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Crabtree and his *Violon d'Ingres*

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Madam President, Elders and Scholars. Previous Orators have dealt in detail with Crabtree's wide spectrum of intellectual pursuits. I will talk tonight about his extra-vocational pursuit; something that gave him great pleasure and something that has not been discussed so far.

J-A-D Ingres was a prominent French artist who played his violin for relaxation when he was not earning his living by painting. The phrase *Violon d'Ingres* has entered the French language as a term for a hobby; but there is an element of passion and expertise that is not conveyed by the pedestrian English word. Crabtree's diversion also involved a stringed instrument. In his case it was the racquet used in real or royal tennis. This game, played within four high walls, as by Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace. It was the only form of the tennis in Crabtree's lifetime, the lawn tennis of today having been born in 1874.

Crabtree was very young when he first thought about tennis. Jean-Jacques Rousseau gave Crabtree's mother a copy of his book *Emile, ou de l'éducation* in 1762 when it was hot off the press (Freeman, 1995). Joseph was eight at the time. We reflect on the fact that Mary was a single mother, Llewellen Crabtree having gone off to sea just before Joseph was born (Cadwallader, 1976). It is therefore natural that a father figure such as Rousseau would be welcomed by the young Crabtree. Indeed, it has been suggested that Rousseau was Joseph's biological father as well as his spiritual one (Miller, 2014). Whatever the case, he exerted great influence on the young Crabtree.

Rousseau understood the game of real tennis well. When he left his native Geneva to go to Paris in 1742 he lived in a garret apartment above the tennis court in Rue Verdelet, where Joseph Barnéon was the head professional. Let us see what Rousseau said about real tennis in Book II of *Émil*:

> 'To dash from one side of the court to another, to judge how a ball will bounce while it is still airborne, to return it with a strong and sure hand – such games are not so much sports fit for a man, as sports fit to make a man of him.'

What direction this and other pieces of advice must have given the rudderless Crabtree! Remember Rousseau – we will come back to him.

But where did Joseph Crabtree actually learn to play tennis? There was no court in Chipping Sodbury, where he grew up. The closest courts were in Bristol and in Bath, but it was really only the children of tennis professionals – *enfants de la balle* – who played tennis at such a young age.

We can be pretty sure that Crabtree played on the Fives courts at Eton College, before he was expelled. (Harte, 1988). We recognise handball as being the ancestor of tennis; real tennis is still called *paume* – the palm of the hand – in France.

In 1772 Crabtree went to Queen's College at Oxford University. He thus encountered real tennis for the first time on the one of the two courts there, in Oriel Street or Merton Street. He was, however, sent down six months after admission for writing satirical verses about his tutor (Sutherland, 1954). He would have had time to pick up only the most basic elements of the game, and even less understanding of it. He was than employed for a short while as a bookbinder in the library of Cambridge University (Brown, 1955), but the tennis court there was at Pembroke College and reserved for the use of students and academic staff.

The next decade of Crabtree's life was spent in England, with trips to Sweden and the Low Countries (Freeman, 1995) and to Germany (Larrett, 1981). Did he play tennis between 1773 and 1783? Probably not; but to quote Orator Brown (1955), 'this is precisely the period of Crabtree's life that we know least about.'

It thus seems definite that Joseph Crabtree only really came to grips with tennis at the age of 29, when he went to join his Uncle Oliver in Orléans in the firm of Crabtree & Hillier, wine merchants, as a *négociant*. (Sutherland, 1954).

Hillier is the anglicised form of the French name Illiers. Oliver Crabtree spelt it Hillier when he registered the firm's name because he assumed that the French were exhibiting their usual inability to deal satisfactorily with the aspirate. Illiers, the local partner in the firm, was a member of the prominent family in Orléans, after whom a street is named. Joseph Crabtree felt that he should likewise adopt a French version of his aggressively English name. Since there was no direct translation of 'Crabtree,' Joseph chose *De la Pommeraye* (the apple orchard) as the optimal rendition (Tancock, 1960).

There were once many tennis courts in Orléans, including the *Jeu de la Salamandre* in Rue d'Illiers.[1] That court and most of the others had gone by Crabtree's time. The two remaining courts were those called the *Caille* (quail) in Rue d'Escures, which had a café attached to it, and the *Caves* (cellars) near the old cemetery in Rue des Bons Enfants. Although the 'court of the cellars' suggests a link with the wine business, the sociable Crabtree would likely have chosen the one with the café.

