The Crabtree Foundation (Australian Chapter)
1980 Annual Oration
Something Borrowed, Something Blue

Professor David Bradley
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Mr President, distinguished guests, gentlemen.

It is a pleasant but sad honour your orator is invested with tonight, and one I should gladly have refused were it not that where the power of election is not in human hands, there can be no denial. Revelation, like Fortune, *blinds the minds of men when she does not wish them to oppose her designs*. I shall therefore do my best (though my fortune may be good or bad) to speak as you would wish me to speak in praise of the poet whom we celebrate on this vigil of the day of his birth and death. If I must begin like the title-page of one of those Elizabethan plays which describe their contents as *a lamentable tragedy mixed full of pleasant mirth* it is because I must also speak of our dear friend and colleague, Arthur Brown, the Living Memory by whose genial influence we are gathered here. You sir have spoken nobly of him, and if I were to speak my heart I should say more of his great kindness, his gift of friendship, his distinction in the world of scholarship, and his many virtues, but that (as I am reminded by a phrase of Machiavelli's) *A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good*. Suffice it to say:

He who was living is now dead.
We who are living are now dying.
With a little patience.

Felix qui superest.

Arthur was one who followed knowledge as a fading star; who took as his motto, in the fullest sense, those lines of Pope's

A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Peierian spring

and not least in his championship of the reputation of that gentlest and most neglected of men and poets, Joseph Crabtree. It was no light task to set out to reclaim the story of our poet's life from the mists of time into which it had been cast and in which, it must be confessed, it still very largely remains, and to establish the very tentative canon of his works. But it is undoubtedly by the example of Arthur Brown that men possessed of wit and judgment have devoted their time, without hope of financial reward, to the piecing together of the scattered and obscure details of that story, and have so often lost even that which they had in its pursuit. What a debt we owe to the distinguished orators of past years! What a rich legacy of imaginative reconstruction they have left us! What pleasing theories have they not been prepared to entertain! What tantalizing hints of the rich back-

alleys of exploration still to be pursued! What care they have spent in embroidering their hypotheses with circumstantial detail into every appearance of established fact!

We honour their endeavours, but we must also remind ourselves that the object of literary scholarship is to attempt to perceive, as Goethe put it, *Das ding an sich*. The thing in itself, as it really is, with the finest discrimination of which we are capable and with the sharpest and most profound understanding of the social and historical background from which it has emerged and the literary and intellectual context in which it exists. Whoever wishes to mine a true vein of poetic pleasure cannot fight shy of the labour of the shovel and the pan. Like the seeker after gold, he must often crouch and sweat in a narrow place, for the constraints of scholarly method often obstruct his passage. Particularly is this so in the case of the *oeuvre* of Joseph Crabtree. So depressingly little is known of the authentic text. So much remains to be reconstructed.

It is my object tonight to survey some of the problems, as far as my research has taken me, peculiar to the recovery of that *oeuvre*.

The scholarly problem that confronts the Crabtree researcher is one with which the academically-trained mind itself is ill-equipped to grapple. That problem may be called, though perhaps mistakenly, the problem of plagiarism. Upon this very word the two worlds of literary endeavour, the critical and the creative, sharply divide. On the one hand the scholar, acknowledging his just debts to his predecessors with scrupulous care (as far as he is able clutters his prose with inverted commas, and renders his books unprintable with footnotes. The journals of some literary sciences (such as Sociology and Education, to name but two) have happily indeed become unreadable from the same cause. Every sentence therein is corrupted by the parenthetical *Grillparzer and Blague, 1942, Bloomfontein, Levitski, Fondbrow, Idlewit and Others, 1908 - Li Wu, Cheng Mau Fong, Sandrachattopadya and Potter, 1979.* (this last from a research paper on Chemical Engineering). There is no need to multiply examples of the fear of plagiarism or to remind this company of the scorn with which we greet the barefaced student who claims to have confused his own notes (or those of his girlfriend) with his dutiful paraphrases from the Xeroxed pages of his Authority. How often have we raised a knowing eyebrow as we have read (nay, as we have sometimes written) in dedicatory prefaces, after mentioning the help of Dr X and Professor Y: *to my predecessors in this field I owe a debt too great to be adequately acknowledged*.

