

JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

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The Common Georgian House. Eileen Sutherland.

Virtually every foreign visitor to London in the 18th century was struck by the black pall of smoke that hung over the capital. Louis Simond, a visitor from France in 1810, wrote: "On winter days in London . . . the smoke of fossil coal forms an atmosphere perceivable for many miles, like a great round cloud attached to the earth." Eric Gustaf Geijer, another visitor at the same period, criticized the architecture as well as the atmosphere: "One passes through houses all alike, all dark and smoke-begrimed . . . into an atmosphere of smoky twilight in which move an unending multitude of people, with the city an enormous murky lump of brick ." These various reports by visitors let us see the Georgian city through 18th century eyes.

In the Georgian era, cities and towns in Britain were transformed: many narrow, cramped and dirty streets in the centres of cities, and open meadows on their outskirts, were replaced in a ferment of construction which saw speculatively-built terraces of new town houses, with uniformity and simplicity of design derived from the early 18th century Palladian movement. It was an ingenious accommodation, making the most of limited money, remarkable for good arrangement and economy of space, and interesting design.

The main streets were well illuminated, and paving was of Purbeck stone rather than pebbles, with stone kerbs and raised pavements on either side for pedestrians. Kerbside gutters drained excess rainwater. Rubbish and litter was usually cleared away every week.

The usual residential terrace consisted of narrow houses, two rooms to each storey, three or four storeys high with floors used: one for eating, one for sleeping, a third for company, a fourth underground for the kitchen, a fifth perhaps on top (dormer-lit garrets) for the servants, customarily with two rooms and a light closet on each floor. The underground area was often "damp, unwholesome and uncomfortable." But this was the location of the kitchen, bakehouse, offices and servants' quarters, as well as storerooms. It was lit and aired by windows opening on to a fore-court or "area", where cellars and vaults beneath the street provided storage for coal and other supplies. The designs of houses varied enormously - different placement of rooms, and number of rooms on each floor, perhaps passage and stairs on a different side of the house - but the common house size was about twenty feet by forty feet.



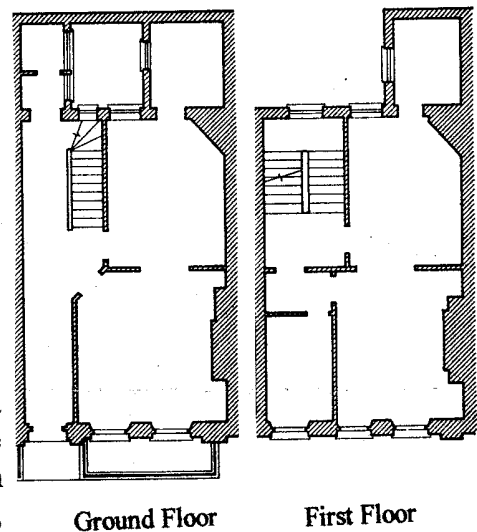
Portland Place, 1800.

These floor plans indicate the usual arrangement of rooms in the Georgian house. The ground floor - up only two or three steps above the street level - did not contain the most important formal rooms. In the earlier years of the 18th century, it was common practice to use one of the lower parlours as a dining room by opening up a gate-leg table. Later, a formal permanent dining room was located on the first floor, adjacent to the formal drawing room. The arrangement varied, however, and was unresolved until late in the century. The first floor back room might be used as a dressing room for the lady of the house, and a place to entertain informal morning visitors.

The two rooms front and back on the second floor were bedrooms, with occasionally a third bed in the closet area. [A "light closet" was an extension off the back room and could be used as a dressing room or small bedroom]. The top floor [the garrets] was divided into a larger number of rooms to accommodate extra family members or servants.

The passage from the front door astonished foreign visitors: apparently in great contrast to European houses, it was very clean, with a neat floor cloth or carpet, the walls painted or papered, and with a glass lamp hanging from the ceiling. The staircase leading to the upper floors was covered with rich carpets, supported by hand rails of mahogany, lighted by lamps, and with busts and paintings on the landing places.

