CHAPTER 2

Conscripting Gentle Jane: Getting the Austen Treatment in the Great War

David Owen

The trench combatants of the First World War probably read anything they could; and if ever they had the luxury of choice, they would surely have selected writing that, however momentarily, took them away from the horror of their circumstances. Amongst the authors whose works British soldiers appear to have read is Jane Austen. Indeed, Austen's novels also formed part of the therapy that some wounded soldiers received in British hospitals. This chapter assesses what aspects of these works might have appealed to such readers and what underlying ideas led to this application of Austen. A tendentious use of a now-canonical writer emerges. For soldiers, the apparent tranquillity of Austen's world was a reminder of calm, order and decency. For military authorities, Austen's works were a timely injection of an ideal 'England' whose values and virtue needed to be re-instilled in those expected to sacrifice their lives to it.

Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire, O still, small voice of calm

When talking of Austen and War, it is now almost conventional to cite the letter from the historian (and jurist) Frederic Harrison to Thomas Hardy, late in 1913 and on the very eve of the First World War, in which Austen is accused of being 'a rather heartless little cynic [...] penning satires about her neighbours whilst the Dynasts were tearing the world to pieces and consigning millions to their graves' (in Kent 1989: 59). And it is perhaps now equally conventional—at least in the ambit of Austen Studies—to point out how significantly this view misunderstands or ignores the submerged, subliminal and indirect manner in which Austen engages with questions of war (what exactly were all those uniformed young men quartered together for up in Meryton? How is it that Captain Frederick Wentworth comes home such a financial catch from his ocean exploits?).

1 John Greenleaf Whittier, ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind’ (1884).
2 A more sympathetic version of this view, though one that essentially makes the same point, is that voiced by Virginia Woolf. Referring both to Scott and Austen, she observes that ‘neither of them in all their novels mentioned the Napoleonic wars. This shows that their model, their vision of human life, was not disturbed or agitated or changed by war’ (1975: 130–131).
The most elegant and informative rebuttal of Harrison that I know of is Christopher Kent’s ‘Learning History with, and from, Jane Austen’,3 which deftly reveals the extent of this misunderstanding and points to far more constructive ways of reading the novelist’s handling of warfare (among other issues). His views show us that, not unexpectedly, our own position—privileged as it is by decades of literary research and debate—takes us in very different interpretative directions to those of earlier readers.

But even accepting that there must have been many other critical ideas on Austen than Harrison’s visceral defenestration, it is equally clear that, at the time of the Great War, she would also have been appreciated by general readers in markedly different ways from those of the readers of today. Yet any reliable access to just how Austen may have been understood widely and generally over a century ago is surely a hopeless task.4 Today’s blogosphere and online-bookseller reviews will doubtless provide future researchers with a wealth of reader-response insight into our own times, from the trivial and partial through to the dispassionate and judicial, but—looking back to the First World War—we are almost entirely bereft of such information. Instead, if we want to glean anything at all meaningful with respect to views on Austen and on her work, all we really have left to us is professional critical response (which accelerated dramatically post-1870 with the publication of her nephew’s hagiographic Memoirs of Jane Austen) and, largely as a part of that same critical response, the various opinions expressed in the almost notorious Janeite/Anti-Janeite debate,5 if that is what we should call it, which would rage up to, and indeed go well beyond, the Great War.

---

3 See Jane Austen’s Beginnings (Grey 1989: 59–72).
4 However, see Johnson’s Jane Austen’s Cults and Cultures (2012: 100–111) for a discussion of contemporary reflections on Austen by (among others) Reginald Farrer in his The Void of War: Letters from Three Fronts (1918). For additional approaches and discussion, see Favret’s ‘Reading Jane Austen in Wartime’ (2008).
5 The term ‘Janeite’ is generally agreed to have been coined by George Saintsbury (Trott 2005: 94, in reference to the OED), who used it in 1894 in his introduction to an edition of Pride and Prejudice, though it is perfectly possible that it was in less formal currency prior to this. Certainly, the notion of Austen devotees pre-existed the nomenclature. Brian Southam traces the origins of what would become the Janeite/Anti-Janeite division to the early 1830s (1986: 237), and it had become a fairly consolidated fault-line in both popular and critical opinion by the end of the century. Essentially, readers who identified themselves as ‘Janeites’ were (often self-admittedly) visceral in the nature of their approval of Austen’s work; ‘anti-Janeites’, on the other hand, though usually not challenging the literary quality of Austen’s novels, drew attention to what they saw as a certain ‘suspension’ of critical insight in Janeite approbation. Southam (op. cit. 239) cites S.F. Malden’s late-Victorian study (Jane Austen 1889: 210)