

Formicating on the Crabtree Frontiers

When contemplating what might be described as my almost unseemly rapid rise through the ranks of the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation - First female Orator, first female President, first female Keeper of the Cudgel, first female Chair – I can but draw upon the words of William Shakespeare, from his play *Twelfth Night*: ‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.’ In my case, the last.

The initial responsibility for setting this course in train lies with Elder Kevin Childs, who invited me to attend the 2010 Crabtree Dinner at which he would be presenting the oration. I initially assumed this was some sort of soft soap sell, hence the name: Crabtree & Evelyn, presumably? Yet the location of the dinner, the Melbourne Savage Club, suggested otherwise.

I was ushered into the quaintly termed Social Room at the Club, on the night of the dinner, and immediately increased the quota of females in the room by 50 per cent. Glass of sparkling in hand, I soldiered on, wondering if I had stepped into some sort of cross between a BBC costume drama set in a London club and a misogynist’s fond dream. In the dining room I was seated with a lively crew and enjoyed the fine wines from the Savage Club’s cellar, an excellent meal, and repartee that grew ever louder until the thud of a cudgel brought the room to order – a process repeated throughout the evening.

Arcane toasts were drunk. Elder Childs duly orated, and questions were posed with much wit and intellectual rigour. I observed closely, at times flummoxed by the banter and the curious titles, and realised I was rather out of my depth when at the close of the evening it was suggested that several of us repair to Bunnings. The thought of these somewhat inebriated gents trying out angle grinders was most disturbing and I politely declined, unaware that the intended destination was in fact the nearby Mitre Tavern, aka the Mitre 10, aka Bunnings.

I believe Elder Childs, now elevated to President Childs, felt he had a responsibility both to correct my initial impressions of the Crabtree Foundation and the Savage Club and to turn my overly critical eye to something more constructive. Bypassing all the Foundation’s traditional procedures to test for Orator material, I was invited to give the 2011 Oration – a bold and controversial move as I was not only an unknown quantity, despite President Childs’ enthusiastic endorsement, I am female.

Concerns were expressed among the Elders. There was some talk of standards, of the need for proper schooling in the traditions of Crabtree, and yet the grudging acknowledgement that after nearly 40 years some attempt at gender balance might be in order. Questions were asked as to the Crabtrovian topic I intended to pursue, and Elder O’Brien the Elder emailed me a vast collection of previous orations with the cryptic instruction: ‘Cop that.’

I was at the time completing a PhD at the University of Melbourne on the art and artifice of publishing letter collections, and in that epistolary frame of mind I was rather taken by the idea of Crabtree’s French Letters as a possible topic. Delving into the aforementioned previous orations revealed an existing body of work on what the French amusingly refer to as ‘redingotes anglais’. Les redingotes did, however, remind me of a longwinded joke about a priest transporting daffodil bulbs

in these useful items of clothing, and there I had the starting point for my Oration: *Joseph Crabtree: Purveyor of the Daffodil as a Tool of Seduction*.

The slow march forward to gender equality continues, and the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation has now welcomed four more female orators: Elders Burrige, Burleigh, O'Brien the Younger, and Semple.

My taking on the role of Keeper of the Cudgel was in response to the original cudgel going missing – its whereabouts guessed at but never confirmed. I trialled a school bell at one dinner, but general consensus was that a gavel was both more stylish and more appropriate. It also fits neatly and quietly into a capacious handbag. Should I wish to pursue a career in real estate, I am well equipped.

And finally, to Madame Chair? Candidates for the three-year tenure were called for and the silence was deafening. Perhaps because I now wielded the cudgel and was known to be perfecting a hammer throw with it, and perhaps because I was overseas at the time and was therefore not in a position to engage in more Shakespearean drama – the lady doth protest too much – I was elected in absentia. All of these roles have proved to be useful at KPI reviews in my professional career, possibly because those conducting the reviews have no idea what the titles mean but think they sound impressive. The true spirit of Crabtree.

Elder Bryony Cosgrove