

Henry Austen's "Memoir of Miss Austen"

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The "Biographical Notice of the Author" which Jane Austen's brother Henry published with the first edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (issued late in December 1817, dated 1818) was the first attempt to provide basic details of the novelist's life; as such, it has a unique importance. Henry's text was reprinted in the first American edition of *Northanger Abbey* (Philadelphia, 1833) and, with omissions, in other early American editions; it is invariably referred to in later biographical studies, and has been, in the twentieth century, widely and continuously available, more especially through its reprinting in the Oxford edition of Jane Austen's works.

But much less attention has been paid to the "Memoir of Miss Austen" which Henry Austen provided to accompany the edition of *Sense and Sensibility* published by Richard Bentley, No. 23 in his "Standard Novels" series, dated 1833. Frederick Martin Link in his unpublished 1958 doctoral dissertation, "The Reputation of Jane Austen in the Twentieth Century," even implies, p. 155, that the 1833 text is a reprint of the 1818 "Biographical Notice," while Brian Southam in his *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, 1968, reprints the "Biographical Notice," describing it, p. 16, as "the only source of information for her life and writing career until the *Memoir* of 1870" and dismisses the 1833 text as "a slightly altered version" of the "Biographical Notice." Yet Henry Austen himself, in a letter to Richard Bentley of 4 October 1832, describes his new text as intended to supersede that already published" (i.e. the "Biographical Notice"). More attention should surely be paid to this later piece, which is largely a rewriting of the 1818 text with omissions, alterations and additions.

But the 1833 text has been, until now, less readily available. It was reprinted by Bentley with the subsequent separate printings of *Sense and Sensibility* in the "Standard Novels" series at least until 1854, and in collected editions from the same plates until 1869; but later editions of the novels published by Bentley from 1870 onwards were reset and do not contain the "Memoir of Miss Austen" (presumably it was thought to have been rendered superfluous by the publication in 1870 of James Edward Austen-Leigh's *Memoir of Jane Austen*). Richard Bentley sold the stereotype plates of his edition of Jane Austen's novels, and these were reprinted, still with Henry Austen's "Memoir" (and the now inappropriate references to the "Standard Novels" series) in 1870 and later by Chapman and Hall in their "Select Library of Fiction" series, and again in 1881 and later by

Ward, Lock and Co. (or Ward, Lock & Bowden). I have found no reprinting of the 1833 text later than the 1880s, so its reappearance here should render a useful service to Jane Austen studies.

MEMOIR
OF
MISS AUSTEN

JANE AUSTEN was born on the 16th of December, 1775, at Steventon, in the county of Hants. Her father was rector of that parish upwards of forty years. There he resided in the conscientious and unassisted discharge of his ministerial duties until he was turned of seventy years. Then he retired with his wife, our authoress, and her sister, to Bath, for the remainder of his life, a period of about four years. Being not only a profound scholar, but possessing a most exquisite taste in every species of literature, it is not wonderful that his daughter Jane should, at a very early age, have become sensible to the charms of style, and enthusiastic in the cultivation of her own language. On the death of her father, she removed, with her mother and sister, for a short time, to Southampton: and finally, in 1809, to the pleasant village of Chawton in the same county. From this place she sent her novels into the world. Some of them had been the gradual performances of her previous life; for though in composition she was equally rapid and correct, yet an invincible distrust of her own judgment induced her to withhold her works from the public, till time and many perusals had satisfied her that the charm of recent composition was dissolved. The natural constitution, the regular habits, the quiet and happy occupations of our authoress, seemed to promise a long succession of amusement to the public, and a gradual increase of reputation to herself. But the symptoms of a decay, deep and incurable, began to show themselves in the commencement of 1816. Her decline was at first deceitfully slow; but in the month of May, 1817, it was found advisable that she should be removed to Winchester for the benefit of constant medical aid, which none, even then, dared to hope would be permanently beneficial. She supported, during two months, all the varying pain, irksomeness, and tedium, attendant on decaying nature, with more than resignation—with a truly elastic cheerfulness. She retained her faculties, her memory, her fancy, her temper, and her affections, warm,

clear, and unimpaired, to the last. Her last voluntary speech conveyed thanks to her medical attendant; and to the final question asked of her, purporting to know her wants, she replied, "I want nothing but death." She expired shortly after, on Friday, the 18th of July, 1817, in the arms of her sister; and was buried, on the 24th of the same month, in the cathedral church of Winchester.

Of personal attractions she possessed a considerable share; her stature rather exceeded the middle height; her carriage and deportment were quiet, but graceful; her features were separately good; their assemblage produced an unrivalled expression of that cheerfulness, sensibility, and benevolence, which were her real characteristics; her complexion was of the finest texture—it might with truth be said, that her eloquent blood spoke through her modest cheek; her voice was sweet; she delivered herself with fluency and precision; indeed, she was formed for elegant and rational society, excelling in conversation as much as in composition. In the present age it is hazardous to mention accomplishments; our authoress would probably have been inferior to few in such acquirements, had she not been so superior to most, in higher things.

