Sense and ‘Non-Sense’in Eight Jane Austen Biographies

KEIKO PARKER
Burnaby, BC

The project for the members of the Vancouver Region JASNA for the summer of 1988 was to read Jane Austen biographies. It was imperative that I knew “who’s who” among the Austens, their friends and relations. Toward this end, George Tucker’s A Goodly Heritage,1 which I read several years ago, was of immense help. At that time I had written my own version of the Austen family tree. With this at my side, I started my summer of reading Jane Austen biographies.

It augured well, when on a Sunday afternoon drive, I came across Elizabeth Jenkins’ Jane Austen2 in a second-hand book-store. This biography relies heavily on her letters. The entire work is interspersed with critiques on the novels; I found these critical comments to be superior to some independent critical essays on Austen and her novels.

My second stroke of luck was that as I was nearing the end of Jenkins’ book, I found Marghanita Laski’s Jane Austen and Her World3 in a Seattle used bookstore. The books I sought to read were now falling into place. Factually there is little new in this book compared with the one by Elizabeth Jenkins to whom it is dedicated. Its great attraction is the 137 illustrations, which complement Jenkins’ work.

For my third biography I turned to Brian Wilks’ Jane Austen,4 another “picture-book” biography. At first glance this is a delightful book with many colour illustrations as well as ones in black and white. Although the illustrations in these two books are sometimes duplicated, there are instances where one book makes up for the other. For example, Wilks presents two illustrations of “before” and “after” estate improvements5 and Laski shows one of “during,” with surveyors at work.6 Again, where one book shows an overall picture, the other concentrates on a detailed portion.7 Wilks mentions the seamy side of life that existed in England in Austen’s time, which is left untouched in some biographies. In this sense he presents the author in a broader context. I liked Wilks’ defence of Austen’s apparently frivolous, sometimes malicious, comments in her letters to Cassandra.8

However, Wilks’ biographical narrative is at times confusing because it is not always chronological. Also, I found it difficult to accept such a sweeping statement as “All her life Jane Austen had feared being poor, as she had feared the plight of the single woman without means.”9 If this were really the case, why did she accept the offer of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither (which would have given her ample security for life) and then change her mind overnight? If she were so concerned with money and success, why did she not turn out romances and epic poems for the public taste, rather than “keep to my own style and go on in my own way”?10 I feel that any anxiety over poverty that Jane Austen may have felt was no more than what any normal woman would have felt at that period in history when the choices for women were so limited.

More serious still are obvious errors found throughout the book. To begin with, the portrait of Jane’s youngest brother, Charles, and the view of Chawton Manor are both reverse images.11 Further errors are:

1. On p. 9 Wilks refers to Edward Knight as Jane Austen’s “eldest” brother.

2. At the end of p. 115 Captain Wentworth’s speech is ascribed to Admiral Croft.2

3. On p. 124 a quote from Austen’s letter (Letters, p. 272) should have been “sucking child” rather than “suckling child.”

4. On p. 137 Wilks states that Austen’s “latest piece of writing, the early version of what we now call Sanditon, but which Jane called Catherine, was, in her own words, ‘put on the shelf for the present.’ ” As I understand it from other sources,13 the “Catherine” mentioned above is Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey, and Austen is referring to the delay in publication of this novel. The unfinished novel which we know as Sanditon was, at the time of her death, as yet unnamed.14

5. Wilks refers to “her niece” on p. 139, but this should be “her nephew” since the letter (Letter 146) is addressed to James Edward Austen. Wilks then goes on to quote a later paragraph from the same letter, treats it as a separate letter, and refers to it as a “letter addressed to her other nephew.”

This lack of accuracy is unfortunate because the book, with its sumptuous illustrations, would otherwise make a splendid introduction of Jane Austen to younger people and new readers.

My fourth biography was Lord David Cecil’s A Portrait of Jane Austen.15 Lord Cecil takes the more conventional view of Jane Austen that she led a “sheltered” life, “bound by convention.”16 Whereas Wilks gives us a vivid picture of world events such as the American and French revolutions, which were the backdrops of Jane Austen’s world, Cecil paints a portrait of her immediate surroundings in southern England, emphasizing the gentry class to which she belonged.
when Lord Cecil’s long-sustained narrative finally drew to a close, I felt I was left with a fairly well-rounded portrait of the novelist.

