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CRABTREE AND THE ORAL TRADITION  
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Mr President, fellow Crabtree Scholars, and, I am delighted to be able to say, ladies and gentlemen, each Crabtree Oration is unique, but this forty-fifth Oration does mark both a significant milestone on the road of Crabtree scholarship and a new departure. For the first time the Crabtree Orator has had the benefit of the published wit and wisdom of the first forty-one Orators to inform his researches and imbue him with a proper sense of reverence. Sadly, with that ill-fortune which has so dogged our academic mission, three Orations have been lost among foul papers.

In the forty-four years since February 1954 when Professor James Sutherland's inaugural Crabtree Oration rocked English literary history to its foundations, the *corpus* of Crabtree scholarship has expanded continuously, while the corpse of Joseph himself has suffered some undignified mutilation.

Notwithstanding the inspiration of all that esoteric wind, I have decided to dispense with some conventions of recent Crabtree oratory. I ask you to take as read the shock and trepidation which befell me on hearing of my election as Crabtree Orator. Similarly, the honour and sense of unworthiness with which I come before the Foundation will be self-evident. Inexpressible — and therefore I will not seek to express it — is my humility before the sublimity of the genius to whom we pay annual homage — with rollmops, Brussels sprouts, swede and mutton disguised as lamb. I forgo these rhetorical *hors d'oeuvres*: they have been more eloquently expressed by others before me and will continue to be so by my successors.

Having said what I propose to omit, I cannot let the occasion pass without saying that it is an honour to be chosen Orator in the year of Professor Bill Mead's presidency. A scholar of distinction in many fields, it is particularly fitting that he should preside at the Oration which will establish — once and for all — Joseph Crabtree's Finno-Ugric connection.

Aside from the Oration itself, the Crabtree Orator's most daunting task is to discover his topic, the intellectual crowbar which prizes open — albeit but a smidgeon — the shameful 'conspiracy of silence' which Professor Sutherland uncovered in 1954.

In rising to this challenge, Orators have some principles to guide them. In his 1959 Oration, Professor A.H. Smith declared that it is 'the aim, the avowed duty, of each member of the Crabtree Foundation to bring his own discipline to the recovery of the life and works of Joseph Crabtree'. A reading of recent Orations might lead a benighted outsider to deduce that the academic discipline of most Crabtree Orators was genito-urinary medicine. Few among you can have failed to notice a trend in Crabtree scholarship to focus upon the Crabtree member. This organic fixation, this frank but becoming phallogocentricity has, of course, been pursued with the noblest of academic motives and in the best possible taste. And, indeed, Crabtree scholarship does appear to pass through cycles of this nature. Senior Scholars among you will recall how, in 1978, in the *notorious* 25th Oration, *The Cleansing of Crabtree*, Orator Tattersall rebuked the Foundation with the following words:

... after the purity of the scholarship which we enjoyed in the first flush of Crabtree studies, we have in more recent times been subjected to a growing coarseness, a salacious crudity, a shameful degree of innuendo and *double entendre*, unworthy of our revered poet.

Tattersall then purged the Foundation with the dubious tale of how Crabtree had his lunchbox amputated.

That said, I must endorse my learned predecessor's sentiment, and as a former student of English literature, I felt it would be timely to revisit the literary bent of Joseph Crabtree's soul.

With this in mind, I recalled the time before I was first seduced — into university administration — by the lavishness of the pay, a period when I had misplaced notions of becoming an academic. I exhumed the research I had dabbled in then. My subject was the position of women in the novels of Thomas Hardy,

George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. Was there matter here for revelation, for, as we Crabtree Scholars cannot fail to recognise, there is almost no orifice of art, science or society into which Crabtree, like a nineteenth-century Forrest Gump, has not penetrated? Was this at last an opportunity to get some aspect of my thesis — a poor thing, sirs, but mine own — into print? *Crabtree in the youth of Thomas Hardy? Crabtree and the sexual conundrum of George Eliot: the man behind the woman and the woman behind the man? Joseph Crabtree: Trollope he knew and loved?*

There is assuredly virgin territory here for future Crabtree Scholars to despoil. But for me inspiration came from another, accidental source, ancient and unwritten, remote from the class conflicts and sophisticated gentility of the Victorian novelists.

