

The Jane Austen Society of North America

THE VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NO. THIRTEEN - FEBRUARY, 1986

"Their coming gives a credit to our assemblies" (The Watsons)

As Mrs. Morland told Catherine in "Northanger Abbey", "There is a time for everything - a time for balls and plays, and a time for work". The next meeting will be a combination of both play and work: we'll do some jobs for the coming Conference, and we'll enjoy readings and discussions. Lunch, Saturday, March 8 th at 4169 Lions Avenue, North Vancouver, 11:00 a.m. RSVP 988-0479.

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"...performing great exploits in a foreign land." (M.P.)

On each January 25th, or thereabouts, we are subjected to outbursts of adulation from Scots all over the world for Robbie Burns, Scotland's favourite poet. One silver-tongued orator, in the course of his "Ode to the Immortal Bard" this year, drew my attention to Jane Austen's reference to Burns and his poems.

In "Sanditon", Sir Edward Denham, "eagerly and fluently" discusses poetry with the heroine, Charlotte Heywood: "What think you...of Burns Lines to his Mary? Oh! there is Pathos to madden one! If ever there was a Man who felt, it was Burns...I confess my sense of his Pre-eminence...Burns is always on fire. His Soul was the Altar in which lovely Woman sat enshrined, his Spirit truly breathed the immortal Incense which is her Due."

Charlotte, "as soon as she had time to speak", replied, "I have read several of Burns' Poems with great delight, but I am not poetic enough to separate a Man's Poetry entirely from his Character; and poor Burns's known Irregularities greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his Lines. I have difficulty in depending on the Truth of his Feelings as a Lover. I have not faith in the sincerity of the affections of a Man of his Description. He felt and he wrote and he forgot."

Sir Edward protests: "He was all ardour and Truth! His Genius and his Susceptibilities might lead him into some Aberrations - But who is perfect? It were Hyper-criticism, it were Pseudo-philosophy to expect from the soul of high toned Genius, the grovellings of a common mind."

Taken out of context, this sounds like unstinting praise, but we must consider the source. Charlotte's first favourable impression of Sir Edward - "he had a fine Countenance, a most pleasing gentleness of voice, and a great deal of Conversation. She liked him" - soon changes. "She began to think him downright silly...He seemed very sentimental, very full of some Feelings or other, and very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words." Later we are told that "he had read more sentimental Novels than agreed with him" and "a perversity of Judgement...made him derive only false Principles from Lessons of Morality...and gathered only hard words and involved sentences from the style of of our most approved writers."



So much for Sir Edward's opinion of Robert Burns.

In her youthful "History of England", Jane Austen writes of her "attachment to the Scotch". The short work consists of a description of each monarch "from the time of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st". In most of the brief accounts she manages to work in some mention of Mary Queen of Scots, "one of the first Characters in the World...this amiable woman...this bewitching Princess..." and affirms that her principal reason for writing the History was to "prove the innocence of the Queen of Scotland" whose descendants on the English throne should be vindicated of all charges of misconduct and tyranny, because they were STUARTS".

In spite of this glorious defense of her favourites, Jane Austen seems to have little liking for Scots. It is interesting to look through the novels to find minor characters - almost all unsympathetically portrayed - with Scottish names. In "Persuasion", when Anne Elliot was preparing to leave her home, Kellynch Hall, she had great difficulty making the gardener Mackenzie understand which plants she wished to give away.

In "Mansfield Park", the "villains" are Mary and Henry Crawford, and Mary's intimate friends in London are Lady Stornaway, née Flora Ross, and Mrs. Fraser. In "The Watsons", Mrs. Shaw is the friend who is trying so hard to promote a marriage for Penelope.

On the other hand, Jane Austen writes favourably of Jane Fairfax' friends in "Emma", Colonel Campbell and his family. Mrs. Grant, in "Mansfield Park", is treated with sympathy, although Dr. Grant does not come off so well. These are the names that come immediately to my mind. No doubt there are other examples of "good" characters, but I think Jane Austen is subtly undermining the Scots!