How ill-prepared then is the literary scholar when he turns to the joy of the creative mind, eternally building on the past and plagiarizing from its predecessors. But now we must not call the act plagiarizing. We might say *borrowing*. But let us rather say that the creative mind *continually rediscovers its own archetypal palimpsests*. The modern poet, argued T.S. Eliot, must write as if all the literature from Homer to the present day were flowing in his veins. Well, that is not precisely what Eliot said, but I fall inevitably into the metaphor which links the springs of Helicon with the outpouring of the grape. *Laeti bibamus sobriam ebrietatum spiritus* is the motto of every true poet, as St. Ambrose wrote in his well-known, even rather hackneyed hymn. What Eliot actually said more discreetly was: *We shall often find that not only the best,* ***but the most individual parts***

(my emphasis) of the poet's work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

But the guilt-ridden scholar seizes upon Eliot's hidden implication like a terrier. If the poet's blood is richer than .05 with the literature of the past, is it not likely to provoke conduct that would be considered careless in a scholar? Or, to change the metaphor, if we regard the poetry of the past as a supermarket in which the goods are cynically exhibited to tempt the light-of-finger, is not the scholar's role that of the store detective who arraigns the poet at the check-out counter and forces him to empty the golden hoard of his brain into the cashier's till? There is a fundamental division of point of view here, and all too often scholars have gone astray in adapting just such attitudes. What is left, for example, if we redistribute T.S. Eliot's own lines to their original sources. Only the satisfaction of having done so.

Shakespeare never botted a line, said Ben Jonson, and scholars have followed him with approval, forgetting that his next remark was the word of a true poet, *I would he had botted hundreds.*

In this example we perceive, of course, the second problem I wish to speak of: that of the manifold possibilities of textual corruption. Jonson's saying is no doubt familiar to you in another version *Shakespeare never blotted a line*. The argument in favour of that reading goes: this must have been what Jonson said during his walking tours of Scotland (in which the great Samuel Johnson followed him), for the printers of the Shakespeare First Folio in 1623 give a version of the latter remark *We have scarce received from him a blot in his papers*, and it is true that the word *blotted* occurs in the manuscript which records Jonson's words. Now it is clear that the words in the Folio are open to suspicion on two counts. First of all they do not equate with commonsense. Surely no poet, unless it be Joseph Crabtree himself, ever produced manuscripts free from second thoughts, inter-linings and crossings-out. Secondly the phrase in which the word *blot* occurs is itself an unconscious palimpsest, for it was used once again of Beaumont and Fletcher by the editors of the 1647 Folio of their works, and had, no doubt, been used many times before 1623. It may then be argued, that Drummond of Hawthornden, who recorded the words Jonson spoke, was certainly a poet, if a pedantic and rather minor one. He must surely have recorded a sense more agreeable to the known habits of the poets of his age*: the tribe of Ben* about whom he was anxious, in his Scottish solitude, to record every scrap of information. The version of his notes that has come down to us, moreover, has gone through at least one process of scribal transcription after 1623 and possibly several. Is it not likely that the word *blot* has there displaced the correct reading because of the scribe's unconscious memory of the phrase he was familiar with from the First Folio (even though, quite clearly it stands in the Folio only as a printer's error?)

These kinds of arguments, Mr President, are in no way unrepresentative of the arguments of textual scholars, among whom our late Living Memory was such a shining example, and although I have spent ten years of devoted work in a misplaced attempt to refute them, they prove somewhat impervious to logical analysis and so must be allowed to hold the field. I am happy that they should continue to do so, for they provide the best

means so far produced of recovering the Crabtree canon and of coming to understand the part played by unconscious palimpsest in the poetic process; that process that Hopkins was to call, echoing Crabtree, *the rise, the roll, the carol, the creation* (though we may suspect, as I shall later suggest, that Crabtree must have written not carol, but barrel).

Where better then to find an example of the transmission of palimpsest than in the works of Crabtree himself, and, for ease of understanding, I begin with the *juvenilia*. In one of the fragments of the little known manuscript *Ars Onani* dated (in a other hand) on the title page, 1760 (as we are told by *Puncher, Wattman, Buglehole, Beltup and others, 1936*) who alone were able to inspect it before its total loss during the Festival of Britain when it was borrowed from the Royal Collection for an exhibition entitled *The Splendours of British Calligraphy*, in Clapham Junction Town Hall: in one of these fragments there occurs a curious little poem.

