

JANE & D'ARCY: FACT OR FICTION

Today is the two hundredth anniversary of Jane Austen's death in Winchester in 1817. To celebrate her life the Sydney Institute has invited me to speak about my new book, *Jane & D'Arcy*, on the topic: ***Jane & D'Arcy: Fact or Fiction.***

In *Jane & D'Arcy* I write about events that occurred in Jane Austen's youth. It is the story of Jane Austen and D'Arcy Wentworth, their youthful romance and adventures, the heartbreak of their separation, and its impact on the rest of their lives.

The most important aspect of writing a biography is to ensure that you catch the real person. *Jane & D'Arcy* is a biography of two people. I believe I have dismantled many of the fictions woven around each of them over time, revealed long hidden facts and captured two real people.

I have told their story from a Wentworth family perspective. My uncle, Bill Wentworth, asked me in 2002 to write it. I had never read Jane Austen, I had only a broad general knowledge of the period. I came at their story looking for the facts, but perhaps the most difficult task was sorting them from the fictions about Jane Austen that have persisted unquestioned for over 200 years.

Jane Austen enthusiasts know her only from her later life, from her selected letters, and her novels, published in her late thirties and early forties. Her youth is unknown to them, it was hidden away from public view. Her family suppressed any information about her teenage years, and that suppression has been maintained for over two centuries. In Jane's own writing from this time she presents herself as vital, exuberant and adventurous.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 at Steventon, in Hampshire, where her father, Rev George Austen, was the rector, and ran a boarding school for teenage boys, preparing them for university entry. She was the seventh of eight children, she had five older brothers, and an elder sister who was almost three. A younger brother was born three and a half years later.

In her youth Jane Austen felt a great insecurity. While still a babe in arms she was sent from home to live with a neighbouring dairy farmer and his wife. The wife breast fed her and Jane lived with them *until she was old enough to run about and talk.*ⁱ

She was almost four when her second eldest brother George was sent away to the care of a distant neighbour, unwanted because of his disability. When she was seven, her third eldest brother Edward was sent away to Kent to live with wealthy childless relatives, to become their son and heir.

At seven Jane was sent to a boarding school near Oxford, with her older sister Cassandra and cousin Jane Cooper. The school relocated to Southampton, where Jane nearly died of typhus fever. At ten, she and Cassandra were sent to another boarding school in Reading, making room for their father to enrol more boarders in his school in the Steventon rectory.

It occurred to Jane that she may have been found in a haystack by the Austens and adopted by them.ⁱⁱ Her insecurity may have pre-disposed her to a restless, rebellious and romantic youth. She was encouraged by her sister Cassandra, and cousin Eliza de Feuillide. She wrote stories about her youth in three volumes of her *Juvenilia*. In these twenty nine early stories and plays she recorded a great deal about her romance and adventures with D'Arcy Wentworth.

D'Arcy was a tall, handsome Irish surgeon who had come to London to gain accreditation from the Company of Surgeons that would give him employment in the East India Company. During this time, awaiting an appointment, he attended lectures and walked the wards at St Bartholomew's Hospital to gain further practical experience. In the evenings, to support himself, he played cards for money.

As a cousin, friend and protégé of Lord Fitzwilliam, he had entrée into London society and to the up and coming, young society gamblers. He was often disillusioned by their failure to pay their losses, he even held

up some of them to recover these debts. It was a dangerous method of debt collection, it put him in the category of highwayman. Several disgruntled gambling colleagues took him to court, principally to name and shame him. As prosecutors, they did not want to be outed as defaulters on gambling debts, and would abandon their cases by failing to appear, to recall events or to recognise him. Finally, D'Arcy was arrested and sent to Newgate to await trial at the Old Bailey. He found himself a celebrity in the Court and a popular villain in the press.

At first the Austens were thrilled with Jane's attachment to someone so well connected. When her father learnt of D'Arcy's notoriety, he became very anxious about his teenage daughter's involvement with him. Reverend Austen dissuaded Jane from travelling to Botany Bay as D'Arcy's wife.

It is understandable that the Austens closed ranks to protect Jane from criticism, and to salvage the good name of the family. It is understandable they were hostile to her marriage to a notorious highwayman, that they prevailed on Jane to abandon him; their relationship and his name were never to be mentioned again.

