

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Tomalin was born in London in 1933 of a French father and an English mother, and was educated at Newnham College, Cambridge. She has worked in publishing and journalism all her life, becoming literary editor first of the *New Statesman* and then of the *Sunday Times*, which she left in 1986. She is also the author of *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, which won the Whitbread First Book Prize for 1974; *Stelley and His World* (reissued by Penguin in 1992); *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (Penguin 1988), a biography of the modernist writer on whom she also based her 1991 play *The Winter Wife*; the highly-acclaimed *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (Penguin 1991), which won the NCR Book Award for 1991, as well as the Hawthornden Prize and the 1990 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography; *Mrs Jordan's Profession* (Penguin 1995), a study of the Regency actress; and, recently, *Several Strangers: Writing from Three Decades* (Viking 1999).

CLAIRE TOMALIN

Jane Austen

A Life



PENGUIN BOOKS

At Chawton

Chawton village, a dozy place startled into attention several times a day by the clatter of rapid coach traffic through its centre, stood where three roads met: to the north, Alton and London; to the south, Winchester if you followed one fork, Gosport along the other. The Austens' cottage was on the corner at the divide, so close to the road that the beds in the front rooms upstairs were sometimes shaken by the six-horse coaches that thundered past. Slower carriages allowed curious passengers to see into the rooms. 'I heard of the Chawton Party looking very comfortable at Breakfast, from a gentleman who was travelling by their door in a Post-chaise,' Mrs Knight wrote to Fanny soon after Mrs Austen had moved in.¹ She liked to look out at the village street, and often sat by the sunny dining-room window to enjoy whatever it offered by way of entertainment.² Jane also amused herself with the passing traffic: at the start of the Winchester term she observed 'a countless number of Postchaises full of Boys pass yesterday mornng - full of future Heroes, Legislators, Fools and Villains'.

The house was L-shaped, of red brick, at least a hundred years old, and probably built as a posting inn; there were two main storeys, and attics above under the tiled roof. Opposite it, between the fork in the roads, was a wide shallow pond, and at the back a 'pleasant irregular mixture of hedgerow, and grass, and gravel walk and long grass for mowing, and orchard, which I imagine arose from two or three little enclosures having been thrown together, and arranged as best might be, for ladies' occupation', according to Jane's niece Caroline, who knew the place well.³ There was a kitchen garden, a yard and generous outbuildings. The church, the rectory and Chawton House were ten minutes' walk away along the Gosport road.

Something like sixty families lived in the village, almost all labourers on Edward's farms and woodlands. They naturally held their employer's mother and sisters in great respect, and carried out work for them on his orders, digging the garden, for instance, and chopping firewood. The ladies in return taught some of the village children to read, and made clothes for the needy, of whom there were a great many in those increasingly needy times; the altogether destitute were maintained from the poor rates. The Austen ladies also extended kindness to another sort of villager in the shape of Miss Benn, sister of a poor clergyman with too much family and too little income to help her, and reduced to renting a labourer's cottage. 'Poor Miss Benn' appears very much oftener in Jane's letters than their few better-off neighbours; she was not very interesting, but then nor were they.

Before the ladies arrived, Edward had the plumbing renewed for them. This did not mean indoor sanitation, of course; some town houses had water closets by then - Henry's and Eliza's, perhaps - but you did not expect the luxury of piped water in a country cottage. An improved pump at the back, and a better cess pit for the privy, well away from the house, would be enough. Some structural alterations were also carried out; however much Mrs Austen liked looking out at the passing world, it was thought better to have the front drawing-room window blocked, replaced by a large and pretty Gothic one on the garden side. The ceilings were low and roughly finished, and none of the bedrooms large, but it was furnished comfortably enough, or at least to the standard of an ordinary country parsonage: this is again according to Caroline.

