

The Savannah Conference

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For most, the conference started on Friday afternoon when, after registering, members gathered in the lobby for the tours conducted by the Historic Savannah Foundation. Old acquaintances were renewed and new ones established as everybody waited for the tours to begin. A hardy few set off in the rain for a walking literary tour of the old town.

The walking tour concentrated on the houses associated with writers who at one time lived in the city. Members were able to see the house where the late Conrad Aiken lived in his youth and the house next door where he returned to live in his later life. His daughter, Joan, was the guest speaker at the Sunday brunch. Despite the rain, which was really more like an aerosol spray, there was ample opportunity to explore, and the patient, informative guides added just the right amount of history per step for a highly agreeable stroll.

Those on the bus were taken through the residential area as well as the historic Davenport House and the Telfair Mansion. Visibility was not perfect through the steamed-up windows and rain, but our members are, if anything, philosophical, and the general impression seemed to be that this was good practice for next year's meeting in Vancouver.

At 7:30, the opening reception was held at the renovated William Scarbrough House. This building, completed in 1819, was one of the first restoration projects undertaken by the Historic Savannah Foundation, and the spacious rooms and centre hall were the perfect setting for the beginning of the conference. Included in the evening's agenda was the Armstrong Vocal Chamber Ensemble's performance of songs popular in the time of Jane Austen. At this reception, a delicious dip was served that prompted numerous requests for the recipe. An intrepid member tracked down the cook and has passed along the information for the many who enquired. Use one can of artichoke hearts (partially chopped) and mix with 1 cup of grated parmesan cheese, 2-3 teaspoons of chopped green onions and 1 cup of good quality mayonnaise. Bake at 375° for a maximum of 25 minutes.¹

This brings us to the wonderful subject of food. After the reception, members could be seen walking down dark alleys, skipping along cobblestones and loitering about the docklands in search of the illustrious Southern cuisine. At midnight, the DeSoto Hilton lobby resembled a stockyard as bloated members were being herded and squeezed into the elevators for the ride upstairs to their rooms. Indeed, the food at this conference was absolutely delicious, and I cannot see how such a standard will ever be surpassed unless a merger with the Nero Wolfe Society can somehow be effected.

Saturday morning, Professor Alistair Duckworth gave the opening address, "Jane Austen's Accommodations." The text is printed elsewhere in *Persuasions*. In the question period that followed his talk, Professor Duckworth when asked to comment on the biography by John Halperin and his presentation of Jane Austen, gave the analogy of the Bishop and the curate's egg: parts of it were excellent.

In response to a question as to why Jane Austen never wrote a sad ending, Professor Duckworth said she was writing comedies and believed that honest people who worked hard ought to be rewarded.

Four *Northanger Abbey* workshops were scheduled next. Mr. Sidney Ives, a librarian from the University of Florida, conducted a lively presentation on the personality of our authoress. For Mr. Ives, there was a joke, central to the tale of *Northanger Abbey* in that the reader was set up to be amused by the ingenuous heroine and to laugh at her romantic fantasies so that General Tilney's behaviour and the threat to Catherine's happiness come as a shock. Despite the excesses of Catherine's imagination, the General does turn into a villain every bit as horrible as a monster in some Gothic romance.

Mr. Ives faced some strong arguments in his seminars, and the reaction to some of his comments bespoke a certain protective pride the members have developed towards Jane Austen. By suggesting there was some connection between Catherine's inability to find a dance partner and Jane Austen's spinsterhood, or that Jane Austen was a "bit of a frump," Mr. Ives was guaranteed a lively and forthright discussion.

Professor Ellen Smith presented an interesting seminar on the Spanish translations of *Northanger Abbey*. Since her most recent and lengthy experience has been in Buenos Aires, we were given examples of Argentine translations. Translation work is always difficult, but the geographical distance from England results in some surprising difficulties. Great liberty is sometimes taken with the description of the characters, and quite often an astounding ignorance of English history and customs is displayed.

