THE CRABTREE FOUNDATION

36th Annual Oration

JOSEPH CRABTREE, FATHER OF MODERN JOURNALISM

Kevin Childs

Mr. President, the long absent Living Burden, the Living Witness, Elders, Scholars and guests. With a profound sense of honour and great trepidation I stand before you tonight and seek to follow in the illustrious footsteps of Orators who came before me. They of course include the distinguished author and critic, Stephen Downes, whose memorable Oration served to introduce me to the sublime world of Crabtree, in particular his role in the evolution of fine cheese, which as those present at that memorable evening doubtless recall, involved no small amount of frottage.

I shall begin with the prolegomenon, the customary preliminary discussion to open a treatise.

Much was known about Joseph Crabtree, poet and polymath, in the nineteenth century; much was forgotten or deliberately obscured in the twentieth century-until 1951. In that year it happened that, at one of Professor Hugh Smith's weekly seminars for scholars of all disciplines or none, two or three of those present discovered a common interest in the life and work of the extraordinary great man, Joseph Crabtree. This interest grew and intensified until Hugh Smith and others at University College, London, were inspired to set up the Crabtree Foundation at the College. The first annual meeting of the Foundation, then numbering some twenty-four members, was held on February 17, 1954, at the College.

With your permission I dwell on the immortal words of the President on the occasion of the tenth anniversary: 'We are not unaware of the problems of Crabtree studies, nor are we afraid, by any methods at our disposal, to restore him to the high station that he deservedly holds in the history of English Literature. This is our purpose.' The collaboration of members of this Foundation, scattered as they are over the face of the earth from the Fisher Library in Sydney to the Folger Library in Washington, from the Royal Library in Stockholm to the Public Library in Chipping Sodbury, is regularly leading to findings of deep significance for scholars attuned to this discipline.

Professor James Sutherland then delivered the first Oration-'Homage to Crabtree'. This was not only a brilliant oration but has become a seminal work. Professor F.P. Wilson spoke of it as 'an eloquent and wise address…beautifully phrased…It is an extraordinary tale.' And Dr B. Ifor Evans - later Lord Evans of Hungershall -summed it up by noting, 'You felt really that on the one hand there was this sense of tense realisation that this new literary territory was conquered, and on the other hand that that sense was being subdued by the discipline of scholarship. It was a lesson to us all.' This noteworthy beginning is but one cause for my hesitation in putting forward to you my thesis tonight.

I should add that, from that early flowering, the membership has grown steadily to some four hundred, worldwide, interest in Crabtree studies has blossomed and each year the Oration succeeds in either developing a particular aspect or introducing an hitherto unknown fact of Crabtree's life and work and establishing his reputation for profound contributions to, among other fields, philosophy, science, art, mathematics, literature, publishing, criminology, cheese making and brewing, placing him at a pivotal position in the history of the Age of Enlightenment. Poet and intellectual, naturalist and inventor, the circle of his friends included all luminaries of the period from Goethe to Captain Cook and from Coleridge to Linnaeus. There seems to be no end to the achievements in Crabtree's long life, as the scholarly researchers of the Orators discovered; at the age of 17 he revolutionised actuarial practice, at 18 he invented soda water and, at 19, the beer pump. It is with due humility that I wish to add my work to this fountainhead of erudition.

We gaze upon this portrait based upon the impregnable rock of the Sutherland picture, which, hanging before you and washed by the annual tide of scepticism, remains indisputable in pedigree and provenance.

Some there may be who have a feeling of dissatisfaction at the Master's portrait and remember the words of Tennyson, who when he saw this work, proclaimed:

'If Crabtree, the less Crabtree he!'

My aim this evening is to argue that Crabtree was much more, not less, never less.

Scholars have hitherto ascribed works plagiarised from the original Crabtree or indeed translated to another language. This being the 36th Oration, I take due advantage of the well established 36 year Rule, as established in the Master's birthplace, Chipping Sodbury, allowing the use of original source material. It is my earnest hope that you may find it as revelatory, indeed enlightening, as I did.

