



Jane Austen and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

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ON 26 AUGUST 1813, Jane Austen subscribed 10s. 6d. towards the formation of a District Committee of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. As reported by the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* of 13 September 1813, Mrs. Austen donated a guinea, and "Miss [Cassandra] Austen" contributed 10s. 6d. So did "Miss Jane Austen." How significant was half a guinea relative to her current income? And what might have been her interest in the SPCK, apart from her Anglicanism and the fact that she knew many of the attendees and subscribers? Possibilities include the Society's progressive stance on education, its potential influence on the American War, and its involvement with the slavery debates.

John Blackburn chaired this "numerous and most respectable Meeting" at the Arms Inn, Basingstoke. The Bishop of Winchester, who had agreed to be President, gave a "liberal donation" of ten guineas. Among other resolutions, it was decided that a third of all parochial contributions would be forwarded to the parent Board in London, with Bibles and Prayer books being first distributed to local parishes. These would be sold at "still further reduced prices than they obtain them from this Committee; such a method being, perhaps, calculated in some instance to give the books a greater value in the estimation of their owners, than if they were gratuitous." All donations would be reserved for "general purposes," with subscriptions considered as applicable to the demands of parishes. Every (male) person giving a donation of five guineas and every annual subscriber of one guinea would be considered a member

of the committee, which would meet every alternate Tuesday, quarterly, and annually.

On the evening of 26 August 1813, reports Fanny Knight, “Mr. and Miss Papillon & At. Cass dined here as Papa drove Mr. P. to Basingstoke to a meeting. Ats. Cass. J. & I walked to Farringdon to call on the Benns” (Le Faye, *Chronology* 457). Although Austen did not attend the SPCK meeting, she mentions many of the listed names in her letters. Those from Basingstoke deanery included Gen. P. [George Purefoy] Jervoise, Esq., M. P.; Thomas May, Esq., prominent brewer and seven times Mayor of Basingstoke; a D. Jackson, Esq.; W[illiam Francis] Digweed, Esq., of Steventon; a Mr. Thomas Knight (the one who adopted Jane’s brother Edward had died in 1794); and W[illiam] Leigh, Esq. From the Alton deanery came the Rev. John Benn, rector of Farringdon; the Rev. Joseph Sibley, father of Conway and the Misses Sibley; Mr. Marshall, landlord of the George, Sittingbourne, Kent; Mr. F[rederick] Gray, cheesefactor of Alton; H[arry] Digweed, Esq.; and William Prowting, Esq., an important freeholder in Chawton. Additional subscribers included Mrs. [Penelope Lutley-]Sclater, tenant of Tangier Park, Hants. (she liked *Emma* very much, more than *Mansfield Park*); an E. Jackson, Esq.; the Rev. Dr. [Henry] Hall, vicar of Monk (West) Sherbourne and Pamber, Hants.; Mrs. Webb, perhaps Mary, née Digweed, of Chawton; Miss Webb [perhaps her daughter]; Miss [Elizabeth] Papillon, sister of the Rev. John Rawstorn Papillon, rector of Chawton; Miss [Catherine Ann or Ann Mary] Prowting, of Chawton; and Miss [Martha] Lloyd, Jane Austen’s friend.¹ Ironically too, the name of H[arris] Bigg-Wither, Esq., whose marriage proposal Austen had rejected in December 1802,² appears just under those of “Miss Jane Austen” and Martha Lloyd. His donation together with his subscription amounted to an ostentatious seven guineas, and his wife’s (he had married in 1804) to three.

How generous was Austen’s 10s. 6d.? During her father’s lifetime, her allowance had been only £20. In 1807, however, she spent £45 after Mrs. Lillingston left her £50. Half a guinea to the SPCK may be compared with her Southampton expenditure that year of £1 2s. 10d. for a “Journey,” 19s. 9d. for “Waterparties & Plays,” 13s. 9d. for tips to “servants,” £13 13s. 9d. for “Cloathes & Pocket,” £9 5s. 11½d. for keeping clothes clean, 11s. for “Sittings in Church,” about three and a half pounds for charity, over £6 on presents, nearly £4 for postage, and £2 13s. 6d. to “Hire Piano Forte.”³

A month and a half before the meeting, however, on 3–6 July 1813, Austen told Francis that she had made £140 from *Sense and Sensibility*. As a result of

selling *Pride and Prejudice* to Thomas Egerton for an additional £110, she gloated, “I have now therefore written myself into £250.—which only makes me long for more.” As news of her authorship was leaking out, she wrote on 25 September 1813, “I shall rather try to make all the Money than all the Mystery I can of it.—People shall pay for their Knowledge if I can make them.” But as Jan Fergus argues, because Austen had sold the copyright of her most popular novel, she did not profit from it as much as she should have.⁴ Her jokey comment on 29 January 1813 that Egerton “shall ask £1-1- for my two next [novels], & £1-8- for my stupidest of all” shows her planning to imitate Egerton’s sharp business practices, says Fergus, for never again would she permit him to undercharge when her own profit was at stake. For *Mansfield Park*, she would invest her own money (Fergus 140–42). Considering Austen’s delight in her hard-earned gains, her donation of half a guinea to the SPCK was handsome indeed. It was only the third time, so far as we know, that her name appeared in print during her lifetime.

