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‘Jane Austen’s Englishness: the Novelist as Patriot’

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For the purposes of this paper, I want to take a straightforward eighteenth-century definition of a ‘patriot’, as a lover of one’s country. Accordingly, we can understand ‘patriotism’ as a love of one’s country. This is the definition Dr Johnson gives in his *Dictionary*, exactly translating the classical Latin phrase *amor patriae* as we find it used in Virgil and Ovid. You will remember that in *Emma*, Jane Austen brings these very words ‘patriotism’ and *amor patriae* into the conversation between Emma herself and Frank Churchill in the scene at Highbury when Churchill purchases a pair of gloves at the village shop.

I want to begin by reviewing what we know about the personal, or what we might call the biographical nature of Jane Austen’s patriotism, as distinct from its presence in the novels. In considering the biographical issue, probably the most important consideration is the fact that for almost the entire period of Jane Austen’s adult life as a novelist, Great Britain was at war. The calendar runs like this. Revolutionary France declared war on Britain in February 1793, two years later, Jane Austen drafted the first version of *Sense and Sensibility*. In 1799, Napoleon assumed power and the war continued, with a year’s break in 1802-03 (the so-called Peace of Amiens), until Napoleon’s defeat and surrender in June 1815.

It was during this period of just over twenty years, that Jane Austen completed five of the six novels. *Persuasion*, the last, she began in August 1815, just seven weeks after the Battle of Waterloo, and she set the action of the novel back into the immediate past, between the summer of 1814 and February 1815, that is, when the war was in its final stages.

What do we identify biographically in the patriot Jane Austen? Immediately, a whole-hearted patriotism; and naturally so, since her two youngest brothers, Francis and Charles, served in the Navy throughout the war; her brother Henry was five years in the Army; and a wide range of Austen friends and relatives joined the Volunteers. This was a homeland-based army, raised to resist the French crossing of the English Channel. This was a serious threat, as Napoleon’s Army of England was encamped along the French Channel coast. It was a threat to which Jane Austen was fully alive since her brother Francis commanded a key section of the coastal defensive system in eighteen hundred and three to four, when the invasion scare was at its height and when Napoleon, commanding La Grande Armée, declared the Channel to be ‘a ditch that shall be leaped when one is daring enough to try’.¹

The answer to this, according to the leading military and political strategist of the time, William Pasley, was for Britain to hold an aggressive stance, with the aim of total victory. For this, he argued, the country should assume ‘the ambition of conquerors.’² Jane Austen was captivated, both by Pasley’s style, and by his message.

As she confessed to her sister, it was ‘a book I protested against at first but which, upon trial, I find delightfully written & highly entertaining... he does write with extraordinary force and spirit’³ — a judgement shared with many other writers, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Walter Scott, Southey and many others.

But this militant patriotism — I think we can fairly describe it as a forceful and militant patriotism — did not blind Jane Austen to other values. In the case of Nelson, for example, she felt that the cult of hero-worship went far too far. Having been asked by her sister what she thought of the official biography, the latest in a long line of Nelson biographies, she replied dismissively, ‘Southey’s Life of Nelson; — I am tired of Lives of Nelson, being that I never read any’.⁴ Those last few words — ‘Being that I never read any’ — sound like a smart and nonsensical comment, written for the sake of effect. However, I think we can take it literally: that Jane Austen did indeed consciously avoid ‘Lives of Nelson’, and for a very good reason: her disapproval of Nelson’s scandalous public conduct in deserting his wife and maintaining an open and adulterous household with Emma, the wife of Sir William Hamilton. For Jane Austen, this was an immorality too far, a shameless unfaithfulness that no amount of heroism could justify or absolve.⁵

Religion also played an important part in tempering Jane Austen’s patriotic feelings. This is clearly illustrated in her reaction on hearing the news of the death at Corunna [in 1809] of Sir John Moore, the commander of the British army in the disaster of its retreat and evacuation from Spain.

