



The Austens and North America, 1809 -1875

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David Hopkinson is an author and educator. His wife of sixty years is Diana Hubback, whose descendant is discussed in this paper.

IN THE STORY OF THE AUSTEN FAMILY there are many instances of interest and some of familiarity with American life, American manners, and American politics.

Jane Austen's infancy coincided with the Anglo-American war, a source of private as well as public concern to their father, who was a trustee for an estate on the island of Antigua. This was to be important to her later, but as a girl she was more impressed by the keen interest of her two clever elder brothers in the social and political innovations emerging in the republican states of America. Her two ambitious, career-minded younger brothers were necessarily concerned as naval officers to learn something of North American history and geography.

Throughout the wars with France the Austen sailor brothers were actively engaged in various parts of the world. Charles Austen was away from home for seven years on the North American station based in Bermuda, but he wrote from Halifax, Nova Scotia, when he learned of his father's death. It has been argued that the "strange business in America," mentioned in *Mansfield Park*, refers to President Madison's 1809 threat to Anglo-American trading relations and the prospect of renewed war between Britain and the States. Charles was on shore for the greater part of its short duration, but Frank is

reported as capturing a Boston schooner. The most significant comment on Anglo-American affairs comes in a postwar letter written when relations were still strained. Jane reports the views of her brother Henry and his political friends: "...with regard to an American war—they consider it as certain—and as what is to ruin us. They cannot be conquered and we shall only be teaching them the skill in War which they may now want. We are to make them good sailors and soldiers and [gain] nothing for ourselves." America was on her mind that month, as in a very different vein she writes to a young niece of a putative novel in which "her Heroine will not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way and never stop till she reaches Gravesend." This fragment of a missing letter seems to anticipate the great escapist tradition of American literature that lay ahead. Did Austen entertain a brief vision of a female Huckleberry Finn whose author was to find her work "unendurable"?

After the war with France ended, Frank Austen did not go to sea again for thirty years. His last appointment was to the post of commander-in-chief of the North American and West Indies Station. His official residences were in Bermuda and Nova Scotia, but much of his time was spent at sea. The role of admiral had to be carried out with an almost vice-regal dignity, but in his case it was discharged for the next four years with conscientious attention to naval efficiency and to the diplomatic duties involved on shore. The warships at his command had duties to perform in pursuit of slave ships trading under Brazilian and Portuguese flags. The trade had been outlawed in British territories for over thirty years. It was also required that a show of force, both naval and military, should go into action to protect property and British interests in Venezuela and Nicaragua. The admiral made courtesy calls in the U.S. In his memoirs, written much later, he is characteristically reserved, but a comment on American manners after a visit to Saratoga Springs is sharply critical of "some vile habits especially that of frequent discharges of saliva, and that without much regard to where they may be... and there was a sort of flippant air amongst the women which seemed rather at variance with the retiring modesty so pleasing in the generality of English women." The admiral was accompanied by his two unmarried daughters, whose letters to their sister in England, now Mrs. John Hubback, were later to

provide lively material for a detailed picture of peacetime life on a battleship in one of her novels, which we know from Henry James were favorites of his mother.

After the admiral's return to his home near Portsmouth he began acquaintance with some very different American ladies, whom he treated with generous courtesy. They were members of a very distinguished Boston family—the Quincys. Miss Susan Quincy wrote in glowing terms of the enthusiasm of their whole family for the novels of Jane Austen. In a correspondence that was to continue for several years, the admiral responded in measured tones after reading the memoir of her famous grandfather, "You will scarcely be surprised that as an English subject I do not entirely agree with all the sentiments relative to Government avowed and advocated by your Grandfather, but I have no hesitation in saying what I have always thought since I was capable of forming an opinion, that the conduct of the British Ministry in all that regarded the transatlantic Colonies was most besotted, as well as unjust and oppressive and could lead to no other results. Had measures of conciliation been adopted such as the Colonies had a right to expect, much bloodshed as well as a vast expenditure of treasure would have been avoided."

Some four years later, a younger daughter from Boston, now Mrs. Waterson, visited Portsdown Lodge and clearly appreciated its dignified calm. The Quincy sisters had early on perceived the resemblance between Francis Austen and Captain Wentworth. The whole extended family seems to have been delighted by the gift of one of Jane's letters preserved by her brother. This must have been the first Jane Austen manuscript to cross the Atlantic.

