FRANCIS WARRE CORNISH

JANE AUSTEN

WOMAN OF LETTERS

Jane Austen

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CHAPTER I - BIOGRAPHY

Materials for a biography of Jane Austen are very meager. Her life was passed in a narrow circle, and there would be little to record if all were known. She lived as the daughter of a country clergyman of moderate means at Steventon in Hampshire, at Bath, Southampton, and Chawton near Alton. She visited friends and relations in Hampshire and Berkshire, and at Godmersham in Kent, and spent some holiday time with her family on different occasions at Lyme Regis, at Teignmouth, Sidmouth, and other seaside places in the west of England. She never went abroad. She was now and then in London with her brothers; but her visits to London were neither frequent nor lengthy, and there is no reason to suppose that they brought her into contact with fashionable or literary society, although her name was beginning to be known, and if she had lived a year or two more would have been famous, since fame such as hers, when it comes to the living, often comes suddenly. She kept no journal — she could be satirical about journals, as readers of Northanger Abbey will remember — or if she did, it has perished. Her nephew, the Rev. James Edward Austen Leigh, who knew her well, collected, with the help of his two sisters, all that could be known in his time, with the exception of a number of her letters to her only sister Cassandra, between two and three years older than herself, to whom she wrote every week or oftener, on the rare occasions when they were parted; for the greater part of her lifetime, from 1775 to 1817, was spent by the two sisters in the same home, with occasional visits to relations.

Most of these letters were destroyed by her sister, who, with misjudging piety, burnt all letters written to herself, which in her judgment ought not to be seen by any eye but her own. Her own answers to these, if Jane had preserved them, were also destroyed.

Her nearest relatives (says Mr. Austen Leigh in the postscript to the Memoir published by him in 1870) were influenced, I believe, partly by an extreme dislike to publishing private details, and partly by never having assumed that the world would take so strong and abiding an interest in her works as to claim her name as public property.

Twelve years after the publication of Mr. Austen Leigh's Memoir, Lord Brabourne, whose mother. Lady Knatchbull, was a daughter of Jane's brother, Edward (Austen) Knight, came into possession of papers belonging to her, on the death of Lady Knatchbull in 1882. Among them (he writes) was

... a square box full of letters, folded up carefully in separate packets, each of which was endorsed ' For Lady Knatchbull ' in the handwriting of my great-aunt, Cassandra Austen, and with which was a paper endorsed in my mother's handwriting, Letters from my dear Aunt Jane Austen, and two from Aunt Cassandra after her decease,' which paper contained letters written to my mother herself.

The date of the endorsement was August 1856.

It will always be debated whether it is lawful or not to publish to all the world, for the satisfying of public curiosity and the enriching of publishers, such revelations as the letters of Keats, the Carlyles, and the Brownings. At that time, at any rate, it was not thought right or decent to publish to all the world the most intimate thoughts and feelings of deceased friends. But to preserve is not the same thing as to publish; and to destroy the most interesting of self-revelations is no kindness to a beloved memory. If Cassandra Austen had been less scrupulous or

less modest she would have done a kinder office to her sister's memory. But we cannot blame her, and Jane would certainly have praised her for doing as she did; the motive of her action may be understood from the fact of her leaving the letters to the person who knew Jane best, next to herself — ' almost another sister,' she writes to Cassandra, — her beloved niece, Fanny Knight, Lady Knatchbull.

These letters had been mislaid or overlooked, and Mr. Austen Leigh was not able to make use of them for his biography; that they should have been unknown to him is one of those cross accidents which impoverish life and literature, for he was a generation nearer to the writer than her great-nephew, Lord Brabourne, and had a more intimate knowledge of the persons mentioned in her letters, many of whom must have passed altogether out of the memory of Lord Brabourne and his contemporaries. Nor can we well spare the sisterly letters which answered and were answered by those that are collected here.

