

On Board With Crabtree

I became involved with the Chapter in the mid-1990s through Crabtree Elder and legend Jim McGrath. I had come to know Jim through my membership of the Monash University Council Bookshop Board (I was a staff-elected Council member) and Jim was Manager of the University Bookshop.

The Crabtree concept is not that easy to describe, although Jim did his best, so I attended my first oration with a good deal of curiosity. I took an instant liking to the melding of semi-serious scholarship with a gentle spoofing of academic customs, and to the food, drink and company which characterise the evenings.

Of course, in those days, the event was conducted at the Monash University Club, reflecting the origins of the Chapter and probably the residential pattern of Elders and Scholars. However, over time, the Clayton venue became less suitable as Scholars from more distant locations came on board, but some were deterred by the travel demands. I might also add that people became increasingly responsible about driving post-function, and catching a taxi on that campus late at night was a near-impossibility.

My early memories of the conduct of Crabtree business are that it was characterised by a number of witty and erudite interjections, points of order and the like, offered by Elders and Scholars who seemed to combine the dramatic arts of both the academic seminar and the parliamentary floor. This aspect did not necessarily translate well to the post-Monash venues, for reasons which elude me.

My own nomination as an Orator was preceded by the customary apprenticeship of moving the vote of thanks to the Orator of the day, which I did for Richard Sebo in 1997. I was petrified when I discovered that no prior indication of content was available, necessitating that one remain passably sober in order to grasp the gist of the speech and cobble together a relevant commentary. Indeed, I would argue that this role demands more sobriety than that of Orator. In the latter, one can read from a previously-prepared (and rehearsed) speech.

In deciding on a topic for my own oration in 2002, I was mindful that learned predecessors, very well informed on matters British and European, had produced a considerable number of speeches with that background. One, the afore-mentioned Elder McGrath, had even taken us to China. By contrast, I knew a little American history and a little more Australian, so I opted for a focus on late American colonial and early Australian colonial developments which involved the great Crabtree: *Crabtree in the Colonies: The Emerging Truth*.

In 2011, the Crabtree Elders decided to create a new position of Australian Chapter Chair, elected by the Elders, limited to one term of three years. This recognised the all too onerous administrative burden carried by the Honorary Secretary, aided by the President, the latter post being the most recent Orator ex-officio, and hence, lacking any continuity beyond the year in question. It was my privilege to serve in that position from 2014 to 2017, following the inaugural pioneering term of Elder Andrew Schnaider. Without doubt, the establishment of this office has played a significant role in enhancing the administrative efficiency of the Australian Chapter.

My relationship with the Crabtree Foundation has been an interesting and rewarding one. The whole concept is delightfully old-world in a society sadly characterised by historical ignorance and associated failings—which would have alarmed Crabtree. Through both the Oration dinners and Elders' meetings, I have been able to meet and maintain contact with a range of erudite, witty and colourful people, enjoying their company and fine food and libations. And importantly, my education about Crabtree never stops.

Elder Paul Rodan