The first of the Austen family to travel extensively in North America was the admiral's grandson, John H. Hubback, Jr. He preceded his mother and two brothers, who were soon to make their lives in the U.S. John Hubback arrived in 1868 on the last leg of a world tour on the business of a Liverpool firm of grain merchants. This took him to Australia, New Zealand, and Chile before arriving in San Francisco by sea. He lodged in the house of a "mild-mannered forty-niner" and had no complaint to make about the raw new community's capacity to maintain conditions in which business could flourish. A new American city was being created with some fine houses and large stores intermingled with wooden shanties. He was fascinated by the mixture of

people from every state in the Union, most of whom had made the long voyage round Cape Horn, but some had survived long journeys across unknown deserts. In all, his impressions were so favorable that his brother Edward decided to seek a living in California, leaving England a year later.

John Hubback's autobiography contains a long description of his elaborate journey to Yosemite, which began on board a river steamer, followed by coach travel until reaching the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. At this point horses were chartered for their small party, and the next two days were spent in the saddle. "Never again," thought the young man, "shall I see anything to match Yosemite." Of his many business journeys the most exciting was to Nevada with a companion carrying twenty thousand dollars to deposit in the State Treasury, then established close to the silver mine in the small town of Virginia City. A year or two earlier it had been doubtful whether Nevada had achieved a population sufficient to permit Lincoln to admit it to the Union. Both men carried a revolver, but they met with no use for weapons. In the summer months John Hubback had business to transact on instructions from Liverpool. A telegram sent from Liverpool at four in the afternoon would be delivered at San Francisco by nine in the morning. He traveled by a small steamer to Victoria, Vancouver Island, and was kept there against his will by fog. San Francisco suffered a severe earthquake during his absence. This was followed by the election of General Grant with solid Californian support. Before the end of the rainless season, when timber was at its driest, the Knox house was destroyed by fire. Immediately after these disasters, he was recalled.

John Hubback's adventurous disposition readily persuaded him to make his journey home by land rather than via Panama. He guessed that by next year the railroad would be finished from coast to coast, and so this would be his last chance to experience rough travel and wonderful scenery. He made his last payment in Californian gold dollars (to his dentist) because federal "greenbacks" were not yet accepted in the state he was leaving on a long, exciting and often uncomfortable journey.

From Sacramento City, reached by boat, he took the train, "winding round huge precipices, crossing trestle bridges at a snail's pace," and eventually making the steep descent to Reno; here his judg-

ment was awry, as he believed that it had already seen its best days. Ahead of him after railhead was reached, there lay many miles to cover packed into a coach as far as Austin City and thence in a "mud-wagon" traveling over an improvised road. There were numerous delays from accidents or delays to await fresh horses, so that vigorous passengers, such as the one Englishman, walked on for some hours, then rested at a spring or water hole until the wagon arrived. At last Salt Lake City was in sight. Brigham Young's tabernacle to hold ten thousand people had just been completed. John Hubback was much interested in a society "so elementary but at the same time so purposeful," conducting itself on novel lines and aiming at self-sufficiency. In the next thirteen hours, only thirty-five miles of mountain country were covered in discomfort, and so it was an immense relief to reach the railroad, which had now reached a point in Wyoming west of Laramie. The train moved slowly on its single line, not yet thoroughly settled in some places, and better food, sleep, leg-room, and elbow-room made for a vast improvement. On the prairies of Nebraska there were comforting detachments of soldiers. Delays from one cause or another continued. Because the trestle bridge over the Missouri River had partially collapsed, a crossing by ferry was made necessary. John Hubback's journey was placid thereafter, but between Chicago and New York he managed to squeeze in a visit to Niagara Falls.

Years later he reflected on his American experiences in words that might have been those of his grandfather. "One met with so much kindness from fellow travelers and the only return that could be made was that of keeping up the English tradition of good feeling and courtesy towards those with whom one came in contact."