There are a few errors in this book:

1. On p. 38 the portraits of Jane’s brothers, James and Henry, are interchanged.

2. On p. 71 the Reverend Thomas Fowle is mentioned as “a pupil of James Austen,” but it should be as “a pupil of Mr. George Austen.”

3. On p. 191 Lord Cecil mentions James Leigh Perrot’s will which left nothing to his sister, Mrs. Austen. Here Lord Cecil quotes Mrs. Austen as saying “I expect he thought that I, as older than him, would be likely to die first” (italics are mine). In fact Mrs. Austen was younger than James Leigh Perrot. According to Jane’s letter to her brother, Charles, Mrs. Austen merely said that her brother always expected to outlive her.17

I now proceed to my fifth book, Jane Aiken Hodge’s *Only a Novel, The Double Life of Jane Austen*.18 This book is based on the premise that our author led the double life of Jane Austen the woman and Jane Austen the novelist. Hodge perceives a “depth and bitterness” in Austen’s work: “Jane Austen looked at the world around her, and found it wanting.”19 This is in marked contrast to Lord Cecil’s view that Jane Austen was “at ease in the world she was born into.”20

Hodge’s biographical narrative is quick-paced, moving from one quote from an Austen letter to another. From time to time, she uses the expression “this batch of letters,” referring to a group of letters Jane wrote to Cassandra whenever they were living away from each other. I found this a good biographical approach, as it gives us a sense of a “bunch” of letters written in succession, followed by months of no letters simply because the two sisters were together. It makes us realize the sporadic, feast-or-famine nature of Jane’s correspondences.

Regarding Mrs. Mitford’s description of Jane as being “the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers,”21 Lord Cecil contents himself with “I like to think there was a time in Jane Austen’s life when she could be called a pretty butterfly. I know of no other woman writer of the first rank who has been similarly described.”22 Here Hodge comes up with the most amusing comment I have read so far:

I like to think that this report may have been superficially correct, though basically false ... what was intended as criticism was in fact high praise. It shows how successfully Jane Austen had embarked on her double life. Young ladies were supposed to be pretty, and silly, and on the catch for husbands. Jane Austen had decided to conform. And as “an artist can do nothing slovenly”, she was, naturally, the prettiest and silliest of them all.23

Once or twice, however, I felt I could not agree with Hodge. Regarding Jane’s letter to Cassandra, “Dame Tilbury’s daughter has lain in. Shall I give her any of your baby clothes?”24 Hodge infers that Jane was referring to Cassandra’s trousseau, adding that it is “extraordinarily cold-blooded”25 on her part as Cassandra had lost her fiancé so recently. Is it not possible that Cassandra, who was good at looking after the welfare of the needy in the village, had a store of baby clothes that she sewed in her spare time to be given away when the occasion arose? I have never heard of a bride-to-be including baby clothes in her trousseau.

Hodge mentions Austen’s letter which refers to a man who accidentally shot himself: “One most material comfort ... of it’s being really an accidental wound .... Such a wound could not have been received in a duel1 26 and states that this is “one of those bits of raw material that Jane Austen did not think fit to use.”27 This statement is correct as far as it concerns a man who shoots himself by accident, but not true with regard to a duel. Jane Austen did use an episode of a duel in *Sense and Sensibility*, albeit “offstage” (SS, 211)28

Hodge’s book contains a very absorbing account of the publishing methods of the day — by subscription, by selling copyright, and so on. It sheds an interesting light on the publication of Austen’s novels.29 One minor infelicity occurs on p. 199 in the last paragraph, where “Charles’ brother and sister-in-law” should read “Cassandra’s brother Charles and his wife.”

I do not agree with every opinion or supposition Hodge puts forward, but the manner in which she reveals Austen to us has a directness that captures the imagination. She carries through the theme of the double life convincingly to its conclusion.

