The Jane Austen Society of North America

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"Nanny came in with her Master's Bason of Gruel" (1) - Cookery, Part I.

Mr. Watson, like Mr. Woodhouse, likes to have a basin of gruel before retiring to bed. Poor old dears, one pities them as victims of indigestion and insomnia. At least, I used to think of them like that until I came across recipes of gruel in "The Experienced English Housekeeper", by Mrs. Elizabeth Raffald, published in 1782. Mrs. Raffald was the "Julia Child" of the day, and although the book is slanted towards the Big House rather than the cottage, Jane Austen probably knew of it or used it. Certainly Emma Woodhouse's cook Serle knew it, if Elizabeth Watson did not. Three recipes for gruel are given, which give me second thoughts about these two elderly gentlemen. "Groat gruel" is made with white wine and sugar to taste, and a quarter pound of currants. "Sago" and "Barley" gruels, flavoured with cinnamon, have "more than a pint of red wine" to a quart of the basic gruel, again sweetened to taste, and with currants.

"Water gruel", which sounds more to the taste of Messrs. Woodhouse and Watson, is made with one "spoonful" of oatmeal boiled 1½ hours in three pints of water; it is then taken off the fire and "white wine, sugar and nutmeg to taste" are added. All gruels are served with "sippets" - fingers of fried or toasted bread. One would certainly sleep like a baby after that.

"The Experienced English Housekeeper" is full of lovely old-fashioned words for foods, utensils and cooking methods. Some of my favourites are "pettitoes" (pig's feet), "flummery" (sweet dishes made with sugar and whipped egg white), "griskins" (the lean part of the loin of a pig), "cullis" (a strong nourishing broth), a "tossing-pan" (for tossing food while sautéing), "gofer iron" (like an individual waffle iron, making a honeycomb pattern on a thin cake baked between its plates), "garth" (a wooden container for baking), and "pikelets" and "wigs" (kinds of small tea-cakes).

What is most interesting, however, is the view of English "cookery" - condiments, sauces, and spices galore; wine used in almost every meat dish; the lavish use of butter and cream; and especially the variety of fruits and vegetables that were available to the cook of the time - about twenty different vegetables, including shallots, endive, salsify, artichokes, cauliflowers, sprouts and celery, as well as finocha, borecole, cardoon, coleworts, rocambole, bugloss and skirret. A dozen fruits, including nectarines, melons, pine-apples, berries and grapes, as well as the common apples, pears, plums, cherries, and so on.

In one of Jane Austen's letters she mentions being given "a hare and four rabbits" and thus they were "well stocked for nearly a week". Eating the same meat each day need not be boring - Mrs. Raffald gives recipes

for 6 ways to cook hare and 6 other ways to treat rabbit (jug, stew, roast, fricassee, Florendine, hash); ducks can be cooked by 8 recipes; beef has 18, lamb 7, and mutton 23 - the popularity of mutton resulted in the expression "eat your mutton with us" meaning simply to dine with us. Venison has three recipes: roast, hash and a pasty ("if you do not want it, it will keep in the pot that it was baked in 8 or 10 days, but keep the crust on to prevent the air from getting into it"). These do not include separate recipes for tongues, heads, feet, organs, etc.

Anchovies are often used as a substitute for salt in flavouring sauces or "made dishes". Other common seasonings are black pepper, white pepper, Jamaica pepper (allspice), long pepper (from immature pods), mace, sage, parsley, garlic, shallots, juniper berries, scraped horseradish, lemon pickle, capers, savory, "Chyan" pepper, tansy, clary, grated nutmeg, marjoram, cloves, thyme, ginger, pickled mushrooms or mushroom powder, morels and truffles. Mrs. Raffald distinguishes between loaf sugar, double refined, treble refined, brown and powder sugar. She uses Rhenish wine, Lisbon wine (port?), Madeira, Claret, Champagne, and French brandy.

So much for cookery this month - more another time.