I have lately returned from the Reading Room of the British Museum where, each afternoon, I took the seat (number 07) where Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* and burrowed into original dispatches sent to the once-great *Times* newspaper, now Murdochised, if I may use such a vulgar term, into a type of tabloid. My mission was to find the part played by Crabtree, until now I believe unknown, in the singular dispatch to that newspaper from field of battle by his good friend and colleague, William Howard Russell, reporter of the Charge of the Light Brigade, war correspondent. But first, to establish a verisimilitude of truth I had to venture further afield...

So, hither I went to Constantinople, or Istanbul as modernists insist on calling it, to an ancient building that contained all the records of vessels that had sailed hence over the centuries. Now, some may say that this was a fanciful expedition; indeed, rather than flirt with the danger of possible ridicule by untold numbers of academic rivals in this pursuit, I harboured such doubts that I even put out a cover story that I was, of all things, holidaying in the lakes of New Zealand.

Over the years many scholars ventured to Constantinople in pursuit of this one momentous truth: how did Crabtree, after so many years of heroic journalism, manage to foresee and then help Russell bring to the world his epic tale of military mayhem and bloodshed? So it was that I found myself in conversation with Mehmet by the fading Turkish light, inquiring about steamer departures in October 1853. His name comes, as those with a knowledge of the region recognise, from Mehmet 11, aptly known as Mehmet the Conqueror, who seized Istanbul at the age of twenty-one, ultimately ruling over large parts of Bosnia, Albania and Greece, and finally signing a peace treaty with the Venetians in 1479, after almost twenty years of pillaging, piracy and war in the Aegean islands and around the Mediterranean. My inquiries to this Mehmet, however, were about later events involving Crabtree.

Now, the many Crabtree scholars among us here tonight do know that this was the year before his demise, aged 100. So how, I hear you ask, does a near centenarian, even one as sprightly and astonishingly athletic as we know Crabtree was, come to be there? Mehmet's records of earlier research by the *Academie Francaise*, which takes an enormous interest in matters Crabtree due to his singular involvement in the history of that benighted nation, show that he had been living in Ankara for some years, immersing himself in a study of the *Koran*, which he was determined to prove was actually, remarkable as it may seem, an offshoot of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Now, my earliest desire, as a Crabtree chronicler, so to speak, had been to explore this aspect of his existence, but when I met Mehmet, turbaned and gap-toothed yet still anxious to discuss the perfidy that befell his cousins in Brunswick when their café was closed because of doubtless false allegations of food poisoning, I fell under the spell of Crabtree the seer. Mehmet, mouth open in the semblance of a smile, remembered his father passing on a single word he had learned when overhearing Australian soldiers yarning, `Booshit'. His accent was strong.

I had gone to his grimy stone building, with its worn steps and smell of musk, to inquire about manuscripts deposited there. Having explained my mission, I was astonished to hear him say, 'Are you too, sir, in search

of Russell?' He went on to explain that a team from those great museums, the Smithsonian and the British, had recently been investigating the hitherto hidden link Russell, credited as I say, with the reporting from the heights before Sebastopol as the six hundred British cavalrymen rode into the valley of death, and Crabtree. Now, those of you unfamiliar with some of the dark arts of journalism may be naively unaware of the fact that some correspondents do, in cases of distress, drink, or perhaps both, sometimes file copy for each other. As an innocent political reporter covering a Senate election I became aware that we had inadvertently mislaid, so to speak, the oracle from 3AW in an Adelaide bordello, where the charms of a lady of the night had led him to miss his aircraft. The beguiling tones of reportage from the great doings of Senate candidates over the next few days were those of an imposter. But who was to know? Or even care?

So, I was to learn, was the case with Crabtree. Russell a young Irishman, had, as all educated people know, been farewelled at a dinner given by Dickens and Thackeray where, I was to learn, the pair sent word to their beloved literary sparring partner whom they knew to be researching in Constantinople, seemingly untroubled by the fact that Britain had joined Turkey, France and Sardinia to maintain a power balance in Europe and stop the Russian push into the Mediterranean. I pass over the scandalous incompetence with which the allied forces, in a presage of Gallipoli, landed on the Crimean Peninsula. Russell noted their lack of overcoats in a freezing winter and even decent food.