The marriage of Catherine Hubback, Sir Francis Austen's fourth daughter, was sadly affected by a severe mental breakdown that her husband suffered in 1848. Her main concern, after many fruitless efforts to restore the balance of his mind, became the welfare of her three boys. For a time the family lived at Portsdown Lodge, but by 1868 her eldest son, John, was on his travels. His reports of job prospects in California persuaded Edward to move from Liverpool. Catherine decided to make a home for him in Oakland, and soon after her arrival, the third brother began farming in Virginia, having married a Swedish girl whom he met on the voyage over.

Having published ten successful novels in the years that followed

her husband's decline, Catherine produced a short story on arrival in California, based on experiences in her voyage. It was published in Bret Harte's magazine *The Overland Monthly*, but life was too active and demanding in Oakland to allow time for writing more fiction. She felt rejuvenated by her "new style of life in a wonderful climate." Her energies were now centered on cooking, gardening, teaching, and social relationships in a society that did not stand on ceremony. She seems to have decided quickly that America was where she intended to spend the rest of her life.

California gave her a sense of space and freedom perhaps most because of the contacts she made with the young. For the first time in her life she was obliged to do much of her own housework, helped by a succession of Chinese boys. As her first winter drew on, she was amazed by the continuing fecundity of her garden, the variety of flowers and fruit, many plants unknown in England. Her letters included long lists of flowers she had seen growing wild when she visited Santa Cruz or drove through the new Golden Gate Park.

One of the chief satisfactions of her new life came from the opportunity it gave her to teach, perhaps first because it was her motherly duty and her pleasure to instruct the Chinese boys in the art of cookery. One of them insisted on staying with her even when his friends threatened him when he refused to join them in more lucrative factory work. Her church membership figures prominently in her letters; she taught a boys' class in the Sunday School. It was uphill work to exert any influence in face of their "irrepressible republican nature." Using English terms she wrote of them as "not ploughboys, but more or less gentlemen's sons and may be future Presidents, so it is well they should know their commandments." She gave lessons in lace-making to a number of young women, earning herself the useful sum of twenty dollars a month. She found American girls "full of frolic and thoughtlessness," but she was delighted that they should be communicative and feel themselves free to confide in her. "Girls here," she wrote "come of age at 18 and then can marry whom they please despite their parents' wishes. Then they can easily get a divorce too. . . . Others turn into domestic drudges. . . ."

The lack of domestic routine and of discipline and good order in the family setting distressed her. In manners and matters of taste nothing was predictable, as it was in England. She supplied her son

with humorous, self-mocking descriptions of two thoroughly American events in which she played a part—a clergy convention and the foundation of an “Improving Society.” Towards the former she contributed by providing for a visiting cleric, but confessed in advance that she was fearful of her rashness: “I daresay that my strange clergyman will not be very disagreeable but it is a risk, and oh dear, I quite forgot—perhaps he may chew tobacco and spit.” Generally she criticized the Oakland Episcopal church for its sermons, its indifferent music, and the lack of awe and dignity in its forms of worship. Nevertheless, the church brought her in touch with people in an engagingly free and easy manner, and the festivities of her first Christmas earned her unqualified praise, especially for some secular dramatic tableaux. The main attraction for members of the club she founded for young ladies was a monthly reunion party, to which gentlemen were admitted, but only lemonade served. The entertainment was varied, but it was a settled point that there was to be “no expense in the way of ices and oysters.” All the same invitations were much sought after by a “nice set of young men.”

By this time she had come to see a permanent future for herself and her two younger sons in America. The climate of California was an overwhelming attraction, though she found the colors so bright and the air so clear that painting could have no success with it. She earned some money by tinting photographs, and she believed in a great future for that new medium, to which conditions were so favorable. In this she was prescient.

When Edward married an American girl, Catherine decided to join her other son in Virginia, where he was finding it hard to struggle in a remote farm that “had not yet a road to reach it from the turnpike.” Traveling by boat to the Panama isthmus, she avoided the cars of which she had the daunting previous experience of “living night and day surrounded by all the indecencies of civilized life.” Now she intended that the great open spaces, which were of supreme attraction, should open up again and that a rural life in which her new gardening skills and her love and duty towards three small children would prove challenging enough. But her hopes were not to be realized. In her first cold winter at Gainesville, Virginia, she died of pneumonia. At some later date Charley moved to California, and both brothers died in 1924.

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*After testing the market in California for short stories, Catherine Hubback included "Austen" in her professional name, to capitalize on her relative's popularity.