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# *'Future Heroes, Legislators, Fools & Villains': Jane Austen and the Public Schools*

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In the letters, juvenilia and novels of Jane Austen four great public schools are mentioned. All four are ancient foundation – Winchester, Westminster, Eton and Merchant Taylors, the first three being of particular distinction. Alongside the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, under the Act of Uniformity of 1663, these three were the only schools in England granted the right to continue to hold services in Latin.

Of these three, Winchester was well known to Jane Austen. It was the school to which her brother Edward was to send his six sons between 1807 and 1826, five of them before her death in 1817. For the novelist at Chawton, it was only an hour's journey away, sixteen miles down the Winchester road. The coaches passed the Cottage door, and Aunt Jane would look out for her nephews passing by at the beginning and end of term. As she wrote to another Winchester nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, in July 1816, she took an even-handed and unromantic view, watching these 'Postchaises full of Boys pass by … full of future Heroes, Legislators, Fools, & Villains'.[1] But no Wykhamists enter the novels.[2]

About Eton – like Westminster, a Royal foundation – Jane Austen has nothing to say, other than to identify it as Edmund Bertram's school. As it was very much a family school, presumably, we are to understand that both his father and his elder brother Tom are Old Etonians too.

Merchant Taylors, where Edward Thorpe, the younger brother of John, is currently a pupil, could not boast the same social and educational cachet as the other three. Nonetheless, like them, it was an ancient foundation, dating from 1561, and with a distinguished roll-call of old boys. These included the poets Spenser, and Shirley; the great divine, Lancelot Andrewes; Clive of India; and the notorious conspirator, Titus Oates. And in Jane Austen's day the school was considered sufficiently important to warrant a massive History in two volumes: the first volume, published in 1812, running to 570 pages; the second, in 1814, to 680 pages.[3]

Why Jane Austen should mention Merchant Taylors is not immediately apparent. But History gives us the answer. Sir Thomas White, a leading member of the Merchant Taylors' company in the sixteenth century, founded both St John' College, Oxford and the Merchant Taylors' School; and by the terms of the College's foundation documents he ensured that old boys of the School should enjoy a favoured place at St John's, where thirty-seven of the College Fellowships were reserved for former pupils. Thus when Mr Austen went up from Tonbridge

School to St John's in 1747, he found himself in a College heavily populated with Old Merchant Taylors. Thirty years later, James was to have the same Oxford experience, and forty years later Henry, when in turn they went to their father's College, meeting Old Merchant Taylors in abundance. Clearly, the reference to Merchant Taylors in *Northanger Abbey* (p. 32) was an allusion that the Austen household would enjoy.

Westminster School is treated rather differently. It is Henry Crawford's school (MP, p.61), small recommendation; and it is the one school that Jane Austen chooses to make fun of. This is in *Sense and Sensibility* during the musical evening in London at which Elinor Dashwood is introduced to Robert Ferrars, the young man who not long before 'had given' her a lecture 'on toothpick-cases' and who now 'addressed her with easy civility, and twisted his head into a bow which assured her as plainly as words could have done, that he was exactly the coxcomb the had heard him described to be by Lucy.' (p. 250)

Elinor observes his 'emptiness and conceit' as he holds forth, for a quarter of an hour, comparing himself with his brother Edward:

> Lamenting the extreme *gaucherie* which he really believed kept him from mixing in proper society, he candidly and generously attributed it much less to any natural deficiency, than to the misfortune of a private education; while he himself, though probably without any particular, any material superiority by nature, merely from the advantage of a public school, was as well fitted to mix in the world as any other man (pp. 250-51).

Robert Ferrars continues, with fluency and aplomb, to this self-satisfied conclusion, quoting the reproachful advice he gives to his mother:

> 'If you had only sent him to Westminster as well as myself, instead of sending him to Mr. Pratt's all this would have been prevented.' This is the way which I always consider the matter, and my mother is perfectly convinced of her error (p. 251).

The joke here is not just in the portrayal of Robert Ferrars, the Old Westminster 'coxcomb', the young man of 'emptiness and conceit'. It is also attached to an underlying debate in *Sense and Sensibility* which, in turn, follows a contemporary debate about the pros and cons of education at public-schools charged, amongst other things, with turning out young men of conceit and arrogance – as against 'private education', precisely the education that Mr Austen himself provided at Steventon Rectory for his sons and for a small number of resident pupils.[4]

Clearly, not all public-school men are tarred with the same brush, a case in point being Edmund Bertram. Equally, 'private education' has its drawbacks. It leaves Edward Ferrars lacking a sense of purpose and beset with indecision, until Col. Brandon sets matters right for him, providing a gentlemanly vocational path with the offer of the living of Delaford. At one stroke he is provided with an occupation and the means for marriage. 'Private education' gave him neither of these things.

A nice question, which Jane Austen leaves unanswered, is the education of her other young men. Was Mr Knightly at a public school or educated privately? And Darcy? And William Walter Elliot? These questions belong with those many other questions we can ask of the novels; intriguing, fascinating questions which remain unanswered and unanswerable.

## *Notes*

References to the novels are to R, W. Chapman's Oxford edition.

[1] Jane Austen to James Edward Austen, from Chawton 6 July 1816 (*Jane Austen's Letter*, 1995, ed. Deirdre Le Fay); p 316.

[2] In 'Edgar & Emma' (*Minor Works*, 1954),of Mrs Willmot's numerous offspring, Sam is at Eton, Jem and Will at Winchester (p. 32).

[3] Harry Bristow Wilson, *The History of Merchant Taylors' School from its Foundation to the Present time* (Vol.1 1812, vol 2 1814).

[4] See [Sidney Smith] review of *Remarks on the System of Education in Public Schools* (1809) by Dr Rennel in *Edinburgh Review* (August 1810), xvi. 326-34. Smith considered the Public School system as 'evil' (p. 327), breeding arrogance and 'conceit' (p328). No Dr Rennel is given in the *British Biographical Index* (second edn. 1993). So the author of *Remarks* may well be Thomas Rennell (1754-1840), Dean of Winchester 1805-40.