

**JOSEPH CRABTREE,
son of Mnemosyane, brother to Calliope, Melpomone and Thalia.**

Is it possible that a man who was so expert in many areas could not also love the theatre?

A contemporary of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, playwright, parliamentarian and manager of Drury Lane Theatre, Crabtree was the power who inspired the theatre of George III as dramatist and purveyor of the highest form of dramatic art, until this humanitarian led an uprising to enable the ordinary men and women of England to rise to artistic heights.

Mr President, distinguished Elders, learned scholars and welcome guests, with some trepidation I stand before you on this auspicious occasion. For some years I have attended the Crabtree Dinner and heard many erudite dissertations from people of perception and discernment. I, on the other hand, can be aptly described by the title of a play by Oscar Wilde, **A Woman of No Importance**. Yet – my one area of expertise neatly dovetails with one of the great passions of Joseph Crabtree.

We have heard of Crabtree as an brilliant mathematician, intrepid explorer, incisive thinker, prominent scientist, sublime poet, distinguished philosopher and prodigious author. It would be unthinkable that a repository of so many virtues would not be a connoisseur of the theatre and a man of influence in the thespian art, hence my allusion in the title to his relationship with the muses.

I intend to explore his involvement with the performing arts which began with his forming a close association with an Irish-born playwright and trace it through to his enmity with that man in the OP Riots, which mesmerised London in the early 1800s. To many of you OP may mean old people or to internet users Original Poster, to musicians it is short for opus. If you are in the theatre then OP is opposite prompt – or the right side of the stage facing the audience.

But this doesn't tell us what the OP riots were, do I hear you say? I shall come to that in due course.

Theatre grabbed Crabtree when he was in his late teens. Accompanying an elderly aunt to France, they took the ferry packet to Boulogne. Seated at an adjacent table was another young man with a younger lady. Crabtree's Aunt Georgina had a somewhat penetrating voice and her all-but monologue carried to the neighbours.

She helped herself to a large serving from the buffet and between mouthfuls said "I always enjoy a small repose while travelling; indeed without such rapprochement I fear no journal would be worthwhile. In truth I believe it prevails

the mail de mary, which deposes many people into a sublime state. When crossing the contagious countries the preposition is even more imperious.”

The young man at the next table was obviously listening and Joseph became embarrassed by his aunt’s volubility. When a heavy swell disrupted the smooth sailing Aunt Georgina decided that she would repair to a place where she could lie down, because, as she put it, she was “entertaining an attack of the vacuous”.

As soon as they were alone the young man apologised for eavesdropping but said he had been fascinated and that Aunt Georgina should be a character in a play.

The lad introduced himself as Richard Brinsley Sheridan and said he was on a mission of mercy. His companion was Miss Elizabeth Lindley whom he was helping escape to France to evade the bad baronet, Sir Thomas Mathews, who had threatened to abduct and marry her. Elizabeth was to hide in a convent.

Sheridan himself would return to England, as his father had enrolled him as a reluctant law student at University College London. As Crabtree was also studying there, the two decided they would catch up. Circumstances stepped in and when they arrived in Boulogne an evil-tempered baronet of gargantuan proportions was awaiting them on the dockside, having hired a fast boat to take him to France. Crabtree took charge and hustled Sheridan and his companion ashore and confronted Sir Thomas upon which the baronet challenged Crabtree to a duel which, in order to give the couple time to escape, he accepted.

I have said, the baronet was a large man and as they squared up he protested that Crabtree had the unfair advantage of shooting at a larger target. So they agreed that an outline the size of Crabtree would be drawn on Mathew’s body and a hit outside that area would not count. Fortunately they both missed.

Once back at University College, Crabtree caught up with Sheridan who had decided he would defy his father by leaving the University, marrying the beautiful Miss Lindley and become a playwright. Some time later Crabtree received an invitation to attend the opening night of Sheridan’s first play at Covent Garden theatre. To his surprise he recognised in the character of Mrs Malaprop, his own aunt Georgina, complete with her foibles of mistaking one word for another.

Was the play a success? No, it was vilified by the public and the critics and was booed on opening night. The reason was its extreme length.

Our Joseph was of course entranced by the portrayal of his aunt and he offered to ghost a rewrite. On its reopening a week later **The Rivals** became an instant success. From this moment on, Crabtree was smitten with the theatre and he and Sheridan became partners in a number of dramatic adventures.

Naturally Crabtree was inspired to write his own play which he called **The Road to Ruin**. A fate-tempting title if ever there was one! But it was received with some acclamation. When Richard Brinsley Sheridan decided to buy Drury Lane theatre from David Garrick, the great Shakespearean actor, Joseph Crabtree became his partner in this grand undertaking. A small but serviceable theatre had existed on that site since 1663, when Charles II gave a charter to Thomas Killigrew, who claimed to be the love child of William Shakespeare. Sheridan decided it should be rebuilt. Theatres were notoriously fire-prone ever since Shakespeare's Globe burned down, when an over-enthusiastic stagehand, put too much gunpowder in a cannon, being fired for sound effects.