The letters which Cassandra preserved, ninety-four in number, and written at different periods during the last twenty years of her life, are a very imperfect chronicle. They are concerned, as their editor says, with ' the most ordinary details and most commonplace topics '; and Sir Leslie Stephen did not hesitate to pronounce them ' trivial.' They tell no intimate story of her loves, hopes, joys, and sorrows; and the omission or suppression of serious topics injures her memory. But they are the only personal record; and enough remains to show that they were written by the same comprehensive genius whose intuition and observation created the novels.

Besides these sources of information, a few letters were published by W. & K Hubback, the authors of Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers. Miss Constance Hill has minutely searched the localities with which Jane Austen was connected; finally, whatever further material existed has been

accurately examined and arranged, and embodied in Messrs. W. & R A. Austen Leigh's Jam Austen's Life and Letters, which must henceforward be the standard work on the subject.

The Memoir appeared early enough to attract objection, if objection were to be made; and recent criticism has not disturbed its reputation for correctness. Even if it is somewhat colored by affection, that is the right temper for a biographer; and especially in this case, where the subject of the biography is a satirist, and consequently exposed to unkindly interpretation; and Mr. Austen Leigh's direct testimony to the lovable character of his aunt outweighs much irresponsible guessing. Nothing further of importance is to be expected; a few letters, a few notices from papers left by relations and friends, perhaps some fragments of early compositions. The result of the excellent work of Mr. William and Mr. Richard Austen Leigh is to confirm and deepen the impression conveyed by the novels, the letters, and the Memoir. We could not wish it otherwise.

Of Jane Austen's parentage and extraction it is enough to say that it has been traced to a family settled at the end of the sixteenth century at Horsmonden in Kent, who carried on business as clothiers, and who acquired wealth in trade, and then position and armorial gentility.

One of these Austens, John, probably the owner of Broadford, Horsmonden, living early in the seventeenth century, had eight sons, the fifth of whom, Francis, was grandfather to John Austen, who married Elizabeth Weller, and died in 1704. Their fourth son, William Austen, born in 1701, married in 1727 a widow, Rebecca Walter, daughter of Sir George Hampson, Bart., and this couple had three children, George Austen, Jane's father, born in 1731, and his two sisters, Leonora, who died unmarried, and Philadelphia, who was sent out to India at the age of twenty-one to find a husband, and there married a man much older than herself, named Hancock.

It was the custom of the less opulent gentry in all parts of the kingdom to send their sons to grammar schools of good repute in their own neighborhood. William Austen lived at Tonbridge; his son George was educated as a scholar of Tonbridge School by the kindness of his uncle, Francis Austen, who was a solicitor in the town. He proceeded thence with a 'Smyth' exhibition to St. John's College, Oxford, of which society he became a resident Fellow on the Tonbridge Foundation. He was known at Oxford as 'the handsome Proctor.' In 1758 George Austen was appointed Second Master at Tonbridge School. He was presented in 1761 by a cousin, Mr. Knight of Godmersham, to a family living, the rectory of Steventon, near Overton, in Hampshire, and about the same time his uncle Francis Austen bought for him the next presentation to the neighboring rectory of Deane, which benefice fell vacant in 1773. He did not reside on his living till after his marriage with Cassandra, daughter of Thomas Leigh, Fellow of All Souls', in April 1764.

George Austen's eldest son, James, born in 1765, was (by his second wife, Mary Lloyd) father of James Edward Austen (afterwards Austen Leigh), the biographer of his Aunt Jane. The second son was an invalid; the third, Edward, who later took the name of Knight, succeeded in 1798 to a large landed property situated at Chawton, near Alton, in Hampshire, and at Godmersham in Kent, left him by a distant cousin of that name. This event no doubt brought the Austens into a larger social circle — from Hartfield and Meryton to Pemberley and Mansfield, one might say; but Jane's interest was in the people around her, not in their houses and estates, great or small — though she took a humorous pleasure in the prosperity of Kent, where 'everybody is rich.' 'Let me shake off vulgar cares,' she writes, 'and conform to the happy indifference of East Kent wealth.'