Two weeks after they parted, D'Arcy left England for New South Wales. His departure was timely for the Austen family, their secrecy was reinforced by his disappearance and his silence.

The day before D'Arcy sailed, Jane's brother Henry, reflected his family's sentiments in a comment in *The Loiterer*, a student paper he edited at Oxford with his brother James. He applauded *the world* for getting rid of its superfluous inhabitants, all those who have too much cunning or too little money, shipped off with the very first cargo of Convicts to Botany Bay.ⁱⁱⁱ

From this time, until the end of her life, Jane remained confined within her family circle. She resented the persuasion of her family, under pressure she had rejected D'Arcy, but she never stopped loving him. She hoped and she waited like the heroic Penelope for his return. For both, it was a heart breaking decision. D'Arcy remained the fixed star in her firmament and the love of her life. Like a Homeric Greek tragedy it was sad and lamentable.

D'Arcy sailed on the Second Fleet, aboard the *Neptune*, the worst of the three slave ships used in that convoy. He was the first paying passenger to arrive in the Colony, and though not appointed from London, he found work immediately as a surgeon.

He served in Sydney, on Norfolk Island, at Parramatta, his patients were mainly convicts, paupers, and emancipists: those convicts who had served their time or received pardons. He served under seven governors and worked closely with most of them, but it was Macquarie with whom he found an immediate rapport.

Governor Macquarie came ashore in Sydney on New Year's Day 1810. After the debacle of the Rum Rebellion he knew he would need able and reliable men to support him. He recognised D'Arcy as enlightened and intelligent, someone he could trust. He knew instinctively he had found the right person to help him to realise his vision for a better society for the Colony.

Both men were over six feet tall; they were the same age, forty-seven, born a fortnight apart. From the outset Macquarie placed new and heavy responsibilities on D'Arcy's shoulders. Within eight months, Macquarie had appointed him Principal Surgeon of the Colony, Treasurer of the Colonial Fund, Chief Magistrate and Superintendent of Police, Justice of the Peace, a member of the Court of Civil Jurisdiction, and a Commissioner of his first major building project, a Turnpike Road, *to be made forthwith between the Town of Sydney and the Hawkesbury*.^{iv}

Later in that year D'Arcy was invited to join the members of a winning tender to build the Rum Hospital in Sydney, to contribute his knowledge and experience in its design and construction.

D'Arcy was Macquarie's *Great Assistant*, and he rose to each new challenge. In the years that followed, he took on other demanding and ambitious projects. He was a founding director of the Colony's first bank, the Bank of New South Wales, and later its president. When Macquarie established a Native Institution for the Education of Indigenous Children, at Parramatta, he appointed D'Arcy to the committee of management.

An army of historians, biographers and critics have laboured for nearly 200 years over the story of Jane Austen and the sources and significance of her writing. They were aware that her family had destroyed most of her letters and suppressed her early writings, and that for more than 50 years, though *often asked*, family members had refused to provide any information about her.^v

In 1869, fifty two years after Jane Austen's death, her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh finally gave way to the growing public interest in her, and published his *Memoir of Jane Austen*.

He said very little about her youth, though he admitted that the family had refused to release her early stories. He described them as, *ridiculing the improbable events and exaggerated sentiments which she had met with in sundry silly romances*.

He summed up Jane's life as, *singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course, and there was no definite tale of love to relate*.^{vi}

Most, if not all of her readers simply didn't believe him. But despite their unreliability, for 150 years Jane Austen's critics and biographers have reiterated these fictions. They have left hidden the secrets her family did not want revealed. A few raised questions about the fictions around her life, but never seriously explored them. They turned a blind eye to clear and obvious references in Jane Austen's writing that contradicted her family's claims, and might have directed their research to reveal something of her secrets.

We know there were difficulties put in their way. Virginia Woolf declared nearly a hundred years ago: *Anybody who has the temerity to write about Jane Austen is aware ... that there are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult to the chastity of their aunts*.^{vii}

I can add that there is a much larger contingent to take on today than just 25 elderly gentlemen. Today there are hundreds of university departments, students, professional Janeites, and groups of enthusiasts, who talk, read and write about Jane Austen.