Mrs Austen and Martha each had a bedroom to themselves, and there was a 'Best Bedroom' kept for guests; family tradition says that Jane continued to share with Cassandra, as they had done at Steventon.⁴ Their bedroom was one with a fireplace beside which you could sit comfortably in an armchair in your dressing-gown; and two beds, as at Steventon.⁵ We find it surprising that Jane did not want to be alone, claiming the privacy that seems appropriate to a writer; especially since she had often enjoyed a room of her own during the many periods when she and Cass were separated. But sisters can become couples, as dependent on the companionable chat of bedtime as husband and wife; Jane described to Anna how she read aloud to Cassandra 'in our room at night, while we undressed'.⁶

No doubt they also found pleasure in playing the game of contrasting personalities. I knew two middle-aged sisters who, in the innocent days of the 1950s, explained to my mother in so many words that they thought of themselves as being like husband and wife; the elder went out to work wearing a suit, the younger preferred flower-printed dresses and took charge of their house and garden. They were certainly sisters, and not lesbian companions, and had evolved their own way of living which both found quite satisfactory. Neither Jane nor Cassandra adopted a masculine role – they had too many brothers to compete with to allow that – but they enjoyed their complementarity. 'I know your starched notions,' Jane teased Cassandra. To the younger generation, Jane was not the prickly person who appears in many letters but the warm and lively aunt, while Cass was 'colder and calmer'. Where Cass was prim, even dull, Jane was always ready to entertain them. Where Cass gave her niece Fanny a lecture on astronomy which left her with a headache, Jane laughed over a silly story with Anna, and Cass 'would exclaim at our folly'.⁷ Their different roles were known and understood within the family.

And Cassandra knew how to leave Jane alone. Jane got up first, and went downstairs to her piano before anyone was about. The piano was an early acquisition at Chawton, and must have stood in the drawing room, at the end of the house, out of earshot of the main bedrooms. While she practised, or simply thought, or wrote, a maid laid the fire in the dining room and filled the kettle. Then Jane prepared the nine o'clock breakfast for the rest of the family. That was, by agreement, her only household responsibility beyond keeping the key of the wine cupboard, and, since breakfast was nothing more than tea and toast, both made on the dining-room fire, it was not a demanding one. In this way she was privileged with a general exemption from domestic chores when Cass and Martha were at home – almost as a man was privileged. They took responsibility for all the arrangements for the other meals of the day, the morning snack and the late-afternoon dinner; Martha's recipe book has survived, with its soups, cakes, cheese puddings and vegetable pies.⁸ There was a cook – she was paid £8 a year – but the planning and a good deal of the work must have been in the hands of the ladies.⁹ Mrs Austen was now also relieved of being housekeeper-in-chief, and gladly gave

herself to the garden. Her granddaughter Anna described her at work there: 'She dug up her own potatoes, and I have no doubt she planted them, for the kitchen garden was as much her delight as the flower borders, and I have heard my mother say that when at work, she wore a green round frock like a day-labourer's.'¹⁰ Mrs Austen in her seventies, dressed as a labourer and putting in potatoes, must have been one of the sights of Chawton.

The Austens did not enter into the social life around Chawton as they had at Steventon. There were no dances and few dinners, and they remained largely withdrawn into their private activities, except when enlivened by family visits. 'Our small family party has been but seldom enlarged by friends or neighbours,' reported Cassandra to Cousin Phila after the Christmas season of 1811.¹¹ Frank had moved his wife and baby to be near them again while he sailed the China seas, and his second child was born at Rose Tree Cottage on the Alton road just after they moved in. Because the baby was a boy, Jane wrote a congratulatory poem to Francis; she was conventional enough to feel he mattered more than his elder sister. The verses began, 'My dearest Frank, I wish you joy / Of Mary's safety with a Boy, / Whose birth has given little pain / Compared with that of Mary Jane'. The reference to pain suggests she may again have been in attendance at the birth; and from now on, with a sense of the ordeal of childbirth made more sensitive also by Elizabeth's death, she is more inclined to write pityingly of married women. But she never criticizes her brothers.

At the end of the verse epistle she wrote of her pleasure in their new home:

how much we find

Already in it, to our mind;

And how convinced, that when complete

It will all other Houses beat,

That ever have been made or mended,

With rooms concise, or rooms distended.

