

The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
2006 Annual Oration
Crabtree on the Rise

G. C. O'Brien
15 February 2006

Mr President, Living Burden, Elders, Scholars and guests, I am deeply honoured and somewhat humbled to have been invited to give the Annual Oration this year. When I was revealed as the prospective orator at the 2005 annual meeting, I assumed that I would be required to invent some palpably plausible, minor episode in the life of the founder. The reality has been exceedingly different, to say the least. There has been no need for invention. Everywhere I have travelled, everywhere I have looked, allusions and references to Crabtree abounded. I now understand something that I should have known instinctively, that like me, there is not a member of this Foundation who does not delight, in an almost religious sense, in recognising, at special moments in our lives, the hand of the founder casting a special glow on our otherwise drab lives. It is now clear to me that I was preordained to find and reveal what you will hear tonight. It was my destiny. The difficulty is not in finding touches of Crabtree, the difficulty is seeing too much of the influence of the polymath in the science, philosophy and literature of the world around us.

I now well appreciate those elders who have preceded me and who have been tempted to try to explain the mystery of Crabtree through his poetry, his role in gastronomy, or in medicine, or in science or some other discipline. In these circumstances only a shallow portrait of this extraordinary polymath becomes apparent through the mists of neglect from Crabtree's death in 1854 to the formation of this Foundation one hundred years later. Unfortunately, like my predecessors, I am no superman, and I can only reveal those clues that the spirit of Crabtree has allowed me to glimpse, and those humble conclusions that it has been my good fortune to be able to draw from these clues.

I would be the first to admit that there are some minor exaggerations, even colourings of the truth in what has been revealed over the last 52 years. In spite of this, the true essence of the man rises out of the pages of archives of this Foundation and casts a light of hope on what a man, or a woman, or in Crabtree's case, both, might achieve from his humble beginnings as the favourite choirboy of the Curate of Chipping Sodbury. In 2003 Elder Downes hinted at the trans-substantiation of Crabtree in white mould cheese, In 1998 Elder Breen enlightened us on Crabtree's role in saving Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo while Elder Salmond in 1993 provided us with evidence of the greatest deception in history, an account of Crabtree's impersonation of George Washington after George became demented. Elder Rodan in 2002 spoke of "Crabtree in the Colonies: The Emerging Truth"

Unfortunately, despite its brilliant intellectual leaps, Elder Paul Rodan's oration falls into the category of less well supported research. Rodan revealed the possible presence of Joseph Crabtree in New South Wales from 1800 until at least 1806, after which he went

on to become Australia's first vigneron. At the conclusion of his revelations Elder Rodan urged scholars to explore further Crabtree's role in Australian History. Bear with me and you will hear how I have taken up his challenge. But first I must address Elder Rodan's basic premise. I believe it is quite likely Paul Rodan got the wrong man. Crabtree could not have been in New South Wales over the first decade of the nineteenth century. Previous Crabtree scholars have placed Crabtree in America, London and France in 1800, in India from 1802 to 1805, in legal practice in London later in 1805, a guest of Sir Joseph Banks at the Royal Society in 1806, accepting a chair at Vilno University in 1808 and assuming a readership in criminology at Oxford in 1809. I cannot accept Elder Rodan's explanation that "during parts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an organised band of Crabtree impersonators roamed parts of the known world". But, of course, it remains up to future scholars to determine where the truth lies. What is surprising is how, in the absence of any evidence, Elder Rodan did manage to uncover Crabtree's critical role in Australian History. What is not surprising is how the missing manuscripts and official cover-ups have led him slightly astray and caused him to draw the wrong inferences from the evidence. Nevertheless I am in debt to him, because without his researches and his challenge I would never have reached the conclusions I am about to reveal.

I have also had some trouble reconciling my conclusions with those of Elder Nick Hudson's 1983 oration outlining Crabtree's contribution to road design and railroad construction, but there is insufficient time to address these concerns tonight.

I am sure that all of us in the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation, like Elder Rodan, have at some time or other puzzled over the shadow Crabtree has thrown over Australia. As revealed by the late Professor Richard Freeman, in 1768 Joseph Banks took Joseph Crabtree and his cousin George on the *Endeavour* as his two flute boys. It was on this voyage that the young Joseph gained his encyclopaedic knowledge of the flora of the world. He and his cousin spent some time in Botany Bay in 1770, an experience which was to stand Cousin George in good stead, when he was transported to New South Wales 51 years later.

