

Jane Austen Society of North America

VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NO. THIRTY - MAY 1990

A COLICKY COLLOQUY ON THE DOUBLE CRITICAL STANDARD - by Irene Howard.

[At the February meeting, the discussion was based on one of the programmes of the CBS radio show Invitation to Learning collected into a book of that title edited by George Crowther in 1964. Viviane McClelland, Rachael Nichols and Ruth Piddington read the parts of Orville Prescott, book editor of the New York Times, Jan Struther, author of Mrs. Miniver, and the moderator, Lyman Bryson, whose comments and opinions led to this appraisal. (Ed.)]

A Colicky Colloquy on the Double Critical Standard - by Irene Howard.

Lyman Bryson, in a radio broadcast some thirty years ago, reflects that there is some mystery about Jane Austen. He himself holds aloof from the general adoration accorded her, blaming his resistance to her charm on his own natural perversity. I believe the only mystery lies in the attitude of Lyman Bryson himself, and that the mystery is soon solved when one sees that his response to Jane Austen and her characters goes back one hundred years to Victorian times when literary critics applied special criteria for evaluating women novelists: they were not just writers; they were women first of all, and as such could be expected to write in a way that immediately separated them from male writers. Discovering, for example, that the author of Jane Eyre was a woman, and that Currer Bell was indeed Charlotte Bronte, they were hard put to account for the power and psychological depth of that novel, for women did not write like that, so sensual, so vigorous, demonstrating such knowledge of the world. Charlotte Bronte responded in a forthright manner to this double critical standard:

To you I am neither man nor woman. I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me - the sole ground on which I accept your judgement. (Quoted in Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, 1977, p.96. Ch.3 deals with the double critical standard.)

Lyman Bryson should accept Charlotte Bronte's admonition, for he judges Jane Austen according to that Victorian stereotype. He finds Jane altogether too unfeminine. He admires her novels in which she "creates a world as nobody else did", but unfortunately, she is a "too intelligent spinster." He praises her irony, which all would agree requires a certain detachment, but regrets that she is "disengaged from life." Then, sadly: "I don't think life ever really touched her." And, "Did Jane Austen live at all, in any real sense?" he worries, looking around for a child to put to her breast or a husband like Dr. Grant to provide her with emotionally-sustaining complaints about being served "green" goose. Not finding either, he shakes his head sadly because, "she didn't really give life anything." What, one might ask, did Chaucer give to life? If he gave nothing but his portraits of the Nun and the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, all viewed with ironic detachment, he would have served life well. What did Charles Dickens give to life but his novels teeming with irrepressible characters? He would not thank you for crediting him with the gift to the world of a great many children, and indeed complained to Catherine about her many pregnancies, as though he had nothing to do with them, while she, giving more than her share to life, sank back exhausted on the sofa and helplessly submitted to her husband's cruel rejection of her. (Phyllis Rose, Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages, 1984). Mr. Bryson might equally well ask, "Did Catherine Dickens live at all in any real sense?" As for what Jane Austen gave to life, her books were her gift and the writing of them engaged her in real living.

Mr. Bryson confesses that his idea about Jane Austen not giving anything to life is really "just an impression", which, one might add, comes straight out of that elemental and very Victorian male desire to have an "Angel in the House". If he were to look for specific evidence, he would only have to read some of Jane Austen's letters to discover a dutiful daughter dispensing her mother's medicine and giving orders in the kitchen, or a fond Auntie Jane doting on her "dear itty Dordy" and thinking "with tenderness and delight on his beautiful and smiling countenance". According to the double critical standard, Jane Austen would then qualify as being both a womanly woman and a writer.

Mr. Bryson was giving his view some thirty years ago, and in this liberated decade it would at first seem unnecessary to beat this particular dead horse. Turning to the last issue of Persuasions, however, one discovers that the horse may not be dead after all, or if it is, it won't lie down. For there is John Halperin worrying about Jane Austen's detachment, while praising her wit and irony and placing her in the same class as Congreve and Wilde. Only there is the danger that she may be too detached and even become, well, cynical and nasty. Are we to understand that these qualities are perhaps unseemly in a woman?