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"She occupied her mind in such like musings and quotations." (Persuasion)

Here are two quotations I have come across lately; they would make good subjects for a debate:

"[Trollope's] eye for architecture was as dull as Jane Austen's."
C.P.Snow, in "Trollope".

"He was, besides, a natural, untaught painter in words. He had almost the 'Austen touch' with his quick strokes."
John Gore, in "The Creevey Papers".

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"...a variety of all the finest fruits in season."

In Europe, the first person to taste a banana may have been the Emperor Napoleon, if the bananas Josephine asked her mother to ship from Martinique arrived in edible condition; otherwise he did not get to taste them until he reached St. Helena, where he was impressed by a new dish served him, banana fritters moistened with rum."

Waverley Root, in "Food"

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"Here is quite a separate puzzle". ("Emma") (Questions all from "The Watsons")

Fill in the blanks with answers to the following questions. The first letters of the answers, reading down, will spell the name of Emma Watson's future home.

1. Where was the Assembly ball held? -----
2. Elizabeth could like any good humoured man
with a comfortable ---. -----
3. What sporting vehicle did Tom Musgrave drive? -----
4. What had just been placed on the Watsons'
table when visitors were announced? -----
5. How many years had Tom Musgrave lived in
the district? -----
6. Whose carriage arrived first at the Assembly? -----
7. What time did the dancers stop for tea? -----
8. What was the occupation of Robert Watson? -----
9. In what room at the Castle was vingt-un played? -----
10. What dish was sent away lest it offend
Mr. Watson at the Visitation? -----
11. What was the name of the Robert Watsons'
daughter? -----
12. What was Mary Edwards surrounded by the whole
evening of the ball? -----
13. Who was responsible for arranging road repairs? -----
14. What was the married name of Emma's aunt? -----
15. What drink was served to the dancers? -----
16. What illness did Dr. Harding suffer from? -----
17. What article of clothing was Charles Blake
provided with and charged to keep on? -----
18. Who would "rather do anything than be
Teacher at a School"? -----

"How strange this is! What can be the meaning of it?" (S. & S.)

Jane Austen's language is almost as easy to read and understand as any modern prose, but occasionally she uses a word or expression that is not quite familiar to us. Here are some that I have picked out:

"...to drive her and all her finery in the old chair to D."

This was a common expression for the least pretentious vehicle that a gentleman might own. It was defined in "Carriages" (W. Fulton) in 1801, as "a light chaise without panels for the use of parks and gardens, and is a name commonly applied to all light chaises." The Watsons' was an open carriage, "convenient but very un-smart", drawn by one horse.

Jane Austen uses the word this way only in "The Watsons". In the Bath novels, a "chair" is a sedan-chair, the common conveyance in Bath. In "Northanger Abbey", Catherine's "spirits danced within her, as she danced in her chair all the way home". And in "Persuasion", Mrs. Musgrove sees Anne overcome and calls: "Charles, ring and order a chair. She must not walk."

A gentleman's travelling carriage was a "chaise", or a "post-chaise". Tom Musgrave surprised the Watsons on his way from London in his post-chaise, and the Robert Watsons arrived in a similar conveyance. Robert was "more intent on

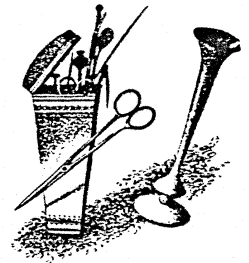
settling with the Post-boy" than greeting Emma. Horses would be changed after each "stage" of 10-15 miles, at a Posting Inn, and the Post-boy would ride on one of the horses, and then return them to their own stables.

"...always drank a dish extraordinary...when they were going to sit up late".

Jane Austen uses the words "cup and saucer" twice in "Mansfield Park", and Darcy brings back his coffee-cup to Elizabeth in "Pride and Prejudice", but the common usage of the time was to speak of a "dish" of tea.

"Sam is only a surgeon, you know".