George's literary output has been analysed by Elder R.S. Nyholm, who discovered that Joseph had maintained a lively correspondence with Cousin George, and who suggested that some of Joseph's unpublished verse from this correspondence may have been inadvertently attributed to Henry Kendall. Indeed there is a suggestion that George's rough cockney expressions and his fufuraceous, fimetarious, drunken, audacious and overpowering presence may well have been responsible for the introduction of the most popular Australian adjective, "bloody", into our language. Phrases such as "he'd bloody well better..." or "kingdom bloody come" abound in George's few remaining notebooks. It is even possible to imagine the young C J Dennis thrilled by the tales of the adventures of Joseph and his cousin George and so being inspired to write his famous nationalist ballad in the early 20th century. Unfortunately this is a line of research that I will have to leave to a scholar of the future, who has the time and the energy to rediscover this correspondence, long lost, but presumably still in the bowels of the Mitchell Library.

However, one slim volume did find its way to Melbourne, but I am getting ahead of myself.

Of course, all elders and scholars will recall that Crabtree, in 1799, arranged for the first wombat and platypus to be sent from Australia to the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society as a mark of gratitude for his invitation to their inaugural meeting in 1793. But Crabtree's real reason for this extraordinary gift may have been to publicize his theory of Natural Asymmetry, which, as observed by Elder Roderick Fisher in London in 1991,

... Had become so obvious to him ever since he started dining in public and was forever knocking over his neighbour's claret glass.

In addition Joseph is recorded as opining, "when facts do not suffice, recourse to analogy and induction is the right and property of genius". Scholars and Elders, I am guided by those principles tonight.

Now I must explain to you how the information I am about to reveal fell into my hands. It came about several years ago, when I bought a cardboard box of books at auction for two dollars. It turned out that because I attended the auction after a fine lunch in the late afternoon on a hot Melbourne Summer day, my attention had wandered and I had bid on the wrong box. When I examined the contents, I found, to my horror, *Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* by Thomas Pickles, a book which would have been out of date well before it was published in 1933, *Architectural Building Construction Volume 3*, by Jaggard & Drury, published by Cambridge University Press in 1922 and a number of similar jewels. In my initial perusal I missed a slim, claret stained, worn and battered notebook. However I did eventually notice it. Inside the front cover was inscribed, D G T Mill 1817, in immaculate copper plate. On examination it proved to be the notebook of a medical practitioner who graduated in London in the early nineteenth century, went to Tasmania and thence to Sydney. As the years rolled by the writing became increasingly unreadable ending in a palsied scrawl. Two of the entries stood out. Among the recipes was one for *Tinctura Opii*, following which was the note "from GC, very good". In the appointments section the initials GC occurred several times.

Could this be the notebook of the medical practitioner who treated George Crabtree in Sydney in his dying alcoholic moments? Were there any other items from the same source at the auction? I checked. The catalogue showed another box had been sold which was described as "notebooks and papers of DGT M". I ascertained that the purchaser lived on The Boulevard in Ivanhoe quite near me. I visited him. He was a former medical practitioner who had taken up amateur history in his retirement. We played billiards over a glass or two of claret, and he reluctantly agreed to show me his purchases. Over the next few months I visited on a number of occasions, and on each he would bring out another item. They were singularly boring and dull. One, I recall, was the manuscript for a book entitled *On the Morbid Sounds of the Chest* by DGT Mill.

On the last occasion I saw him, he showed me a manuscript that was of a very different character, entitled *Stories from GBC*. I realised immediately that this was unlike the previous notebooks and begged and pleaded to borrow it. He agreed but only after he had researched it in detail. We agreed that I should visit again in four weeks. I did, but his wife greeted me at the door with the news that he had died from a massive cardiac arrest brought on by an excessive intake of claret. She went on to advise me that she had given his wine away and burnt his foul smelling boxes of old papers.

In answer to my question, she remembered well the box he had bought at auction and was particularly keen to burn it because of the handwritten *Ode to Claret* which he had discovered in it, and which he kept reciting when drunk.

Alas, I now have no evidence to support the tale which follows. It is based on my best recollection of the first story in that manuscript, and, doubtless I may have some of the finer detail wrong, but it casts an intriguing light on a longstanding puzzle in Australian History, and provides an interesting alternative to Elder Rodan's revelations.

"My cousin J. and I", as the manuscript recounted, "had often travelled to Uncle Oliver's firm in Orleans. J. had fond memories of his first visit there in 1783 when we had to flee creditors in England. We were to return there on many occasions, for many happy visits with the maids of Orleans."

