

Jane Austen: The Novelist as Historian

Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991)

In a famous letter to her sister Cassandra, Jane Austen claimed that *Pride and Prejudice* was 'rather too light & bright & sparkling', and that she might have relieved this effect by providing a chapter of 'solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story', one possible subject being 'a history of Buonaparte'. But if an outline of Napoleon's career would have been irrelevant to the rest of *Pride and Prejudice*, this was partly because the impact of his enterprises was already implicit in the novel—in its shortage of eligible bachelors, and the high proportion of such as did exist who were in the army. Readers of Austen's time would have recognized in the novel aspects of their own wartime society, without needing to have them spelt out. Some such readers, notably Sir Walter Scott and Richard Whately, even commented on just how true-to-life her novels were.

With such concerns in mind, Oliver MacDonagh in his valuable new book looks back at Austen's time with the eyes of a professional historian. His aim is twofold: 'to draw attention to the illumination of English history, in the quarter-century 1792-1817, which her novels may provide', and 'to illuminate the novels themselves by historians' evaluation of the period' (p.ix). He deals with several features of Austen's society, choosing one or more of the novels and fragments as focal points for each aspect: religious and ecclesiastical trends (*Mansfield Park*); money, and especially its implications for women's marriage choices (*Lady Susan*, *The Watsons*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*); girls' development and education (*Catharine, or the Bower*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*); family relationships (*Persuasion*); village social life (*Emma*); characteristics of the Regency (*Sanditon*). His primary historical source material is Jane Austen's letters, plus the records of her own and her family's life.

It is in the chapters centred on *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Sanditon* that the expressed aims of the book are followed through most explicitly. In the context of religious belief and ecclesiastical practice in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Professor MacDonagh uses the professional lives of Jane Austen's father and clergymen brothers James and Henry to illustrate the growing influence of Evangelicalism in the doctrinal sphere and, in the

temporal, growing disapproval of pluralism and other practices redolent of a worldly attitude to the clergyman's role. Supported in his interpretations by Jane Austen's letters, he goes on to discuss the spectrum of religious opinion among the characters in *Mansfield Park*—having some perceptive observations to make about Henry Crawford's relentless preoccupation with show and surface. He concludes that the novel as a whole embodies a 'Median' Anglican position: radical reform of the ecclesiastical system is not advocated, but clergymen should be earnest and upright in their pivotal role in the social order of the countryside; the Evangelicals' emphasis on sin, hell, atonement and redemption is endorsed, but not the emotionalism often associated with them. For historians, *Mansfield Park* reveals an ecclesiastical system based on pluralism, the use of social and political influence, and the possession of both capital and hereditary rights, all co-existing with sacerdotal doctrines implicitly corrosive of such a system. (An earlier version of this chapter was published under the title 'The Church in *Mansfield Park*: a Serious Call?' in *Sydney Studies in English* 12 (1986-7), 36-55.)

In the case of *Emma*, Professor MacDonagh relates the social structure and social interactions of Highbury to those of Chawton as it is portrayed in Austen's letters. He argues that in both villages the paucity of numbers among the middle and upper orders meant that in practice people crossed the boundaries of rank in their social lives, but also that they might have to spend much time with those they did not find particularly congenial. Both Chawton and Highbury show 'the same inherent tendencies towards social convergence and personal repression'. And Austen's insights might provide for historians 'an implicit but coherent theory of how society worked, at one of its levels, in the small towns and large villages of south-eastern England during the Napoleonic wars', especially of 'how the leading members of such communities interacted with one another and developed group characteristics' (pp.143-4). Similarly, *Sanditon* is 'a precise response to and particular manifestation of the spirit of the age in which it was composed, the Regency' (p.146). MacDonagh demonstrates how this fragment focusses on the very features identified as characteristic of the period in the standard work on it (*The Oxford History of England*)—building, fashion, the burgeoning of seaside resorts, and above all, the spirit of restlessness—while some of the details of *Sanditon* might suggest in turn further areas of investigation to historians. He also offers the interesting hypothesis that Austen's text has affinities with works by writers not normally aligned with her, Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* and Byron's *Don Juan*, since all share 'a special sort of

amalgam of wit, economy and ruthlessness' (p.163).

MacDonagh's approach to these Austen texts is generally persuasive, and the same might be said of his treatment of others, although the overall implications of relating historical evidence to the literary work under discussion (and vice versa) are not spelt out in every instance. He looks at relationships among the members of the Musgrove family in *Persuasion* in the light of those among the Austens, suggesting that personal affection between individuals was secondary to considering the family as a whole and fulfilling accepted duties towards it. He studies *Sense and Sensibility* in the context of contemporary indicators of living standards, as well as in relation to Austen's own circumstances as a female dependant on a very limited income. Again working from Austen's life and letters, particularly the vicissitudes of her own marital prospects and those of her niece Fanny Knight, he traces in the fiction her growing recognition of the importance of wealth in securing a husband, coupled with her awareness that, given the lack of alternatives, a woman's decisions about marriage were seldom easy in either moral or practical terms.

Yet there is I think some uncertainty in MacDonagh's treatment of Austen as a woman writing about the lives of contemporary women. His reading of her fiction leads him to the unexceptionable conclusion that she believed girls should be brought up to be 'rational, considerate, well-judging beings of taste, integrity and discrimination' by means of extensive reading of literature and history and access to cultured conversation (pp.80-81). But he also adduces the stupidity of Mrs Allen, Mrs Palmer and Mrs Bennet to argue that Austen generally deprecated her own sex relative to men; he does cite Sir Walter Elliot as one counter-example of male silliness, but surely other creations like Robert Ferrars, Mr Collins and Mr Rushworth would suggest that Austen did not make any correlation between intelligence and sex. MacDonagh claims too that Austen's notorious letter to the Prince Regent's librarian, in which she declined to write a novel about a clergyman like him on the grounds that she was 'the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress', was written '[w]ith perhaps a little, but not very much, tongue in cheek' (p.76). But since the man was quite obtuse, while at the same time someone whom Austen could not afford to offend, it is very likely that her self-deprecation was tactical rather than sincere; indeed she was later to pillory some of his foolish ideas in her 'Plan for a Novel'. The complex issue of Austen's position as a woman writing about women's lot in a society with narrow conceptions of their capacities

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has received much attention in recent years from such critics as Margaret Kirkham, Mary Poovey, Claudia L. Johnson and Alison Sulloway. Professor MacDonagh does acknowledge that, as an historian, he is not conversant with the wide field of Austen scholarship. But since these critics have themselves drawn on historical material, it is perhaps unfortunate that he has not engaged with their work, and has moreover concentrated so much on Austen's life and letters as his historical evidence.

Yet this emphasis on the life and letters does have its advantages. Professor MacDonagh recognizes the context of Austen's correspondence, as well as its incompleteness. He draws on it both extensively and judiciously to illuminate her fiction—rather than coming to it with preconceptions about her attitudes and then selecting a few extracts to bolster these, practices not unknown among professional literary critics. Thus Austen scholars, as well as the general readers MacDonagh envisages among his audience, should find his book very welcome.

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