

## Jane Austen's Letters

DEIRDRE LE FAYE

London, England

I am quite often asked when and why I became interested in Jane Austen, first to the extent of writing a biography of her, and now to the further involvement of producing a new edition of her letters. I can only say that I certainly never intended to become either her biographer or her editor – no burning childish ambition in this respect – far from it, not even very much interest at all, until well into adult life. My first encounter with her novels was at the age of about 8, when I picked up *Northanger Abbey*, and was totally bewildered by it. Up till then my literary diet had been the popular adult fiction of the later nineteenth or early twentieth centuries – *Ivanhoe*, *Quo Vadis*, *Last Days of Pompeii*, *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, the Sherlock Holmes stories – and so forth. I expected books to open with a bang, in more senses than one – volcanic eruptions, Roman orgies, brutal Norman barons, vengeful skeletal ghosts, revolver shots – corpses on the floor and Baskerville Hounds at the very least. The first chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, about a plain little girl not much older than myself, seemed not only unpromising to the point of dullness, but quite incomprehensible as the beginning of a story – there *was* no story, no dialogue, no action, just pages of long solid prose. So I put it back on the bookcase, and returned to *Quo Vadis* and the company of Petronius Arbiter, whose Roman luxury I much preferred to the sufferings of the Christian hero and heroine.

I think my next contact with Jane Austen was *Pride and Prejudice* at school in my teens, though I can't now really remember; certainly, I did read all the novels gradually, at intervals, in early adult life, and was sufficiently interested then to buy a copy of Chapman's edition of her letters, in the 1960s, and one or two works of biography or literary criticism as well.

When I started research work in the 1960s, it was historical, not literary, and followed on from assisting at an archaeological dig on the site of Selborne Priory in Hampshire – Gilbert White's Selborne, which is only a few miles away from Chawton – and this research enabled me to publish an article on the history of the Priory. During these years, when I used to stay in Selborne for some weeks each summer, one day I visited Chawton and wandered into the Cottage – part of which was then still in private tenancy. I can dimly recall an aged villager taking the entrance sixpences and grumbling that she thought it a great pity that a perfectly good house should be made into a museum instead of being kept for domestic use. At some date thereafter, again I can't remember precisely when, I became a member of the Jane Austen Society, and started to attend the Annual General Meetings at Chawton, and so gradually became more and more interested in the novels, the place, and the person.

In the 1970s, when I'd finished my work on Selborne, I turned toward the history of North London, where I live, and so joined the local Camden History Society. One project we decided upon was to record the gravestones

in the old parish churchyard of St. John-at-Hampstead. (Until the early nineteenth century Hampstead was a separate village, on the hills to the north of London, but it has been engulfed in the ever-increasing sprawl of the city and is now part of the borough of Camden and the NW3 postal district of London.) An initial attempt to record the gravestones had been made in the 1880s, when some local antiquarian paid an elderly man, Mr. Millward, father of the Hampstead village schoolmaster, to copy the inscriptions – at one penny per grave – and as Millward's notebooks had survived in the local history collections, this made a very useful starting point. Each member of our group was given a section of Millward's work to check and map; and in my section I found there was or had been a gravestone with the following inscription:

In memory of Philadelphia wife of Tysoe Saul Hancock, whose moral excellence united the practice of every Christian virtue she bore with pious resignation the severest trials of a tedious and painful malady and expired on the 26th February 1792 aged 61.

Also in memory of her grandson Hastings only child of Jean Capot Comt. de Feuillide and Elizabeth his wife born 25th June 1786 died 9th October 1801.

Also in memory of Elizabeth wife of H. T. Austen esq. formerly widow of the Comt. Feuillide a woman of brilliant generous and cultivated mind just disinterested and charitable she died after long and severe suffering on the 25th April 1813 aged 50 much regretted by the wise and good and deeply lamented by the poor.

I was not so well up at that time in the Austen pedigree as I have since had to become; but even so, the juxtaposition of the distinctive name of de Feuillide with that of Austen set memories scurrying round, and when I checked with such Austenian literature as I then had beside me, it was indeed quite clear that this group of people were Jane's relatives. *This* was the turning point and origin of my future work: I was so puzzled as to why they were buried in Hampstead that I wanted to find the reason. I never in fact did find the answer to that particular question! – but I found, over the course of time, many answers to other questions that had never been properly asked before.

