

Regency England and Jane Austen

Todd, Janet. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Jane Austen exists in our consciousness in a liminal historical space between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her period of publishing, 1811–17, coincides with the Regency period, when King George III's madness was considered permanent and his dissolute and unpopular son, later George IV, had become Prince Regent. This transitional time falls between revolutions: after the French Revolution, which had had such a profound political impact on Britain, and before the Industrial Revolution truly transformed the nation into the first urban industrial power.

13

Through almost all Jane Austen's adult life, Britain and France were at war. In the 1790s, when hostilities first began, the country was vulnerable and in danger, easy prey to the superior Revolutionary armies of expansionist France. With military failures abroad, the government feared French sympathisers within the kingdoms and responded by draconian measures: suspending habeas corpus and passing 'Gagging Acts' which banned public meetings. Yet many who were appalled at the French Terror of 1793–4 still held to reformist ideals and hoped that Britain could progress constitutionally and socially without following France into violence and dictatorship.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, such hopes were largely dashed. The government's insistence on patriotism and control of print through taxes and regulations had made inroads into the Enlightenment reform movements and, with the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars dragging on, had impressed people who, decades earlier, would have seen such partiality as cant. The country had been blamed for losing its morale and will to win, and for failing to show the proper patriotism of moral principle and energetic enterprise. Meanwhile, the weariness of war was movingly expressed by writers such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld in her poem 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven', which opened with the lament: 'Still the loud death drum, thundering from afar, / O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war.'

Two of Austen's brothers were in the Royal Navy, fighting the French. Francis joined Nelson in 1798 and helped pursue Napoleon after the Battle of the Nile; later he assisted in blockading the French fleet planning to invade Britain and accompanied convoys to Africa and the West Indies, narrowly missing the action at Trafalgar. Letters and newspapers kept Jane Austen in close contact with his and Charles's equally energetic wartime activities. She saw something of the fallout in men and money, but in her novels she allowed characters to feel pride in a new and assured maritime power and, even more, to revel in the entrepreneurial aspect of naval service, the possibility of prize money and advancement for the enterprising (officer) class: 'the glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance', as Henry Crawford imagines it in *Mansfield Park*.

In 1814, Britain appeared to have won the war at sea and on land and Napoleon was exiled to Elba. Victory was celebrated throughout the country. Then, to national bewilderment, he escaped to France and recaptured Paris. As the journalist Leigh Hunt remarked, 'We want nothing now, to finish the romantic history of the present times, but a visit from the Man in the Moon.' Renewed fighting followed and in June 1815 Wellington and the allies defeated Napoleon for the last time. Twenty-two

years of war had really ended. Britain had become a major European and world power.

14

Disillusion soon followed victory, as the old order of kings and hierarchies was re-established in Europe. Returning warriors found themselves with little stake in the new Britain. Through the 1790s and early 1800s, despite the war and wartime blockades, the consumer boom for the well-off that had marked earlier decades continued. The result was a greater polarising of rich and poor: the former epitomised by the extravagant Prince of Wales and the gambling and drinking elite of London and fashionable watering holes; the latter by Luddites, impoverished workers who rebelled against machines designed to replace them and against enforced reduction of wages. When war ended in 1815, the ruling classes had little sense of how to cope with the problems of an increasingly divided and restless society and they responded to mass unemployment and the disastrous harvest of 1816 with stricter legislation. Their actions persuaded many that the ranks of society were no longer integrated but opposing. [...]

15

The Church of England is a felt presence in Jane Austen's life. She was the Anglican daughter of an Anglican clergyman, presumed to hold traditional views on the role of the Church in society. These would encompass both piety and social realism: a man's entering the Church could result from vocation or simply family tradition and interest. Austen accepted the divine mission and implication of the Church but also its worldly function as a national institution. In this combining of religion with the politically useful she was not far from the Scottish divine and rhetorician Hugh Blair, whose book of *Sermons*, mentioned with some irony in 'Catharine' and with less by Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, was one of the age's most read and appreciated works. Austen's distaste for the new movement of Evangelicalism (an enthusiastic tendency which emphasised conversion and an entirely different life in Christ, while seeking to interrupt the lax social harmony of the established Church) is boldly expressed in 1809 to Cassandra, 'I do not like the Evangelicals' (L, p. 170). By 1814, the year of *Mansfield Park*'s publication, however, she had qualified her distaste: 'I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals'; she was 'at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason & Feeling, must be happiest & safest' (L, p. 280). In the most ominous years of the Napoleonic War she had come to value Evangelicalism's seriousness, its implied critique of the triviality of many Anglican members and ministers. Yet her final two novels do not continue the critique, and the (equivocal) social ideal apparently vested in serious clergymen in *Mansfield Park* settles on working gentleman farmers in *Emma* and entrepreneurial sailors in *Persuasion*. Austen seems to have professed in her novels the kind of morality that grew from the accepted doctrines of the Church of England-- that human nature is always fallible, and that pain and difficulties help to create a soul-- but her books are not primarily religious ones like those of Hannah More and Jane West: they may show affliction but do not preach the need for it.

16