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"fresh from the street, and...ready to tell what ever might interest" (2)

Media coverage of Jane Austen and the activities of JASNA has been widespread the last couple of months, ranging from the front page of the Wall Street Journal, to People Magazine. The Toronto Globe and Mail reprinted the article from the Wall Street Journal, thus rousing the ire of Mary Millard who berated Canada's "National" newspaper for going far afield looking for news of the Society, when there is an active group in Toronto who hosted the 1982 annual Conference, a foremost Jane Austen scholar and patron of the Society, Juliet McMaster, teaches at the University of Alberta, and a descendant of Jane Austen herself, Joan Austen-Leigh, one of the founders, lives in Victoria. A further Letter-to-the-Editor from Mary Humphries of Ontario described the "very special and possibly unique celebration" in Toronto - the re-creating of Evening Service as it would have been held in St. Nicholas' Church in Steventon, on the day of Jane Austen's birth, Sunday, December 16, 1775.

A Washington Post article, describing the birthday celebrations across the continent, mentioned that the Society's members, "a blend of teachers, writers, psychologists, social workers, doctors, lawyers and housewives, have essentially nothing in common except for love of Austen's novels - but that seems quite sufficient". More recently, in a Globe and Mail article commenting on the current "popular revival" of Jane Austen's work, Judith Finlayson writes: "Austen was an astute observer of people and society who employed her powers of description to create novels which accurately reflected their times", but "Austen's talent for documenting the influence of society on the individual" can be just as valid for us today.

Thanks to Freydis Welland, Fred Braches, Earle Clarke, Joe Costa, Joan Austen-Leigh and others, for keeping me so well informed.

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"Perhaps if we make a round game he may be tempted to sit down with us" (3)

At the November luncheon it was decided that our next meeting should be a card-party, to try out some of the old card games. All the novels (with the exception of the fragment "Sanditon") mention card-playing - this was the usual entertainment for evening parties at home, for gentlemen out without their wives, or for those who did not wish to dance at a ball.

Mr. Watson declared "his head won't bear whist", but Mr. Edwards enjoyed his "quiet little whist club". In Highbury, also, the "gentlemen and half-gentlemen" of the town had their whist club in the former ball-room of the Crown Inn. Mr. Wickham didn't play at whist, but Mr. Darcy "fell a victim to" Mrs. Bennet's "rapacity for whist players". Whist, played like bridge but without the bidding, was perhaps the most common game, but it was played with partners and required even numbers.

In "Sense and Sensibility", Elinor, wanting to talk to Lucy Steele, hoped to be "cut out" of the five people proposing to play casino, since this game also required four players. Lady Catherine de Bourgh preferred quadrille (4 players) at her own home, but Miss de Bourgh chose cassino (the spelling seems to have been optional), joined by Elizabeth, Charlotte and Mrs. Jenkinson. Lady Osborne and Mr. Howard played cassino at the ball, before the latter decided to join the dancing. Since Mrs. Bates was "a very old lady, almost past everything but tea and quadrille", that was probably the game preferred by Mr. Woodhouse - it doesn't sound very demanding, although the rules are difficult to follow.

"Round games", for an indefinite number of players, form important scenes in "Mansfield Park" and "The Watsons". "Speculation" and "Vingt-un" are the two games mentioned. On the next page are the rules for "Speculation". They may sound rather complicated, but the way to learn is by playing, and we can all learn together.

At the Grant's, the four players of "prime intellectual state and dignity" sat down to whist, while the other six played "Speculation". Although Fanny said "she had never played the game nor seen it played in her life", she could "feel herself mistress of the rules of the game in 3 minutes". Poor, dim, Lady Bertram found it "a very odd game", and it obviously kept Henry Crawford pretty busy overseeing her cards and his own, as well as encouraging Fanny in avarice and hard-heartedness, qualities necessary for a winner.

In "The Watsons", Speculation was the chosen game, "the only round game at Croydon now", according to Mrs. Robert Watson, until Tom Musgrave arrived and announced that "Vingt-un is the game at Osborne Castle" - that settled it. We are told that Tom Musgrave, naturally, was the life of the party, but no details of the actual playing are given. The game can be played with cards or dice, and the rules are very simple.

Speculation: This is a game for any number of players. The full pack is used and each player is supplied with an equal number of counters. A certain agreed number are contributed by each player to form the pool, the dealer paying double. The cards rank as at Whist (Ace high). The dealer gives three cards face down to each player and no player must look at his cards until later. Any player doing so is fined for each card looked at. These counters are put in the pool. The top card of the remainder is turned up for trumps. This extra card becomes the dealer's property, in consideration of his double payments to the pool.