It is a cohort that prefers to regurgitate fictions, not to look for facts. To quote Professor Peter Washington, editor of the Everyman edition of the *Juvenilia*, they suffer from *a literary form of Heritage Syndrome, or HS, what really turns them on is historical recreation, and they rejoice in their rigor mortis*.^{viii}

I have endeavoured to reveal the Jane portrayed by her own writing, not the fictional myth promoted by her family and maintained for the last two hundred years.

In my search for facts, not fiction, I followed lines of inquiry that seemed to me to be fairly obvious. If there was nothing to hide why, soon after she died, did her family destroy most of the Jane's correspondence? Why did her sister Cassandra take up her scissors and cut certain references from letters from Jane that she kept?

The first of Jane Austen's remaining letters, dated January 1796, covers the arrival of Tom Lefroy at Ashe. Was this a deliberate ploy by the next generation of her family? Even though Jane says in this letter *I do not care sixpence* for Tom Lefroy, Jane Austen aficionados claim he was her real love. He came into her life six years after D'Arcy's departure, and well after the completion of the most significant of her *Juvenilia* stories.

None of Jane's letters remain from mid 1801 to late 1804, there are only three between August 1805 and mid 1808, and no letters left from June 1811 to November 1812, or November 1813 to March 1814. These were all important periods in her relationship with D'Arcy. Her biographer, David Nokes, commented that in this period *tracing the life of Jane Austen..is like searching for a missing person*.^{ix}

Did the Austen family suppress her early stories, the three volumes of her *Juvenilia*, because many of them relate directly to the period and the events of her romance with D'Arcy?

From these early writings it is quite clear that Jane's chronological age did not reflect her maturity,

knowledge or intellectual development. One can understand why it would have been difficult to impede her great desire to discover the wide exciting world and what it might offer.

From the age of thirteen, Jane read her stories aloud after dinner for her family's amusement. Many of them deal with a young girl finding her way to adulthood; with love, sex and marriage, with schemes to defeat the wishes of despotic parents, of youths hurrying off to Scotland. Aged 15, Jane wrote of visiting Newgate and of appearing in Court, at 16 she declared she had married: *without the consent or knowledge of my father*.

Her Juvenilia was not released for publication until more than a hundred years after her death. The second volume was released first, in 1922; the first volume was published in 1933; the third was not released until 1951, 134 years after Jane's death.

In one of these stories, *Lesley Castle*, she recorded a visit to Scotland and described her impressions in detail. Years later, in a letter to Cassandra, Jane recalled that a coach trip had *put me in mind of my own Coach between Edinburgh and Sterling*.^x

In 1913, two of her grand-nephews added a footnote to the letter protesting: *A visit of Jane to Scotland, of which no record is left in family tradition, is so improbable that we must imagine her to be referring to some joke, or possibly some forgotten tale of her own*.^{xi}

The Austens knew that to admit a young girl had travelled to Scotland, could only mean one thing. She had travelled north to take advantage of Scottish law, that unlike the English *Marriage Act* of 1753, permitted youths to marry without parental consent. It was common practice for young couples to travel to Gretna Green, just across the Scottish border, for a Scottish marriage, and several of Jane's cousins and nephews did so. Jane's writings from her earliest time are filled with stories of elopements and marriages performed under Scottish law.

A few of Jane Austen's biographers, like David Nokes and John Halperin have tried to find the missing facts. Halperin commented on *the unsubtle, ritual closing of ranks among the family*, and felt it *helped explain why so many have laboured so long to discover what was hidden. Surely something was being hidden... Could this life, could any life, be so devoid of "events," of "crisis," of "attachment"?* *And what about all that burning and pruning of her letters carried out so assiduously by Cassandra?..The effect of the destruction was to suppress anything of a peculiar intimacy. As one critic surmised "the gaps in the letters can be expected to correspond with crises in their author's life."* *But she was not supposed to have had any crises.*^{xii}

Reading and critical discussion of Jane Austen's writing is limited mainly to her six published novels, an area of study well entrenched before the release of her Juvenilia. Many of these early stories and plays relate directly to D'Arcy and to their adventures together. But there has been little attempt by professional Austen critics and biographers to understand the zany stories or black humour of her Juvenilia, their significance or their meaning.

The Austen family, in protecting her name, claimed she had never left Steventon. But the fact is that it was only after D'Arcy left England that she became totally corralled within the family circle.