I spoke of the phallogentric tendency of recent Crabtree research: it is but a short step from phallogentricity to Finno-Ugric studies. That short step, I am confident, will lead to one giant leap for Crabtree scholarship.

I propose to show how Finland played a decisive role in a late-flowering of Crabtree's poetic talent and how Crabtree contributed to the creation of an epic work of poetry and through that to the birth of a nation.

I must ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to make a journey of the imagination, a quality with which all Crabtree Scholars, like their patron, are replete. I ask you to join me, in your minds, or indeed in your cups if you will, in a glass of *Koskenkorva*, Finnish vodka, for it was this spirit which was the lubricant for the release of the precious evidence I am about to disclose.

Translate yourselves, if you will, to a farmhouse near the west coast of Finland. It is a summer evening when the sun barely goes down. The farmer and his wife have served their visitors, myself among them, with the customary coffee and cakes; it is time for serious libations of vodka.

In a corner of the room sits an aged crone, the farmer's grandmother. She sat seemingly distracted, by turns dyspeptic and flatulent. After several tipples, in a moment of pungent silence, her eyes closed and she began to intone — repetitively, hypnotically, in the rhythm that Longfellow's *Hiawatha* made famous. I need hardly remind the literary *aficionados* of the Foundation that this is a trochaic rhythm, metric feet comprised of one accented syllable and one unaccented syllable. Long passages of verse, or, to be more precise, runes, line after line of oral balladry flowed from this ancient memory, verse tales of the creation, of lust, of superhuman heroes, of lust, of battles and betrayal, of lust, of birth, marriage, death, of lust, yes, the very materials of epic poetry. This was the national poem of Finland, the *Kalevala*.

Captivating as this recitation was, vodka and trochaic tetrameter are powerful soporifics, and I was wondering how to escape this runic outpouring when one magic line caught my attention:

Otsonen, metsän omena  
Otsonen, metsän omena ...

Out of the blue came this plangent invocation, resonating across more than one hundred and sixty years, signalling to me beyond doubt that our founder had indeed never lost 'that avidity for experience that formed the basis of Crabtree's culture' which Professor Hugh Smith had identified in the sixth Oration.

I went back on succeeding evenings to excavate the memory of this relict of the oral history and literature of Finland. In meandering fashion, she took me back through her reminiscences to the time of a distant ancestor, one Arhippa Perttunen.

Arhippa Perttunen — may he rest in peace — was an illiterate rune-singer in the early years of the nineteenth century who lived in the village of Latvajärvi in White Sea Karelia, now part of Russia. At that period, there was little Finnish culture or written literature. For some six hundred years, the country had been part of the Swedish empire; in 1809 it passed to Russian rule. The great majority of the people lived off the land as farmers and foresters. There was no coherent Finnish national identity and such indigenous culture as there was consisted largely of oral folk balladry. Ballads, runes and charms were passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, the oral tradition of my title. A large portion of such verse lodged in the memory of Arhippa Perttunen.

And through Arhippa Perttunen, we are introduced to a personality unfamiliar, I suspect, to most of you, but a hero of Finnish nationalism, Elias Lönnrot ([see page 142](#)). Elias Lönnrot: born 1802, died 1884; one of seven children, the son of a poor tailor. At the age of twenty he entered the Swedish University of Turku, the old capital of Finland, some one hundred and forty-eight years before I taught there myself. He earned his MA in 1827 and went on to gain a doctorate. In 1832 he qualified as a Doctor of Medicine at the University of Helsinki. In 1833 he was appointed district physician in the town of Kajaani.

