The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
35th Annual Oration

Crabtree in Clubland

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Mr President, the long absent Living Burden, the Living Witness, Elders, Scholars and guests. It is with a profound sense of honour and much trepidation that I stand before you tonight and seek to follow in the footsteps of the illustrious Orators who came before me.

I have been informed by the Elders - indeed it has been so billed in the e-pistles about this evening - that I am the youngest orator in the history of the Crabtree Foundation. As if the knowledge of my predecessors' great learning and wit were not enough; I feel that I also carry the weight of the expectations of the new generation. Pray be gentle, ladies and gentlemen.

At the outset I should - and will - acknowledge that this Oration would not have been possible without Ian Cummins. Our friendship began when he "recruited" me into the History Faculty in 1996 and it was Ian who invited me as his guest two years ago (among a throng of others - some might say - and have said - that it was a branch-stacking exercise worthy of the Socialist Left faction of the Labour Party to which Ian almost certainly does not belong). Ian taught me: at times Russian history, but, for the most part, how to enjoy myself, and so I suppose the

appellation "*protégé*" allotted to me by Jim McGrath is apt. I need to make a disclaimer. Most of you would know that Ian is an inveterate, compulsive punster, whose art occasionally has the capacity to delight, like a bottle of red Burgundy from a wispy vintage, and, to continue with the oenological metaphor, at other times exhibits some of the surprise and subtlety of the Bulgarian Chateau Boyar, a mainstay of drinks parties at the Bulgarian Embassy in East Berlin in the days of Erich Honecker. Happily, I cannot begin to aspire to the linguistic acrobatics, some of them horizontal, of Ian's Oration on Crabtree and the Eastern Bloc. I am here to reveal the truth, or at least *a* truth, or, at the very least, something which quite possibly *could have been* true about the great man and polymath Joseph Crabtree.

The title of this oration, is, as you know, *Crabtree in Clubland*. The original title was *Crabtree and Clubland* but, for reasons best known to Jim McGrath, it was edited to "*in*" Clubland. Like any author confronted by a superior editor, I was most displeased by this quite unnecessary fiddling, but relented over time.

So what is 'Clubland'? That word is not a collective noun for a large number of unsavoury nightclubs; nor does it refer to the sort of 'gentlemen's clubs' in which the principal entertainment appears to be provided by women clad less than scantily - an entertainment which would have surely shocked Crabtree. No, the original 'Clubland' refers to a number of clubs in the West End of London, centred in St James's Street, frequented in Crabtree's time by men of the aristocracy and upper classes, the cream of Society from London and the Counties.

The most popularly held conception of a London club comes from the Victorian times. Then the Club was a retreat to which West End men might take themselves, certain that the troubles and worries of the outside world would not follow them into a building which they regarded as a temple of dignified seclusion and repose. Perhaps the best description of a club existing in Crabtree's latter days is that given by a witty Bishop, who defined it as a place "*where women ceased from troubling and the weary were at rest*". Another amusing definition was that once given by George Sala, an English journalist, who, incidentally, coined the phrase "Marvellous Melbourne" on his visit to Australia in 1885. "*A club*," said Sala, "*is a weapon used by savages to keep the white women at a distance*". Quite possibly this was a pun on the name of that den of eccentrics, the Savage Club.

To a member his club formed a safe retreat from the cares of the world, but it needn't necessarily be a shrine of crystallised selfishness. The aim of club life should be a sort of defensive alliance tacitly concluded between a number of individuals, all moving in the same sphere of life, against the troubles and perturbations by which humanity is assailed from time to time.

So, from the mid-Victorian period to today the idea of club life is certainly that of safe, luxurious and often profoundly dull sodality which men prefer at times. But it was not always thus, and it was not this which attracted Crabtree to be a part of this world.

In Crabtree's times, and it will be revealed, it is unlikely that Crabtree became a club man until the early 19th Century, clubs were predominantly a place for men to divert themselves in a somewhat less

genteel way, or perhaps in a way which was, though *gentlemanly*, not *genteel*. The fundamental Victorian charter of the perfect club - that it ought to be unassuming, unobtrusive and luxurious - had not yet come to pass. It was still a world more redolent of the 18th Century club, where high stakes gambling and political intrigue were a great deal more frequent than quiet times spent dozing in the club library or taking snuff in front of a fire.

Over the past year, since the honour of giving this Oration was unexpected thrust upon me, I have looked for clues as to Crabtree's experiences in Clubland. It seemed almost inexplicable - perhaps another instance of the conspiracy of silence against him - that a man of such undoubted talents as Crabtree would not have had some connection to the *milieu* of so many of the eminent men of the day.

