

“The Novelist and the Navy” [from *Jane Austen and the Navy*]

[Austen wrote throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and sailors and soldiers frequently appear in her novels, though her portrayal of these characters tends to focus far more on their domestic concerns than on their time in battles. Brian Southam’s *Jane Austen and the Navy* examines Austen’s family relationships and naval records, along with her novels, to position her as a historian of the British Navy. This chapter explores Austen’s personal connections to the Navy through her brothers and other family members. Southam argues that sailors represent a “distinct” character type in her novels and that *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* can be read, in part, as “a tribute” to those in naval service.]

“with ships and sailors she felt herself at home”

James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870)

Her biographer’s claim was well-based. Jane Austen lived and wrote throughout the length of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and her sailor brothers Francis and Charles fought through them. With Nelson’s Navy afloat, it was a high point, “The Classic Age of Naval History” a modern scholar has called it, his book entitled *Britannia Rules*.¹ Yet there is no triumphalism in Jane Austen, no narrative of national victory, on land or sea. Austen-Leigh wrote of her brothers’ “distinguished” service “during that glorious period of the British navy.”² But it could be said that this “glorious period” passed Jane Austen by. Her attention as a novelist was not upon great events but upon private lives, not upon war but upon the character of the warriors returned from the fray, sailors home from the sea, now at home and settling to peacetime life with their families or seeking wives. Only once, in William Price of *Mansfield Park*, does Jane Austen portray a young sailor with the war to return to. And even for him, the pipe-dream is not martial success but a retirement cottage in the country, the sailor’s proverbial dream. Naval heroism is kept

1 C. Northcote Parkinson, *Britannia Rules: The Classic Age of Naval History, 1793–1815* (1977). [Footnotes have been modified to include full references to the material reprinted here.]

2 James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, edited by R.W. Chapman (1870, 1871, edn. 1926), pp. 13–14.

strictly off-stage. The heroism we witness in the naval novels is the moral heroism of Fanny Price, her "heroism of principle,"¹ and the "heroism" of "fortitude" and self-denial that Anne Elliot witnesses in the "sick chamber" of Mrs. Smith.²

The closest we get to maritime adventure, or misadventure, is Louisa Musgrove's jump from the Cobb at Lyme. Like the admiring young ladies of *Persuasion*, attentive to Wentworth, or the family circle at Mansfield Park, listening to the adventures of William Price, we have to be content with sailors' tales and sailors safe on shore. The navy closest to Jane Austen's heart is that described with a sly diminuendo in the final words of *Persuasion*, a "profession" "more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance";³ and it is one of the purposes of this book to determine, as well as we can, why Jane Austen should choose to confront the reader, as she does, in presenting this amusing and surprising reversal of values: the "domestic" above the "national" and "virtues" above "importance."

The sailors in Jane Austen form a distinct group, and they stand apart from the other occupational or professional types we find in the novels. Unlike the clerical characters, including the great comic portraits, Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton, the naval figures are seen in a warm and romantic light, are laughed at, if at all, gently and with affection. Yet there is no emotional fuzziness; all are sharply in focus. The portraits are of individuals, each distinct and distinctively naval. Collectively, they stand as "social portraits" of their calling, "saturated with their professional peculiarities,"⁴ an observation that comes to life as soon as we think of Admiral and Mrs. Croft or the occasion at Lyme when Anne Elliot visits the lodgings of Captain Harville and his family. She warms at the sight of his naval ingenuity in the "fitting-up of the rooms," his wind-proofing of the doors and windows, and the collection of carvings, his own handiwork in "rare species of wood ... from all the distant countries" he has visited,

connected, as it all was with his profession, the fruit of its labours, the effect of its influence on his habits, the picture of

1 *Mansfield Park*, p. 265. All Jane Austen novels cited here are the Oxford editions, edited by R.W. Chapman (1923), 6 vols.

2 *Persuasion*, p. 156.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

4 Richard Simpson, review of *Memoir*, *North Britain Review*, 3 (April 1870), pp. 129–52; reprinted in B.C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, 1870–1940* (1981), p. 264.

repose and domestic happiness it presented, made it to her a something more, or less, than gratification.¹

It is in this very particular evocation of naval life—its manifestation in the home, its creation of “domestic happiness”—that Jane Austen’s sympathies are most abundant.