For the advancement of Crabtree scholarship most of these details are incidental, except, as I shall show, for Lönnrot's medical training. The link that stretches across one hundred and sixty years from Elias Lönnrot to the forty-fifth Oration of the Crabtree Foundation is the eleven field-trips Lönnrot made, between 1828 and 1844, to eastern Finland and Karelia collecting oral poetry, and one of those trips in particular.

The name of my geriatric source of runes was Alma Sillanpää. At the end of the Second World War, Alma Sillanpää became a refugee from the Russians. She was driven out of her homeland of Karelia and resettled on farmland in western Finland. Her memories, bequeathed from generation to generation, encapsulated a visit by Elias Lönnrot to her distant ancestor Arhippa Perttunen. About the date she was vague. My researches place this in the spring of 1834, Lönnrot's fifth rune-collecting trip.

Uncertain as much of her memory was, Alma Sillanpää was crystal-clear in one detail, a stark silhouette which had imprinted itself indelibly upon the recollections of every female scion of this farming family. With some acerbity she spoke of the sprightly foreigner who had accompanied Lönnrot on his Karelian odyssey — the *sipping sodblurilainen*, the man from Chipping Sodbury, as she knew him.

Alma Sillanpää murmured these words, '*Otsonen, metsän omena*', over and over like a mantra.

Lest you are wondering about the provenance of this evidence of Crabtree's presence in Scandinavia, I remind you how, in his 1968 Oration, Professor Peter Foote gave a clue to Crabtree's appetite for things Nordic: 'if anyone in the kingdom was familiar with the Scandinavian past, it was Crabtree; if anyone was eager to extend still further the range of his experience by a visit to a northern country, it was our mighty poet'; and then again, 'Crabtree, turned 70, was still at the height of his physical and intellectual powers; and we know what affection he regularly inspired in others.' Add to this appetite for novel experience the 'restless sexuality' which Negley Harte, our Secretary, identified in his 1988 oration, and we find ourselves unerringly following Crabtree's footsteps to Karelia in the 1830s.

In the 1830s many of the menfolk of Karelian villages were peddlers: they travelled away from home for lengthy periods — peddling. Their wives — resilient, resourceful women, women endowed with an abundance of that untranslatable quality the Finns call *sisu* — it might be crudely rendered as grit, guts or spunkiness — their wives ran the household and the village. Thus, in his eighty-first year, Joseph Crabtree, accompanying Elias Lönnrot on his fifth rune-collecting trip, found himself in a remote Karelian village where the few remaining men were stuffed with oral balladry and the women were... mostly alone and full of *sisu*. It is no part of my brief to expatiate upon the fulfilment which Crabtree, an exotic foreigner, allegedly equipped with a new set of utilitarian tackle, a transplanted Benthamite lunchbox, was able to bring to those lonely Karelian peddlers' wives. That was mere ephemeral passion, little more than an octogenarian operating on sexual autopilot. I eschew salaciousness in Tattersallian pursuit of pure scholarship. For Crabtree's contribution to posterity we must look to what his poetic muse bequeathed as a result of this runic quest. And, as ever, his genius hid beneath the skirts of another's, lesser, talent than his own.

Elias Lönnrot it was who collected these runes and charms from the singers of Karelia and elsewhere. Where there were *lacunae* in the stories, he added verses of his own as a kind of poetic Polyfilla, weaving these oral legends into a coherent national epic — the *Kalevala*. It was Elias Lönnrot who came to be seen as the cultural messiah of Finnish nationalism. But with that Masonic intuitiveness for which members of this Foundation are renowned, you will already have divined that the *inspiration* behind those reverberative trochaic tetrameters was Crabtree's, a versifier with rhythm as deeply seated in his bowels as haemorrhoids.