And so on to my sixth book, Park Honan’s *Jane Austen, Her Life*.30 Where Lord David Cecil takes one page to describe Madame Lefroy and her friendship with the much younger Jane Austen,31 Honan takes two pages — much to the same effect.32 Regarding Austen’s early writings, Honan states:

If her parents were amused, she also lightened her own spirit in these pieces. She cleared the rectory of heavy theatricals, and kept herself from taking Henry Austen’s flirting rehearsals with Eliza too seriously. By writing mock novels and plays, she lifted plays and novels as things into the realm of the imagination, so they could be possessed and got over. Her hilarity was a response to the flirtatious excitement and emotional disorder she saw around her .... But, by making up what appear to be the lightest, most innocent jokes, Jane Austen sailed over awkward themes. She kept her imagination free. She was to contend with the world in her own good time.32

I can make little sense out of statements such as this.

Again, describing a ball at Manydown, the home of the Bigg-Withers, Honan writes: “Skipping up the front steps of Manydown House, they [Cassandra and Jane] would probably go at once to Alethea Bigg’s room.”34 It is an enchanting
picture of the young Jane Austen, but the next moment I wonder. Why Alethea’s room? Why not her sister Elizabeth’s room or her other sister Catherine’s? Then, as if to anticipate my doubt, Honan quotes a letter of Austen presumably to establish the close friendship that existed between Jane Austen and Alethea Bigg. But the said letter is from 1817, many years “into the future.” At this point, I found the credibility of this book somewhat in question. It is this attempt to create verisimilitude that made me wary whenever Honan tried to recreate a scene in the rest of the book. Unfortunately Jane Austen did not have her Boswell, so that much of what is written here is pure conjecture. How far a biographer may try to pass off conjecture as the genuine thing is a moot point. It is this “docu-drama” quality that detracts from the final effect, contrary, I am sure, to the author’s intention.

Further on, Honan asserts that Jane’s dependency on Cassandra was less now and that she was beginning to feel greater friendship towards Catherine and Alethea Bigg. He continues:

‘I once thought’, Jane Austen wrote this year, ‘that to have what is in general called a Freind ... independent of my sister would never be an object of my wishes, but how much was I mistaken?’

This paragraph implies that Austen wrote this of herself, whereas the truth is, it is from a passage in Lesley Castle, one of Jane’s Juvenilia written that year. This is highly misleading and not fair to the unsuspecting reader.

Honan puts forth his theory explaining the strangely critical letter that Fanny Knight (Lady Knatchbull by then) wrote to her sister about her Aunts Cassandra and Jane (that infamous letter which states that they were “very much below par as to good society,” etc). Honan claims that Fanny was annoyed over the elopement of the eldest daughter of her husband by his first wife with one of her own younger brothers. Fanny was subsequently angered that Cassandra sided with the two young people, and as a result wrote this spiteful letter. If this were so, why did she include her Aunt Jane in the inventive, since the entire event took place in 1826, nine years after Jane’s death? I regret that Honan was unable to solve the mystery of this ungrateful letter.

Later in the book, Honan tries to solve yet another puzzle (if it can be so called) of the Harris Bigg-Wither incident, which I referred to earlier. Here I discovered three writers with three different images of the man. Elizabeth Jenkins describes Harris as “as invalidish man.” Lord Cecil says he “had the reputation of an excellent character” whereas Honan cites Jane Austen’s niece, Caroline, who describes the same man as “very plain in person – awkward, and even uncouth in manner, nothing but his size to recommend him – he was a fine big man.” The relationship between father (Lovelace Bigg-Wither) and son (Harris) is also portrayed in a different light by two of the biographers. George Tucker in his A Goodly Heritage has characterized the relationship as “the only surviving son of a doting father.” Honan paints a more strained relationship saying “Lovelace’s brilliant, nervous, active temperament did not harmonize with the awkward, tactless, bulky presence of his son.”