The metaphor is brilliantly surprising with its suggestion of rooms as living tissue to be cut short or swollen; we have all seen concise bathrooms and distended kitchens.

Some old neighbours turned up at Chawton, and there was news

of others. Harry Digweed from Steventon had married a Dummer girl, Jane Terry, and moved to Alton. Jane was ferociously condescending about them, the more so when her niece Anna, James's daughter, aged only sixteen, declared her determination to marry Mrs Digweed's brother, Michael Terry, a shy clergyman in his mid-thirties. It was a classic case of the girl who feels bored and unwanted at home rushing into the first love affair that comes along, and it fizzled out after her father had given his reluctant permission for the engagement. She was invited to Godmersham, and Mr Terry travelled to Kent to visit her, and won the approval of Fanny and her father; but on returning home Anna announced she had changed her mind. This annoyed her father and stepmother as much as the original engagement, and she was sent to spend three months at Chawton with her grandmother and aunts in the summer of 1810. Officially, she was in disgrace; in truth, she enjoyed herself and was better entertained than at Steventon.

Jane kept up regular contact with the Biggs; Alethea's nephew William Heathcote and her nephew James-Edward were close friends and went to Winchester together. Through James and Mary as well as through Manydown came news of the Chutes, the Portsmouths, Harwoods, Bramstons and Lefroys. Jane was not much better pleased with Anna's second engagement than with her first, this time to Benjamin Lefroy, the youngest son of her old friend. 'There was *that* about her which kept us in constant preparation for something,' as her aunt wrote, sounding as though the whole family were nervous of what Anna, attractive, wayward and unpredictable, might do next, if not with one young man, then with another. Fifteen years had gone by since Jane herself set out to shock the neighbours by her behaviour with Benjamin Lefroy's cousin, and there must have been some consciousness of this at the back of her mind even as she made her aunt-like pronouncements about the ill-matched temperaments of Ben and Anna, he a solitary with a 'queerness of Temper', she gregarious and unsteady. Anna's alleged unsteadiness disappeared entirely when she became a married woman; and Jane herself had, after all, broken off an engagement. You wonder if the aunt's occasional asperities towards her clever, charming niece are tinged, however faintly, by regrets for her lost Lefroy.

Chawton, July 26. - 1809.

My dearest Frank, I wish you joy
 of Mary's safety with a Boy,
 whose little has given little pain
 Compared with that of Mary Jane.
 May he a growing blessing prove,
 And well deserve his Parents' Love!
 Endow'd with Ad's & Nature's Good,
 Thy Grace poppling with thy Blood,
 In him, in all his ways, may see
 Another James William see!
 Thy infant days may be inherit,
 Thy warmth, thy wisdom of spirit,
 He would not with one fault dispense
 To weaken the resemblance.
 May he receive thy Nancy's sin,
 Peeping as daringly within,
 His curly locks but just descide,
 With 'Tut, my he not come to hide.
 Scaly of danger, bearing pain,
 And threaten'd very oft in vain,
 Still may one terror daunt his soul,
 One dreadful engine of Control

The poem by Jane Austen to her brother Frank on the birth
 of his son

When Ben Lefroy turned down a curacy on the grounds that he was not sure about taking orders, the family was enraged; he told his future father-in-law he would have to give up the engagement rather than be pushed into the curacy. James complained about this during one of his frequent visits to Chawton, made on horseback, alone and across country, as he most enjoyed travelling. Occasionally he brought a poem for them to read. In 1812 there was 'Selborne Hanger':

Who talks of rational delight

When Selborne's Hill appears in sight

And does not think of Gilbert White?

... Oh could my rude and artless lay

Such sweet attractive charms display . . .

Nè'er would I seek fictitious theme . . .