For some years after his arrival in Orléans Joseph lived with his Uncle Oliver but in 1790 he found more congenial lodgings with Paul Vallon (Sutherland, 1954). Vallon was a notary's clerk described 'one of the wittiest men…with an excellent heart.'[2] How much more congenial he sounds than his Uncle Oliver, who has been called 'a petty tyrant'! (Sutherland, 1954)

The twenty-five year-old Annette Vallon came to visit her brother Paul in

Orléans. You will not be surprised that when she met Crabtree she was inevitably and deeply attracted to the young poet. One thing led to a mother, as the saying goes, and Caroline Vallon was conceived. Shortly before the birth William Wordsworth came to Orléans to pay his respects to his brother poet. Having met and liked Annette Vallon and realising the awkwardness of the situation in which Crabtree found himself, he asked the young couple if it would helpful for him to assume paternity (Sutherland, 1954). Annette agreed, seemingly with less alacrity than Joseph. Even so, Crabtree needed to find alternative accommodation, preferably just outside Orléans.

He bought himself a small country property, which he called, inevitably, *La Pommeraye*. It was just to the east of the CBD, on eight acres of land including a vineyard. The house suited him so well that he did not sell it until 1824, long after he had left Orléans. A good description of the property is given in the auction notice.[3]

It was a modest two-storey house with a vaulted cellar underneath it, to cater for Crabtree's commercial activities. We are told that it had an English garden. Crabtree had built himself a small tennis court. It was just 66 ft. long, but this was common in renaissance Italy. By the time of the sale the court had been converted into a barn, which is only to be expected. Throughout France nearly all tennis courts were used for some other purpose. Often they were converted into theatres for visiting acting companies: Molière started his acting career in a tennis court.

Crabtree left Orléans in 1793, in the months between the execution of Louis XVI and the start of the Reign of Terror, when things really started to get nasty in France. He moved back to London. Here he played his tennis at the court in James Street, Haymarket.

The Haymarket court had been a very active one, enjoying royal patronage, but the gloom of the French revolution had its effect in England too. Crabtree was one of the few who kept the tennis court alive. The most notable of his fellow-members was that excellent player – and dandy – Scrope Berdmore Davies. A recently-discovered cache of Scrope Davies' papers shows that he won a lot of money at tennis in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.[4]

A fact of great significance to us is that the French tennis ball was quite different to the English tennis ball. They were – and still are – made by hand on the same principles, but the French ball was harder than the English ball and was covered with cloth that was less fluffy. The result was that it flew faster through the air and reacted more severely to cut. It was altogether a more lively ball.[5]

It was also valuable. In Orléans the balls were kept in a *blouse*, a pit covered by a stout wooden grate that could be locked to prevent theft. Small wonder then that Crabtree brought a supply of the coveted balls with him when he left France. In 1816 they were mislaid, which caused him much distress. He made an anguished note in his diary – "I lost my precious balls today." This statement has been taken by Orator Tattersall (1978) to mean that Crabtree had undergone a sex-change

operation. Perhaps the use of the scalpel had been suggested to him by the added comment: 'they were nicked.'
We can dismiss this proposition outright. Such an operation was in no way feasible at that time, and Tattersall's theory flies in the face – if I may use that expression – of all that we know about Crabtree.

But we have gone too far ahead in time. The Revolution, which drove Crabtree from France, continued until November 1799, when Napoleon Bonaparte took power. Far from easing the situation, Napoleon's expansionist activities threw the whole of Europe and Russia into turmoil. Nation states large and small were drawn into the conflict, and some – like Geneva – were entirely consumed by it. Long before Napoleon met his waterloo his opponents knew that the end was in sight. They convened the Conference of Vienna at the end of 1814 to try to formulate a plan for peace in Europe. It was not a Congress in the modern sense, in that representatives came and went over a six-month period and met at many locations and social events.

Joseph Crabtree was a member of the British Delegation (Mason 2001) and his brief was, according to Orator Sinnhuber (2002) to use unofficial social contacts 'to discover the schemes of the major powers at the Congress and, if possible, to turn them in a direction beneficial to England.' Among Crabtree's many contacts were Charles Pictet de Rochemont and Jean-Gabriel Eynard from Geneva. They told him *inter alia* that the old tennis court in Geneva was about to be brought back into play. The court in Rue Chevalu had been built in 1652, but it had fallen into disuse even before the French Revolution.[6] With the return of independence to Geneva the tennis court was restored by a committee headed by Marc-Auguste Pictet, who was the Professor of Natural Science at the University of Geneva and the brother of the Charles just mentioned.

Naturally Crabtree would want go to Geneva to see the court; even more so because Rue Chevalu had been renamed Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau in recognition of Rousseau's contribution to the ideals of the Revolution. The first opportunity to see them came in the summer of 1816. He stayed with Marc-Antoine Pictet, on Charles' introduction; this urbane polymath proved to be an ideal host.

Crabtree was not the only English tourist in Geneva in the summer of 1816. There were the Shelleys – Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary and her half-sister – who arrived in May 1816. They stayed at the Maison Chapuis, near Coligny, on the southern shore of Lake Geneva. A fortnight later Lord Byron and his two servants arrived, with his personal physician, Dr John Polidori. They also stayed at Coligny, but at the Villa Diodati, which was a just few minutes' walk from the Shelley party. Byron was joined soon after by his guests John Cam Hobhouse and Crabtree's friend Scrope Davies.[7]

Cam Hobhouse recorded a very significant event in his diary. On Wednesday 4 September he wrote:

> I went to play tennis with the marker this morning – a match which brought Professor Pictet, who amongst his other pursuits is manager of the tennis court, and has written a treatise on it, to the place, and another twenty who had not seen such an amateur for a long time…Davies was beat three sets even by the marker, the first hard match.