Honan now requires about six pages to delve into Jane Austen’s heart and attempts to answer the question of why she changed her mind overnight and retracted her consent to marry Bigg-Wither. When all is said and done, I find the most satisfactory explanation to be the simple statement made by Elizabeth Jenkins that Jane Austen had “to put first things first ... [When] it came ... to marrying without love, she could not do it.” I feel the entire incident bears testimony to Austen’s integrity and her fastidious taste; she practised what she preached – she would not do herself what she would not allow her heroines, the Elizabeth Bennets and Anne Elliots, to do in her novels – namely, to marry without love. Her action requires no six-page apologia from anyone.

Like Wilks, Honan gives titles to each chapter. Lord David Cecil does so too, but uses such general titles as “The Family,” “Early Years,” etc., which are flexible enough to accommodate comfortably whatever must be included in these chapters. I felt an awkwardness with Wilks’ titles such as “Young Men and Women” and Honan’s “I Could Die of Laughter,” since these chapters must include facts and opinions beyond what the titles suggest. Honan’s Chapter 11, “Nelson Relaxes” ranges in subject matter from a list of Frank’s ships, Nelson and his dalliance with Emma Hamilton, to the fashions of the day and the technical advances in cotton spinning. Honan then skips a decade to quote a letter from 1813 before the chapter is even half over. He left me dizzy with his far-flung topics.

There are a few errors in this book. One of them appears on p. 201 where Honan states: “one Thursday evening Jane and Cassandra typically reached the dance at 8 p.m.” (italics are mine). How could this be possible, since Jane was writing about this ball to Cassandra, who was staying at Mrs. Lloyd’s at the time? Is this yet another attempt at verisimilitude? Also why “typically”? And then on p. 248 the date quoted as “Friday, 1 July, 1808” should be “Thursday, 30 June, 1808.”

Perhaps Honan is at his best when discussing the individual novels by Jane Austen, especially in his examination of Mansfield Park. This section of the book also contains an interesting idea by Honan regarding one of Jane’s letters: “Now I will try to write of something else, and it shall be a complete change of subject – ordination.” It is generally supposed that Jane Austen was referring to her next novel Mansfield Park, saying that its subject matter was ordination. Honan puts forth a new interpretation of this letter stating that:

[Jane Austen] meant to tell her sister that after discussing her last novel she was changing her letter’s subject to thank Cassandra for enquiring about clerical ordination at James’ rectory; she of course never had said ‘ordination’ was the subject of Mansfield Park.

Of the photographs included in Honan’s book, the one that caught my attention was that of Chawton House with the pond in the foreground. One sees a photo of Chawton House itself often enough, but not so often with the pond. I was reminded of Jane Austen’s invitation to James Edward Austen to visit her at “a house by the side of a considerable pond.”
Honan gives new insights into such aspects of Jane Austen’s life as the pressure she may have felt to prove herself through achievement, living as she did amongst brothers who were brilliant, talented, or steadily rising in their careers. He also stresses the sense of failure Austen may have felt towards her family for not marrying to advantage.

I grant that extensive research has gone into this book and that Honan has new things to say about Jane Austen and her life. But I feel that the two hats Honan wore – one of scholar-researcher and the other of story-teller of Jane Austen’s life – did not fit well together in this instance.

To summarize some of the discrepancies I found in the six biographies I read so far:

1. Laski and Cecil both state that Mr. and Mrs. Austen went to Steventon immediately after their marriage in 1764. Wilks and Honan claim they first went to Deane, and then to Steventon in 1771.

2. The water colour portrait of Fanny Knight is generally accepted as being painted by Cassandra. Wilks, Cecil, and Hodge all agree on this. Laski, however, gives it as “reputedly by Jane Austen,” and Honan does not name the painter.

3. Laski states that Sir Charles Grandison was dictated by Anna Lefroy and that Jane Austen was merely an amanuensis. Brian C. Southam considers the work to have been authored by young Jane herself.

4. Jane’s brother, Edward Austen (later Knight), has his birthdate given as 1768 by Laski and Wilks. Cecil and Honan refer to the year 1767. Tucker states: “Edward was privately baptized at Deane on 7 October 1767. The year of his birth is usually given as 1768, but this is incorrect. Not only is the year recorded plainly as 1767 in the Deane baptismal register, …”

After I finished the preceding six biographies, a nagging question remained – to read or not to read John Halperin’s The Life of Jane Austen.66 I had heard that it is “bad” from my Janeite friends. But then I remembered the scene in Pride and Prejudice where Darcy “demands” that Elizabeth read his long letter out of “justice” (PP, 196). I also remembered the scene in Emma where Mr. Knightley consents to read Frank Churchill’s equally lengthy letter: “as it seems a matter of justice, it shall be done” (E, 444).

