

Rob Makes a Revelatory Visit

Emeritus Professor Rob Willis headed up Monash's department of business systems for several years. He gave elders and scholars a saucy insight into Joseph's early years in his 1996 oration *The First Coming of Crabtree*.

At school, Meg Sheepshagger looked across the classroom and smiled at Joseph 'for no reason', Rob recounted, before chasing him around the schoolyard to bite him on the neck 'in a really strange way'. Joseph falls madly in love with her, of course, until she runs off with Rupert Ramsbladder. He declares that his life is 'finished'. Such sad notes to begin such an illustrious polymathematical career!

Rob is from Yorkshire, and his geographic roots are often revealed in his unbending views on politicians and the people who run Collingwood Football Club, not to mention its players. His wit tortures. He is the only Crabtree elder who knows by heart *The Lion and Albert*, Stanley Holloway's comic monologue, and will recite it at call, exaggerating his north-country accent. The only books he reads are by P. G. Wodehouse – all and any literary biases are accepted among Crabtree elders and scholars. Unfortunately!

Introduced by Richard Sebo, Rob visited University College London in 2003. (Richard gave the 1997 oration *The Darker Side of Crabtree*, in which he revealed that Joseph had written one of Coleridge's quasi-erotic poems.) In London, Rob was shown the purse, 'of fine purple velvet with a brass handle and surrounds like a church collection bag', as he puts it. And he met the Keeper of the Purse, who had been recently married in a Californian spa bath. He met the Keeper of the Cudgel, too, and observed the actual weapon, a 'very knobby thick stick' that was mounted in a glass case on the keeper's office wall. He revelled in a private viewing of the actual likeness, a canvas in oils in a heavy and ornate gilt frame. Its painter and subject are unknown, but it is Joseph, we may be sure, and our likeness of the likeness is but a frail imitation of the ghost.

In London, Rob learned about the origins of the foundation. Relaxing one day in a pub, he was told, a UCL professor was accosted by a gaggle of babbling students who were keen to be grown-up researchers. Not wanting his pint disturbed, his drinking punctuated, he told them to go off and study the life of Joseph Crabtree, a name he had seen on a headstone during a recent churchyard ramble.

Rob notes that Crabtree chapters were begun in South America and Zimbabwe. They failed to prosper for what he enigmatically explains were 'obvious reasons'. Are Crabtree elders and scholars especially attractive to lions and pumas? Tasty morsels?

Living Burdens and the sole Living Witness

Among office-bearers of the Australian chapter, **Jim McGrath**, who gave the 1992 oration entitled *Erotic Influences on Crabtree's Musical Contribution to the Chinese Pizza Industry*, appears to be the Australian foundation's original and only **Living Witness**. Jim's landmark scholarship revealed that Crabtree's influence had metastasised on the Monash campus to such an extent that it had influenced even *his* approach to Crabtree research. He believed that his paper had the two most important qualities of academic writing – it was neither interesting nor intelligible to laymen.

There appear to have been only two **Living Burdens** – the tiresome **Gordon Troup** and the even more boring pedant **Stephen Downes**. Rob Willis, who knew Gordon well, called him a physicist 'typified by his shorts, short-sleeved shirts in all seasons and large frame'. He liked a glass or more of red wine. At Crabtree orations, elders and scholars groaned when Gordon leapt to his feet to make some minor correction; the Frankfurt schoolboy Walter Benjamin, for example, did not write that history was a

catastrophe. He said it was a 'single' catastrophe that piled at the feet of those who looked backwards, who dared to shirtfront it head-on, an easily grasped concept. (Gordon was also known as the foundation's **Dead Weight**.) Gordon died in 2015 at 83, and in Monash's obituary of him he is remembered as have formidable intelligence, a man who brought colour and enthusiasm to usually bone-dry laser physics and quantum electronics. He coached the university's fencing team (with épées, not 8-gauge fencing wire) and wrote learnedly on the importance to health of free radicals in red and white wine, cognac and coffee. His research is increasingly important in these days when radicals have usually lost all freedom.

Elder Stephen Downes