Hearing the news, Jane Austen wrote to her sister. She acknowledged that Moore, who was fatally wounded at the heart of the battle, was ‘very Heroick’; but she added, ‘I wish Sir John had united something of the Christian with the Hero in his death’, an acid comment inspired by the newspaper reports that his dying words were far from ‘Christian’; quite the opposite, he worried about public opinion back in England and whether or not his military failure would be held against him.⁶

The clearest illustration of the proximity of Jane Austen’s religious views to her patriotic values comes in a letter she wrote in September 1814, a few months before the end of Britain’s war with America, known as the War of 1812. At the time, Jane Austen was staying with her brother Henry in London. Henry was a banker and mixed with a wide circle of his clients. These included naval and army officers as well as city merchants and fellow-bankers. Their talk was of the American war and the possibility of a disastrous outcome. Having listened to them, Jane Austen wrote to her sister about these gloomy predictions. Yet she concluded on a very different note: ‘If we *are* to be ruined, it cannot be helped — but I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation inspite of much Evil, improving in Religion, which I cannot beleive the Americans to possess.’⁷

It’s safe to presume that on this same religious principle that Jane Austen had no uncertainty about the outcome of the war with France, since France was the largest and most powerful of Europe’s Catholic nations and England, an apostate from Rome, could be regarded as the champion of the Protestant faith, and so destined to triumph.

This, then, is the somewhat qualified place of patriotism in Jane Austen's world view: it's not a case of a relentless chauvinism: my country right or wrong. The laurels of victory have to be deserved before they can be won; and the winning, to use Jane Austen's own words, comes only to the 'Religious Nation' under 'the protection of Heaven'. This is what I understand to be the true ethical or philosophical position on which Jane Austen's patriotism is grounded.

Turning now to Jane Austen as novelist, as a wartime novelist,

we are immediately stuck, not by the presence, but by the *absence* of patriot issues.

The three early novels — *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* — could as well be novels of peacetime. Looking first to *Northanger Abbey*, we might expect to hear something of the progress of the war from Captain Frederick Tilney, a regular army officer in the 12th Light Dragoons. But there seems nothing to distract him from socializing in Bath or coming home. And his father, for all that he is a General, has no military duties or attachments whatsoever. Not a word about old comrades or old campaigns or the present war crosses his lips. He claims to have 'many pamphlets to finish'. But there is no suggestion that these 'pamphlets' have anything to do with the war. All he says, rather mysteriously, is that they concern 'the affairs of the nation', that they are 'for the good of others.'⁸

The same is true of *Sense and Sensibility*. The sole military man is Colonel Brandon, returned from pre-war service in India. He's a man of leisure, with time on his hands, eager to pay court to Marianne Dashwood, and is no more involved or interested in the war than General Tilney. Edward Ferrars, we are told, once considered the army as a possible career, but thought it 'a great deal too smart'; for the navy, he was too old at 18; leaving the idleness of Oxford as his only option.⁹

On the face of it, *Pride and Prejudice*, with its substantial military presence, promises to be different, populated, as it is, with no less than three Colonels, a militia regiment, and a military camp facing the French coast at Brighton. But not so. The army, as Jane Austen describes it here, is no more than a social gathering ground. Wickham tells Elizabeth, quite unashamedly, that his 'chief inducement' to entering the militia 'was the prospect of constant' and 'good society' (79); and we see that the occupation of the officers is wining, dining, dancing and flirting. Mention of the war, even a whisper of war, Jane Austen studiously avoids.

On Jane Austen's part, this is a decisive act of exclusion. Her sailor brothers, serving in the Channel Fleet, were engaged with the French from the very outset.

Their letters home and reports in the press kept her fully alert to the threat from France. Hence, we have to understand that the absence of the war from these three early novels is distinctly a matter of artistic choice.

Our attention is held solely upon England and the English; and within that, the focus is held, more *narrowly* still, This fictional world is populated by the gentry families of southern England whose preoccupations are domestic and family concerns and affairs of the heart, forming a perspective in which, by Jane Austen's choice, the war has no place.