By then Russell had befriended the eccentric English scholar and when, in early 1853, Russell too succumbed to the appalling plague and pestilence of which he wrote so vividly, he had no recourse but to turn to his new friend and plead with him to cover for him. So it was almost certainly Crabtree who was describing for readers of *The Times* the manoeuvres that led to war in cables the paper believed to be from Russell. One finds delicate allusions to this in the official history of the newspaper. Crabtree, in his many forays in the region, some of which were expounded upon in President Andrew Schnaider's pathbreaking Oration last year, spent a little time in Russia fossicking out ancient manuscripts in mosques left from Mehmet 11's times, hoping for evidence to support his thesis, had ascended the heights above Sebastopol.

In a note to Russell, which is footnoted in the 1912 Bodley Head edition of *War Reporting That Helped Win the Empire,* Crabtree remarked that it seemed to him that there, above the fields of Balaklava on the verge of a plateau, which, for him, was a stage as seen from the box of a theatre (a phrase repeated by Russell) was the likely setting of a tumultuous battle.

Russell was to write:

Datelined, Heights Before Sebastopol, October 25: 'If the exhibition of the most brilliant valour, of the excess of courage and of a daring which would have reflected lustre on the best days of chivalry can afford full consolation for the disaster of today, we can have no reason to regret the melancholy loss which we sustained in a contest with a savage and barbarian enemy.' Just 198 of the 600 survived; the Light Brigade, he wrote, was annihilated by their own rashness and the brutality of a ferocious enemy.

The influence of Crabtree on this immortal dispatch is contained in the passage where the describes a rocky range in outline and appearance wonderfully like the Trossachs, the picturesque wooden glen in Scotland immortalised by Scott in *The Lady of the Lake* written, of course 44 years earlier, and often quoted by Crabtree.

I lately received a communication from a scholar of Wordsworth, Dr Gloria Bel Canto, a member of the Florence Order of Crabtree scholars, who imparted to me her sure and certain knowledge that *The Lady of the Lake* indeed contains an acrostic dedicated to the Master. Pray forgive me if I take the liberty of quoting a little to explain.

She points out that if one takes the first letter of each second line thus:

Stanza Three…Canto the first

A hundred dogs bayed deep and strong,
Clattered a hundred steeds along,

C

Canto 10:

The eagles answered with their scream,
Round and around the sounds were cast,

R

11

Far o'er the unfathomable glade,
All twinkling with the dewdrop sheen,

A

13:

Lost for a space, through thickets veering,
But broader when again appearing,

B

15

On yonder meadow far away,
The turrets of a cloister gray;

T

31

Booming from the sedgy shallow.
Ruder sounds shall none be near,

R

And then, the neat trick of hiding the climactic round-off:

Canto the second, Verse 17:

Then prelude light, of livelier tone,
Expressed their merry marching on,
Ere peal of closing battle rose…

The double E!

There have over the decades been revelations that some profound passage in a work hitherto ascribed to a lesser Master was either plagiarised from an original Crabtree composition or cribbed wholesale in the vernacular, or translated to another language. With no revelation of a manuscript as proof, we can yet rely on the tantalising 'proof by induction', which is so popular with teachers of mathematics and so unreliable in the hands of policemen and lawyers. Many clues are available, so we are left with the tangible evidence in this acrostic that Crabtree was indeed the phantom wielder of the pen behind which stood Scott's name. The genius of Crabtree, like that of Bacon in his coded mask happy to hide behind Shakespeare, was also evident, as was noted in a London Crabtree oration in 1970, is also revealed in four consecutive lines in Shelley's *Hellas,* which begin with the letters C, R, A, and B, but alas, unlike Scott, there was no tree! The mere roots stood.

Just as Scott and Shelley presented no difficulty for this man of great letters, so Sebastopol was to be his last stand for deathless prose upon the field of death, as I have seen it put. He penned it, in the words he put in a note to Russell and in phrase that correspondent would later borrow, by candlelight until, and I quote, it 'disappeared in the bottle like a stage demon through a trapdoor'.