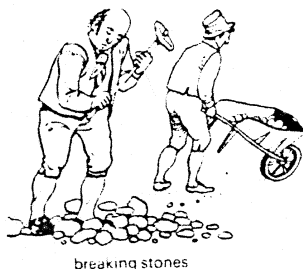
The medical profession was in a state of change at this period. In the mid-18th century, the Company of Barber-Surgeons was dissolved, and the Surgeons' Company was formed. This was the beginning of scientific surgery - pupils no longer studied anatomy only from books and lectures, but learned practical techniques and did the dissection of bodies themselves. No anaesthetics were used, the patient was usually heavily sedated with brandy and restrained by assistants. Speed was essential, and many operations were performed in only minutes. There was no knowledge of infection, and any operation was dangerous.



The social status of a surgeon was rising, but was still low in "The Watsons". Mr. and Mrs. Edwards would not be likely to agree to a marriage between their well-endowed and attractive daughter and a mere surgeon. A physician was usually a university graduate, and had a higher social status. In 1800, Bath had 22 physicians, with MD after their name, 14 surgeons, 4 surgeon-dentists, 10 surgeon-apothecaries, 14 apothecaries, 4 apothecary-druggists, and 9 ordinary druggists.

"Your road through the Village is infamous...who is your Surveyor now?"

E.W.Bovill, in "English Country Life 1780-1830" explains the situation: "The principal reason for the badness of the roads was lack of a road authority. The duty of maintaining a highway - which amounted to no more than removing obstacles and filling in ruts and holes with faggots and unbroken stones - fell on the parishes through which it passed. Every parishioner was required by law to do six days unpaid work annually on the roads under the direction of the parish surveyor, a hatefull office filled in turns by reluctant local farmers...It is hardly surprising that the modest amount of work the law demanded for the highway often remained undone. Where a conscientious surveyor saw that it was done, usually with pauper labour, it was still hopelessly inadequate."



"I had not time even to put a little fresh powder in my hair".

Men's hair styles had changed radically. Wigs were almost entirely out of fashion and men wore their own hair down to their shoulders or tied in a queue, and powdered. After a tax on hair powder in 1795, many men stopped using it, but Robert Watson, as a professional man, would be more conservative.

"...assisting the Landlady in her Bar to make fresh Negus for the...Dancers".

Colonel Francis Negus (died 1732) invented this drink - a mixture of wine (especially port or sherry) and hot water, sweetened with sugar and flavoured. In "Mansfield Park", Fanny Price goes to bed after the ball, "feverish with hopes and fears, soup and negus, sore-footed and fatigued".

"Miss Watson sitting at the best Pembroke Table..."

A Pembroke (supposedly an original design of the Countess of Pembroke) was a small rectangular or oval table supported on four legs with drop-leaves to be raised and supported by brackets on the long sides of the frame, and drawers at the ends. The earliest recorded was made by Chippendale for the actor David Garrick, about 1771. They became common for a short period, because of their neat appearance and good proportions. Fanny Burney wrote of "only a pembroke work-table", but another quotation of the same period mentions "these inlaid Pembrokes of wonderful workmanship". No doubt the Watson table came somewhere in between. By the time of "The Watsons", Pembroke tables were going out of fashion. Mr. Woodhouse (in "Emma") had had one for 40 years, but it was not good enough for Emma and she replaced it with a "large modern circular table".

"You are sure of some comfortable soup."

A common - and very pleasant - custom was the serving of "white soup", a chicken broth, either before the guests began their long cold drive home, or, as at the Edwards' house, when they arrived back home again. Mr. Bingley promises white soup when he has his ball, and Miss Bates enjoys the soup at the ball in "Emma".

"the fish and counters...brought forward from the beaufit."

A fish was a small flat piece of bone or ivory, often shaped like a fish, used instead of money or for keeping account in games of chance. In "Pride and Prejudice", "Lydia talked incessantly of...the fish she had lost and the fish she had won." In the 18th century, a buffet, either a sideboard or a small alcove, for displaying glass and china, was often spelled "beaufit". In "Emma", Miss Bates, talking constantly, of course, plies her visitors with "sweet-cake from the beaufet".