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Where Jane Austen waves the patriot flag, of course, is in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, with the entry of sailors and naval affairs: in *Mansfield Park*, with its focus on William Price, the young midshipman, and on the dramatic maneuvering that takes place between Fanny, Sir Thomas Bertram and Henry Crawford, as William moves towards his commission; and beyond this, there the considerable section of the novel set in Portsmouth, Britain's largest and most important naval base. In *Persuasion*, the naval presence is even more pronounced. The sailors, now returned from the war, are re-entering a peacetime society and the imaginative and emotional heart of the novel resides in the story of Anne Elliot, a heroine, we are told on the final page, who 'gloried in being a sailor's wife'.¹⁰ [According to Mrs Barrett, 'Anne Elliot was herself; her enthusiasm for the navy, and her perfect unselfishness, reflect her completely' (Family Record, pp. 209-10).]

Neither in *Mansfield Park* nor in *Persuasion* does Jane Austen attempt to portray a flawless naval world. We remember, for example, the revelation of Mary Crawford's life with her uncle, Admiral Crawford, 'a man of vicious conduct',¹¹ and her scathing remarks on the 'circle' of Admirals gathered at her uncle's home, these commanders memorable not for their great victories or acts of heroism but for 'their bickering and jealousies' over matters of pay and precedence. But what really upsets her listeners, Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram, are Mary Crawford's comments on the Admiral's behaviour and morals, whatever she bitterly insinuates in her notorious pun on those 'Rears' and 'Vices' of which she saw 'enough'.¹² Whatever precise meaning we place on these words, Mary is clearly insinuating some gross immorality in the naval circle entertained in her uncle's home. Equally, Jane Austen is prepared to entertain us with a lyrical outpouring of naval enthusiasm from Louisa Musgrove, her heart set on Captain Wentworth, when she 'burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy — their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved'.¹³

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While a pronounced tone of naval sentiment runs through both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, *Emma* stands apart. There is no mention whatsoever of the navy; and only a single reference to the war, the death 'in action', long ago, of Jane Fairfax's father, Lieutenant Fairfax.¹⁴ On the other hand, *Emma*'s patriotic credentials are beyond question. It stands as Jane Austen's sole excursion into a type of novel known at this time as the 'national tale'. The 'national tale' was an extremely popular genre established in 1806 with the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl* by Sydney Owenson. The novel carries a very pointed sub-title, *A National Tale*, for this was exactly the leading characteristic of this genre. National tales, and there were very many of them published between 1806 and the 1840's, were essentially polemical novels, nationalistic in character. Their purpose was to assert the historical, cultural, religious and social elements that together formed the Gaelic or Celtic national identities of either Scotland or Ireland. In effect, the national tale was a cry of protest against their colonial status, their subservience to the cultural, territorial and political domination exerted by the English.

What brought matters to a head was the creation, in 1801, of the so-called United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. This was effected by the Act of Union, which closed the Irish Parliament in Dublin and brought Ireland wholly under the control of the British Parliament in London. It was this, and the whole history of England's repressive colonialisation

of Ireland, which triggered Owenson's protest and led to the development of the national novel as the most prolific genre of this period.

Looked at in this perspective, we can read *Emma* as a riposte to the national tale, as a celebration of those things Jane Austen valued most about England, specifically, the Home Counties of southern England that she knew and loved: its small towns and villages, its countryside, as she describes it, assertively English: 'It was a sweet view — sweet to the eye and to the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive'.¹⁵ This pastoral scene, the setting of Donwell Abbey and Abbey Farm, embodies an idyllic national landscape. In the same way, the landowner, the novel's hero, George Knightley, is labelled English through and through. His name delivers a personification that takes us directly to the ruling Hanoverian dynasty, successively Georges the First, Second and Third; and his surname provides a further personification recalling England's patron saint, St George, and the tradition of chivalry and *knighthood* with which St George is associated. Knightley's counterpart is Frank Churchill, the quasi-villain of the story. One is the epitome of Englishness, the other, of Frenchness, or, to be precise, Frenchness in an Englishman, a nationality-of-character signalled in his name: Frank giving us Frankish or French.