Edward Austen (Knight) married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Brook Bridges, and had many children. His eldest daughter, Fanny, was Jane's favorite niece, and a dear and intimate friend. The fourth son was Henry, born in 1771; Cassandra, born in 1773, came next; then Francis William, who entered the Royal Navy and lived to be G.C.B. and Admiral of the Fleet; the seventh child was Jane, born in 1775; the eighth and last, Charles John, also a sailor, who rose to the rank of Admiral and died in 1852.

We do not know whether Jane had a favorite brother; if any, it would seem to have been Henry; she writes affectionately of all; her numerous sketches and portraits of sailors have been thought to indicate her love for the navy, to which her brothers Frank and Charles belonged. It has often been remarked that she dwells with pleasure on friendships of sisters, and of brothers and sisters. The most signal instance is the mutual affection of William and Fanny Price; but we see it also in the Bennets, Crawfords, Bingleys, Tilneys, and Darcys, and the Dashwood sisters. She writes enthusiastically about the 'unchecked, equal, fearless intercourse with the brother and friend ' which sisters may enjoy. 'An advantage this, a strengthener of love, in which even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal.' And there may be a sisterly touch in the last words of Persuasion: —

She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.

Family affection was a strong characteristic of the Austens. They had many advantages to make them content with themselves and each other; good looks, active and well-furnished brains, no little humour, wit and facility of conversation, a good position as a county and clerical family, and a sufficiency of money; a strong cousinry, disposed to be independent and take their own view of

neighbors outside their own circle; genial and kindly withal. It would not perhaps be uncharitable to surmise that they did not fully understand how rare a bird had been hatched in their nest; a creature whose wings could not be clipped by rustic associations and country proprieties and precedences, and who could see all the world in a little mirror.

Steventon parsonage was the home of George Austen and his wife and family until 1801. The villages of Deane and Steventon are about a mile apart, and the population of both together amounted to about three hundred souls. The joint income of the two livings, now about £500, was no doubt of considerably larger actual value a hundred and fifty years ago.

The Parsonage, which has since been pulled down, and has given place to a new house built on the opposite slope of the shallow valley, was a small house, with three sitting-rooms and seven bedrooms. It stood in a field sloping north towards the road from Deane to Popham Lane, with gardens and shrubberies behind it; on the south side was a path leading to the parish church, a small Early English building, near which stands an Elizabethan manor-house. The country is of a quiet rural character, well timbered, with elm-bordered field roads ('hedgerows' is the Hampshire name) and clumps of trees marking villages and farmhouses. The surface of the land is gently undulating; it is a grazing country, and there is no great amount of cornland. It has probably changed little in a century and a half, except that thatch has in great measure given way to tile and slate, and that the roads, which are now uniformly good, were then deep and ill-kept like the lanes near Mansfield Park, through which Mrs. Norris dragged the reluctant Lady Bertram to call upon Mrs. Rushworth at Sotherton in winter.

All the novels, and the letters too, are full of complaints of miry ways and the difficulty of walking in winter. Though

the sisters considered themselves great walkers they were often kept indoors. The coach roads in most parts of England, kept up by statute labor and turnpike trusts, must have been good, or John Thorpe himself could not have boasted of the exploits performed by his fabulous horse, which no man in England could make go less than ten miles an hour in harness. 'Tie his legs, and he will get on.' Stage-coaches and post-chaises could do long journeys in a day; but the smaller roads and country lanes were mended by the parish authorities when mended at all. Roads are made to suit the traffic, not traffic to suit the roads; and a few old men breaking stones by the wayside, and a cartload of their manufacture pitched here and there in soft places kept the cross-roads open for farm use. We are told by Mr. Austen Leigh that on the occasion of a move by the George Austens from Deane to Steventon a wagon with mattresses and feather-beds to ease the jolting was the only conveyance available for Mrs. Austen. It is difficult in these days to form a true idea of the sameness of country life a hundred years ago, as it is depicted in Jane Austen's letters. Difficulty of locomotion makes neighborhoods small, and small neighborhoods contract interests and create monotonous habits of living. The vacuity of country life a century ago is illustrated by every chapter of Jane Austen's books; and those who complain that her range of subjects and scenes is small must remember the seclusion of her life in the country, 'where nothing ever happens.' No one can ever have felt more wearily the tedium of everyday remarks, dull repetitions, old news, and dreary jokes.' The distractions from small-talk were books of engravings, cabinets of coins and medals, drawers of shells and fossils; backgammon, cribbage, speculation, and other games of cards; charades, acrostics, and bouts-rimés for the clever ladies; for the numerous dull, filigree work, netting and knitting, miles of fringe and acres of carpet-work. The men were little more occupied than the women; they did not

