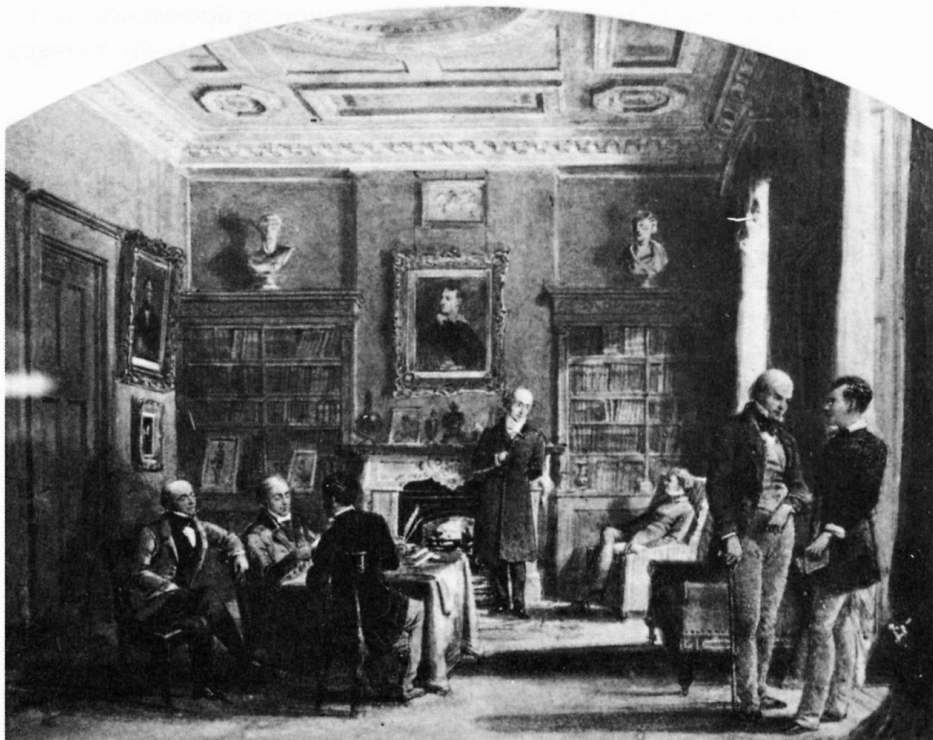


Jane Austen in Distinguished Company

CHRIS VIVEASH
Swindon, Wiltshire, England

When *Mansfield Park* was first published in May 1814, heralded by five small newspaper advertisements spread between *The Star* and *The Morning Chronicle*, no review of the novel appeared in any periodical or journal. Jane Austen was rightly upset. Her third novel, poorly printed and largely ignored, deserved better treatment than this. She blamed Thomas Egerton, her publisher, who not only expected her to finance her own novels, but refused utterly to print a further edition of *Mansfield Park* correcting the numerous errors. Encouraged by her brother Henry, Jane Austen determined to change publishers. Egerton had craftily bought the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* (and was to publish the third edition of this novel without, as far as is known, paying the writer the usual courtesy of informing her), leaving the copyrights of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* in her own possession.¹ The composition of her new novel, *Emma*, had begun, when Jane and Henry began the search for a new publisher.

John Murray, the publisher of Scott and Byron, was under siege from female writers during this period, all anxious to meet the famous writers



“Scott meeting Byron.”

From *Jane Austen and her World* by Marghanita Laski,
permission John Murray (Publishers) Ltd.

through Mr. Murray.² Scott made the transition from poet to novelist in one leap with *Waverley*. “Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones,” complained Jane. “It is not fair. He has fame and profit enough as a poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths.”³ The parson’s daughter needed money herself.

John Murray had recognised Lord Byron’s talents in March 1812 by publishing *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, when other publishers refused to print it. “I awoke one morning and found myself famous” was Byron’s response. It was to Murray’s Albemarle Street offices, during the late summer of 1815, that Henry Austen made his way on his sister’s behalf. After the usual posturing on both sides, Jane Austen was offered a contract, giving £450 for the copyrights not only of *Emma* but also of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*; this offer seems not to have been accepted, since although John Murray did publish both *Emma* and a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, the author retained her copyrights in these novels. “He is a rogue of course, but a civil one” was Jane’s comment on Murray.⁴

John Murray had more than fractious authors to deal with. He was blind in one eye from a schoolboy accident, when he ran onto the blade of a penknife held by a master.⁵ Early in 1815 he had brought together Scott and Byron for the first time. They embraced each other in the most affectionate manner, and entered into a cordial conversation. Afterwards it was a curious sight to see the two greatest poets of the age—both lame—stumping downstairs side by side. Shortly after this famous meeting John Murray was brutally mugged whilst returning across fields from Stoke Newington.⁶

William Gifford, Murray’s respected editor and crony, had asked for a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* prior to the offer of the contract for *Emma*. “I have for the first time looked into *Pride and Prejudice*; and it is a very pretty thing. No dark passages; no secret chambers; no wind-howlings in long galleries; no drops of blood upon a rusty dagger—things that should now be left to ladies’ maids and washerwomen” wrote Gifford to Murray. Later Gifford wrote “I have read *Pride and Prejudice* again—’tis very good—wretchedly printed, and so pointed as to be almost unintelligible.”⁷ His comments on Egerton’s printing vindicated Jane Austen’s desire to change publishers. Gifford was regarded by Byron as “my literary father and myself as his prodigal son.”⁸ Was Byron conscious of Jane Austen? His wife Annabella Milbanke had a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* (“at present the fashionable novel”), as did his late mistress Lady Caroline Lamb (her copy may be seen at Chawton Cottage), but until John Murray had offered a contract to Jane Austen, no one was aware of her identity. Jane shared printers with Byron. T. Davison of Lombard Street printed *Mansfield Park* as well as *Persuasion* alongside Byron’s works. However, Byron commanded print runs of 7000 copies (*Childe Harold*, Canto III) in comparison with Jane Austen’s modest print runs of 1750 copies.