My detective work that led to Mehmet, incidentally, involved an examination of the records, filled out in neat script by hand of course, of failings (the letter 'f' appears to mean 's') from Constantinople for Marseilles of a post steamer on the …and there is was, the Empress Chloe sailed on that date and among her passengers was one M'sieu Grabgree, the nearest the Continentals could come to his name. The great man quietly returned to England later in 1853, where he subsequently met and inspired Sir Henry Flashman at Rugby School.

He could justifiably reflect on his glorious days in the field as a journalist. One scholar speculates that a justification of nineteenth century journalism was that it provided many intelligent people with a livelihood and an opportunity of using their talent without feeling that it was wasted. Others kept themselves by journalism till their books gained recognition. Carlyle was helped by the *Edinburgh*, Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* came out in *Tinsley's Magazine*, Gissing refused work for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Fortnightly*, Sir Henry Maine was for a time kept going by the *Saturday Review*, while H. D. Traill gave up an inspectorship of returns for journalism and Mrs. Oliphant sent a family to Eton on the proceeds of her writing. 'I joined the great army of literature,' Leslie Stephen wrote, 'because I was forced into their ranks, but also with no little pride in my being accepted as a recruit.' Not for Crabtree such reflections, however, he remained a journalist through and through.

Consider, if you can, what our journalism would have been without him. The roots of some of the finer flowerings of the popular press which came to a crop under the hand of Lord Northcliffe are to be found, as the Chief, as he was known, remarked more than once, in the work and vision of Crabtree. Northcliffe in his younger days remarked to his younger brother Leicester (later Sir Leicester Harmsworth, 1st Baronet) how he learned at his father's knee of the extraordinary feats of Crabtree from excited talk about his enterprises commented upon at that fine London establishment, the Wig and Pen Club (the history of this club contains a brief pen portrait of Harmsworth dining with an unidentified group of 'distinguished journalists', among whom the keen-eyed may recognise features of remarkable likeness to those before you this evening. Others such as Phillip Knightley in his useful article, *Interesting if True* in ***Granta 53****: News: Scoops, Lies and Videotape. Who makes it? Who owns it? Should we believe it? explain how* it came to pass that Murdoch, in turn, modelled his popular journalism on that of the genius Northcliffe, the so-called founder of modern journalism with his mass circulation *Daily Mail,* so what you see before you in say, the *Confidential* column of that distinguished organ, the *Herald Sun*, has its origins in the work of the Master.

A further distilling, almost a decanting of yellowed, fragile letters and manuscripts in the British Museum have led to the, to me at least, astonishing discovery that Crabtree was probably also there at that most splendid of British victories, Waterloo. This time it would seem that he gave more than a hint of his real self, preferring the by-line, again in *The Times*, of Henry Crabb Robinson. He followed Napoleon's campaign in Germany in 1807 but, alas, like most correspondents at the time was generally unsuccessful in getting to the right spot at the right time. The authoritative Schnaider traces Crabtree to St Petersburg in 1802. Further correspondence from the von Benckendorff family, in previously secure archives in Moscow, note 'Dolly's cultured Englishman departs today, alas, for what he says is his journalistic duty, noting that he uses an alias but to look for at least part of his name in print…'(*Nobility Zapiski Beckendorfa, File 7764/A/ Sygma)*
He missed out in Spain on the battle of Corunna, in 1809, arriving after it was all over. But in June 1815 came the Battle of Waterloo, long, dreadful and sanguinary but gloriously terminated, as Crabtree wrote, in the complete overthrow of the Tyrant's army, with the loss of 210 pieces of cannon, 150 by the British and 60 by their allies, the Prussians, the greater part of Bonaparte's baggage, and nearly all his personal staff. Great was the enthusiasm for the Duke of Wellington, as the *Morning Post* noted, that illustrious hero, whose own person, always exposed to the greatest danger, 'is held sacred by Heaven for the general good of the nations of the earth'. (Would that our military leaders in places such as far-off Afghanistan gained such esteem). The similar hosannas for Wellington overlooked the fact that Napoleon had already lost the Battle of Nations, the greatest battle until the First World War, three years earlier, after overreaching himself in Russia.

Who, then, was to put this right, to strike as balance as it were against the excesses of the egregious *Morning Post*? Crabtree's corrective, as Crabb Robinson, appeared in *The Times* some nine months after the battle, on November 4, 1815. My research in that newspaper's records show a struggle by Crabtree to get the newspaper to accept that there was another version of that battle worth presenting.