It was here, too, that her observation of the sailor brothers was at its closest and most familiar. Over the period of the war, they were not continuously at sea. Jane Austen visited them and their growing families and was welcomed as a favorite aunt. And beyond this family setting the sailor brothers introduced the Austens to a widening circle of their naval friends and Jane Austen met even more in London and in Bath, a gathering-ground for retired Admirals and for Captains and junior officers home on leave or on half-pay between ships.

The sailor brothers recognized themselves in the novels, their habits and their sayings, and allowed their sister to use the names of their ships. In this sense, *Mansfield Park* and, to a greater degree, *Persuasion*, can be seen as forming a tribute to them and to their service, a recognition that the nation’s security and success in the Long or Great War (as the two French wars became known) was largely a naval achievement—in the great and dramatic victories, of which Trafalgar was only one; in the blockading of the French fleets, a stranglehold which confirmed the Navy’s mastery of the seas; and in the protection of Britain’s trade and its possessions overseas. Anne Elliot’s first words in *Persuasion* (spoken, Jane Austen tells us, in “the summer of 1814” when, with Napoleon on Elba, the war was thought to be over) put it succinctly: it is “The Navy, I think, who have done so much for us.”²

It was not solely patriotism, nor family affection, which moved Jane Austen to treat her naval characters in so favorable a light, with the rogues seen or heard about only at a distance—Admiral Crawford and his “circle of admirals” with their “*Rears, and Vices,*” as Mary Crawford encountered them, “their bickerings and jealousies”;³ and, in *Persuasion*, Admiral Brand and his brother, “Shabby fellows, both of them” in the eyes of Admiral Croft.⁴ The clue to Jane Austen’s partiality is found in *Persuasion*, in Louisa Musgrove’s response to the little naval colony at Lyme. Walking with Anne Elliot, she

1 *Persuasion*, p. 98.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

3 *Mansfield Park*, p. 60.

4 *Persuasion*, p. 170.

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.¹

Jane Austen invites us to smile. This is a truly ecstatic outburst, voicing the ardent sensibility of a young lady of nineteen, her eyes set on a handsome and eligible Captain, newly-returned from sea with a small fortune in prize-money. Yet Jane Austen gives us no reason to doubt Louisa's sincerity, her "fine naval fervour."² As far as "the character of the navy" was concerned, it was a "fervour" shared by Anne Elliot—"She gloried in being a sailor's wife"³—and endorsed by Jane Austen herself.

The association suggested here between the heroine and her creator is a mild supposition with which few readers are likely to disagree. However, far closer ties have been claimed. *Persuasion* has always been regarded as a work apart, the one novel in which Jane Austen allowed herself a heroine of mature "sensibility," a heroine who "learned romance as she grew older,"⁴ whose growing older in loneliness and renunciation is colored by nostalgia and melancholy, a faded heroine drawn with gravity and tenderness, entering upon an autumn of unmarried life. The Victorian novelist Julia Kavanagh attributed the sadness of *Persuasion*, its "melancholy cast," to "some secret personal disappointment";⁵ while Virginia Woolf found *Persuasion* a work of "peculiar beauty," remarkable among the six novels for its confessional quality:

the famous talk about woman's constancy which proves not merely the biographical fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so. Experience, when it was of a serious kind, had to sink very deep, and to be thoroughly disinfected by the passage of time, before she allowed herself to deal with it in fiction. But now, in 1817, she was ready.⁶

1 Ibid., p. 99.

2 Ibid., p. 167.

3 Ibid., p. 252.

4 Ibid., p. 30.

5 Julia Kavanagh, 1862; reprinted Southam, *Critical Essays on Jane Austen* (1968), p.195.

6 Woolf, 1923; reprinted Southam (1968), p. 282.

Rebecca West read *Persuasion* in the same way, glimpsing beyond it the face of Jane Austen “graven with weeping.”¹ Many readers of *Persuasion* find themselves in agreement, detecting in the story of Anne Elliot some degree of some oblique image of Jane Austen’s own hopes and disappointments, and seeing the “felicity” of Anne’s final reconciliation with Wentworth as wish-fulfillment, the novelist’s reshaping of her own life. Was this the impulse, however veiled, behind a comment she made in the last months of her life, that Anne is a “Heroine ... almost too good for me”?²

