REVISED EDITION

CHRISTOPHER GILLIE

AUSTEN

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Chawton. The cottage belonged to Jane Austen's brother Edward. He gave it to the widowed Mrs Austen in 1809. The first four of Jane Austen's novels were published while she lived here, and she only left in 1817 when she moved to Winchester where in a few months she died.

A PREFACE TO AUSTEN

CHRISTOPHER GILLIE

REVISED EDITION

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To my daughter, Jane

Christopher Gillie is an Arts Tutor for the Open University having for a long period served Trinity Hall, Cambridge as a lecturer in English. Among other books he has compiled the *Longman Companion to English Literature* and in 1983 published the volume on E M Forster for the present series.

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Foreword

The centre of the world of Jane Austen lay in and near the county of Hampshire and had its outposts, usually for comparative purposes, in London, Lyme Regis, Bath and one or two areas not exactly on the map. All these locations are dominated by families, often obsessed with finance and the prospects of matrimonial alliances and occasionally alarmed by the unsatisfactory status of newcomers to the district. To accompany these observations she undoubtedly had notions of the appropriate architectural contexts though, as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner pointed out, she spent rather too little time in visualizing and verbalizing them. In this book we have provided one or two of such settings, but Christopher Gillie's main purpose has been to explore the social and moral themes that emerge from the conversations that provide the matrix of the novels. If they are social comedies they are shown to be also dramas of the conscience, the mind and the imagination that derive from the eighteenth-century situations and idioms which she recreated.

For the Revised Edition of this most successful study Mr Gillie has turned to several new and revealing topics and reviewed some of the most distinguished criticism and scholarship of the last decade. Social and political attitudes associated with the opening of the nineteenth century are prominently discussed on pages 59–61 and 99–101. A chronological table has been provided to help the reader define for himself the context of the popular and seminal novels associated always with her name. How we should read them today in order to understand the universal truths that nourish them is the preoccupation of the modern commentator, and to set these out in the most cogent manner has been Christopher Gillie's special concern in these pages.

MAURICE HUSSEY
General Editor

Maurice Hussey died suddenly in June 1991. The Publishers and author would like to pay tribute to his wisdom, inspiration and friendship as Editor of Preface Books. He will be sadly missed.

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Introduction

'What do you read, Mr Masson?' said Mrs Merry.
'Very little off my own line, Mrs Merry. Miss Austen is the novelist I read the most.'
'What do you think of her books, Mr Fletcher?' said Delia to Francis.
'I am afraid, Miss Bentley, that I have very little use for books written by ladies for ladies, if I may so express myself; though I dare say I should be the better for them.'
'Oh, no, you would not. You could not be,' said Bumpus.
'It is the other way round,' said Masson.

IVY COMPTON-BURNETT: *Pastors and Masters* (1925)

Ivy Compton-Burnett, from whose second novel this extract is taken, invariably set her stories at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of this one. The conversation suggests fairly enough Jane Austen's reputation at the time: she was admired by a literary elite, including Tennyson, Macaulay, George Lewes and George Eliot; she was despised by the solemn, the pompous, the obtuse and the humourless. But she was also enjoyed by very many who found in her an assured and reassuring world for escape from the restless questionings of their own.

In the twentieth century a change has come about; the novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett to some extent illustrates it. No other novelist of distinction carried the mark of Jane Austen's influence so clearly, and yet her novels are sharp, pitiless, pessimistic analyses of human relations. The change is further indicated by this sentence from an essay entitled 'Regulated hatred: an aspect of the work of Jane Austen,' by D. W. Harding, first published in 1940 in *Scrutiny*: 'Her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked: she is a literary classic of the society which attitudes like hers, held widely enough, would undermine.' How has this change come about—the change which has replaced Jane Austen the tranquillizer for the overstressed by Jane Austen the 'truth-teller' as Laurence Lerner has designated her?

Although she had discriminating admirers in the nineteenth century, none of them seems fully to have realized the subtlety and depth of her art, nor the perfection she brought to the novel form, which was to prove the chief vehicle of imaginative expression of the Victorian age. This is partly intelligible if we remember that she also culminated the eighteenth century art of fiction, and her six novels show some typically eighteenth-century assumptions about

society and about attitudes to human nature. The Victorians abandoned and often despised many of these assumptions, which involved a static view of the social order while they were deeply preoccupied by change, and an ironic, illusionless conception of human nature which they were apt to interpret as moral shallowness or cynicism. Cynicism is indeed the charge which many Victorians would have made about many of our own attitudes, and in this respect our temper of mind is closer to Jane Austen's than it is to theirs; this is perhaps the principal reason why most of the valuable Jane Austen criticism has been produced in the last half century. But in regard to her static view of society, it is by no means the case that she was incapable of any other: I end this book by suggesting that had she lived the normal term, she might have become the first of the great Victorian novelists.

