

# Jane Austen Society of North America

VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NUMBER NINETEEN - AUGUST 1987

NEXT MEETING - Saturday, September 26, 11:30 am - Lions Ave., NV

The next Vancouver meeting will be on Saturday, September 26th - our usual format of business session, pot-luck lunch, discussion and reading.

The important item on the agenda is the surplus from the 1986 conference. At the last meeting, some suggestions were: to provide library books, in Braille, Large Print and regular editions; to invest the money and use the revenue as an annual prize for an undergraduate essay on a Jane Austen-related topic; to pay for lecturers and meeting space for the local chapter meetings; to commission the production of a tape of "Our Own Particular Jane" by the Victoria cast. At the next meeting, we'll make definite plans for this money. Come prepared to discuss these ideas, as well as your own suggestions and opinions on the subject.

Dianne Kerr has been wondering about the secret engagements in "Emma". (See her article on page 3). She is working on her own ideas as to why Jane Austen did this, and challenges you all to a debate on the subject in September.

The theme of the New York conference this year is The Juvenilia, including Lady Susan. Since many of the talks will probably be printed in Persuasions at the end of the year, we should be reading and discussing these early works, which are published in Minor Works. We'll start by reading Lady Susan at the September meeting. If any of you have a copy, or can borrow one from the library, please bring it with you. We'll pass around the book and read the story-in-letters aloud in turn. The story shows Jane Austen's characteristic irony and flashing wit, and focuses on the most wicked character Jane Austen ever wrote about. You'll enjoy it.

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## GARDEN DESIGN

The slide/lecture on Garden Design on May 23rd was a great success. We began with a few readings - the first sight of Pemberley as Elizabeth and the Gardiners approached, the discussion of the "improvements" required for Sotherton and the description of the estate in "Mansfield Park", and part of Cowper's poem "The Garden", where he writes about improvers.

Dr. Temple Maynard of the English Department of SFU gave us an interesting and instructive view of changing ideas about garden design. His first slide was a drawing of an ancient Egyptian garden: a small house with rectangular walled garden, with trellises, trees, rectangular beds and reflecting pool. Until the 18th century, gardens changed very little. The beds were usually geometric in shape, often contained by clipped hedges, and divided by gravel walks, enclosed by walls, and with water in the form of reflecting pools or fountains.

When it became customary for wealthy Englishmen to go to the Continent on the Grand Tour, they saw landscapes in Italy, and copied in Italian and French paintings, that changed their ideas about gardens. Landscapes were laid out around the country estates to look as much as possible like the paintings - even with dead trees planted in appropriate places, and special grasses in the lawns that would turn brown like the sun-baked Italian countryside.

This was the age of the great "improvers", Capability Brown and Repton, and thus we arrive at the time of Jane Austen and her descriptions in Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice. We all gained a much better idea of the changes in garden design through the centuries from Dr. Maynard's excellent presentation.

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### NAPOLEON'S HAT

In 1972 a Japanese businessman bought at auction Napoleon's dress-uniform hat, so familiar in pictures. In his will, Mr. Tomioka directed that the hat, an important cultural item for France, should be returned to that country. Recently his son, as a gesture of goodwill between Japan and France, presented the hat to the director of France's Fontainebleau museum, where it will be on display with other memorabilia of the famous General's life and career.



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### JANE AUSTEN'S QUILT

The May issue of In Britain magazine contained an interesting article called "Grab it and Run". Despite all precautions, fire is a dire threat at art galleries and museums, and curators and custodians must be constantly alert to possible dangers. A dozen curators, from galleries throughout Britain, were asked to choose and describe which one item from their collections they would select to rescue in such an emergency. A Van Dyke painting, a 17th c. doll's house, R.L. Stevenson's printing press, Florence Nightingale's silver owl, Charlotte Brontë's desk, and the parish register containing Shakespeare's baptism and burial entries, are among some of these treasures.

In this illustrious company is the well-used but lovingly preserved patchwork quilt made by Jane Austen, her sister and her mother, probably for the double bed which the sisters shared in the back bedroom at Chawton.

The curator of Chawton Cottage, Jean Bowden, writes: "We know it was the Austen ladies' habit, after an early (4 o'clock) dinner, to settle down together in the drawing room here, to sew, draw, read and chat, and often one would read aloud to the others, perhaps from a gothic romantic novel...[Jane] was thinking about her writing as she sewed and at the time they were making this patchwork quilt Jane was very excited about publishing her first novel, Sense and Sensibility. Mansfield Park also probably came into being while she was sewing this quilt".

At the conference in 1988 in Chicago, you will be able to see a replica of this quilt, industriously and lovingly made by members of the Chicago chapter.

