



Literary Legacy: Jane Austen's Writing Desk Donated to the British Library

JOAN AUSTEN-LEIGH

Joan Austen-Leigh is the great-granddaughter of Jane Austen's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh. She is the author of *Letters from Highbury* and *Later Days at Highbury*, and her many plays have been performed on CBC and in venues in Canada, the United States, Australia,

and Britain. Her works are published by Gage and A Room of One's Own Press, as well as by Oxford University Press. With Jack Grey and Henry Burke, Joan Austen-Leigh founded the Jane Austen Society of North America. For nineteen years, she edited this journal.

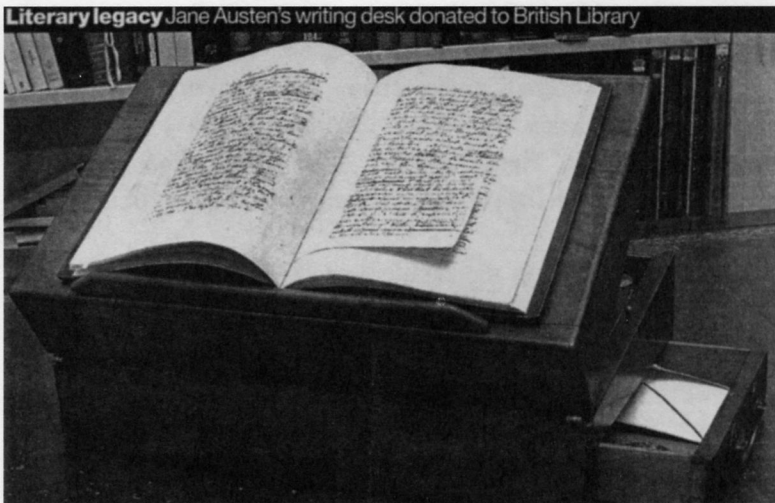
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, COUSINS, distinguished scholars and friends—including especially representatives from the Jane Austen Society and the Jane Austen Society of North America.

I wish at this time particularly to mention my daughter, Freydis Welland, without whose efforts the presentation of the desk would not have been possible.

Then I would like to express my personal appreciation of the journeys you have all undertaken to come here. Darcy declared that “50 miles was within an easy distance.” Elizabeth disagreed. And even today, 50 miles is not always easily accomplished. As for Miss Bingley, she would indeed be “all astonishment,” were she to understand that there are several persons in this room who have crossed the Atlantic in order to be present on this occasion.

I hope you understand that this writing box might never have come here. On October 24, 1798, Jane Austen wrote from the Bull and George at Dartford to her sister Cassandra:

I should have begun my letter soon after our arrival but for a little adventure which prevented me. After we had been here a quarter of an hour it was discovered that my writing and dressing boxes had been by accident put into



a chaise which was just packing off as we came in, and were driven away towards Gravesend on their way to the West Indies. No part of my property could have been such a prize before, for in my writing-box was all my worldly wealth, 7l. . . . Mr. Nottley immediately despatched a man and horse after the chaise, and in half an hour's time I had the pleasure of being as rich as ever; they were got about two or three miles off.

Jane Austen wrote to her niece Caroline that she “always maintained the importance of aunts.” It is rather appropriate, therefore, that this writing box should have descended in the female line of the family through a series of aunts to a series of nieces. From Jane, it passed to her sister Cassandra. From her to her niece, Caroline, and from Caroline to her niece Mary Austen-Leigh. From Mary to her nieces Dorothy, Honor, and Lois Austen-Leigh, and from them to their niece, myself, Joan Austen-Leigh.

The desk was bought originally by the Rev. George Austen at Ring Brothers, Basingstoke in December 1794. One likes to think for his daughter's nineteenth birthday.

I want to quote to you from the *Memoir of Jane Austen* written by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. He speaks of the quiet life at Chawton Cottage where Jane lived with Mrs. Austen, Cassandra,

and their friend Martha Lloyd. He says: "In that well occupied female party there must have been many precious hours of silence during which the pen was busy at the little mahogany writing desk while Fanny Price, or Emma Woodhouse, or Anne Elliot was growing into beauty and interest." He continues: "This mahogany desk, which has done good service to the public, is now in the possession of my sister, Miss Austen."

After 200 years in the family, I, great-granddaughter of James Edward Austen-Leigh, together with my three daughters, Freydis Jane, Damaris Jane, and Tibbie Honor, now present this desk into the care of the British Library to be preserved and displayed for future generations, where it will continue to give good service to the public in the contemplation of the immortal characters who sprang to life on this little mahogany writing box.