



Contemporary Biography: Some Problems

IRENE B. MCDONALD

Irene B. McDonald is an Adjunct Faculty Member in English at the University of South Alabama.

*Where is the wisdom we have lost
in knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge we have lost
in information?*

T. S. Eliot

Choruses from "The Rock"

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that a single woman writer of few remaining letters must be in want of a biographer.

And equally true is Lytton Strachey's comment in his preface to *Eminent Victorians* "that it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one" (10).

Two situations contribute to today's difficulties in writing (and living) a good life—the need to understand all human behavior and the availability of a great deal of historical data. Contemporary biographies, though generally more accurate than earlier ones, suffer from a post-Freudian compulsion to scrutinize, analyze, and explain. Earlier biographers reported behavior; today's writers (and readers) demand explanations. They thrive on researched data and speculation, some of it quite possibly true.

Consider, for example, this incident in Jane Austen's life. In Chawton, during her last illness, too tired during the daytime to climb the stairs to the room she shared with her older sister, Cassandra, Jane remained downstairs. To rest, she used an arrangement of three chairs. If she chose the sofa, she told her niece Caroline, Mrs. Austen would hesitate to lie there as was her habit.

Can a contemporary biographer merely report this detail? Who would accept such dereliction? Our inquiring minds want to know more.

And now, in "a frenzy fit," running mad as often as we choose (*Minor Works* 102), we begin our scrutiny. Did Austen suffer a martyr complex? Didn't she once refer to herself as "the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress"? Boasted of her condition, in fact, "with all possible vanity," proclaimed it in writing in a letter to the Prince Regent's librarian (11 December 1815)? She sounds very much a martyr. A singular martyr at that, for didn't she also proclaim to this same librarian, one James Stanier Clarke, how she had to keep to her own style and go on in her own way (1 April 1816)?

Or did she intend to shame her mother, "something of a hypochondriac," we are told (*Drabble* 25)? At the time, Jane must have known how ill she herself was. Did she subconsciously intend to show up her mother, a Mr. Woodhousian valetudinarian who nevertheless could spend hours in the garden?

Or was Jane, no longer a child but a woman in her forties, still frightened of her mother? Would Mrs. Austen pen sharp rhymes about a daughter lying on a sofa while the aged parent trembled in exhaustion on a hard chair?

Or was she merely being respectful, deferring to her old mother, who after time in her favorite potato patch, would quite naturally tire? Wait, perhaps the sofa had become stained by Mrs. Austen's smock, a garment she habitually wore while gardening. Fastidious Jane would quite rightly opt for a cleaner venue.

Or did Jane remember her juvenile spoof on the cult of sensibility? In *Love and Freindship*, Laura's eighth letter describes how she and friend Sophia, overwhelmed by pathetic feelings, "fainted alternately on the sofa" (*Minor Works* 86). Did Jane envision her mother and herself performing similar acrobatics?

More questions arise as we indulge our speculations. Wouldn't Mrs. Austen have noticed those three chairs placed in so unusual an arrangement? Wouldn't she have seen Jane lying on them? Wouldn't she be concerned? Or, was she indifferent to her gifted daughter? Was Cassandra their mother's favorite? During Jane's final months in Winchester, only sixteen miles away, why didn't Mrs. Austen leave Chawton to visit her dying daughter? Did she dislike, during this prime May-June-July growing season, to leave her gardens? Had gardening become such an obsession?

On and on we go, analyzing, scrutinizing, exploring every possibility—without the barouche-landau, of course (“extremely fond of exploring”) (*Emma* 274).

The availability of historical data contributes to the problems (and length) of contemporary biography. It can tempt a biographer into excesses. It can be used to justify speculations and often creates additional ones. But, unfortunately, such material does not always lead to truth. In *Rambler* of October 13, 1760 (No. 60), Samuel Johnson, himself no mean biographer, scoffed at those who “imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferences.”

Jane Austen's biographers, however, will not be overwhelmed by primary sources. Austen kept no journals. Though she wrote many letters, relatively few (only about 160) remain. Cassandra burned the greater part of Jane's letters to her and expurgated portions of those she kept. Jane's correspondence with her favorite brother Henry seems to have been destroyed.

As a result, biographers seek out secondary material. Take Jane's cousin, for example: Eliza Hancock—Madame de Feuillide—Mrs. Henry Austen. Because of her colorful existence, Eliza undoubtedly deserves a large swatch of Austen's life story. Current biographers can (and often do) discuss Philadelphia Austen, Eliza's mother, who traveled to India to find a husband. They can deal with that very husband himself, Tysoe Saul Hancock, a middle-aged surgeon, worried by her frivolities and later beset with financial woes. They speculate on the question of Eliza's paternity (her mother's husband? Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal, a significant friend?), the complexity of Hastings's seven-year parliamentary trial, the social and financial status of Eliza's first husband (the guillotined Comte de Feuillide), Eliza's

finances as a widow, the precarious health of her son (christened Hastings), her flirtations with the Austen boys (James and Henry), her eventual marriage to Henry (ten years her junior), their trip to France to try to regain the de Feuillide estate.