What I very soon realised was that none of the Austenian literature I could lay hands on was able to provide me with the information I wanted. R. A. Austen-Leigh's *Austen Papers* of course gave me Mr. Hancock's letters home to his wife Philadelphia, and Eliza de Feuillide's letters to her cousin Phylly Walter, and confirmed the date of Eliza's second marriage to Henry Austen, but there was nothing to suggest a Hampstead connection. Jane's letter of 24th May 1813 did say: "Henry talks of a drive to Hampstead . . ." – so that was a clue, she certainly knew that Eliza was buried there. But I soon found that there was no biography which could tell me anything more; the best for all round information was (and remains) Elizabeth Jenkins' *Jane Austen*; but this gives a general picture of the family and their period, without much specific detail such as I was then seeking. So I started trying to find out for myself just what I wanted to know.

I can't now remember how long it took me, but by dint of writing round to any- and every- one who seemed likely to know, I made contact with R. A. Austen-Leigh's literary heirs, his sister's descendants. They still own the bulk of the Austen-Leigh archive, and of this, in the course of several years, I have had the free run. It has provided the original, firm basis upon which to build my researches; and the more facts one finds the more avenues open up in front of one for finding still more facts—and so it goes on, in ever expanding circles—or perhaps an inverted cone—as you go upwards so it all keeps broadening out. In reading Mr. Hancock's actual letterbook, now preserved in the British Library, (as opposed to the extracts from it given in *Austen Papers*) I came across some further comments that suddenly reminded me of *Sense and Sensibility*; and this led to my first literary article, "Jane Austen and her Hancock Relatives" which was published in *Review of English Studies* in 1979, in which I discussed whether Mrs. Hancock's character had given Jane Austen some ideas for that of Mrs. Dashwood, and whether that of Mr. Hancock had had some bearing upon the creation of Colonel Brandon.

As I read through the Austen-Leigh archive, and also started to look in county record offices for parish registers, rate-books, and other families' archives, I was able to find out more and more scraps of relevant information about Jane and her family, and these I published as I came across them, in *Notes & Queries*, *RES*, and the *Book Collector*, as well as some short pieces in the *Jane Austen Society Reports*, or in the *TLS*. I also met other distant descendants of the Austens, who in their turn had miscellaneous items of family archive. Just like a jigsaw—the piece seems useless or even colourless in itself, but when slotted into place the whole picture suddenly becomes much more vivid and comprehensible.

By now quite some years had passed, and I had amassed a card-index of information that amounted to about 10,000 items. During these years, I had noticed with growing exasperation how inadequate the current Austenian literature was; more than enough literary criticism—endless rehashings and reconsiderations of the novels—but such biographical information as the critics offered was very limited and in most cases not only repeated old errors but created new ones—as I was now in a position to judge. So when the Austen-Leigh heirs suddenly asked me if I would like to produce a second edition of the family biography by William and Richard Austen-Leigh: *Jane Austen, her life and letters, a family record*—I felt not only very honoured to be asked, but sure, in fact, that I could do so, because I knew that I had information which nobody else possessed.

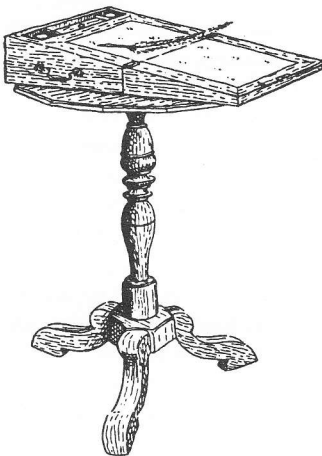
I set out, therefore, not to write "faction"—ie, fact mixed with fiction, as did Helen Ashton in her *Parson Austen's Daughter*—but to provide everything possible in the way of accurate facts and dates for Jane Austen's quiet and undramatic life. I did not choose to "interpret" these facts according to my own opinions and thereby obscure them for future researchers; there is more than enough "interpretation" already published, and most of it is misleading and consequently useless, if not indeed dangerous, as it only distorts Jane Austen's image still further in the eyes of posterity. If other

people want to try to view her life as dramatic, and write “docudrama” instead of biography, so be it—but at least now they will have facts to base their extrapolations upon, not groundless guesses and airy theories.