And this represents a critical moment in our poet's development. Professor Armour in the 1992 Oration commented, so incisively, 'the *Ars Salutandi* marks a watershed in Crabtree's development from his neo-metaphysical phase into the full Romantic apocalypticism of his late full maturity'. Scholarly debate still rages in the footnotes of learned journals as to whether it can truly be described as a neo-metaphysical rather than a proto-metaphysical phase, and it is not for me to resolve that controversy. What we can be sure of is that the insistent hypnotic rhythm of the *Kalevala* shows that by 1834 Crabtree had cast off that namby-pamby, daffodowndilly attachment to Romanticism, which, if Tattersall is to be believed — and I for one am agnostic on this matter — cost him his manhood, in favour of the rugged, earthy masculinity of trochaic tetrameters and in so doing convinced Elias Lönnrot that this *was* a fitting medium for the creation of a national epic poem on a grand scale.

With that generosity of spirit which is at once so admirable and so frustrating to Scholars, Crabtree gave this gift to Finnish literature and the Finnish nation anonymously. There is virtually no identifiable reference to Crabtree in all the fifty runes and 22,795 lines of the *Kalevala*, and none of us should ever forget what has become known as the Larrett axiom of Crabtree scholarship, first enunciated by Dr Bill Larrett in his 1981 Oration, namely 'final proof eludes us'. And yet for those acute enough to recognise his penchant for subtle ambiguity, secreted therein is an unmistakable signature, an image of Crabtree among the Karelians, albeit cunningly concealed beneath the litotes, metonymy, synecdoche, objective correlatives, anthropomorphic symbolism and other poetic tropes which make him so limpidly accessible as a lyricist.

So, let us now return to the line with which we began and the passage that follows in the thirty-second rune of the *Kalevala*. You will find the text on the back of your menu cards:

Otsonen, metsän omena  
mesikämmen käyreyinen  
tehkämme sulat sovinnot  
rajarauhat rapsakamme  
iäksemme, ilmaksemme  
polveksemme, päiviksemme,  
ettet sorrasorkkasäärtä,  
kaa'a maion kantajata  
tänä suurena suvena,  
Luojan lämminnä kesänä!

Many among you will be devotees of the prose translation of the *Kalevala* by Francis Peabody Magoun Junior, late of Harvard University. The purists will join me in insisting on the 1907 verse translation of W.F. Kirby:

Otso, apple of the forest,  
With thy honey-paws so curving,  
Let us make a peace between us,  
Haste to make a peace between us,  
So that always and forever  
In the days that we are living  
Thou wilt fell no hoofed cattle,  
Nor wilt overthrow the milch-kine  
Through the finest of the summer  
In the good Creator's summer.

Before opening up this passage for critical exegesis, I want to explore Joseph Crabtree's body. We know but little of our poet's physical characteristics. We have, of course, the awe-inspiring portrait, so expressive yet elusive. We can only speculate, however, about his dimensions, but we have some suggestive pointers. I have not been fortunate enough to share with our revered Living Memory, Mr Bryan Bennett, the privilege of fondling a lock of our poet's hair, but a man of his remarkable virility — Crabtree's, that is — must surely have been hirsute to an uncommon degree. This is no fanciful speculation. The poem I recited to you is an incantatory charm or spell to Otso, or Bruin, the bear, that fearsome denizen of the Finnish forests. Our poet-hero, the man from Chipping Sodbury, is here metamorphosed into that hairy predator, terroriser of helpless cattle. What a striking symbol of Crabtree's brief encounter with the lonely peddlers' wives of Latvajärvi.

But lest we miss the subtlety of the allusion, it is reinforced with the tender imprecation '*metsän omena*'. '*Metsänomena*' is a crab-apple; *metsänomenapu* a crab-apple tree, a crabtree. Thus, in these electrifying ten lines we have a poem layered with ambiguity, cryptically signed, if I may put it that way, in memory of our poet. It is at once a prayer for mercy from the ursine ravisher of helpless cattle, but also a hymn of devotion to the hirsute Lothario of Chipping Sodbury. Such mesmeric — and ambivalent — adoration did Crabtree inspire.