It remains to make a few observations on that which her friends deemed more important, on those endowments which sweetened every hour of their lives. If there be an opinion current in the world that a perfectly amiable temper is not reconcilable to a lively imagination, and a keen relish for wit, such an opinion will be rejected for ever by those who had the happiness of knowing the authoress of the following work. Though the frailties, foibles, and follies of others, could not escape her immediate detection, yet even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness. The affectation of candour is not uncommon, but she had no affectation. Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive, or forget. Where extenuation was impossible, she had a sure refuge in silence. She never uttered either a hasty, a silly, or a severe expression. In short, her temper was as polished as her wit; and no one could be often in her company without feeling a strong desire of obtaining her friendship, and cherishing a hope of having obtained it. She became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives. It was with extreme difficulty that her friends, whose partiality she suspected, whilst she honoured their judgment, could persuade her to publish her first work. Nay, so persuaded was she that the sale would not repay the expense of publication, that she actually made a reserve from her moderate income to meet the expected loss. She could scarcely believe what she

termed her great good fortune, when "Sense and Sensibility" produced a clear profit of about 150*l*. Few so gifted were so truly unpretending. She regarded the above sum as a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing. Her readers, perhaps, will wonder that such a work produced so little, at a time when some authors have received more guineas than they have written lines. But the public has not been unjust; and our authoress was far from thinking it so. Most gratifying to her was the applause which from time to time reached her ears from those who were competent to discriminate. When "Pride and Prejudice" made its appearance, a gentleman, celebrated for his literary attainments, advised a friend of the authoress to read it, adding, with more point than gallantry, "I should like to know who is the author, for it is much too clever to have been written by a woman." Still, in spite of such applause, so much did she shrink from notoriety, that no increase of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen. In the bosom of her family she talked of them freely; thankful for praise, open to remark, and submissive to criticism. But in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. In proof of this, the following circumstance, otherwise unimportant, is stated. Miss Austen was on a visit in London soon after the publication of *Mansfield Park*: a nobleman, personally unknown to her, but who had good reasons for considering her to be the authoress of that work, was desirous of her joining a literary circle at his house. He communicated his wish in the politest manner, through a mutual friend, adding, what his Lordship doubtless thought would be an irresistible inducement, that the celebrated Madame de Staël would be of the party. Miss Austen immediately declined the invitation. To her truly delicate mind such a display would have given pain instead of pleasure.

Her power of inventing characters seems to have been intuitive, and almost unlimited. She drew from nature; but, whatever may have been surmised to the contrary, never from individuals. The style of her familiar correspondence was in all respects the same as that of her novels. Every thing came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen. It is not too much to say that she never despatched a note or letter unworthy of publication. The following few short extracts from her private correspondence are submitted to the public without apology, as being more truly descriptive of her temper, taste, and feelings, than any thing which the pen of a biographer can produce. The first is a playful defence of herself from a mock charge of having pilfered the manuscripts of a young relation. "What should I do, my dearest E., with your manly, vigorous sketches, so full of life and spirit? How could I possibly

join them on to a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine, as to produce little effect after much labour?" The remaining extracts are from a letter written a few weeks before her death. "My medical attendant is encouraging, and talks of making me quite well. I live chiefly on the sofa, but am allowed to walk from one room to the other. I have been out once in a sedan chair, and am to repeat it, and be promoted to a wheel-chair as the weather serves. On this subject I will only say farther, that my dearest sister, my tender, watchful, indefatigable nurse, has not been made ill by her exertions. As to what I owe to her, and to the anxious affection of all my beloved family on this occasion, I can only cry over it, and pray to God to bless them more and more." She next touches with just and gentle animadversion on a subject of domestic disappointment. Of this, the particulars do not concern the public. Yet, in justice to her characteristic sweetness and resignation, the concluding observation of our authoress thereon must not be suppressed. "But I am getting too near complaint. It has been the appointment of God, however secondary causes may have operated."

The above brief biographical sketch has been, in substance, already published with Miss Austen's posthumous novels. It is a matter of deep regret to the writer, that materials for a more detailed account of so talented a woman cannot be obtained; therefore, as a tribute due to her memory, he subjoins the following extracts from a critical journal of the highest reputation:—

"Unlike that of many writers, Miss Austen's fame has grown fastest since she died: there was no *éclat* about her first appearance: the public took time to make up its mind; and she, not having staked her hopes of happiness on success or failure, was content to wait for the decision of her claims. Those claims have long been established beyond a question; but the merit of *first* recognising them belongs less to reviewers than to general readers. So retired, so unmarked by literary notoriety, was the life Miss Austen led, that if any likeness was ever taken of her, none has ever been engraved.* With regard to her genius, we must adventure a few remarks. She herself compares her productions to a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, worked upon with a brush so fine, that little effect is produced after much labour. It is so: her portraits are perfect likenesses, admirably finished, many of them gems, but it is all

*No likeness ever was taken of Miss Austen; which the editor much laments, as he is thereby precluded from the gratification of prefixing her portrait to this edition.

