

Nostalgia for Abbeys

Jane Austen and the Reformation: Remembering the Sacred Landscape

By Roger E. Moore.

Ashgate, 2016. x + 167 pages.

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Review by Rachel M. Brownstein.

On the cover of *Jane Austen and the Reformation* is an image of a “gothic ruin”—the crumbling and broken arches of, as it happens, Melrose Abbey, spectacularly dwarfing three miniscule eighteenth-century tourists with their guide and dog. Inside the book, Roger Moore’s fascinating argument convinces us to see the cover scene rather differently: the people as nostalgic pilgrims and the decayed stone structure as a monastic relic of “the Sacred Landscape” of pre-Reformation England. In Jane Austen’s time, Moore shows, picturesque places like this one functioned as memorials of the lost, more spiritually vital past before the Church buildings that dotted the countryside had been seized by King Henry VIII. Before they devolved into the mere property of rich families and subsequently, sometimes, picturesque ruins, these gracious buildings housed vital religious communities, Moore recalls, and had the crucial social function of feeding and protecting the hungry and homeless.

Based on meticulous research into the work of many generations of historians—of religion, architecture, and society—this book is enlightening to the secular American reader; it deepens one’s understanding of Jane Austen, her novels, and the soulless modern society

they satirize. Moore considers Austen from an original angle: instead of emphasizing the modernity of the novels, he argues rather that her distinction—and her seriousness—is associated with nostalgia for a pre-modern past.

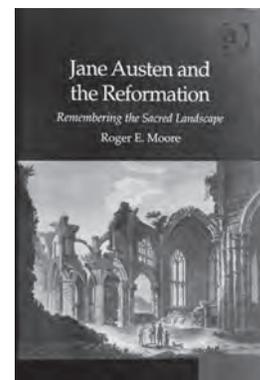
A clergyman’s daughter and a religious woman proud of her family’s connections with the Stuarts, Jane Austen was closer in spirit as well as in time to Catholic England. Her first readers (having perhaps also read Goldsmith’s “The Deserted Village,” the poetry of John Clare, and the work of the radical journalist William Cobbett) would have been aware, as she was, that pre-enclosure, pre-Industrial England looked very different from the countryside they knew. They would perhaps have understood, as later readers do not, quite, that nostalgia for a lost spiritual dimension of life underwrote the vogue, in her time, for Romantic ruins. Claire Tomalin and other recent scholars have taught us a good deal about the English landscape Austen lived in—for instance, that among its features were big houses (Netherfield Park; Kellynch Hall) that their owners could not afford to live in, and therefore rented to strangers. Roger Moore reminds us that hundreds of years before Mr. Bingley settled with his landlord, some of these houses (Donwell Abbey; Northanger Abbey) were inhabited by groups of men or women bound by vows to serve their God and the poor by structuring their time on earth according to monastic rules and rites. The standard Whig view of history that celebrates the English Reformation is corrected and complicated by the knowledge that vagrants huddled in the precincts of Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey—and that the poor were less problematic when the abbeys functioned, and took care of them.

Moore demonstrates that Austen was closer to this pre-modern past than, say, Wordsworth, her contemporary. The best evidence he offers is embedded in insights into passages in *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, and her juvenile “History of England,” and in his more extensive

brilliant reading of *Northanger Abbey*. This novel, he shows convincingly, satirizes not only Catherine Morland, the credulous reader of gothic romances, but also her deplorably venal admirer, General Tilney. As many of her best readers have conjectured, Austen’s novels tend to focus on one or another sin: in this one, greed and lack of hospitality is on the table—a table stunningly loaded with hothouse fruits. Heedless (unlike Catherine) of its spiritual dimensions, the boastful General is proud of his Abbey’s modern kitchens and elaborate gardens, which keep armies of servants busy. That, like a pre-modern abbot, the General has rigid notions of how everyone’s time should be spent, under his direction, is surely, as Moore suggests, a little Austenian joke.

The owner of Northanger Abbey, who boasts of having improved it, is (unlike poor spooked Catherine) heedless of any spiritual dimension it might ever have had. He is not a gothic murderer, as Catherine thinks he is; on the other hand, as a reader of Government pamphlets, he just might be involved in the network of voluntary spies that his son Henry comically harangues Catherine about. Certainly he is a crude and vulgar improver, a harsh cold-hearted father and altogether a selfish modern man, less than civil and civilized. *Northanger Abbey* is the more interesting for Moore’s reading.

Roger Moore is an excellent writer. This important book is absurdly expensive. Libraries should buy it.



Plaque on 8 College Street, Winchester, England.

Rachel M. Brownstein taught for many years at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center, CUNY. She is the author, most recently, of *Why Jane Austen?* (Columbia University Press, 2011).