There is an apocryphal story that mirrors this line of biographical interpretation. First made public in the *Reminiscences* (1886) of Sir Francis Doyle, it runs as follows. In 1802, taking advantage of the Peace of Amiens, Mr. Austen and his two daughters travelled to Switzerland. Then aged twenty-seven—the same age as Anne Elliot—Jane Austen is said to have met “a young naval officer, who speedily became attached” to her, but who died before they could meet again. The story is unauthenticated and was dismissed by the authors of the major family biography, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters* (1913). Although many families did take advantage of the Peace to travel freely on the Continent, there is no evidence whatsoever that Mr. Austen or either of his daughters went abroad then or at any point in their lives, and at this time we know for sure that they were in England. Nonetheless, Doyle’s report is not to be dismissed out of hand. It belongs with a group of stories handed down in the family, differing in detail, but with the common theme of a romantic encounter tragically frustrated.³ That the young man was a “naval officer” fits the precise moment, since during the fourteen months of the Amiens Peace there was an influx of naval officers in civilian society. This detail, at least, is not implausible.

Whatever we make of the Switzerland story, the biographical reading of *Persuasion* is supported by a contemporary witness, a Mrs. Ann Barrett, a young woman who came to live in Alton, only a mile away, between 1812 and 1816. She made the acquaintance of the Austens at Chawton Cottage and struck up a friendship with Jane. The two women became sufficiently intimate for the writer to talk with her visitor about that most private of subjects, her own writing, including her current work, *Persuasion*, and its heroine. Mrs. Barrett recalled

1 Rebecca West, *The Strange Necessity* (1928), pp. 263–64.

2 Letter to Fanny Knight, 23 March 1817 (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, edited by Deirdre Le Faye [third edition, 1995, 1997], p. 335).

3 For my attempt to disentangle the origins of the tale and relate it to other stories of broken romance in Jane Austen’s life, see Southam, “Jane Austen: A Broken Romance?,” *Notes and Queries*, 206 (1961), pp. 464–65.

Jane Austen speaking of her fear of invading the “social proprieties” by portraying living people in her work and her endeavor “to create not to reproduce.”¹ In the case of *Persuasion*, however, it was a distinction which proved to be flexible. Mrs. Barrett’s testimony is on record: “Anne Elliot was herself; her enthusiasm for the navy, and her perfect unselfishness, reflect her completely.”²

Mrs. Barrett’s account is intriguing, pointing as it does to some degree of identification between the author and her heroine; some degree, too, of self-revelation, however guarded, however unconscious. Academics resist this kind of interpretation. But readers of *Persuasion* will speculate nonetheless, just as Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West did; and just as Roger Michell, who directed the BBC film of *Persuasion*, found it “the most poignant of the novels”:

I was moved by the idea of the author, shortly before her death, writing a novel about lost opportunities. She died a virgin in 1817 and here she is writing an erotic love story which is full of sexual yearning. We know that there were moments in her life when she could have married, and then for one reason or another she didn’t. One can’t help wondering whether she was thinking, “I missed out.”³

What this book sets out to explore is the less subjective and less contentious area pointed to by Mrs. Barrett, Jane Austen’s “enthusiasm for the navy,” something observed by her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, who got to know his Aunt well in the last years of her life. In the opening chapter of the *Memoir*, Austen-Leigh refers to her “partiality for the Navy” and “the readiness and accuracy with which she wrote about it.”⁴ He pointed to the family as being “so much, and the rest of the world so little, to Jane Austen”; and to her sister and brothers as “the objects which principally occupied her thoughts and filled her heart, especially as some of them, from their characters

1 These particular views are well known, since they were communicated directly to Austen-Leigh and are quoted in the *Memoir* (p. 157) almost verbatim, and attributed not to Mrs. Barrett by name but to an unmarried “friend” of Jane Austen. But Austen-Leigh omits all reference to what Mrs. Barrett records of Anne Elliot and *Persuasion*.

2 William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, revised and enlarged by Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters: A Family Record*, (1989), pp. 209–10; R.W. Chapman, “Jane Austen’s Friend, Mrs. Barrett,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 4 (1949), pp. 171–74.