Professor Dean Cantrell gave a presentation on "Her Passion for Ancient Edifices," which included a slide show of some ancient and not so ancient buildings. We saw photographs of Blaize Castle, which was perhaps thirty years old when Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey*. As well, there were pictures taken of the surrounding countryside. Professor Cantrell did a thorough job of explaining ancient edifices and their role in *Northanger Abbey*.

Professor Patrick Bizarro addressed the subject of "Humour in *Northanger Abbey*." For him, there were two parallel styles of humour presented: Henry Tilney's wit and sarcasm were used to make people laugh at themselves, while the direct and sometimes heavy-handed commentary of the narrative was there to make us laugh at the characters.

Soon members were coming forward with their favourite passages of the book; indeed, one might suggest that humour in any shape or form be put on the agenda at all future meetings as it is obviously the favourite subject of the members. One person suggested that the encounters between Henry and Catherine were but a precursor of the duel between Mr. George Knightley and Emma Woodhouse. This brought further examples until it seemed as if all the novels were connected in such a way.

Right after luncheon, Miss Kathleen Gancy of Edinburgh, a well-known correspondent of our executive officers, spoke on "The Tilneys and the Bennets." She examined each family with wit and proposed various matches between those two great houses. She was then joined by the morning's speakers who proposed their own ideas for the cross-pollination of the novels. When the discussion was opened to the members, there was no lack of ideas. In our part of the hall, the most outrageous proposition was a bridge table composed of Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Elton playing Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Bertram. Lady Bertram, oblivious to Sir Walter's frantic signalling and

comforted by the presence of dear Pug on her lap, was pleased that her four no-trumps had beat out Mr. Bennet's bid of three hearts.

During the afternoon, while saner heads were resting upstairs, a business meeting was being held in the main ballroom.

The dinner took place under perfect circumstances of good conversation and good food. The by now, ritual "Tadpoll" and a newer diversion called "Novel Pursuit" were conducted by the noted disciplinarian, Mr. Dwight McCawley. The first order of business was the runoff of the "*Northanger Abbey* Quiz," which the members found in their registration packets. The ten people with perfect scores were given two dastardly tricky questions, which resulted in another tie. Prizes were then awarded to Mrs. Charlotte Samelstein and Mrs. Eileen Sutherland.²

Next, a two-page question sheet was given to each table for "Novel Pursuit." In introducing this game, the Society may have created a monster; for future meetings, will members be forced to memorize the most obscure and arcane data solely for the honour of winning much-coveted glory from our Society? This could mean the end of literature as we know it!

Mr. McCawley should be commended for his firmness in preventing bedlam, for when the festivities finally came to a close, it was agreed by all to have been a most successful evening.

Sunday brunch brought the members together for the last time. Joan Aiken, author of *Mansfield Revisited*, applied her special talent to reconstructing *Northanger Abbey*. It was an imaginative presentation that demonstrated her great admiration for Jane Austen as well as her own talents as a writer. How fortunate we were in having an author speak to us who is so well connected with not only Jane Austen, but the City of Savannah, too. Yet this was not the only marvellous thing about the Savannah meeting. Our Society is really coming into its own as we meet from year to year. The delight in hearing our members discuss the works of Jane Austen and apply their knowledge and enthusiasm towards an ever-increasing enjoyment and appreciation of her writing is shared by everyone.

For those of us who follow non-literary or non-academic careers, this Society plays a very special role for it keeps alive our interest and lets us meet fascinating and most entertaining people. If any of you have ever contemplated attending an annual meeting but held back, I urge you to reconsider and meet us in Vancouver. There, like at all past gatherings, you will find that while *Persuasions* is a pleasure to read, the real pleasure comes in making it happen.

Southern hospitality is something that can never be forgotten. With constant attention and gracious charm, Patricia Robinson-King and her Savannah Committee kept up this fine tradition. Next year we cross the continent to the Pacific where the magnificent city of Vancouver awaits us. I hope that those who were not able to sample the delights of Savannah will, in 1986, be with us amid the splendour of Canada's west coast.

¹ Serve at room temperature with fresh vegetables.

² What was Isabella Thorpe wearing when she met James Morland? What book did Mrs. Morland recommend to Catherine on her return from *Northanger Abbey*?