The marker was the head professional, Henri Delahaye, who had come from Paris. Crabtree, who was Pictet's guest, was of course among the 'other twenty' who saw this important match. Polidori and Byron's servants were there, but not Lord Byron himself. Byron obviously had no wish to meet Crabtree, because there was bad blood between them.

The previous year, after leaving the Congress of Vienna, Crabtree had returned to England and had not only cuckolded the newly-wed Byron but had sired a daughter, Ada (Tattersall, 1978). In her maturity, as Ada Lovelace, she was to play an important role in the development of computers. Parenthetically, this episode was thoroughly discussed by Orator Breen (2018), who permitted himself the observation that Crabtree's contribution to computer technology was truly seminal.

While Lord Byron was in Geneva he several times attended the brilliant salon at Coppet run by Madame Germaine de Staël, a woman of breathtaking intellect and passion. Byron could not have known that Crabtree had had a brief liaison with Germaine de Staël, twenty-four years earlier (Tancock, 1960). Brief it may have been, but the affair made a great impression on Crabtree. He wrote a poem – one that may sound vaguely familiar – which started:

> Germaine kissed me when we met
> Her jumper heaving o'er the satin.
> Time, you thief, who loves to get
> Sweets into your list, put that in!

I have tried without success to find any further verses. He did give a copy to his friend and fellow-poet Leigh Hunt, but there, I am afraid, the trail runs cold.

Crabtree returned to London after his stay in Geneva, and doubtless continued to play tennis there. He was sixty-five years of age, but we are talking of a sport where players do not gain their full potential until their mid-thirties. The Frenchman Joseph Barcellon, Crabtree's contemporary, was fifty-two when he retired undefeated as world champion of real tennis. The current world champion, the Australian Robert Fahey, is also fifty-two, having first won the title twenty-eight years ago.

The Geneva interlude is the last documentation we have of Crabtree's interest in real tennis. I regret that I have been unable to point to a lasting memorial of Joseph Crabtree in the game. No records of the *Cercle du jeu de paume d'Orléans* have survived and the municipal library contains no relevant printed material. The *Traité sur la connoissance du royale jeu de paume* by Bruyset de Manevieux was published in Lyon in 1783. This was the year that Crabtree arrived in

Orléans, knowing little about tennis and even less French. To imagine that he had a hand in the book is to draw too long a bow. In 1822, nearly forty years later, *A Treatise on Tennis* was published in London. It was written anonymously by "A Member of the Club," which was the one at the court in James St, Haymarket. Crabtree, now 68, a member with a thorough knowledge of the game, would be an ideal candidate for authorship. Subsequent research has unshakeably shown that it was Robert Lukin.

Sometimes brilliant shots are named after the people who popularised them. An example is the *coup d'Orléans* – a clever ricochet of the ball – named after Philippe-Égalité, Duc d'Orléans. He was seven years older than Crabtree and is known to have played on the same court in Rue d'Escures. Might this shot have been in reality the *coup de Crabtree*? It would not be the first time that the credit for one of Crabtree's innovations was wrongly given to someone else and I suspect, Madam President, that it will not be the last.

Thank you for your attention.

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[1] Travers, R and Renard, I. *Orléans : real tennis and Pila Palmaria*. Melbourne: Nicholas Alexander Publishing, 2022

[2] Legouis, Émile. *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon*. London: JM Dent, 1922, p. 12

[3] À vendre par adjudication…La maison de campagne, appelée 'la Pommeraye.' *Journal Général du Département du Loiret*, 14 March 1824, p. 2

[4] Burnett, TAJ. *The Rise and Fall of a Regency Dandy*…etc. John Murray, 1981. The foreword to this book is written by a member of Scrope Davies' family, Bevis Hilier, who is doubtless a descendant of Crabtree's business partner in Orléans. For the Crabtree-Davies contact, see the orations by Arthur Tattersall (1978) and Peter McMullen (1996).

[5] EB Noel and JOM Clark. A history of Tennis. OUP, 1924: p. 364.

[6] Travers, R. *Real tennis in Geneva : from Faguillon to Pictet*. Melbourne: Nicholas Alexander Publishing, 2020

[7] Ellis, David. *Byron in Geneva: that summer of 1816*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011. The most enduring legacy of this stay was that Shelley's wife Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin wrote *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*, a book that has not been out of print in the two centuries since it first appeared. How could the 19-year old Mary possibly have come up with such a wild and chilling story? I leave that for other Crabtree scholars to investigate.