miniature painting; and, satisfied with being inimitable in one line, she never essayed canvass and oils; never tried her hand at a majestic daub. Her "two inches of ivory" just describes her preparations for a tale of three volumes. A village—two families connected together—three or four interlopers, out of whom are to spring a little tracasserie;—and by means of village or country town visiting and gossiping a real plot shall thicken, and its "rear of darkness" never be scattered till six pages off *finis*. The plots are simple in construction, and yet intricate in development;—the main characters, those that the reader feels sure are to love, marry, and make mischief, are introduced in the first or second chapter; the work is all done by half a dozen people; no person, scene, or sentence, is ever introduced needless to the matter in hand:—no catastrophes, or discoveries, or surprises of a grand nature, are allowed—neither children nor fortunes are lost or found by accident—the mind is never taken off the level surface of life—the reader breakfasts, dines, walks, and gossips, with the various worthies, till a process of transmutation takes place in him, and he absolutely fancies himself one of the company. Yet the winding up of the plot involves a surprise: a few incidents are entangled at the beginning in the most simple and natural manner, and till the close one never feels quite sure how they are to be disentangled. Disentangled, however, they are, and that in a most satisfactory manner. The secret is, Miss Austen was a thorough mistress in the knowledge of human character; how it is acted upon by education and circumstance; and how, when once formed, it shows itself through every hour of every day, and in every speech to every person. Her conversations would be tiresome but for this; and her personages, the fellows to whom may be met in the streets, or drank tea with at half an hour's notice, would excite no interest; but in Miss Austen's hands we see into their hearts and hopes, their motives, their struggles within themselves; and a sympathy is induced, which, if extended to daily life, and the world at large, would make the reader a more amiable person; and we must think it that reader's own fault who does not close her pages with more charity in his heart towards unpretending, if prosing, worth; with a higher estimation of simple kindness, and sincere good-will; with a quickened sense of the duty of bearing and forbearing, in domestic intercourse, and of the pleasure of adding to the little comforts even of persons who are neither wits nor beauties,—who, in a word, does not feel more disposed to be benevolent. In the last posthumous tale ("Persuasion") there is a strain of a higher mood; there is still the exquisite delineation of common life, such life as we hear, and see, and make part of, with the addition of a finer, more poetic, yet equally real tone of thought and actions in the principals. If Miss Austen was sparing in her introduc-

tion of nobler characters, it was because they are scattered sparingly in life. Her death has made a chasm in our light literature;—the domestic novel, with its home-born incidents, its ‘familiar matter of to-day,’ its slight array of names, and great cognisance of people and things, its confinement to country life, and total oblivion of costume, manners, the great world, and ‘the mirror of fashion.’ Every species of composition is, when good, to be admired in its way; but the revival of the domestic novel would make a pleasant interlude to the showy, sketchy novels of high life.

“Miss Austen has the merit (in our judgment most essential) of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste and of practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive. She might defy the most fastidious critic to call any of her novels (as *Cœlebs* was designated) a dramatic sermon. The subject is rather alluded to, and that incidentally, than studiously brought forward and dwelt upon. In fact, she is more sparing of it than would be thought desirable by some persons; perhaps even by herself, had she consulted merely her own sentiments; but she probably introduced it as far as she thought would be generally profitable; for when the purpose of inculcating a religious principle is made too palpably prominent, many readers, if they do not throw aside the book with disgust, are apt to fortify themselves with that respectful kind of apathy with which they undergo a regular sermon, and prepare themselves as they do to swallow a dose of medicine, endeavouring to get it down in large gulps, without tasting it more than is necessary.”

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Perhaps these volumes may be perused by some readers who will feel a solicitude respecting the authoress, extending beyond the perishable qualities of temper, manners, taste, and talents.—We can assure all such (and the being able so to do gratifies us more than the loudest voice of human praise) that Jane Austen’s hopes of immortality were built upon the Rock of ages. That she deeply felt, and devoutly acknowledged, the insignificance of all worldly attainments, and the worthlessness of all human services, in the eyes of her heavenly Father. That she had no other hope of mercy, pardon, and peace, but through the merits and sufferings of her Redeemer.

October 5, 1832.

The Editor of “The Standard Novels” feels happy in being able to state, that arrangements have been made for including several other of the works of Miss Austen in this collection. Miss Austen is the founder of a school of novelists; and her followers are not confined to her own

sex, but comprise in their number some male writers of considerable merit. The authoress of "Sense and Sensibility" had for her contemporaries several female novelists, whose works attained instant popularity—Madame D'Arblay, Miss Edgeworth, Mrs. Opie, Miss Porter, and others, most of whose novels preceded hers in order of time: but, notwithstanding the temptation which nearly all writers are under (especially at the commencement of their vocation) to imitate that which has commanded distinguished success, Miss Austen at once freed herself from such influence, and, with combined boldness and modesty, struck into a path of her own, of which she remains to this day, the undisputed mistress. The truth, spirit, ease, and refined humour of her conversations have rarely been equalled. She is, emphatically, the novelist of home. One of the most remarkable traits of her genius may be found in the power by which, without in the slightest degree violating the truth of portraiture, she is able to make the veriest every-day person a character of great interest. This is, indeed, turning lead into gold; but it would be difficult to detect the secret of the process.