The formal rooms upstairs were usually panelled with wainscot and painted, with marble door frames and chimney pieces, and brass locks for the doors. The dining-room could be dark, with dark panelling, very much a masculine room. In contrast, the drawing-room would be light-coloured, the height of fashion, a feminine room where women retired after dinner to make tea and chat, while they waited for the men to finish drinking and talking politics.



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Jane lived in rural and small town England, but she had the opportunity to get to know London whenever she made long visits to her brother Henry, in Sloane Street, Henrietta Street, and Hans Place. Her letters to Cassandra give hints of how his homes fit this pattern of the "common" Georgian house.

April 25, 1811, at a musical evening at Henry's, in Sloane Street: *The Draw^s room being soon hotter than we liked, we placed ourselves in the connecting Passage, which was comparatively cool, & gave us all the advantage of the Music at a pleasant distance, as well as that of the first view of every new comer.* [All the guests would come up the stairs into this passage, before going into the drawing room]. *Including everybody we were 66 . . . quite enough to fill the Back Draw^s room, & leave a few to be scattered about in the other, & in the passage.* [This seems as if the back room was larger and more important than the front].

May 20, 1813, in Sloan Street: *I am very snug with the front drawing-room all to myself.*

September 15, 1813, Henrietta Street: *Here I am, my dearest Cassandra, seated in the breakfast, dining, sitting-room, beginning with all my might.* [This was probably one of the parlours on the ground floor, not the more formal rooms on the floor above]. When they arrived

the day before: *We were kindly welcomed by the coachman, and then by his master, and then by William [a servant], and then by Mrs. Perigord, [Henry's servant] who all met us before we reached the foot of the stairs [in the entrance hall, just inside the front door]. Mde. Bignon [Henry's housekeeper, perhaps mother of Mrs. Perigord] was below [in the kitchen, in the lowest storey, built underground] dressing us a most comfortable dinner. . . The little adjoining dressing-room to our apartment makes Fanny and myself very well off indeed. [Many of the rooms had an adjoining alcove or closet which could have various uses].*

The next morning: *At eight I have an appointment with Madame B. [Bignon], who wants to show me something downstairs [in the underground kitchen area]. [After dinner] We are now sitting round the Circular Table in the inner room [the back drawing room] writing our Letters, while the two Brothers [Henry and Edward Knight] are having a comfortable coze in the room adjoining [this may be a small "closet", or the main drawing room]. After our return [from a shopping trip], Mr. Tilson walked up from the Compting House & called upon us [Henry was now living over the Bank].*

March 2, 1814, Henrietta Street. *I have taken possession of my bedroom, unpacked my bandbox . . . and am now writing by myself at the new table in the front room [perhaps the first floor parlour].*

October 17, 1815. Hans Place. *Henry [sick] is in the back room upstairs, [on the "chamber" floor] & I am generally there also, working or writing.*



Jane Austen preferred to write about "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village," but occasionally she lets her characters visit London. If we think about the floor plans, we'll be able to get a better understanding of the actions in these passages.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth going with Sir William Lucas and Maria to Hunsford Parsonage, stop for a night on the way at the home of the Gardiners in Gracechurch-street in London. *As they drove to Mr. Gardiner's door, Jane was at a drawing-room window watching their arrival [from a front drawing room a good view could be obtained of all the street in front of the house]; when they entered the passage she was there to welcome them. . . . On the stairs were a troop of little boys and girls, whose eagerness for their cousin's appearance would not allow them to wait in the drawing-room [where, perhaps, Jane had been 'teaching them, playing with them, and loving them'], and whose shyness, as they had not seen her for a twelvemonth, prevented their coming lower [down the stairs to the passage by the front door where the travellers had entered].*

