

The Jane Austen Society of North America

VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NUMBER THREE - AUGUST, 1983

FALL LECTURES - With summer nearly over, it is time to plan ahead. Two lectures have been arranged for the Fall. I am trying out something different - Saturday morning lectures - so please let me know what you think of the idea. If most members would prefer to go back to the evening time, we can arrange that in the Spring.

Saturday, October 1: "Only a Novel: Jane Austen and Some of her Contemporaries" - Terry Dobroslovic.

Saturday, October 29: "Jane Austen's Novels: A Survey" - Dr. Mabel Colbeck.

Both lectures will be held at 10:30 a.m. in the Vancouver Public Library, Robson and Burrard Streets, in Room 307 (third floor). These lectures are free and open to the public, so mention them to friends who might enjoy them. To help with publicity, will you please post the enclosed notice in your community centre, library or favourite bookstore, or wherever interested passers-by may see it.

I suggest we get together afterwards at the Spanish Grill of the Hotel Vancouver, or one of the nearby smaller restaurants, and over lunch have a pleasant talk about what we have heard.

THE MAY LUNCHEON - The weather certainly co-operated with us in May, and the lunch could not have had a lovelier setting than the Beach House in Stanley Park, with the sunshine on green lawns and brilliant flowers. Eleven members and friends were there, and enjoyed a delicious "brunch" and sprightly conversation. The "Show and Share" portion was begun by Freydis Welland, who brought an interesting little book containing an original chapter of "Persuasion" and the final form which Jane Austen had revised the next day, as well as a facsimile page of her handwriting. Keiko Parker brought a case full of books to show us: two volumes of "Pride and Prejudice" in Japanese, an English-language Japanese college text of "Pride and Prejudice", several editions of the same novel to compare the illustrations, and "Literary Houses" featuring Northanger Abbey, and "Literary Landscapes" which included Bath and Winchester. Kay Rankin showed us an old edition of the Juvenilia she has recently been reading and enjoying, and I brought "The Century of the Lady: 1720-1820", which has many lovely illustrations. Mary Coleman had "This England" magazine with a long article on Winchester. Donna Short had just recently returned from a holiday in Britain which included a visit to Winchester, Bath and Chawton, and she told of visiting Chawton Great House (in a very bad state of repair) and the Cottage (beautifully cared for) where she had a long and interesting conversation with the friendly and knowledgeable curator. She showed the pictures she had taken of the cottage, its surroundings and some of the exhibits inside. The fact that "luncheon" wasn't over until nearly 4:00 o'clock shows what an interesting time we had.

SALE OF JANE AUSTEN VERSE - Some manuscript items from a Godmersham collection were sold to private buyers at a book sale at Christie's in July. Four stanzas of light verse by Jane Austen, with a fragment of verse by her sister Cassandra on the back, and the manuscript chapter "Jane Austen and Pride and Prejudice" by Somerset Maugham, were among the books and manuscripts attracting wide attention from buyers.

HOLIDAY QUIZ - In which novel did the heroine:

- a) take a trip to a seaside town, where a passing gentleman showed his admiration for her appearance?
- b) have a picnic at a local beauty spot?
- c) go to stay at a newly-developed spa?
- d) go to visit friends at an old abbey?
- e) tour the beautiful scenes of a relative's youth?
- f) visit a well-known country-house?
- g) plan a visit to a country-house, but the trip was cancelled before the group could set out?

OTHER REGIONS - The April newsletter of the Chicago region presents several interesting ideas we may want to consider for ourselves. They had an annual "Gala" day, free to members because speakers donated their time, and the meeting room cost nothing. The program last September began at 10 a.m. with a "get acquainted" time, followed by a slide show of "Jane Austen Country". Lunch was individually ordered and purchased. Two speakers in the afternoon were followed by tea at 4:00, with a quiz and readings. It sounds to me like a splendid day's entertainment, and one that we should seriously consider adopting for our group. I have a few slides which would be appropriate, of Winchester, Bath and Chawton. If any of you have slides you would be willing to loan for a day, please let me know, perhaps we can amass enough for a little slide-show some time. I'm sure we could get several interesting speakers, and perhaps invite a car-load or two of members from Washington and Victoria. It might be an idea for next Spring - what do you think?

