

Meeting His Waterloo – What unrelenting research revealed!

William (Bill) Breen has a long career in his role as an academic historian. A career that would eventually lead him to be an Elder in the Crabtree Foundation. He attended Xavier College, in Melbourne, from 1950-1955 and then went to the University of Melbourne where he completed a BA with Honours in History. After tutoring in the History Department for two years, he won a fellowship to attend Duke University in North Carolina to pursue a PhD in American history. In 1969 he returned to Melbourne to become a lecturer at the newly established La Trobe University in Melbourne's northern suburbs. In 1990 he was appointed a Reader in History and remained at La Trobe until he retired in 2003. During that time, in addition to his teaching, he was elected chair of the History Department, was treasurer and president of the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association and edited the official history of La Trobe University which examines the first 25 years from 1964-1989. He also published two books on early 20th century American history, and twenty articles in refereed journals (almost all published in the United States) and jointly authored a textbook on American history for Australian high school students. In retirement, he has supervised a La Trobe M.A., contributed to the Australian Dictionary of Biography series, and regularly taught various courses in American history and, more recently, the history of World War II to University of the Third Age (U3A) audiences in various northern and eastern suburbs.

When Bill started his teaching role, he joined a young, enthusiastic and intellectually stimulating history department at La Trobe. For a time it was the largest history department in the country. Sometime in the late 1980s Bill was invited to join a small group of Crabtree members at the university which included Michael Osborne, La Trobe's Vice-Chancellor, the historian Prof. John Salmond, the economist Prof. Greg O'Brien and Ralph Gallagher, a senior university administrator. He remembers sharing convivial taxi rides from the university to attend the annual Crabtree dinners which he found amusing and an opportunity to catch up with old acquaintances.

Bill presented the Annual Oration in 1998. As a student at Duke University he had enrolled in a graduate course given by Prof. Theodore Ropp titled "War in the Modern World." which was the most interesting and intellectually stimulating courses he had ever attended. At La Trobe he occasionally offered a similar course in addition to his regular American history subjects. That course led him, somewhat indirectly, to question the role of Joseph Crabtree at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. His unrelenting historical research, over time, revealed the true story of Joseph Crabtree in that momentous battle. This incredible story of Joseph's plucky derring-do was revealed to members of the Crabtree Foundation in the 1998 Annual Oration which added an unknown military dimension to Crabtree's unusual *curriculum vitae*. Bill revealed that Joseph had patriotically stepped in and impersonated Marshall Blucher, the leader of the Prussian army, when he was knocked unconscious early in the battle. The assistance given by the Prussian army, led by Joseph dressed in Blucher's uniform, came at a critical moment in the Battle of Waterloo and made possible the victory of the Duke of Wellington and thus saved a large part of Western Civilization including the British Empire from the Gallic embrace. Bill's historical insight is a considerable addition to Crabtree scholarship.

Having given an Oration, Bill became an Elder and he continued to participate in Foundation affairs attending annual orations and the more frequent business meetings of Elders (code for pleasant lunches) where Crabtree administrative matters and annual orations were reviewed. Regrettably, increasing age has limited Bill's participation in the Foundation's affairs in recent years.

Bill enjoyed the absurdity of the Crabtree Foundation. The Annual Dinner gave people the opportunity to enjoy the intellectual joke that is the Foundation as well as catch-up with old acquaintances or meet new people who shared the joke. The location of the dinners at the Savage Club added another highlight to the evening.

Writer: Scholar Barbara Ainsworth, ed Elder Bill Breen, Orator

1998 Oration: *Joseph Crabtree: the military dimension*.