The outcome of my research, then, was the publication in 1989 by the British Library of *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, which some of you I expect by now have read. As you will see, it is entirely a factual record; I certainly would have liked to discuss the novels in more detail, and to quote more from Jane’s letters; but the British Library wanted 100,000 words, and as it was the simple factual text clocked up 120,000 without difficulty; so there was nothing for it but to forego literary criticism and further quotations from correspondence. I’m still continuing my researches, and I hope someday there may be a second edition to include the further fine details that keep cropping up here and there.

In the meantime, while I was busy card-indexing my biographical facts, David Gilson had published his great Jane Austen bibliography in 1982, and on the strength of it Oxford University Press asked him to produce a new edition of the *Letters*; and it was agreed that I would assist him in this work by providing information on the people and places mentioned by Jane, and that Mrs. Jo Modert would also assist with her knowledge of the present location of all Jane’s surviving letters. However, for personal reasons David was unable to continue with this task; and as you know, poor Jo Modert died in the summer of 1991, eighteen months after her book *Jane Austen's Manuscript Letters in Facsimile* was published; so Oxford University Press asked me to undertake the new edition instead, and this is what I am presently working on. My text is to be handed over to them next spring, and I still have a great deal of typing to do, let alone still finding scraps of information about Jane Austen’s family and friends in all sorts of unexpected places.

In the course of my researches, I have been able to find dates for all the letters that Dr. Chapman could not date in his time, which means that quite a number of them will change places in the new text, as also will those late entries in his second edition which he could not print in their correct chronological order—eg, nos. 74.1, 99.1, and so on—and then there are the additions of the scraps of unpublished material which Jo Modert found, plus some other miscellaneous items, such as Jane’s Will, that seem appropriate for insertion. This therefore means that the layout and numeration of the new edition will differ quite considerably from Dr. Chapman’s, though I shall of course provide a concordance.



My numeration now goes up to 161, as opposed to his 149 plus the “point one” numbers.

I am also proposing to print separately Jane’s drafts as well as her final texts, in the few cases where both exist—e.g., her verse letter of 26th July 1809 to Frank, congratulating him on the birth of his first son—as I think it interesting to compare such texts and notice even the small improvements she saw fit to make as she wrote. Some of the letters, indeed, are only known to us from her drafts, such as those to Revd. J. S. Clarke; and the draft of her final letter to him, that of 1st April 1816, shows how she had to struggle to compose something suitably formal and polite. In a few other cases, letters are only known to us from copies made by members of the Austen-Leigh or Lefroy families in later years—sometimes more than one copy of the same letter—and I intend to draw attention to each of these and to any discrepancies between their texts.

I am planning for maximum readability in the text; the letters will follow on, one after the other, with only a brief heading to give the necessary names and dates. The printed text will reflect as closely as possible Jane’s own spelling, capitalisation and punctuation, wherever this can be checked from the manuscripts; in the case of those letters which cannot now be traced—luckily fewer than 20—the appearance of the text will have to be as published by Lord Brabourne, with the exception that his arbitrary paragraphing will be abolished. In the cases where it has been possible to check Lord Brabourne’s version against Jane Austen’s manuscripts, it can be seen that not only did he quite often omit or alter sentences, but that his division of her text into paragraphs was nearly always incorrect—Jane Austen has in fact very few paragraphs at all in her letters, her changes of subject usually being marked by dashes. These Brabourne-text letters must therefore be viewed with great reservation when used for literary or biographical criticism. I seem to remember that one writer made great play of the fact that Jane apparently alternated without reason between spelling “friend” sometimes as “freind” and “niece” as “neice.” So far I can see from the manuscripts, Jane did indeed spell these words with the “e” before the “i,” but, especially if she is writing hastily, it is not always easy to distinguish between them. Lord Brabourne, therefore, promptly “tidied up” his great-aunt’s Georgian spelling into conformity with what was by then the “correct” version. Hence the modern critic’s argument that to alternate between the spellings is somehow of deep psychological significance, has no base whatsoever.