even smoke; a little shooting, hunting, riding, and driving is mentioned, not much reading. They were never too busy to walk and talk at any hour of the day, to go shopping with the young ladies, or escort them on long journeys in post-chaises.

But narrow as it may have been, this was the life out of which the novels sprang, and no one can deny that there was room in it for human nature to display itself. Dullness may have an advantage in such an atmosphere; but genius cannot be stifled by it, and the emotions can survive, even if the events of every day are as little worthy of being recorded as those which took place at Hartfield and Uppercross, Steventon and Godsmersham. The present generation seeks to enhance life by locomotion;

. . . navibus atque
quadrigis petimus bene vivere.

But where there is gain there is loss; and Jane Austen was sent into the world not to compare century with century but to show how true to itself human nature is.

The depth of Steventon leisure is indicated by the fact that Mr. Austen used to read Cowper aloud to his family in the morning. He had, however, some duties besides the care of his small parish, for he took pupils, some of a very tender age; among them Lord Lymington, and a son of Warren Hastings, who was an intimate friend and benefactor of his sister, Philadelphia Hancock.

The George Austens lived at Steventon until 1801, and had eight children born to them, who were successively put out to nurse in the village, according to the custom of the time. They ran about with other village children, sharing their food, amusements, and sicknesses. When, after a year or two spent for the most part in the open air, they came back to their father's house, there was little of the familiarity with older people which is common in our days; children lived apart from their parents and under stricter discipline than now.

Jane's birth was thus announced by her father, writing on the same day, 17th December 1775. After saying that it had been expected for some time, he adds: —

We have now another girl, a present plaything for her sister Gassy, and a future companion. She is to be Jenny, and it seems to me as if she will be as like Harry as Gassy is to Neddy.

One more child, Charles John, the Admiral, was born in 1779.

Nothing is known of Jane's childhood except that, like the rest of the family, she was put out to nurse from the time she was weaned till she was two years old, and that five or six years later she and her sister Cassandra spent some time with relations at Southampton, where Cassandra and Jane contracted a putrid (i.e. typhoid) fever. Jane was dangerously ill.

Notwithstanding this, Mrs. Austen again sent her little girls away from home, this time to the Abbey School at Reading, to be under the care of a Mrs. Latournelle, 'a person of the old school,' as we learn from Mrs. Sherwood, who was a pupil of hers, uneducated but capable. Nothing is recorded of Jane's studies. The most interesting thing about her schooldays, we are told, brings out her devotion to Cassandra. She was sent to school only because ' she would have been miserable without her sister.' ' If Cassandra,' said her mother, ' were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate.'

As for Jane's home education, it was that of a country gentlewoman, such as could be picked up in a busy family; on the one side domestic and practical, on the other elegant rather than solid. Education as a science was then unknown, though the lamp of scientific method, lighted by Rousseau and his teachers, had already been held up by Thomas Day and transmitted to Mrs. Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth. The object of education was to impart

knowledge, whether useful or not, not method, unless through the medium of Latin and English grammar.

Jane Austen's idea of a sensible girls' school is given in Emma:

... a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.