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne visit Mrs. Jennings in London. Marianne is expecting to hear from Willoughby any minute. After dinner, *when they returned to the drawing room, she seemed anxiously listening to the sound of every carriage. . . . Already had Marianne been disappointed more than once by a rap at a neighbouring door, when a loud one was suddenly heard which could not be mistaken for one at any other house . . . Marianne starting up moved towards the door . . . she opened the door, advanced a few steps towards the stairs, and after listening half a minute, returned into the room in all the agitation which a conviction of having heard him would naturally produce . . . Colonel Brandon appeared.*

From an informal drawing room on the ground floor, every noise from the street could be heard, and even if they were sitting in the main drawing room on the first floor, they would be in a position to hear carriages, footsteps and loud knocking very easily - one of the general complaints against the front rooms was the noise from the street. The drawing room door opened directly on to the passageway which led to the stairs, and sounds such as a man talking would come straight

up to the room above. Marianne was so overcome that she didn't stay long enough to distinguish whose voice she heard. When Colonel Brandon came in, Marianne rushed out of the drawing room and up the stairs to her bedroom.

After spending most of the next day shopping, with Marianne looking out for Willoughby everywhere, they returned to Mrs. Jennings' house. *No sooner had they entered the house than Marianne flew eagerly up the stairs, and when Elinor followed, she found her turning from the table with a sorrowful countenance, which declared that no Willoughby had been there.* Entering the house from the street door at the ground floor, they would be facing the stairs just a few steps along the passage. Marianne would rush up the stairs immediately, to the drawing room on the first floor. When Colonel Brandon comes again the next day, *Marianne, who had seen him from the window . . . left the room.* From the windows of the front drawing room, it would be easy to see the street, and who was coming to the door.

Even in these trivial details, Jane Austen is scrupulously exact, and if we read carefully we can get a real feeling of the typical London house from her descriptive words.

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Jane Austen's Heroines.

"Jane Austen's heroines - and it is this which distinguishes them from Clarissas and Evelinas, like Catherine of *Northanger Abbey*, have 'nothing of a heroine of romance about them.' It is simply the accident of filling the central position of a love-story which makes heroines of them; but they show no hint of those perfections and those astounding misfortunes which raise a girl above the level of ordinary mortals.

Possessing neither superhuman virtue nor unmatched beauty, they appear to us in all the simplicity and variety of their own characters. They never strike an attitude or adopt a pose. They need be nothing but themselves all day long; nice girls, rather badly educated, sad when circumstances force it on them, and cheerful because they are young and in good health, provided that cheerfulness is not uncalled for at the moment.

For the first time English fiction gives us heroines who never fly up above the level of reality, who are neither angels nor goddesses, and, born to a placid middle-class existence, contrive to be happy in it. They are subjected to all the contingencies which up to that time the heroine of a novel had been spared. Returning from a long country walk in driving rain, they arrive with - 'weary ankles, dirty stockings and a face glowing with exercise.' Their lives, like their days, are tranquil and all of a piece. They spend their time in embroidery and fringe-making; they play a few pieces rather badly on the piano; they draw or paint, and, most important of all, they receive visits from their friends and very often go to call on them.

Their persons are less well known to us than is the way they spend their time. The features of these heroines, whose living image we can so well conjure up, are not once described by the author.

Jane Austen and her Work, Leonie Villard (1924).

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Sir Walter Elliot disparaged the Navy: "A man is in greater danger in the navy of being insulted by the rise of one whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to." Thomas Sheridan (the father of the playwright) once said something similar about music: "It often draws persons to mix in such company as they would otherwise avoid."

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Changing Fashions.

“...she has turned away two housemaids for wearing white gowns.” [MP.p.106]

Class boundaries were becoming increasingly blurred in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Neil McKendrick comments:

“The most obvious way this blurring of the class lines revealed itself was in dress. Writer after writer notes the ‘absence of those outward distinctions which formerly characterized different classes’. T.Somerville [1741-1814], writing in the early 19th century, reflects on the changes which had taken place in his lifetime. ‘At that time various modes of dress indicated at first sight the rank, the profession, and the age of every individual. Now even the servants are hardly distinguishable in their equipment from their masters and mistresses.’ Davis, in his *Friendly Advice to Industrious and Frugal Persons* [1817], drew attention to the same phenomenon: ‘a fondness for Dress may be said to be the folly of the age, and it is to be lamented that it has nearly destroyed those becoming marks whereby the several classes of society were formerly distinguished.’