We have not, to my knowledge, had the benefit of a 'psychological profile' of Crabtree, and therefore we do not know if there was something peculiar about him which drew him, like the proverbial moth, to the many lights of discovery, exploration, learning, writing and, of course, beautiful women. We should remember Michael Deakin's injunction that Crabtree was a "*complex number*". Nonetheless, it is evident from past scholarship that he was at the very centre of great many such things. It beggars belief, then - rightly, as you will see - that Crabtree would not have been drawn to arguably the most seductive light of all - certainly in Regency London and certainly to a middle-aged man born in Chipping Sodbury - that of *Society*, and, by extension, the smarter clubs, which were, to use an undergraduate word, the 'manifestation' of society.

The first tangible clue to Crabtree's connection to Clubland came unexpectedly from Cummins' revelation of Crabtree's assignations in the Eastern Bloc. We now know that Crabtree was intimately familiar with Catherine the Great. He was the subject of "*lovely ladies' chatter*" amongst the upper echelons of St Petersburg Society. Crabtree also "*availed himself of the chance to travel a little further afield in Russia*". What Cummins did not reveal is that during those travels further afield Crabtree took the opportunity to visit Riga and Reval (now Tallinn), where he had been asked to stay by the von Benckendorff family, one of the oldest and noblest Baltic German families, by whom he was befriended during his first visit in St Petersburg.

Crabtree returned to St Petersburg shortly after the turn of the 19th Century, though precisely when, it cannot be ascertained. However, in the addendum to a recent edition of *Zapiski Benkendorfa: 1812 God: Otechestvennaia Voina; 1813 God: Osvobozhdenie Niderlandov* (Yaziki Slavyanskikh Kul'Tur, Moscow, 2001) there is a reference to a letter from Count Alexander von Benckendorff, who was born in 1783 and became a soldier and statesman of some renown. In that letter, thought to have been written in 1802, and directed to one of his fellow young officers, von Benckendorff makes reference to "*taking tea with the Baroness von N…, where I was pleased to see that cultivated Englishman of whom Maman* (née Schilling von Cannstatt) *was so enamoured and who has become so very friendly with Dolly*". The letter is, not unusually, in English and, as would be expected from a Baltic German, pedantic in its grammar. More importantly, it must be referring to Crabtree, who had almost certainly been spending a considerable time in the bosom of the von Benkendorffs.

The "*Dolly*" in the letter was von Benckendorff's sister Dorothea, born in Riga in 1785. She was educated at the Smolny Convent in St Petersburg and became a maid of honour to the Empress Maria Feodorovna in 1799. It is highly likely that the young German would have attracted Crabtree's attentions, possibly prior to her marriage to Lieutenant-General Count (later Prince) Lieven in 1800, but more likely thereafter. We do not know whether Crabtree's initial attentions towards Dorothea were chaste or not; but it is clear that he had made an impression which was to last.

In 1812 Prince Lieven was sent as the Russian ambassador to the Court of St James's, which role he played until 1834. He brought as his chief object the resumption of friendly relations between Britain and Russia which had been for a time suspended in consequence of the Peace of Tilsit. Dorothea, Princess Lieven, came with her husband and used her undoubted intelligence, charisma, and social skills to establish herself as one of the leaders of London Society.

Crabtree was not of high birth, though we have seen that he was accepted into and shone in high society outside of Britain. However, it is one thing for a socially accomplished Englishman to be well frequented on the Continent; it is another thing altogether to be accepted in London. He needed a champion, someone who would provide him with an entrée into Society. I am convinced that Princess Lieven became Crabtree's champion and provided him with that entrée. For Princess Lieven, together with Lady Jersey, Princess Eszterházy and four other equally *grandes dames* were Lady Patronesses of Almack's, one of the most exclusive clubs in London.

At Almack's these "*fair arbiters*", the most influential and exclusive ladies of the *ton,* created a temple of exclusivity for the balls held on Wednesday nights (the only activity of the club apart for the high stake card play which followed the balls) by allowing only those of whom they approved to buy the non-transferable annual subscriptions, costing ten guineas. Holding that subscription became the difference between being in society and being in 'Society'. Not to have it might conceivably allow one to affect that one had simply not applied. To have one's subscription withdrawn, however, meant that one had been tried and found wanting, a social disaster for those dedicated to their place in the *ton*.

Money was never the *sine qua non* to being a member of Almack's. A title was a recommendation, though breeding and behaviour were more important. A penniless Irish poet like Thomas Moore could be adjudged to have the right address and the right style to make him a valued member. Conversely, the Duke of Wellington was once famously turned away from the doors because he was guilty of the double solecism of arriving seven minutes late and wearing trousers rather than knee-breeches, a mistake that - tellingly - Crabtree is never recorded as having made.