While on the subject of Lord Brabourne and his edition of the letters, I must emphasise that he, far more than Cassandra, censored Jane’s texts. Caroline’s comment on the correspondence between the sisters is well known: “Her letters to Aunt Cassandra (for they were *sometimes* separated) were, I dare say, open and confidential—My Aunt looked them over and burnt the greater part, (as she told me), 2 or 3 years before her own death—She left, or *gave* some as legacies to the Neices—but of those that *I* have seen, several had portions cut out—” and Cassandra has been blamed ever since for doing this. In fact, Cassandra seems to have excised very little—the “portions cut out” which I have noticed in a few manuscripts amount to only a very few

words, and from the context it would seem that the subject concerned was physical ailment. Lord Brabourne's censorship is far more drastic and far more misleading, and all the worse for being done silently into the bargain. Not only does he omit or alter references to the physical body, its illnesses and pregnancies, but he quite often leaves out whole sentences and then runs the remaining text together, or else, as I said above, cuts up a coherent sequence of text into erroneous paragraphs. I am now particularly suspicious of his version of the letter of 21st October 1813, which *apparently* contains a brief paragraph of only the two consecutive sentences: "I suppose my mother will like to have me write to her. I shall try at least." Critics have seized upon these sentences, in recent years, as "proof" that Jane and her mother did not get on well together. I think it far more likely that the "her" here relates to some other female—possibly even Aunt Leigh Perrot—to whom Jane certainly does not want to write but will do so at her mother's request. If this letter ever reappears I would not be at all surprised to find that there had been some preceding sentence, perhaps along the lines of: "My Aunt is as disagreeable and full of complaints as ever that we keep her in ignorance of our travels . . ." which Lord Brabourne considered improper for publication and therefore excised without explanation. In view of the fact that only a fortnight later (3rd November 1813) Jane is also saying: "I have had a very comfortable Letter from her [and this 'her' quite definitely *is* Mrs. Austen] one of her foolscap sheets quite full of little home news"—it would seem that mother and daughter were perfectly happy and willing to write to each other.

Cassandra's censorship, as mentioned above, lay more in the destruction of complete letters rather than removing sentences. Her handiwork can usually be noticed when the dates of surviving letters are compared. When the sisters were apart, they wrote to each other about every three days—say five letters in a fortnight—another letter begun as soon as the previous one had been posted. There is always a first letter from Jane telling Cassandra of the journey from home to the destination; then a series of letters talking about daily events at the other place; and one or more letters planning the journey back home. If Cassandra is the traveller, then the first letter is from Jane wondering how the journey went; the bulk of the sequence is Jane telling Cassandra how life progresses at home, and the last one or two are Jane's anticipation of her sister's speedy and comfortable return trip. When a sequence of letters does not contain this pattern and frequency of correspondence, it means that Cassandra destroyed some of the group in later years. Close consideration shows that it was probably because either Jane had described physical symptoms rather too fully (e.g., during the autumn of 1798, when Cassandra was at Godmersham and Mrs. Austen was ill at home in Steventon being nursed by Jane), or else that she had made some comment about other members of the family which Cassandra did not wish posterity to read. An example of this is in Jane's letter of 11th October 1813, where she says: "As I wrote of my nephews with a little bitterness in my last . . ." and then goes on to praise them for their virtue in going to church just recently. But "my last" letter does not survive—it came somewhere between 25th September and this one of 11th October—and Cassandra evidently did not



want the younger generation to come across the “little bitterness” in later years and be hurt by what Jane herself now felt to be an over-hasty criticism that she repented of.

Where there are such letters missing from the sequence of a group, and where gaps of months or perhaps even years exist between groups, some comment or mark of division to this effect will be given in the text to draw attention to the fact. The physical details of the letters – watermarks, post-marks, endorsements, seals/wafers, etc., plus descent and provenance, wherever known – will be given in end-notes. There will also be end-notes to provide comment on obscure points in the text, and these will all be properly numbered and paginated. I have plans as well for providing much more information about the people and places Jane Austen mentions – mini-essays in biography and topography – if Oxford University Press will permit me the necessary space. Chapman’s multiple indexes will be tidied up and wherever possible the information they contain will be subsumed either into end-notes or else into these biographical and topographical essays; there will also, of course, be a proper General Index.