The object of the game is to hold the best trump among the cards dealt. Should the turn-up card be an Ace, the pool, as of right, goes to the dealer. If, otherwise, it is a fairly high one, say a ten or a court card, it becomes an object of speculation and the dealer may sell it to the highest bidder. He inquires 'Who buys?' and names his price in counters. If a purchaser is found he pays the agreed price to the pool and places the card face up on top of his own hand.

The player on the left of the purchaser then turns up his top card and if this is not a trump, the next player turns up a card and so on, until a higher trump than the first should appear. When this happens, the new card, if not kept by its owner, is given to the highest bidder. If the card is not a trump, it may be beaten by the highest card that is turned up of the same suit or by another trump. This in turn becomes an object of speculation and the owner of the highest trump exposed is exempt from turning up any other card until he has been beaten.

At the close of every round the pool is won by the player who holds the highest card of the trump suit. If the Ace of trumps is turned up, the round is concluded at once and its owner is the winner.

This buying and selling business is often carried on to a considerable extent. Sometimes players will sell their whole hands to each other, or a single card blind on the chance of its proving a winner. Sometimes the game is played with an extra hand being dealt and placed in the middle of the table for pool. At the end of the round this hand is examined and if a better card is found in it than that belonging to the winner, the pool is left undisturbed and added to the next new pool. In some circles, anyone turning up a five or a Knave pays one or more counters to the pool.

"Everyone being as perfectly complying and without a choice as on such occasions they always are", these are the plans:

Meet at my house (we'll arrange car-pools) at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, February 24th. We'll get out our "fish and counters" and a "tolerably clean pack" of cards, and have an hour or so of cards, break for lunch, and then another card session.

Sandwiches have been traditional fare for card players, ever since the Earl of Sandwich put "a piece of meat between two pieces of bread" in the early 1700's, and we have good precedents for following the custom: Mrs. Weston proposed having "merely sandwiches...set out in the little room", and at Mansfield Parsonage, Edmund found "even the sandwich tray...worth looking at." So that will be the bill of fare. Each person bring two sandwiches, we'll put them all together and share them. I'll supply tea and coffee, and dessert. I hope you will all give "most joyful consent and approval" and let me know that you will come for "some pleasant hours at Speculation" and other games. Friends and/or prospective members are certainly welcome.

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"I know...what a life they lead" (4)

A new critical biography, "The Life of Jane Austen", by John Halperin, has recently been published. In a review in the Sunday Telegraph, Christopher Booker writes: "Professor Halperin has deployed every scrap of surviving evidence.. to produce an interweaving of Jane Austen's life with studies of her books...He is particularly good on Jane Austen's ironic detachment as a correlative of that lack of real personal warmth which made her so impatient with children...it was also this which led her to see so cuttingly through the false sentiment so fashionable in the society and literature of her day".

James Fenton, in "The Times", is more blunt. He writes that "Professor Halperin has an uneasy relationship with his subject-matter...I don't follow all of his literary judgements. Is "Mansfield Park" really Jane Austen's 'most unpleasant novel'? Is is true that 'almost everyone in it is selfish - self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and vain'? This seems an over-emphatic way of looking at the characters, who are full of nuances. Sometimes I think that Professor Halperin and I have read a different book."

A critic is entitled to a contrary opinion on the novels he is reviewing, but the onus is on him to justify his attitudes. It doesn't sound as if this author has succeeded. Other adverse comments I have heard about the biography include a charge of numerous factual errors, and that cannot ever be justified.

For lighter reading, Joan Aiken has written "Mansfield Revisited", the story of Fanny Price's younger sister, Susan, due to be published in the Spring.

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"A woman never looks better than on horseback" (5)

The Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute in New York has a new exhibit called "Man and the Horse". The galleries are devoted to every aspect of man's use of horses since prehistoric times, with "horse-drawn wheeled vehicles and sleighs, polo gear, winter and summer riding habits, hunting attire, postilions' livery, cavalry uniforms, jockeys' racing silks, coaching livery" and much more. Costumes include those from the American West, Mexico, Spain and the Cossacks. Some of them must date from the period of Jane Austen's lifetime, and it would be interesting to see the outfits of the well-dressed riders and drivers of her time. It sounds like an exhibit worth seeing.