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### CONVERSATION

Jane Austen would have known, and probably agreed with, this quotation from Dr. Samuel Johnson: *"That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but a quiet, calm interchange of sentiments"*.

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A JA POSER - WHY DID SHE DO IT? by Dianne Kerr.

"Impropriety!" (exclaims Emma in reply to Mrs. Weston) "...it is too calm a censure. Much, much beyond impropriety!...So unlike what a man should be! None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life".

"I dared not address her openly", (writes Mr. Frank Churchill to Mrs. Weston), "... (and I induced) the most upright female mind in the creation to stoop in charity to a secret engagement..."

"The consequence" (declared Jane Fairfax to Mrs. Weston), "has been a state of perpetual suffering to me; and so it ought. But after all the suffering that misconduct can bring, it is still not less misconduct...I can never be blameless. I have been acting contrary to all my sense of right...(and) I shall yet dread making the story known to Colonel Campbell".

All very clear and plain. There is no doubt that the impropriety, immorality almost, of contracting a secret engagement cannot be questioned. Everyone agrees to that -- excepting of course the egregiously vulgar Mrs. Elton, who enjoys, because of the delightful pécadillo, a splendid opportunity to display her faultless discretion, and to give the other young ladies a "sample of true conjugal obedience", since, as she says, that may soon be required of another.

Then what are we to think of the secret engagement contracted between Emma and Mr. Knightley?

Of the fact that it is indeed kept secret, there can be no doubt. Emma and Mr. Knightley become engaged to each other before the last sentence of Chapter 49: "She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned to the house". But the two people most expected to be adversely affected by this engagement are not informed until near the conclusion of Chapter 53, in the case of Mr. Woodhouse, and at some still later unspecified time in the case of Harriet Smith.

The motive dictating secrecy in the second instance, that of Emma and Mr. Knightley, is identical to the motive dictating secrecy in the first instance, that of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. Both "engaging" couples are fully aware of the incontrovertible opposition to be expected from one parent in each of their respective cases. Additionally, Emma knows that she has, albeit inadvertently, countenanced and supported Harriet Smith's dreams of attaching Mr. Knightley to herself.

And though the exact duration of the second improper secret engagement is never precisely specified, it evidently encompasses more than a day or so; a minimum of a fortnight, more probably a full month elapses before poor Mr. Woodhouse receives his "considerable shock".

Now we know that Jane Austen need not have handled her material this way. She is never poverty-stricken for ideas. She could well have arranged to announce the second engagement immediately upon contract; the inclusion of secrecy in the second engagement must be quite deliberate. Of the fact that Jane Austen knew exactly what she was about we can be absolutely certain: she can be precise to the nearest minute, to the smallest bit of lace, to the exact cast of countenance, when she so chooses -- and she can be equally imprecise when she so chooses, interweaving a Mr. Knightley's directly spoken avowal of love with no reply at all from an Emma, but with: "What did she say? Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does..."

The very precision, specification and detail accorded the revelation of the Fairfax-Churchill affair, and the lack thereof accorded the revelation of the identical Woodhouse-Knightley affair -- acknowledgement of wrong, suffering and shame in the first instance, but not in the second -- indicate clearly that Jane Austen had something in mind.

But what? She cannot be playing a cheap trick on us, pulling the wool, so to speak, inducing us to infer that the Fairfax-Churchill secret is contemptible because it persisted fully from October to the end of June, while the Woodhouse-Knightley affair is a mere trifle because it obtained only for the month of July. No, the point is quite clearly established in the first instance; duration is irrelevant; secrecy is unacceptable; engagement must be announced upon contract.

It cannot be the case that one affair is reprehensible because untoward consequence resulted. None did from either affair. It cannot be the case that one affair bore perilous possibility, the other not: Emma might have fallen in love with Frank Churchill; equally, Harriet might have refused poor Mr. Martin a final time. Both bore like perilous possibility.

Why did Jane Austen do it as she did?

*[Do you agree with Dianne Kerr's reading of Emma? What is your opinion on the question? Come to the next meeting and support your position, argue your case, and defend your ideas. No prizes given for "winning", but we'll all be interested in various opinions.]*

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## DIARIES

If Jane Austen ever kept a diary, she might have used one put out by Letts of London. The Globe and Mail carried full-page ads this summer for products and services from Britain, and among those which have been available since Jane Austen's time, or even before, were mentioned Gordon's Gin, Stilton cheese, Piper's Scotch, Wedgwood china, and Letts Diaries.

Around 1796, one John Lett set up business in the heart of London, and published the first Diary in 1812. Since then, these diaries have been used by such well known figures as Dickens, Shaw, Dr. Livingstone and Stanley, as well as many members of the Royal Family.