Some points that occur to me regarding the letters:

Although so few, relatively speaking, survive, nevertheless we are very lucky in that they fall into clearly-defined groups which give examples of a wide variety of recipients and subjects and Jane’s approach to both. There are the letters to Cassandra, which are often hasty and elliptical – the equivalent of chatty telephone conversations between the sisters, keeping each other informed of the events at home during the temporary absence of one of them, and interspersed with comments on the news of the day, both local and national. To brother Frank, away at sea, Jane writes in a more regular and considered style, giving a bulletin of information about all members of the family, such as someone away for a long period would need to know. As the nephews and nieces grow up, Jane’s letters to Fanny Knight are those of an “agony aunt” in the modern sense – giving advice on affairs of the heart to this motherless teenager. Anna’s interest in trying to write a novel leads to the group of letters in which Jane sets out her views as to how credible fiction should be composed (these letters of course are now of particular interest to us); there are cheerfully teasing, almost slightly flirtatious, letters to young James Edward Austen, as he grows from goodnatured schoolboy to charming young Oxford undergraduate; and little joking notes to the much younger Caroline. Finally, we have the crisp business correspondence with Crosby & Co. and John Murray regarding publication, and the careful social formality of Jane’s responses to Lady Morley and to the pompous, humourless Revd. James Stanier Clarke.

It is a matter for great regret that no more of Jane’s letters appear to have survived; apart from members of her immediate family such as her brothers and their wives, she would have had reason to write to her aunt and uncle Mr. and Mrs. Leigh Perrot, to her Cooke cousins, her Cooper cousins, the Fowle connections at Kintbury, and old friends such as Madam Lefroy at Ashe and the Bigg family at Manydown – perhaps even to the Bramstons, Digweeds and Terrys, once she had left Steventon. She does herself mention correspon-

dence with Miss Irvine of Bath, and with the Buller family of Colyton, Devon; but with the exception of the single letters to Alethea Bigg (24th January 1817) and to Anne Sharp (22nd May 1817), none of these other probable recipients seems to have preserved her correspondence. I do not, however, entirely give up hope that one day somebody's attic will be cleared out and a distant descendant come across a bundle of Jane's letters addressed to his or her several-times-great-grandmother.

On a practical level, the effort of typing Jane's texts into my word processor has forcibly brought home to me the sheer time it must have taken her to write a letter, and I am not surprised that she sometimes says her hand is tired of holding a pen. Although I have never tried to write with a quill, I guess that in fact it must be more tiring than using a pencil, biro, or fountain pen, in as much as one presumably could not rest the weight of the hand upon such a thin, frail implement without making it bend and dig into the fibres of the rag-paper, so producing only smears and blots. Despite these material difficulties, her niece Caroline remembered: "Her handwriting remains to bear testimony to its own excellence; and every note and letter of hers, was finished off *handsomely*—There was an art *then* in folding and sealing—no adhesive envelopes made all easy—some people's letters looked always loose and untidy—but *her* paper was sure to take the right folds, and *her* sealing wax to drop in the proper place—."

As well as time, letter-writing was an expensive business, due to the cost of both paper and postage. Jane normally uses a quarto sheet, folded to form two leaves (i.e., four pages); she does not usually cross her pages, but her lines are even and close and quite often postscripts are squeezed in either on the address panel or upside down at the top of the first page. As the recipient had to pay the postage (which increased according both to the number of sheets of paper used, and the distance the letter travelled), it was incumbent on the writer to give the best possible value for money, and you will recall that here and there Jane apologises to Cassandra for "not filling the sheet." Occasionally Jane uses a foolscap sheet, or a further leaf in addition to a folded quarto—but as such larger letters would have been more expensive, she usually only allows herself more paper when the letter is either franked or else travelling inside a parcel. In her accounts for 1807 she notes that she spent £3.17s.6½d. [approximately £3.88 in modern decimal coinage] that year on "letters & parcels"; and in 1813 she had to pay 2s.3d. [approximately 12p.] for a letter received from Frank when he was away on the Baltic Sea.

I have also pondered on the various handwritings of the Austen family; and although I do not necessarily believe graphology to be an exact science, nevertheless I am both interested and amused to see how the hands of Jane and her siblings do indeed seem to match not only their personalities but even their physical selves. I assume that Mrs. Austen taught all her children to write, so some similarity in letter-formation is to be expected; but Jane's and Cassandra's hands are remarkably similar, and sometimes—if only a few words exist—it is difficult to decide which of them wrote the phrase. For example, some of the letters have dates endorsed on them, and in one or two cases I really cannot decide whether it was Jane who added another date as



