

Austen Country

Jane Austen & Adlestrop: Her Other Family.

By Victoria Huxley.
Adlestrop: Windrush, 2013. xi + 227.
19 color + 5 B/W illustrations. Paper. \$26.99.

Jane Austen's Country Life: Uncovering the rural backdrop to her life, her letters, and her novels.

By Deirdre Le Faye.
London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2014.
100+color + B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$29.95.

Review by Laurie Kaplan.

What was rural life like when Jane Austen identified “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village [as] the very thing to work on?” Deirdre Le Faye’s *Jane Austen’s Country Life* and Victoria Huxley’s *Jane Austen & Adlestrop: Her Other Family* evoke for today’s readers the Georgian countryside. While Le Faye presents a panoramic appreciation of the countryside pleasures and hardships of the calendar year, Huxley reveals the landscaping and inheritance issues faced by the Austen country cousins in the village of Adlestrop. Together, these books provide insight into the “English verdure, English culture, English comfort” that informs the settings of Austen’s life, letters, and novels.

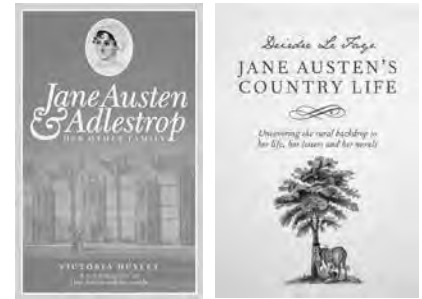
Deirdre Le Faye’s *Jane Austen’s Country Life* masterfully explores all aspects of the “rural backdrop” to Austen’s letters and novels—to the countryside as Austen herself would have known it. Citing such seasonal activities as sowing crops, washing and shearing sheep, raking and turning hay, and “stirring up” the Christmas cake, Le Faye connects the traditional farming calendar and the vagaries of weather to Austen’s plots and fictional events. Le Faye notes, for example, that the main action of four of Jane Austen’s novels starts in September, when “the slight pause after the hectic and anxious time of harvesting gave the opportunity for both farmers and gentry to plan for agricultural and social life.” *Emma*, Le Faye reminds readers, with its umbrellas, mizzle, snow, and famous strawberry beds, “contains the most

emphasis on the weather and its effect upon the life of an agriculturally based community.”

The text of *Jane Austen’s Country Life* is lavishly supplemented by exquisite 18th and 19th-century paintings and drawings of people, interiors, and exteriors. The visuals enhance almost every page of this elegant book. A two-page view of “The Country round Dixton Manor” (English School, c. 1725) illustrates the “sort of countryside that Jane Austen would have seen on her way to visit her Leigh relatives at Stoneleigh Abbey.” A companion oil painting, “Haymaking at Dixton Manor,” is a gorgeous two-page panorama depicting the multiple stages of mowing and raking. A ghastly drawing of “A Gibbet” follows Le Faye’s discussion of thieves, robbers, and murderers. As Mr. Woodhouse would agree, the countryside could be a dangerous place, indeed.

In her writings, Jane Austen displays not only a sophisticated awareness of the seasonal cycles of planting, growing, harvesting, and celebrating, but also an astute understanding of the customs and routines faced by the landowners, farmers, and country vicars. In *Jane Austen & Adlestrop*, Victoria Huxley excavates particulars about the Leigh family’s estates and their squabbles about inheritance, for example, and about Repton’s “improvements” that transformed the countryside that Jane Austen knew so well. Using as her major source an unpublished family history written in 1788 by Mary Leigh (1731–97), Cassandra Leigh Austen’s Adlestrop cousin, Huxley focuses on the ambiguous will that shaped the prospects of the Leighs and greatly disappointed the Austens.

It is not known how many times Jane Austen visited Adlestrop, but Huxley suggests ways in which Jane Austen’s visits to Adlestrop and Stoneleigh Abbey provided source material for the novelist’s imagination. It is known that Jane arrived in Adlestrop with her mother and sister in 1806, shortly after word was



received that their very rich relative the Hon. Mary Leigh at Stoneleigh Abbey had died. The problem was that Mary’s mentally ill brother had specified in his will that after Mary’s death his estates would pass “to the first and nearest of my kindred being male and of my name and blood.” This designation was claimed by Mrs. Austen’s brother James Leigh Perrot, and by the Adlestrop Leighs, represented by Rev. Thomas Leigh (1734–1813). Interestingly, while Claire Tomalin finds Mrs. Austen’s brother discrete in his pursuit of the inheritance, in Huxley’s view, the Leigh-Perrots emerge from the haggling as grasping and selfish.

Among the book’s illustrations, Huxley includes portraits, maps, and two very helpful family trees: one for the Leighs and Austens, and one for the Leighs of Stoneleigh and Adlestrop. Notwithstanding some unfortunate spelling and editing problems (e.g., “Bennett”), Huxley’s book is filled with details about Jane Austen’s maternal connections, their houses, estates, wills, and bequests.

Le Faye’s and Huxley’s books make us think in new ways about Jane Austen’s love of landscapes and estates, and about her knowledge of how those estates are handed down. Le Faye in particular emphasizes how the cycles of the seasons affect the plots of the novels. Both books engage the reader by recreating the scenery and exploring the country matters that Jane Austen transformed into such fictional estates as Pemberley and Mansfield Park.

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