At Crabtree's insistence a novel remedy was introduced. An iron curtain – literally, a curtain made of metal – was installed as a sort of blast shield against potential fire. They still feature in every British theatre and are used as advertising boards for local merchants. British law insists that they are raised and lowered in the presence of every audience. Just think of the number of lives that Crabtree has saved with this innovation.

When the new Theatre Royal, opened in April 1794 the real star of the show was the iron curtain, which was demonstrated for the audience by being brought down and struck with hammers. A marvellous tintinnabulation!

Joseph demonstrated his creative energy by producing a series of hit shows. He chose the plays, puffed them, as promotion was then known, and ensured they were a financial as well as artistic success. His greatest talent was casting the most appropriate actors for the roles. Though this came not without its own problems.

Crabtree overheard one leading member of the company say to the others "Remember this is a one man show. I am that man. You will all stay at arms length from me, By that I mean my arm and yours".

Principal actors always consider themselves the lynchpins of theatre believing the play revolves around them. Crabtree's mission was to make theatre about the play. This brought him into conflict with those on stage. His raging arguments became legendary.

Crabtree described one member of the company as a man of a thousand characters, all of them the same. The actor tried to intimidate Crabtree by use of his great height, asking if the manager had noticed the actor was taller than him. However Crabtree simply said "Don't worry, you will be cut down to size".

Another actor engaged in an argument on the art of theatre, insisting he knew more than Crabtree and that he never talked about anything he didn't have the

facts on, to which Crabtree said “Well, that must limit your conversation frightfully.”.

An actor who tried to prove his popularity by telling Crabtree that he had the audience glued to their seats was discomfited by the reply of “how clever of you to think of it”!

In 1800 Joseph became a national hero when King George III attended a performance. Standing in the stalls Crabtree took a pinch of snuff, resulting in a sneeze of hurricane-like proportions, causing him to jostle the arm of a man standing beside him who at that moment was pointing a pistol at the King. The would-be assassin's shot missed by inches. The King unruffled ordered the performance to continue. He then invited Joseph Crabtree to join him in the royal box. Crabtree never let on that he had saved the King's life inadvertently.

Unlike the rest of us mere mortals who may be a jack of several trades and perhaps a master of one, Joseph Crabtree was the master of everything he turned his hand to. Consequently he was in great demand and he was not able to give undivided attention to his theatrical passion.

As you will know from previous orations, Crabtree visited many parts of the world. In 1799 Elder David Cunningham told of his time with the East India Company, working with Warren Hastings, who is considered by most historians to be the first Governor General of India (but don't tell Barry Jones). On his return to England, the big news was that Warren Hastings was to be impeached.

By this time Richard Brinsley Sheridan had become a member of parliament. He had given the burgess of Stafford five pounds each to elect him and his maiden speech was condemnation of bribery.

Sheridan, despite Crabtree's advice, was one of the main speakers for the prosecution. His speech was described by Edmund Burke as the greatest ever delivered in ancient or modern times.

It enhanced Sheridan's reputation for the moment but after a long trial Hastings was found not guilty. A wedge had been driven between Crabtree and Sheridan; a small crack which was to become a chasm.

“Theatre” Sheridan used to say “is like caviar, only the educated palate can appreciate it, but you Crabtree want us to present tripe and onions at Drury Lane”.

And indeed Joseph had made it his mission to open theatre-going to the widest audience. He argued that if they served mutton chops everyone would be satisfied.

Performances consisted not of one play, as today, but an evening of several attractions, comic, serious, musical. Crabtree allowed anyone who arrived at interval to enter at half price. This influenced impoverished drama students, who still arrive at interval and casually saunter in with the audience without paying anything.

Honest Crabtree turned a blind eye to the habit of some of "improving" their seats, by buying a cheap ticket and moving stealthily to expensive ones. As a drama student I myself was thrown out of the Savoy Theatre in London for just this misdemeanour! A famous procrastinator, Sheridan let the curtain go up on his play Pizarro, with the fifth act still not written.

Crabtree saved the day by locking Sheridan in the prompter's-room, with pen and paper but he was too inebriated to write, so Crabtree took over. Every ten minutes as much of the dialogue as he had completed was sent to the green-room.

Did the play please the audience? Yes in five years it earned 25 thousand pounds.

On 24th February 1809 disaster struck. Despite all the precautions, Drury Lane caught fire and burned to the ground. The House of Commons session was suspended to allow Sheridan to go to the theatre. On arrival, he found that gallant Crabtree was already superintending the fire brigade's attempts to stop the inflamation.

The scene was captured in verse by a bystander:

"As Chaos, which, by heavenly doom,
Had slept in everlasting gloom,
Started with terror and surprise
When light first flashed upon her eyes:
For shouts were heard 'mid fire and smoke,
And twice ten thousand voices spoke—
'The Playhouse is in flames!'

