

# Muse & Musings

*"The company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation"*

## Jane Austen Day, April 13<sup>th</sup>

### Cads and Corsets . . .

#### and *Persuasion* at the Metro

Our Jane Austen Day this year was an all-day event with two speakers punctuated by a catered luncheon and finishing up with a large group attending the Metro Theatre's presentation of *Persuasion*.



Charles Carroll speaks on rogues; Melanie Talkington on corsets.

The first speaker, Dr. Charles Carroll, spoke on JA's villains, especially Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. He set out to be provocative and he succeeded, provoking a lively discussion after his talk. His rather obscure title "An Adjustment in the Wellspring of the Booty – Jane Austen and Emotional Self-Regulation" – was a tongue-in-cheek reference to a student paper, with (I think) a nod to the afternoon presentation on corsets. The villainy of men such as Willoughby was that they did not control their emotions or impulses. The heroism of the heroes was in their "self-regulation" or prudence, their ability to control their emotions and also to save and increase their resources, rather than to squander them, as Willoughby has done.

The point of provocation was his contention that hurtful villains such as Willoughby were not as bad as various heroes such as Colonel Brandon (*S&S*) and Captain Wentworth (*Persuasion*), who had actual (military)

killing in their backgrounds, or Sir Thomas Bertram (*Mansfield Park*), who was a slave owner or even Mr. Darcy, who is a powerful landowner in a time of huge inequality.

The discussion pointed to the futility of judging the past by current standards; also that sea captains, who were in any case fighting an enemy who was equally bent on killing them, generally sought to avoid sinking enemy ships or killing their crews in order to preserve their prize money. It was an excellent discussion.

After a generous and delightful lunch with a great deal of conversation, the second speaker was corset-maker Melanie Talkington, of Lace Embrace Atelier, who spoke on corsets (stays, really) in the time of Jane Austen, and answered questions on corsets in general. Melanie has a world-class collection of antique corsets – she was invited to exhibit 40 items from her collection at the Louvre in Paris in 2013.



A display of some of the beautiful items Melanie brought to illustrate her talk.

During the Q&A, our morning speaker Charles Carroll asked why the pieces were all embroidered and decorated, given that they were underwear, not meant to be seen. Melanie made a little joke about it being like unwrapping a gift. But the consensus of several of us during the drive home was it is because women like to wear pretty things. Nothing to do with men.

– Elspeth Flood

## Review of the Metro's *Persuasion*

To cap off this year's most excellent Jane Austen Day on April 13<sup>th</sup>, many of our group carried on their Austen celebrations by taking in a performance of the Metro Theatre's production of *Persuasion*. The play was adapted from the Austen novel by British playwright Timothy Luscombe.

Before the actual performance, our group gathered in the upstairs lounge for an exclusive pre-show talk with Director Joan Bryans (well-known to many of us for various other Austen productions) and the play's Music Advisor, Pat Unruh. This part of the evening I found most enjoyable, giving us many insights as to the complexities of staging this particular Austen work. Unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, there are not pages of lively dialogue. Instead *Persuasion* is a very quiet, thoughtful novel whose central figure is the introspective Anne Elliot.

The novel also has a very large cast of characters, whittled down to twenty-one for this adaptation, and played by only twelve actors, requiring many rapid costume changes. The novel has several locations (Kellynch, Uppercross, Bath, Lyme), meaning the set had to be able to represent numerous different locations on one stage.



Director Joan Bryans and music advisor Pat Unruh describe their work before the play.

Pat Unruh then gave us a fascinating description of how much work goes into selecting the music to fit the action, such as matching the music to the length of a particular speech, or scene change. The music also had to be historically accurate. I found Pat's talk made me listen far more closely to the music selected during the dance scenes, and when Anne Elliot was called upon to play the piano while the rest of the scene was played out by others. Pat also shared historical facts about the piano-forte which was developed during the 18th century and among

other innovations provided the ability to play music both softly (piano) and loudly (forte).



Left: The marquee at the Metro Theatre. Right: Mikayla Wust as Anne Elliot, Quinn Mathews as Captain Wentworth

As for the play itself, the set was simple but effective, with large empty picture frames suspended on wires to create the suggestion of walls and which were moved around as necessary to create different interior spaces. The stage also had raised platforms and tubs of greenery to suggest outdoors, or activity taking place "elsewhere." For some of the younger actors the versatility required to play multiple characters was obviously challenging, but they generally pulled it off and all in all it was a spirited and sustained performance. I particularly enjoyed Roger Monk's Sir Walter Elliot – played more for laughs than perhaps Jane Austen intended, but very entertaining. And I found Mikayla Wust's Anne Elliot to be a very sympathetic interpretation.

