

In Memory of Nick Hudson

On 1 March 2018, the Australian Chapter of the Crabtree Foundation lost one of its finest. Elder Nick Hudson's Oration and indeed his questions and interjections at our dinners represented the best of Crabtree scholarship. One always felt a frisson of anticipatory pleasure when Nick rose to his feet. That fine bass voice! Those superb waistcoats and bowties!

Nick described himself as 'a jack of many word trades: author, editor, typesetter, publisher, with a lifetime's experience of wrangling meaning from words'. He is well known to editors for his book *Modern Australian Usage* - a genial and opinionated style guide in the Fowler tradition, erudite and witty but never condescending, like Nick himself.

On an interstate flight he once got chatting to a fellow passenger – a mining executive who was interested to learn that Nick was in the book publishing business. Indeed, said Mr BHP, I am considering opening a little bookshop when I retire. Now that's a coincidence, responded Nick, because I have often thought that when I retire, I might open a little steel mill.¹

His working life in publishing spanned the changes from hot-metal typesetting to digital and online communication. As each new development came along, Nick seized on it, learnt about it, and exploited it.

He was not only innovative but daring. In 1985 the British government banned a book which made scandalous allegations against British intelligence services: *Spycatcher* by Peter Wright. The ruling only applied in England, so Nick promptly published the book in Australia and subsequently took on the British government, fighting two court cases to defeat the suppression order. And the lawyer who successfully represented Peter Wright in court? Nick described him as a smart young fellow who was almost as smart as he thought he was: Malcolm Turnbull.

Nick also had a passion for railways, which he shared with Joseph Crabtree. He once wrote a letter to *The Australian* in which he suggested that Crabtree might have pushed William Huskisson under Stephenson's *Rocket* in 1830, and further that Brunel's idea of a 7-foot gauge for the Great Western Railway came from Crabtree and was based on the conclusion that a man wearing a top hat might fall between the tracks and remain unscathed.

Nick discovered that, on one of Crabtree's visits to Australia he proposed that a railway be built between Echuca and Chipping Sodbury, Crabtree's place of birth, based on the principle propounded by Euclid regarding the shortest distance between two points. The plan was shelved by Crabtree's critics although one part was built, now being the route of the Indian Pacific across the Nullarbor Plain - the longest piece of straight railway line in the world.

My thanks to Elders A'Vard, Cummins, McGrath and Schnaider who contributed to these recollections along with various of my publishing colleagues.² And may I now ask you all to be upstanding and to raise your glass in memory of Elder Nick Hudson.

Past Chair Bryony Cosgrove

¹ The Society of Editors Newsletter, June 1991

² <https://tributes.theage.com.au/obituaries/30077/nicholas-hudson/>