

The Conference at Santa Monica

A Social and Culinary Commentary

by
One Who Was There

First there was Wilshire Boulevard meeting Ocean Avenue. Then there was the great wrought iron gate leading into the courtyard of what appeared to be Pemberley. Then there was “a fine large tree,” which was indeed a *very* fine tree, so fine, that I must devote a sentence to it: a Moreton Bay Fig, brought as a sapling from Australia over a hundred years ago, now 80 ft. tall and 120 ft. across, and “which in all its majestic glory occupies some of the most expensive real estate in Southern California.”

Finally there was the Miramar Sheraton Hotel itself, with its marble lobby and Persian carpets, its huge windows through which gleamed vistas of palm trees, flowers, white sand beaches and Pacific rollers. One did feel a little like Fanny Price creeping into Mansfield Park, appearing at the desk, in slacks and sandals, crumpled and weary from nine hours’ travel. The bedroom, of course, was on a par with the rest: gold taps, three telephones, balcony with view and earthquake instructions.

Earthquakes. Yes, it is a truth pretty generally acknowledged that the possibility of earthquakes and the recent L.A. riots did impair attendance at the Santa Monica Conference. Pity. Santa Monica is a friendly, happy place, about as threatening as Highbury, and with six bookshops within two blocks of the hotel!

Our Conferences have, alas, become woefully expensive. But as somebody remarked: Think of it as a major vacation. Stay awhile. Make it worth the cost. Some of us did arrive early, taking advantage of the low conference rates at this most splendid and elegant hotel. In such a holiday mood, four of us set off on Thursday to Universal Studios – feeling rather guilty, a little Lydia and Brightonish – but vastly entertained to be nearly swallowed up by a shark and to experience a flood, a fire, an avalanche, and an earthquake in what the guide called A Controlled Environment.

Thursday evening also saw a book caravan set off for four local bookstores, which stayed open especially for JASNA members. Later, in the hotel bar, the three remarkable members (out of 2,500) who have attended all fourteen conferences – Jack Grey, founder, Gene Koppel, editor of *Persuasions*, and Lorraine Hanaway, past president, tried a memory test to recall exactly when and where each meeting had been held. (1979, New York. 1980, Baltimore. 1981, San Francisco. 1982, Toronto. 1983, Philadelphia. 1984, St. Louis. 1985, Savannah. 1986, Vancouver. 1987, New York, again. 1988, Chicago. 1989, Santa Fe. 1990, Washington, DC. 1991, Ottawa. 1992, Santa Monica.)

Friday was the first official day, when the majority of members arrived. In a bungalow near The Tree, one picked up one’s registration packet, which contained a surprise, a present for each registrant: *Seven Letters*, a perfect

darling pet of a book, two and a half inches by two inches, being the seven existing letters which Jane Austen wrote to her sailor brothers. It was beautifully bound in the same style as the early Chapman volumes, pale blue with white binding, clear letterpress type, in a limited numbered edition of 300 copies. The brain child of Lucy Magruder, who says, that “a person who describes her work as written on ‘a little bit of ivory’ surely should be printed in miniature.” Speaking of books, Pat Latkin was there with her marvellous, and indispensable Jane Austen Book Store, with exciting serendipitous “finds.” Imagine, *Northanger Abbey* in French, for \$1.00!

Also of special interest was a rack of BBC costumes, the actual dresses which had been worn in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *War and Peace*, exquisitely hand-made, with hooks and eyes and buttons—no cheating, no concealed zippers—in soft natural materials and the muted colours of the period. Harriet Williams, of Long Beach, feeling that our members would love such an opportunity, had taken a chance and bid on them in London. Now she was offering these same costumes for sale by silent auction. Great was the enthusiasm and interest, limited in some cases by the sizes being often 2 or 4! Each garment had the character, the show and the name of the creator sewn on labels inside. (Elizabeth Bennet’s white dress worn for most of *P & P* eventually went, I was told, for about \$700.) Meanwhile, everybody milled about, buying books, bidding on dresses, greeting old friends, making new ones and drinking tea under the palm trees on the patio.

In the afternoon buses transported those who had signed up to the world-famous Getty Museum. Many were the superlatives: “Breath-taking” “A Greek Temple” (actually, a Roman villa), “Magnificent” “Not to be missed,” etc. Alas, I, having other concerns, did miss it.