The one criticism I had is that this adaptation suffered from having rather too much story to pack into the two hours allotted, so it felt a little rushed and if one didn't already know the novel, I think it would have been confusing as the play shifted through so many locations, characters and plot changes. However, that particular issue was obviously not a problem for our group of dedicated Janeites. It was certainly well worth attending and was an enjoyable way to complete our annual day of "all things Austen."

– Joan Reynolds

## May 11<sup>th</sup> Meeting

### The Importance of Aunts

For the May meeting, a panel discussed the importance of various aunts in the novels. The Aunts Panel consisted of Joan Reynolds, Elspeth Flood, Pam Ottridge, Marjorie Johnson, Jean Brown and Susan Olsen.

Marjorie told us about Anne Elliot's role as an aunt in *Persuasion*. I found myself so interested in my assigned Mrs. Phillips from *P&P* that I wrote a whole piece on her (see below). Jean Brown talked a bit about Mrs. Norris from *Mansfield Park*, but was mostly inspired by the topic to remember an aunt of her own. Pam talked about Lady Catherine and Susan talked about Lady Bertram, the "sleepy aunt" in *Mansfield Park*.





*The Aunts Panel: Joan Reynolds, Elspeth Flood, Pam Ottridge, Marjorie Johnson, Jean Brown, Susan Olsen*

Joan, who gave us two for the price one, talked about Miss Bates, the garrulous lady in *Emma* whose seemingly vacuous ramblings actually reveal all the secrets in the novel to the reader who is paying attention. Miss Bates's niece Jane Fairfax is the consolation of her life. Later she gave us Mrs. Gardiner, who as Elizabeth Bennett's aunt is her good friend and confidant – gracious, articulate and wise, warm and approachable – and very possibly pregnant! Joan's write-ups may appear in future issues of M&M.

– Elspeth Flood

## Thinking about Mrs. Phillips

When I agreed to represent Mrs. Phillips at the Aunts Panel for the May 11<sup>th</sup> meeting, I realized that I had never given Mrs. Phillips a thought. When I searched online for pictures to illustrate Mrs. Phillips, I realized that neither the 1980 mini-series nor the 2005 film had even cast the role. However, on thinking about Mrs. Phillips, I realize that she is foundational to an understanding of the Bennet family and their position in Meryton.



*Mrs. Phillips played by May Boland 1940; by Lynn Farleigh 1995.*

There were three Gardiner siblings, offspring of a country attorney in Meryton. The son, who becomes a successful merchant in London, is Edward. As we are not given first names for the daughters, I will call them P and B, for their married names. There is nothing in the text to indicate birth order, but I am inclined to think that P is the oldest and B is the youngest. P marries her father's partner and effectively inherits the family business. B (I believe) is youngest and prettiest, the petted and indulged family favourite. This leaves Edward with the middle position, to be bossed by P and leaned on by B.

There is no indication in the text of the Phillipses having children, so we must assume they have no daughters of their own to compete with the Bennet girls. Perhaps there may even be a legacy for them. Mrs. Phillips seems both prosperous and happy – far more contented than her sister.

When Miss B Gardiner married Mr. Bennet, it was an aspirational marriage – she hoped to be raised to his social status, and to go into society. For him it was the opposite – he was content to be a country squire and never go into society beyond the immediate neighbourhood of Meryton. This of course led to a great deal of conflict (which Mr. Bennet invariably won), and to a great deal of anxiety for Mrs. B, who wanted to raise her daughters up to Mr. B's status in the landed gentry. A family such as the Bennets might typically spend several months of the year ("the Season") in London, where their children might attend social gatherings such as balls to meet suitable partners.



*C.E. Brock illustration of Mrs. Bennet whispering to Mrs. Phillips.*

I do not believe that the Bennet girls were ever in danger of not finding husbands – they were the prettiest and most popular girls in the neighbourhood. In the absence of a Mr. Bingley serendipitously bringing himself and Mr. Darcy to Netherfield, Mrs. Phillips is the girls' best resource for finding husbands, being right in the thick of Meryton. Mrs. Gardiner may be her superior in every respect, but she is in London, and in the City at that, not in Meryton.