"How nice Mary Edwards looks in her new pelisse!"

This was a long ankle-length cloak of satin or velvet, or other fabric, and lined and trimmed with silk, satin or fur. It was a common article of dress, mentioned in several of the other novels. Mrs. Allen, in "Northanger Abbey", was consoled to discover "that the lace on Mrs. Thorpe's pelisse was not half so handsome as that on her own". And in "Persuasion", Sir Walter Elliot announced, "If I thought it would not tempt her to go out in sharp winds, and grow coarse, I would send her a new hat, and pelisse."



"...the Village...contained no gentleman's family but the Rector's."

Mr. Watson was the rector of the little village of Stanton; Mr. Howard was "clergyman of the parish in which the Castle stood" - probably he also was a rector. There is an excellent article in this year's Persuasions (if you are a paid-up member of JASNA, you should have recently received your copy) which discusses the hierarchy and history of Church government. It explains why Mr. Watson, a semi-invalid and seemingly performing few of the duties of a clergyman to his parishioners, being appointed to the living for life, cannot be removed; but at his death, the living will be presented to someone else, and his family will no longer have the income. Thus the daughters, unless they marry, will be totally dependent on their brothers. There is no indication of who made the presentation to the living of Stanton - if it was Lord Osborne (or his father), the behaviour of the Osborne family is even more reprehensible: "I have lived here 14 years without being noticed by any of the family."

"...promise to dance the two 1st dances with him."

The ball-room scene is easily understandable if you remember that the dancers formed a long double line, or a "set" of eight. The top couple begin, and "dance



down every couple", performing various figures according to the dance, sometimes linking elbows and turning around (Miss Osborne spoke to Charles, "as she turned him") or merely "passed...in the dance". When their turn was over, they would take their places at the bottom, and the next couple would become "top couple". Sometimes the various figures for a dance would be optional, and the leading lady would choose which she wanted: "Miss Carr being impatient to call". There was plenty of opportunity for conversation while waiting

a turn to dance, and it was customary for spectators to come and stand beside the dancers talking to them, as Lord Osborne "came and under pretence of talking to Charles, stood to look at his partner." Dances were danced in pairs of two dances with the same partner - "at the conclusion of the two Dances, Emma found herself..." and a young lady was not supposed to dance more than twice with the same gentleman.

"Nothing sets off a neat ankle more than a half-boot."

Lord Osborne is referring merely to low boots. Emma Woodhouse, in "Emma", wears half-boots, "having some alteration to make in the lacing of her half-boot..." Anne Elliot, in "Persuasion" just wears "boots" - "rather the thickest" according to Mr. Elliot. It is interesting that Lord Osborne in this early novel recommended "nankin galoshes with black", and in the last novel, "Sanditon", a proof of the fashionable attractions of that seaside town was a Shoemaker's window display of "Blue Shoes, and nankin Boots". Nankeen (or nankin) was a kind of yellow cotton cloth originally from Nanking, China, but later made of ordinary cotton dyed yellow. It was a durable cloth often used for men's trousers. "Galosh" was a piece of leather or other material running round the lower part of a boot or shoe above the sole.

"We thought it too dirty."

Emma Watson is not the only heroine who ~~was~~ often kept indoors by bad weather. One of the reasons may have been the ankle-length skirts which would be muddy in minutes in the dirt lanes of the villages and even in London and other cities. One could hitch up one's gown to protect it once in a while, as Elizabeth Bennet did in her concern for her sister Jane, "crossing field after field...jumping over stiles and springing over puddles", but on most occasions the daughters of the parsonage and the Great House would be expected to show more decorum, by much less rigid and prejudiced critics than Miss Bingley. Mrs. Bennet's daughters were not expected to help in the kitchen ("I always keep servants that can do their own work"); probably they had nothing to do with the laundry either. As long as fresh starched white petticoats and clean muslin gowns were available when wanted, they may not have given a thought to the maids who provided them.