There is much more to say on the alleged nastiness and cynicism of Jane Austen, but such thoughts will have to wait for the next opportunity at a luncheon meeting.

In the meantime, see how Lyman Bryson has led me to defend Jane's womanliness, quite as if I were a Victorian lady novelist intent on appeasing the literary critics by showing off her embroidered cushions. (Showalter, p.85).

Would anyone like to have my receipt for plum chutney?

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SPREADING THE WORD: LEARNING TO PUBLICIZE JASNA

In our efforts to keep JASNA healthy and growing, we could garner attention by standing on street corners brandishing copies of Emma. Or we could wait for some enterprising Austenians to search us out. But probably the safest way of spreading the word about JASNA is through the news media.

Unfortunately publicity is a lot of work, and it takes a team effort, so we are inviting volunteers to join our Communications Committee. We need half a dozen people who are willing to publicize the monthly meetings as well as special events. You don't have to have any special skills or experience. Shannon Rupp, one of our members, will set up a four-hour workshop to teach people the basics of writing news releases and developing a list of media contacts.

We haven't set a date yet. We'll set up a time to suit the members - perhaps a luncheon meeting on a weekend, or one or two evening sessions: it won't all be hard work! We should have our first meeting by July, so we have time to put together a news release for our September meeting.

Those who are interested, who would like to learn a new skill, and try their hands at writing publicity, should call Shannon at 736-4930.

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"Mr. Denny entreated permission to introduce his friend"

C.E. Brock (1895)



Mr. Denny entreated permission to introduce his friend

C.E. Brock (undated, but later)



The uniform that Henry Austen would have worn as an officer in the Oxford Militia

The dress of the ladies and gentlemen in the compared illustrations is usually very similar, but notice the difference in Mr. Denny's uniform in these two examples of C.E. Brock and H.M. Brock. JA did not say specifically which militia regiment she intended: "the --shire militia" was the way she referred to it. Even more interesting, compare the uniforms in the two CEB examples, and the Oxfordshire militia to which Henry Austen belonged.



H.M. Brock (1898)

JANE AUSTEN DAY SUCCESS

'She was not deceived in her own expectation of pleasure.

"The best ever!" was the verdict about the third annual Jane Austen Day on March 17th, when 43 members and guests met at Stanley Park Pavilion for lunch, information and entertainment.

Vancouver member Barbara Ellison started off the programme with a talk about education and governesses in Jane Austen's time and in the novels. Today it is unusual for a young lady to know more than one of the accomplishments considered necessary then - drawing, painting, singing, playing the piano or harp, doing fine needlework, or doing any of the many "arts and crafts" practised by heroines of the day. The novels give clues to the educational background. An important point to keep in mind is whether it is Jane Austen the narrator who uses the term "accomplished", or merely one of the other characters - Jane Austen brings out the superficial nature of some of these elegant young ladies.

Another way of looking at the novels and their heroines was given by Deborah Blenkhorn, who examined the use of naval metaphor in Jane Austen's covert revolution against the "establishment". With some of her own metaphors - Fanny Price seen as a "small dinghy" towed along in Edmund's wake, Anne Elliot as a neglected "old sloop" finally coming into a "good safe anchorage" - Deborah inspired us to re-read the novels with this sort of language in mind.

A break at noon for soup, chicken salad and strawberry cake, was a time for comments and conversation, greeting old friends and making new ones.

Dr. Rhodri Liscombe, of the Department of Fine Arts, UBC, showed slides and discussed the work of Regency architect William Wilkins, the builder of the New Assembly Rooms in Bath and many neo-Tudor or neo-Gothic country houses, such as those Jane Austen and her heroines would have known. One of the interesting aspects of the Regency period was how a man could come to greatness from minor beginnings, and Wilkins was a good example. Starting as a mere builder, he developed his talent and trained himself as he worked, and the slides showed his confidence and sureness of touch increasing through the years.