she despatched the letter, or Cassandra who annotated it upon receipt. I have come to the conclusion that Jane used a very slightly thicker pen than Cassandra did, and her writing therefore appears rather more strong and forceful; furthermore, her letters and lines tend to have a cheerful upward thrust, whereas Cassandra's tend to be very level or even turn downwards. A tiny but very revealing difference is in their ampersands—Jane's move upwards with a merry little rococo curl as a final flourish, while Cassandra's tail off in a weak downward droop. These differences in handwriting seem to bear out the distinction in character that James Edward Austen-Leigh made between them: "They were not exactly alike. Cassandra's was the colder and calmer disposition; she was always prudent and well-judging, but with less outward demonstration of feeling and less sunniness of temper than Jane possessed. It was remarked in her family that 'Cassandra had the *merit* of having her temper always under command, but that Jane had the *happiness* of a temper that never required to be commanded.'"

Of the brothers, James' hand was spiky and untidy, as Jane said in her letter of 14th January 1801—" . . . every line inclining too much towards the North-East, & the very first line of all scratched out . . ."; Henry's and Charles' hands are very similar—rounded, flowing and forward-moving, in keeping with their warm hearts, impetuous dispositions and long legs; and Edward's and Frank's hands are quite unlike all the others—small, upright, neat and precise, Frank's especially so—again oddly in keeping with their small statures, and calm, sensible, eminently practical natures.

I have also noticed some other points, more abstract, to beware of when studying Jane's letters. First, one must always listen very hard to what she is saying, and consider what sort of a response she is making to the news, whatever it may be, from Cassandra, to which she is replying. A particular case is the letter of 5th September 1796, concerning the "ball" at Goodnestone. More than one critic has taken Jane's words utterly literally, claiming that a "ball" could mean nothing more than a family dance, and that it was a deliberate insult to a poor relation to send Jane home on foot at night afterwards. They thus totally misunderstand the situation and overlook the deliberate irony in Jane's information. Cassandra has been telling her that she (Cassandra) is due to go to a public ball, complete with musicians and waiters (no doubt one of the monthly Basingstoke Assemblies); to which Jane counters, teasingly, that *she* has already been to a ball *here*—and then launches into her description of what was, yes, an impromptu hop in the drawing-room, with Mama playing the piano for all the young people, the brothers and sisters married to sisters and brothers, who had just dined together. And as the return walk was a matter of accompanying her brother and his wife from Goodnestone to their home at Rowling a mile away, on a fine late summer evening, no question of "insult" could possibly arise.

Changes in social behaviour must also be understood; when Jane asks Cassandra, in the letter of 15th October 1808: "I suppose you see the corpse?"—referring to Elizabeth Austen after her sudden death—she is not being morbid, as one writer has suggested, but displaying a perfectly normal interest in the current etiquette of bereavement and mourning. As there were

then no mortuaries or funeral parlours, the corpse had to wait at home until a coffin could be made and a grave dug or a tomb opened, and during this brief period, before the lid of the coffin was finally screwed down, the family would come quietly to pay their last respects to the deceased person. If the face of the corpse could be seen to look peaceful and serene (as Jane mentions of her own father in 1805) this would provide the crumb of comfort that the final moment of death had released the soul to a happier existence.

Another pitfall for the unwary critic is a change of meaning for words still in use today. "Stout" to Jane, meant "strong, robust, healthy" – it did not mean, as it does now to us, "stocky, fat, thick-set." "Indifferent" is another trap – when Jane says "Henry is very indifferent" she does not mean that he is being neglectful or callously careless of her needs and opinions, but that he is in a poor state of health. There are a number of other words which have undergone subtle alterations in meaning over the last two centuries, and it is both interesting and very worthwhile to read the critical works which discuss this aspect of Jane's writings.

