

Readers and Reading in America

Reading Austen in America

By Juliette Wells.

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Review by Kelly M. McDonald.

At the 2016 AGM, Juliette Wells introduced to a wider world the 1816 Philadelphia edition of *Emma*, reprinted in two volumes from Murray's three-volume original. Now comes a book centered on North America-residing readers of the only Austen novel to be published in the U.S. during her lifetime. (Copyright laws began to address international issues decades after Charles Dickens first challenged such "piracy.") Wells' hunt for the elusive edition actually unearthed two sets—bringing the total copies known to exist worldwide to six. The production of *Emma* and histories of past owners form Part One ("The 1816 Philadelphia *Emma* and its Readers") of *Reading Austen in America*.

An account of the book trade, Philadelphia circa 1816, reestablishes lost history about the publishing firm of Mathew Carey. The answer to "Why *Emma*?" may be as simple as someone shipping him new titles from London, which absentmindedly (twice!) included the latest novel from the anonymous "author of 'Pride and Prejudice' &c &c."

One Philadelphia *Emma* that Wells herself has identified belonged to Jeremiah Smith (property of Dartmouth College).

Smith made corrections to the text, which tellingly denotes a more slipshod printing of *Emma* in Philadelphia compared with that of Murray's printers in England (who benefited from Austen's proofing).



AGM table centerpiece.

Mentioned in passing is Smith's penchant for marking sections of the text; a missed opportunity for an exploration of Smith's interaction with the story and/or characters. Wells concentrated on what she found readily informative: Smith's lengthy notations of Austen's life, obituary, and review notices (one hitherto unknown).

The Smith copy provided more material for discussion than the pristine copy at Winterthur, once belonging to E.I. du Pont. A short discourse on the du Pont sisters yields little about their reading *Emma*, since Wells wonders if they even opened it. (Some readers do keep books unspoiled.)

The copy belonging to the New York Society Library, its battered volumes indicative of the treatment given by former circulating library patrons, is most conducive to Wells' title *Reading Austen in America*. One reader's delightful list of reactions to the characters of *Emma* includes that the title character was found to be "intolerable." A telling comment written in a different hand queries, "I wonder who likes this book."

More in-depth is the treatment given by the Countess of Dalhousie, a Scotswoman who resided in Canada; her inclusion broadens the meaning behind "America" in the book title. Unfortunately, as is often the case with 19th-century diary entries, the fact of reading is more readily encountered than any diarist-recorded reactions.

Although further examples of reception history are lacking, more examples along the line of the jottings found in the Smith and Circulating Library copies would have informed the discussion of people actually reading Austen, a tough task, especially if limited to the 1816 Philadelphia edition of *Emma*, given that period correspondence would be potentially more effusive, but such support materials remain unavailable. Perhaps the book's title should have indicated Readers in America, for it is background histories of the owners which most chapters have in common. The stand-alone

(and among the book's most successful chapters) is the correspondence relationship between the Quincy sisters of Boston and Admiral Sir Francis Austen,

which opens Part Two, "Transatlantic Austen Conversations." Wells includes the relevant diary entries of Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy Waterston, which recall a mutually-satisfying, face-to-face meeting when she visited England in 1856.

None of the chapters is a reprint, per se, but three cover the same ground as articles in *Persuasions/Persuasions Online* (a source of further illustrations). This allowed Wells a chance to finesse, flesh out, or update arguments; nonetheless, this method affects overall cohesion.

The remaining chapter references the collector of Jane Austen manuscripts and ephemera, Alberta H. Burke. As the prior owner of Goucher College's 1816 Philadelphia *Emma* (Wells now teaches at Goucher), Burke should have provided the culminating voice. Wells, however, directs readers to her earlier book and tries a different view of the same events; the chapter in *Everybody's Jane* remains a more lively account of the woman and her passion for Austen.

In presenting facets of Wells' current scholarship, readers will welcome this "collected" volume. Judging from the "fandom" of the Quincys and library patrons, reader reception can provide fascinating insights. These entertaining personal histories will open more eyes to the possibilities behind unearthing copies of the 1816 Philadelphia *Emma*.

Kelly M. McDonald is an independent scholar and newly-elected JASNA board member. Letters and diaries by Jane Austen's niece Emma Austen Leigh (1801-1876) form her research.

