

The True Art of Letter-writing

Jane Austen's Letters

Ed. Deirdre Le Faye.

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Review by Marsha Huff.

While no new letters have been found since the publication in 1995 of the third edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*, the indefatigable editor, Deirdre Le Faye, has not put aside her work on this landmark collection. Continuing research by Le Faye and others has led to discoveries regarding Jane Austen and her family that clarify puzzling references in the letters and, as Le Faye says in her Preface to the fourth edition, show Austen's social awareness and interest in national events.

For this volume Le Faye has expanded the annotations and updated the biographical and topographical indexes. The 100-page biographical index, which Le Faye created for the earlier edition, is full of interesting family histories and serves as an indispensable reference quite apart from its usefulness in understanding the letters. The only feature missing from the third edition—a subject index—has been added, with entries running from “actors, performers” to “weather, seasons.” The list under “authors, books, poems” provides a succinct summary of Austen’s eclectic reading, which encompassed both literature and nonfiction.

Le Faye’s new notes decode many terse references in the letters. What did Austen mean, for example, when she wrote to Cassandra in a letter dated 15 June 1808 that “the brewery scheme is quite at an end?” Drawing on contemporaneous reports in *The Times*, Le Faye explains that in 1807 Henry Austen’s bank, in

conjunction with two other London banks, had been attempting to establish The Old English Ale Brewery in the West End of London, a plan that was abandoned the following year.

In a letter dated 21 January 1801, Austen refers to a recent illness of the widowed Mrs. Knight, Edward Austen’s adoptive mother. It is remarkable that Cassandra did not destroy this letter because it includes a private joke shared by the sisters at Mrs. Knight’s expense. Cassandra in her previous letter had insinuated that Mrs. Knight had “lain-in.” Austen replies, “I do not think she would be betrayed beyond an Accident at the utmost.” In a new note Le Faye explains that “accident” was a euphemism denoting a miscarriage. (This quotation illustrates another improvement introduced in the fourth edition: words that Austen underlined in her letters are reproduced with underlined text, instead of the anachronistic italics used in earlier editions.)

In her Preface Le Faye traces the publication of Jane Austen’s letters over the course of almost 200 years and the early critical response. When Austen’s nephew James-Edward Austen-Leigh quoted several letters in *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), he felt it necessary to warn readers “not to expect too much from them.... [T]he materials may be thought inferior to the execution, for they treat only of the details of domestic life.” *The Times* in its otherwise kindly review of *A Memoir* did not disagree, saying, “her letters are nothing.”

The two-volume collection of letters published in 1884 by Austen’s great nephew Lord Brabourne was likewise not well received by reviewers. *The Times*, however, said, “though not of the highest class as letters, ... [t]hey have the great merit of being entirely natural.” Le Faye points out that reviewers were presumably comparing Austen’s correspondence with the formal letters of Fanny Burney and Mary Russell Mitford, authors “famous in their day, who had deliberately written not for their families but for effect and for posterity.”

Dr. R. W. Chapman in the Introduction to his first edition of the letters (1932) said, “Jane Austen’s letters have had some detractors and some

apologists,” but he saw “no need for apology.” Rather, he celebrated the entertaining “characters” in the correspondence and found Austen’s fragments of observation and criticism to be “in the same class as the material of the novels.” Confirming Chapman’s opinion, readers now turn to the letters for entertainment as well as biographical information, enjoying the same gimlet-eyed irony and subversive humor that mark her fiction.

It is hardly surprising that early commentators did not appreciate Austen’s chatty reports from the female realm. The pen was, after all, in the hands of men who placed no value on the domestic life of a woman, whether a novelist or a maid servant. We now enjoy the very elements denigrated by them: flowers in the garden, food on the table, and dancers at a ball are the stuff of a woman’s daily existence—in this case a woman who was also an astute observer and great writer. In dismissing Austen’s letters, early reviewers also focused only on the quotidian, ignoring ample evidence of her active life of the mind.

It is largely thanks to Deirdre Le Faye’s masterful editions that Jane Austen’s correspondence can be read with ease. Le Faye’s work combines a meticulous compilation of data about the physical attributes and provenance of the letters with annotations and indexes that allow us to read over Austen’s shoulder as she shares everyday news and frank opinions with family and friends.



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