

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1993 Annual Oration
Joseph Crabtree And The Sources Of The Nile (1768-1794)

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Before embarking on this convoluted tale - a tale *that unfolds through rivalry, pride, greed and finally bloodshed* (1), I must pay tribute to my eloquent and scholarly predecessors on whose toes, as it were, I stand today. Before *seeking to lift the palsied hand* of Crabtree studies to a posture both erect and proud, let us give due praise to the great Crabtree orators of yesteryear. Our 1992 orator, in a moving and passionate address, urged us to resist the efforts of sombre scholars, with the dry dust of libraries in their souls, to circumscribe and limit the boundaries of our curiosity about the natural world. It was doubtless in this spirit that he proposed we should look on former Crabtree orators *as intellectually well-hung giants who have done great things, and not as the wine—sodden wrecks that they now appear to be*. But enough of such eulogies, and on with our story!

JOSEPH CRABTREE was born in 1754. He died, a century later, in 1854. He was, quintessentially, a survivor. A practical man, imbued with insatiable curiosity and a constant urge to travel, he was brave, determined, cool in adversity, passionate as occasion demanded. Skilled in political intrigue, with a remarkable knowledge of arcane herbal remedies and poisons, he was a man who saw much but said little. A man of action but also a dreamer, he was generous with his friends but remorseless with his enemies, of whom he had many, especially enraged husbands. I will not dwell on this regrettable aspect of his character beyond noting three curious matters relevant to the unfolding of our tale. Crabtree was, we have it on the best authority, frequently and fatally attracted to women with sad eyes. He had a particular aversion to snakes - an aversion he sought gallantly but unsuccessfully to conceal. And he suffered from a remarkable degree of testicular asymmetry, which is perhaps why he was seldom observed to bathe, and never unclothed.

These three seemingly unrelated phenomena - the attraction to sad-eyed ladies, the sensitivity to the pronounced contrast in the size of his family jewels, and his morbid fear of snakes - are all closely linked. Indeed, it is the burden of our post-prandial ramblings this evening to reveal this nexus, to show how the idiosyncracies of the Crabtree temperament were fatefully involved in the sad and sorry saga to discover the sources of the Nile, prompting at least two mysterious deaths, to say nothing of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and the undignified scramble for Africa, the aftermath of which still resonates around the world today. . . .

These claims may seem far-fetched, but to anyone who has sought to delve into the miasmatic mists of Crabtree's life, they should come as no surprise. I wish simply to give evidence. You may draw your own conclusions. If, like Lear, you rashly conclude that "nothing shall come of nothing", I would remind you that on occasions such as this a little voluntary suspension of disbelief would be no bad thing. Or, as Mohandas Ghandi once said when asked what he thought of western civilisation: *I think it would be a very good idea*.

In the little village of Chipping Sodbury, set amidst the green and golden rolling limestone hills of the Cotswolds there is a small antique shop run by one of England's best loved former television comedians. During a recent pilgrimage through the Vale of Evesham, I came to the curiously named hamlet of Wyre Piddle. Discrete enquiries about the origins of this name revealed that it commemorated an event in the life of a long-forgotten returning traveller from bygone days - two centuries or more ago. Intrigued, I sought the assistance of scrumpy - rough but potent West Country cider -and while losing heavily at darts and shove-halfpenny to the local hedgers and ditchers, I discovered a clue. Gathering dust on the mantelpiece, over the wide fireplace inside the ancient village inn were two fragments of black volcanic glass which, I can now confirm, once belonged to Joseph Crabtree. They are similar to the ones I now circulate among you. Until very recently they were used by the Danakil and Galla nomads of the Ethiopian lowlands for shaving, for circumcision and for castrating one's enemies. (I might add that neutron-activation and trace-element analyses of Crabtree's heirloom's shows conclusively that they came from what was once called Gariboldi volcano in the Ethiopian Rift, and that Scanning Electron Microscope analysis revealed microwear patterns consistent with cutting soft but meaty tissue) .

So much for the first clue. The second is more subtle and ultimately involves Crabtree, the Sudanese melon girl, the missing camel driver, and the snake. Pickled in a bottle of vintage brandy near the back of the antique shop in Chipping Sodbury are the mangled but amazingly well preserved remains of a four-foot long snake. Careful inspection of the anal scales shows it to none other than the Sudanese saw-scaled viper, known to science (erroneously) as *Echis carinatus* .