3 BBC Television press release for the first showing of *Persuasion*, 1995. (9 March 1995), p. 16.

4 *Memoir*, p. 5.

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or professions in life, may be supposed to have had more or less influence on her writings... .”¹ In its exclusions and preoccupations, Jane Austen’s naval world is no different. Like that of her own family, it is the world of the gentry, the naval gentry, the officers and the aspiring Midshipmen. Of the lower deck, the existence of ordinary seamen, we hear virtually nothing. Jane Austen’s focus is tight: in *Mansfield Park*, upon the politics of “interest” and the pulling of strings behind the scenes, the leverage needed to get Midshipman Price the commission he is unable to achieve on his own; in *Persuasion*, upon the magic touch of war and prize-money, their “persuasive” power in transforming a nobody into a suitor now sufficiently elevated to claim the hand of a Baronet’s daughter, not any Baronet’s daughter, not one of “the almost endless creations of the last century” (a standard reward for naval heroism) but the daughter of a Baronet of lineage “ancient and respectable.”² For this is a world of social mobility, its naval process given caustic definition by Sir Walter Elliot “as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their father and grandfathers never dreamt of.”³ How his indignation must have been fired to see common or garden Captains raised to the knighthood for their feats at sea and Flag-officers honored with Viscountcies, some of them, like Nelson, indeed “of obscure birth,” the recipients of honors undreamt of. Doubtless, Jane Austen had overheard this complaint on the lips of many crusty old Sir Walter Elliots in Bath and in the great houses of Hampshire and East Kent, and she lays it here before us, immortalized.

Beyond what is said of Francis and Charles in the last section of this chapter, I have not set out to present the life-stories of the sailor brothers but only those aspects of their lives which bear directly upon *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* and which, at the same time, help to provide some of the basic information and knowledge of naval matters which Jane Austen could take for granted on the part of her contemporary readers. This was an audience found throughout the land in their rectories and country-houses, some small, like Mrs. Bennet’s Longbourne, some grand, like Mansfield Park or Pemberley, some middling, like Mr. Woodhouse’s Hartfield, or in their town houses, in London or lodged in Bath, like the John Dashwoods, Mrs. Ferrars and Sir Walter Elliot exiled from Kellynch. Yet whether these were families of dignity and wealth or of small pretension, they

1 Ibid., p. 12.

2 *Persuasion*, p. 3.

3 *Persuasion*, p. 19.

had a common bond. They were all of them members of the gentry, bound by a traditional culture of respect for primogeniture and the ownership of land, the source of power and prestige, and all of them with someone in the Navy—a younger son, a nephew, a cousin or an uncle—someone whose career could be tracked in the *Navy List*, whose exploits at sea could be followed as the latest dispatches reached England and appeared in the *Gazette*, to be copied in the London papers and the provincial press, whose postings and promotions were discussed at home and written round the family, just as they were amongst the Austens, in newsy letters meant for circulation and general reading.

Then there were the individuals and groups moving on the fringes of the gentry. We find them in such vulgarians as the Misses Steel and Mrs. Elton nee Augusta Hawkins of Bristol, Mr. Price, the ungentlemanly Lieutenant of Marines, Wickham the steward's son, now travelling upwards with a Lieutenant's commission purchased for him in the Militia, and viewed more favorably, Sir William Lucas, successful "in trade" and knighted, as Mayor of Meryton, for his address to the King, and the Gardiners, City Merchants of Gracechurch Street, gentlemanly in their manners and welcome at Pemberley as uncle and aunt to the young Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Yet at the heart of this mobile scene remained a stable core, families of the Austen ilk, at ease in the company of their fellow-gentry, united by their public schools, universities and clubs, their common round of receptions, balls, weddings and hunts, their cross-linkings in marriage and affinity. No more than a humble country clergyman, beyond his parish a man of no social consequence, Mr. Austen was nonetheless of the gentry. Educated at Tonbridge School and Oxford, he was respected for his learning and married into the Leighs, a line boasting noble forebears, a lineage carried proudly by his wife: a granddaughter records that Mrs. Austen "was amusingly particular about people's noses, having a very aristocratic one herself, which she had the pleasure of transmitting to a good many of her children."¹ The daughters of the family were welcome at the great houses of Hampshire and the eldest son James (like Elizabeth Bennet) could marry into an aristocratic branch—his first wife, Anne Mathew, was a granddaughter of Peregrine Bertie, second Duke of Ancaster and the fifth Duke and Duchess were godparents to their first child. The Austens' second son Edward could enter Darcy's world, the ranks of the greater landed gentry, with estates and country houses at

1 Quoted in Constance Hill, *Jane Austen, her Homes and her Friends* (1902), p. 32.

Godmersham in Kent and Chawton in Hampshire, inherited from his adoptive parents, the Knights of Godmersham.