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## JANE AUSTEN CRITICISM

A book of critical essays has recently been published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, in London. It is Jane Austen, The Critical Heritage, Vol II, 1870-1940, by Brian Southam. The publishers' advertisement reads, in part:

"The comments written here reveal the development of modern critical attitudes towards Jane Austen's work. Writers represented include Henry James, Virginia Woolf, E.M.Forster and W.H.Auden".

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## FRISKS

"We had a beautiful night for our frisks". (Letters of Jane Austen, 6 November, 1813).

It is a shame that this use of the word frisk seems to have died out of the language. We still say frisky, and frisk around, but seldom find this noun form.

It must have been a common usage once - the OED gives lots of examples, including uses by Shakespeare, Johnson, Fielding and Goldsmith. Jane Austen would have seen it in any of these, as well as in her favourite poet Cowper's Table Talk:

*"The Frenchman, easy, debonair and brisk,  
Give him his lass, his fiddle and his frisk...  
Is always happy."*

Jane Austen uses it herself only once in the novels, in Pride and Prejudice, when Elizabeth and the Gardiners return to Longbourn after their trip to Derbyshire, cut short by Lydia's elopement. The little Gardiner children are waiting for them: "...when the carriage drove up to the door, the joyful surprise that lighted up their faces and displayed itself over their whole bodies, in a variety of capers and frisks, was the first pleasing earnest of their welcome."

All these examples agree with the dictionary definition of "a playful leap or skip; a brisk lively movement, in horsemanship or dancing; a caper, a jig".

But Jane Austen's usage in the quotation from the Letters is different. She is writing to Cassandra describing a concert she attended with relatives and some friends - definitely no dancing or capering involved.

It is in this sense that we need to keep the word - there is no other that quite suits the occasion. Revels, frolics, diversions, amusements - none is quite suitable for a lively and stimulating entertainment, pleasant, informal and satisfying.

Please join me in bringing back this word into use - and may you enjoy your frisks all summer.

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## HELENE HANFF AND JANE AUSTEN

In the May Newsletter I mentioned the film version of 84 Charing Cross Road, along with a quotation about Pride and Prejudice by the author, Helene Hanff. I have just read Q's Legacy, her account of her early life in New York, and the writing of that book and its sequel, Duchess of Bloomsbury Street. When the latter was published, fan mail and presents began to pour in.

Hanff writes: "There was a beautiful set of Jane Austen from a woman in Australia who wrote that she was getting old, she knew her children would sell her books when she died and she wanted her Austen in the hands of someone who would appreciate it. (At the time, P&P was the only Austen I owned; I'd read the others and hadn't liked any of them much. But if the donor is reading this, I want her to know that just last week I finished rereading all of the others in turn, not for the first time, and blessed her all over again for putting Jane's books so firmly on my shelves)."

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### MENTAL STIMULATION

The Austens were a reading and writing family - Jane was not the only one who tried her hand at stories, essays, verses. One of the favourite family enjoyments was writing and guessing "charades" (what we would call "riddles" today). Here are some I made up - not to be compared with Jane Austen's own! - for you to puzzle over during the long lazy days of August.

"My first could store a pirate's hoard;  
My next is a pause for a forgotten word;  
My last is oft covered with lush green sward;  
My whole is a coat, a seat, or a lord."  
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"My first is a sound of ovine distress;  
My next is a trim for milady's dress;  
The wealth of a lord is in my third;  
My fourth is a sore and painful word;  
My whole is a source of Suckling pride  
According to Mr. Elton's bride."  
--

" My first is a noble man of Spain;  
My next has water that is not rain;  
My third, a prefix for off or away;  
My last, a work-party of olden day.  
My whole is the home of a man respected,  
Whose suit of the heroine is not rejected."  
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" My first is what a miser  
Loves to touch and weigh;  
My next, a kind of profit  
That does not always pay;  
My whole, the young ladies wasted  
On a Mansfield holiday."

Try some yourself - I'll print them in the November Newsletter for the long lazy days of winter.

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### EDUCATION AND UNDERWEAR - CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

Mary Somerville (1780-1872) was a writer contemporary with Jane Austen. Her education was probably quite typical of the time:

"I had not yet been taught to write, and although I amused myself reading the Arabian Nights, Robinson Crusoe, and the Pilgrim's Progress, I read very badly, and with a strong Scotch accent; so, besides a chapter of the Bible, [my father] made me read a paper of the Spectator aloud every morning, after breakfast; the consequence of which discipline is that I have never since opened that book. Hume's History of England was also a real penance to me".

At age 10 she was sent to a boarding school.