The third and final clue came from the house of Yusif the Carpenter, in the former red-light quarter of what is now Port Sudan. Two hundred years ago Port Sudan was a squalid little port on the salt pans and scorching coastal plains at the foot of the Red Sea Hills. The local people eked out a miserable living by smuggling the narcotic leaf khat up the Red Sea by dhow from southeastern Ethiopia.

However, the pirates of Massawa in northeastern Eritrea fought fiercely to monopolise this trade, so that very little of it ever reached the Sudan.

One morning, while I was examining some sub-fossil shells collected from the well in his back garden, the Port Sudan harbour master mentioned a curious button shown to him by Yusif the Carpenter. This button, which I shall forthwith refer to as Crabtree's missing fly-button, was of a sort fashioned in the West Country of Britain between the years 1750 and 1780, and worn on the nether garments of males from those parts. (In size, shape and colour it was somewhat reminiscent of the button excavated immediately above the La Perouse glass-bead layer at Captain Cook's landing site at Kurnell, . . . but I digress!)

So, you now have the evidence: a West Country fly-button from the house of Yusif the Carpenter in Port Sudan; a pickled Sudanese viper in an antique shop in Chipping Sodbury; and two blades of volcanic glass from Ethiopia, with minute traces of human blood protein along the cutting edges, both now in the ancient pub at Wyre Piddlenear Chipping Sodbury. What are we to make of all this? What is the connecting thread? Yes, the alert student of Crabtree will have guessed correctly! The missing link is Joseph C alias Yusuf) Crabtree, colloquially but affectionately known to this day in northern and

eastern Sudan as Abu Tabeeb or Abu Thaba'an or Father of the Snake.

With a generous measure of Celtic intuition, finely disciplined imagination and scientific forensic skills, aided by even more generous libations of Mr Cooper's ambrosial sheep dip, I am now able to put before you the following sad, sordid and sorrowful tale. (It has taken me 33 years to gather and sift all the evidence, but I am a slow and patient man). This, then, is the tale I tell.

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At sundown on October the 4th, 1772, Joseph Crabtree was about to visit Sittina's maid in the town of Shendi, 20 days' camel journey south of Aswan. Sittina was the Queen of Shendi, a town on the right bank of the Nile in northern Sudan. Crabtree was a lusty 18 years of age; Sittina, in the words of the great Scottish traveller James Bruce of Kinnaird, was *a tall beautiful woman of 40 with very red lips and the finest teeth and eyes he had ever seen.*

Striving to remove a mosquito from his left eye, clad only in a short, loose-fitting Sudanese gellabia or night-shirt, Crabtree was horrified to see a snake crawling up his left leg, no doubt seeking the furry warmth of his family jewels. . .

Crabtree reacted much as you and I might have reacted. He uttered a raucous West Country screech, dropped his candle, and leapt in the air, kicking frantically as he did. The snake landed yarded away, and was rapidly dispatched by his fearless Sudanese suffragi or body-servant. Unfortunately for young Joseph, the snake had struck: two clear fang marks were visible, together with a translucent pale yellow fluid, and a triangular row of tiny punctures from the snake's teeth. Crabtree remained as calm as the occasion demanded, observing with detached fascination the swelling and slow discoloration of his left testicle. With great fortitude and presence of mind he contrived to attach a small tourniquet, but fainted once pressure was applied.

He awoke to see James Bruce of Kinnaird towering over him to his full 6 foot 4 inches, together with the local hakim or doctor, and Sittina's sad-eyed maid. Bruce had just returned from 4 years in the highlands of Ethiopia. In one hand he held two razor-sharp flakes of black Ethiopian volcanic glass, and in the other he dandled a once cherished portion of Crabtree's anatomy. He bowed, handed Crabtree his trophy, together with the two obsidian surgical tools, bade him good night and farewell, and strode off into the Sudanese desert night.

