Crabtree Oration 2025: Kieran Thompson

Mr. President, Hon Sec, esteemed Elders and Scholars of the Crabtree Foundation, I stand before you tonight in the Lower Crabtree Hall to reveal a tale of fiery innovation: the true and untold story of how Joseph Crabtree, the unsung hero of pyrotechnics, invented the rocket, played the decisive role in Arthur Wellesley's victory in the Peninsula Campaign and left an indelible mark on the rhetoric of the space race.

Now, you might be thinking, "Rockets? Crabtree? Has our undistinguished orator overindulged in the claret?"

But bear with me, my friends, for the truth is often stranger than fiction, and Crabtree's life was a tapestry woven with threads of brilliance and eccentricity.

Our story begins, as many Crabtreean tales do, in a moment of inspiration fuelled by an likely source.

It was 1799, and Crabtree, ever the bon vivant, found himself lamenting the slow delivery of his favourite vintage from Burgundy.

"If only," he mused, "there were a faster way to transport these precious bottles across the continent!"

As Elder McGrath revealed at the 1992 oration, Crabtree became a proud member of the British East India Company in 1781 and was a regular traveller to the Subcontinent thereafter.

Reflecting upon this experience, Crabtree's devious mind applied itself to solving his Claret conundrum.

Now, some of you, steeped in traditional accounts of military history, may be familiar with Mysorean rocket.

Developed by Hyder Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, in southern India, the Mysorean rocket caused havoc amongst the East India Company's armies in various battles in the 1780s

Exactly when our scion was in the service of the Company!

As in all things to do with Crabtree scholarship – coincidence? I think not!

Inspired by the damage wrought by the Mysorean rocket, conventional historians would have us believe that the Royal Arsenal in London only began a military rocket research and development program in 1801.

The traditional historiography prosecuted by these same unenlightened historians would also have us believe that the driving force behind the British adoption and further development of the Indian rocket was Sir William Congreve.

According to their account, in 1805 Sir William demonstrated the first solid fuel rockets at the Royal Arsenal.

This test was considered sufficiently successful, that the Royal Navy used the rocket, now called the Congreve Rocket, in two attacks on the French Fleet at Boulogne in 1805 and 1806.

In 1807, Congreve was also apparently present for the Bombardment of Copenhagen, during which 300 rockets contributed to the conflagration of the city.

By this telling, Congreve was the inventing genius who adapted an Indian design and wrought death and destruction on the Crown's enemies.

As for any Crabtree loyalist, the simultaneous occurrence of JC's stint in India with the East India Company's first observations of modern rockets, was one coincidence too many.

I trawled the archives for evidence to scratch the crabby itch of intuition, that the great conspiracy to erase our patron from the pages of history was afoot.

I found it.

I stand before you tonight to reveal that it was Crabtree, not Congreve who was the creator and champion of the modern Western rocket.

Indeed, the "Congreve Rocket" must henceforth be known as the "Crabtree Rocket"!

My time in the bowels of the Baillieu and Bodleian libraries has turned up clear evidence that during his time with the East India Company, Crabtree was the man who witnessed firsthand the effects of the Mysorean Rocket.

I can now correct the historical record and reveal that it was at the Battle of Seringapatam in 1792 that Crabtree first saw Tipu Sultan fire rockets at the advancing British under Charles Cornwallis, in an ineffective, yet impressive display of technology.

However, as we know, Crabtree was only partially a military man.

Whilst JC was deeply involved in events that impacted military and political outcomes, many past orators have revealed that he was primarily a man of peace, culture and good humour.

Thus we return to Crabtree in 1799 lamenting the slow delivery of a particularly excellent vintage.

As was revealed by Elder Charlwood in his 1976 oration, Crabtree worked with his uncle Oliver as a wine shipper with the firm Crabtree and Hillier.

Sitting in their offices in London, Crabtree envisaged "The Claret Express" – a rocket-propelled wine delivery service, to ensure a customer's thirst was quenched within an hour of an order arriving at the vineyards of Burgundy, Bourdeaux and beyond.