Friday evening after dinner, we all assembled in the Starlight Ballroom, a vast area with space for socializing as well as accommodation for a stage and the necessary 300 chairs. We were welcomed by conference co-ordinator, Lucy Magruder, who, with her husband, Marshall, and her devoted workers, Carol Medine and Susan Ridgeway, has had so much to contend with owing to the foundering of the *Queen Mary* as a hotel. Ciji Ware, a local radio personality, gave a lecture on women playwrights of Jane Austen’s period. There seems to have been an astonishing number of them.

Actors then proceeded, as a prologue to the play we were about to witness, to act out the scenes in *Mansfield Park* when *Lovers’ Vows* is being discussed and rehearsed. It was extremely cleverly put together and included excerpts from some of the other novels. The modest person responsible, whose name was not on the program, was Nancy Gallagher. Guffaws of laughter greeted Mr. Rushworth and his speeches about his 42 speeches and his pink satin cloak. A charming little Fanny Price played the harp (perhaps she had learned from Mary Crawford?), and refused to take part in the acting, while a stiff Edmund Bertram showed his disapproval of the proceedings. The prologue concluded with the proposal of inviting the Austens, who lived nearby, to witness the production, a charming conceit which made us all feel that *we* were the Austens.

The play chosen, *Which is the Man?* a farce by Hannah Cowley, has not been performed, as far as could be ascertained, since 1801, and might very well have been seen by Jane in London. Indeed the title was highly reminiscent of Anna's title, "Which is the Heroine?" which Jane said she liked "very well, & I dare say shall grow to like it very much in time . . ."

The young professional actors performed with wit and *élan*. They were dressed in the BBC costumes, the women utilizing their fans over their *decolletage* to great effect. The director, Kathryn Laird-Johnson, who also played a part, had "set it up," as if the play were actually being done by amateurs at a country house who might well bump into each other on entrances, and speak in the wrong accent and have to be corrected. All this added immeasurably to the fun, and the actors were rewarded by rounds of applause from the audience which thoroughly appreciated the style of the performance.

At the conclusion, glasses of champagne were handed round and Joan Austen-Leigh asked everyone to rise and drink a toast to "Our own particular Jane."

Saturday began at 8:30 a.m. with coffee and pastries, once more in the Starlight Ballroom, where gusts of freezing air-conditioning had everyone shivering until suitable steps were taken. Three distinguished speakers from England were present: Deirdre Le Faye, editor of a forthcoming new edition of *The Letters*; Nigel Nicolson, author of *The World of Jane Austen* (1991) and *Portrait of a Marriage*; and Gaye King, chairman of the Jane Austen Society (Midlands). Also from England came member Mollie Thomas, who has faithfully attended almost every conference since JASNA began. As the speeches are given elsewhere in this issue, I shall not dwell on them here. There were both plenary sessions, which everyone attended, and smaller breakout seminars with a variety of speakers and topics. These, one had to choose beforehand and one's selection was printed on one's name tag. No chance of gate crashing! One unimpeachable doorkeeper had her work cut out to restrain the mob from barging in. The seminar in question had the respectable academic title of "Travelling and Dining in Regency England," given by Simon Varey who is not only a medieval scholar and professor, but also a professional chef with his own catering business. It was this latter skill which he was demonstrating, and which caused a near riot, the aromas emanating through the closed door out into the passage being too much to bear for those unfortunates excluded from such delights.

The first free sample to be handed out was "Lambs' Wool," a drink which would have been familiar to JA at inns, served hot in winter, cold in summer. The recipe called for equal parts of cider, beer, and white wine. Delicious. (It can also be made with non-alcoholic substitutes.) Another recipe (or receipt, as JA would have called it), was Lamb à la Maintenon, named after Louis XIV's mistress. Take boneless loin of lamb, dip it in melted butter, roll in a mixture of herbs – fresh or dried, parsley, basil, thyme, marjoram – and grill. Mr. Varey had an efficient small electric grill, an electric wok, and various other aids and devices not available to Serle at Hartfield, all simmering and bubbling with delicious concoctions. All this, before dinner.

But I see I have left out lunch. This was “on your own.” Three of us walked five blocks to a famous local place, Polly’s Pies, where there was a choice of some twenty-one varieties. Poring over the menu, and debating the relative merits of apricot, boysenberry, marionberry, strawberry, blueberry, one of our number declared, “I don’t care what Dr. Grant thinks, I *like* apricots.” These are the moments that make a JASNA Conference entrancing.

