

Jane Austen Society of North America

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JANE AUSTEN IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

One would not expect to find Jane Austen the subject-matter of a Slavonic Studies conference in Eastern Europe, but one of the papers presented at the Sixth International Congress of Slavists in Prague was a comparison of the Czech writer Božena Němcová and Jane Austen, written by Cyril Bryner. Not knowing anything of Czech literature, I cannot judge the validity of the argument, but the paper (fortunately in English) is intriguing to read.

The two writers lived at different periods, in different countries, and had no contacts, but some circumstances of their lives were similar. Němcová died aged 42; Jane Austen, a few months before her 42nd birthday. Both were transition figures, fitting between periods, and dissimilar to other women novelists of their times. Jane Austen wrote in the early 19th c. but belonged in many ways to the 18th. Němcová, writing in the last half of the 19th century, could be classified as either Realist or Romantic. Both began writing when very young, but published their works mainly over a period of seven years. Němcová was a noted writer of rural novels at a time and place when most of her contemporaries were acclaimed for their historical works; Austen was overshadowed by the historical writer Sir Walter Scott, and had no sense of fellowship with her great Romantic contemporaries. Neither writer attracted a large following; in spite of varied translations, the fame of each is largely restricted to her own country.

In other ways, Bryner finds the two writers were opposites. Austen was a member of a large, close family, leading a conventional, uneventful life, mainly in small villages. Němcová was married at 17 against her will, to a much older man, crude and pugnacious, who antagonized neighbours and colleagues. Němcová's life was squalid, adventurous, unconventional, and tragic. Her own restlessness, and her husband's job, caused constant moving from town to town until she finally settled in Prague, where she starved and died. Austen seems to have been untouched by her literary peers, but Němcová was in close association with the literary figures of her time. She was preoccupied with ethnography and patriotism, whereas Austen displayed almost no sense of martial or cultural pride.



Their writing style and techniques differed. Bryner wrote: "Austen creates atmosphere and characterization almost entirely through dialogue. Němcová also uses dialogue brilliantly for characterization. But just as important is her attention to picturesque and revealing details, notably dress and food - which Austen completely ignores. Němcová is a great lover of Nature and devotes all of her talent to its description. Austen rarely notes it but somehow manages to fully convey the picture of the natural surroundings of her characters and particularly the atmosphere in which they move."

"Above all, the two writers are students of the social order which they both satirize and accept at the same time...[They seem to be] accepting the existing social order superficially while in reality [they are] scrutinizing all of its intricacies and inadequacies. They both are students of snobbishness and cast [sic]. They laugh at these while accepting them. But their humour does not obscure their highly moralistic intent, which is revealed by the very titles of some of their works: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, and A Good Man, Poor People, Memoirs of a Noble Soul."

Němcová and Austen both had an optimism in the face of tedium or misfortune. Cities were seen as the source of evil. Both writers had similar views on women's rights and the position of women: "Němcová was a great upholder of women's rights long before the age of suffragettes. She bitterly felt her own lack of education and campaigned to make better education available to women...She is more interested in a creative role for women than in the equality of sexes...The gentle Jane Austen is a least likely suffragette. But like Němcová, while accepting the social order, she is highly critical of it. She is most concerned over the fate of women restricted to a position of inferiority from which society offers few escapes."

The two writers shared ideas and themes of marriage. "According to the usages of the times, Němcová's peasant heroines are ready for marriage around sixteen. Austen's heroines, who are placed on the marriage mart by their mothers at puberty, often are not much older. These circumstances give little time for maturing and complicating love. Both authors take a clear-eyed, unsentimental view of love and marriage though both are partial to the Cinderella theme of sudden blossoming, fortuitous circumstances and the winning of a great prize through marriage."

Jane Austen grew up in a tradition of personal journals, and maintained a large correspondence. Němcová, too, was known as a marvellous and industrious correspondent. They shared an exuberance of style, a gift for lively dialogue and a sense of humour - both delighted in burlesque.

