

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1977 Oration
Crabtree: The Road To Charliegrark

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Mr President, distinguished guests, gentlemen

Just 12 months ago this week, I was honored with an invitation to attend the first Australian Crabtree Oration, an event that was to open my eyes and mind to a whole new world of discovery and mental stimulation. You, sir, were the Orator on that occasion and I shall never forget the masterly dissertation we were privileged to hear. The then president, you will recall, was unstinting in his praise of your eloquence, your mastery of words, the high order of scholarship and research you brought to your task.

However, I confess, the evening was somewhat clouded for me. For at the end, the president (known - and revered - by Crabtree scholars the world over as *The Living Memory*) invited - nay - *directed* me to prepare and deliver the 1977 Oration. I sought - modestly, humbly - to decline. In my innocence I was unaware of the awesome powers of a president of the Crabtree Foundation: a request, an invitation, a direction from the president allow of no refusal. His power is absolute.

Later this evening, sir, you will exercise that power in naming next year's Orator. I can only pray that you will display a finer judgment than your predecessor (who, it will be remembered, made his decision AFTER the port).

Nevertheless, while I count this opportunity to pay my tribute to Joseph Crabtree a signal honor, I keep asking myself: how could I, an ill-lettered scribbler, have blundered into such a predicament - placing myself, pretentiously, within one of the most august bodies of scholars and literary researchers ever assembled in the history of English letters? Indeed last year, as the barren months sped by, I found myself sinking deeper and deeper into despondency.

Professor Brown had charged me with the responsibility of identifying and authenticating Joseph Crabtree's influence on Australian journalism. You, sir, made my task more difficult, you said you believed it unlikely that Crabtree ever again visited Australia after his voyage with Cook in 1772.

Sir, I am happy to reveal that he did, indeed, return to the Antipodes -on many occasions. Admittedly, the first pieces of evidence I uncovered were fragmentary and far from compelling. There was, certainly, a tantalizing fascination in plucking at random a few tiny tesserae from the rich mosaic of Crabtree's life and work - but nothing that gave my efforts any sure direction.

Until ...on one blessed day halfway through the year, some benevolent providence delivered to my office the instrument of my salvation. Not inappropriately, perhaps, it took the

form of a man of the cloth - Pastor Barry Crabtree a servant of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a dedicated worker among the youth of this country, and, above all, a man of wit, charm, erudition, and humanity - qualities that immediately stamped him as a true scion of the illustrious family, Crabtree.

Pastor Crabtree had come to the Information Office with a simple request for information about the University (luckily, nobody ever asks difficult questions - they know better). I explained my plight to him, and, to my great joy, he readily, eagerly, agreed to assist me in my research.

Unfortunately, Pastor Crabtree was not able to prove conclusively, in accordance with the exacting standards of scholarly accuracy demanded by the Foundation, a direct line of descent from Joseph Crabtree, but that there is, in fact, a very close relationship, I personally have no doubt.

Barry Crabtree - himself a poet, incidentally - told me an enthralling tale about his own great grandfather, one Abraham Crabtree - Abe - a most colorful individual, a man of courage, independence and infinite resource. A sailor, he arrived in the colony about the middle of last century. It's thought he jumped ship in Port Phillip. From there he made his way to a remote settlement in far western Victoria - Lake Charliegrark, which, as you know, is close to Lake Boorookpi on the southern fringe of the Little Desert.

Now, why should Abe have undertaken this perilous and lonely journey?

In the answer to this question lay my first, certain clue to Joseph Crabtree's presence and work in Australia. . Suddenly it all became blindingly clear.

Charliegrark is, of course, an Aboriginal word meaning *place of magpies* and in the awesome stillness of that distant Antipodean wilderness, the evening carolling of magpies can exert a magical influence on the senses.

Picture, if you will, Joseph Crabtree in that magnificent loneliness. You cannot then avoid the question: Where else but here could Crabtree have composed his memorable *Ode to a Magpie*?

*Hail to thee, pied singer!
A bard may never write
A poem that could charm the sky
Like the Bird of Boorookpi.*

(The original of this poem can be seen in a mouldering collection in the Goroce Mechanics Institute. Characteristically, it's signed with a nom-de-plume...Bard of Boorookpi.)

In the same collection is a poem that begins ...