Nothing happens and no one lives or visits in Meryton that Mrs. P doesn't know all about. When the militia is stationed at Meryton, she entertains the most suitable officers, providing the Bennet girls with a safe place to meet and socialize with them. Had there been no Mr. Bingley and no militia, she would undoubtedly have been setting up the girls with a succession of local young men until she had them all married. Perhaps she had already been doing that when the combined distractions of Bingley, Darcy and the officers sidetracked her for a while. I think she would have been less obvious and less single-minded in her machinations than her sister. If one young man didn't work out, oh well, try another.

Mrs. Phillips's role in the novel is to show us where Mrs. Bennet has come from – which is no bad place – and where Mr. Bennet is content that his daughters should remain.

– Elspeth Flood

## Member Profile

### Janice Mallison, Co-RC



*Janice Mallison has bravely agreed to step up and help Michelle and learn the ropes, with a view to standing for election as RC herself when Michelle's term expires.*

#### 1. Tell us a bit about yourself and your life to-date.

I was born in London England and moved to Canada in 1957. My father joined the Canadian Air Force and we lived in various parts of Canada before being posted to Germany. I went to university in Aberdeen Scotland and London, staying in the UK until 2002 when I moved to Vancouver.

#### 2. When did you join JASNA?

2018.

#### 3. How did you first get started with Jane Austen?

I started reading the classics when I was about 18 and her novels were among my early favourites.

#### 4. What do you like about JASNA?

The presentations and discussions afterwards as well as the chance to spend time with fellow bookworms.

#### 5. Has JASNA given you any special memories? New friends? Inspiration to new experiences?

I've enjoyed all the talks but particularly the one about Jane's navy connections. My father was in the British navy before we moved to Canada. I'm slowly getting to know all the members and look forward to deepening those acquaintances.

## From Eileen's Archive

Newsletter #15 August, 1986

### Georgian Coinage

England in Jane Austen's time was in a state of transition, from an agricultural land to an urban industrialized country. One of the aspects of that change was the coinage of the common penny. In *Man Made the Land*, Hugh C. Prince describes the changing Georgian was of life:

"The first copper penny to be minted in Britain is stamped boldly with the date of 1797. Unlike the modern penny, it does not declare its value. It is heavy, thick and deeply embossed, a solid ounce to be tumbled with a clatter on a wooden bench, a coin known to collectors as a cartwheel penny . . . The image it bears is . . . robust and virile. It speaks plainly of British tastes and habits at the end of the

18<sup>th</sup> century . . . It was important in facilitating thousands of everyday transactions by ordinary families. Pennies could buy all kinds of things that had been either prohibitively expensive or unobtainable at any price a century earlier: China tea, Jamaica rum, silk twist, plugs of tobacco, sisal rope, coal tar, whale oil, soap, printed broadsheets, seats at the theatre, metal spoons, teacups, buttons, brooches, calico, velvet, ginger biscuits, scuttles of sea-coal, legs of mutton, jugs of beer. As pennies circulated more freely household spending changed in character, and products from distant parts of the world entered British homes in increasing quantities. Labourers began to drink imported tea instead of beer and to wear manufactured cottons as well as homespun woollens. Things once bargained for at weekly markets or bartered from itinerant traders were now bought in shops, and in



place of temporary stalls permanent buildings began to arise in medieval marketplaces . . . Hundreds of towns might boast a solid Georgian bank, a row of well-appointed shops, a coffee house and perhaps auction rooms or a corn

exchange of the same period."— by Eileen Sutherland (1986)

*[from Man Made the Land: Essays in English Historical Geography, Baker Alan R. H. And Harley J. B. (editors), Published by David and Charles, Newton Abbot (1973)]*

## Fall 2019 meeting dates

### Mark your calendar!

September 14

October 19

November 16

December 14

As we do not yet have programs set for September and the following months, please see the program of events on our website (thanks to webmaster Lauren McMahon):

[JASNA-Vancouver program](#)



## Library Corner

Just a reminder to members – if you borrow a library book, or books, at the June meeting you have three months to read it. Imagine lazy summer days lost in the world of Jane Austen! There is a wide choice of books, something to interest every member, so peruse the choices and borrow a book or two for the summer.

— Cathleen Boyle





*Jane Austen Day: Everyone listens attentively as Charles Carroll speaks (left) and as Melanie Talkington shows her antique stays.*



*Corset on display at the Surrey Museum; table flowers; Michelle and Phyllis between events; Michelle, Joan Bryans and Pat Unruh at the Metro.*

**This Newsletter**, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, is distributed to members by email and posted on our website. Members who so request may receive a hard copy either at a meeting or in the mail. All submissions and book reviews on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome.

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