At length the mist awhile was cleared,
When, lo! amidst the wreck upreared,
Gradual a moving head appeared,
And eager firemen knew
'Twas Joseph Crabtree—name revered!—
Now leading all their crew.
Loud shouted all, in signs of woe,
'A Crabtree to the rescue, ho!
And poured the hissing tide.

Meanwhile, Joe Crabtree fought amain,
And strove and struggled, all in vain,ow!
To bid the pumping torrent flow,
For fear the roof should fall.

Sheridan realising this was a hopeless cause took himself to a tavern opposite the theatre and ordered a bottle of port. Immediately Crabtree went over to demand to know why he was not helping save the theatre. Calmly Sheridan replied "May not a man enjoy a glass of wine by his own fireside?"

Drury Lane was gutted. Sheridan swore to rebuild it and a new and more magnificent theatre opened on the 10th October 1812. So far so good. But the great expense caused Sheridan, already financially overstretched, to raise the admission prices.

Entrance to the pit rose from 3/6d to 4/s. The boxes went from six to seven shillings. The third tier which had always been open to the public now became private boxes leased for 300 pounds per annum.

These had curtains to conceal the occupants from the rest of the audience which allowed for some more private activities. Indeed it was said that there were those who at the end of the evening had no idea of what the on-stage entertainment had consisted.

To add insult to injury, these tiers had pushed up the one shilling gallery, at the top of the roof, to a level so high that only the legs of the actors were visible.

Crabtree strongly opposed these arrangements and left the management of Drury Lane. In the radical newspaper *The Spectator* he wrote "to construct this annual, privileged, voluptuous circle, the galleries are contracted to a degree that is scandalous and calls most loudly on the people to resent".

They did more than resent. They rioted. Opening night came and Sheridan went before the curtain to make a welcome speech but could not get out a word. Catcalls came from all over the house. An attempt to begin the play was defeated.

Of course the word of what had happened spread throughout the capital and many people flocked to see if the demonstrations would be repeated. They were not disappointed.

The demonstrations grew each day and became the cause celebre of all London. People in the streets began wearing badges with the letters OP on them, which

in London in 1812 everyone knew stood for Old Prices. If Sheridan was seen in the street, it was shouted at him, when he rose to speak in the House of Commons he was drowned out by cries of "OP"!

In *The Spectator* Crabtree wrote that if "Sheridan will not give us the English spirit of Garrick we will give him the French spirit of Marat".

Them's fighting words One of the rioters was arrested for assault. At his trial the Judge noted that it would be impossible to foresee what the consequences of such an act would be "It leads to every species of horror – to the subversion of our present government and it leads of course to great evils – probably to the worst of all evils that a nation can endure." Thereby placing the discontent against theatrical price rises as equal with the French reign of terror!

The OP riots drew a bigger crowd than any theatre. The general public became an audience to the audience. The riots continued for 67 nights. One hundred and seventeen people were arrested. When they appeared in court some looked very shabby and it was speculated that they were not theatre-goers but thugs hired to cause trouble.

Indeed they were, but were not employed by the OP group but by Sheridan, intending to throw blame on the demonstrators, by accusing them of gratuitous violence. Discovering this, Crabtree sought out Sheridan and threatened to denounce him as a provocateur unless he restored the old prices. Sheridan, fearful for his parliamentary career, agreed.

He was so traumatised that he sold Drury Lane but retained the enormous debts incurred during his ownership. In 1812 he lost his seat in the general election, thereby losing his immunity from arrest and the debtors closed in.

His life went downhill and he turned to gambling but during a particularly fraught game of bezique suffered a heart attack and died. He was recorded as having expired from a cardiac affection, in fact a pack of cardiac affection.

Crabtree on the other hand prospered and diversified. We have heard from Elder Downes of his contribution to gastronomy by creating camembert and from others of his explorations in the east and the antipodes but he also excelled as a writer.

His erotic poems were extolled by Elder Martin, his influence on Wordsworth by Elder Charwood and his last great adventure when he substituted for his friend Howard William Russell, who had become a household name for reporting the Crimean war. Elder Childs discovered that Crabtree in fact wrote the account of the Charge of the Light Brigade for *The Times*. This occurred in the last year of Crabtree's life.

Today I have the privilege of revealing something that has only just come to light. On his return to England Crabtree was inspired to pen a poem on the disastrous but heroic event, which he sent to the poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson. He died very shortly after and Tennyson passed one of the most dramatic poems in English literature off as his own. This was first act of the disgraceful practice of denying Crabtree the just credit for his life and extraordinary achievements. Something that was to continue for the next hundred years.

Fellow Crabtreeites, we have the duty to right this historic wrong. Fortunately we have the means to do it. I call on you all to resume your researches and I look forward to more such revelations next February.

Calliope was the muse of epic poetry.

Clio was the muse of history.

Erato was the muse of love poetry.

Euterpe was the muse of music.

Melpomene was the muse of tragedy.

Polyhymnia was the muse of sacred poetry.

Terpsichore was the muse of dance

Thalia was the muse of comedy.

Urania was the muse of astronomy