Jane Austen herself worked preparing meals, preserving, butchering, and other jobs connected with food, and I am sure also could turn her hand to whatever was necessary in keeping house, not just supervising and giving the orders. It is her own experience which is echoed in "The Watsons" when Elizabeth Watson was so busy with "our great wash" that she had no leisure to tell Emma about the family.

Caroline Davidson, in "A Woman's Work is Never Done", describes laundry practices of the period. Soap was expensive, and highly taxed until the mid-19th century. Most households economized by using a mixture of soap and lye, a cleaning solution made by passing water through clean wood ashes. By this period, soap was not often made at home - it was a long and tedious process and the fats or oils required were needed for cooking or candle-making. Piped water was not usual in common homes until late in the 19th century. The job of going to other people's homes to help with the laundry was one of the most common female occupations. Washerwomen were a main source of gossip and scandal.

The wash water was heated in a "copper", set in brickwork with a fire underneath, or simply in the largest cauldron available, over an open fire. Often done out of doors, the washday could become a social occasion. The hot water was ladled into wooden tubs, and the linens were soaked, soaped, and beaten with a "dolly" (a two- to six-legged pole) or "peggy" or "possing stick" (similar but with a perforated plunger which acted by suction), and scrubbed by hand or on a ridged wash-board. It was very hard work, and took long hours, completely disrupting the household routine.

Poor people, with little change of clothes, needed to wash more often; the wealthy could do a washing only every 4 to 6 weeks. By the end of the 19th century the weekly wash had become the norm. The majority of women washed on Monday, or at least early in the week, since the job took several days, and clean clothes were required for Sunday. (Market days were usually Thursday or Saturday, so the washing must be finished before then).

Drying the linens presented another major problem, especially in towns. Most houses were too cramped or too damp to dry clothes indoors, and thus drying was at the mercy of the weather. Linens were hung on hedges, trees or clothes-lines, carried inside when it began to rain, and then carried out again.

With the washing, drying and finishing - smoothing or ironing, starching, etc. - the whole process would take three to four days. In 1799, James Woodforde,

a rector in Norfolk, recorded in his diary that his household washed every 5 weeks, and the washing and drying took 4 days. Two washer-women were given their breakfasts and dinners, and 1 shilling each when they were finished. Mrs. Purefoy, at the same period, wrote: "We wash once a month, the maid and the washerwoman wash all but the and next day she and the washerwoman wash the Buck" (buck: large quantities of coarse linen).

In many of the novels, Jane Austen refers obliquely to the work of washing: in "Persuasion", Mrs. Charles Musgrove has a "laundry-maid", and Kellynch Hall has a "laundry-door". Catherine Morland, in "Northanger Abbey", finds a "washing-bill" after her harrowing adventures with the strange cabinet. Part of Miss Steele's great curiosity about Marianne Dashwood in "Sense and Sensibility" was to know "how much her washing cost per week". And in "Sanditon", Miss Diana Parker hires "cooks, housemaids and washer-women", for her friends.

Only in "The Watsons", so different in many ways from the other novels, do we have one of the main characters actually doing any of the work.

"...imagine him mortifying with his Barrel of Oysters, in dreary solitude."

One meaning of mortification is self-denial or abstinence. Jane Austen would have known this in a religious context, but also have read it in Richardson's "Sir Charles Grandison": "She is retired to Shirley-manor to mortify, after so rich a regale." We smile at the thought of Tom Musgrave practising aceticism with a barrel of oysters.

Oysters were very cheap at this period. Dr. Samuel Johnson was known to purchase them almost daily for his cat. And the quantity that a Georgian gentleman could consume was amazing - a "snack" of 50 or more at a time was not uncommon. A little later than our period, American oyster-cellars were offering "all you can eat for 6 cents".

Emma Woodhouse, in "Emma", served scalloped oysters at one of the little supper parties her father enjoyed so much.



Don't forget the next meeting: Saturday, March 8th.

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