At more expensive schools, and under ' finishing ' governesses at home, girls might learn lists of dates, ' the chronological order of the Kings of England, and of the Roman Emperors as low as Severus, besides a great deal of the heathen mythology, and all the metals, semimetals, planets, and distinguished philosophers.' Not to be able to put the map of Europe together, not to know the names of the principal rivers in Russia was culpable ignorance; but why it was important to know these things was a question not to be asked. Rich people, like Lady Bertram, put their daughters ' under the care of a governess, with proper masters, and could want no more.' The Austens, with their seven children in a house crowded with pupils as well, could not have devoted much care to the systematic education of their sons and daughters; and Jane probably believed with Dogberry that ' to write and read comes by nature,' for (not to go beyond the circle of her own creations) we know that Fanny Price and Catherine Morland, with all their disadvantages, grew up to be well-bred, sensible, and capable women, and that all the advantages of the Bertrams did not prevent Maria and Julia from being conceited and ignorant.

The Miss Bennets in Pride and Prejudice were but slenderly furnished in music; they did not draw, no, not one of them.

' Who taught you? Who attended to you? Without a governess you must have been neglected,' says Lady

Catherine de Bourgh.

' Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might.'

Mrs. Austen, like Mrs. Morland in Northanger Abbey, had her time 'much occupied in lying-in and teaching the little ones'; and when Cassandra and Jane ceased to be little ones, they probably learnt to shift for themselves, and to educate and to be educated by their brothers. Both parents were above the average in intellect, and the father was a professed scholar and teacher; and clever brothers and sisters, whilst adding to the family stock of knowledge, exercise each other's wit, and enjoying a free right of mutual criticism, can easily make ignorance appear criminal and ridiculous. That was probably Jane's experience, and she never can have doubted that life is more important than books. In such a family, however, books could not be neglected. 'We were always encouraged to read,' said Elizabeth Bennet; and Jane's reading, if not wide, was sound. She knew Shakespeare well, but it would not be extravagant to guess that she cared less for Shakespeare as a poet than as a revealer of human nature. She read Goldsmith's History of England, and recorded on the pages of her copy her admiration for Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I. She admired Johnson, Cowper, Scott; among the modern poets she praises Crabbe, but with no great enthusiasm. She had no taste for Hannah More and other writers of the Evangelical school. She read Waverley under protest, declaring it to be unfair that Scott, being a poet, should write novels, and good novels; but she was conquered. She knew and was both amused and irritated by the fashionable tales of mystery and sentiment, such as Mrs. Radcliffe's and Miss Jane Porter's romances, to satirize which was the original motive of Northanger Abbey.

But a well-known passage in that book shows that she valued novels as works in which the greatest 'powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humor, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.' 'Let us not desert one another,' she cries; 'we are an injured body.' She admired and praised Miss Burney's novels; she read Fielding; Richardson she knew intimately. Indeed, she owed much to him; though she had none of his tragic depth and pathos, she resembled him in tenderness and humor, and in his power to detect and reveal the secrets of humanity.

Her estimate of her own literary education was humble enough. She speaks of herself as a woman who ' knows only her mother-tongue and has read little in that. ... I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.' She had, however, enough knowledge of French at least to read it easily, and as much Italian as then formed part of a young lady's education. Her acquaintance with French was probably improved by intercourse with her cousin, Eliza Comtesse de Feuillide, who came to England with her mother Philadelphia Hancock, George Austen's sister, when Jane was eleven years old. Of this lady the author of the Memoir writes: ' She was a clever woman, and highly accomplished, after the French rather than the English mode.' Her husband, Jean Capotte, Comte de Feuillide, was an officer in the Queen's regiment of Dragoons, and owner of estates in Guienne; and with him she saw the court in the most brilliant days of Marie Antoinette. The de Feuillides spent some time in England during the earlier years of the Revolution, and visited their relations at Steventon. The Count's connection with England may possibly have brought him under suspicion. He was denounced to the Committee of Public Safety in 1792 on his return to France, in order to escape the

penalties incurred by émigrés; and compromising facts having been proved against him (among them the concealment or destruction of papers in order to save the life of a royalist friend), he was executed in February 1794. His widow remained in England, and was often at Steventon, a curiously incongruous inmate of the quiet rectory; not unwilling to change her estate again, but loth to give up (as she said) 'dear liberty, and dearer flirtation.' Some years later (in 1797) she married her cousin. Captain Henry Austen, Jane's brother, some ten years younger than herself, but even after that event she flirted merrily (like the Miss Bennets and the Miss Watsons) with her 'brother officers,' and especially their colonel. Lord Charles Spencer.