Ladies and gentlemen, lest you think I have betrayed my promise to avoid salaciousness, I must open your eyes to the true profundity of these runes. Our seventh Orator, the late Dr Leonard Tancock, established that 'Like all the greatest geniuses ... (Crabtree) gathers up all that has gone before and looks forward with prophetic vision down the uncharted vistas of the future'. The late Professor William Armstrong in his 1961 Oration affirmed Crabtree's 'delight in multiple levels of meaning'. Professor Armour, in yet another penetrating *aperçu*, shamefully excised from the collected Orations, diagnosed the essence of Crabtree as 'his ability to turn everything into supremely ambivalent verse which offered an entire panoramic vision of his age — and ours, for he was nothing if not prophetic'. Superficially, then, these lines seem no more than a half-amorous, half-timorous plea to Otso, Bruin, the bear; but Crabtree's penchant for ambivalence — reflected as much in his sexuality as in his poetry — is unmistakable in the ambiguity of these verses; and he wills us to deconstruct the text. In so doing, we see symbolised the next 150 years of the history of Finland. During that period Finland, a peace-loving rural nation, symbolised by the cattle or *milch-kine*, established its national identity, in 1917 declared its independence from Russia, the predatory grisly, and for some 70 years thereafter sought to mollify the bear on its eastern border. All this Crabtree envisaged on the basis of his one venereal field-trip to Karelia in 1834. What a hairy visionary this was, my fellow Scholars. And for this reason I have subtitled my oration 'Crabtree and the birth of a nation'.

In the Preface to the first edition of the *Kalevala* published in 1835, Elias Lönnrot wrote:

Dubious, to say the least, of my abilities to produce something suitable, I have occasionally been plagued with doubt to such an extent that I have been on the verge of throwing the whole thing into the fire.

But in the athletic company of Joseph Crabtree such doubts were soon dissipated. Elias Lönnrot went back to his general practice in Kajaani. Inspired by the manly vigour and poetic fecundity — or indeed the poetic vigour and manly fecundity — of his travelling companion, he completed the mammoth task of collating the runes he had gathered into the epic poem, the *Kalevala*, which he published in 1835 and again in a longer, definitive version in 1849. The poem was the catalyst for a surge of Finnish nationalism: it led to a golden age of Finnish art in the latter half of the nineteenth century and culminated in the declaration of independence in 1917. It made Lönnrot, as I have said, a cultural icon for an emerging nation, while Joseph Crabtree — catalyst, progenitor, metric galvanizer and comforter of peddlers' wives — was commemorated as a bear-like shadow in the minds of generations of Finnish farmers' daughters.

In 1838 Elias Lönnrot published a journeyman work of do-it-yourself medical diagnosis, *The Finnish Farmer's Family Doctor*. One fundamental section deals with the treatment of piles, that scholar's affliction which, as Professor Foreman revealed in 1989, Crabtree bore with characteristic stoicism. This section has been deleted from some editions of Lönnrot's work because it was mistakenly believed that prolonged sedentary indulgence in the sauna had eradicated haemorrhoids from Scandinavia. Be that as it may, I have no doubt that Lönnrot had gained first-hand knowledge of this ailment from his travelling companion. In 1998 every Finn knows of the *Kalevala*; few would even have heard of Lönnrot's medical handbook. I would like to leave you, therefore, my friends, with a thought-provoking footnote.

Joseph Crabtree was almost certainly the anonymous midwife at the birth of the epic poem which led to the flowering of a new Nordic culture and ultimately to the founding of a nation; but his memorial is buried deep in the thirty-second rune of a massive epic, just as his physical presence survived namelessly in an unread paragraph on haemorrhoids in a forgotten medical manual and in the fading memories of a Finnish peasant, Alma Sillanpää, who died on 6 December 1997, the eightieth anniversary of Finnish independence.