

Academic joke that grew into a legend

Exposed at last: the long-forgotten

British hero who was invented

by 'professors behaving badly'.

Nick Nuttall unravels the hoax

SOME men rise to greatness, some have it thrust upon them. And one was simply made up by a group of academics, whose joke got a little out of hand.

The name of Joseph Crabtree has been gaining ground for 40 years. Supposedly he was a poet, inventor and intellectual who towered above luminaries of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

His achievements were many. According to a book put together by 200 academics with links to University College London, he invented the velocipede — an early primitive bicycle — well before the accepted date. He also proposed the first international system of decimalisation, invented soda water and created something known as the Siamese marine engine.

Born in Chipping Sodbury in 1754, he counted the poet Wordsworth, philosopher and poet Goethe, writer Sir Walter Scott, and the scientist William Banks among his circle. Well-travelled, regularly shipwrecked and often bankrupt after business errors, he lived to be 100 and was buried in Haworth near the Brontës.

Or rather, not. For Mr

Crabtree never existed. The trouble is that the academics who invented him have been developing his story for so long at annual get-togethers, they had enough material for a book, the 342-page *Crabtree Orations 1954 to 1994*, which they paid to publish through the Crabtree Foundation this year. It is a dense compilation of talks and illustrations on their subject.

Then they made their mistake. They wanted to share their private joke with a wider audience, so they tried to fool *The Times*. Negley Harte, secretary of the foundation and an historian at University College London, followed up a news story that a sketch of a bicycle attributed to Leonardo da Vinci was in fact a 1960s doodle. He said: "I have read with interest your piece in *The Times*. It seems likely you are not familiar with the light thrown on the matter in the 1992 Crabtree oration. You may, after perusing the Crabtree volume, want to make some further reference."

Professor Peter Armour of Royal Holloway College, University of London, and a purported authority on Crabtree's Italian period, at-



Man who never was: "portrait" of Crabtree

tributed a "Leonardo" bicycle sketch to Crabtree and said it was hoped that the book and reviews in a newspaper such as *The Times* would allow the great Crabtree finally to "receive some public recognition". The reputation of the great man had been damaged by him "gathering" a lot of powerful enemies. Here is this virtually forgotten British poet and polymath who has never been fully recognised. He was a bigger genius than Leonardo da Vinci."

But close examination of Crabtree's CV revealed that he had been involved in just about every major event of his time, and yet was listed in no reference works, such as *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*. And while his followers might try to claim that this was originally the fault of

doubting contemporaries some of his claims to fame were, to say the least, a little far-fetched — such as his attempt to poison Mozart.

Then there is the suggestion that the unsung polymath so frightened the physicist Wheatstone that he failed to deliver a proposed lecture to the Royal Society in 1846. Instead Michael Faraday was forced to give an impromptu speech, which inspired James Maxwell to conceive the theory of electromagnetism, paving the way for the development of electricity.

Crabtree's minor talents included translating economic texts and some of Scott's work into Polish. And in 1829 he supposedly inspired Edward Lear to write *The Dong With The Luminous Nose*.

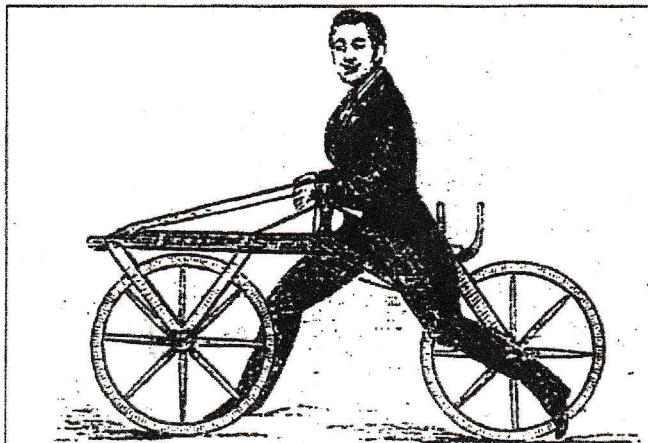
The truth about Crabtree was admitted by Lord McNally, who was press spokesman to the former Prime Minister James Callaghan, a member of the foundation and graduate of UCL: "It is the longest-running academic joke — a lot of professors behaving badly."

He was invited to join the foundation, set up by the late Sir James Sutherland, ten years ago. Other members are said to include Reginald Jones, assistant Director of Intelligence (Science) at the Air Ministry during the Second World War, Sir Derek Roberts, Provost of UCL, and Desmond Lynam, the broadcaster.

"If you read the book, you realise that there has been more research into Crabtree than in the average PhD thesis. The spoof contains just enough credibility to work," Lord McNally said. *The Times* was "as ever on the ball" yet this was unlikely to be the last word on the myth.

"Every third Tuesday in February the foundation meets for what academics term a monumental piss-up and an annual oration. I try to keep my head down so I am not asked to do the next year's oration. You put your reputation on the line for wit and scholarship," he said.

Professor Armour insisted: "He is not made up. I have to maintain this. I have spent so long doing research."



The young Joseph Crabtree and the bicycle that he invented ahead of its time: his life and work were originally said to have been suppressed by his enemies