It is not clear why Princess Lieven helped Crabtree. It may have been for his wit; it may have been in recognition for 'services rendered'; perhaps it was to advance a fellow outsider. She was certainly not exclusive with her favours. She was friends - in varying degrees of intimacy - with George IV, Prince Metternich, the Duke of Wellington, George Canning, Count Nesselrode, Lord Grey, François Guizot and a haemophilic smattering of royal and grand Dukes. Her support for

Crabtree may even have been as a favour to a past *inamorato* of her mother, Baroness Schilling von Cannstatt (*pace* Cummins, in for a Schilling, in for a pound). In some ways her motivation is irrelevant. What I think can be safely stated is that, having entered Society by the well-used passage offered to him by Princess Lieven, Crabtree seized the opportunities that Society, and in particular Clubland, offered.

Foremost among those opportunities was gambling, or, in Crabtree's instance, supplementing his income through playing cards for high stakes. Crabtree was not, in the early years of the 19th Century, 'well off' and, while undoubtedly vigorous, he was no longer young. Given what we know about his later life, he must have had ambition and aspirations for the future, all of which could have benefited from greater liquidity. High stakes gambling at Almack's provided the perfect opportunity.

As far back as 1770 Horace Walpole famously wrote that "*the gaming at Almack's…is worthy the decline of our Empire, or Commonwealth, which you please. The young men of the age lose 10, 15, 20 thousand pounds in an evening there. Lord Staverdale* [sic], *not one-and-twenty, lost £11,000 there last Tuesday, but recovered it by one great hand at hazard*".

So what proof exists, or, perhaps more aptly, *remains* of Crabtree's late night efforts at the card table? Unexpectedly, while researching an unrelated matter recently in the archives of the Circolo dell'Unione in Venice, I came across a manuscript of an unpublished, anonymous memoir (which has since been tentatively attributed to a Venetian nobleman, Count Foscari) titled "*Ricordanze di un Gentil'uomo Veneto* -

Viaggi in Inghilterra, Francia e Svizzera" dating from the 1850s. Amongst many amusing entries, most of which do not bear repeating in polite company, Count Foscari recalls a night at Almack's in 1815, when he observed a man having a good run at the card table, possibly at his expense. Rather peevishly, he referred to "*quel maledetto uomo (non mi ricordo il suo nome), ch'e' stato benedetto da una memoria fenomenale, come quella di General Scott – e sembra che avesse sessant'anni* ". It is a great pity that Count Foscari could not - or chose not - to recall the name of that "*damned man*". But, given the date, the reference to Almack's and to the man being sixty years old and having a "*phenomenal memory*", I believe that it can be quite safely taken as being a reference to Crabtree.

Major-General John Scott of Balcomie, to whom Crabtree was compared in the Venetian's slender opus, was the father-in-law of George Canning, one of Princess Lieven's paramours. Scott was known to have won £200,000 - an astonishing sum in those days - thanks to his notorious sobriety (surely unprecedented for a Scotsman) and knowledge of whist, one of the most fashionable games of the time. The General possessed a great advantage over his companions by avoiding the excesses which used not infrequently to muddle their brains. He confined himself to dining off something very light, such as a boiled chicken with toast and water, and in consequence always came to the whist table with a clear head. Possessing a remarkable memory, with great coolness of judgment, he was able honestly to win the enormous sum of £200,000.

It should not be suggested that Crabtree ever won such prodigious sums of money; if he had, his feats would almost certainly have been written into the annals of Clubland. But the crucial link here is boiled chicken. I can confidently reveal that it is not unlikely that General Scott

learned the beneficial qualities of boiled chicken to card play from Crabtree, who was very fond of the dish and early on recognised its powers to improve concentration. The then teenage Konstantin von Benckendorff, the other brother of Princess Lieven, records in his unpublished diary for 1798: "*Count von N.. and Maman and Dollie's Englishman staying. Delicious cold chicken and strawberries for luncheon. Papa most miffed with the Englishman after tea, for he and Mama won all the hands at cards.*" The circumstances of the acquaintance between Scott and Crabtree remain, alas, unknown. But it is altogether possible that they were introduced by Canning, Scott's son-in-law, at the behest of Princess Lieven. In any event, Crabtree was very discreet and certainly more understated in his winnings than General Scott, but he was on his way to amassing a small fortune.

And so we turn to White's Club. Having entered Society through Almack's, Crabtree must have coveted the holy grail of Clubland - a membership of White's. White's was and remains the oldest - predating the Bank of England - and most prestigious London club, and certainly one of the most famous clubs in the world. It has a good claim to be considered the archetype and model of what a gentlemen's club should be. Naturally, not everyone would agree. Swift called it "*the common rendez-vous of infamous sharpers and noble cullies*", and rather similar views were expressed two hundred and fifty years later by journalistic snipers at Clubland who were eager to blame the Burgess-McClean-Philby scandal on an alleged old boy network operating from the bar at White's.