*I heard a thousand blended notes
While in the bush I roamed...*

The startling significance of this will not be lost on those of you who have previously noted Wordsworth's enduring debt to Crabtree's genius. It is interesting to note that the fourth stanza of this poem begins (in our poet's manuscript):

The magpies 'round me hopp'd and play'd...

NOT

The birds around me hopp'd and play'd...

as it appears in Wordsworth's version.

One other piece of evidence that, to my mind, establishes Crabtree's association with Charliegrark beyond all reasonable doubt, can be found in a tiny graveyard on the shores of the lake.

Crabtree, as you know, was a renowned necrologist and nowhere did his art achieve a finer flowering than in Australia (of that I will speak more later). The Charliegrark example I wish to cite epitomises, in just four lines, the quintessential Crabtree - his consummate skill as a poet, his compassion, his love of robust companionship, the pleasures he found in strong drink, and his predilection for word-play.

Allow me to quote:

*Here Lies a Tavern-keeper,
A Spirited man, of Cheer,
A Village mourns his Passing,
And wakes upon his Bier.*

Is it any wonder that the young Abraham Crabtree (Hopping Abe, as he was known - one leg was two inches shorter than the other, the legacy of a drunken spree) should have felt irresistibly drawn to that part of the country so beloved of his fabled relative?

As I said earlier, the precise relationship between Joseph Crabtree and the very large branch of the family that sprang from Abe's days at Charliegrark has not been fully established, but it seems fairly certain that Abraham was of the generation that immediately followed Joseph's. Pastor Crabtree tells me that most of the male Crabtrees of that era bore biblical names - Joseph and David (who, he believes, were of the same generation), Abraham, Thomas and many others.

I wish that I had the time here to recount some of the tales that Barry tells of his great grandfather's exploits - his elopement with a squatter's daughter (at night, on horseback), the classic feud that developed when Hopping Abe tried to settle part of a property controlled by the squatter Broughton, the gun battle that broke out with Abe and Broughton exchanging shots from their long-barrelled muzzle-loaders across the placid waters of Lake Charliegrark, Abe's alcoholic frolics and his frequent brushes with the law (none of which, I'm happy to say, ended in a conviction in court). Indeed Abraham's life seemed crowded enough for two men, and it's

tempting to speculate that, in the folklore handed down through the generations of Australian Crabtrees, some confusion may have crept in as to the respective roles played by Joseph and Abraham. But I must stick to the facts - as far as they are ascertainable - and for most of these I must rely on the record of my interview with Barry Crabtree (I have that record with me tonight, and would be happy to play parts of it back for anyone interested at a later hour).

Sir, I fear I have strayed a little from my brief. With greater perspicacity than even I had given him credit for, Professor Brown long ago divined that Joseph Crabtree had had a profound influence on Australian journalism. For my part, I would have said - facetiously - that any influence that he might have had could only have been baleful, given the standards that have, from time to time, prevailed in that field of human endeavour.

Such a judgment, of course, would be not merely inaccurate, but positively mischievous. There have been times - even before the advent of the Press Council — when Australian journalism has scaled Olympian heights ... none more so than when Crabtree's powers were at their greatest.

And that time, in my humble opinion, was the early part of last century. There was, of course, no such thing as a *free press* in the infant colony of New South Wales. The only newspaper permitted was the *Sydney Gazette*, a four-page weekly established in 1806 and printed by the authority of the Governor. It was not until Governor Brisbane, with his emancipist ideals, arrived in 1821 that other newspapers began to appear. Chief among them were W.C. Wentworth's *Australian* and John Dunmore Lang's *Colonist*. Governor Darling, who succeeded Brisbane, made strenuous efforts to stifle these brash new organs of public opinion, but, back in England, Chief Justice Forbes refused him the necessary power, maintaining that the *ordinary law* was sufficient protection against any *unjustified virulence* that might offend the sensitivities of the thieves, vagabonds, footpads, cut-throats, remittance men, and miscellaneous villains who largely constituted Australian society at the time.

The result, naturally was that the Australian press of the day was remarkably free. However it must be remembered that, while there was indeed some pretty lusty and uncouth journalism, the result, no doubt, of the monumental power struggles between competing proprietors - the papers also contained passages of reportage - in prose and poesy - of outstanding delicacy and beauty. In fact, it seemed, no reporter of the time could resist the temptation to record the most mundane events - a ship arrival, a petty court case, the price of vegetables - in elegant, flowing verse.

Much of this I ascribe to Crabtree's powerful and pervasive influence. .

