*Chapter 1*

# Life and times

Jane Austen is one of the great writers of English literature because no reader and no period exhausts her books. Something always escapes from a reading while every reading enriches. Like the town of Lyme in *Persuasion*, the novels 'must be visited, and visited again'. In this respect the comparison with William Shakespeare, often made in the mid- to late nineteenth century, is apt. She shares with him, too, a rare crossover appeal, achieving both academic and popular status: the object of scholarly analysis and cult enthusiasm. Inevitably there is uneasiness across the boundary: the academy worries about studying work with such mass appeal, such easy intimacy with film and television, while the public has become irritated by the exploiting, deconstructing, abstracting, genderising, politicising, and sexualising of their heroine. Despite differing readerly anxieties, however, nobody can doubt that Jane Austen serves something of the Bible's former function: helping to make a shared community of reference for the literate English-speaker, her work insinuates itself into the way we think and talk – or wish to talk. This is a more visual than literary age, but for many of us Jane Austen's novels still function as the works of Radcliffe, Burney, Cowper, and Scott did for her heroines, saturating our minds and attitudes.

## Not a life of event

Her biography depends on written evidence outside her novels, for she is one of the least overtly autobiographical of authors: there is no female writer or witty older spinster in her works and no heroine who rejects marriage as she did or who lies on her sickbed mocking hypochondria. Almost all the information on Jane Austen comes from her family, mostly from letters written to her sister Cassandra, who selected some as souvenirs and rejected others, long before there was any notion of their being of any importance to the wider public; they begin in 1796 after the earliest works had been drafted. The letters are augmented by pious memoirs from her brother and nephew, the 'Biographical Notice' (1817) by Henry Austen and *A Memoir of Jane Austen*

(1870) by James Edward Austen Leigh, both of which stress the familial, constricted nature of her life and lack of romantic passion. Outside these sources, little is known of Austen compared to her celebrated contemporaries, Lord Byron or Percy Bysshe Shelley for example, whose daily, sometimes hourly, activities and thoughts are documented. As a result, much remains hidden, perhaps her most intimate aspects, and yet, as John Wiltshire has remarked, we have for Jane Austen 'a fantasy of access ... a dream of possession'.[1] Each generation makes a consistent image of the author, a new commodity in keeping with its own desires: the kindly spinster of the nineteenth century, the baulked romantic heroine of the twentieth, and the ambitious professional author of the present.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 into a web of family connections, which included on one side the rich and influential Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey and the Knights of Godmersham and on the other clerics and an apprentice milliner. Her father, George Austen, was a country rector of latitudinarian or liberal views in the village of Steventon in the southern English county of Hampshire, and her mother Cassandra (née Leigh), daughter of a former Fellow of Oxford's All Souls College, had aristocratic links. George Austen had obtained a parish through the interest of Thomas Knight, the rich husband of his second cousin. Later he acquired a second living at neighbouring Deane through his uncle Francis. Thomas Knight owned not only the Steventon living but also the manor of Steventon, with all its dependent houses and holdings. To the Austens he rented a nearby farm, with which George added about a third to his clerical income; together with his reliance on tithes, this must have given the family a keen interest in agriculture and agricultural improvements.[2] To augment his income still further, George took in well-to-do boys to prepare for university; by 1779 there were four pupils living at the rectory. While common for Anglican clergymen, such activity still suggests the rather insecure family status of George Austen, just on the edge of the gentry. It contributed to his daughter's lifelong concern for money and the nuances of class. Although less important than native intelligence and good sense, birth and breeding mattered: being a gentleman or a gentleman's daughter with the manners and mannerly attitudes implied.

George and Cassandra Austen were cultivated people. In his son Henry's words, George, with his library of over 500 books, was 'a profound scholar' with 'most exquisite taste', and Cassandra composed skilful comic verse on local people and events, a common pastime within her community. The pair had eight children. Beyond a handicapped boy who was sent from home to live in a neighbouring community (and is unmentioned in the 'Biographical Notice' and *Memoir*), the Austen sons did reasonably well: James followed his

father into the Steventon living; Edward was adopted by the rich Knight relatives, later changed his name to Knight, and inherited Godmersham Park, Chawton Manor, and Steventon, delivering an income somewhere between £10,000 and £15,000 a year; Francis and Charles entered the Royal Naval Academy as young boys, just under twelve years of age, and rose up the ranks during the long Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, ending as admirals through their impressive longevity (ninety-one and seventy-three respectively); after a time in the militia Henry became a banker and agent for the army until bankrupted in March 1816 by the post-war economic slump; then he entered the Church. By contrast, the two girls, Jane and her sister Cassandra, the elder by three years, had no professional opportunities and few chances of forming an independent income. While her father lived, Jane had only £20 a year to spend on herself and give to charity.