As far as we know, James never did seek a fictitious theme after his early efforts in *The Letter*; and about these he now spoke slightly.¹² He does not appear to have offered encouragement to his sister in her writing, although he did later respond warmly to *Mansfield Park*.¹³ When he composed his memorial lines to her they were full of love and praise for her character, but remote about the quality and content of her writing. He commended her for not giving offence in spite of her eye for the ridiculous, and for keeping up her share of domestic work while she wrote; also for not succumbing to the vanity or pride that afflicts authors.¹⁴ In another late poem he singled out Scott as a novelist, but did not mention her. All this suggests a somewhat ambiguous reaction from the eldest son, who considered himself the writer of the family, towards the little sister, who claimed the territory from him and used it to produce – well, only novels: 'only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language'. The passage in defence of the novel in *Northanger Abbey* has the ring of personal argument; it also loyally singles out two other women novelists, Burney and Edgeworth, for praise. Whether James and Jane ever discussed the subject of women's fiction openly or not, there are the elements of a debate in their respective writings.

Henry's visits were as likely to be impromptu as announced; he would arrive in his curricle or gig to see his bank partner in the High Street in Alton, and then take one of his sisters for an outing to Selborne or Petersfield. Edward came from Kent in the autumns of 1809 and 1810 and the spring of 1812, with Fanny, now his indispensable companion, so devotedly did she take on her mother's role; they divided their time between Chawton and Steventon, went to Alton Fair, took the boys to Winchester and were invited to dinner at The Vyne.¹⁵ Fanny was always glad to return to Kent, but he found these Hampshire visits so congenial that he decided not to re-let Chawton House when the present tenants' lease expired, but to keep it for family use.

Charles, still in the Atlantic – he did not return to England until 1811 – sent news of his two Bermuda-born daughters and asked his sisters to stand as godmothers. Frank arrived home in July 1810 to see his son for the first time. In the public sphere he received formal thanks from the Admiralty for his effective command at sea; and from the East India Company a thousand guineas and some silver-plate for bringing back 'Treasure' from China to England. Like Warren Hastings, Frank was a pragmatist who worked with high efficiency within the conventions he found and did not think of trying to change them. He had joined the navy to make money as well as to serve the country, and could well take the view that carrying bullion for the East India Company was one way of serving his country. These were in fact his last dealings with the Company; he went on to serve in the North Sea, fighting the Americans in the war that broke out in 1812, and later escorting convoys in the Baltic. Mary bore him a second son in 1811.

All this family business stirs in the letters of aunt, sister, godmother and good village lady. The other life was stirring too, entirely apart from Chawton and her brothers' careers and children: Jane Austen managed the day-to-day routines of a novelist with an efficiency and discipline worthy of her naval brothers. The famous account of her working habits, given by her nephew, credits her with almost miraculous powers in stopping and starting under interruption.

She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was coming.¹⁶

The picture is admirable, exasperating, painful; and can be only half true. How she juggled with revisions under such circumstances becomes especially mysterious; neat and dextrous as she was, she could not go through a complete manuscript of *Sense and Sensibility*, making changes and rewriting, with only single sheets of paper under her blotter. There must have been times when the other inhabitants of the cottage protected her silence and privacy with something more effective than the creaking door. There was after all no reason why she should not have worked upstairs, or in the early morning during her piano-practising time.¹⁷

Encouragement and practical help came from Henry. In the last months of 1810 the publisher Thomas Egerton of the Military Library, Whitehall, agreed to publish *Sense and Sensibility*. Henry's army connections may have helped to make the deal, but Egerton was not enthusiastic enough to take any risk when an ex-officer offered him a manuscript by an anonymous lady. He merely agreed to publish on commission, which meant the author paid for the printing, plus something for advertising and distribution, and kept the copyright. 'Printed for the Author' states the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*: Henry and Eliza's money paid for the printing.¹⁸ And in March he and Eliza welcomed her to Sloane Street again, where she began to correct her proofs.