This was the public Jane Austen was writing for, attentive to its tastes and interests. In the early novels, the entertainment contains a strain of literary satire directed at the current fashions for novels of “sensibility” and Gothic fiction. By the time Jane Austen reached *Mansfield Park*, early in 1811, she was set firmly on the path of “modern” fiction (the term Scott used in his 1816 review of *Emma*), choosing a contemporary subject and story; and her success in this style of writing was confirmed both by the reviewers and her fellow-novelists. Scott credited her with “knowledge of the world” and with characters “that the reader cannot fail to recognise,”¹ while Maria Edgeworth found *Mansfield Park* “like real life”² and, in 1818, was positively glowing about *Persuasion*. Having only read as far as Louisa Musgrove’s accident, she was already singing the novel’s praises. She disliked “the tangled, useless histories of the family in the first 50 pages.” But aside from that, “especially in all that relates to poor Anne and her lover” the novel appeared to her

to be exceedingly interesting and natural. The love and lover admirably well-drawn: don’t you see Captain Wentworth, or rather don’t you in her place feel him taking the boistrous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa? And is not the first meeting after their long separation admirably well done? And the overheard conversation about the nut? But I must stop, we have got no further than the disaster of Miss Musgrove’s jumping off the steps.³

These comments are useful to us, not so much as evidence of Jane Austen’s impact on her fellow-novelists, but for their value in confirming both the historical accuracy and the authenticity, the reality and the realism, of her fictional account.⁴

1 Quoted in Southam (1968), pp. 58–69.

2 Ibid., p. 11.

3 Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 17.

4 It is worth remarking on the trust that historians have placed upon Jane Austen as an accurate and dependable eye-witness to the naval matters of her time. Not only is this found in historians of earlier generations such as Arthur Bryant and Northcote Parkinson, for Jane Austen also features in a work as recent as *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy* (1995) in which the Cornell Professor Daniel Baugh quotes Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion* in his discussion of “naval patronage” and “the social comprehensiveness of the officer corps” (p. 154).

Like many of the early admirers, Maria Edgeworth praised Jane Austen's handling of characters and scenes. What we would regard as an historical perspective, taking a larger, external view of the novels, has only been formed during the last thirty years or so; and to anticipate the chapters that follow I have chosen two very different, even contradictory, responses to the novels: the first from Winston Churchill, Britain's Prime Minister in the Second World War and a First Lord of the Admiralty in the First; the other from the novelist V.S. Pritchett. In December 1943 Churchill went down with 'flu and during the convalescence his daughter Sarah read him *Pride and Prejudice*. He found it soothing and comforting, and felt transported into a world free from conflict:

What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the crushing struggle of the Napoleonic wars. Only manners controlling natural passion so far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances.¹

Pritchett's experience of Jane Austen was totally different; in effect it contested Churchill's view:

Our perfect novelist of comedy ... is often presented as an example of the felicity of living in a small, cosy world, with one's mind firmly withdrawn from the horror outside. This has always seemed to me untrue. I think of her as a war-novelist, formed very much by the Napoleonic wars, knowing directly of prize money, the shortage of men, the economic crisis and change in the value of capital. I have even seen a resemblance of that second visit to Darcy's house as a naval battle; for notice there how the positions of the people in the drawing room are made certain, where Elizabeth like a frigate has to run between the lines.²

Although I have made no attempt to follow Pritchett into the pursuit of naval analogies or metaphors in the novels, it hardly needs saying that the Jane Austen portrayed hereafter is Pritchett's "war-novelist" not Churchill's novelist of "calm lives" conducted in a society untroubled by the cataclysms of the time. The lives of the sailor brothers, both their lives at home and their careers at sea, are threaded through the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, it may be helpful at this point

1 Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (1952), v. 377. For the circumstances, see Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill, 1941–1945* (1986), p. 609.