Many regard Jane Austen as the greatest English novelist; Němcová was often called "the best Czech novelist" and "our first modern woman". It is interesting to find such similarities in the work of women of such disparate backgrounds.

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"I am come in a great hurry -- it was all a mistake --" (NA)

In their latest catalogue, Bantam Books proudly announced the "striking new cover art" of their re-issue of Emma. The cover picture shows an attractive young woman on the brow of a hill with gown and cloak billowing in the wind. Underneath:

Emma by Charlotte Bronte and "Another Lady"

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CHAPTER X.

Two comments on the drawings of Hugh Thomson for Pride and Prejudice:

"I have been studying the beautiful drawing you have sent me with a magnifying glass and it is still more wonderful when seen through this glass than when looked at with the naked eye. The accuracy of touch reminds me of Gerard Dow, and perhaps still more of Albert Dürer. The extraordinary power of giving expression to the faces is to me most astonishing". (Lauder Brunton)

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"I am inclined to think it is quite the best thing you have done: in delicate definition of character, and in felicity of actual workmanship, it is certainly in advance of all that has preceded". (Comyns Carr)



HE day passed much as the day before had done. Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley had spent some hours of the morning with the invalid, who continued, though slowly, to mend; and, in the evening, Elizabeth joined their party in the drawing-room. The loo table, however, did not appear.

Much of the charm of Thomson's work appears in the small drawings used as chapter headings, and the "illuminated" initial letter of the first word, often showing a delightful sense of humour.



Neither did the apothecary think it at all advisable.



Above: Hugh Thomson

Left: C.E. Brock

THOSE ENGAGEMENTS...AGAIN!! by Dianne Kerr.

Keiko Parker takes up her cudgels most spiritedly and with eloquence (May, 1988); her arguments are clear. But I remain unconvinced.

At the risk of sounding like a pedant and preacher, I must say that I firmly believe in the gospel according to Austen. And I am quite convinced that with Austen it was always --- if I may borrow a well-known line from Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock to illustrate: "It doesn't matther what yez say, Ma, a Principle's a Principle." And the Principle here is simply that playing a Confidence Game is always wrong. No matter how charming the Players, no matter how light-hearted the Game, 'con games' breed victims.

It is indeed true that Harriet Smith recovered quickly from her disappointment over Mr. Knightley --- although her slow recovery over Mr. Elton doesn't presage that. And it is indeed true that Austen tacitly shows us her own disapproval of the Churchill/Fairfax affair by having other people comment harshly; and she does treat the Knightley/Woodhouse affair with humour: "...indulging in one scheme more...", as Keiko points out.

It is indeed true that the Churchill/Fairfax liaison was kept secret from the other actors and from the reader; the Knightley/Woodhouse liaison was kept secret only from the affective parties. And it is indeed true that Churchill and Fairfax had a selfish reason for their concealment; Knightley and Woodhouse had not.

But! What is actually at issue here is not the motives involved, but the possible consequences involved. Emma herself speculated (ch.14) as to whether or not she might fall in love with Frank; both the Westons were fully trusting that she would do so; and some portion of the Highbury population was confidently expecting that their own Native Son (albeit prodigal) would capture the hand of their own Native First Lady. So Emma stood to be made a fool of.

Similarly, in the second case, Mr. Woodhouse will have continued confidently assuring anyone who would listen that Emma would never marry --- Emma herself had told him so, many times. And Harriet continued some weeks day-dreaming of a delightful union with Mr. Knightley --- Miss Woodhouse herself had encouraged her to hope for it. So Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Smith both stood to be made fools of.

So the immorality of concealment is condemned by Austen, evidently, partly because of the possibility of the victim's making a fool of himself, '...exposing [himself] to the scorn and ridicule of the world...' --- as Elizabeth counts that among the serious charges against Mr. Darcy.

But more serious is the danger of devastating the social process. In the world of the upper-class 18th c., matching and mating is a serious occupation. This is not the world of the Caveman, the Pioneer, the Quaker, or the Yuppie, wherein such occupation is less paramount. But even if it were any of those other worlds, such endangering would still violate a basic principle governing inter-human behaviour. An Austenian principle, as it happens, but one valid for any society, and any time frame: if you deliberately permit interested others to believe that you are free to fall in love, or to be fallen in love with, when in fact such freedom is not existent, you imperil not only the opportunities of those others, but also the opportunities of the would-be lovers of those others.