The final event on the programme was a piano recital by one of the teachers at the Vancouver Academy of Music, Rena Ling. Rena began with a few informative and interesting remarks about the piano of the day - not built to give the great sound we associate with a modern concert grand, but meant for small rooms about the size of the one we were in. Her choice of music was appropriate selections from composers contemporary with Jane Austen, which she might have heard or played herself: selections from Bach, Schubert, Beethoven and Mozart, ending with "variations on a theme" so popular at the time. It was a delightful and relaxing ending to a successful Jane Austen Day.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Who often reads, will sometimes wish to write - George Crabbe (1754-1832)

We need more contributions to the Newsletter - any topic, any length, any time.

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EYRE OF UNREALITY - Kathleen Glancy

To David Gilson's invaluable bibliography I owe the knowledge of a passage from Queen Victoria's diaries revealing that she and Prince Albert embarked upon reading Jane Eyre directly after finishing Northanger Abbey. I wondered how they got on. I read the books in that order myself, and had previously read all Jane Austen's major novels. Even with a gap of several weeks between NA and Jane Eyre the results were ... well, something like this.

I had just finished reading Mr. Rochester's narrative of the history of his marriage when a voice spoke. "But is this probable?" it asked. I looked up. A young man in the costume of the late 18th c. or early 19th c. stood at my left shoulder, and had apparently been reading over it. He was rather tall and almost handsome, with a brown complexion. "I am rather nice in my notions of the standards of probability that should be met with in a good novel, I admit," he said - good heavens, he must be Henry Tilney if he goes about using nice in that context, I thought - "but this particular production would offend anyone with any sense of logic. I do not say that one might not keep one's mad wife in the attic, but to do so without her relationship to oneself becoming known seems so unlikely. Only look, madam, at one of the reasons he gives for the lady's family wishing the match. He was well born, and they were not, but they were rich. Such marriages happen often, but when they do the lady's family do not keep them secret - nay, they make them as public as possible, for what else is the object of the exercise? So far as I am aware, the London newspapers are quite prepared to publish notices of marriages taking place in the Colonies, on receipt of the usual fee. Any why keep the lady in the attic at all? It seems very strange!"

"But this is a very strange man. Madam, will you oblige me by turning back a few chapters?" This voice came from my right shoulder, and its owner needed no qualifying adjectives to be attached to "tall" and "handsome". He was not the sort of man to whom one could refuse what he condescended to ask, by which I identified him. I turned back the pages.

"There, I thank you", he said. "Look here." He read aloud: "'You, small and plain and poor and insignificant as you are, I entreat you to be my wife'. And people", he added on a rather plaintive note for such an imposing looking creature, "have accused me of proposing in a less than polite manner. A man who talks like that, and indeed who discusses his former mistresses with virtuous young women by way of diverting conversation, would be quite capable of keeping his wife in the attic, Mr. Tilney."

"It passes belief that an Englishman of birth and education would do such a thing." This gentleman had been standing behind me but now moved to Mr. Darcy's side. An older gentlemen, this, but too tall and attractive and decided-looking to be Colonel Brandon. Mr. Knightley, therefore. "I should suppose," he continued, "that I am equivalent to this Rochester in age and position, but can anyone fancy that I, if I had the misfortune to be married to a madwoman, should keep her in an attic at Donwell?"

"Certainly not without Miss Bates finding out," murmured Henry Tilney. Mr. Knightley looked rather affronted. "Of course nobody could imagine such a case," said Mr. Darcy soothingly. "If you had a mad wife you would put her in a private lunatic asylum, as would any sensible man. If you kept her at home, though of course not in the attic, I am sure you would hire attendants who were sober, efficient, and sufficient in number to watch her round the clock and thus prevent her from emerging and biting your guests or setting fire to the house whenever the mood took her. A single drunken nurse is inadequate provision for such a charge, as you would realise."

