

## A Fine Brush on a Little Piece of Ivory

**A Regency Buck: Adam Buck (1759-1833)**

By Peter Darvall.

Ashmolean, University of Oxford, 2015. 191 pages.

216 color illustrations. Soft cover. £20.

Review by Juliet McMaster.

“It was a style of beauty, of which elegance was the reigning character, and as such, [Emma] must, in honour, by all her principles, admire it” (*Emma*, 167). Almost against her inclinations, Emma concedes that Jane Fairfax, being so elegant, must also be admired; but she has to work hard at it.

“Elegance” is also the reigning characteristic of the art of Adam Buck, a Regency portraitist, miniaturist, and print-maker. The dozens of color illustrations in this volume present ladies and gentlemen of the Regency, elegant in themselves—with their classical high-waisted muslin gowns, their cravats and form-fitting buckskins—and also elegantly depicted, in sensitive line and watercolor, pastel and aquatint. For the illustrator of Austen’s novels, these images would be a splendid source, so meticulous is their attention to detail in hairstyle and costume, their fine shading, their avoidance of the crude and the *outré*, their classical calm.

And yet ... I find myself veering towards Charlotte Brontë’s reservations about

Jane Austen and applying them to Adam Buck’s numerous portraits: “Anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works” (Letter of 12 April 1850).

I supply these connections between Austen and Adam Buck’s works myself, since I write for *JASNA News*; for though the cover blurb asserts Buck’s “many portraits of sailors, clergymen, labourers and their families will strike a chord with readers of Jane Austen’s novels,” the book’s author, Peter Darvall, mentions her only once, and then with a spelling error: “Mrs. Bennett’s daughters, the young heroines of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, would have worn similar gowns.”

Yes, these elegant portraits of the gentry of the day have an irresistible feel of the period, and a charm of their own. *Skating Lovers* (below left), with its finely controlled motion, has an Austenesque appeal. One could play a game of re-naming the sitters: The Duke of York (figure 26) could be Admiral Croft; Vice-Admiral Robert Plampin (figure 96) for me has a look of Captain Harville; a beautifully-touched “portrait of a young girl by a river” (figure 15) might be Harriet as Emma initially sees her.

Adam Buck was an Irishman from Cork who came to England to make his fortune. Judging from the status of many of his subjects—including the Edgeworth family, the Duke of York, Edmund Burke, and many other familiar names—he was highly successful. He was certainly prolific. But the palmy days of the Victorian art scene had not yet arrived, and the status of the artist, particularly such as worked in watercolor, aquatint, and other graphic media rather than in the more prestigious oils, was not high; nor were the prices he could ask. Buck worked hard not only on individual portraits, but also on prints that could be

sold in large numbers. He was one of the stable of designers kept busy by Ackerman’s printing house. He had to resort to pot-boilers, like the many designs of mothers and children, with titles like *Mamma at Romps* and *The Dancing Darling*. And we are told that for all his extraordinary competence in what he did, he died in poverty.

The book, like the portraits in it, is meticulously put together, with beautifully reproduced images and many of them, and conscientious attention to matters like provenance. The letterpress is informative and exact. One gets no gossipy biographical details, no anecdotes or quotations from letters that might acquaint us with Adam Buck’s voice or personality. And the punning title, *A Regency Buck*, is irritatingly misleading. For me, expecting from the title to learn about Beau Brummel and his ilk, the first words of the Preface, “Adam Buck was in many ways the quintessential miniaturist” were a severe anti-climax. Not that I don’t want to hear about, and see the work of, one who works with a fine brush on a little piece of ivory. But I like the inside of a book to match what has been advertised on the cover. This is a minor cavil, however. And I can indeed enjoy wandering among portraits of the real men and women of Jane Austen’s day.

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