The first line of this poem (at least we must presume it to be the first line, for it is the only one that remains and there is perhaps just space enough for a second) shows the young poet, as is not unnatural at that period) drawing his inspiration with joy from Alexander Pope. The cautious, even tremulous, tone however is no doubt to be ascribed to the influence of his Methodistical uncle who might at any moment have discovered and demanded to inspect these outpourings of the youthful Muse of which he disapproved so strongly. The line runs:

*Know **not** thyself: but seek immortal fame*

What, then, could the second have been? I think there is no doubt that it was widely known in its time and had indeed passed into folk-tradition, for it was rediscovered for us only recently by the researches of Mr Jack Fingleton, who recalls hearing it shouted by a Northcountryman at a cricket match. This uneducated fellow, observing a batsman who had been struck forcibly in his indelicates by a fast delivery and who was writhing in some anguish on the ground holding the affected parts, suddenly cried out:

Stop pleasuring thyself, and get on with the game

We may put the lines together: Who can doubt that they originally belonged together?

Crabtree's juvenilia will not detain us long. I have mentioned them only to demonstrate a method of approach and to preface the revelation I am happy to make tonight that it was by the scrupulous application of just such methods as I have indicated that the Living Memory some time before his death virtually succeeded in piecing together the Crabtree canon and had, indeed, prepared the prospectus for an edition of the fragments that remain in Uncle Josiah's notebook (as it is called) with an introduction, notes and glossary. It is a tribute to the labours of editor that the *apparatus criticus* was of considerably greater length, nearly ten times, in fact, that of the fragments themselves. This edition might have been the crowning achievement of a life's work, but that the prospectus, after lying for several years unnoticed in the vaults of the Clarendon Press, was finally returned without comment. Upon its re-submission to the editors of the newly-established journal *Penthouse* it was promptly returned, but with many lines violently scored through and some even cut out with scissors. Its subsequent fate is

unknown to me, and I have not, of course, been able to consult it in preparing these notes. Nevertheless, it is to my predecessor in this field that I owe a debt too great to be adequately acknowledged.

What became clear from even such a cursory examination of this manuscript as was permitted me, is that Crabtree not only rejoiced in the heritage of the past, but is himself one of the most potent transmitters of that heritage. We may track other poets everywhere in his snow. The position in which he stands in literary history may best be illustrated by a firmly-established example.

The Epigraph of his *Ode to Claret*:

Who has no thirst, forever, curst and silent let him be

is, as is quite obvious, a creative adaptation of lines of the Scottish poet Henryson celebrating the installation of the Procurator Fiscal of Edinburgh in 1421.

Their bellies burst
Wha's lips are purst
And wilna drink ta thee

and it takes very little imagination to spot the elegant and haunting end product of this process in *The Ancient Mariner*:

We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea.

Mr Leonard Dommett has told us of Crabtree's comment that he *imbibed the rules of Art unknowingly*. Certainly that is what is involved in the transmission of *unconscious* palimpsest, yet I am not so sure that Crabtree was not more aware of the springs of his inspiration than that comment implied.

One of the most complete of the fragments my own researches have uncovered reads thus:

The Butt that old blind Homer broached at first
Kept one great age of poets from the thirst.
The Romans next contributed their Puncheon
And made old Chaucer happy at his luncheon.
From Chaucer a new hogshead flowing down
Nourished the wits of country and of town
And though the maids and scholars raised a quarrel
Pope quickly shoved his bung into their barrel.
So too, this small time's kilderkin or rundlet
Will flow to future centuries unlit!
So age to age still adds a poet's firkin
To keep the wherewithal beneath our jerkin.

Incidentally, one observes in this merry little piece, Crabtree' s intimate and expert knowledge of the vintner's trade, learned at Bordeaux while a youth under the eagle eye of that same dour and Methodistical uncle; fear of whom had undoubtedly inhibited the early promptings of the Muse. True classicist that he was at this period, he employs the metaphor of casks descending in regular order of size from greatest to least. If the latter part of the poem appears to lack power we should rather observe by its verbal enactment that to employ the language of another place it *realizes its values* the relative vitality of the language in the description of the larger containers clearly revealing that he preferred them to the smaller. Only the very obtuse could fail to see that, whatever the other merits of the poem, *Crabtree stands*, as the late F.R. Leavis claims, ***on the side of life*** *and is indeed among the most unjustly neglected of the writers in the central tradition of English poetry*.

It is probable, nay certain, that when we are able to apply computer tests to the fragments that remain, we will be able to extrapolate our results and reconstruct the Crabtree canon from the works of later writers even in those instances where there are no fragments to guide us. In the first instance we will apply quantitatively to the entire *corpus* of English poetry, and at random, the tests of word frequency, image-clusters, echolalia, logorrhea, the incidence of prosopopeia and strong caesuras and all the other stylistic tests now in use, and others still to be invented. All that is in the future. But one thing I dare predict with some certainty: that the work of later poets will reveal their derivation from Crabtree not least where we find his well-known preference for feminine endings.