'Con games' induce entrapment; 'con games' are always wrong. This concept is essential to the impeccable system of morality which permeates all of Austen's

novels, and which had sent them all six gleaming and shining through time.

At the conclusion of Chapter 12 in Persuasions, we learn Anne Elliot's thoughts: "...[she could not] help fearing...that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination."

Is this not an applicable judgement which Austen omits from Emma's tale? Might we not infer that this is a proper pronouncement on Emma's behaviour? Emma herself does not make it, because proud, irrepressible, imprudent Emma is not introspective in exactly the same way as humble, shy, prudent Anne is.

But Austen evidently had that sort of self-examination in her repertoire. She could have used it and didn't. Why don't these two intelligent people, Emma and Mr. Knightley, recognize that they are doing precisely what they have found so offensive in others? Is Austen showing us that even the best human beings don't always follow their own precepts? That idols have feet of clay?

Of Austen's consciousness of the moral foundation of her works, there can be no doubt: the concluding sentence of Northanger Abbey, "...I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience", being but one evidence.

Can it be that Austen herself didn't notice the inconsistency? That doesn't seem reasonable, because she could have more easily and naturally concluded the fateful walk in the garden with an immediate application to Mr. Woodhouse. The concealment is in no way necessary to the denouement; predictable reaction from the father is in no way altered by time. Yet Austen deliberately delays the revelation... for some reason.

Because while the deception persisted --- and Mr. Woodhouse was the last to know --- he could have been the butt of malicious laughter. To say nothing of the danger to Harriet, since, to parody the last line of Chapter 51, "...it really was too much to hope, even of Mr. Martin, that he could propose to the same woman THREE times in one year".

Surely we must wonder: why does Austen tease us unnecessarily, having upright George and proud Emma play the same wicked game that rascal Frank and gentle Jane played?

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"...her memory endears it now."(NA) - Leila Vennewitz.

"A very long time ago, when I was secretary to one of the canons of Winchester Cathedral, my daily walk took me past the modest house (what today we would call a 'row house') in which Jane Austen died. The pavement was narrow, and the front door opened directly onto it, with no little garden or forecourt. One almost brushed the windowpanes as one passed by.

"Some thirty-five years later I was walking slowly along the north aisle of Winchester Cathedral with my brother and said: 'I know her memorial tablet is somewhere near here, but where exactly?' (I had spent all those intervening years in China and North America - excuse enough, possibly, for forgetfulness, but still I felt disloyal). Suddenly my feet surprised me by coming to a halt - of their own volition, as it were. I looked down and saw that my toes were precisely on the lower edge of the memorial slab let into the ground. My feet had known where not to tread."

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"...in a prudential light, it is certainly a very good match for her." (P&P)

(In November, 1988, Dr. Jocelyn Cass gave us a talk on "The Mercenary and the Prudent Motive". Members wanted a chance to read the paper and think it over at leisure. Here is a slightly abridged version.)

Jane Austen lived in a harsher society when women of some status, some education, and no outstanding talent had few ways of supporting themselves. Unless they were very well endowed, physically, socially, or financially, gentlewomen who refused any economically viable husband were turning away a mealticket and creating a drain on the family resources or, as Jane Austen and Charlotte Lucas more elegantly put it, "marriage...must be their pleasantest preservative from want."

For much of her life JA was a poor relation and her portrayal of the John Dashwoods, Lady Catherine, Mrs. Norris and the Dalrymples suggests she did not enjoy it. The financial pressure on women is always evident in her novels. Mrs. Bennet may be funny: "...what is to become of us all? The Collinses will turn us out, before he is cold in his grave; and if you are not kind to us, brother, I do not know what we shall do". Mrs. Bennet may be exaggerating, but basically Mrs. Bennet is right. In The Watsons Elizabeth says the same thing without any saving humour: "My father cannot provide for us...we must marry. It is very bad to grow old and be poor and laughed at." Did the author agree? She was to write to her niece Fanny, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor - which is one strong argument in favour of matrimony".

