vast and contested fortune. She lost the title (though she continued to use it anyway) but managed to keep the money. More seriously, she was tried in the House of Lords (an eighteenth century instance of peer review), was convicted of bigamy and faced the prospect of being branded for the crime. It was obviously time to leave England. To this end she acquired a luxury yacht, complete with dining hall, drawing room, picture gallery and organ, and a vast collection of antiques and set sail for Saint Petersburg. Though the crew (and, one hopes, the chef) were largely French, among its company was one Joseph Crabtree, working his passage and sometimes hers.

After an agreeable voyage, Chudleigh's luxurious craft finally docked in Saint Petersburg and was moored between the notorious Russian yacht *Voyumat* and the good ship Venus, having been directed there by the Harbour Master, a functionary also known as the Dock Head.

Chudleigh's extravagant and promiscuous reputation proved no barrier to her entrée into high Petersburg society and soon she was on very good terms with the Empress herself. For such ladies the old saying "one good turn deserves another" needs to be modified. It might be truer to say that "one wanton deserves another". As Mae West later remarked, "Goodness had nothing to do with it!"

But what of our hero, Greenfinger? Despite her flirtation with Western ideas, Catherine, with the aid of her adviser, lover and secret husband, Prince Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin, sought to run a pretty tight ship of state. Then as so often in Russian history, her country teemed with informers, spies and intrigue. Word soon reached the Empress of the virile young Englishman recently arrived in La Chudleigh's entourage. In the upper echelons of Petersburg society he was already the subject of lovely ladies' chatter, and Catherine made it her business to meet this *Mellors avant la lettre, française ou quelconque: il n'importe pas*. It was all very well for Voltaire to write: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Upon meeting Crabtree, Catherine became much more interested in cultivating the *jardinier* himself.

Crabtree's contemporary, Domenico Cimarosa, is perhaps best remembered for his opera *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, and we are confronted with at least two instances of secret marriage in tonight's oration: Chudleigh's and Catherine's. By all accounts, Catherine's secret and much loved husband, Prince Grigori Potemkin, was a remarkable sexual athlete, but, from time to time, was called upon to undertake other duties of state, often entailing prolonged absences in distant parts of the country, particularly in the south, where Russia was wrestling with Turkey for control of the Black Sea. Before his departure from Saint Petersburg, Catherine had had a porcelain cast made of his prodigious member, which was wrapped in cottonwool and silk and kept in a wooden box. Though she might well have admired this magnificent memento, the hot-blooded Catherine had more immediate and pressing fleshly needs. She employed a number of ladies-in-waiting known as *eprouveuses*, whose role

paralleled that of official tasters of meals engaged by leaders fearful of being poisoned. Potemkin was, after all, a very hard act to follow and it was the job of these *éprouveuses* to see just how hard any potential followers might be. It was only a matter of time before our Greenfinger was put to the test.

When asked to perform,
He transcended his norm,
So, very soon,
He was in like Flynn,
To -- the Empress Catherine!

Cognoscenti of Crabtree can well imagine how a man of his erudition, culture, wit and genius truly shone in Catherine's court. It seemed that, after centuries of backwardness, darkness and oppression, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment had at last come to Russia. To Voltaire, Catherine was "the Semiramis of the North", though certain later observers came to regard her as a septentrional Messalina. One of her earliest biographers, the Irishwoman Mrs Anna Jameson (1794-1860), concluded that

"This woman, whose political crimes have consigned her to universal execration, whose private vices cannot be contemplated without the deepest disgust and abhorrence, seems to have possessed all the blandishment and graces of an accomplished Frenchwoman."

(Anna Jameson: *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns* (London, 1831), vol. II, p. 35)

One aspect of French culture which Catherine chose not to pursue was that of gardening. In preference to the French pattern of highly cultivated and manicured formal gardens, Catherine favoured the wilder, more romantic English style of garden. "I adore English gardens", Catherine told Voltaire, "and I despise deeply straight lines and identical *allées* ... In a word, Anglomania is more important to me

than ‘plantomania’.” Crabtree could not have arrived in Russia at a more opportune time. Other English gardeners followed him, notably William Gould, a protege of Capability Brown himself.