This phenomenon was very widely commented on by both English and foreign observers, the major difference being that the foreigners usually recorded their amazed admiration for the prosperity of the English working classes while the indigenous commentators more characteristically denounced their extravagance and ostentation....The German Moritz in 1782 notes that ‘the distinction in dress amongst the various classes is not...great’, and ‘even the poor...wear silk stockings’; Karamzin in 1790 finds ‘the Lord and the artisan are almost indistinguishable’; and von Archenholz confirms the picture, when he writes of the same decade, that ‘the accumulation of riches, luxury and pleasures are enjoyed by all classes’, adding that ‘England surpasses all the other nations of Europe in the luxury of dress and apparel, and the luxury is increasing daily’...By the end of the century what had previously been looked on as being a luxury for the worker was thought of in terms of being a decency or even a necessity.

The change was blamed by most English on the downward spread of fashion, and on the imitation by the poor of their social superiors in matters of dress, diet and possessions....As early as the 1750s Fielding complains that ‘attorneys’ clerks, apprentices, milliners, mantua makers and an infinite number of lower people’ aspire to the pleasures of the fashionable: by the end of the century they were, according to contemporaries, already enjoying them....

Women in particular were abused for their dependence on fashion and for their extravagant expenditure on clothes, a criticism which increasingly applied to all classes. Indeed the expenditure of the lower ranks spurred the middle and upper ranks to ever further efforts to stay ahead. The fact that the lead was given by upper ranks of society should not blind us to the fact that social emulation can work both ways - one of the reasons for the increased expenditure of the middle ranks was their desire to continue to outdistance the more competitive lower orders...

Entrepreneurs exploited the situation with such skill that ‘the fashions alter in these days so much, that a man can hardly wear a coat two months before it is out of fashion’. Both men and women were made to conform.”

“Home Demand and Economic Growth” by Neil McKendrick, in *Historical Perspectives. Studies in English Thought and Society*, Neil McKendrick, ed. (1974).

September Meeting: "Books and Berries". Chair: Susan Olsen.

(1) The first book discussed was P.D. James' latest, *To the Lighthouse*. The reviewer, **Barbara Phillips**, had heard a talk given by Roger Woods of East Texas (a specialist on P.D. James), who had met James in London (the author is now in her 80s). James became much more open when the interviewer mentioned a son who suffered from mental illness as had James' husband after W.W.II. The latter was institutionalized for twenty years, and James brought up their two daughters while working as a civil servant. The author has a very strong religious faith (of the Anglo-Catholic type). Phillips re-read James' earlier works as well as this most recent book. In the earlier works not only is that religious faith evident but there is also a clever detective who solves the crimes and re-establishes order from disorder. Murder is the ultimate crime. The model followed was much like Agatha Christie, and often takes place in a "closed" community. In about 1986, (*A Taste for Death*), the author's views expand so that not only is murder the crime, but it contaminates all - the survivors as well as the victim. The greatest sin is now ignorance. The killer is always motivated by revenge or anger, and wants to change perceived wrongs. The killer is usually an orphaned person. In spite of those clues, Phillips usually can't guess the killer correctly.

James sees divorce as a sin, and the break-up of families as very harmful to society. She is also an opponent of multiculturalism, which she sees as watering everything down. Money, sex and celebrity also have negative effects on society. In James' latest book, Adam Dalgleish, her clever detective/poet, is again brought in to solve the crime. The book was recommended as a good read.

(2) **Irene Howard** did not review a book, but had a tribute to Esther Birney, a member of JA Vancouver, who recently died. (Irene has the programme handout that was recently used at the Brock House memorial, and which has all Esther's bio details. She was born in London in 1908 of Polish/Russian/Jewish parents. She was trained as a social worker. She married in the U.K. and came to Canada in 1936). At UBC, Irene was a student of Esther's husband (Earle Birney) and a friend of Esther's. Esther was a special friend to many and a lover of life who remained active on many fronts until about her 92nd year. Her last five years were spent in a care facility.

