Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America – *Persuasions* #14, 1992
www.jasna.org ISSN 0821-0314

Growing Up in Steventon

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My childhood was spent at Steventon Rectory. This was not Jane's own home, but a square early nineteenth-century replacement, built by her brother Edward a few years after her death for his son William, who was about to take up duties as rector of Steventon. Edward then demolished the old house, leaving nothing but the iron pump from the back yard, which we regarded as something of a holy relic. When I was eleven, the Second World War broke out, and almost at once there was no petrol for private cars, travel for us consequently reverting to more or less what it had been for the Austens, more than a hundred years earlier. Either we walked or we rode on ponies, or we spanked along in a small cart drawn by a donkey. Because of the consequent slowing down of the pace of life, we, like the Austens, really got to know our surroundings within the boundaries dictated by such forms of transport. The Steventon fields, woods, hedgerows and winding lanes are still dear to my heart. We were also fond of our neighbours: that is to say, because they were rather few and far between, it was foolish not to make the best of their virtues and disregard their shortcomings – as they also kindly

did about ours, no doubt – because the alternative was, quite simply, rather a solitary existence. Freindship was therefore very important; neighbours were known intimately and visited frequently, and such ties were valued and reassuring.

Many of the houses written about by Jane Austen in her letters were also those known to my family. Steventon Manor, for instance, home of Jane's rather dull acquaintances the Digweeds, belonged to my uncle. Later he and his family moved to Oakley Hall, where Jane used to visit the Bramstons, recounting on one occasion that "we did a great deal – eat some sandwiches all over mustard, admired Mr. Bramston's Porter and Mrs. Bramston's Transparencies." This was the same Mrs. Augusta Bramston, of whom Jane related that she found *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* "downright nonsense but expected to like *Mansfield Park* better, and having finished the first volume flattered herself she had got through the worst." I used to walk to this same Oakley Hall across the fields from Steventon to do lessons with my cousins and their governess, and every inch of the way is clear in my mind.

Perhaps Jane and Cassandra, like us, picked blackberries on their way home to eat for tea, enjoying them as simple pleasures are enjoyed with an especial sharpness, when under the shade of war and the threat of invasion. Because that, of course, was another factor linking our circumstances. It has always seemed strange to me that so much has been made of the lack of comment in Jane Austen's letters about the war that raged for so much of her life. If I had been separated from my sister, our letters, I am sure, would have been about flirtations, dresses, and the rest of the preoccupations of the Austen sisters. Partly because that is in the nature of young women; partly because such preoccupations can mask anxious apprehensions lying beneath the surface.

Having fortuitously experienced something of what it must have been like to live in the Steventon of Jane's time, I am the more aware of the great benefits to Jane, and so to posterity, of the constraints of such a life, its leisurely pace and the relatively small dramatis personae. Towards the end of her life she told her niece Anna, who was attempting to construct the plot of a novel:

> You are now collecting your people delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life, 3 or 4 families in a country village is the very thing to work on.

And this is, of course, exactly what fate provided for Jane herself, the perfect circumstances for her particular genius.

Because of her love of her family and friends Jane was well aware of the importance of a marrige that would not remove her from them in an era when travel tended to be a luxury beyond the reach of many. Advising her favourite niece, Fanny Knight, about a suitor, she summed up his good qualities, adding that it was rare indeed for the "perfect" lover to appear, and warned Fanny not to disregard the value of one who was "the brother of your particular friend, and belonging to your own country." She herself may have had just such thoughts earlier when she accepted a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg Wither of Manydown. The prospect of living in close proximity to his two sisters, her dear friends Alethea and Elizabeth, and within walking distance of her family at Steventon, must have been a great consideration, in addition to the security such a marriage would bring. But second thoughts prevailed and the next morning she changed her mind. Writing years later to Fanny she warned that "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection."

At this same Manydown my sister was bridesmaid to Anne Bates, the then daughter of the house; and we were sent to stay at Deane Parsonage to be out of the way during the birth of our brother, where Jane had spent a night in Martha Lloyd's bed after a Manydown ball: "Nurse and the child slept upon the floor," she told Cassandra, "and there we all were in some confusion and great comfort. The bed did exceedingly well for us, both to lie awake in and talk till two o'clock, and to sleep in the rest of the night." At Ashe Rectory I danced, in the house where Jane had enjoyed the famous flirtation with Tom Lefroy. At Hackwood she danced in the room where we later attended the weekly dancing class.

Not, of course, that Jane Austen's life was confined to this particular neighbourhood, or to travels on foot. Far from it. While it provided the greater part of the raw material for her first three novels, as Chawton would later in her life for the last three, these calm periods were interspersed with ventures further afield, enriching her experience. On the journeys themselves her observant eye assimilated and stored away a myriad impression, later to be transmuted into art.

Towards the end of her life, when even the Chawton donkey was too much for her to ride, and life had to be confined to the house, Jane could amuse herself watching the carriages pass by her windows along the main Winchester highway. In July 1816 she wrote to her nephew Edward, then a Winchester College schoolboy:

> We saw a countless number of post-chaises full of boys pass by yesterday morning – full of future heroes, legislators, fools and villains.

These were Edward's fellow students returning at the end of the holidays.

On one occasion the Austens themselves were observed. Mrs. Knight wrote to Fanny Knight: "I heard of the Chawton party looking very comfor-

able at breakfast, from a gentleman who was travelling by their door in a post-chaise about ten days since"; a poignant and intimate tableau of the unwitting little group, Mrs. Austen, Cassandra and Jane, and Martha Lloyd, recorded for all time by such a random chance.

In May 1817 Jane wrote to her "dearest Edward," the nephew especially close to her, to reassure him about her health, and to tell him of what was to prove her last journey in a carriage. This was to Winchester, in order to be near to the doctor in charge of her case. Typically, her concern was for her brother and nephew William Knight rather than complaining of the exhaustion the journey must inevitably have brought her.

> Thanks to the kindness of your father and mother in sending me their carriage, my journey hither on Saturday was performed with very little fatigue, and had it been a fine day I think I shd. have felt none; but it distressed me to see Uncle Henry and Wm. K who attended us on horseback, riding in the rain almost all the way.

On Friday 18 July 1817 Jane Austen died in her College Street lodgings at Winchester. Cassandra wrote to Fanny Kngiht of the last journey of all for that bright spirit: "I watched the little mournful procession the length of the street; and when it turned from my sight, and I had lost her for ever, even then I was not overpowered, nor so much agitated as I am now in writing of it." Only too soon Cassandra became fully conscious of her loss. She lived on for many years, but things could never be the same again without her bewitching, brilliant, dear and loving Jane.

(This is part of a paper meant to be delivered at the conference, but illness in the author's family prevented her from attending.)