In much the same period, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft was complaining about the restricted lives of women. The only real 'work' that society seemed to sanction was the gaining of a husband and, when genteel, reasonably educated girls remained single, they were regarded as a drain on their families, used primarily to help nurture and nurse their married relatives. Austen accepted the inescapable fact of female dependency on men, and the anger of Wollstonecraft is not openly expressed in the novels, except perhaps by the occasionally melodramatic Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, who implicitly compares her lot as potential governess to that of a slave or prostitute, but the predicament haunts all the heroines. At the same time, the duty of care and social usefulness that devolved on so many daughters and sisters is not downplayed or diminished by its unprofessional standing.

At Easter 1783 the Austen girls were sent to Oxford to be tutored by Mrs Ann Cawley, who then took them to Southampton, a stay interrupted in the autumn by an outbreak of typhus from which Jane nearly died. There followed a couple of years of more formal instruction at Abbey House School in Reading, ruled by the eccentric Mrs La Tournelle, known for her cork leg and thespian obsessions. But it seems that the fees taxed the Austen parents and by the end of 1786 the sisters had returned to Steventon, where they were casually instructed within the family by an educated father, mother, and brothers – and more so by themselves. Jane seemed unperturbed by the informality: although she appreciated a well-stocked mind, especially for its conversational results, she had little respect for formal education, even for boys. In her novels fools could not become wise through education in facts; information without aptitude benefited no one, neither heroine nor author. When considering the lightness of *Pride and Prejudice*, she laughingly suggested she might have followed more educated writers by padding it out with

'an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte' (*L*, p. 203). Reading promiscuously, especially in fiction, she felt no need for 'enormous great stupid thick Quarto Volumes' (*L*, p. 206). Her own slim novels would not be history or comments on history, but the later ones would be aware of their place in history.

Financially dependent on their father, as they came to adulthood the two Austen daughters naturally contemplated a future of marriage as the 'pleasantest preservative from want' (*P&P*, 1:22). Neither sister achieved it: Cassandra became engaged to a clergyman who died in Jamaica from yellow fever, leaving her his fortune of £1,000, and, when she was twenty, Jane briefly flirted with a visitor from Ireland, Tom Lefroy, the nephew of her much-loved neighbour Madam Lefroy, who made sure the young man left before his relationship with a penniless girl became serious. Throughout their lives the sisters' closest relationship would be with each other. A great-niece, who knew only Cassandra, wrote that 'they were wedded to each other by the resemblance of their circumstances, and in truth there was an exclusiveness in their love such as only exists between husband and wife'.

Considering how much the Austens depended on the patronage and interest of their kin, it is not surprising that the network of family members impinged on Jane's life. Outside the immediate family group, one relative especially impressed her: Countess Eliza de Feuillide. Fourteen years older than Jane, Eliza was the daughter of George Austen's sister Philadelphia, who had gone to India to marry Tysoe Saul Hancock in 1753. They had one daughter, Eliza (rumoured to be the result of an affair with Warren Hastings, future Governor of Bengal, a rumour supported by his setting up a £10,000 trust fund for the child).[3] Eliza stayed for long periods in the Steventon parsonage, flirting with the Austen sons and much enjoying the theatricals in which they all indulged.[4] Through Eliza the French Revolution of 1789 impacted personally on the family. Eliza had married a French captain in the dragoons who styled himself the comte de Feuillide; during the Terror in February 1794 he was guillotined while his wife and son were in England. Three years later Eliza married Jane's favourite brother Henry and continued flirting, declaring she had 'an aversion to the word *husband* and never ma[d]e use of it'.[5] The glamorous countess may have influenced Austen's depiction of pretty, vivacious women, from the predatory Lady Susan and Mary Crawford to the sparkling Elizabeth Bennet.

From the age of eleven, probably earlier, Jane had been writing delicious, sometimes surreal stories and parodies to amuse her family – or, in Virginia Woolf's opinion 'everybody' – since 'even at that early age . . . Whatever she writes is finished and turned and set in its relation, not to the parsonage, but to the universe'.[6] The stories are full of anarchic fantasies of female power, licence,

illicit behaviour, and general high spirits. Drunkenness, incest, and serial killings routinely occur in speedy kaleidoscopic permutations, revealing even at this early stage Jane Austen's youthful awareness of the comic possibilities of language through absurd conjunctions: Lady Williams's 'handsome Jointure and the remains of a very handsome face' or the advice to beware of the 'unmeaning Luxuries of Bath and of the Stinking fish of Southampton' ('Jack and Alice' and 'Love and Freindship [*sic*]' (*J*, pp. 14 and 105)). Each work is self-consciously literary, mocking the idea of realism by exaggerating details of ordinary life, inflating current stylistic habits of hyperbole, and turning common plot devices into parodies of the adult reading to which, in her novel-addicted family, Jane Austen was exposed. These juvenile productions physically mimic the grown-up book: they are written out carefully in notebooks and provided with dedications to Martha Lloyd, 'Madame La Comtesse De Feuillide', and, of course, Cassandra.

