

“Such a Treasure, Such a Sister, Such a Friend”

JASNA
Script
#19

(A program commemorating the anniversary of Jane Austen’s death)

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Narrator

Jane Austen died in the early hours of July 18, 1817. She was 41 years old. Some medical historians believe that Jane’s final illness was Addison’s Disease, which is a loss of function of the adrenal glands. The disorder gives rise to weakness, fatigue, weight loss, and severe gastro-intestinal disturbances, sometimes accompanied by back pain. There are intermissions during which the patient feels much better and becomes hopeful of recovery. One of the significant symptoms is that the skin develops patches of brownish or blackish pigmentation, alternating with whiteness. Crises often occur during periods of mental stress. Addison’s Disease is now controlled by drug therapy, but, if not treated, it is fatal.

To commemorate the anniversary of Jane Austen’s death, we will hear excerpts from Jane’s letters written during the last year of her life and from letters written by her sister, Cassandra, immediately after Jane’s death.

Cassandra

Since 1809 Jane and I had lived with our mother in a cottage owned by our brother Edward Knight, in the Village of Chawton. Jane had always enjoyed good health, but in the spring of 1816, her strength began to decline. In May we traveled to Cheltenham so that Jane could drink the water, but the spa did not work a cure.

When we returned to Chawton, Jane resumed work on the manuscript she had begun before she fell ill, which she and I called “The Elliots.” It was, of course, entitled *Persuasion*, when it was published after her death. Jane finished the novel in July, 1816, but was not happy with the ending and wrote a new conclusion in August. Her letters after that summer provide brief glimpses of the illness that was steadily progressing.

In September she wrote to me from Chawton, while I was in Cheltenham again—this time with our sister-in-law, Mary Austen, who was unwell:

Jane

Thank you, my Back has given me scarcely any pain for many days.—I have an idea that agitation does it as much harm as fatigue, & that I was ill at the time of your going from the very circumstance of your going.—I am nursing myself up now into as beautiful a state as I can.

Cassandra While some weeks were better than others during the remainder of that year, Jane was certainly not well. Her natural good spirits and optimism, however, did not diminish, and her letters touch only briefly on the subject of her health. On her last birthday, December 16, 1816, she wrote to our nephew James Edward Austen. Edward (as we always called him) was writing a novel at the time, which he often discussed with my sister:

Jane Uncle Henry writes very superior sermons.—You and I must try to get hold of one or two and put them in our novels;—it would be a fine help to a volume; and we could make our heroine read it aloud of a Sunday evening.

I am quite concerned for the loss your mother mentions in her letter; two chapters and a half to be missing is monstrous! It is well that I have not been at Steventon lately and therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them;—two strong twigs and a half towards a nest of my own would have been something.—I do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches full of variety and glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?

Ben was here on Saturday to ask Uncle Charles and me to dine with them, but I was forced to decline it; the walk is beyond my strength (though I am otherwise very well) and this is not a season for Donkey Carriages.

Cassandra With the arrival of the new year, Jane enjoyed a period of relief. In January, 1817, she wrote to our niece Caroline Austen, who was 12 years old at that time:

Jane I feel myself getting stronger than I was half a year ago, & can so perfectly well walk to Alton, or back again, without the slightest fatigue that I hope to be able to do both when Summer comes.

Cassandra A few days later, Jane wrote to our childhood friend, Alethea Bigg. Alethea was the sister of Harris Bigg-Wither, the unfortunate young man whose marriage proposal my sister had accepted one winter evening in 1802 and then recanted the next morning. That event was ancient history by the time this letter was written: