

Elder Donald Ernest (Don) Charlwood OAM (1915 – 2012)

Words Flying Free with Crabtree

Don Charlwood was a prolific writer and the author of the phenomenally successful coming of age story, *All the Green Year*, set in 1929 in now-not-so-fictional “Kananook” near Frankston. It was published in 1965, and as often suggested, was likely to have been based on his own childhood. Don Charlwood was also a World War II hero, a navigator of Lancaster bombers flown out of England. His is third most extraordinary achievement was his involvement in the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation. He attended the first meeting organised by Professor Arthur Brown; he was the first Australian to deliver a Crabtree Oration in 1975, jointly with Bryan Bennett; and he delivered a second Oration in 1976. His 1975 contribution is generally considered as part of the initial meeting and the one delivered in 1976 as the first of the Australian Chapter Orations.

Don Charlwood came from modest background. He was born in Melbourne and grew up in Frankston, the eldest boy of five siblings. He dreamed of being a writer at school. When he left Frankston High School in 1932, during the depths of the depression, his options were limited to working in a produce market and the local real estate office, until his adult wages (at 18) made him too expensive and consequently unemployed. In 1933 he moved to a relative’s farm near Nareen where he worked as a farm hand, and more importantly, found time to write. He completed a short story course at the London School of Journalism, and published several stories, some of which he sold.

In 1940, he volunteered to join the RAAF and was placed on reserve. In May 1941, he was called up and after initial training in Australia was sent to Vancouver Canada, where he met his future wife, Nell East. There, he, and the rest of his course were sent to Edmonton for six months training as bomb - aimer/navigators. His group was subsequently posted to England in 1943 where he flew in a crew of five under pilot Geoff Maddern, firstly on Halifax bombers and then on Lancasters. Charlwood completed the maximum 30 missions before being “screened” out to training duties.

Don returned to Australia in 1945 where he worked as an Air Traffic Controller. His autobiographical works *No Moon Tonight* (1956), *Marching into War* (1990) and *Journeys into Night* (1991) focus on his journey as a RAAF navigator in Bomber Command.

Who knows how it came about that Don Charlwood found himself as one of the first six to attend the inaugural Crabtree dinner, and the first Orator? Professor Brown was a man who gathered like-minded others around him, and he may have met Don at the Beef and Burgundy Club or invited him to the Department as a recognised writer. Brown was, as well, a member of the Royal Airforce between 1941 and 1946 so it possible he met Charlwood during his tour of duty in England. And if not, it would have been a point of connection between them.

The 1975 Oration dinner held at the University Club, comprised an Introductory Oration by Bryan Bennett: *In Praise of Joseph Crabtree and In Condemnation of Those Who Seek to Belittle, or Worse, to Ignore His Creative Endeavour*, followed by Don Charlwood’s short Oration *Crabtree's Ode on the Return of Governor Phillip from New South Wales*. Don loved

literature from when he was a boy, and especially the poetry of Crabtree contemporaries, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, so he easily identified with the poetic aspect of Joseph Crabtree. Appropriately, the Crabtree *Ode* discovered an Australian connection to the Crabtree tradition, story, and style. While there is no corroborating evidence, it seems likely that “Brownie” and Bryan Bennett might have colluded with Don in working up the Oration which involves a (surprising and serendipitous) revelation that Charlwood’s grandfather, Arthur Charlwood, a printer who emigrated from England, held in his papers a poem marked JC. Don Charlwood found the poem, *Ode on the Return of Governor Arthur Phillip from the Colony of New South Wales*, and Bryan Bennett authenticated it as the work of Crabtree. The story and the last four lines of the poem offer a sportive portent of an ongoing and quixotic bond between the Parent Country and her Australian Colony:

O we at Home do join in fervent prayer;
May all those men so stained and dark with guilt
Learn gentle English ways to make them whole:
May each one from his betters learn to bat and bowl.

Don Charlwood’s second oration *The Obscure Decade and After* picks up on his 1975 story and extends Crabtree’s links with Australia. Charlwood writes about the period from when Crabtree was sent down from Oxford in 1772 until he joined his uncle in Orleans in 1783. Charlwood posits that when Captain Cook sailed out on the *Resolution* for his second voyage, there was a mysterious young able seaman aboard who signed under the name of Thomas Perry and wrote verse. Of the extant works one is *Malus Sylvestris* (the wild apple or crab tree) – a clue as to who the young man might have been.

Don Charlwood’s ongoing involvement in the Crabtree Foundation is shrouded in mystery. Most of the elders remembered little about him – other than that “he was a lovely bloke”, that he had been a navigator in World War II and the first Australian to complete a tour of thirty flights. There was a story told to Elder McGrath that Charlwood once asked a non-flying officer how long it took to complete a tour and the officer told him he didn’t know because no-one had ever completed one yet!

No one is sure how many Oration dinners he attended – perhaps three or four and on occasion he was accompanied by his daughter - but he apologized for many more. Charlwood had no ongoing connection to the University like the other early Orators. In 1976 he was 61 and older than many of the others who began to gather for the annual dinners. He is remembered as being reserved. By then he was moving into the most active period of his writing life. An engaging and natural writer he had experienced an amazing life to write about. What is curious (or maybe not) is that the Crabtree verses Don Charlwood managed to unearth through his research are a quite a lot better than many of the other lines attributed to Crabtree.

Elder O’Brien (the Younger)