At fourteen Jane Austen wrote the longest of these juvenile productions, 'Love and Freindship', a brilliant burlesque of popular sentimental novels. It took two girls through a series of absurd adventures in which, as in sentimental fiction, love and hate are sudden and absolute, female friendship immediate and excessive, familial relationships made and unmade, and emotional extremes paralleled only by the extreme nature of the happenings. While sentimental to the core, crying, fainting, palpitating, falling ill and dying, the central characters are entirely amoral, believing that sensation must triumph over commonsense morality and justify any act of theft or betrayal.

'Love & Freindship' was followed two years later by a work that foreshadowed the mature novels, 'Catharine, or The Bower', a rehearsal for 'Susan', which would in time become *Northanger Abbey*. In this story Austen created a principled, unsophisticated heroine of ordinary achievements, devoted to a fantasy life within a garden 'bower' and constrained by a maiden aunt to whom 'all gallantry was odious' and for whom any slight impropriety foretold the destruction of the kingdom. The manuscript ends before a concluding marriage – if that indeed was to be its end. 'Catharine' was succeeded by 'Lady Susan', probably written in 1794 but copied out later in about 1805, a more polished but less prefiguring work.[7] An epistolary *jeu d'esprit*, it was rooted in the eighteenth-century novel in letters, which suited the subject matter of a heroine manoeuvring within a world in which men control property and women make property of men. The female rake Lady Susan, a handsome, selfish widow with 'attractive Powers', enjoys her own energetic duplicity and knows that 'Consideration & Esteem as surely follow command of Language, as Admiration waits on Beauty' (*LM*, p. 30). Her schemes fail, but, like the jolly heroines of the burlesque juvenile pieces, she is left unabashed and unreformed, still very much 'herself'.

Throughout her life Jane Austen avoided ostentatious habits and what she called 'novel slang', adhering instead to plain writing and to commonsensical consequences in plots that are none the less tightly constructed. The new 'style of fiction' with which she was credited by Walter Scott in his review of her mature novel *Emma* is hinted at in the high-spirited burlesques and parodies of these Steventon days.[8]

From about 1795 Jane Austen was sketching out three full-length novels, clearly intended for more than family amusement. One of either 'First Impressions', an early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, or 'Elinor and Marianne', an early version of *Sense and Sensibility,* was in 1797 offered by her father to the publisher Thomas Cadell, who declined to see the manuscript. With their pictures of clever, sensitive sisters with not quite enough money and so a pressing but unacknowledged need to marry, both books seem to justify W. H. Auden's comic remarks:

> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
> An English spinster of the middle-class
> Describe the amorous effects of 'brass',
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society.[9]

They also convey need for affection and respect in marriage, as well as the subtle mutual love of siblings, all interacting with this 'economic basis'.

In 1800–1, in part to benefit his wife's health, George Austen appointed his son James as curate of Steventon, sold his farming lease, and proposed moving to Bath, where many water and electricity health treatments were on offer. There he, his wife, and two unmarried daughters could live comfortably in lodgings on the tithe income, which had appreciated during the last war-torn decade. Unconsulted about the decision, Jane is said to have fainted at the news, being, it is thought, appalled at the notion of separation from her childhood home, as well as the prospect of living in a crowded city.[10] Her letters of the time suggest a more ambivalent reaction. In January 1801, she wrote

> I get more & more reconciled to the idea of our removal. We have lived long enough in this Neighbourhood, the Basingstoke Balls are certainly on the decline, there is something interesting in the bustle of going away, & the prospect of spending future summers by the Sea or in Wales is very delightful . . . It must not be generally known however that I am not sacrificing a great deal in quitting the Country – or I can expect to inspire no tenderness, no interest, in those we leave behind. (*L*, p.68)

Her initial impression of the city that would be her home for the next five years is not recorded but in May 1801 she wrote to Cassandra that 'the first veiw of Bath in fine weather does not answer my expectations; I think I see more distinctly thro' Rain. – The sun was got behind everything, and the appearance of the place from the top of Kingsdown, was all vapour, shadow, smoke & confusion' (*L*, p. 82). She had enjoyed the prospect of hunting for lodgings, although she soon tired of walking round unsuitable or 'putrifying' houses. Finally they rented in Sydney Place, moving three years later to Green Park Buildings East.