Realising the obvious commercial value in such a service, Crabtree turned his attention to adapting the Mysorean Rocket to suit Western tastes.

He experimented with gunpowder, fireworks, and other volatile substances, and through a series of tests and near-catastrophic explosions, he eventually devised a rudimentary rocket, powered by a carefully calibrated mixture of saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal.

By 1803, a full two years before the supposed first test of Congreve's device, Crabtree's Claret Express was ready.

As we know from Elder Rodan, at around this period Crabtree had founded Australia's first Vineyard in the vicinity of Parramatta.

Crabtree considered testing the Claret Express with some plonk from Parramatta but concluded that the world was not yet ready for an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

As such, he turned instead to his friend Nicolas Defer, the owner of Romanée -Conti.

That Crabtree should be on close intimate terms with the proprietor of one of the world's greatest wines will come as no surprise to those of us here tonight.

As we know, and as numerous scholars have previously attested, Crabtree was a vigneron of the highest class.

Having convinced Defer of the market to be captured by the rocket-powered delivery of his product, Crabtree travelled to Burgundy in mid-1803 for the first test of the Claret Express.

Clearing a space amidst the vines, Crabtree and Defer carefully attached a dozen bottles of Romanée-Conti to the outside of the rocket and skilfully adjusted the various angles of yaw, pitch and roll.

Satisfied with their work, the pair stood well back and lit the fuse.

Unsurprisingly for an inventor as prodigiously successful as Crabtree, the launch went without a hitch and the Claret Express flew majestically into the sky towards its intended destination of Crabtree and Hillier.

However! Those amongst you paying sufficient attention may have spotted a flaw in our Patron's best-laid plans.

How could the Claret Express actually deliver the dozen bottles of heavenly red nectar intact?

Unfortunately for the wine lovers in the room, the answer is as simple as it is obvious – it couldn't.

Indeed, as the Claret Express streaked across the skies of the Home Counties, the rocket calamitously fell from the sky and landed smack bang in the middle of Crabtree and Hillier's warehouse.

Arriving at the scene of destruction after a day's travel from Burgundy, Crabtree immediately concluded that rocket-powered wine delivery had a few kinks that needed to be worked out before being introduced to the public.

As an interesting historical aside, the issue of how to catch a rocket has only recently been solved by Mr Musk and his SpaceX company, which successfully caught a rocket as it came to land via an enormous pair of chopsticks. Perhaps - aside from ruining the US Government - Mr Musk could devote some attention to re-introducing the concept of the Claret Express with the addition of his chopsticks!

Following the failure of the Crabtree Rocket for wine delivery, our Crabby Master decided to pursue other interests.

Despite this, news of Crabtree's invention and the unintentional destruction at long-range it wrought spread widely over the following years.

In 1807, following the illegal and outrageous invasion of Portugal by French and Spanish armies, Crabtree spied an opportunity.

Well known for his hatred of Napoleon Bonaparte, Crabtree was keen to do all in his powers to thwart the Corsican upstart.

Accordingly, Crabtree reconnected with his old friend Arthur Wellesley, who he knew from his days fighting Tipu Sultan and the Mysoreans in India. Indeed, Wellesley had also been present at the Battle of Seringapatam where the rocket was first used against His Majesty's forces.

By now, Wellesley had risen to command the British forces in what was to become the Peninsular War.

Recognising the potential military application of the Claret Express, Wellesley implored Crabtree to deploy his rockets against the French.

And so Crabtree arrived at the front lines, armed with a quiver of rockets and a mischievous glint in his eye.

The effect was immediate and demoralizing. The French, accustomed to the predictable arc of cannon fire, were utterly confounded by these fiery projectiles that screamed through the air, leaving trails of smoke and chaos in their wake.

Crabtree's rockets proved instrumental in several key battles, disrupting enemy formations, demoralizing troops, and even setting fire to supply wagons laden with French brandy (a particularly satisfying outcome, I'm sure).