2 V.S. Pritchett, *George Meredith and Comedy* (1969), p. 28.

to give a brief sketch of their place within the Austen family and how they were seen by their sister Jane and others who knew them well.

Francis and Charles were the two youngest of the six Austen sons. The eldest was James, born in 1765, and destined to inherit his father's clerical livings and head a family of three. Next came George, born in 1766. In some way mentally defective, he was cared for away from home. Then Edward, born in 1767, adopted by distant cousins, the Knights, and through them the inheritor of considerable property at Godmersham in Kent and Chawton in Hampshire. He raised a family of eleven. Next, Henry, born in 1771, a man of many talents, soldier, navy agent, wine merchant, banker and clergyman, destined to marry his cousin, Eliza de Feuillide. Then Jane's lifelong companion, her sister Cassandra, born in 1773, a spinster, though not by choice; followed by the last three children: Francis, born in 1774; Jane, in 1775; and Charles, in 1779.

Mr. Austen, an Oxford educated scholar, passed on the values of education to his children. James and Henry were taught at home before going on to St John's, his old Oxford college; unusually for girls, Cassandra and Jane were sent away for their schooling; and instead of putting Francis and Charles directly to sea at eleven or twelve, the route followed by most youngsters, he set them on an "academic" course, entering them for the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth, where they received a thorough educational grounding in astronomy, mathematics and the other knowledge and skills needed to prepare them for a career at sea.

Although the Rectory was a place of learning where Mr. Austen guided his children's study of the classics and encouraged their formal exercises in writing, their upbringing was far from a grind. The family reading ranged widely, including the latest novels alongside Pope, Fielding, Sterne, Johnson, Sheridan and Shakespeare. It was also lively. In the summer holidays, a small stage was set up in the Rectory barn and at Christmas plays were put on in the house, with a company made up of the younger Austens joined by friends and relations, amongst whom Eliza de Feuillide was the star. They performed popular works, including Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Garrick's *The Chances* and *High Life Above Stairs*. For a more modest evening's entertainment, the grown-ups and children would take turns in reading aloud, some of it by no means "polite" literature, or put on their own rhyming charades or read their little poems. We can trace the influence of all this in Jane Austen's childhood writings—her extensive *juvenilia*. The effect of this strong literary background was also felt by the sailor brothers. We find this in the official letters and reports of Francis Austen, which are remarkably sustained and

composed; also in the extensive private journals in which Charles recorded the events of the day, his reflections, and his reading at sea—the latest novels of Scott, the poems of Byron and so on.

Over the course of time, the sons of the family went their ways: in 1786, Edward left for two years on the Grand Tour, returning to live at Godmersham with the Knights; James took a curacy in 1790 and married two years later; Francis went off to the Naval Academy in 1786, Charles in 1791; Henry enlisted with the Oxfordshire Militia in 1793; while, outside the school terms, the two daughters remained with their parents at Steventon. In 1801, Mr. Austen passed on his livings to James and left Hampshire for retirement in Bath. It was a sad parting from the old home and both Francis and Charles—Charles “much surprised” at the news, as Jane recorded, “& means to come to Steventon once more while Steventon is ours,”¹—returned to help with “the final packing and farewells.”² Nonetheless, the family remained in close contact. The sisters would stay with Henry in London. Together, or individually, or in company with their parents, they would visit Edward at Godmersham, sometimes for months on end. Henry, too, was a frequent visitor and, in the last years of the war, Godmersham was also convenient for Charles, stationed with his wife and family at Sheerness. And Francis, newly-married in 1806, was happy to share lodgings with his widowed mother and two sisters at Southampton. There was a continual round of visits, meetings and a full flow of “family” letters, letters for family consumption, carrying news from household to household and written to be read aloud and shared. In this way, the Austens remained together, close in feeling, understanding and knowledge, although they might be far flung, even thousands of miles apart, with Francis in the East Indies or China and Charles stationed in Bermuda, as he was for well over six years.