One of the greatest difficulties the enquirier faces is, of course, in the dating of the fragments, which raises a seeming impossibility of making any estimate of the development of the poet's style. This is of course a result of his great modesty and hatred of any kind of publicity. Moreover, he was careless of the fate of his works. Not only did he scatter them in pot-houses and taverns, he would, when in France and Germany, slip them with gratitude into the plackets of chambermaids or even toss them carelessly to friendly post-boys. Some few, indeed, were preserved in England. These, as we now know from the researches of the Living Memory, he had sent to his kindly uncle, Josiah, in Chipping Sodbury, but all without the least indication of date, some in a bewildering variety of complex codes, and, both these and others, in such an assortment of disguised hands that the veritable sign manual of Crabtree remains as inscrutable to the paleographer as the signature of Shakespeare himself.

Perhaps I may be permitted to give you some brief examples: here is the first and most complete:

Have you not in chimney seen
A sullen faggot wet and green
How coyly it receives the heat
And at both ends doth fume and sweat?

So fares it with the untried maid

When first upon her back she's laid
But the well experienced dame
Cracks and rejoices in the flame.

This poem has been variously ascribed by later critics to such diverse poets as Milton and the Earl of Rochester. That such various judgments can be made surely indicates that the true author is none other than the poet whom we have seen to stand centrally in the English tradition. Although the only assured technical test I have so far obtained of Crabtree's versification is missing it would be a bold critic who would deny that the poem bears no trace at all of feminine endings. Moreover it appears among Josiah's papers with a note *W. displeased*. No doubt then it can be dated fairly accurately to the time when the poet, having delivered Annette Vallon into the protective hands of Wordsworth, plunged back with relief to the pleasures of the French capital.

Then there is a poem in code to which we can still offer no certain solution. It is in a slightly decayed state and reads in part:

Should a boatsman loudly state
He'll put up the rending late
Tis a proof that he can .....
Tongue his twist than .....

Two most ingenious guesses have been made about these lines. The first by Puncher, Wattman et. al. already cited, was the suggestion that the first two lines should be amended to read: *Should a batsman loudly state /He'll put up a standing late...* But this seems somewhat extreme, has an appearance even at this point in time of being un-English, and offers no insight into the meaning of the last lines. A more plausible suggestion comes from Dr Harold Love of my own department. He believes that the lines in question are a *jeu d'esport* expressing criticism of the Peel administration's budget about the time of the readings of the Bill for the first Factory Act, a bill he believes to have been defeated not for its own shortcomings but because of mistaken fears about the probable effects of the government's restriction of the money supply. He would thus read the first lines as translating by a metathetical inversion: *Should a statesman loudly boast/ He'll put up the lending rate*. This seems the more plausible when we observe that the more normal order of words in the last line, would be *twist his tongue* which might well apply to a politician. It has been further suggested that the lines are themselves a witty palimpsest of the old rhyme:

If a boy that turnips cries
Cry not when his father dies
Tis a proof that he had rather
Have a turnip than his father.

If that is the case, it is tempting to supply the missing words in 'the final couplet thus:

Tis a proof that he can sooner
Tongue his twist than Dr Spooner

Unfortunately this hypothesis is not without one almost insuperable objection: the worthy Doctor was only ten years old when Crabtree himself died, and he had no doubt not yet developed those curious habits of speech which later made him an object of affectionate ridicule. The matter must I'm afraid remain a mere Speculative possibility.

That efforts of reconstruction in this direction are not without some possibility of success is, however, suggested by many examples where the originals of lines found in the work of later poets can be clearly detected in the Crabtree fragments. I'm sure you may have already recalled many of these for yourselves, and I offer just two examples. The first perhaps needs a little preludium.

Crabtree, if a modest man who sometimes concealed his meanings, was nevertheless in no sense really indirect. Not for him the meanness of the Ironist, that least robust of all writers, hiding his true intention in hints and ambiguities: *Willing to wound*, as Pope said, *and yet afraid to strike*. What Crabtree had to say he said for the most part straight out and was proud of it, like the man he was.

In for a pound's the attitude I like
Let me be not the lapwing but the shrike.
No coward soul, warm breast; firm hand to spurn or hold.
Poetic fire admist no tremulous member.
(Though sometimes I remember
How Dick would be too bold.)