But one of JA's delightful qualities is her fairmindedness and, whatever the economic facts, to marry without any affection or inclination was a nauseating and unhappy prospect. So Emma Watson presents the other side of the issue. To "pursue a man merely for the sake of situation is shocking," she says....

Which of the sisters speaks for JA? Was The Watsons never finished because she could not decide? or because the issue had emerged too plainly in this novel and could not convincingly be resolved within the limits of the conventions of the romantic novel? From Elinor Dashwood, proclaiming that a lasting connection with the wrong person is "the worst and most irremediable of all evils" to Anne Elliot finally marrying the man of her choice, the conflict between economic fact and personal feeling is always present. It appears to be resolved, only because JA was working in a convention which demanded that heroes and heroines be rewarded by marriages offering both love and financial security.

In general, JA portrays unsympathetically those characters to whom marriage is merely business, but she was no advocate of marrying on impulse. In Lydia Bennet she drew with devastating accuracy an adolescent girl who has what our contemporary young describe as "the hots", and we know what happened to Lydia -- George Wickham, a fate worse than death. A marriage made recklessly, an alliance formed without adequate financial support, was almost guaranteed to produce more than personal unhappiness. In an age without birth control, a household without income was seldom without babies and "setting up an impoverished nursery", as the contemporary phrase had it, ensured misery for all concerned. It created a parasitic household dependent on the charity of relatives: the Wickhams and the Prices are cases in point.

So JA is no advocate of romantic impulse. What then, given the economic situation, did she believe was the right way to approach marriage? Did you examine the financial prospects carefully and then fall wildly and calculatngly in love? Was

it possible to be prudent without being mercenary? The question is an important sub-theme in Pride and Prejudice, and the title of this paper comes from a discussion between Elizabeth and her Aunt Gardiner about Wickham....

Although Mrs. Gardiner makes a poor showing in this discussion, she has presented her position much more coherently in the Christmas conversation to which Elizabeth refers. On that occasion also, Wickham was the subject: "Do not involve yourself, or endeavour to involve him in an affection which the want of fortune would make so very imprudent..."

In fact, Mrs. Gardiner is preaching a doctrine of emotional as well as financial responsibility, so that no hearts are broken in the necessary pursuit of security. Her precepts may fall chillingly on ears attuned to the irresistible passions of Harlequin and Hollywood but Elizabeth Bennet wryly acknowledges their value...

This sense of emotional responsibility is lacking in Wickham himself, as it is lacking in Willoughby, who so disastrously encourages the affection of a girl he knows he cannot afford to marry. Colonel Fitzwilliam, on the other hand, is scrupulous in signalling to Elizabeth Bennet that his attentions to her cannot be taken seriously. "There are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money".

"Some attention to money" is prudent, paying attention only to money is mercenary, and people who are mercenary or imprudent do not care about the emotional damage they do. Surely this makes a perfectly simple and adequate distinction between discretion and avarice? However, JA is always subtle: in Pride and Prejudice, where this question is so central, she juxtaposes Charlotte Lucas and Wickham so clearly that we are forced to reconsider the neat and obvious distinction I have just made.

In the 18th c. not only gentlewomen but gentlemen without wealth or family influence faced an uncertain future...success depended upon one's connections. For men, as well as for women, marrying money was often the only means of establishing or maintaining themselves in the gentle classes. "Handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain". A hard-headed acceptance of this fact is evident in both S&S and P&P. Thus the conjunction of Charlotte Lucas and Wickham is quite logical and the narrative voice pairs them quite explicitly. Elizabeth, sympathizing with Wickham's natural desire for independence - that is, a rich wife - is said to be "less clear-sighted perhaps in his case than Charlotte's". Does "perhaps" cast doubt upon her past clear-sightedness? Elizabeth's first judgement that Charlotte could never "be tolerably happy in the lot she has chosen", is not borne out by her visit to Hunsford....Moreover, when Mr. Darcy observes that Mr. Collins is fortunate in his choice of a wife, Elizabeth is forced to concur: "She seems perfectly happy, however, and in a prudential light, it is certainly a very good match for her".