The entire episode barely rates a passing mention as a minor footnote in volume 5 of *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile, in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773*, by James Bruce of Kinnaird, Esq., FRS. But Crabtree it would seem, remained scarred for life. Somewhat ungratefully, to my mind, he was to blame many of his later misfortunes not upon the snake (now preserved in medicinal brandy), but upon the man he was wont to refer to as Bruce the Butcher, or simply as *that bloody butcher* - the man who had undoubtedly saved his life. From that time on, the iron had entered Crabtree's soul, and he began to plot a terrible revenge .

A week later, at dawn on October the 11th, 1772, Joseph Crabtree eloped with Sittina's sad-eyed maid, together with 5 camels, 2 camel drivers, 1 pickled snake, a sack of dried dates, 20 water melons, the melon girl (sister to the maid), 1 small barrel of French brandy, and 10 guerbas (goatskin bags) of Nile water, bound for the town of Suakin on the Red Sea coast .

During the terrible desert crossing 3 camels died of thirst, one camel man went missing, the other went mad and had to be abandoned, but the 3 survivors (Crabtree and the 2 girls) finally reached the village of Erkowit, a mist oasis in the Red Sea Hills. Here the Hadendowa tribesmen cared for them, awed by the myths already gathering around Abu Tabeeb and his pickled snake. Eventually, a passing mule caravan laden with salt blocks and led by the great-great-great grandfather of Yusif the Carpenter, discovered them and brought them to the smugglers' stronghold in Port Sudan. The girls settled here and raised their families. In due course, the ever restless Crabtree found a safe passage back to London, where he at first sought to forget the entire bitter-sweet episode.

All might have ended there had it not been for the disturbing news that James Bruce was about to publish his long delayed narrative: *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile*. The year was 1790, 16 years after Bruce's return home, 18 years after the Shendi snake incident, and the very year in which a Persian prawn seller from Pusan was killed by his pet Doberman in the East End of London. Crabtree was in the prime of life, no longer besotted with either the 3rd daughter of Daniel MacGillycuddy, 4th Earl of Kerry, nor even with Constanze, former wife of the late Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Perturbed by the thought that the true history of his hitherto well-concealed testicular asymmetry was about to be revealed to the London literati in all its gory detail, he laid his plans with meticulous care.

His subtle use of innuendo, skilful use of disinformation, his vigorous use of gross and bare-faced lies, or what Gladstone might later have described as *terminological inexactitudes*, all bore fruit. Even the intellectually alert but now aged Dr Samuel Johnson was taken in by Crabtree's duplicity. Note carefully the following comment by one of Johnson's contemporary biographers:

Dr Johnson said ' that, when he first conversed with Mr Bruce, the Abyssinian traveller, he was very much inclined to believe he had been there, but that he had afterwards altered his opinion.

Except for his former friends and scientific colleagues across the Channel in France, where the great French naturalist Buffon had once presented him to the late King Louis XVI, few in England believed a word of Bruce's account of his travels in Africa. He was, we are reliably told, *universally disbelieved*. Crabtree's malign and shadowy influence can be readily detected here. Bruce left London, *morose and enraged*, returning to his country estates at Kinnaird in Scotland, never to cross the border again.

There is a sad and sinister sequel to our tale. In 1794, *Bruce had been entertaining a large party at Kinnaird, and having seen off one of his guests was hurrying up the great staircase of his house to fetch another when he tripped and fell. He pitched on to his head. He lived for a few hours but never regained consciousness. He was just 64. (2) .*

There is a tree which grows to this day in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles. It is an Ethiopian tree and grew from a collection of seeds sent to King Louis XVI by James Bruce of Kinnaird in 1773 or 1774. The bark of this tree is often added to local Ethiopian beer by village brewers to give the drink a bitter, more thirst-quenching flavour. If too much is added, the beer becomes dangerous: literally able to paralyse a man. The symptoms are paralysis of the chest muscles, enormous difficulty in breathing, collapse and eventual death...

Was the 33rd person on the guest list at Bruce's final party really one Jamie Campbell? Or do the initials betoken something more sinister? Is this how Joseph Crabtree finally secured his revenge?

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Let me conclude this sorry tale of intrigue, vanity, passion and dark deeds with one perhaps sobering thought. The Galla nomads of Ethiopia are still great users of the razor-sharp black volcanic glass. The word they use for this glass is "ballche" or "ballchit", and in Ethiopia there is a great of it