There were theatricals at Steventon during Madame de Feuillide's visits, as at other times before she came to England. The theatre was a barn or the dining room; and Madame de Feuillide, when present, took a leading part in the performances. It was a family custom, and it is not likely that Jane, though very young, would be left out. But the only tradition of the kind is that at a Twelfth Night party she drew the character of Mrs., Candour in Sheridan's School for Scandal and acted it with spirit.

At the Reading school, or at home, Jane learnt to be an exquisite needlewoman; and this was only part of a general facility and completeness. Everything she touched was done with grace and precision, and told of pains taken as well as natural talent. She played all games of skill better than anyone else, spillikins and cup and ball among the number. She drew well, she played the piano, and sang with an agreeable voice, though she held her own musical attainments very cheap, and wrote somewhat slightingly of music, or at least of musical performances. At a party in her brother Henry's house in London, she sat out of the way of hearing too much of the music; but she cared enough about music to copy out in her faultless

handwriting many pages of songs and other pieces, which are now preserved at Chawton House; and we may perhaps recognize a personal experience when she makes Emma Wood house disparage her own playing, because, though she knew what was good, she had never had perseverance enough to attain skill. Like Catherine Morland, ' she could listen to other people's performance with very little fatigue,' but she did not wish to be counted among the performers.

Even the concert (she writes) will have more than its usual charm for me, as the gardens are large enough for me to get pretty well beyond the reach of its sound.

And again, of a public singer: —

That she gave me no pleasure is no reflection upon her, nor I hope upon myself, being what Nature made me upon that article.

Much the same is said of Elizabeth Bennet, and of Anne Elliot: —

She played a great deal better that either of the Miss Musgroves, but having no voice or knowledge of the harp, and no fond parents to sit by and fancy themselves delighted.

This recalls Lady Susan and the girl who was not to learn music because she had neither voice for singing nor arm for the harp.

Her performance was listened to only out of civility or to refresh the others, as she was well aware. She knew that when she played she was giving pleasure only to herself . . . but this was no new sensation ... in music she had always been alone in the world.

This passage could not have been written by a wholly unmusical person; and it conveys too strong an impression to have been written at second hand.

Probably she was less indifferent to music than she professed to be: but music to her was an accompaniment to

society, an amusement, not a source of independent delight.

Yes (she writes to her sister), we will have a pianoforte, as good a one as can be got for thirty guineas, and I will practice country dances, that we may have some amusement for our nephews and nieces when we have the pleasure of their company.

A subject which is often mentioned in her letters, as well as her novels, is dancing. Dancing was then a more important thing than nowadays, in the country at least, which most of its inhabitants never left, unless now and then to go to the nearest seaside place, or to spend a few weeks at Bath, Cheltenham, or whatever might be the neighboring Spa. Dinner-parties were solid and frequent among people who were within dining distance; the dinner -hour was five o'clock, and even brag and speculation could hardly keep the company awake till an early bedtime. When there was a good-natured lady, like Mrs. Weston in Emma, to play country dances, or a fiddler turned up in the servants' hall, as at Mansfield, and half a dozen couples to dance, it was an easy matter to arrange an impromptu ball. More serious affairs than these were the public balls at the county town, which were then more frequent than now and less formal, and private balls (dances we should call them) such as that commanded for Fanny Price's benefit by Sir Thomas Bertram, who would certainly not have approved anything at all unusual or adventurous.

There is plenty of evidence in her letters that Jane was fond of dancing; and we have her own word for it in Emma, her delightful ironical word: —

It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind; but when a beginning is made — when the felicities