So marrying Mr. Collins is prudent, yet if ever a person married to secure a situation it was Charlotte Lucas....Engaged to Mr. Collins who is neither sensible nor agreeable, whose society is irksome and whose attachment to her is imaginary, Charlotte feels herself fortunate. Married to him, she is content. In what way is the prudent Charlotte different from the mercenary Wickham, pursuing freckled Miss King for her ten thousand pounds?

Was JA, like Elizabeth Bennet, unsure of the right, the truly wise, relationship of money to marriage? "Since we see everyday that where there is affection young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune from entering into engagements...how can I promise to be wiser..."

In her last novel JA again turns to this issue, for the advice given to the

young Anne Elliot is essentially Mrs. Gardiner's advice to Elizabeth. Lady Russell has persuaded her goddaughter to break her engagement to a young officer who has only his pay to depend on and no certain future. Is it Anne's subsequent unhappiness or Captain Wentworth's subsequent success which proves Lady Russell wrong? Has JA finally decided that it is not wisdom to resist affection? or is there another explanation?

Persuasion presents an alternative to the society of property, family settlements, and the economic dependence of young couples. The naval officers, prosperous because of their captured prizes, are the first self-supporting professionals in the Austen novels. Theirs is a society in which independence has its modern meaning and individuals are free to make their own choices. Persuasion is the only novel which concludes with a hero and heroine going together into a new world of their own choosing, to friends of their own making, leaving property, rank and family behind....

Had JA failed to distinguish between the mercenary and the prudent motive in P&P because for her they were both materialistic, both cold constraints on natural affection? The economic and social background of her earlier novels left little room for cheerful confidence and successful exertion. Did she turn thankfully in Persuasion to a setting where the qualities she had always valued - personal choice and youthful happiness - were no longer subject to family ambitions and financial considerations?

(In the interest of saving space, I omitted many of the supporting quotations - you can look them up. Let us have your thoughts and comments, on Dr. Cass' talk, and on JA's heroes and heroines, for a future Newsletter).

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"There was merit in every drawing - in the least finished, perhaps the most". (Emma)

Marking this year's 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, the Art Gallery of Ontario has an exhibit of about 70 caricatures from French and English cartoonists of around the year 1800. The engravings, lithographs and etchings give a vivid picture of the savage prejudice each country felt for the other.

English caricaturists drew Napoleon ("Little Boney") wrapped in a tricoloured blanket and cuddled by a grinning Devil. The French artists depicted the English as drunkards obsessed with death. A Rowlandson cartoon shows English soldiers as happy and healthy, with apple-cheeked wives and fat babies; the French soldiers are portrayed as foppish, vain, effeminate and terribly emaciated. In an anonymous French cartoon, a fat John Bull is gluttonously preparing to devour an enormous meal, while a dapper Frenchman is paying court to a beautiful woman, in Chacun son gout.

During hostilities, the French cartoons were mostly political; after Waterloo, caricatures of the English were more social: their "bad taste in clothes, their lack of refinement in eating, their corpulent physiques, and lack of delicacy in relations with the fairer sex".

The exhibit is "touring the country", but unfortunately the Vancouver Art Gallery has no plans to present it here.

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"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested". Francis Bacon.

"What a great traveller you must have been, ma'am!" (Persuasion)

The town of Whitby in Yorkshire has tenuous connections with both Jane Austen and Vancouver: the great days of its whale trade were 1775-1815, almost coinciding with her lifetime; and a museum to Captain Cook, the explorer of our B.C. coast, is in a restored house belonging to the Quaker John Walker, to whom Cook was apprenticed, and where he lived for several winters.