So little is known of the Bath period of Austen's life that speculation flourishes: she is portrayed sometimes as profoundly unhappy, at others as busy and involved, as falling in love or giving up all hope of love outside the family. Two startling facts stand out. When nearly twenty-seven, on a visit back to Hampshire, she accepted the proposal of a wealthy young man, Harris Bigg-Wither, whom a few hours later she rejected. Five years her junior, he was the heir to a considerable property in her Steventon neighbourhood and the brother of her good friends. Another interesting event occurred in spring 1803 when her parody of gothic writing and conduct book novels, *Northanger Abbey*, then entitled 'Susan' and drafted probably in 1798–9, was sold for £10 to Benjamin Crosby & Co. The date suggests that Austen used the early part of her time in Bath to revise the third of the novels she had drafted in Steventon before the move. The book was not printed, however. Considering the level of much fiction published at the time it was a strange omission, caused, it has been surmised, by the astringency of the contents, although the practice of buying and delaying printing was not uncommon. Crosby had a financial interest in the popular gothic novelist Mrs Radcliffe and may not, on further thought, have wished to have her mocked in one of his productions.

About 1804 Austen began work on a new, harsher book, with more realistic touches than she had so far allowed herself. She wrote forty pages of *The Watsons*, graphically portraying the small humiliations involved in social sinking within a claustrophobic society. The story concerned four unmarried daughters of an ailing father with a small income: two are desperate husband-seekers, a third would be happy to remain single if she had an income, and a fourth, the more genteel Emma, returning from years spent with an affluent aunt, claims she would rather be a teacher than marry for money: later Emma was to have become dependent for 'a home on her narrow-minded sister-in-law and brother' (*FR*, p. 241). But, before Austen reached this point, she stopped writing. She did not return to the work, although it remained in her writing desk at her death, heavily corrected and not written out as a finished fair copy.

There are several possible reasons for her quitting. Since it occurred at about the time when she must have realised that 'Susan', like 'First Impressions' or 'Elinor and Marianne' before it, was not going to be published at any time soon, she might have felt demoralised. But, considering her later clear belief in the value of her writings, this is perhaps insufficient cause. Her nephew James Edward Austen Leigh, who gave the novel its title, claimed she stopped because the subject matter was 'unfavourable to the refinement of a lady', being set in too lowly a rank of life where 'poverty and obscurity' may easily degenerate into 'vulgarity'. A further possibility, entwined with this social anxiety, is that Jane Austen abandoned *The Watsons* when her life turned upside down with her father's death (the father in the novel was also a cleric). The new financial and social precariousness may have upset the writing of a novel with a heroine in similarly reduced circumstances but younger in age. In her letters of the period there is considerable, if ironic, bitterness about money and status: 'prepare you[rself] for the sight of a Sister sunk in poverty, that it may not overcome your Spirits', she wrote to Cassandra (*L*, p. 108). The plot of *The Watsons* – a delicately brought-up girl returning to her poorer family and facing the threat of economic hardship – would recur in *Mansfield Park*.

When George Austen died early in 1805 his Steventon living passed to his son James; the living of Deane was now lost to the Austen family. Consequently the three women, with an annual income of £210 between them, including the interest on Cassandra's legacy from her dead fiancé, faced a life of dependence on the young male Austens: James, Henry, and Francis each contributed £50 per annum to their upkeep, Edward offered another £100. Without this support, their situation would not have been far from that of the Bates women in *Emma*, also widow and daughter of a country clergyman – or indeed the Watson sisters one of whom notes, 'Female economy will do a great deal . . . but it cannot turn a small income into a large one' (*LM*, p. 116). The Austens gave up lodging in Green Park Buildings, and their friend Martha Lloyd, whose mother died three months after George, joined the household for both company and financial convenience. The arrangement was so successful that it continued for the next twenty years.