I think I need scarcely point out how much had been owed to these lines by a wide diversity of later poets and poetesses, and even by mere poetasters and proverb-mongers. The last lines, however, perhaps need a note for they involve a curious bit of literary history to which I cannot refrain from referring. Crabtree was, of course, alluding to Sir Richard Steele who had in the preface to his great work The Christian Hero (1701) expressed great contempt for the habit of a literary contemporary, whom I need not at present name, of picking up and pocketing little pieces of orange-peel in the street. This, the great Samuel Johnson, who was inclined to take devotional literature rather personally, quite unreasonably, when reading the passage many years later, supposed to apply to himself. (He did, indeed, have such a habit, as I'm sure you will know). It was widely believed that Steele's diatribe were the sole cause of the fits of depression which he afterwards suffered. Crabtree, of course, was in no way directly involved, but it was a story that clearly came to occupy his mind a good deal, and his remote connection with it came about in this way. He was consulted by Mrs Thrale about another habit of Johnson's in his depressive fits which caused her constant concern, and about which Joseph Crabtree was by way of being a London authority; namely, the habit of charitably picking up prostitutes in the street in order to take them home and give them a bath. No doubt she told him the orange-peel story as a prelude to her enquiries. Crabtree's dumbfounded reply to Mrs Thrale has had to wait for the discoveries of the late Professor

Jim Clifford whose *Dictionary Johnson* is shortly to be published. I believe that he will there assure us that the manly Crabtree, scorning to assent with civil leer to her insinuations cried - striking his right hand on the table (you will remember that his left had been severely disabled, as Mr Len Dommett has told us by the re-coil of a snapping E-string. He was, in any case, strongly right-handed as the great. enlargement of the left-hand side of his cranium surely indicates in The Portrait): *By God madam, that's his story, and he's sticking to it*" a remark that has gone through various forms of creative palimpsest ever since, even among those who have no claim to poetic inspiration.

But Mr President, I digress, and I must try your patience no longer.

My last illustration refers to the Crabtree heritage in Australia. It is a brief one, and I believe it to be unique.

I say that perhaps too boldly, for I would not for a moment wish to question the integrity of the Orators who have made such persuasive cases for the touch of the revered foot on these our shores and the sound of the voice-that-is-still echoing in our valleys of coolness no less than on our sweeping and sunburned plains. While I do not question for a moment the probability that Crabtree sailed with Cook, I think we should adopt the caution which Mr Don Charlwood so amicably urged upon us in giving, credence to any more intimate penetration. In Bernard O'Dowd I find no trace of him. Brennan followed the French *symbolistes*, and I doubt if it can be reliably established that he had ever read a single English poem. In Alec Hope, apart from the title, *Death of a Bird*, which may' owe something to Crabtree's Death of the Bard, a forthright riposte to Gray's famous poem, there is nothing to be discovered. Nor in Judith Wright's, or Gwen Harwood's work or even Chris' Wallace-Crabbe's where we might have expected at least a fraternal acknowledgement.

No. The only palimpsest I have detected is a curious one, for it springs from one of the most puzzling but at the same time most typical of the Crabtree fragments. On the last page of uncle Josiah's notebook there are some notes, presumably dating back to Crabtree's Oxford days (for the writing is rounded and somewhat childish) in which he was, it seems, meditating on lectures he had been attending on Aristotle's Poetics, and in particular the passage you will recall in which Aristotle discusses the relative merits in poetic fiction of probable impossibilities or improbable possibilities. Aristotle has of course not bothered to discuss probable possibilities or improbable impossibilities. He quite logically preferred the probable in Art to the possible - even when it is impossible: I despair of making myself clearer at this stage - but Crabtree had seen through the complex terms and had meditated long, as the many strange doodles that cover the paper indicate, and at last he bursts out at the foot of the page in passionate disagreement with his own credo:

Ever in verse shall I praise the absurd
Nee'r shall ***my*** *Art make the probable possible*

That indeed is a key statement. Can there be any doubt left in your minds that in some inscrutable way Bill Hart-Smith, surely one of the least learned but most receptive of our Australian poets, inherited not only the cadence, but also something of the fire and passion (and perhaps part of the sense) of those lines when he wrote of that sweetest of singers, the Australian magpie, these words:

More than is necessary comes from this bird
More, in my heart, than is possible, probable.

More than is necessary, Mr President, has come from this bird also. Let me in turn adopt a creative palimpsest and say with Hamlet (and I believe with the grateful assent of all present). *The rest, is silence*.

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