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"My reward is to be..." (6)

In June, 1798, the British man-of-war "De Braak" was sunk in a storm off Lewes, Delaware, after stopping at that port to take on supplies on its way to England. The "De Braak" had been loaded with chests of gold and silver coins taken from Spanish vessels intercepted in the Caribbean. Contemporary attempts at salvage were in vain.

Recently, as reported in The Sun, a salvage company has re-discovered the wreck and brought up "tons of artifacts", including more than one hundred 18th century coins, each of which is now worth $1,000 to $5,000. The historical interest of the other articles which could be salvaged is just as important, and could tell us of life aboard ship in the time of Captain Wentworth, Admiral Croft, William Price, and Jane Austen's own sailor brothers.

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"I have promised to write..." (7)

The death of Sir John Betjeman last May left vacant the position of Poet Laureate in England. In late December, however, the Queen appointed Ted Hughes, a prolific writer of poetry and prose, to the prestigious post, which used to require the composing of formal works upon every public occasion.

The post of Poet Laureate dates from 1617, and has included such famous poets as Dryden, Ben Jonson, Wordsworth and Tennyson. It has also included men whose names are now completely forgotten, and who were fairly insignificant even in their own times. The traditional salary included "a butt of sack", but now the incumbent receives about $115 plus a bonus of $42 in lieu of the wine.

In Jane Austen's lifetime there were three. From 1785-1790, the Poet Laureate was Thomas Warton who, according to Dr. Johnson, had a "love of mean company and low jocularity", and who edited a miscellany of verse called the "Oxford Sausage". In spite of frequent sparring, he and Johnson were warm friends, and Warton has recently been recognized as a real predecessor of the Romantic School.

Warton's successor was Henry James Pye, who was Poet Laureate for twenty-three years. The "Oxford Companion to English Literature" says he was the constant butt of contemporary ridicule, while the "Dictionary of National Biography" says he was "destitute alike of poetic feeling or power of expression", and that he achieved "a uniformly dead level of dullness". His yearly verses in celebration of the King's birthday caused general merriment. Pye requested that the stipend of a butt of wine be changed to £27, "which is clear evidence that he was not sound in the head". Pye wrote poems, plays, and translations from the Classics, but none of his works has been reprinted since 1822.

When Pye died in 1813, the post was offered to Scott, who turned it down, and then to Southey, who jumped at it.

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"the dissipation of unpleasant...ideas which only reading could produce..."(8)

"It is hard for modern readers to visualize how small and close-knit the early 19th century intelligentsia really was. Almost everyone knew, or at least knew about, everyone else; the names of most scholars and authors worth remembering, and dozens more worth forgetting, occur in the letters...Advance notices in the journals kept everyone informed of everyone else's activities and plans."

This quotation is from Murray B. Peppard's "Paths Through the Forest", a biography of the Brothers Grimm, who were collecting and writing down their folk and fairy tales at about the same time Jane Austen was writing. What was true of Germany was certainly also true of literary society in England. Jane Austen's father and brothers kept abreast of contemporary affairs and publications, and she herself was a subscriber to Fanny Burney's "Camilla".

In later years, her publisher Murray loaned Henry Austen (and probably Jane Austen herself) some of his latest publications. Jane Austen wrote of them to her sister, and certainly discussed them with her brother. It could be said of Jane Austen, as well as of Fanny Price, "to good reading she had been long used."

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"rewarded by a gracious answer" (9)

All the quotations are from "The Watsons". Here are the sources;

(1) In the evening at the Watson's, putting an end to the impromptu visit of Tom Musgrave.

(2) Mr. Edwards, entertaining his wife, daughter and Emma Watson, before the ball.

(3) Elizabeth to Mrs. Robert Watson the first evening of their visit.

(4) Elizabeth to Emma (speaking of teachers).

(5) Lord Osborne to Emma Watson.

(6) Tom Musgrave, trying to persuade Emma Watson to drive home with him.

(7) Elizabeth, speaking to Emma of their brother Sam.

(8) Emma, sitting reading with her father.

(9) Lord Osborne and Emma, when he and Tom Musgrave visited, after the ball.

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Keep February 24th free for our card party. As Elizabeth said to Emma:

"I would advise you by all means to accept the invitation, there is always something lively going on."

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