Word of the Crabtree Rocket spread throughout Europe, striking fear into the hearts of Napoleon's generals. The tide of the war turned, and the French were driven back across the Pyrenees.

Nor did its military utility end here. The Crabtree Rocket again proved to be vital in the Battle of Leipzig in 1813.

Crabtree, ever modest, downplayed his role. As such, the Crabtree Rocket was mislabelled in the press as the Congreve Rocket, following a shameless publicity campaign prosecuted by Sir William.

Nevertheless, it was Crabtree, not Congreve, who made the significant contribution to the Allied victory.

Crabtree’s other exploits throughout the remainder of the Napoleonic Wars are well known by scholars of this foundation.

He is known, for example, to have impersonated Prussian Field Marshal Von Blucher at the Battle of Waterloo, thereby assisting Wellesley to vanquish Napoleon once and for all.

Scholarly work undertaken by our Parent Foundation also indicates that Crabtree engaged in some psychological warfare by taken the wife of Marshall Ney, a key figure in Napoleon’s retinue, as his mistress on the eve of Waterloo.

Now, was this the end of the historical influence of the Crabtree Rocket?

Of course not!

What Scholars may not be aware of, was Crabtree's influence over the national anthem of the United States of America.

The "Rockets' red glare" mentioned in the first verse of the *Star Spangled Banner* was traditionally thought to refer to the firing of Congreve Rockets on Fort McHenry, Baltimore, during the War of 1812.

As I have demonstrated this evening, these were Crabtree Rockets!

Nor does the legacy of Crabtree's invention end there.

As we know from Elder Hudson's 1983 oration, Crabtree played a key role in the development of the railway.

Famously, the gauge of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Great Western Railway was determined by Crabtree's measurement of the body, from the bottom of his feet to tip of his top hat, of the Member of Parliament for Liverpool Mr Willilam Huskisson, after he had been struck by an oncoming train.

Brunel's gauge of 7 feet and half an inch was indeed a safety measure to ensure that all future parliamentarians could simply lie between the tracks should they be unexpectedly faced an oncoming train.

But, I hear you ask, what was the name of the train that struck Huskisson and who else besides Crabtree was present that day?

Why, the train was of course Stephenson's Rocket, named as such as a direct tribute by one of England's greatest inventors to another.

And who else should be there on the very day of Huskisson's demise, but Crabtree's old friend Arthur Wellesley, now promoted to Duke of Wellington and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

JC's influence spreads further still.

Crabtree, ever the visionary, saw beyond the immediate applications of his rockets on the battlefields of Europe and in the future of the wine transportation industry. He imagined his fiery projectiles soaring beyond the Earth's atmosphere, carrying humanity to the stars.

He filled his notebooks with sketches and calculations, dreaming of a future where derivations of his rocket could break the bonds of Earth.

But what, beyond the hunger for exploration and discovery, could have motivated Crabtree's desire to explore space?

Upon reviewing the esteemed orations of my predecessors, and following assiduous research in the darkest, dankest corners of the world's great libraries, I had an epiphany.

Cheese!

As you will recall, Elder Downes revealed to us that Crabtree invented Camembert – the King of Cheeses – and that when one consumes camembert, one is undertaking an act of "Gastro-Transubstantiation". One is, in effect, eating a piece of Crabtree himself.

The connection between Crabtree's camembert, rocketry and space exploration is clear, is it not?

For fans of Wallace and Gromit's 'A Grand Day Out', the answer will strike you as powerfully as a whiff of camembert.

As every school child knows, the moon is made of cheese.

I therefore submit to you all, that Crabtree's driving motivation to pursue space exploration was to secure a sample of lunar lactose, undoubtedly to be quaffed with a drop of the finest wine transported via the Claret Express.

Yet, as with many things, Crabtree's mind was ahead of its time and his ideas on rockets in space were dismissed as fanciful for over a century.

Crabtree's notebooks of rocket designs and calculations, along with his belief in the possibility of using rockets to get to the moon for epicurean purposes, were rediscovered sometime in the early 20th century by a group of scientists and engineers in England.