Such material represents only an introduction to the fascinating Eliza. Much more can be sought out. Didn't Eliza once undertake a regimen of sea bathing hoping to restore little Hastings's health? What was his condition (and, what were the medical theories then)? How did a woman and child partake of seabathing at that time? Another matter, consider the extravagant lifestyle of Eliza before and after she married Henry. Was their lavish party that Jane attended in London (professional musicians, a rented mirror, newspaper reportage) typical? And on and on we go, extremely fond of exploring, indeed.

Exhausting the material on Eliza, biographers can (and do) turn to Mrs. Austen's brother Thomas, farmed out because he was weak-minded or mad. A similar situation existed with George, the second Austen son, abnormal in some way. Why was he raised so apart from the Austen family? Why did they pay him so little heed, rarely referring to him, eventually sending him to an unnamed grave?

Of course Jane's aunt, Mrs. Leigh-Perrot, deserves at least a chapter, or two or three. Accused in Bath of shoplifting, she remained in custody from August until her trial in March, when she was acquitted. Found guilty, she could have been hanged or more likely transported. Though found innocent of the charge of stealing a card of white lace, was she perhaps a kleptomaniac? Had her husband, Mrs. Austen's wealthy brother James, bought her off? Did she steal (or seem to steal) later in her life? Weren't there some hints about greenhouse plants? (Consider the acquisitiveness of dreadful Aunt Norris in *Mansfield Park*. An echo of Mrs. Leigh-Perrot's behavior?) Jane apparently didn't like her aunt, though they shared the same first name. Why not? Did Mrs. Leigh-Perrot's attitude toward money and her less affluent in-laws find itself caricatured in *Sanditon's* Lady Denham, who "employs her position of power with gleeful malice, dangling her money and estate before poorer relations" (Copeland 124).

Then think of all that relates to the naval careers of the two sailor brothers, Frank and Charles, to the legal battles (£15,000 paid to lawyers) fought by Edward to retain the rights of his inheritance from the Knights, wealthy cousins who adopted him, and to the com-

plex financial circumstances responsible for the failure of Henry's bank.

And Jane's love life? Whatever happened to Tom Lefroy with whom she enjoyed such lively flirtation? We know later in his native Ireland he married and became Lord Chief Justice. What sort of husband and Lord Chief Justice was he? What can we know about his "boyish love" (Tucker 59) for Jane? Did Harris Bigg-Wither ever talk about his reaction that morning of December 3 when Jane reversed her decision of the night before to marry him? And, was Cassandra correct in her late-in-life comments about the mysterious man (a clergyman?) the family met at the seaside? It seems he was worthy of Jane. It seems he died before he could renew their acquaintance or declare his intentions.

Consider the numerous Austen nieces and nephews. Did "itty Dordy," Edward's son George, who learned to skip so well so early in life, develop into a famous cricket player? How could favorite niece Fanny misplace dear Aunt Jane's letters? How did her son, Lord Brabourne, happen to find them? How legible were they? And, the crucial question, what was in the letters Cassandra burned?

A semi-crucial question—what happened to the Austen papers? Only two manuscripts of her mature novels survive—the last two chapters of *Persuasion* (the British Library, London) and *Sanditon* (King's College, Cambridge). Could the others be mouldering in some publisher's storage center? Did a distant heir cart them off, only to misplace them in a croquet box, now hidden in some dusty castle attic? Surely the well-thumbed copy of "First Impressions," unlopped and uncropped, must exist somewhere.

And finally, what was the cause of Austen's death? Hodgkin's disease? Addison's disease, as most biographers believe? Can we match the symptoms she reported in her letters (nausea, fever, weakness, skin discoloration) with today's symptoms?

Enough running mad, or even running sane, as it were.

A recurrent problem with much contemporary biography is that, in "our data-ravenous contemporary world" (Weintraub, *Queen Victoria* xi), peripheral material assumes exaggerated importance. The reasons for greatness (six novels in Austen's case) merit less concern. Perhaps what our era needs is a new genre, an addendum to the standard literary biography, something called "The Peripheral Biography," an "Everything-you-always-wanted-to-know-about So and So's relatives,

lovers, and friends, the houses and gardens he/she lived in, favorite amusements, flowers, donkeys,..."

Conscientious biographers might first write a focused biography, one, in Strachey's terms, of "a becoming brevity—a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant" (10). Then they could indulge themselves with another. It would include enlightened speculation and heavily researched periphery, all stretched out to five hundred pages minimum, with perhaps "a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte" (*Letters* 4 February 1813).