And he did so in a most remarkable, ingenious and, might I say, totally typical manner. His dispatch from this battlefield quoted the well-known words of the rather neglected Megret after the death of Charles XII at Fredrikshald, doubtless known to all scholars present this evening, but I shall repeat them, for they are grand: 'Voila, la piece finie.' On this occasion the phrase, meaning 'Then the tragedy is ended' was uttered by an unknown general who believed Napoleon had fallen in battle, rather than having been dismounted from his horse and taken prisoner while making a charge at the head of his guards.

Earlier, wrote Crabtree, Napoleon, 'contemplated with a look of ferocity the hideous scene of butchery beneath him'. The greater the obstacles which he had so little foreseen, however, the more his resistance. Told things were bad and his troops exhausted, he only replied, 'Forward! Forward!' Cut down by the overwhelming force of artillery, their cavalry done for, the French marched on, recorded Crabtree. [ibid] Nothing arrested their progress but death. Soon the reserve yielded and the rest flowed back like a torrent. Artillerymen abandoned their cannons, wagon train drivers cut the traces of their horses, the infantry and every other species of soldiery, he wrote, formed one confused, intermingled mass, partly lying across the roads, partly across the fields…not a single battalion existed behind which the rest could rally.' The disorder was increased by the darkness of night.'

The captured Napoleon was, as every schoolboy once knew, banished to the volcanic island of St Helena in the mid-Atlantic, dying there six years later lonely and embittered.

Crabtree provides a delicious, if somewhat infelicitous footnote, to the downfall of Emperor Napoleon. It seems that George 1V of England had been feuding with his wife, Caroline, daughter of the Duke of Brunswick, for many painful years. An aide reported to the King on Napoleon's death with these words: 'Sir, your greatest enemy is dead.' To which King George joyfully exclaimed, 'Is she, by God!'
Crabtree is noted as `illustrious English correspondent present at Waterloo' in an obscure volume (*Charmant Charles, King of Kings;* Deux Magots Press, 1856) on the life of Charles X, a true Bourbon who famously never learned anything, and never forgot anything. Crabtree renewed his acquaintance with *Les Temps*, which was having a spot of bother with the authorities. An *opera bouffe,* or what we would call a farcical event, ensued, as he noted in his dispatch to *The Times* when 44 journalists declared their defiance

of the king's attack on press freedom. Two newspapers were suspended and two more attacked by the military.

The *Temps* had been the most critical, so at noon on July 27, 1830, mounted gendarmes drew up in battle order in front of the paper's office. Staff and contributors stood silent and impassive as the police chief strode up to the newspaper's chief who memorably said that in the name of the law he called on the commissionaire to forebear. The commissioner sent for a locksmith. Just as the doors of the printing house were about to be forced upon, writes Crabtree as Robinson, the newspaper head stepped forward with a copy of the Criminal Code and read the section on punishment for robbery accompanied by housebreaking. The locksmith uncovered his head to show respect for the law. The locksmith was told to go ahead, but threw up his job and was loudly cheered when the newspaper chief began noting the names of all those present. Another locksmith was sent for but found his tools were missing.

Several hours went by, as Crabtree says, [ibid] multitudes of people were given an example of disobedience combined with respect for the law. The soldiers defaced the presses, including, Crabtree noted, the radical organ *L'Email,* known to its many admirers by the initials of its owners, the Societe de Presse de Audience Masse, or SPAM, leading to the oft-quoted saying, 'This email is spam.'

Spam notwithstanding, the attempt to suppress the press led to more rioting, followed by the abdication of King Charles X. Alexandra Dumas, novelist, soldier of fortune and editor of *La France Nouvelle* and author of *The Three Musketeers*. With Crabtree following his every move for *The Times*, [ibid] Dumas attempted to take the Hotel de Ville as a mounted National Guardsman, dodging grapeshot behind a bronze lion of the Palais Mazarin, entered the Tuilleries with the invading forces and was sent to capture the royal powder magazine at Soissons to bring the powder to Paris. He carried out this almost impossible feat, and as it turned out, entirely unnecessary feat with just two companions, threatening to blow out the brains of the military commander in the true spirit of Athos, Porthos and Aramis, whom he would immortalise some fourteen years later.

