



Jane Austen's WORLD

The Life and Times of England's Most Popular Author



Published to commemorate the
200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*

MAGGIE LANE

DEDICATION

*To Peter Troy
who found out more about Jane Austen
than he ever thought he wanted to know*



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Church and Clergy

AS THE ESTABLISHED RELIGION of the country, the Church of England held calm but powerful sway over national life. Its bishops, many of whom were related to the ruling families, sat in the House of

England were unquestioned by all but a tiny minority. The prudent, pragmatic morality it preached, based on reason rather than revelation, and not too difficult to follow, was a significant factor in creating a quiescent and cohesive society.

Nevertheless there were subtle changes going on in the ecclesiastical world during Jane Austen's lifetime. A century of Georgian laxity was coming to an end, to be replaced by Victorian piety that would in turn last for a hundred years. As the daughter and sister of clergymen, and as a woman to whom religion was personally important, she registered these changes with deep interest.

Incomes and patronage

The Church of England in the eighteenth century was stocked with men who looked to it for a means of livelihood rather than a vocation. It is significant that in Jane Austen's world parishes were frequently referred to as "livings", as if they only existed to provide somebody with an income for life.

Younger sons were frequently intended for the church long before their personal inclinations could be known, simply because it was a way of providing for them. Though conscientious parish priests undoubtedly existed – Mr Austen was surely one of them – it was possible for a clergyman to do very little work – or even none, if he employed a curate. Mary Crawford describes such men: "A clergyman has nothing to do but be slovenly and selfish – read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine."

The standard of living enjoyed by clergymen varied enormously. Bishops could earn as much as



"A DULL SERMON" BY JOHN COLLETT – MARY CRAWFORD WOULD ENJOY THE JOKE.

Lords. The universities and endowed schools were under its exclusive control. Its parish churches were well-attended and its clergymen, with a few exceptions, were respected and influential in their local communities. The doctrines of the Church of

£7,000 p.a. At the other end of the scale were curates doing all the work of the parish in the absence of the incumbent, and earning barely more than £50 p.a. Most country parsons had a stipend of a few hundred pounds, which some were able to augment, like Mr Austen, with teaching or farming. The glebe land attached to a rectory, by enabling vegetables to be grown, was a valuable part of a clergyman's resources. Jane Austen does not often give her clergymen's incomes, but we know that the Delaford living which Colonel Brandon presents to Edward Ferrars is worth £200 p.a., while at Mansfield Parsonage Dr Grant enjoys an income of very little less than a thousand a year.

Jane Austen's own clerical brothers had widely different incomes. James eventually held three livings, amounting to £1,100. He turned down a fourth, after much heart-searching. Henry, falling back on the church for a livelihood after his bank had failed, in 1818 could get nothing better than the curacy of Chawton at £54. 12s. 0d.

Pluralism – having the care of more than one parish – which was to be frowned on later, was common in this period. So was absenteeism. In 1809, of 11,194 incumbents in England, 7,358 were non-resident. Sometimes the absentee had a private income besides his stipend and preferred to live as a gentleman of leisure. More often, inadequate stipends encouraged a parson to hold more than one benefice.

Obtaining a living was not a matter of becoming ordained and then applying to some central body for a vacancy. The cathedrals, the universities and the Crown all had livings to dispose of, but the great majority were the gift of private landowners. Some clergymen, like Edmund Bertram and Henry Tilney, know there is a family living reserved for them. Others have to attract the goodwill of a patron, as

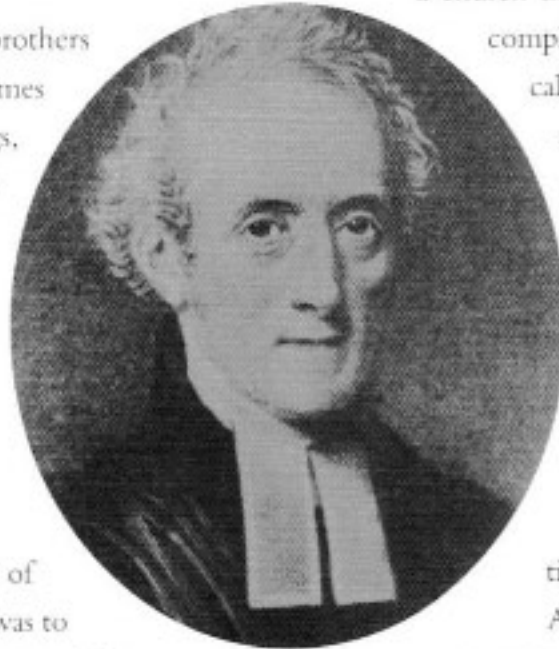
Mr Collins does of Lady Catherine, with the consequent obsequiousness that marks all his dealings with her.

Patronage, nepotism, pluralism, absenteeism, lack of independence from the landholder – taken for granted in Jane Austen's world, these were among the abuses which a new movement within the church sought to reform.

The Evangelicals

Toward the end of the eighteenth century the evangelical movement sought to bring spirituality back to a church that had become materialistic and complacent, if not corrupt. As well as a call for higher standards of personal morality, the Evangelicals encouraged Bible-reading, morning and evening family prayers, grace before meals, and Sunday observance. Personal conversion and salvation by faith were its message; enthusiastic preaching and pastoral work its methods of stirring up congregations to a more spiritual life.

At first Jane Austen, with her belief in rationality and the essentially private nature of religious feeling, was wary of such enthusiasm, which she suspected of being false or exaggerated emotion. "I do not like the Evangelicals," she stated baldly in 1809. By 1814, however, she was largely won round. Her only reservation was that people should be genuinely converted from within, not swayed by eloquent speakers: "I am by no means convinced," she wrote, "that we ought not all to be Evangelicals, & am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest & safest". In *Persuasion* Sunday travelling is a sign of Mr Elliot's moral laxity but in the earlier *Northanger Abbey* even the clergyman Henry Tilney travels on a Sunday without its seeming wrong, so much had Jane Austen's own ideas changed.



JANE'S BROTHER, THE REVEREND HENRY AUSTEN, WHO BECAME A CLERGYMAN LATE IN LIFE.