Yet this would not necessarily have meant that we should now admire her later work even more than her earlier. What has caused critics of the twentieth century to recognize the true greatness of the work which she accomplished is a sense of its unusual modernity. This is an effect of the alertness of her consciousness. Whatever our terrible shortcomings, we have learned from our characteristic thinkers—our psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists—that survival depends on how well we can understand ourselves, and that our understanding depends on what we can observe, on how well we can interpret the evidence, and on how far we can relate the different categories of evidence to one another. The novelists have had an important part in forming this modern consciousness because they give us an image of social man in which we can imaginatively participate, not merely facts available only to our analysis. Jane Austen was the first in our language to understand this novelistic function with full clarity, and few have understood it better since.

Part One
Biographical Background

Chronological Table

	LIFE AND WORKS	RELEVANT BACKGROUND
1764	George Austen (1731–1805) marries Cassandra Leigh (1739–1827). He is the rector of Steventon, Hampshire, in the gift of his relative Thomas Knight with estates in Hampshire and Kent.	
1775	16 December: Jane Austen born. Seventh of eight children: James (1765–1819); George (1766–1838); Edward (1768–1852); Henry (1771–1850); Cassandra (1773–1845); Francis (1774–1865); Charles (1779–1852).	Sheridan: *The Rivals*
1776		Adam Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*
1777		Henry Mackenzie: *Julia de Roubigné* Hannah More: *Percy* (a tragedy)
1778		Fanny Burney: *Evelina* Sheridan: *The School for Scandal*
1779		William Cowper: *The Olney Hymns*
1780		Samuel Johnson: *Lives of the Poets*
1781	An Austen cousin, Elizabeth Hancock, marries the Comte de Feuillide.	Rousseau: *Confessions*
1782		Burney: *Cecilia*
1783	Jane and Cassandra sent to school with Mrs Cawley, widow of the Principal of Brasenose, Oxford. School transferred to Southampton. Jane nearly dies of putrid fever.	End of American War of Independence George Crabbe: *The Village*

1784	Jane and Cassandra sent to Abbey School, Reading, under Mrs Latournelle.	Cowper: *The Task* Death of Samuel Johnson
1785	Education continued informally at home. Learns French, some Italian, the piano, and reads English literature extensively.	
1787	Family theatricals (including *The Rivals*) in the Steventon barn. Jane begins to write sketches.	
1789		Beginning of French Revolution
1790	*Love and Freindship.*	Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the French Revolution*
1791	Edward marries Elizabeth Bridges. The *History of England.*	Thomas Paine: *Rights of Man* I
1792	James marries Anne Mathew. *Evelyn, Catharine,* etc.	Paine: *Rights of Man* II Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
1793		William Godwin: *Political Justice* War with France; French Reign of Terror under the Jacobins
1794	Elizabeth de Feuillide's husband guillotined in France. Jane working at *Lady Susan.*	Mrs Radcliffe: *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Godwin: *Caleb Williams*
1795	Death of James's first wife. Cassandra engaged to Thomas Fowle.	The Directory takes over the government of France
1796–8	Jane working at *Elinor and Marianne* (later *Sense and Sensibility*); *Susan* (later *Northanger Abbey*); *First Impressions* (later *Pride and Prejudice*).	Burney: *Camilla* Robert Bage: *Hermsprong* William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge: *Lyrical Ballads*