At another meeting of this active Chicago group (34 paid-up members) the entertainment consisted of a reading of one of the novels - each member who wanted to participate chose a certain scene to read, they were put into correct order, and a narrator gave a short summary of any missing parts. This was evidently a great success, and in fact the group had previously done the same thing for "Lovers' Vows", the infamous play of the theatricals in "Mansfield Park".

CRITICISM ON TAPE - Besides the three novels on tape which I wrote about in May, the Vancouver Public Library has two tapes in the Audio-Learning Discussion series. "The Development of Jane Austen's Comic Art" is a dialogue between Dr. W.A.Craik, of the University of Aberdeen, and Mr. B.C.Southam, Editorial Director of Routledge and Kegan Paul. Both are eminent in Jane Austen studies and excellent speakers. They do not always agree in this discussion, but each presents a valid and well grounded opinion. Side 1 discusses the development of Jane Austen's comic art, from the burlesque and parody of the juvenile works and the early novels "Northanger Abbey" and "Sense and Sensibility", the "sparkling" "Pride and Prejudice", a new approach in "Mansfield Park", and finally the mature triumphs of "Emma" and "Persuasion". Side 2 goes deeper into the comedy in "Emma" itself, discussing the humour in plot, incident and character. The speakers emphasize how well the novel repays endless re-reading, for the first time around one cannot be aware of the complex doubles-entendres of Frank Churchill's games, or appreciate the richness of the ambiguous situations. They stress the importance of Miss Bates, not just as a humorous character, but as a vital mover of the action, and delve into the validity and function of the other main characters. The tape is pleasant listening (about 30 minutes each side), and provides stimulating new insights into the characters in the novel.

The other tape, on "Mansfield Park", spoken by Dr. Stephen Fender and Dr. John Sutherland, both Instructors in English at London University, requires a little more concentration from the listener, perhaps because it reflects the greater depth of thought and meaning in the novel itself. Side A discusses the "Symbol of the House", and Side B, the "Tone and Meaning in 'Mansfield Park'". Both speakers feel that "Mansfield Park" is firmly set in the social history of the period. Their comments are thought-provoking, and suggest new ways of looking at "Mansfield Park" which will give you a deeper insight into the intricacy and complexity of Jane Austen's ideas, and thus more pleasure each time you re-read the novel.

LIFE AT SEA - The visit to Vancouver in June of the schooner "Pride of Baltimore" resulted in a spirited verbal battle in the "Letters to the Editor" columns of the Vancouver "Sun". Hurling expressions like "Humbug" and "Balderdash", two old salts re-fought the naval battles of the War of 1812 in which American privateers like the "Pride of Baltimore" harassed British naval vessels and cut supply routes to the Duke of Wellington, fighting in Europe against Napoleon. The result of the exchange of letters was not any more conclusive than the war itself - according to one authority, the British won the war but the Americans won the peace treaty.

I don't think Jane Austen's sailor brothers were ever involved in the war against the Americans, but according to Captain Wentworth, naval gossip would have told them all about the ships and fellow officers who were in this phase of the war. And I'm sure that Jane Austen, like Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, was interested in every detail of life at sea.

It was interesting to go aboard the "Pride of Baltimore", but I was disappointed that we could not see the crew's quarters below, although I'm sure that the modern fittings were not so cramped and primitive as the original. The reconstruction in the Provincial Museum in Victoria of Captain Cook's vessel "Discovery" as it was during his voyage of discovery in 1776 to the West Coast, gives some idea of how officers lived at sea at that period.

