

Recollections of the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation's Living Witness – Jim Mc Grath

Joining

I spent the last 20 years of my working life at Monash University, starting as Bookshop Manager on Tuesday, 3 January 1984. That morning several members of the Bookshop Board dropped in to make me welcome, and one of them – Maurie Butler (filling in for the Comptroller) – not only brought a Monash University Club membership form (and signed it as one of the two nominees) but invited me to my first Crabtree Annual Dinner and Oration (AD&O). Seven weeks after we first met, he introduced me as his guest.

First Years

My first impressions of Joseph Crabtree were unfavourable: I thought him boring, and the Orators even more so. Too many Orations were convincing impersonations of Dr Dryasdust rather than parodies and failed to set Crabtree in his historical period. I have to admit that I missed (I think for domestic reasons) two Orations that might have changed my mind: those by Philip Martin and Noel Murray, both of whom I knew fairly well and respected greatly. I always asked a question at the dinners.

Women

It was in 1989 that women were first admitted to the Foundation. There were cries of 'Shame' and 'We'll all be ruined' (or 'rooned') but there really wasn't all that much fuss. The more far-sighted Elders were looking for a female Orator. That they took another 22 years to find one shows they weren't trying hard enough (see below, under 'youth policy'). *Nihil innovetur nisi quod traditum est* ('Let there be no innovations save those that are handed down to us', to quote Pope St Steven the First).

Oration

Soon after the 1991 AD&O, Pat Kilbride (Ric Belshaw had died) asked if I'd be the Orator in 1992. I eagerly accepted the offer although I arrived at a topic with considerable difficulty. I have to admit, however, that my reputation for being witty suffered (needlessly) for the whole of the period that passed while I was preparing my Oration. I had a higher purpose: I intended – as all Orators intend – to set the world ablaze with my wit. I prepared not only the Oration, but the 'answers to questions', assuming that questioners would always ask questions other than the ones they should have asked. For example, I said that Crabtree's influence was decisive over the question of whether Monash should have a Department of Stamp-Collecting, and that Crabtree, quoting Confucius, said that 'Philately will get you nowhere'.

Response to My Oration: *Erotic Influences on Crabtree's Musical Contribution to the Chinese Pizza Industry*

Kilbride rang me on the morning of the day I was due to give my Oration to ask if I had a topic and would I care to tell him what it was. He used to say that my Oration was the funniest. Peter Darvall said that he'd asked his mother to read all the Orations as a preparation for his writing his own, and that she said, after reading them all, that mine was the best. Several others (who weren't actually present on the night) said they wished that they had been there. One of the latter had an excuse: John Salmond, Professor of American History at La Trobe, was in the USA on study leave. The next

ten or so Orations were (mostly) rather better than anything that had been inflicted on me before mine.

President

I was President in 1993 and again in 1994, because Martin Williams had accepted the position of Professor of Geography at the University of Adelaide and couldn't take the time off. I think that I did it rather well – the second time. Nick Hudson was the other person to have done the job twice, in 1984 and 1989.

Subsequently

I've never been sure whether the title I subsequently acquired was The Living 'Witness' or 'Witless'. I know that I was aging rapidly, and that, even though I wasn't old enough to have personally known Crabtree, I soon would be if I kept aging as fast. I had long advocated a 'youth policy' for the Foundation. It seemed to me that we would run out of Orators if we stuck to getting people who had already given Orations to do the minor speeches. The policy was only half-heartedly applied.

I proposed (in 2009, I think) that the position of Chairman be created. It was an obvious move: too many Presidents had shown themselves to be either useless, or at least absent when Kilbride visited the Club at lunchtime (as he did once a year) in his annual search for a speaker, even though he and his wife Bernadette, a key early member of the Foundation, were generally to be found at the Club between 4.30pm and 7pm most weekdays.

I proposed, when the role of Chairman was established, that Andrew Schnaider fill the position (because of his Law degree). He changed two things: assembling Elders periodically to worry about the future and improve the official version of the past; and increasing Elders' attendance at departed Elders' funerals.

I initially supported the Foundation's move away from Monash University and to the Savage Club. The main reason was the heatwave in February 2009. There were advance apologies galore for the AD&O, and still more people didn't show up on the night because of heat or fires. Schnaider suggested the move to the Savage Club, and I agreed.

I proposed that Phil A'Vard be appointed to a position that would take advantage of his theatrical know-how. I was shocked to find that he had become Dep. Hon. Sec. and even more shocked when he turned out to be the best of the three we've had.

I supported Paul Rodan (and would have supported Bryony Cosgrove, three years later, had it been necessary) as candidate for the position of Chairman, following on from Andrew Schnaider's extended tenure. My direct involvement with the Foundation came to an end thereafter, because Rodan (and then Cosgrove) took the obvious view that one of the responsibilities of a Chairman is to hold the Secretary's hand.

I attended two AD&O dinners at the Savage Club, but I found the place didn't suit me, lacking a certain something, that soupçon of je ne sais quoi that a university environment offers. These days, I offer my Living Witness interjections from afar.

Witnessed by Elder Bryony Cosgrove