

Crabtree's Thespian Tradition: Tall Tales and Short Drinks

Elder Phil A'Vard has a long association with the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree foundation having been introduced to the foundation by Professor Arthur Brown of Monash University.

The two had an excellent professional and personal relationship, helped, no doubt, by Arthur's fondness for taking Phil to the University Club for a late-morning tippie. At one of these meetings, Arthur invited Phil out to dinner on a Wednesday night at the Club without divulging what its purpose was.

Arriving at the Club, Phil observed the forty or so academics and senior staff present, including Professor Brown wearing long socks and shorts. Having gotten off the plane from the UK, Professor Brown traded in his sensible English trousers for a more liberating and Australia-appropriate pair of shorts and never looked back! Following the usual chit-chat about the latest developments in Mesopotamian archaeology and why funding for the arts was down, a member of the audience stood up and gave a presentation about Joseph Crabtree, at which point Phil became a scholar of the Foundation – an accolade he has only managed to surpass within the confines of the Crabtree Foundation itself.

From the outset Phil found he was at home. He noticed that many of the attendees were eccentrics. Whilst the concept of Joseph Crabtree contradicted logical thinking, it was the sense of the ridiculous and the friendship of his fellow scholars that drew Phil back each year.

On reflection, over the ensuing 50 years, the Crabtree dinners have changed considerably. Not only did the venue change from the Monash University Club to the Savage Club in 2010, and more recently (2021) to the Athenium Club, but the cohort has broadened considerably, from academics to Scholars and Elders from many varied backgrounds including journalism, publishing, and law.

Some of the traditions have also changed. Today there is less thrust and parry following the Oration where the atmosphere would be charged and the orator would be harangued, as only academics can, by a stream of questions concerning their research.

After Arthur died in 1979, Phil continued attending the annual orations and it was under Jim McGrath's influence that Phil took on the Hon. Secretary role. The position had been vacant for some time, and it was realised that for the Australian Chapter to survive it was necessary to create a new relevance for the organisation. Initiatives included moving the function to the Savage Club and encouraging non-academics to attend.

Phil delivered his oration *Was Crabtree a Thespian?* at the 2001 dinner on the topic of Crabtree's contribution to the theatre. Not having been an academic as such, Phil's research drew on his 40-years' experience in the theatre industry, with the Oration itself being written with the help of several bottles of red wine and an all-night huddle with his son. During the course of their research, Phil was astounded, yet not surprised, to learn that Crabtree had had many similar, almost identical, experiences to his own in the theatre business. It was as if Phil's oration was a collection of anecdotes of 40-years solving scenery calamities and securing the next show.

For Phil, the enjoyment of being a Crabtree elder is the opportunity to be part of a group of friends who like to catch up once or twice a year to enjoy good food and wine; but most importantly it is the pleasure of each other's company, which fuels the witty interchanges and convivial laughter.

Phil strongly believes that for the Crabtree Foundation to continue it is essential to introduce younger people, and not to forget that Crabtree reflects a healthy disrespect for convention and a sense of the ridiculous.

Scholars Kieran Thompson and Adrian Ponton