(3) **Cathy Morley** and her daughter **Sophie**, referred to two books they had found at a thrift sale. The books were by Janet Arnold and contained patterns for the clothing of 1660-1860 (Vol.1) and 1860-1940 (Vol.2). The author had actually taken apart clothing of the different periods in order to create the patterns.

(4) **Sandy Lundy** spoke about two books: The first was *Period Piece* (by Gwen Reverat) which was an account of her childhood in Cambridge. She was the granddaughter of Charles Darwin, a notable hypochondriac, (among several famous relatives). Her father was a professor at Cambridge University and her mother was an American. They were a dotty and quite eccentric family. There are charming woodcuts by the author used to illustrate the book.

The second book was *Conducted Tour* by Bernard Levin (who recently died). The book is about his life at a British public school and later at L.S.E. He loved music and was able to pursue that love as a music critic. In the 1980s he realized a life-long dream in attending eleven musical festivals in Europe and Australia. Both books were recommended as good memoirs.

The Edinburgh Review. Allan Massie.

“In his life of Francis Jeffrey, fifty years after the event, Lord Cockburn recalled the impact of the first publication of the *Edinburgh*, in October 1802:

‘The effect was electrical. And, instead of expiring, as many wished, in the first effort, the force of the shock increased on each subsequent discharge. It is impossible for those who did not live at the time, and in the heat of the scene, to feel, or almost to understand, the impression made by the new luminary, or the anxieties with which its motions were observed. It was an entire and instant change of every thing that the public had been accustomed to in this sort of composition. The old periodical opiates were extinguished at once. The learning of the new journal, its talent, its spirit, its writing, its independence, were all new. And the surprise was increased by a work so full of public life springing up, suddenly, in a remote part of the kingdom.’

Cockburn was scarcely impartial, being not only Jeffrey’s biographer, but a close friend, political colleague, and contributor to the *Edinburgh* himself, but his encomium was not exaggerated. The *Edinburgh* did represent something new; it was remarkable, and soon acquired an unusual authority. Scott, an early contributor, told a correspondent that ‘No genteel family can afford to be without it, because independent of its politics, it gives the only valuable literary criticism that can be met with.’ . . .

What now strikes us, on the 200th anniversary of the launch of the *Edinburgh*, is the youth of the four founders: Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham, Francis Horner and the Revd Sydney Smith. Smith, at thirty-one, was the oldest. None of the others was yet twenty-five. They were advocates, recently called to the Bar, short of briefs, and with poor professional prospects, on account of their Whig views and the complete Tory dominance of Scotland. One may wonder at the self-confidence of the three young Scotsmen and an obscure English clergyman temporarily resident in Edinburgh.

Yet this confidence was to be justified. Within ten years, the *Edinburgh* had a subscription list of 12,000 (at a time when the daily circulation of *The Times* was only 8,000), . . . this represented at least 50,000 readers.

The *Edinburgh Review* put Scotland at the centre of culture.”

Times Literary Supplement, August 9, 2002.

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Landscape Gardening.

Mr. Rushworth in MP has visited a friend who has recently had his grounds at Compton “improved.” He observes that the friend “has not got much above a hundred acres altogether . . . [but] at Sotherton, we have a good seven hundred . . . If so much could be done at Compton, we need not despair.”

In *Mastering the Novels of Jane Austen*, the authors comment: “To assume that the mere size of the park is a significant factor is to betray a distinct lack of taste. Mr. Rushworth’s tasteless zeal is evident in his assurance that ‘Repton, or anybody of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down.’ What emerges here is an ignorance of Repton’s current thinking. Perhaps the irony of the passage is that Rushworth thinks of himself as advanced when he is only repeating views that have become slightly dated. Repton did not always cut down old avenues. It is possible that Jane Austen would have expected her readers to see the eager improver as both tasteless and out of touch.”