With English influence taking root in the realm of gardening, our Greenfinger took a short rest from his labours in the Empress’s bedroom and greenhouses and availed himself of the chance to travel a little further afield in Russia, to the terrain of forest and bear. Wandering through vast forests might have satisfied romantic sentiments in his young soul, but the constant need to watch his step and avoid the large and numerous bear droppings so frequently scattered across his path rendered his reveries a little less than idyllic. One might be able to cultivate an English garden, but toilet training of Russian bears was not part of his mission. The local peasants, however, reassured him on this point and told him of the tappen, a plug inserted into the bear’s rectum prior to hibernation, thereby assuring these beasts of undisturbed repose during the long Russian winters. Just as Australians listen for the first chirp of the cicada in summer and Englishmen poise, pen in hand, to inform *The Times* of hearing the first cuckoo in spring, Russians cock their ears for the first popping of tappen which heralds the ending of winter. Such explosions are rarely heard in Chipping Sodbury.

When this solitary wanderer returned to Saint Petersburg, he found that Anglophilia was being challenged by Hellenophilia. Since Russia had been encroaching on some of the outlying territories of the Ottoman Empire, some of which Potemkin was soon to annex to Russia, the cause of Greek independence from Turkish domination was becoming increasingly popular in Russia. One of its advocates, one Philip Metamorphosis, had arrived in Saint Petersburg in Crabtree’s absence and was being feted there. This handsome Hellene had already caught the Empress’s eye while our hero was communing with nature and engaged in Rousseauian reveries of a solitary wanderer. Perhaps Crabtree sensed that his star was on the wane and that it was time to redirect his steps homeward.

From the rewards showered upon him by an infatuated Empress, he had had the foresight to commission a yacht considerably sleeker than La Chudleigh's overburdened craft which had conveyed him to Russia in the first place. This was moored ready for a quick getaway should it be needed, while the bulk of the Russian Baltic Fleet, and strangely its pursuit vessels, had been safely berthed in a labyrinth of the canals and creeks for which Saint Petersburg, like Venice, is so famous. (Almost a century and a half later, the Italian futurist Filippo Marinetti was to call for the filling in of Venice's canals with the rubble from its *palazzi*, an act of destruction which not even the most deranged Russian nihilist would advocate for the Venice of the North.)

Crabtree's influence with the Empress was by no means spent, however, and indeed her regard for him must have been enhanced when he magnanimously proposed a banquet in the Winter Palace in honour of his new Greek rival, widely known by this stage as Phil the Greek. Champagne, vodka and the finest of wines flowed in abundance that night as the cream of Petersburg society danced the hours away. As at any Russian banquet, numerous and increasingly intoxicating toasts were proposed, culminating in a succession of vast roars of "Phil the Greek!", "Phil the Greek!", which resounded well beyond the Winter Palace, across the vast Palace Square outside it, finally reaching the ears of gangs of navvies employed on neighbouring public works projects. By this time and at that distance, however, the message had become somewhat garbled and the navvies thought that they were being urged to "fill the creek". Never dreaming of disobeying instructions seeming to come from the Winter Palace, they set to with a will and, despite their puzzlement, proceeded to pour vast amounts of rubble into the nearest creeks and canals. Marinetti's dream was thus realised a century before his birth and, more immediately, much of Russia's Baltic Fleet, including its pursuit vessels, found its access to the wider sea blocked. With a devoted crew, Crabtree was therefore able to make a rapid exit from Russia, reaching England a few days later.

It was there that he produced his great trophy from a large wooden casket which he had smuggled out of the Winter Palace itself. This was a source of wonderment and admiration in the secret reaches of the British government, particularly in those parts of it concerned with Defence of the Realm. This was surely Russia's secret weapon, code-named 4P - by today's standards a trifling sum, but in those days something of incomparable value. For 4P was Potemkin's Purloined Porcelain Prong! After due examination, analysis and copying, this pride of a Prince was then placed on a plinth and became one of the glories of the British Empire.

As for Crabtree, this bearer of the phallus was welcomed at the Palace, where he was made a Companion of the Bath, a fitting decoration for a son of Chipping Sodbury and travelling companion (and more) of the Countess of Bristol. He thus achieved a West Country trifecta. The ambiguously spelt citation on his Order reads: "Joseph Crabtree, charged with blocking the movements of the Russian bear, brilliantly made a tappen!"

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