Chance made both Dumas and Crabtree witnesses [ibid] to the surrender of royal power by the Duke of Orleans who walked into the Hotel de Ville as if entering the mouth of an abyss. A declaration was read. The Marquis de Lafayette waked the Duke to a window, put the French flag in his hand and showed to the waiting crowd, which burst into cheers.

Crabtree's singular account in *The Times* of August 1830, of which the preceding is but a fragment, stands again as a monument to his journalism.

On returning to London, Crabtree was initially content to spend time with other men of letters. [ibid] He enjoyed the company of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who was just three years younger than the master. It is recalled that Sheridan's son Tom was expected to get a seat in Parliament. My copy of *Table* Talk, Number 906 of the Everyman's Library Series, (J.M.Dent & Sons, London, 1934) notes that the younger Sheridan said many men who are called great patriots in the House of Commons were great humbugs. 'For my own part,' said Tom, 'if I get into Parliament, I will pledge myself to no party, but write upon my forehead in legible characters,' To be let" '.
`And under that, Tom,' said his father, ` write, "Unfurnished''.'

Crabtree's Continental triumphs were to prove but a precursor of a significant career as journalism continued to grow, with the whole surface of society, reportedly irrigated by a thousand streams. An account such as this evening's would scarce be complete without reference to the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a series of 71 imaginary colloquies, which appeared in *Blackwood's* Magazine from 1822 to 1835. Scholars [Who?] now insist that Crabtree was among the different authors, whether under his once familiar nom de guerre of John Gibson Lockhart, William Maginn or, James Hogg. We know he was familiar with Ambrose's Tavern in Edinburgh, usually the setting of these exchanges and the central characters of "Christopher North", "Timothy Tickler" and the "Ettrick Shepherd" (based on James Hogg) expanded to include some based on real people.

He was not only to be found in this rarefied stratum, however. A hard-to-come-by file of *The Cheap Magazine*; or *Poor Man's Fireside Companion*, published in 1813 by George Miller and Son, Haddington, a forty-eight- page monthly organ, selling for fourpence, reveals its purpose as diverting the dangerous energies of the northern peasant and labourer into peaceful, moral channels, a cause close to Crabtree's heart.

From his scrabbling early days, he was now a profound success, for the rates of payment were thus always adequate and often high. To induce Crabtree to contribute for the *Edinburgh* on any subject he liked, the publisher increased to thirty guineas the standard rate of twenty guineas a sheet for contributions of the first order. Such a rate, said Crabtree in an interview published in the alas neglected work, *Story Unused, the Silent Greats of Fleet Street*, by Phileas Monckton, ‘stimulated every brain, and half convinced the world that Poetry, Romance, Philosophy, and even Criticism, were the first crafts and the most profitable in the world”. How our organs of opinion have changed!

A challenge to scholars of Crabtree's journalism is that those immersed in such literary study recently have sought in social or popular cultural history the answer to problems previously formulated-and answered- in exclusively literary terms. In the case of the 19th century, one cannot possibly understand the spirit of the age without being saturated with the aura of its journalism, and so to know Crabtree is to unlock a significant depository of knowledge, something for which I for one am truly grateful...

It was said, for example, of the *Edinburgh* that “to have the entry of its columns was to command the most direct channel for the spread of opinions and the shortest road to influence and celebrity”. Those times were indeed fortunate, with a literary underworld of this kind, for Cobbett’s journalism is literature, Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* appeared in the *Examiner*, and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* in the *Indicator*.

In this company, Crabtree shone. I conclude by recording a little known tribute to him, which was burnished into an illuminated scroll on his retirement (a copy of which is in the National Museum of Scrolls in Weston Super Mere, Somerset). His writing, it says, seemed to be judicial utterances from the loftiest readings of culture, balanced, dignified, and authoritative and to embody in finished and scholar-like style the opinions prevalent among the most intelligent circles of London society.

Doubtless greater and more effusive tributes have been paid to giants of journalism, but surely few have been more sincere and heartfelt.

Kevin Childs

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