

The Austens et al from 1600 to 2003

A Chronology of Jane Austen and Her Family

By Deirdre Le Faye.

Cambridge University Press, 2006. xv + 776 pages.

7 B/W illustrations. \$150.00.

Reviewed by Peter W. Graham.

A preliminary confession: I didn't read every page of Deirdre Le Faye's *A Chronology of Jane Austen and Her Family* before sitting down to review it. Nor is it likely that most readers will do so though some especially thorough Janeites will probably pore over every item in this reference book containing some 15,000 entries from May 20, 1600, ("Horsmunden: Francis Austen I, fifth son of John Austen I and wife Joan Berry, baptized.") to July 19, 2003, ("Chawton: The Great House re-opens as Chawton House Library, the Centre for the Study of Early English Woman Writers, created by the Leonard X. Bossack and Bette M. Kruger Foundation").

Fascinating and seductive to the empirical sensibility, this repertory of facts will be of great use to Austen scholars, who in times to come will turn to the *Chronology* to ascertain where Jane Austen or members of her family were and what they were doing on a particular date. But the book offers far more than just a chronicle of the nuclear Austen family. It gathers together centuries of details about the travels, circumstances, publications, correspondences, financial transactions, wills, and possessions of generations of Austens, their kin, and their associates.

Deirdre Le Faye was tireless in visiting county records offices, libraries, and archives both public and private to gather materials for her biography *Jane Austen: A Family Record* and for the notes to her edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*. Thanks to her efforts in publishing the raw materials of those projects, subsequent scholars and readers will have a much easier time locating facts relevant to the Austens. What we now are lucky enough to have, conveniently assembled in *A Chronology of Jane Austen and Her Family*, is a selective edition of Deirdre Le Faye's exhaustive card index.

The *Chronology* is well proportioned. More than 500 of its pages are devoted to 1776 to 1817, the years spanning Jane Austen's life. The first 66 pages give details of the dynastic back-story; the final 200 or so offer relevant citations from the years after Jane Austen's death with particular focus on the generation of nephews and nieces who had personally known her. The *Chronology* does not, of course, relate a story of the Austen family's lives over the days, years and decades, but it does provide innumerable details allowing readers with a general sense of the Austen narrative arc to enrich their understanding in highly particularized ways. Reading the concise characterizations and extracts from a wide range of sources—pocket diaries maintained by family members and others, correspondences, sale catalogues, bank records, wills, and the like—we can supplement the Austen family narrative with minute and precise details.

Chronology entries reveal the weather, social engagements, family members' health, financial gains and losses, and domestic and public responses to specific victories and setbacks. We can trace what happened over generations to material objects such as the

topaz crosses Charles Austen presented to his sisters or the holograph of James Edward Austen-Leigh's memorial verses "To the Memory of Miss Jane Austen." We can glimpse in brief what various Austens thought of the Reverend George Austen's decision to retire to Bath, read Charles Austen's wistful remembrance of being promoted to Post Captain five years back and reflecting "Then I had a lovely & beloved wife to rejoice in any good that befell me, such anniversaries always make me melancholy" and follow the details leading up to the publication of Bentley's new one-volume edition of Jane Austen's novels in 1833. But some of the unearthed treasures of the *Chronology* are charmingly random quotidian occurrences in the Austen milieu that somehow got put down in writing and thus have escaped the oubliette of time. Here's a personal favorite, an instance of Arcadian reality from the citations that begin 1809: "Steventon: James Doe, 21, steals ten fowls and six ducks from Harry Digweed."

The *Chronology* compiled by Le Faye is supplemented by other documents, including 32 family trees (of the Austens, Leighs, Knights, Lefroys, and others), lists of abbreviations and printed sources, an index of personal names, and illustrations ranging from photographs of pages from pocket-books, a business ledger, and Jane Austen holographs, to a map of southern England. The last of these indicates all the places Jane Austen visited and offers the best visual representation I have seen of the geographical space in which she passed her life. As everyone knows, Jane Austen was not an extensive traveler. As the map shows, she existed within the limits of a roughly equilateral triangle of southern and central England, bounded by Teignmouth in Devon, Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire, and Godmersham in Kent, with the preponderance of place-names marked in Hampshire, Kent, and Surrey. But, as Le Faye's *Chronology* attests and as Austen's narrator incisively explains in *Emma*, "A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer."

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