It is with this sense of “doing justice,” then, that I started to read Halperin’s version. Unfortunately, I was soon to be disappointed when I began to notice errors. One of the earliest occurs on p. 5, where Halperin misquotes a passage from Henry Austen’s “Biographical Notice.” Here the original word “impossible” is replaced by “possible.” But I need not dwell on numerous factual and interpretive errors, since Deirdre Le Faye has discussed them at length and added a list of errors of more than two pages in close type in The Review of English Studies vol. XXXVII, No. 147, August 1986. One American reader is said to have counted 176 factual errors. Let me add just a few that I found:

1. On p. 289 Halperin lists opinions of Emma that Jane gathered from her family and friends. Halperin states that her “father ranked Emma below Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice (but above Mansfield Park).” Not only was Jane’s father long since dead and could not have expressed an opinion of any sort, I could not even find this particular set of comparisons among those opinions recorded.

2. On p. 305 Halperin misquotes a passage from Persuasion. Referring to the unfortunate Dick Musgrove Austen has written, “a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (P, 68, my italics). Halperin has inverted the two words into “nobody alive.”

3. On p. 344 Halperin quotes Austen’s letter of 22 May 1817 to Anne Sharp. After quoting Jane’s words of appreciation of her sister’s and brothers’ care during her last illness, Halperin adds: “Again there is no mention of her mother.” As the words imply he has been trying to make a case for something less than perfect harmony between Jane and her mother. But the fact is Jane does mention her mother near the end of the same letter, and writes: “I have not mentioned my dear Mother; she suffered much for me when I was at the worst, but is tolerably well …” In short, if I live to be an old Woman, I must expect to wish I had died now; blessed in the tenderness of such a Family ….

But enough of errors. This biography abounds with such words as “cold hearted nastiness,” “maliciousness,” “pettiness,” “snappishly,” and “mean-spiritedness.” If Halperin is not characterizing Austen’s words and actions in this biased fashion, he is busy weaving insinuations. One such case is his effort at creating sibling rivalry between Cassandra and Jane. The latter has only to beg the former to accept a gift of cloth for a gown out of the proceeds of her book, for Halperin to interpret it as a sign of Jane’s “crowing,” with its implied sibling rivalry. Here he makes a further case of the supposed lack of warm feelings between Jane and her mother saying, “there is no mention of any present for her mother.” He makes no allowance for the probability that Mrs. Austen was not of an age to care much about a new gown but Cassandra and Jane still were, or that Jane might well have bought some gift of usefulness for Mrs. Austen that she did not bother to mention in her letter. Halperin also makes a big case about Jane’s dislike of noisy children. So what? I do not like noisy children, either. The only person I know who derives great satisfaction out of being surrounded by noisy children is Mrs. Musgrove!

To quote Mr. Darcy, Halperin seems to “willfully misunderstand” many biographical details. He was too precipitate in searching out negative signs with which to create a false image of our author. Possibly he was trying to bring about in his Austen biography what D.W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick have done in Austen criticism. However, what seemed in Austen criticism a new insight in 1940 and its creditable development in 1952, cannot apply to Austen biography where
accurate information and unbiased observations are of utmost importance.

One major scholastic disadvantage of this book, apart from its copious inaccuracies, is that Halperin chose to lump together all notes at the end of the book without reference numbers. This makes it difficult for a reader to trace the source of his information. I cannot do better than to quote Deirdre Le Faye who states: “A writer of Jane Austen’s quality deserves the compliment of a biography of equal precision and sensitivity. This slovenly and biased work should never have been published ....”