It immediately struck me that here was circumstantial evidence that this last manuscript was from George Bernard Crabtree, Joseph Crabtree's cousin. The description of him given by Elder R S Nyholm as a *ne'er do well* whose *lack of honesty* was largely responsible for the failure of their import and export business, Crabtree and Crabtree, is in accordance with a number of passing references to him provided by orators over the years. He was thick-set, bejewelled and uncouth. He had been born within the sound of Bow Bells and had a crude cockney accented turn of phrase. It is not hard to imagine George as the unscrupulous, bitter, bullying enforcer for his refined cousin. He drank to excess, but unlike Joseph was a surly often inarticulate drunk.

Now we are indebted to Professor Prakash Datta, who in 1971 revealed that George and Joseph had travelled together to India in 1802, importing wine, presumably including claret from their Uncle's firm, Crabtree and Hillier, in Orleans. In return they shipped back to England gold, silver, silks, Indian hemp and powdered rhinoceros horn. Dr Andrew Tay, in his oration in 1965, which I commend to scholars, explained how Crabtree had decided to include rhinoceros horn in his contraceptive pills so as to maintain the libido in the face of the assault on "that part of the spirit by the croton oil and other ingredients". As history records, these pills were singularly unpopular because of their pungent odour of rhinoceros excrement. Necessity is often the mother of invention so it is not hard to imagine Crabtree and his cousin deciding to retain the rhinoceros horn for their own use as their libidos suffered and continued to decline as a result of their excessive consumption of claret, which they took in kind as their commission on the sale and export of their Uncle's wine.

To return to the manuscript, the author then went on to describe how he fled from Calcutta after selling brandy tainted with rum to the incoming Governor-General, the Marquess Cornwallis, a port and brandy man, whose palate was renowned in a dozen countries. There follows a description of China and his business dealings there, including a description of the pleasures of opium. Surely here was evidence that supported the connection between Dr D G T Mill and his opium addicted patient George Crabtree!

Perhaps some future scholar may be able to use this information to throw some light on George's mental and physical decline which culminated in his transportation to New South Wales as a guest of Her Majesty. After several pages dealing with China, the charms of its women and other pleasures there is an account of the return voyage to Portsmouth, travelling under an assumed name. There follows a description of a dinner with William Bligh and Banks in London in 1805. Presumably Joseph was there as well, since Banks would not have invited the uncouth foulmouthed George, without his fellow flute boy, who at age 51 was now the toast of London society and had commenced a legal practice as a Proctor in London. Crabtree's legal practice was not yet providing him with sufficient funds to support his lifestyle, and he was still relying on his import and export business, and in particular, Crabtree and Hillier wine from Orleans for additional income.

Crabtree and Bligh would have warmed to one another immediately. Bligh would not have held a grudge if they had duelled over a woman and he had won the prize. Crabtree was keen to finance his increasingly expensive lifestyle. They had both been born in 1854, were men of the world, and had travelled widely. Over the port, Banks recounted how he had just obtained the post of Governor of New South Wales for Captain Bligh at a salary of 2000 Pounds. Crabtree was all ears as talk turned to provisioning Bligh and his family. Bligh was somewhat contrite after his recent court martial in February, which had been convened to consider his "tyrannical, oppressive and unofficerlike manner". The court had found the charges "part proven" and had reprimanded him and ordered him to be "more correct in his language". He told Crabtree that he was giving up claret and wondered if Crabtree had access to high quality elderberry wine or clover wine. He also told Crabtree that he could feel his sexual powers diminishing. Crabtree offered him his contraceptive pills but there is no historical evidence that Bligh accepted.

Crabtree wondered how he might find high quality non-alcoholic wine, it was not an item which had ever interested him before, but now there was the potential for a substantial financial windfall if he could clinch the contract. He convinced his cousin George to accompany him back to their Uncle's establishment in Orleans which had now been expanded to include a number of old somewhat neglected vineyards. On a balmy moonlit autumn evening when George and Joseph were wandering back to their hotel after a liaison with two young maids of Orleans, the nieces of Marie Havel, a girl Joseph remembered with affection from much earlier visits, a fortuitous accident occurred.

Crabtree was now in the habit of using powdered rhinoceros horn and the extract of Indian hemp as a primitive but extremely effective precursor to Viagra. Elder Prakash Datta revealed this to us in his 1971 oration, when he quoted a scrap of verse on the back of an order to Crabtree and Crabtree for trodden Indian Hemp, dated 1817, which is

preserved in a bundle of commercial papers in the India Office Library. The last lines of this fragment read:

*I was a poet and she was a child,
In that kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than due
To the horn from rhinoceros hide.*

For further technical details, Scholars are referred to Elder Edwin Clarke's 1972 account of *Crabtree's Medical Milieu*.