Between the death of George Austen in 1805 and Jane's arrival in Chawton in 1809 there is little evidence of creative activity. In summer 1806 the women travelled to Clifton near Bristol, from where they continued via Stoneleigh and Steventon to their journey's destination, Southampton, to set up house for a time in Castle Square with Jane's naval brother Francis and his new wife Mary. Whatever ambivalent feelings Jane had expressed about Bath on first arrival, she was glad not to return to the city: on 1 July 1808, she wrote, 'It will

be two years tomorrow since we left Bath for Clifton, with what happy feelings of Escape!' (*L*, p. 138). From Castle Square she made visits to Chawton Great House, Steventon, and her brother Henry's house in London; she also tasted luxury and ease for a few weeks at the mansion of Godmersham in Kent, owned by her brother Edward since 1798 (she visited less often than Cassandra, perhaps because this grand family was not entirely keen on a scribbling female relative). Whatever she was writing – and it is difficult to imagine her not writing – she emerged from these unsettled years a serious novelist with a wider range than she had commanded as a young girl in Steventon and, despite publishing setbacks, with a firm belief in her extraordinary talent.

In 1809, with expenses in Southampton rising, Mrs Austen, Jane, Cassandra, and Martha Lloyd were rescued by Edward, who, following the shock of his wife's death in October 1808 and the realisation that he was a widower with eleven children, offered his mother and sisters a free place to live in Chawton (now the Jane Austen museum): a cottage on the main road, with a flower and vegetable garden and pasturage for donkeys, situated close to his own extensive and often unoccupied manor. In this Hampshire village, never in want but never free from 'vulgar economy', the four women lived from then onwards a full family existence of visiting and being visited by siblings, nieces, and nephews.

Letters are full of trips to the country and London, where Jane went to parties, art galleries, and plays and indulged her fascination with dress and fashion, while grumbling over the exhausting shopping expeditions she made with her sister-in-law Eliza (although intensely interested in clothes, she was not keen on shopping for them). She never lost her enthusiasm for a city she once flippantly described as 'the Regions of Wit, Elegance, fashion, Elephants & Kangaroons' (*L*, p. 80).

In Chawton, despite the two publishing rebuffs, she began turning herself into a professional writer, joining the entrepreneurial intellectual classes burgeoning in the early nineteenth century.[11] From Southampton she had written to the publisher Crosby under the assumed name of Mrs Ashton Dennis, 'Authoress', stating that she assumed from the six-year delay in publishing that he had lost the manuscript of 'Susan' and suggesting she dispatch another copy. Crosby's son replied that she could have the manuscript back 'for the same as we paid for it' (*L*, pp. 174–5). She let the matter drop for the moment and began revising the other two Steventon drafts into *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the latter title possibly chosen because another fictional *First Impressions* (by Margaret Holford) had recently appeared in print. She was past the usual time for marriage and

had 'taken to the garb of middle age' prematurely; if her financial and social position were to improve, it would have to be through what she did best, what alone seemed possible in her circumstances: writing for money.[12] Combined with a spinsterhood shared with congenial female companions, it was not an unattractive future.

The cancelled and rewritten chapters of *Persuasion* (the only surviving manuscript of a novel published in or just after Austen's lifetime) support her brother's claim that his sister needed 'many perusals' before she was satisfied. She was not a writer achieving perfection at once but one who needed to try, accept or change, score out and rewrite. Her critical and editorial abilities equalled her creative; her judgement matched her inspiration. She wrote new novels while simultaneously revising ones started earlier, allowing the newer ones to gestate as she corrected and tinkered with the older. Plot items, situations, and character types recurred across novels, with significant differences, with more complexity, some added nuance. However, most striking is the fact that Austen could revise an early-conceived novel and write a later one while keeping intact the individual stylistic integrity of each. The Chawton novels – *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* – continue to be romances ending in marriage, but they raise questions of identity and responsibility, passion and selfhood that have no easy or definite answers, often suggesting in their conclusion other trajectories than those they provide; they leave a troubling sense of what might have been.

Much later her relatives and friends looked back on the Austen of the Chawton years. Although her works now seem less family affairs, more privately authored, Cassandra recalled lively debates over drafts, for with her alone Jane could talk 'freely of any work that she might have in hand'. Austen also discussed strategies with her favourite nieces, knowing they would enter into her 'pleasures of Vanity'. Her nephew James Edward remembered an altogether more 'mystic process' of writing, disturbed by their childhood mischief, which, as he stressed, never elicited 'any signs of impatience or irritability' in their novelist aunt (*FR*, p. 241; *Memoir*, p. 82). Meanwhile, Mary Russell Mitford repeated her mother's unflattering surprise over the transformation Jane Austen had undergone from the 'prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly' to the author of *Mansfield Park*, 'stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of "single blessedness" that ever existed'.[13]

Jane Austen entered the literary marketplace at a propitious time. Women novelists had been increasing in number throughout the eighteenth century and they actually formed a majority towards the end. Peter Garside has argued that, by the 1810s, 'the *publication* of Jane Austen's novels was