I now come to my latest Austen biography, Jane Austen, A Family Record.60 This is a revised version of Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters, A Family Record, by William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, originally published in 1913, to which Deirdre Le Faye has added new information she has gathered. I can only say that it was refreshing to read a book which contains accurate information and just sufficient explanatory comments to make all the events comprehensible. My only wish is that some attempts will be made to correlate this new edition with the 1913 edition which is not readily available now. Some page references for each chapter from the older edition, or a suitable alternative should be very welcome among scholars and students alike.

In conclusion, if one reads eight or nine biographies, one discovers as many different views as there are authors. The reader then retains what he agrees with and discards what he feels unacceptable. On returning to Jane Austen’s novels, one understands them better and appreciates even the minor details. For example, if one remembers the Harris Bigg-Wither incident, the simple speech of Emma Woodhouse that “A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked” (E, 54), as Austen was to write years later, takes on added poignancy.

For me two questions remain unanswered. The first pertains to Jane Austen’s funeral. She passed away on Friday, July 18, 1817. The funeral at Winchester Cathedral took place on Thursday, July 24. Six days had elapsed since Jane’s death. Was such a delay in burial customary? Or could this have had anything to do with obtaining permission to bury her remains within the Cathedral? Honan could have done his imaginative best to satisfy my curiosity.

The second question is this: Captain Wentworth describes his ship the Asp and says “Four-and-twenty hours later, and I should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth … ” (P, 66). I now quote the passage which immediately follows:

Anne’s shudderings were to herself alone: but the Miss Musgroves could be as open as they were sincere, in their exclamations of pity and horror (italics are mine).

This passage reminds me of what Aristotle stated in his Poetics, that tragedy consists of events which invite pity and horror (italics are mine). The coupling of these two words strikes me as too selective to be a coincidence.

Did Jane Austen read Aristotle’s Poetics? Was the volume in her father’s or her brother James’ library? I could not find the answer to this in any of the books I read.

Notwithstanding any criticism, reading these biographies gave me immense pleasure. I can think of only one set of books that I could read with greater joy!

NOTES


3 Marghanita Laski, Jane Austen and Her World (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975).


5 Wilks, p. 110.

6 Laski, pp. 40-41.

7 E.g., compare the photos of Jane Austen’s patchwork quilt, Laski, p. 76 and Wilks, p. 112.

8 Wilks, pp. 37-38.


11 Wilks, pp. 7, 113, and 121.

12 The actual quote of Captain Wentworth’s speech appears on p. 116.


Cecil, p. 9.

Cf. L 492.


Cecil, p. 10.

Quoted in Hodge, p. 46.

Cecil, p. 67

Hodge, p. 46.

*L 25.*

Hodge, p. 55.

*L 83-84.*

Hodge, p. 73.

References to and quotes from Jane Austen novels are based on *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press in 6 volumes.

Hodge, pp. 120-25.


Cecil, p. 58.

Honan, pp. 40-41.

Honan, pp. 53-54.

Honan, p. 85.

*L 476.*

Honan, p. 88.

Chapman, vol. VI, p. 132

Honan indicates the above in the notes at the back of his book.


Honan, p. 117.
Jane Austen was a major English novelist and an iconic figure of the world literature. She is best known for portraying the romantic lives of the middle. Unfortunately, Austen’s most extraordinary works Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Emma did not gain much praise during her lifetime, however, they are known as historical milestones and classics in literature today. Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 in Steventon Hampshire, England. She was the 7th child of 8. Jane was closest to her sister Cassandra who also remained her best friend for life. Their parents encouraged learning, writing and acting in their children which provided Jane with the inspirations and context for her future endeavors. Jane Austen Biography. Even our most beloved storytellers have lives with stories of their own to tell. Entry last updated on 04/16/2018; Authored by Renee Warren; Content ©www.JaneAusten.org. Growing up, the Austen children lived in an environment of open learning, creativity and dialogue. Mr. Austen worked away in the rectory and also tried his hand at farming on the side to earn more money for the growing family. Additionally, he would take on teaching roles within the home to outside children for additional funds. The Austen children would all grow...
within this close-knit family with Jane herself forming an exceptional bond with her father. In 1783, at the age of 8, Jane and her sister Cassandra were sent off to boarding school for their formal educations.