Unfortunately, when powdered rhinoceros horn and a small quantity of the extract of Indian Hemp are mixed with large quantities of claret it creates an extreme form of a drug inducing *temporary spastic neurogenic bladder*, or in popular parlance, micturition, or more crudely "the Japanese bladder". The result was that Joseph found himself having to stop every fifty paces to relieve himself. As you are all aware autumn is a time when the fields near Orleans are covered with dandelions. There is a deep seated urge in a man in Crabtree's state of inebriation to aim at trees or fence posts or even in extreme, at larger weeds. Naturally, the mixture of rhinoceros horn, extract of hemp and warm urine eventually came in contact with a clump of dandelion. By some obscure chemical reaction the odour of this mixture was like ambrosia. Had Crabtree found his non-alcoholic wine for William Bligh and, just possibly, solved Bligh's libido problem at the same time?

We can imagine what followed. Joseph, with his cousin George's help, worked feverishly over the next few weeks experimenting with different proportions of powdered rhinoceros horn, extract of hemp, crushed dandelion and urine. They even experimented with the addition of some of the opium which George had brought back from China. They successfully used Crabtree's exceptional knowledge of flora and the experience of their uncle's centenarian chief winemaker to use traditional local herbs as fining agents to reduce the cloudiness. The aroma was again ambrosial; it pervaded the whole room, but what about the taste? After much pressure George was cajoled into trying the wine. He reluctantly syphoned a small amount into his taste-vin, or winemaker's cup¹. George sniffed the potion, smiled, sipped a little and delightedly pronounced it "excellent".

So the wine was syphoned into a hogshead ready for transportation to London. All that remained was to write the tasting notes and find a name. Crabtree, by this stage was inebriated just from the smell of the drink. It is easy to imagine how his knowledge of botany would have come to his aide; he realised that he needed a French name; he knew that the French name for Dandelion was Pisse en Lit; so in his temulence he settled on "La Pisse". Soon the wine was ready for delivery to Bligh's ship, and finally, Bligh and the hogshead arrived in Sydney on 6 August 1806. Bligh's new found mission, as a teetotaler, was to curb the traffic in spirits which was rife in the new colony. As history

¹ I record here my indebtedness to Elder Downes for his allusion to these delightful objects in his excellent account of Crabtree and his role in the discovery of camembert and in particular in the gestation of the mother mould

records he tightened government control of the manufacture and sale of spirits and he reinforced regulations against illegal stills, all the while drinking his non-alcoholic wine “La Pisse” purchased from Joseph Crabtree.

What is obvious in hindsight is that if one small taste-vin of this potent non alcoholic wine could turn George Crabtree into a monster, what would a hogshead of nearly 240 litres do for Governor Bligh over a much longer period of regular imbibition? History records his increasingly erratic behaviour, his bad language, his increasingly volatile temper and his alienation from the Rum corps and the settlers, who were led by Macarthur. This culminated in Bligh’s arrest in January 1808. In retrospect, was it possible that Bligh’s irascible behaviour was exacerbated by this period of swearing off the drink?

Naturally, when George Crabtree was transported to New South Wales, thirteen years later in 1821, there were still many who recalled those difficult times. George recounts the reminiscences of one Arthur Tumbrell, as I recall, who was an orderly to one of the officers in the Rum Corps. His claim, which George recorded, was that the Rum Corps was aware that Bligh was not himself. They eventually realised that he was being poisoned. They tried to tell him but he was crazed beyond redemption and wouldn’t listen. They didn’t intend to arrest Governor Bligh. They simply wanted to lock him up to enable him to dry out or, as they put it, to “take the pisse” out of him.

Of course the rest is history, the cover-up, placing the blame on Johnston at his court martial, Bligh’s immediate return to alcohol and his foreswearing non-alcoholic drink forever, and, finally, Bligh’s promotion to Admiral of the Blue and subsequently Vice-Admiral. Bligh died in Kent in 1817. There is no evidence to suggest that Crabtree was ever invited to visit Bligh in retirement on his estates, but there is little doubt that Crabtree would have been at his funeral in Lambeth. Bligh had had the only vintage of La Pisse ever produced. The Rum Corps destroyed what little was left, and like Bligh, all preached the evils of drinking non alcoholic beverages for the rest of their lives.

There is still much confusion, not only about the Rum Corps rebellion, but also about the origins and indeed the meaning of the Australian phrase “to take the piss out of someone”. Nowadays it is interpreted as bringing someone back to reality, whereas its original meaning was obviously to provide assistance to someone who is being poisoned. So I can only urge scholars, whenever they hear the phrase to recall this further important but inadvertent contribution of Joseph Crabtree to Australian culture. As to whether Joseph Crabtree was Elder Rodan’s Crabtree, that remains a challenge for some future scholar.