When I came to consider a title for my revised version of the Austen-Leighs' biography, I found that the third element of their original title: *Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters, a Family Record – A Family Record* – fitted the situation perfectly. As I was writing – and of course as any biography has to draw a great deal of its information from Jane's own letters, I read them over and over again – I became ever more aware of just how much Jane was a part of her family, and how her life had to be bound up with theirs, whether she liked it or not. As a single woman, it was difficult if not impossible for her to travel any distance without a father, brother or nephew to provide a protective male escort; as a single woman with no private means she could never have lived alone outside the family circle, even if she had wanted to. Luckily the Austen family was large, healthy and happy – and in this respect Jane was far better off than the unfortunate Brontë sisters, for example. But just as the Brontës and their works cannot be properly considered without reference to each other and to their family origins and background, so Jane and her letters and novels cannot be properly understood without knowledge of the Austen family. If all we knew of Jane was that she was the younger daughter of a fairly poor and unimportant clergyman, that she lived in rural Hampshire, never married and died in early middle age, how could we account for the naval knowledge in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, for the London information in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, for the details of local topography of Lyme Regis and Bath in *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, and for the familiarity with the lifestyle of the county families and minor nobility which appears throughout her novels? We need to know that this is accurate information, gained as a result of having two brothers who were naval officers, a third who combined military and financial careers and lived in London, and a fourth who became rich and lived in style in Kentish society; and that her parents, though not wealthy, were kind and considerate, highly intelligent, and members of respectable and long-established families. It is also noticeable that the naval terminology in *Mansfield Park* changes as between the first and second editions (see p. 380 and Dr. Chapman's notes,

p. 549), and this is obviously the result of Captain Frank Austen giving Jane the benefit of his practical knowledge of Portsmouth harbour. Had it not been for Jane's passion for accuracy, and for the availability of such accurate information from other members of her family, her works might have included such ludicrously imaginative errors as that of Mrs. Brunton in *Self-Control*, which Jane herself laughed over: "... my Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way, & never stop till she reaches Gravesend."

Again, the homes in which she lived were not those of her own choice, but always the result of family circumstances; first the parsonage at Steventon during her father's incumbency there; then, it was his choice to retire to Bath; then, it was Frank's decision (no doubt in concert with the other brothers) that Mrs. Austen, Cassandra and Jane should share a house with him in Southampton; finally, it was Edward Knight who offered the Chawton cottage to these his female dependants. Jane may have voiced her opinions in these matters, but she could never have made any final decisions for herself – she must always go along with the family. Whether feminists among us like this or not, that was the accepted social position of portionless single women at that period. Had she married Harris Bigg-Wither in 1802, she would only have exchanged dependence upon father and brothers for dependence upon a husband – though perhaps as a wife she might have had more chance of persuading a husband to agree with her own wishes. On the other hand, if she had become a wife and mother, she might never have had the time to write even six novels.

In return for the provision of a home and financial support, whether from fathers or brothers, Jane – and Cassandra, and their friend Martha Lloyd – did what all other single women in a family group were expected to do (and, indeed, are sometimes still expected to do even today) – help look after aged parents, manage households when sisters were lying-in in childbed, teach youthful nephews and nieces, and nurse any ailing relative or friend for weeks on end. In this respect, indeed, Jane seems to have been remarkably lucky, almost indulged and favoured, in that the Austens always seem to have accepted that her peculiar gifts lay in literary composition, and allowed her to spend a great deal of her time in writing her novels. Cassandra visited Godmersham more frequently than Jane, and following Elizabeth Austen's sudden death in 1808 stayed there for six months or more to help run the household; Martha Lloyd was also frequently called away to nurse friends and relatives. Jane was asked by Henry to attend the deathbed of his wife Eliza in 1813, as Eliza and Jane had always been particularly fond of each other; but apart from this sad occasion, her main task in the family was teaching and playing with her brothers' children – like her own Jane Bennet – starting with two-year-old Anna Austen in 1794. Anna's mother, James Austen's first wife, died very suddenly and the inconsolable toddler had to be sent to Steventon to be looked after by her grandparents and two young aunts. Anna was always Mrs. Austen's favourite grandchild, perhaps as a result of this early fostering, and Chawton Cottage seems to have become something of a refuge for her during her rebellious teenage years.

When there were no children visiting the Cottage to be amused, Jane's time – after preparing the family's breakfast at nine in the morning – was largely spent in writing, and no reproaches for selfishness or laziness were hurled at her, as might have been the case in a less sympathetic family. Nor did she have to keep her writing a secret from the family or fear any discouragement from them – right from her earliest childhood, indeed, her compositions had been a source of pride and amusement in the home. So far from being oppressive or stultifying, the Austen background provided exactly the sheltered greenhouse in which Jane's own particular talents could take root, thrive and bloom. Not for her the miserable, angry desperation of Charlotte Smith, forced to write novels as a livelihood for herself and nine children when separated from a foolish, worthless husband; nor Mary Russell Mitford's similar desperation in churning out the *Our Village* essays to provide an income for her irresponsible old father to squander.