At this point Jane Austen hoped the book would appear in June. The immediate family, and friends as close as Mrs Knight, were in the know—Jane expected her benefactress to like at least the character of Elinor—but she begged them to preserve strict secrecy as to her authorship. A fellow novelist, Mary Brunton, publishing at the same time, told a friend why she would not consider letting her name be known to the public: 'To be pointed at—to be noticed & commented upon—to be suspected of literary airs—to be shunned, as literary

women are, by the more unpretending of my own sex: & abhorred, as literary women are, by the more pretending of the other!—My dear, I would sooner exhibit as a rope-dancer.'¹⁹

A lady naturally avoided any public notice; but the intensity of Jane Austen's feelings about seeing her work in print after so many years was overwhelming. 'No indeed, I am never too busy to think of S&S,' she told Cassandra, 'I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child.' It is the rejoicing, vulnerable voice so rarely heard in her letters; much closer to Marianne's voice than Elinor's, and not unlike the one prompted by Tom Lefroy fifteen years earlier. Like every writer, Jane was frightened of the world's response; at the same time her book was the child of her heart; and she must have known in her heart that it was good.

The end of April came and the printer had reached only Chapter 9 and Willoughby's first appearance, not even the end of the first volume. Henry was hurrying him as best he could, but he was about to go away on business. No matter, Eliza would act for him: 'It will not stand still during his absence, it will be sent to Eliza.' The acknowledgement of Eliza's concern with the printing of the book, able to take over Henry's role, and judged reliable to Jane, is important; as the printing went on slowly, the sister-cousins had a common interest and purpose. They had always been friends; now their friendship acquired an extra dimension, and they made plans for Eliza to come to Hampshire for a fortnight's visit in the summer.

Sense and Sensibility was advertised on 31 October 1811 in the *Morning Chronicle* as 'a New Novel by a Lady—'. A week later another advertisement called it an 'Extraordinary Novel!' and at the end of November it had become, in the way of newspaper announcements, 'Interesting Novel by Lady A—'. Who could the mysterious Lady A—be? She was good for publicity purposes at any rate. Publication dates were no more exact then than now, and the number of copies printed is not known but is not likely to have been more than 1,000; the three-volume edition sold for fifteen shillings. It sold out by the summer of 1813, and made Jane a profit of £140. The importance to her of this first money she had earned for herself can be best appreciated by women who have endured a similar dependence. It signified not only success, however modest, but freedom; now she

could decide one or two things for herself. She could give presents and plan journeys. A fixed order had been moved.

Well before *Sense and Sensibility* sold out, Egerton saw that it was a success and was ready to buy her next work. There were favourable reviews, well meant if leadenly worded: 'very pleasing and entertaining' and 'well written; the characters are in genteel life, naturally drawn, and judiciously supported. The incidents are probable, and highly pleasing, and interesting; the conclusion such as the reader must wish it should be'.²⁰ Still more important, it had taken the fancy of the *beau monde*, the people whose taste and opinions were most influential, and was passed round at dinner tables and in letters to friends and lovers. Lady Bessborough, clever and sharp as a pin, friend of Sheridan and the Prince of Wales and sister of the late Duchess of Devonshire, had the perception to complain that it ended 'stupidly', but she was greatly amused by it. Little Princess Charlotte, next in line to the throne, sixteen years old and simultaneously neglected and quarrelled over by her parents, the Prince Regent and his estranged wife Caroline, felt that 'Maryanne & me are very alike in disposition, that certainly I am not so good, the same imprudence, &c however remain very like. I must say it interested me much.'²¹ The family of Lord Holland was delighted with it too, judging from the remark of his eldest son, who told Charles Austen a few years later that 'nothing had come out for years to be compared with "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility"'.²²

Egerton was prepared to pay for the copyright of *Pride and Prejudice*. He offered £110 and, although Jane had hoped for £150, she accepted, no doubt on Henry's advice. This was in November 1812. Copyright at that date was in any case not as it is today; it lasted for only fourteen years, extended for another fourteen if the author were living. 'It's being sold will I hope be a great saving of Trouble to Henry, & therefore must be welcome to me,' Jane wrote to Martha; it meant he did not have to advance money. To Cass she again called the new book 'my own darling Child'. It was advertised as being 'by the Author of *Sense and Sensibility*' and sold for the higher price of eighteen shillings; and was immediately reviewed extremely favourably, with particular attention given to Elizabeth Bennet's character. There was even greater enthusiasm from the public. Sheridan recommended it as one of the cleverest things he had ever read; it must

have reminded him of his own mastery of dialogue before he threw away his best talents, and he was generous enough to recognize and hail a greater voice than his own. Henry Austen was told by a literary gentleman that it was much too clever to be the work of a woman. Warren Hastings wrote so admirably that Jane was 'quite delighted'. The great world read, laughed and bought.