When, a few years later, John Pascoe Fawkner launched his *Melbourne Advertiser*, newspapers were still the *handmaids of other men's professions* (their proprietors often were politicians first and newspapermen last - but always businessmen). But, at least, Fawkner made a gesture to the arts by featuring a widely-read *Poet's Corner*.

Melbourne's early chronicler Garryowen (Edmund Finn) recalls one notable contribution to this column. It was, he said, penned by an anonymous Collins Street Rhymer', and written (mark the date) on February 14, 1839. It read:

*Melbourne will rise in mighty state,
And tho' a bantling now,
Will shame her Parent and create .
A lustre round her brow.*

*Melbourne, left in her infant state
To flourish as she may,
Shall, notwithstanding this hard fate,
Behold a brighter day.*

*Melbourne will flourish; raise the cup,
Loudly hurra to her glory!
Her day now dawns - her sun is up –
And success will be her story. ' .*

Do we see in this prophetic piece the dawning of the age of elegance in Australian literature? More importantly, do we detect that moment in his life's work when Crabtree (for I am convinced that he was the anonymous rhymist) was beginning to develop an interest in necromancy to match his already established skills in necrology? For it was only a matter of time before his powers of prophecy were to become more widely acknowledged.

I believe those powers were never more evident than in Crabtree's quite beautiful poem, *Afternoon at Newport*. You will, of course, be familiar with the similar work subsequently published over Wordsworth's name, bearing the title *Yarrow Visited*. Let me assure you that in the original, the first two lines ran thus:

*And is this - Yarra? - This the Stream
Of which my fancy cherished...*

After following that noble stream's course through hills and meadows, forests and idyllic pastoral scenes, we come suddenly to this significant passage:

*That region left, the vale unfolds
Rich groves of lofty stature,
With Yarra winding through the pomp
Of cultivated nature;
And rising from those lofty groves
Behold a ruin hoary,
The shatter'd front of Newport's Towers,
Renown'd in Border story.*

And finally, that extraordinarily prescient last stanza:

*The vapours linger round the heights,
They melt and soon must vanish;
One hour is theirs, nor more is mine –
Sad thought! which I would banish,*

*But that I know, wher'er I go,
Thy genuine image, Yarra!
Will dwell with me - to heighten joy,
And cheer my mind in sorrow.*

In a later edition of the *Melbourne Advertiser*, Poets Corner was garnished with a lay entitled *The Lover to his Intended*, the first verse of which, I believe, was so erotic that even Edmund Finn delicately refused to reproduce it.

The last verse, however, reads:

*Sing me to sleep thy Cadences
Shall be the music of the breeze
To fill my sail and waft me on
Until some halcyon Shore be Won
While Love and Hope and Pleasure beam
The guiding Stars throughout my Dream'*

This, to me, is unmistakably Crabtree - in direct line of descent (though written, perhaps, half a century on) from that unforgettable - and almost unbearably moving - poem so eloquently recited by Don Charlwood last year ... *the ship rides shuddering down the moon...*

I beg leave, at this point, to digress a little. It occurs to me that in my admittedly deficient reading of Crabtree, I have seen little reference to his prowess as a hymnist. Here I can touch only briefly on this aspect of his work, but I do humbly commend it as a rich source of material for future students.

My interest was aroused by Edmund Finn's lively account of the premature opening of the first Wesleyan chapel in Collins Street, Melbourne, in 1841. As the structure was nearing completion, a temporary pulpit was erected - *in a loose and hurried manner*, Finn notes - and a preliminary service arranged. The first resident minister was one Reverend S. Wilkinson, who, we are told, was a *zealous, pious, charitable...courteous, cheerful and frequently jovial man* - everything, it seems, that Joseph's morose, Methodist Uncle Oliver was not. The Reverend Wilkinson was also, obviously, a cleric in a hurry, for he proposed to preach a sermon on *The Heavenly World as the Christian's future home*. As a prelude, he decided to give sonorous voice to the following hymn:

*Nothing on earth I call my own -
A stranger to the world unknown
I all their goods despise -
I trample on their whole delight,
And seek a country out of sight -
A country in the skies*

Now, I have been unable to confirm the authorship of this rare hymnal gem - but does it not bring to mind our Joseph's early association with his austere, forbidding Uncle Oliver?