A German translation of Crabtree's notebooks appeared shortly thereafter, inspiring a groundswell of academic interest across institutes in Berlin, Bonn and Bremen.

Unfortunately, the most studious disciple of Crabtree's rockets during this period was none other than Wernher Von Braun, a scientist who rather blotted his copy book by leading the Nazi development of the V2 rocket – a weapon which had in common with the Claret Express the tendency to fall suddenly from the sky over southern England.

Nevertheless, following Von Braun's wise decision to surrender to the Americans instead of the Russians at the close of the War, the influence of Crabtree's work spread to the New World.

It played a crucial role in the US space program throughout the Cold War, as Von Braun designed the Saturn V Rocket which powered the Apollo missions to the moon.

It can therefore be said by all who revel in the truth of Crabtree scholarship, that the Crabtree Rocket was a foundational part of humanity's journey to a new realm.

Nor was his contribution limited just to practical matters.

In his famous remarks of September 12 1962, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

Soaring rhetoric indeed. But is there more there?

I dug deeper.

To the untrained mind, President Kennedy's remarks appear to be nothing more than a well-crafted piece of political pageantry.

To those of us with a discerning and trained mind, however, the President's remarks blatantly point to Crabtree.

Consider, for a moment, what JFK might have been referring to when he mentioned "the other things".

The traditional historiography - which I am here to correct tonight - would have us believe that the other things refer to the President's earlier remarks about "why climb the highest mountain" and "why fly the Atlantic".

WRONG!

What we are truly seeing in the President's speech is the unmistakable, polymathic influence of one Joseph Crabtree.

No doubt aware of Crabtree's influence in the development of rocketry, the President's comments are a subtle, yet undeniable tribute to Crabtree and his mastery of fields as varied as espionage, maritime navigation, bankruptcy and erotic poetry.

The "other things" are obviously all of Crabtree's accomplishments.

Nor is this the only clear evidence of Crabtree's legacy on the Space Race.

Indeed reverence for Crabtree's contribution to manned space flight would be well known by all if not for a garbled transmission.

When Neil Armstrong stepped foot on the moon, what the world thought it heard was “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

If not for a dodgy connection between the Eagle Lunar Module on the Sea of Tranquillity and the radio telescope in Parkes, New South Wales, the world would have heard what Armstrong actually uttered at that momentous occasion:

“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for Crab Kind.”

Timeline

1781:

Crabtree became a member of the British East India Company and traveled to the Subcontinent.

1792:

Crabtree witnessed the Mysorean rockets being used at the Battle of Seringapatam.

1799:

Crabtree, while working as a wine shipper, conceived the idea of a rocket-propelled wine delivery service, "The Claret Express".

1803:

Crabtree adapted the Mysorean rocket for Western tastes and developed a rudimentary rocket

He also tested the Claret Express in Burgundy.

Crabtree founded Australia's first vineyard near Parramatta.

1807:

Crabtree used his rockets in military applications, assisting Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) in the Peninsular Wa

1813:

The Crabtree Rocket was vital in the Battle of Leipzig.

1815:

Crabtree impersonated Prussian Field Marshal Von Blucher at the Battle of Waterloo. He also engaged in psychological warfare by taking the wife of Marshall Ney as his mistress on the eve of Waterloo.

1812:

Crabtree's rockets were used during the War of 1812 at Fort McHenry, the rockets referred to in the Star Spangled Banner.

1830:

Crabtree influenced the development of the railway. He measured the body of William Huskisson after Huskisson was struck by an

oncoming train, which determined the gauge of the Great Western Railway.•

20th Century:

Crabtree's notebooks were rediscovered in the early 20th century, influencing German rocket scientists. His work influenced Wernher Von Braun and the US Space program.

1962:

Crabtree's influence was evident in President Kennedy's 1962 speech.

1969:

Neil Armstrong's famous quote on the moon was misheard; he actually said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for Crab Kind."