For the twenty years or so of war, Francis and Charles served in every theatre of operation. But it was not unbroken service. Like all naval officers, they enjoyed periods in England on half-pay when they were on leave or awaiting orders for another ship. Despite all the years of absence and the uncertainties of war-time life, in themselves they found sufficient stability to make successful marriages. It was during a home posting, in command of the Sea Fencibles on the Kentish coast, that Francis met his first wife, Mary Gibson, and between 1807 and 1821 raised a family of five daughters and six sons, three of whom entered the Navy. His wife died in July 1823, a week after the birth of their last child (who was to live for only six

1 Jane to Cassandra, 11 February 1801 (*Letters*, p. 50).

2 Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen's Family: Through Five Generations* (1984), p. 129.

months). Five years later, in 1828, Francis married again. This time it was to Martha Lloyd, an intimate friend of Mrs. Austen and her daughters and as their long-term companion, virtually a member of the family. Over thirty years earlier, Martha had been Jane's and Cassandra's original choice for him. Francis recognized her abundance of "good sense," her "sweet temper, amiable disposition" and, what he valued most, "what is of a far greater importance, a mind deeply impressed with the truth of Christianity."¹

Charles, too, was twice married. First, in 1807, in Bermuda, to Fanny Palmer, a girl of seventeen, the youngest daughter of the island's former Attorney-General. Of their four daughters, the last died in infancy, and it was following the birth of this child, in September 1814, that Fanny died too. Six years later, Charles married her elder sister, Harriet. Of Charles' second family of four, two died very young, while the two surviving boys followed their father into the Navy.

The sailor brothers passed the war unscathed. Inheriting the hardness of the Austens—their father lived to nearly seventy-four, their mother to eighty-eight—they served on in the peacetime Navy: Charles, by then a Rear-Admiral, into his seventy-fifth year, dying on active service in Burma; Francis, to the age of ninety-one, ending as Admiral of the Fleet. Whatever similarities are to be seen in the pattern of their lives, the two men were very different in character and sensibility. In childhood, Francis carried the nickname Fly (Jane Austen uses this in one of her letters),² a name which brings out his boyhood character as a lively little scamp, "Fearless of danger, braving pain," a lad with "warmth, nay insolence of spirit." This is Jane Austen's description of her brother in a verse-letter written in 1809, congratulating him on the birth of his first son, Francis-William junior, and recalling his own "infant days ... His saucy words & fiery ways."³ As he describes himself, in boyhood Francis was "rather small of stature, of a vigorous constitution and possessing great activity of body."⁴ Mentally vigorous, too. When he completed his time at the Portsmouth Naval Academy, aged fourteen, his report accounted him an ideal student, hard-working and faultless in conduct, "altho' he has a lively and active disposition."⁵ All too soon, however, Fly fades from view, to be replaced by an officer for whom the formality and stiffness of Francis sounds exactly

1 Francis Austen's Memoir, quoted in David Hopkinson, "The Later Life of Sir Francis Austen," *Jane Austen Society Report* (1983), p. 256.

2 Letter dated 15–16 September 1793 (*Letters*, p. 10).

3 Letter dated 26 July 1809 (*Letters*, pp. 177–78).

4 Francis Austen's Memoir, quoted in *Family Record*, p. 62.

5 NMM, MS AUS/14.

right. In the eyes of Jane Austen he was always “amiable” Frank. But his officers and crews found him formidable, a strict, sometimes harsh, disciplinarian—as he must have seemed, too, to his children, judging from the calvinistic severity of his letters home. He was a stickler for rules and regulations, punctilious and conscientious to a fault, a slave to “duty.” As a devout Evangelical commanding a “praying” ship he courted no popularity; and in himself he was a reserved and private man. Of his innermost life we can only guess. But the occasion of Mary Gibson’s death in 1823 provides us with a moment’s insight. The entry in his Memoir is tight-lipped and drained of emotion: “It would be impossible and needless to describe the deep agony of the bereaved.”¹ The “bereaved,” of course, was himself.