After Austen's death, it seemed fashionable to emphasize what a treasure she had been, how unsingular, how plain and dutiful and ordinary and good. In his introduction to the posthumous *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, in what Myer calls "the first whitewash operation performed by her surviving relatives" (224), brother Henry emphasizes Jane's stature "of true elegance," her "modest cheek," her accomplishments, her temper "as polished as her wit." He takes pains to assure us that she had no burning ambition to achieve fame and fortune through her writing. She "became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination" (*NA* 5-6). And most important of all, "she was thoroughly religious and devout." Now an ordained and practicing clergyman, Henry is careful to conclude that "her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church" (*NA* 8).

This picture of perfection was perpetuated by family members and nineteenth-century biographers. Perhaps over-reacting in their attempts to humanize her, recent biographers reveal a much more troubled Jane Austen. They speculate on her antagonism toward her mother, on her unhappiness and sense of powerlessness early in life when sent away to school, on her fear of marriage and childbearing. Jane felt a rivalry with Cassandra, some infer, and resented Edward's rise to fortune. One conjectures that she was not popular with her brothers, who named their daughters after Cassandra. Another concludes that her letters show her diffidence, a lack of tenderness toward herself and others, anger and disappointment. Others emphasize her frustration. She grumbled about domestic and social obligations. She felt the injustice of her situation as a poor spinster with little social position. Though she burned with ambition, she wrote of herself in self-deprecating prose. And, most shocking of all, her father, the

learned Reverend George Austen, an Oxonian, may have made money in the opium-transporting business. (Not so shocking, says another, because opium, widely used as a painkiller, was as common as today's aspirin.)

Is it ever possible to see another age objectively? Our era seems preoccupied with the trauma of childhood, parent-child conflicts, sibling rivalry, women's rights, mistreatment of inferiors, love relationships, and debunking in general. Must these concerns color and distort the past?

"We view each life more in our terms than in our subject's," writes Stanley Weintraub, "—which is why library shelves strain under the weight of yet another biography of the same figure, and one perhaps no closer to that elusive thing called truth" (*Biography* 7).

A 669-page biography of Jane Austen? Really? Just published? Do we need another one?

Of course we do. We agree with James Boswell that no one can know "with certainty beforehand, whether what may seem trifling to some, and perhaps to the collector himself, may not be most agreeable to many" (26). In the "Advertisement to the First Edition" of his *Life of Johnson*, Boswell also emphasizes just how hard "the collector himself" worked. "Were I to detail the books which I have consulted, and the inquiries which I have found it necessary to make by various channels," he writes, "I should probably be thought ridiculously ostentatious. Let me only observe, as a specimen of my trouble, that I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly" (4).

Like Boswell, good collector-biographers consult many sources, make inquiries "by various channels," and run half over any number of cities pursuing "that elusive thing called truth." We remain grateful to them. And we understand when they include all they can find, and "fix." Yet, ironically, this abundant detail and the resultant information-speculation cycles often fail to satisfy. There remains an almost inexpressible longing for "the wisdom we have lost in knowledge," "the knowledge we have lost in information" (Eliot 96).

WORKS CITED

- AUSTEN, JANE. *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1952.
- AUSTEN, JANE. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933-69.
- BOSWELL, JAMES. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1960.
- COPELAND, EDWARD. "Sanditon and 'my Aunt': Jane Austen and the National Debt." *Persuasions* 19 (1997): 117-29.
- DRABBLE, MARGARET. "Introduction." *Lady Susan *The Watsons* Sanditon*. New York: Penguin, 1974.
- ELIOT, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1901-1950*. New York: Harcourt, 1952.
- MYER, VALERIE GROSVENOR. *Jane Austen: Obstinate Heart: A Biography*. New York: Arcade, 1997.
- STRACHEY, LYTTON. *Eminent Victorians*. Chatto & Windus, 1918. London: Penguin, 1986.
- TUCKER, GEORGE HOLBERT. *Jane Austen the Woman. Some Biographical Insights*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.
- WEINTRAUB, STANLEY. *Biography and Truth*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.
- _____. *Queen Victoria*. New York: Truman Dutton, 1987.
- ADDITIONAL BIOGRAPHIES OF JANE AUSTEN
- AUSTEN-LEIGH, JAMES EDWARD. *A Memoir of Jane Austen by Her Nephew*. London, 1870, rev. 1871. Oxford: Clarendon, 1963.
- AUSTEN-LEIGH, WILLIAM, AND R. A. AUSTEN-LEIGH. *Jane Austen: A Family Record*. 1913. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. New York: Barnes, 1996.
- BUSH, DOUGLAS. *Jane Austen*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- CHAPMAN, R.W. *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1961.
- HALPERIN, JOHN. *The Life of Jane Austen*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984.
- HONAN, PARK. *Jane Austen: Her Life*. London: St. Martin's, 1996.
- JOHNSON, R. BRIMLEY. *Jane Austen: Her Life, Her Work, Her Family and Her Critics*. New York: Haskell, 1974.
- KAPLAN, DEBORAH. *Jane Austen among Women*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- MUKHERJEE, MEENAKSHI. *Jane Austen*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.
- NOKES, DAVID. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Farrar, 1997.
- TOMALIN, CLAIRE. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 1997.