At the end of the afternoon on Saturday, there was a book-signing by the many authors present, and a last run at the silent auction. Then followed the AGM business meeting, at which a new slate of officers was presented, Eileen Sutherland of Vancouver retiring after four dedicated years. Garnet Bass of Raleigh, North Carolina, is taking over as our new president.

A brief hour in which to change for dinner. And what a variety of costumes burst upon the scene, from California casual to elegant Georgian. A particularly striking couple, who said they represented Admiral and Mrs. Croft, was Clive and Jan Caplan from Islip Terrace, New York. She was in a charming spotted dress and mob cap, while he wore a most impressive and authentic-looking naval uniform, which appeared to have come from an elite theatrical costumier, but which he had constructed entirely himself, down to his brass-buckled shoes. Secrets of his costume he revealed to me – but I won’t spoil it by telling, though I believe I heard dining room curtains mentioned. Mr. and Mrs. Caplan are to be congratulated on their effort and the pleasure they gave to all who saw them. Many others, too numerous to mention, and not seen by your reporter in the throng, also came in costume.

At dinner, we each received another gift from our generous conference convenors. This was a handsome coloured map of the world, as published in 1801, extremely suitable for framing. The after-dinner speaker, Norman Thrower, being an authority on historical geography, explained various fascinating details, pointing out that then, the Prime Meridian passed through the Canary Islands.

The menu, which had been devised by Simon Varey and the executive chef to be as close as possible to food of the period, began with sorrel soup *en croute*, continuing with salmon and chicken, and finishing with trifle. The actual menu itself was folded in the style of a letter of Jane Austen’s time. Directions, if you are out of envelopes and wish to try this, are on pp. 74-75. Remember what James Edward Austen-Leigh said in his *Memoir*? “In those days there was an art in folding and sealing. No adhesive envelopes made all easy. Some people’s letters always looked loose and untidy; but *her* paper was sure to take the right folds, and *her* sealing-wax to drop into the right place.”

After dinner Lorraine Hanaway, past president, made a speech of appreciation to Eileen Sutherland, in which appeared the memorable words that she was “always amiable.” A just tribute of praise, for, as president, there can be many trying moments and difficult decisions. As a token of esteem, Eileen was presented with a George III teaspoon with crest which had been used in the Austen family.

The results of the fiendishly difficult Quiz were announced. The person who set the Quiz cheerfully admitted that she could never have answered the

questions herself. Catalina Hannan (who was also the unacknowledged co-winner of last year's quiz) of Rye, New York, handed in a perfect paper and was given an annotated copy of *Jack and Alice* put out by students at the University of Alberta and donated by Juliet McMaster, co-convenor of the next conference.

The evening closed with the singing of period sea shanties. As far as this observer is concerned, and not being overly fond of sea shanties, they were quite the most interesting one has heard, preceded, as they were, with historical explanations of their provenance, with reference to the press gang, grog, cat-'o-nine-tails, and so on.

More about the Royal Navy, and the hard life of a sailor in Georgian times was told us by Timothy Runyan on Sunday morning. J. David Grey gave a witty introduction of Nigel Nicolson, the next speaker. The story was told of a definition of perfect happiness: "Lying on a river bank on a summer's day, reading *Emma* with a much-loved companion fast asleep beside one." Whether the much-loved companion should be awake or asleep was a debatable point.

Lunch was followed by a fashion show of the BBC costumes with an excellent commentary by Patricia Crawford, recalling many of Jane's own remarks about clothes.

Lucy Magruder made us laugh by telling us that the management of the Miramar Sheraton had paid her the compliment of saying they had never had a conference where the people were so well-behaved and polite! Well! Of course *our* members have "elegant, agreeable manners." From us, one would not expect less!

We might return the hotel's compliment by saying that although at first sight, the Miramar Sheraton appeared to be Mansfield Park, by the time we had been there a day or two, it became quite like home, so friendly and so charming were the staff.

We bade each other farewell sadly, but hoping to meet again next year, 1993, at spectacular Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies, where Margaret Drabble will be one of the speakers. The following year, 1994, is to be in romantic New Orleans. One conference will be a week earlier than usual, bearing in mind the possibility of snow, and the other a month later, in case of unseasonable heat. Take your pick. Do try and come.



These Badges were designed, made and donated to the Conference at Santa Monica by JASNA Central Missouri Region, Columbia, MO.