This drama of national types is developed throughout the novel and constantly before us in the collision of language: Frank Churchill's 'system of hypocrisy and deceit, — espionage and treachery'¹⁶ set against Knightley's English straightforwardness, his 'true English style'.¹⁷

The traditional enmity of England and France is acted out in the antipathy between the two men. In setting this engagement, Jane Austen was drawing on the national stereotypes familiar to her readers in political cartoons: John Bull, the archetypal Englishman of bull-dog breed, four-square and solid, a ferocious guardian of English virtues and values, and fiercely Francophobic. And ranged against him the Monsieur-Englishman, artful, devious, glib and deceitful, a foppish, rootless creature of frivolity and fashion. It was an old game, going back to Shakespeare and beyond, and Jane Austen was delighted to continue this tradition. It sharpens the comedy and enriches the play of language.

Why it was that Jane Austen decided to incorporate her own distinctive version of an English national tale within the romantic comedy of *Emma* is a question we shall never know the answer to. There may, however, be some explanation in the circumstances of the time. When Jane Austen began *Emma*, in January 1814, victory was in prospect for Britain and its allies. Their armies had entered France; by the end of March, they were at the gates of Paris; and on the 6th of April, with Jane Austen well into the novel, Napoleon abdicated, to go into exile on the island of Elba. With this historical background, *Emma* can be read as a work of celebration, Jane Austen's record of an English way of life, a rich parochialism to be treasured and smiled at, a rural culture for her readers to enjoy in time of peace, a local comedy and romance that could stand as one version, at least, of England's national tale.

It was an American critic, Lionel Trilling, who, fifty years ago, first drew our attention to this particular aspect of the novel. Trilling observed that *Emma* 'is touched lightly but indubitably — by national feeling'. And Trilling's explanation rings true: 'that Jane Austen thought of herself, at this point in her career, as having, by reason of the success of her art, a relation to the national ethic':¹⁸ a successful art of peace, as it were, to crown the nation's success in the art of war.

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Notes and References

- ¹ Quoted in Longmate (1991, edn 1993), p. 258.
- ² Pasley, p. 448.
- ³ Letter of 24 January 1813 (Letters, p. 198).
- ⁴ Letter of 11 October 1813 (Letters, p. 235).
- ⁵ Although there is in fact no record of Jane Austen's views on Nelson's treatment of his wife, I believe that we can infer them with some accuracy from her comments on a very similar situation, the Prince Regent's treatment of his wife. All this is set out in chapter seven, 'Nelson: Honour and Dishonour', Southam (2005), see particularly pp. 237-241.
- ⁶ Letter of 30 January 1809 (Letters, p. 173). In associating the 'Christian' and the 'Hero', Jane Austen may have had in mind Dr Johnson's words in *Rambler* 44: 'The Christian and the hero are inseparable'.
- ⁷ Letter to Martha Lloyd, 2 September 1814 (Letters, pp. 273-74).
- ⁸ Northanger Abbey, p. 187.
- ⁹ *Sense and Sensibility*, pp. 102-03.
- ¹⁰ *Persuasion*, p. 252.
- ¹¹ *Mansfield Park*, p. 41.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60. The pun resides in the fact that, in addition to their everyday meanings, 'Rears' and 'Vices' are successive naval ranks: Rear Admiral, Vice Admiral.
- ¹³ *Persuasion*, p. 99.

¹⁴ *Emma*, p. 163. We are told in chapter two that Mr Weston ‘had satisfied an active cheerful mind and social temper by entering into the militia of his county, then embodied’ (p. 15). As this would have been in 1793, at the beginning of the war, it would have been regarded as the gentlemanly thing to do.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

¹⁶ [missing note]

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