NEW BOOKS - Two new books of Jane Austen criticism have recently been issued, and were reviewed by Angela Leighton in the Times Literary Supplement of April 15. "Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction" by Margaret Kirkham (Brighton: Harvester) is described by the reviewer as "a scholarly, readable and often adventurous interpretation of Austen's fiction." The book discusses the development of 18th century feminism, analyses the heroines of the novels and concludes that "Jane Austen's feminism is an informing moral consciousness rather than a private literary allusion."

The other book reviewed, "Jane Austen: A Reassessment" by P.J.M. Scott (Vision), presents Jane Austen as "a writer who looks upon the dark side of human character and human society, and whose view of the world is disaffected, pessimistic and savage." The reviewer, however, found it an "intense personal crusade", and the argument hard to follow because of the author's personal reminiscences, constant interruptions and divigations. She writes, "Scott's irresistible wish to talk about other things certainly ensures that Jane Austen herself remains shadowy and anonymous by comparison."

Another book recently reviewed in TLS is by Frederick M. Keener, called "The Chain of Becoming: The Philosophical Tale, The Novel, and a

Neglected Realism of the Enlightenment" (Columbia University Press). The Austen novels, especially "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion", are discussed, but how they are considered to fit in with the philosophical tales of the title is not made clear. I have not read any of these books, and they are not yet at the Vancouver Public Library, but no doubt they will be available in time.

QUIZ ANSWERS - a) Persuasion. b) Emma. c) Sanditon. d) Northanger Abbey. e) Pride and Prejudice. f) Mansfield Park. g) Sense and Sensibility.

"MURDER AT THE SPA" - I am addicted to murder-mysteries; not the sex-and-violence kind that sends the protagonist from bed to bed in crime centres around the world, but the civilized ones where a murder has taken place in an English country-house or college, or the hitherto-peaceful village in the countryside, and where the detective painstakingly follows clue after clue, to the inevitable justice at the end. And most of my favourite stories have at least one passing reference to Jane Austen, either to her work in general, or to a specific novel or character. At first it may seem odd that a murder-mystery writer should be a reader of Jane Austen, but a closer look makes it understandable. In a good classical murder mystery, the clues are so meticulously "planted" in the course of the story that a superficial reading may miss them altogether, or mistake their significance. It is only with close observation for each detail, insight into character and probing of motives that the truth can be discerned. No loose ends or trailing sub-plots for long distort the tight framework, and each scene unfolds inevitably from what came before.

These are all characteristics also of the novels of Jane Austen. One of the great pleasures of re-reading the novels is the sudden awareness of the clues to character set down, oh! so casually, into the narrative, that we overlooked on a previous reading. We readers should have been wiser than Elizabeth and not been taken in by Wickham's perfidy; along with Mr. Knightley, we should have noticed that some hanky-panky was going on between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill.

Jane Austen would have made an excellent writer of mystery stories. In fact, perhaps she started one. "Sanditon" is a new departure, different from the preceding novels, and could easily be the beginning of an excellent mystery. Why did Sidney Parker make his sudden, unannounced visit at this time? Why was Clara Brereton meeting Sir Edward secretly, in a far corner of the grounds, in a thick mist? And who damaged the axle of Mr. Parker's carriage and caused it to overturn in the first place? Any mystery-story fan will seize on these clues as items of tremendous importance to the revelations to follow! What a pity Jane Austen never finished it.

BATH - The beautiful city of Bath has been "in print" again. Mr. Earle Clarke sent me a copy of the Financial Post Magazine of August 1, with an interesting article describing the city. This is the only instance where I am out of sympathy with Jane Austen: she didn't like Bath - didn't want to live there, and was glad when the family moved away - but the city is high on my list of places I must spend a long time in, some day!

DON'T FORGET the lectures in October. And please keep in touch:

Eileen Sutherland,
4169 Lions Ave.,
North Vancouver, B.C.
988 -0479