“Of *Emma* I have nothing but good to say. I was sure of the writer before you mentioned her. The MS. though plainly written has yet some, indeed many little omissions; and an expression that may now and then be amended in passing through the press. I will readily undertake the revision,” wrote

Gifford, when at last he received the manuscript in September 1815.⁹ The frustrations Jane Austen experienced during the late autumn of 1815 with John Murray and the printing delays, coping with her brother Henry's illness whilst managing to fend off the increasingly florid epistles of James Stanier Clarke regarding the royal dedication of *Emma*, are too well known to repeat here. John Murray, it must be said, was doing his best for Jane. "Have you any fancy to dash off an article on *Emma*?" wrote Murray to Scott in December 1815. "It wants incident and romance, does it not? None of the author's other novels have been noticed, and surely *Pride and Prejudice* merits high commendation."¹⁰ Scott immediately complied with Murray's request. He published an article on *Emma* in No. 27 of the *Quarterly Review*. "Enclosed is the article upon *Emma*. It will be unnecessary to send proofs of *Emma* as Mr. Gifford will correct all obvious errors and abridge it where necessary," wrote Scott to Murray.¹¹

The reviews of *Emma* were splendid and numerous, compensating for the lack of attention paid to the second edition of *Mansfield Park*. Jane Austen gleefully noted forty-one comments by family, friends and others on *Emma*, none more august than that of the Prince Regent, sent from Brighton in March 1816. While Jane was flattered to have a review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review*, she wrote to scold Murray that *Mansfield Park* had escaped mention yet again.¹² This was to be the last letter Jane Austen wrote to her publisher. He had furthered her reputation in life, and would continue to do so after her death. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously in December 1817, prefaced by Henry Austen's "Biographical Notice." "I am printing two short but very clever novels by poor Miss Austen, the author of *Pride and Prejudice*," wrote John Murray to Lady Abercorn that month; by return that lady responded "Pray send us Miss Austen's novels the moment you can. Lord Abercorn thinks them next to W. Scott's. . . it is a pity that we shall have no more of hers."¹³ Murray had also written to Byron in Italy telling him of "two new novels left by Miss Austen the ingenious author of *Pride and Prejudice* who, I am sorry to say, died about six weeks ago."¹⁴ No reply was forthcoming from Byron; Margarita Cogni, "tall and energetic as a Pythoness," occupied his every hour in Venice. However, Jane Austen was gently to haunt Byron four years later in 1821. An anonymous pamphlet, *Letter to the Right Honourable Lord Byron by John Bull*, was published by John Gibson Lockhart, son-in-law of Scott; it included a clever pastiche of a scene from *Emma*, beginning "Now, tell me, Mrs. Goddard, now tell me, Miss Price, now tell me dear Harriet Smith, and dear, dear Mrs. Elton, do tell me, is not this the very look, that one would have fancied for Childe Harold,"¹⁵ and so on for some twenty lines. Byron enjoyed the pamphlet, and wrote to Murray in June 1821: "It is diabolically well written . . . I must forgive the dog, whoever he is."¹⁶ Sir Walter Scott, in later life, looked back to Jane, and wrote in his diary, "What a pity such a gifted creature died so early."

John Murray was dealing with Cassandra Austen as late as February 1819, concerning the sum of £479 owed to the Austen family, this being the profits on *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.¹⁷ Whilst Jane Austen would have

been impressed by Murray's cheque to the family, she would also have respected Murray's kindness in saving her favourite poet George Crabbe from penury, at great personal cost to the publisher, during the same year, 1819.

John Murray had plans to republish Jane Austen's works in 1831. A reply from Cassandra Austen sounded hopeful: "I am not disposed to part with the copy-right of my late Sister's works, but I feel inclined to accept your proposal for the publishing another edition," she wrote in May of that year. But the project did not materialise until Henry Austen in 1832 contacted Richard Bentley, who agreed to purchase the copyrights (including that of *Pride and Prejudice* from Egerton's executors) and to publish all six novels.¹⁸

John Murray died at the age of 65 in 1842. He dealt honourably with Jane Austen and her family, and his name is inseparably connected with one of the brightest eras of English literature.

NOTES

- ¹ R. W. Chapman, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), Letter 74.1, p. 501.
- ² Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends* (London: John Murray, 1891), Vol. 1, p. 283.
- ³ R. W. Chapman, Letter 101, p. 404.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter 111, p. 425.
- ⁵ Samuel Smiles, p. 22.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- ¹² R. W. Chapman, Letter 127, p. 453.
- ¹³ Samuel Smiles, Vol. 2, p. 65.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 21.
- ¹⁵ Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 182.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- ¹⁷ R. W. Chapman, "Jane Austen and her Publishers," *London Mercury* 22, 1930.
- ¹⁸ D. J. Gilson, "Jane Austen and John Murray," *Book Collector*, Winter 1985, p. 520.