Its very exclusivity would, at first, lead us to believe that Crabtree could never have been a member of White's. (After all, White's, unlike

Almack's, did not hold balls and did not have Lady Patronnesses who could have obliged Crabtree.) But was that right? At first I could find no reference to Crabtree in the memoirs of some of the club's better known members, and, unlike those of Beau Brummell and Lord Alvanley, his witticisms are not recorded for posterity. Even Captain Gronow makes no reference to him in his celebrated memoirs of the period.

Inspired by the memory of past Orators, who were not prepared to be disheartened by momentary setbacks, I turned in my researches to the famous Betting Book of White's to see if I could learn anything from its pages. The Betting Book, privately printed in 1892 in two rather extravagant quarto volumes by Algernon Bourke (who was the original inspiration for the character of Algy Moncrief in "*The Importance of Being Earnest*") together with an addendum listing all the members who were members of White's from its inception, records all of the private bets between the members of the club from October 1743 to March 1878.

Unsurprisingly, Crabtree's name is absent from the list of members, or at least absent in his own name. I noted, however, that there was a certain Mr Cradock elected in 1817, whose name appeared on the list of members between Sir John Cradock (later the 1st Baron Howden, soldier and early tax exile) and Lord Cranborne (later the 2nd Marquess of Salisbury, politician and father of the great Prime-Minister). There was no other mention of this mysterious Mr Cradock, whose Christian name Mr Bourke does not give, but it is clear that of the Cradocks only Sir John is at all known.

I turned to the Betting Book itself to see if it would cast any light upon the identity of Mr Cradock. Could this be Crabtree? Remarkably,

the Betting Book, as published, gave up an interesting clue. There was an annotation "*bet illegible*", between a bet on 23 May 1815 whereby "*Sir George Talbot bet Mr Worley ten guineas that the war with France would be over on 23 May 1816; no war, no bet*" and a bet on 28 May 1816 whereby "*Lord Foley bet Sir George Talbot fifty guineas that barring natural death, Bounaparte* [sic] *is at the head of a French Government by 28 May 1817*" (which bet is recorded to have been lost by Lord Foley). Could this "*illegible*" bet lead to the answer? In much excitement I telephoned an English friend of mine who is a member of White's and whose name, for reasons of discretion I seek your indulgence to omit from this paper. I asked my friend, who happens to be an amateur expert in handwriting, to examine the manuscript of the Betting Book in the club's archives. He did and reported to me that the bet recorded a wager between Sir George Talbot and Lord Frederick Bentinck, whose handwriting was notoriously difficult to decipher, that "*the man whose name is similar to Sir J. C. will be a member of this club within five years*". That must surely be a reference to a name similar to that of 'Sir John Cradock', therefore a reference to the mysterious, elusive and otherwise unacknowledged Mr Cradock, elected in 1817, which, in my view, definitively points to the possibility of Joseph Crabtree being elected a member of White's.

It is almost certain that Crabtree was a member of a great many more clubs. At that time club membership was relatively inexpensive and men who belonged to a club also tended to belong to a number of others. I believe that this year's Orator to the Parent Foundation spoke, by sheer coincidence, of Crabtree's role in the foundation of the Athenaeum Club. It is likely that he would have also been a member of the Travellers' Club, founded in 1819 - for he had certainly satisfied the requirement that a

candidate for membership must have travelled at least five hundred miles from London - and a host of others. Regrettably, despite many sleepless nights and extensive research in the field, I was unable to find any clues whatsoever of Crabtree's connection to other clubs, and a Crabtree Oration cannot be based on mere conjecture and supposition.

What is clear is that Crabtree reached the Parnassus of Clubland by being elected a member of the two most exclusive clubs of his age. In his usual style he was supremely discreet about this; in part, I feel this was so because although he must have enjoyed the high life offered by his clubs, at his heart he was not only a man from Chipping Sodbury, but, more importantly, he was a man of a great many passions and interests. To have taken a more active role in Clubland, to have won ostentatiously large sums of money at the card tables, to have been celebrated as a wit or to have become actively involved in political intrigue - all of which he could have done, had he wanted to - would have almost certainly exposed him to being remembered principally as a high-living Clubman, conforming to type, as it were, rather than the brilliant and highly adaptable polymath whom we honour today. He came, he saw, he conquered and he enjoyed but he remained an enigma.

A.A.G.S. Schnaider 2009