Mastering the Novels of Jane Austen, Richard Gill & Susan Gregory.

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, & Submarines: Len Haffenden.

Last year, we enjoyed Len Haffenden's talk about Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar. This talk, at the October meeting, is set in a later period, but is still about naval matters, and was just as interesting as we had expected.

Arthur Conan Doyle was a "Renaissance Man", interested in almost everything. He was a medical doctor in Edinburgh and a ship's doctor at two periods. He set up in general practice in Portsmouth. This was not a financial success: he sat writing short stories while waiting for patients. [Someone commented about the change: now patients read short stories while waiting for the doctor]. He soon discovered he could make more money as a writer than as a doctor. He served in the British army in W.W.I and wrote a definitive history of the British Army on the Western Front. He ran twice for Parliament, but was "too honest a man to be elected". He was a prolific writer, on many different subjects - novels, short stories, plays, poems, essays, and articles espousing various causes relating to the public good on many different topics. He considered the Sherlock Holmes stories, 56 short tales and four novels, as inferior literature - an opinion not agreed with by many readers today.

In the spring of 1913, just shortly before the outbreak of WWI, he wrote a pamphlet warning the government and the public of the future danger of Submarines! He clearly saw what menace a single submarine could be to merchant shipping, and especially to great warships. The pro-battleship authorities ignored his advice: "Submarines were underhand, under water, and un-English!" Churchill was the one important person who took submarines seriously. Enough of the Lords of the Admiralty were cynical and practical men who knew where British interests lay, but they also had to take into consideration the tremendous cost and the years it took to build battleships; and each battleship needed 1000 to 1500 men for a crew.

Early submarines, as designed, went down easily but didn't come back up. There were myriads of inventions and designs - most were colossal failures. Thousands of anecdotes and true stories describe the errors, accidents and near-misses. But there was never a shortage of volunteers to man the prototype experimental vessels. The great disadvantage was the smallness of space inside, almost no room to move around. As technology got better, the number of crewmen needed got smaller; the inside space was more comfortable. Another disadvantage was the odor that built up during even a short voyage: food odors, diesel fuel smells, body odors. Some bonus was the danger pay, special food, and mostly the prestige of the position.

Len brought his history lesson up to date with talk about today's necessity for Canadian submarines to patrol the Arctic waters to maintain Canadian sovereignty.

This was a new experience for us - a talk about a different writer, in a different period. But again Len gave us an excellent talk, spoke with deep understanding, a "depth" of information, and perhaps even gained some new aficionados for his favourite Sherlock Holmes.

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Review by Deborah Cameron, of *The Stories of English*, by David Crystal.

"Crystal honours the contribution made to English not only by the usual literary suspects - the *Beowulf* poet, Aelfric, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Johnson, Austen and Dickens - but also by anonymous rune-carvers, scribes, clerks and court reporters, *Sun* journalists and the translators of scripture into Scots, Yorkshire dialect and African-American vernacular English" - a goodly company.

Guardian Weekly, June 25-July 1, 2004.

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You Jane? Review by James R. Kincaid.

This is an amusing but vitriolic review by Kincaid of a recent sequel/completion of Jane Austen's *Sanditon* by Julia Barrett, which she titles *Jane Austen's 'Charlotte'*.

Kincaid does not call himself an expert on Jane Austen sequels - he says he has read 8 out of 80 he has identified. But if you include plays and film adaptations, web publishing of "Austen-inspired novels, novellas, short stories, reminiscences, poesy and dramatic rambles," the count increases to 1,365 or so. "So you might say," he concludes, "I am in the position of a Shakespeare expert who has long ago read most of the first act of *Hamlet*."

It is enough, however, to give him a point on which to evaluate Barrett's latest novel. "This riot of Austen activity seems to me healthy, happy and in the best tradition of tastelessness. The fastidious will say that it has plenty to offer that is dead awful, but not all of us have a keen nose for the awful."