From this great port and shipbuilding centre in the last half of the 18th c., Whitby's ships carried coal and transported soldiers, imported timber, and traded to India and America. Whaling was one of the prosperous ventures, but Whitby ships did best of all carrying soldiers during the Seven Years' War and the long Napoleonic War period, making the town one of the wealthiest in the kingdom in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Many of the wealthy ship builders and sea captains were Quakers, living and dressing modestly while they made their fortunes. The question of ships carrying arms for self defense split off some of the wealthier of the community, who moved their religious devotions to the parish church.

In Georgian times, the Church of England believed the parish church should reflect the social order of the town. Its two focal points, reflecting God and Caesar, were the towering three-decked pulpit, and the family pew of the Great House. The wealthy had private pews lined with coloured baize and their names on the doors; the "middling sort" were in plain pews of unpainted oak or painted deal; and the poor sat on benches around the periphery of the church, or at the back of the galleries.

The town was set out to reflect the same social status. In the centre is the old town, with big old houses converted to tenements, archways opening into long narrow yards lined with houses on either side. Steep flights of steps climb the hillsides overlooking the old harbour, crammed with houses, shops and the work places of craftsmen, sail factories, rope-walks and timber dealers.

Modest, middle-class homes and terraces following the contours of the land housed lawyers, bankers and more prosperous shopkeepers; and outside town, in free-standing houses or terraces with large front gardens, lived the upper classes.

Later, as in Sanditon, terrace houses were built for summer visitors with a view of the sea and open to the full force of the sea winds, but these older houses were built along one side of a sheltered valley beside a pleasant stream.

Whitby is not on the usual "tourist circuit", but for anyone in that part of England, it would be a delightful place to visit, wandering around the network of old streets, precipitous steps, and pedestrian passages; imagining ships' masts, bowsprits and figureheads towering over the houses along the water's edge; listening to the echo of now long silent hammering in the old shipyards; smelling the redolence of whale-oil boiling in the now vanished sheds. Whitby remembers the days of its past glory, and with a little imagination you can too.

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"A book is a gift you open more than once".

"...where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies". (NA)

Modern spies identify themselves to each other by carrying a copy of one of Jane Austen's novels, of course. Here is an excerpt from John Le Carré's latest novel, The Russia House, (with thanks to James Reicker, Ottawa):

First he sat, only to have an old lady thump him on the shoulder and demand his seat. Then he hovered in an alcove near the lift until he risked being walled in by a rampart of cardboard suitcases and brown parcels. Finally he removed himself to the protection of a central pillar and there he remained, apologising to everyone, watching the glass door turn off and on and shuffling out of everybody's light, then into it again, while he brandished Jane Austen's Emma at his chest and in his other hand a lurid carrier bag from Heathrow airport.

It was a good thing that Katya arrived to save him.

There was no secret to their meeting, nothing secretive in their behaviour. Each caught the other's eyes at the same instant, while Katya was still being buffeted through the door. Barley threw up an arm, waving Jane Austen.

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NEXT MEETING: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1989 (Place to be decided later)

Keiko Parker, who provides the illustrations for our comparisons of Hugh Thomson and the Brocks, has been asked to give a slide presentation of illustrators of Pride and Prejudice from various editions, at the conference at Santa Fé.

We are privileged to see a preview of her slides and talk at the next meeting. It will be our usual gathering, with our usual impressive pot-luck lunch, starting at 10:00 o'clock. Since we will require a hall which can be properly darkened for slides, the site has not yet been decided - you will be kept informed. This is a reminder to mark your calendars for the beginning of a new Jane Austen season.

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CHALLENGE FOR THE SUMMER

New York Magazine asked readers to suggest remarks that the famous would never, never have said; for example, Peter Pan: "Oh, grow up!" or Imelda Marcos: "New heels and soles, please".

We can do the same with Jane Austen - take your favourite characters, and stretch your wits to come up with a phrase or sentence they would absolutely never have said. And I'll come up with a prize for the best collection.

Have a happy and creative summer!

This Newsletter, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, comes out four times a year: February, May, August and November. All submissions on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome. Mail to the Editor: Eileen Sutherland, 4169 Lions Ave., North Vancouver, B.C. V7R 3S2.