

## A Naval Officer's Wife

### Jane Austen's Transatlantic Sister: The Life and Letters of Fanny Palmer Austen.

By Sheila Johnson Kindred.

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Review by Laurie Kaplan.

Frances (Fanny) FitzWilliams Palmer Austen's short life (1789–1814) resounds with Romantic overtones. A graceful beauty at sixteen, she caught the eye of Charles Austen, Jane Austen's brother, a naval officer serving in the West Indies. The youngest daughter of the Attorney General of Bermuda, Fanny became engaged to Charles Austen in 1806 and was married, at the age of seventeen, in May 1807. Her first child, Cassy, was born in December 1808. When Fanny (pregnant again) left Bermuda for the first time in September 1809, her life pattern of sailing aboard her husband's ships was established. Between 1809 and 1812, the new mother made the journey between Bermuda and Halifax five times, and for much of her married life she was in transit on Captain Austen's ships. From 1812–1814, Jane Austen's "transatlantic sister" and children lived aboard Captain Austen's HMS *Namur* stationed off Sheerness, Kent. And in 1814, after seven years of marriage, Fanny died aboard the ship.

In *Jane Austen's Transatlantic Sister: The Life and Letters of Fanny Palmer Austen*, Sheila Johnson Kindred has created an absorbing biography of an adaptable and resourceful woman. Professor Kindred grounds the biography in the social and naval history of the period,

which she embellishes with documents, letters, and contemporary sketches, paintings, and engravings from museums and private collections. In addition, Kindred

**Sculpture at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.**

draws on Jane Austen's novels and letters to create a portrait of a "gentle and amiable" woman whose "association with [her sister-in-law] may have contributed to Jane Austen's creative process," especially *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Fanny's twelve extant letters, published for the first time in this book, and her pocket diary, "her only surviving personal possession," provide a picture of a Captain's life on sea and shore. Fanny's newsy letters contain compelling information about how she negotiated the codes and manners of naval society, while simultaneously worrying about such domestic concerns as the price of fabrics, eggs, and butter, and about her children's welfare, especially when they were staying with their Austen aunts in Chawton or with their Palmer grandparents and Aunt Harriet at 22 Keppel Street in London.

In a variety of ways Fanny's letters reveal her bravery as she rode out the storms at sea and coped with the doldrums at anchor. Capable, organized, and resilient, she wrote about Charles's professional anxieties and her own domestic uncertainties, and she also acknowledged the fears and tribulations experienced by all naval and military families. For Fanny, weathering storms, suffering from seasickness, worrying about her husband's career, and caring for ill children formed part of the continuing pattern of displacement.

In her chapter "Afloat and Ashore, 1812," Kindred points out how for Fanny "the charm of living at sea" soon resulted in claustrophobia, a feeling exacerbated by the recurrent fogs. The perimeter of Fanny's life aboard the *Namur* was circumscribed geographically: "The only place she could go to outside the apartment was a small part of the quarterdeck and the poop deck over the captain's quarters." But what may have been more disturbing about life afloat was the fact that "Fanny was virtually cut off from female company . . . She had no companions of her class to discuss topics of common interest and everyday concern." Moreover, although public flogging

was a fact of life on board a ship, and Charles was able to warn his wife in advance, Kindred questions how Fanny coped "with the cruelty of flogging when she heard the unmistakable sounds of suffering and the ominous pulsating of the drums."

On 31 August 1814, Charles and Fanny's fourth daughter was born on board the *Namur*. On 6 September, Fanny Palmer Austen died, aged 24 years. Devastated by the death of his beloved wife, Charles sought solace in an active life at sea. Six years after Fanny's death, in August 1820, Charles married his sister-in-law, Harriet Palmer, Fanny's older sister. Harriet had been caring for her nieces since their mother's death. Kindred recounts the opinions of Jane Austen's family about Charles's choice of wife, and she addresses the Church of England's prohibition against marriage to a dead wife's sister. Charles and Harriet's new domestic arrangements make fascinating reading.

*Jane Austen's Transatlantic Sister* adds a compelling chapter to the biographical material about the Austen family. As Kindred weaves the letters into the text of the biography, the reader perceives the development of Fanny's sense of self from ingénue to bride to mother to officer's wife. In this detailed account of naval family life in the early nineteenth century, Kindred chronicles the life story of an impressive woman who faced immense challenges and (unlike her sister Harriet) rarely complained.

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