Charlotte opens with Austen's own words with minor alterations of modern spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing - up to Chapter 12. Then Barrett takes over "at her most recklessly self-confident." Kincaid gives one example of the heroine's turn of speech: "Dear Madam . . . were you then privileged to know the gentleman of this gracious house whilst still he walked these venerable halls?" Kincaid's assessment is: "Austen's rational heroine is made to sound oafish, tone-deaf, toadying and pedantic."

He also complains about Barrett's transformation of the characters: "making one character (Lady Denham), notable in the Austen section for her closefistedness, into a vulgar spendthrift, mounting showy parties." Why?!

Kincaid goes on: "I have only one complaint myself: that the cruelty, the dirty-dog underhanded nastiness so characteristic of Jane Austen is nowhere to be found. . . . I find something missing without the Austen bile." He gives examples - easy to find - of Austen's terse descriptions: "She had nothing to say one day that she had not said the day before." [S&S], or the depiction of Mrs. Bennet: "She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper."

Kincaid concludes, tongue-in-cheek, that we must ignore the "easy distinction between refined and coarse, art and entertainment - . . . insofar as I regard these sequels as rat-bottom awful and can see them as nothing else, I lose out, diminish by one my count of blessings."

TLS December 3, 2000.

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A lady is a woman in whose presence a man is a gentleman.

A gentlemen is expected to stand up if a lady is standing; take off his hat when meeting a lady, in an elevator, inside a house, or in a restaurant.

In a downtown department store, two young women entered the elevator on the tenth floor to go down. An elderly man entered, and promptly removed his hat. The elevator stopped on Nine. Nobody got on or off. The elevator went down to Eight and stopped. Nobody got on or off. Then on to Seven and stopped. At this point, one of the young women turned to the other and growled, "Hell, this damn thing's stopping on every floor". Quietly, without a change of expression, the elderly man put his hat back on.

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A Toothpick-Case - Eileen Sutherland.

Elinor and Marianne, in *Sense and Sensibility*, had business at Gray's jewellery shop in London; it was crowded and they had to wait:

"All that could be done was, to sit down at that end of the counter which seemed to promise the quickest succession; one gentleman only was standing there, and it is probable that Elinor was not without hopes of exciting his politeness to a quicker dispatch. But the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness. He was giving orders for a toothpick-case for himself, and till its size, shape, and ornaments were determined, all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy, he had no leisure to bestow any other attention on the two ladies, than what was comprised in three or four very broad stares". (p.220)

This is usually read as a condemnation of the foppery -- the "strong, natural, sterling insignificance" -- of Robert Ferrars, someone who would spend so much time choosing a toothpick-case, of all trivial things!

In days when dental care was not the common thing, however, toothpicks were a necessary part of a man's or woman's grooming, and a toothpick-case was a required accessory, not to be taken too lightly.

The poet William Cowper could not have diverged more strongly in character from Robert Ferrars; yet in at least two of his letters he mentions his preferences in toothpick-cases:

"If your short stay in town will afford you an opportunity, I should be glad if you would buy me a genteelish toothpick case. I shall not think half a guinea too much for it; only it must be one that will not easily break. If second-hand, perhaps, it may be the better." (Letter to Rev. William Unwin, April 1, 1782). And:

"I am charmed with your kindness and with all your elegant presents. . . . A toothpick case I had; but one so large, that no modern waistcoat pocket could possibly contain it: it was some years since the Dean of Durham's, for whose sake I valued it, though to me useless. Yours is come opportunely to supply the deficiency, and shall be my constant companion to its last thread." (Letter to Mrs. King, September 25, 1788).

Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, wrote after a visit to her cousin:

"The Carriers will be an age in bringing the Box - Tell me what *oddments* . . . are left out -- because I know not what came & what was left -- my Toothpick Case I miss & some other trifles which I fancied ought to have been in the Trunk already arrived." (Letter to Mary Monkhouse, Wales, December 3, 1811).

It was Robert Ferrars' manner of shopping, and personality in general, that was held up to ridicule -- not what he was buying.

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