"But there is really no comparison," said Henry, "between you and this man, sir. I should not think that it would ever occur to you to seek to entertain a house party by disguising yourself as a female gypsy and telling their fortunes." Mr. Knightley, in plain unaffected gentleman-like English, assured Mr. Tilney that no consideration he could imagine would induce him to disguise himself as a gypsy of either sex.

"There is too," said Henry, "the fact that you would not seek to keep your marriage secret, or to induce an unsuspecting young woman to abet you in committing bigamy."

"I should not," said Mr. Knightley. "Even supposing that I had no morals at all, as seems to be the case here, I should be deterred from bigamy by the fact that sooner or later my legal wife's relations would discover and disclose the truth, with dreadful consequences for the woman that I had deceived. A man who lacked all conscience would be deterred from such a course by reason."

"This man does not appear to exercise whatever reason he may possess," said Mr. Darcy, "and I am inclined to believe that his wife is not alone in her affliction."

"That is very likely," agreed Mr. Knightley.

"It was probably having to live with him," said Henry Tilney, "that drove the unfortunate woman mad."

At this point another shape began to materialise. The three gentlemen regarded it with apparent recognition. "I must be going now," exclaimed Henry. "I do have a sermon to write."

"I must depart - an appointment with William Larkins," said Mr. Knightley.

"Disguise of every sort is my abhorrence," Mr. Darcy told them sternly. "Madam, Mr. Edmund Bertram is about to arrive, and as a consequence we find it desirable to leave."

And they made their bows and vanished. Edmund Bertram, a good-looking but extremely solemn young man, solidified. Very fortunately the perusal of a few passages of Jane Eyre struck him quite speechless with horror.

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THE SECOND PERFECT NOVEL

...being well aware that a serious dispute must be the consequence of any reply.

During the course of his talk at Santa Fe in October, John Halperin said that Pride and Prejudice was one of two perfect novels in English. He gave the name of the second one in answer to a question, but none of the Vancouver members there could remember what that was. Now he has written in answer to my query:

"My other perfect novel was Henry James's The Ambassadors, which fewer would agree with. But there it is."

Any comments?

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CONTEMPORARIES: ANNE ELLIOT AND KITTY WELLESLEY

...to think of the contrast between them - to think that where nature had made so little difference, circumstances should have made so much...

When Captain Wentworth first saw Anne after a long absence, he said she was so altered he would not have known her again [p.60]. When Wellington returned after ten years in India to marry his affianced bride, Kitty Packenham, he reportedly whispered to the officiating clergyman, "She's grown ugly, by Jove!"

There are other parallels: family pressure prevented the original marriage in both cases; the man went off in grim determination and achieved military and financial success; and the young woman, rejecting another, more eligible suitor, waited faithfully for her departed lover to return.

The differences in the stories are more significant - Wellington and Kitty were married immediately on his return from abroad; Anne and Wentworth gradually got to know one another once more, and fell in love again. The Wellington marriage deteriorated rapidly, but presumably the Wentworths "lived happily ever after".

Kitty Packenham, born in 1772, was the daughter of a baron, and was petted, loved and admired by family and friends. (Anne Elliot, born in 1787, the daughter of a baronet, was ignored, neglected and unconsidered by her immediate family - was Sir Thomas Bertram correct in thinking "the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" led to firmness of character?). Kitty's father, in every way a contrast to Anne's, was a Post Captain in the Navy, described as "bluff, good-tempered, and an enlightened landowner". Kitty and Anne both had older sisters named Elizabeth, but Kitty was the second of nine children, a large, happy, close-knit family.