Whatever the answer to that, I should like to picture our poet in the congregation on that auspicious occasion, for it's recorded that when the good Mr Wilkinson came to the penultimate line - *a country out of sight* - the planking under his feet gave way. As Finn says, *like a criminal turned off when the drop falls*, the hapless preacher dropped - not, perhaps, to *a country in the skies*, but certainly *out of sight*.

Crabtree revelled in the newness, the rawness, the lusty aggressiveness of the young Australian colonies. He adapted quickly to the rough and ready life, fell easily into the often crude manner of speech and writing - but withal, invested it with his own strength and enduring dignity. He travelled widely. It came as no surprise to me, then, to find in the columns of the *Kaloorlie Sun* an *Ode to Westralia*, that struck me as hauntingly familiar. It read, in part:

*Land of forests, fleas and flies,
Blighted hopes and blighted eyes,
Art thou hell in earth's disguise,
Westralia.*

The power of this poem obviously seized the imagination of contemporary editors, for its author (none other than *The Boulder Bard*) discovered that it had been reproduced - without acknowledgment, or payment - in a number of other papers. Whereupon, our bard savagely wielded his pen as follows:

*Band of robbers, jobbers, crimps,
Fat man's tools and bully's pimps,
Clique of deadheads, blackmails, imps,
Press-tralia!*

*You will publish unpaid screed,
Bury principle for greed,
Of the poor, you take no heed,
Press-tralia!'*

No one who has dipped, be it ever so lightly, into Australian newspapers of the latter half of the 19th century - papers such as John Norton's *Sydney Truth*, for example - could be left in any doubt as to the influence that Crabtree had on Australian journalism! Or of his opinion of the morals of our 19th century newspaper barons.

* * * * *

I spoke earlier of Joseph Crabtree's career as a writer of funerary verse; and it is in this field that I have found my researches peculiarly rewarding. I have indeed spent many pleasurable hours in graveyards large and small - as also have my tireless colleagues Warnemunde and Erbacher. We have found many a headstone - from Cape York to Charliegrark - that has been enlivened by the works of Crabtree.

At three-halfpence a line (no penny-a-liner, he), I imagine that Joseph found the trade a lucrative one. But rarely did he allow his meticulous standards to slip.

There's little evidence, for instance, of morbid religiosity in his necrologues. Rather, he sought mainly to concentrate on the positive aspects of his clients' earthly existence - as in the tribute to a tavern-keeper I quoted earlier.

Recently, at Beechworth I discovered an enigmatic - not to say ambivalent tribute to one James Brasslin, a Yorkshireman who sloughed his mortal pelt sometime in the first half of the last century. (Mr President - I apologise for introducing that word *ambivalent*. But you may recall that at the inaugural Crabtree Oration at University College, London, in 1954, Professor F.P. Wilson said that no scholarly address could be considered complete unless it contained the words *surely* and *ambivalent*. Now, *ambivalent* hadn't even been invented in Crabtree's day; but even if it had - and even if he had understood what it meant - I like to think that our Joseph would surely be in two minds about using it.)

But I'm bound to say there is a certain ambiguity, if not ambivalence, about the following tribute to the head of James Brasslin:

*His languishing head is at rest,
Its thinkings and achings are o'er,
His quiet immovable breast
Is heaved by affliction no more.*

In the same cemetery (indeed, a most lively burial ground), I found this farewell message to one William Roberts:

*Afflictions sore long time he bore,
Physicians were in vain,
Till God did please death should him ease,
And free him from his pain.*

Mr President, gentlemen: Your long and sore afflictions are coming to an end. As the great Irish balladeer, Sean O'Crabtree put it: *It's a long way from Chipping Sodbury to Charliegrark*. I would like, before winding up, to thank you for accompanying me on at least a part of that epic journey.

I have it on the authority of one of this country's most distinguished after-dinner speakers that an oration - as distinct from an address, or a lecture, or a dissertation - is, by definition, long and boring. I have now spoken for some minutes, and, if I have managed to render tedious a significant part of the life and work of one of the world's greatest literary figures, then I feel I have nobly fulfilled those criteria.

One other essential component of an oration, I understand, is the inclusion of some classical quotation - preferably in a foreign tongue. I have no facility with languages (I admit to no shame here - after all, Crabtree demonstrated his *manly independence* by refusing to learn French in all the time he spent in that country). Therefore, I shall conclude with a passage from another, lesser figure in English literature...

*He draweth out the thread of his verbosity
Finer than the staple of his argument.*

Thank you.