1797	Death of Cassandra's fiancé, Thomas Fowle. James marries Mary Lloyd. Edward inherits Kent and Hampshire estates from Thomas Knight. Henry m. Elizabeth de F.	
1799	Mrs Austen's sister-in-law, Mrs Leigh Perrot, arrested for shoplifting in Bath. Acquitted.	
1800	Jane seems to have had a brief romance with a gentleman met at Sidmouth; he dies soon after.	Death of Cowper Maria Edgeworth: *Castle Rackrent*
1801		Edgeworth: *Belinda*
1802	Jane receives a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg Wither; she accepts him but withdraws the next morning.	Peace of Amiens Walter Scott: *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*
1803	Sells the ms of *Northanger Abbey* for £10 to Crosby in expectation of publication.	War with France renewed
1804	Visits Lyme Regis. Begins *The Watsons* (perhaps an early draft of *Emma*). The death of Mrs Lefroy, Jane's best friend.	Napoleon declared Emperor of France
1805	Death of Jane's father. Mrs Austen and her daughters move to Southampton.	Battle of Trafalgar Scott: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*
1807	Charles marries Fanny Palmer.	Madame de Staël: *Corinne* Crabbe: *The Parish Register* Abolition of slave trade
1808		Scott: *Marmion* Beginning of Peninsular War
1809	Mrs Austen and her daughters move to Chawton in Hampshire, on Edward's estate. Crosby returns the unpublished ms of *Northanger Abbey*.	Hannah More: *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* Death of Sir John Moore in Spain
1810		Scott: *The Lady of the Lake* Crabbe: *The Borough*

1811	*Sense and Sensibility* published: 'a novel by a Lady'.	
1812	*Pride and Prejudice* sent to publishers; *Mansfield Park* begun.	Byron: *Childe Harold* Crabbe: *Tales*; Napoleon invades Russia
1813	*Pride and Prejudice* published; well received. Jane's last visit to Edward at Godmersham.	Southey: *Life of Nelson*
1814	*Mansfield Park* published; *Emma* begun.	Restoration of the Bourbons in France Scott: *Waverley*
1815	Jane Austen in London with Henry; the Prince Regent orders his librarian, James Clarke, to give her every attention. *Emma* consequently dedicated to the Prince Regent.	Battle of Waterloo Scott: *Guy Mannering*
1816	*Emma* published. Walter Scott's essay on Jane Austen in the *Quarterly Review*.	Byron: *The Prisoner of Chillon* Scott: *The Antiquary*; *Old Mortality*
1817	*Persuasion* completed and 'put upon the shelf for the present'. Jane Austen, having contracted Addison's disease, moves to Winchester for better medical attention. Dies on 18 July.	John Keats: *Poems*
1818	Publication posthumously of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.	Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*

Silhouettes of Jane Austen's parents, the Reverend George Austen and his wife, formerly Cassandra Leigh. Profiles in silhouette were in Jane Austen's day the equivalent of the modern photographic portrait.

1 Character and Family Background

One of the most misleading facts that are widely known about Jane Austen is that her life was what is called 'uneventful'. Her biography can indeed be quickly summarized.

She was born on 16 December 1775, at her father's rectory at Steventon in Hampshire, the seventh in a family of eight children. She lived with her parents until the death of her father in 1805, and then with her mother until the year of her own death. The household moved from Steventon to Bath in 1801, from Bath to Southampton in 1806, from Southampton to the Hampshire village of Chawton in 1809. Every change of address represents, on the whole, a downward social direction. She died on 18 July 1817, in Winchester, where she and her sister Cassandra had taken lodgings so as to be near her doctor. Her death seems to have been due to a then obscure illness called Addison's Disease. She visited other places, including London and a number of country houses, but she scarcely left the south of England. She and her sister attended boarding-schools at Oxford, Southampton and Reading when she was between the ages of seven and nine, but she received most of her education at home. She never married, though she received at least one proposal; she may have had at least one love affair, but little is known about it except that it was not connected with the proposal. She seems to have had no direct relationships with any of the famous men and women of her time, unless we call the royal invitation to dedicate one of her novels to the Prince Regent a direct relationship. The memorable events seem to have been the publication of the novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815); after her death, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, in December 1817.

What, apart from the novels, could appear more commonplace? And for that matter what could be more commonplace than the events in those novels? And yet, as novels, they are so far from being ordinary or commonplace that few by other writers contain so much quickness of life so well sustained. We do not judge them, of course, by the amount of shock they produce in the nervous system, but by their luminousness. Correspondingly, the facts about Jane Austen's life illuminate her art only in so far as we seek in them what is illuminating, not what is glamorous or startling.

To begin with the large family of which she was a member. The father, George Austen, came from stock which dated itself back to the class of medieval clothiers which were known as 'the Grey Coats of Kent'—'a body so numerous and united that at county elections whoever had their vote and interest was almost certain of being