

Biographical Facts

Jane Austen: A Family Record, 2nd edition

By Deirdre Le Faye.

Cambridge University Press, 2003. 408 pages.

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Reviewed by Jon Spence.

The biographical sources for a life of Jane Austen fall into three categories. First: parish records, wills, bank accounts, and other more or less “public” documents. Secondly: personal letters, diaries, journals, and other “private” papers written during Jane Austen’s own lifetime. Thirdly: the memoirs, family histories, and life-and-letters biographies written by members of Jane Austen’s family, most of whom were one or even two generations subsequent to Austen herself.

It is these in the third group that create special difficulties for the Austen biographer. The accuracy of the family writers depends not only on the infallibility of their own memories but on that of their informants’ memories. So far removed in time and first-hand knowledge from the actual events, it is reasonable to assume that lapses of memory occurred and even that there was, perhaps unconsciously, speculation and conjecture.

Should this family material be considered “primary sources” of information on an equal footing with the documents that make up the first two categories? Kathryn Sutherland’s introduction to her recent edition of James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (and including some of the other family recollections) shows how unreliable these family sources can be. Sutherland’s carefully argued essay sounds a long overdue note of warning to biographers.

The family material is tempting because it often seems to offer answers to some of the questions that arise from the material in the first two categories. And because we are hungry for fact and certainty about Jane Austen’s life and because there are so many places where we do not know and probably will not ever know for sure what happened and why, biographers have tended to confer on the family material the status of “primary sources,” the status of “fact”: This is true even of Deirdre Le Faye’s *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, which since its publication in 1989 has become known as “the factual biography” of Jane Austen.

Jane Austen: A Family Record has now been brought out in a second edition, and Deirdre Le Faye has corrected the factual errors (comparatively few but important) that have come to light during the fifteen years since its first publication and has stylistically revised some passages. Other improvements include the breaking of very long paragraphs into shorter units and the setting off of long quotations from the author’s own exposition, improvements that make the book more readable and easier to consult. Le Faye’s acceptance of much of the material emanating from the family as unimpeachable “fact,” however, remains. The reader should be aware of—and wary of—this.

In her account of Jane Austen’s relationship with Tom Lefroy, for example, Le Faye writes:

There is no further information as to what happened at Ashe on the evening of 15 January [1796], and it is highly unlikely that Tom proposed or that Jane ever really believed [as she joked in a letter] he would do

so. However, Mr. and Mrs. Lefroy [his aunt and uncle whom he was visiting] had seen enough of the mutual attraction to take fright at the idea of an engagement between so youthful and penniless a pair, and Tom was sent off rapidly to London to live under the watchful eye of his uncle Benjamin while he studied at Lincoln's Inn.

Le Faye makes clear that in the first sentence she is speculating that Tom did not propose at the Ashe ball and that Jane had not really expected him to. But the second sentence, presented as fact, comes from the family material and cannot be proved or disproved. The only thing here that we can be certain is "fact" (and then only if we believe Jane Austen's own letter) is that Tom did leave soon after the Ashe ball. Jane says nothing to hint that his departure was hastened. The reader of Le Faye's account, though, is left with the impression that all of the rather precise details of the statement—the Lefroys taking fright, their reasons for doing so, and their action to prevent an engagement—are factual.

Deirdre Le Faye also sometimes presents her own inferences as fact. For instance, Chapter 6 of her book begins: "According to Jane's own memories, 1787 was the year in which she started to devote her spare time to writing." Two sources are given for this statement: one from Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*; the other from his sister Caroline Austen's *My Aunt Jane Austen*. Nothing in the former implies the year 1787. The latter recounts that when Caroline was twelve Jane Austen sent her a message saying she wished that when she was Caroline's age she had "read more and written less." Jane Austen herself turned twelve in December 1787, which is apparently the basis for Le Faye's inference. But according to Caroline, Jane Austen did not say she started writing at twelve, only that she was writing by that age. Le Faye, as the biographer, is of course entitled to her own inferences, but to present them as bald fact, as she does here as well as in other places, is misleading.

I do not mean to undermine or diminish the value of Le Faye's work as an exposition of factual information. Where her information is strictly factual, we can be almost certain that she is right. But when she presents information from family memoirs and recollections as "fact" we have to be as wary as we are when reading the family sources or conventional (to distinguish them from "factual") biographies.

Nevertheless, when we want the "facts" in the strictest sense, it is to Deirdre Le Faye's book that we turn. As a work of biographical reference *Jane Austen: A Family Record* could hardly be bettered. It provides more fully and accurately than any other book the factual details of Jane Austen's life. It is unlikely that it will ever be superseded, and it will certainly continue to be, as it has since its first publication, the foundation of all biographical work on Jane Austen.

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