By 26 August 1813, when her brother took Mr. Papillon to the meeting, Austen had almost finished the manuscript of *Mansfield Park*, for on 6 July, she had announced that she had “something in hand—which I hope on the credit of P. & P. will sell well, tho’ not half so entertaining.” Her query in the same letter about Francis Austen’s old ships confirms that at least the Portsmouth chapters (7–15 in volume 3), just before the end, had been written by early July, when Cassandra said it was “Finished” (Wiltshire xxv–xxviii). Critics often ascribe the difference between the light and bright and sparkling *Pride and Prejudice* and the more somber *Mansfield Park* to the influence of the Evangelicals, citing as evidence Austen’s remark on 18–20 November 1814, six months after *Mansfield Park* was published, “I am by no means convinced that we ought not to be all Evangelicals, & am least persuaded that they who are so from Reason & Feeling, must be happiest & safest.” But it’s hard to be sure of the tone, because it appears in a high-spirited letter about Mr. Plumtre’s proposal to her niece Fanny Knight.⁵ A little over a year before this comment, however, she had supported the oldest Anglican mission organization in Britain with some of her precious cash.

From 1698 onwards, the SPCK communicated the basic principles of the Christian faith both at home and abroad. In the eighteenth century, it was by far the largest producer of Christian literature, for Thomas Bray, its founder, believed passionately in the power of the printed word. Pamphlets exhorted specific groups such as farmers, prisoners, soldiers, seamen, servants, and slave-owners to improve their way of life; the group published as well more

general works on subjects such as Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, the Prayer Book, and private devotion.

So which of these many activities might Austen have especially admired? The SPCK's provision of equal education in literacy, numeracy, and Biblical knowledge for girls as well as boys would surely have appealed to her, along with its encouragement of such skills as needlework and woodwork. She might also have known that as well as providing advice and encouragement to local groups to help them set up, finance, and run many hundreds of schools, the SPCK was the catalyst for the spectacular growth of the charity school movement. In 1811, two years before the Basingstoke meeting, the National Society was established to take over SPCK's responsibilities in this area ("Our History").

The Society's religious and educational activities provide reason enough for Austen to contribute so generously. An additional reason may be its range of publications, many of them destined for the navy in which her brothers served. Since Britain had been at war with America since 18 June 1812, perhaps Austen thought that by contributing to the SPCK, she might help influence the outcome of a conflict involving her sailor brothers. As Brian Southam points out, she refers in *Mansfield Park* to the war when Tom Bertram asks Dr. Grant's "opinion" of the "strange business . . . in America" (*MP* 140). "Strange," because when the United States declared war on 8 June 1812, it was unaware, due to the six weeks it took for the news to cross the Atlantic, that Britain had just dropped the root cause of the dispute, the Orders in Council that restricted American trade with Napoleonic Europe and authorized the searching of American merchant vessels for British-born sailors and their immediate impressment in the Royal Navy. Southam adds that as Sir Thomas Bertram voyaged home from Antigua in September/October 1812, he would have been at risk from the Americans as well as the French (265–71, and note). On 2 September 1814, with Britain facing defeat, Austen would write to Martha Lloyd, "I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation inspite of so much Evil improving in Religion, which I cannot beleive the Americans to possess." That lack of religion the SPCK was trying to redress, perhaps in an attempt to influence the course of the war.

Slavery was not on Mr. Blackburn's agenda at Basingstoke, but seeing that in August 1813 Austen was writing about a family supported by a plantation in Antigua, it is worth noting that the SPCK also sent pamphlets to the West Indian plantations through its offshoot, the Society for the Propagation

of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Travis Glasson tells how the SPG's missionaries, believing in the essential humanity of all mankind, worked to convert slaves and improve their treatment. But over time, the SPG became increasingly comfortable with slavery, allied itself with masters, and embraced slavery as a missionary tool. The SPG kept three hundred slaves on its Codrington Estate sugar plantation in Barbados, hoping to make a profit and save souls at the same time. But their cruel treatment resulted in few conversions.

In 1766, the Bishop of Gloucester had preached against slavery to the SPG, exclaiming,

Great God! To talk (as in herds of cattle) of property in rational creatures! Creatures endowed with all our faculties; possessing all our qualities but that of colour; our brethren both by nature and grace, shocks all the feelings of humanity, and the dictates of common sense.

Again in 1783, the Bishop of Chester preached to the SPG, renewing criticism of their holdings in Barbados, but to no avail (Tomkins 13, 34). Although the SPG made anti-slave-trade statements, it was actually committed to slavery, cooperated with slave traders, defended slaveholding, and opposed the abolition. We cannot know whether Jane Austen knew about these activities. But her financial support for the SPCK confirms yet again her involvement in matters well beyond what she misleadingly called, on 9 September 1814, "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village."

NOTES

1. Deirdre Le Faye lists these individuals in her invaluable biographical index to Austen's *Letters*, except for William Leigh, who may have been one of the "worthless Nephews" of Thomas Leigh on the Saye and Sele side of the family (216, 418n9).
2. Caroline Austen to J. E. Austen-Leigh, in J. E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir* (187–88, 212 n. 28).
3. See Jan Fergus (122), citing Le Faye's *Family Record* (163).
4. Fergus estimates that if Austen had been able to publish the second edition of *Pride and Prejudice* herself, she would have made about £470 when it had sold out (140).
5. For Austen's ambivalent attitude to the Evangelicals, see Jones (250–51 n. 115, 271 n. 181).

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