Arthur Wesley (as he then was, "Wellesley" came later when his eldest brother changed the family name) lived on a neighbouring estate in Ireland. He was described as "frank, open-hearted and popular" and "his quickness of speech reflected the quick intelligence of his mind". (Frederick Wentworth was "a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy"). The young couple, who had known each other since childhood, were part of the fashionable social life of the Irish gentry: balls, theatre parties and concerts during the season in Dublin, where the Packenham had a town house, (the Elliots "travelled up to London...for a few weeks annual enjoyment of the great world", but Anne was not included), and a round of visits to friends and relatives, picnics, musical evenings and theatricals, the rest of the year. Arthur and Kitty were soon openly in love.

The Wesleys, however, were financially insecure, selling their Irish properties, and severing connections with Ireland, all points against the family in the opinion of the Packenham. Arthur, also, had a personal reputation for gambling and idleness. His request for Kitty's hand was peremptorily refused.



Catherine (Kitty) Pakenham.

Humiliated and resentful, Arthur Wesley determined to change his way of life and better his position financially. World events were in his favour. With help from his eldest brother, he was enabled to purchase promotions in the army, and he became a lieutenant-colonel, in command of his regiment, at the age of 24. His first active service was in the campaign against the French in Flanders, a particularly futile and disastrous venture, under the Duke of York, whose military prowess has received immortality in the nursery rhyme: "He marched them up to the top of the hill and he marched them down again".

In 1796, promoted to colonel, Arthur joined his regiment in India, full of determination to seize any opportunities for advancement. He was still determined to marry Kitty. For the next ten years, he showed his administrative ability and bravery in battle, in the work of establishing a peaceful regime in India.

Meanwhile, Kitty remained at home with her family. She had promised that there would be no communication with Arthur, and she had no way of knowing whether his feelings towards her had changed. Relatives and military acquaintances, travelling between Ireland and India, gave her occasional news of Arthur, his popularity with the ladies, and his successes in battle, but Arthur himself sent no messages.

Kitty continued her life of visits, parties and family pleasures, but it was with a background of the Irish Rebellion, French invasion, and bloody retaliation by the military. Friends were killed, houses burned and appalling atrocities committed by both sides, often against innocent people she had known. A special sorrow was the death of her young brother William when his ship capsized in a gale off the Irish coast. In the years of fearful anxiety, "her bloom had vanished".

At last, a mutual friend acted as a go-between and Arthur - successful in his career and financially well-to-do - decided to return to Ireland and propose again. This time Kitty's family was in favour: like Captain Wentworth, Arthur was "no longer nobody. He was now esteemed quite worthy..." He had returned with a fortune of some thirty or forty thousand pounds. (Captain Wentworth had "five-and-twenty thousand pounds"). Kitty wrote in reply to his letter of proposal, "...I am conscious of a degree of happiness of which 'til now I had no idea".

Jane Austen would have ended the story here, but for the Wellesleys, life went on, unfortunately not "happily ever after".

Arthur had made up his mind when he went to India that Kitty was the woman he wanted to marry, that she was strong of character and full of integrity and good principle, and he never wavered from that decision. Kitty's view of marriage was a domestic one, based on romantic novels and the sentimentality of the time, and the families of devoted husbands she knew. He regarded marriage like a contract: the wife looked after the home and children, the husband controlled the finances and pursued his career. He had never envisaged a domestic life in an ideal home. His career would always come first with him.

If they had had time to become "more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth and attachment", they might have resolved their differences or reconsidered. But they had no time. Arthur was caught up in military duties on an abortive expedition to Germany, and parliamentary duties in a by-election. He planned five days leave to go to Ireland, marry Kitty, and return to his duties - he expected Kitty to be as practical and devoted to duty as himself. It took Kitty a long time to learn that theirs was not a touching, sentimental, romantic love story.