Jane Austen herself was not part of this excitement. She was preserving her anonymity at Chawton, and alone with her mother; Cass and Martha were both away visiting when *Pride and Prejudice* appeared. She had sets sent to her brothers, and celebrated publication by taking turns with her mother to read the first chapters aloud to Miss Benn, as they sat beside their fire on a damp January evening. 'She was amused, poor soul! that she cd not help you know, with two such people to lead the way; but she really does seem to admire Elizabeth. I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do not know.' Just for once in her life, whether she knew it or not, Miss Benn was the luckiest person in the kingdom.

When Mrs Austen took over the reading on Miss Benn's second visit, she went too fast, and 'tho' she perfectly understands the Characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought'. Jane could not help being exasperated by her mother, the strong, stubborn old woman used to being in charge, who wanted to make her mark even in appreciating and interpreting her grown-up daughter's work. She found too that anonymity, however ladylike, had considerable drawbacks. Every author hopes to talk about a newly published book, but there was no one at hand to talk to. She wrote to Cass about the typographical mistakes and the sudden realization that she had made the Bennets serve suppers when they would not have done; and how a "said he" or a "said she" would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear —. Since there was no one at Chawton with whom she wanted to discuss any of this, she went out walking, in the mud, to Alton; at least she escaped her mother's visitors, she grumbled.

Then she decided she would let young Anna into her secret. After that, she wrote to Cass at Steventon to inform her that other people in Chawton were reading books by Miss Edgeworth and Mrs Grant; although she does not say so, no author is quite pleased to hear of

other books being read when hers is available. Foolish Mrs Digweed had the three volumes of Mrs Grant's *Letters* and 'it can make no difference to *her*, which of the 26 fortnights in the Year, the 3 vols lay in her House'.²³

When she returned to the subject of *Pride and Prejudice*, she let her pen run on as freely as if she were in love with her 'darling Child'; as indeed she had every right to be.

The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling; – it wants shade; – it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter – of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense – about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte – or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile. – I doubt your quite agreeing with me here – I know your starched Notions.

She liked to tease Cass when she was happy, and there are few passages in the letters so happy, so witty, so free as this. Here she has no need of defences, and her prose sails as blithely and brightly as any of Elizabeth Bennet's most beguiling speeches.

Inside Mansfield Park

In the spring of 1811, when Jane was correcting her proofs while staying with Henry and Eliza in Sloane Street, Eliza gave a musical party. She employed professional pianists, harpists and singers, decorated her drawing room with a hired mirror, special chimney lights and floral arrangements; eighty guests were invited and over sixty came, overflowing from the first-floor drawing room into the passages and front room. The party was a success; it went on until midnight and was mentioned in the *Morning Post*. Jane enjoyed the music, and reported to Cassandra that a drunken naval captain talked to her about their brother Charles. On another evening Eliza took Jane to visit a French friend, the Comte d'Antraigues, with his musical Countess and son Julien. 'It will be amusing to see the ways of a French circle,' wrote Jane.

What neither she nor Eliza knew was that Emmanuel Louis d'Antraigues was a spy, in the pay of both the Russian and the English governments, and now in some trouble; his English protector was Canning, but Canning was no longer Foreign Minister, and d'Antraigues was fearful about his own future. He was also anxious to rid himself of his wife.¹ Naturally none of this was apparent during the Austens' visit. 'Monsieur the old Count, is a very fine looking man, with quiet manners, good enough for an Englishman – & I believe he is a Man of great Information & Taste. He has some fine Paintings, which delighted Henry as much as the Son's music gratified Eliza.'

'The old Count' was fifty-eight. The Countess was a retired opera singer, Anne de Saint-Huberty, who had been at the height of her fame in the 1780s. The Austens could reflect that such marriages were not unknown in English society, since the Earl of Craven,