Most fiction writers rely heavily on their own life experiences to provide material for the stories they wish to create, Jane was no different, she was a truth teller, and she wanted desperately to record her most important feelings and experiences, those her father had ruled were never to be discussed.

Throughout all her stories, she reveals to the reader shards from her own early life. It was the very short period in her youth that she spent as friend and lover of D'Arcy. This period provided her with the emotional experience and knowledge of the world that she would reveal through her writing.

In her maturity, Jane was more circumspect than she had been in her teens, but she described her emotional experiences, she named people and included many characters from this time. For these revelations she faced anger and criticism from her brothers.

The Austen family, from the time Jane returned home, wanted her history hidden from the world. The family promoted the fiction, taken up as a fundamental truth, that Jane Austen went to London only once, during her youth, passing through it with her parents on the way home from visiting her great uncle Francis in Kent. But we know from her *Juvenilia* that by the age of fourteen, Jane knew the layout of London, the social stratification of its streets and squares. It is not possible to have written *Sense and Sensibility* in which she drew so precisely on that knowledge, without ever having spent time in London.

Sense and Sensibility, her first novel, she drew a vivid picture of Marianne's grief, angst and total breakdown at the end of her great love affair. It is extraordinary that anyone reading that novel could accept the Austen fiction that Jane had no experience of love. It is not hard to believe she was writing her own experience.

How might a biographer of Jane Austen have unravelled the secret of her romance with D'Arcy, without the benefit I had of access to a long held family story? I suggest they might have followed up specific facts in her stories, put together her references to real people and families, particularly the Wentworths and Fitzwilliams.

In her writing Jane made many references to members of both those families and used many of their family names. D'Arcy and Lord Fitzwilliam were cousins and loyal friends. In *Pride & Prejudice*, she gave a cameo role to Colonel Fitzwilliam, the younger son of a Lord and a cousin of Mr Darcy.

Another important character in the novel, Wickham, was a real person, the original Scarlet Pimpernel, who helped many French aristocrats to escape the guillotine during the French Revolution. Later, in Britain, he prosecuted supporters of the revolutionary ideals for sedition. Among those transported to New South Wales, were the five Scottish Martyrs, and many other English and Irish supporters of democratic reform.

In 1813, in her letters, Jane referred anxiously to the real Wickham who has returned to Hampshire, near to where she is living. Inexplicably none of her critics or biographers has veered from the Austen family fictions to follow up the clues that Jane writ large in *Pride & Prejudice*, which could have lead them to the true story of her romance with D'Arcy Wentworth.

Following her elopement to Scotland, Jane held to her marriage to D'Arcy, notwithstanding that her father had refused to give his permission or to marry them formally under English law in St Nicholas' in Steventon. Neither Jane nor D'Arcy ever entered into a second marriage.

Jane was proud to be a member of the Wentworth/ Fitzwilliam clan. In one of the few letters that slipped through her family's censorship, after Cassandra and her niece, Fanny Knight had referred to her as "Miss Darcy," Jane replies to them as "Mrs Darcy."^{xiii} In an early portrait she is wearing a wedding ring.

I believe that *Jane & D'Arcy* will revitalise Austen scholarship, replacing long held fictions with facts, and that her readers, particularly those in Australia, will be delighted to know her after all these years, as Mrs D'Arcy, Mrs D'Arcy Wentworth, with a place in Australian history.

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- i J.E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, Richard Bentley & Son, London, 1871.
- ii Jane Austen, *Juvenilia*.
- iii Henry Austen, *The Loiterer*, January 1790.
- iv Governor Macquarie to Viscount Castlereagh, 30 April 1810.
- v Caroline Austen, *Reminiscences*. Jane Austen Society, 1986.
- vi J.E. Austen-Leigh, op cit.
- vii Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen at Sixty," *Nation and Athenaeum*, 34, 1923.
- viii Peter Washington, Introduction to *Sanditon and other Stories*, Everyman's Library, London, 1996.
- ix David Nokes, *Jane Austen: A Life*, Fourth Estate, London, 1997.
- x Jane to Cassandra Austen, 23 August 1814.
- xi William and Richard Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters, A Family Record*, by. London. 1913.
- xii John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1984.
- xiii Jane to Cassandra Austen, 24 May 1813.