"The chief thing I had to do was to learn by heart a page of Johnson's

Dictionary, not only to spell the words, give their parts of speech and meaning, but as an exercise of memory to remember their order of succession. Besides I had to learn the first principles of writing, and the rudiments of French and English grammar. The method of teaching was extremely tedious and inefficient".

She was sent to the village school to learn needlework, and the village schoolmaster was allowed to give her a few lessons on the use of the globes - Latin was suitable for boys only.

Another contemporary writer, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846), a writer of religious books, tracts, and contributions to periodicals, describes the common fashionable use of "stays" for young girls. Her father disapproved:

"Stays and every species of tight dress were strictly prohibited...The little girl of the anxious friend [who had wanted to put her in stays]...enjoyed all the advantages of that system from which I was preserved. She grew up a wand-like figure, graceful and interesting, and died of decline at nineteen, while I, though not able to compare shapes with a wasp, or an hour-glass, yet passed muster very fairly among mere human forms of God's moulding; and I have enjoyed to this hour a rare exemption from headaches, and other lady-like maladies, which appear the almost exclusive privilege of women in the higher classes."

Jane Austen and Some Contemporaries: Mona Wilson

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#### THE GARDINER CHILDREN

While I was writing about frisks, I wondered about the Gardiner children and their visit to Longbourn. Did Mrs. Gardiner have no more congenial relatives to look after the children? Before the news of Lydia's elopement overthrew them all, Jane Bennet of course would have been gentle and kind, but not the sort who would get down on the floor and play with them. Mrs. Bennet's attention would have oscillated from doting hugs and kisses, to shrieks driving them away when her "nerves" got too much for her. Mr. Bennet would have nothing to do with them.

But what sort of life was it after the dreadful news arrived? Mrs. Bennet was weeping and wailing and prostrate, Jane necessarily in constant attendance. The whole household would be in such an uproar that the poor children would be forlorn and forgotten. It is no wonder that at the sight of their parents "the joyful surprise...lighted up their faces and displayed itself over their whole bodies..." Never would loving parents have been more welcome.

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#### SITKA SPRUCE OR MENZIES SPRUCE?

The most frequently-planted forest tree in the British Isles is the Sitka Spruce, one of the most common trees in B.C. "The tree was first noted and described by Dr. Archibald Menzies when in Vancouver [sic] in 1791. He found it in Puget Sound. David Douglas collected and introduced the first seed to England - and indeed to Europe - when working for the Horticultural Society of London in 1831. It remained rare until the Oregon Association, a group of noblemen and gentlemen, chiefly Scottish...collected a considerable quantity of seed in 1850. Thus it was that the tree at first became more widely established in Scotland than elsewhere."

From Country Life

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## GILPIN ON THE PICTURESQUE

William Gilpin, whose writings on the "picturesque" in the 1770's-1790's taught an entirely new way of viewing landscape, was well known to Jane Austen. On a visit to Bath in 1799 with her brother Edward and his family, she wrote to describe their lodgings to her sister Cassandra: "...the prospect from the drawing-room window, at which I now write, is rather picturesque, as it commands a perspective view of the left side of Brock Street, broken by three Lombardy poplars in the garden of the last house..."

In Northanger Abbey, Catherine, on a walk with Henry and Eleanor Tilney, cannot take part in their conversation. "They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing; and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste....[Henry] talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances; side-screens, and perspectives; lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that...she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape."

Gilpin looked at natural scenery with the eye of a painter, and if it did not conform in proportion and balance to what he considered aesthetically pleasing, nature was at fault. He formulated rules of beauty: "As in history-painting, figures without drapery, and other appendages, make but an indifferent group, so in scenery, naked mountains form poor composition. They require the drapery of a little wood to break the simplicity of their shapes, to produce contrasts, to connect one part with another, and to give that richness in landscape which is one of its greatest ornaments."

Gilpin had an uncompromising directness when he disapproved of a scene. In Scotland in 1776, he wrote: "Here the [mountains and forests] were neither grand nor amusing. All were one general blot".

The surface of the lake was "broken by a number of islands, which are scattered about it, and prevent all unity of composition. Its banks also are tame scenes of pasturage and cultivation". The approach to Perth would have been "extremely picturesque, were it not for an awkwardness which totally incapacitates it for the pencil - the Tay runs in a direct line between parallel banks."

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## DON'T FORGET

Saturday, Sept. 26, 1987. 11:30 a.m.

4169 Lions Ave., North Vancouver

Business: Discussion of Conference surplus funds.

Lunch: Pot-luck - let me know what you want to bring.

Discussion: Secret engagements in Jane Austen

Reading: Lady Susan

RSVP: Eileen Sutherland, 988-0479.

FRIENDS WELCOME

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