Kitty liked the trivial chit-chat of domestic affairs; she couldn't discuss political and military matters, and had never been taught to manage money. She had trouble keeping her household accounts straight, neglected to pay bills, and was afraid to ask Arthur for more money. Wellesley, recalling his insecure early life, was fanatical about honesty and control in financial affairs, intolerant and harsh with Kitty's muddling and impulsiveness. He had no experience of household expenses and deplored the lack of discipline among the servants, so unlike his military personnel. The few periods he was at home, he wanted to be surrounded with the boisterous laughter of fellow-officers, or serious talk with parliamentary friends. He refused to discuss any of his problems, or the military or political situation, with Kitty.

As soon as he could, Wellesley returned to military action. In the five years of the Peninsular campaign, he achieved military victories, honours and titles; he never took leave to come home. His letters to Kitty were terse and noncommittal - he gave her instructions, requests for things to be sent to him, meticulously informed her about the welfare of her relatives (two of her brothers served with him), but scarcely ever wrote personal remarks or endearments. She knew nothing more than she read in the newspapers or heard from others about his actions. If she tried to get news by writing to friends in office, he was furious at her treachery in betraying his neglect.

Lonely and depressed, Kitty tried to avoid all public occasions - the wife of the hero would be questioned about events and would soon be seen as knowing little of what was going on. Gossip was prevalent about their situation.

Kitty maintained her routine life. Besides her two beloved little boys, she carefully brought up the children of a broken marriage in the Wellesley family, her own orphaned niece, and Arthur's godson from India. She may have achieved strength of character from experience, but no forgiveness or indulgence from Arthur was forthcoming. She was never given a chance to prove her worth. The scandal of a divorce was not to be thought of. They maintained the public face of their marriage, but the gulf between them was unbridgeable.

For Kitty, unlike Anne, there was much to "dim her sunshine".

[Further reading: A Soldier's Wife, by Joan Wilson (1987)]

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MEMBER SPEAKS ON TRANSLATIONS

You have only knowledge enough of the language to translate at sight these inverted, transposed, curtailed...lines into clear, comprehensible, elegant English.

Vancouver member Leila Vennewitz has turned a hobby into a career. As a young woman she moved to Paris to learn French; there she also learned German - at first with a French accent! But she corrected that, and went on to study German from other teachers. Now she is a professional translator, for the past 27 years translating contemporary German literature into English. Her translations are internationally acclaimed, and she has been granted many prizes and awards.

On April 26th, Leila Vennewitz and another Vancouver translator spoke at the Goethe Institute, in connection with the National Book Festival. Our congratulations to Leila for her achievements.

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BIRTHDAY PROJECT

What did it signify...in what language my answer was couched?

I have a project in mind for our meeting on Jane Austen's birthday: in how many languages could our members say "Happy birthday" to Jane?

Please let me know what non-English language you are familiar with - your native tongue, one you learned in school, the language of your parents or grandparents, one you use in business or social occasions. I don't want to look up the words in a dictionary - the language should have a connection with a member.

You don't need to have complete fluency - just a few words will do. Anne Elliot could translate the words of an Italian song: what can our members do?

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SUMMER TASK

You are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books, and make extracts (P&P)

Barbara Peacock has suggested that we have a book-review section in these Newsletters: your Summer Task is to read a book relating to Jane Austen, and bring or send your comments - a few sentences, or half a page or so - to the September meeting, where we will have readings and discussion about them. It need not be a new book, perhaps one that you have just discovered for yourself, or a favourite that you have re-read, and would like to share. Opinions will be printed in future newsletters. Favourable ones will help us to choose a good book for our pleasure reading, and controversial comments will lead to a good discussion. And, of course, any comments or opinions on recently-published books will be especially helpful.

In addition - it's a long summer - re-read the article in the latest issue of Persuasions: Assertion and Aggression in the Novels of Jane Austen, by Dwight McCawley, and we'll make it a basis of the rest of the discussion time at the September meeting.

September Meeting: Saturday, Sept. 15, at St. Philip's Fireside Room,
3737 West 27th Avenue, Vancouver. 10:00 a.m.

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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. Price to Non-members: \$8.00 per year.