It seems to be the fashion amongst some literary critics or biographers at the present time to try to denigrate the other members of the Austen family – one recent writer claims that the Revd. George Austen was a callous and neglectful father because he did not bring his daughters out in London society, give balls for them at Steventon rectory, nor leave them legacies at his death. The simple facts are that Mr. Austen's income was quite insufficient either to accumulate into individual legacies or to pay for the costs of a London season (even the Miss Bertrams of Mansfield Park don't make their debuts in London, but only in Northampton); and that Steventon rectory was a small shabby country parsonage probably much the same age and size as Chawton Cottage. So far as the family finances were concerned, Mr. Austen had perfect faith in his wife's ability to look after their children, and his Will, made in 1770 and never altered in the remaining 35 years of his life, quite simply in one paragraph left everything to her as his sole heiress and executrix.

Similarly, some people like to claim that Mrs. Austen was a disagreeable hypochondriac, nagging and bullying her two spinster daughters as they grew older. There are certainly a number of references in Jane's letters to her mother's ailments – mostly headaches and bilious attacks; but when one considers that Mrs. Austen was a small slight woman, who had had eight live births and probably at least one miscarriage in 16 years, that she had spent all the early years of her married life in rearing her own children, acting as matron or surrogate mother to the boys who boarded in the rectory as Mr. Austen's pupils, and managing the home at all times – it seems instead surprising that by the time she reached middle-age she was not in worse health. When the family moved to Chawton Cottage, her pastime then – in her seventies – was to dig in the garden and plant her own vegetables. I think some headaches and bilious attacks from time to time can be forgiven her.

Some people think Cassandra's censorship of her sister's letters provides an unnaturally pretty picture of Jane, verging on that of a plaster saint; but again, careful consideration shows that this is not so. Jane was not given to loud-mouthed grumbling and complaining, but some of her letters, by their lack of the usual cheerful jokes and amusing gossip, very definitely betray

her inner unhappiness – for example, those around the period of their move to Bath and also the move to and earlier years of life in Southampton; and she certainly did not wear sentimentally pious rose-coloured spectacles, when she identified and commented sardonically on the follies and inconsistencies of the society around her.

What my study of her letters and all other biographical material has shown me, is that she was a remarkable, and I would say unique, personality. She had all the best Georgian virtues of an enquiring and intelligent mind, rational sense, quiet and sincere piety, good manners, honesty, modesty, a strong sense of social and familial duty, and warm affections into the bargain. Her brother James, indeed, declared (in verse) that she *was* Sense and Sensibility – “Fair Elinor’s Self in that Mind is exprest, And the Feelings of Marianne live in that Breast.” She was an extraordinarily bright and witty child, and matured rapidly into a highly intelligent young woman – remember that *Pride and Prejudice* was written when she was 21 – and was vivacious and attractive as well; Mrs. Mitford may have meant to be rude when she described her as “the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembered,” but I think that can be taken really rather as a compliment. Then, as the years go by and no husband to her taste can be found (do not forget that, had she put mercenary considerations before affection, she could have married Harris Bigg-Wither), she makes no useless complaints but undertakes with practicality and cheerfulness the domestic duties of daughter and aunt, and accepts the humble social position of the unimportant spinster daughter – she “. . . stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of ‘single blessedness’ that ever existed . . . no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire screen or any other thin upright piece of wood or iron that fills its corner in peace and quiet.” That comment from Miss Hinton is probably excessively sour because the Hintons were then at law against the Austens; but the teenaged Maria Middleton, at the same period, commented: “She [Jane] was a most kind & enjoyable person to Children but somewhat stiff & cold to strangers She used to sit at Table at Dinner parties without uttering much probably collecting matter for her charming novels which in those days we knew nothing about . . .” – so her quietness when in company outside the family circle seems to be confirmed. In later years her brother Henry told Bentley the publisher: “Indeed the farthest thing from her expectations or wishes was to be exhibited as a public character under any circumstances.”

But for us, of course, the important point is, that her *unimportant* position in society enabled her to be the fly-on-the-wall who sees and hears everything, and she had the intelligence to accept the position and turn it to advantage – not only for her own creative satisfaction at the time, but to our advantage, two hundred years later, in ways such as she could never have dreamed of.