The Hubbacks saw Francis as a man who valued “extreme neatness, precision, and accuracy”,²³ and tales of the Admiral’s oddities circulated widely in the family. Lord Brabourne, the son of Edward’s eldest daughter, recorded two of these, one a highly characteristic story, “one of the things most like himself that he ever did”:

He was exceedingly precise, and spoke always with due deliberation, let the occasion be what it might, never having been known to hurry himself in his speech for any conceivable reason. It so fell out, then, that whilst in some foreign seas where sharks and similar unpleasant creatures abound, a friend, or sub-officer of his (I know not which), was bathing from the ship. Presently Sir Francis called out to him in his usual tone and manner, “Mr. Pakenham, you are in danger of a shark—a shark of the blue species! You had better return to the ship.” “Oh! Sir Francis; you are joking, are you not?” “Mr. Pakenham, I am not given to joking. If you do not immediately return, soon will the shark eat you.” Whereupon Pakenham, becoming alive to his danger, acted upon

1 Memoir quoted in Hopkinson (1983), p. 253.

2 John H. and Edith C. Hubback, *Jane Austen’s Sailor Brothers* (1906), p. 3.

3 Although *Sailor Brothers*, written in 1904–6, comes forty years after Francis’ death, more than fifty after Charles’s, it carries the full authority of an informed family account. John Hubback, its principal author, lived at Portsdown Lodge for eight years (1850–58). Between the ages of six and fourteen he was particularly close to his grandfather and the book carries his personal recollections of Francis and the Admiral’s tales of naval life. It also draws upon a memoir by John Hubback’s mother, Catherine, the Admiral’s fourth daughter, born in 1818. She was a successful writer, with ten novels to her name, the first of them based upon *The Watsons*, Jane Austen’s unfinished story read aloud to her by Cassandra and by her step-mother, Martha Lloyd.

the advice thus deliberately given, and, says the story, saved himself “by the skin of his teeth” from the shark.¹

Brabourne then proceeded to a second anecdote of “Uncle Frank,” this one:

bearing upon the exact precision which was one of his characteristics. On one occasion he is said to have visited a well-known watchmaker, one of whose chronometers he had taken with him during an absence of five years, and which was still in excellent order. After looking carefully at it, the watchmaker remarked, with conscious pride, “Well, Sir Francis, it seems to have varied none at all.” Very slowly, and very gravely, came the answer: “Yes, it *has* varied—*eight seconds!*”²

Charles comes across very differently. Even as a Lieutenant of nineteen, he remained the baby of the family, “Our own particular little brother” Jane called him.³ In 1813, now a Captain and the father of a growing family, he was “dear Charles all affectionate, placid, quiet, cheerful good humour”;⁴ and whenever his name enters the correspondence, Jane writes of him with tenderness and solicitude. The *Sailor Brothers* speaks of his “bubbling enthusiasm”⁵ and “undoubted charm.”⁶ Enlarging on this, the Hubbicks enter an intriguing note of reservation (for which, unfortunately, they provide no illustrative stories):

His charm of manner, handsome face and affectionate disposition, combined with untiring enthusiasm, must have made him very hard to resist, and he evidently had no scruple about making his wants clear to all whom it might concern.⁷

The family biographer, James Edward Austen-Leigh, knew his Uncle as a man of “sweet temper and affectionate disposition,” qualities which “had secured to him an unusual portion of attachment, not only from his own family, but from all the officers and common sailors who served under him.”⁸ In writing this, Austen-Leigh may

1 Lord Edward Brabourne, editor, *Letters of Jane Austen*, 2 vols. (1885), i.37.

2 Ibid., p. 38.

3 Letter to Cassandra, 21–23 January 1799 (*Letters*, p. 38).

4 Letter to Cassandra, 14–15 October 1813 (ibid., p. 239).

5 *Sailor Brothers*, p. 46.

6 Ibid., p. 36.

7 Ibid., p. 54.

8 *Memoir*, p. 15.

have been thinking of the silver salver presented to Charles by the officers and crew of the *Aurora* in 1829 and the snuffbox from the ship's "young Gentlemen"—given "as a Testimony of their Esteem and gratitude." One of the family voices was that of a nephew, Commander George Rice, who served under his uncle in the Second Burmese War. In his letters home, it was always "the dear old Admiral" or the "good old Admiral," "without exception the kindest-hearted and most perfectly gentleman-like man I ever knew."¹ His appearance was striking. We have a good description from Anna Austen (James' eldest daughter), who knew her Uncle as a man of "very remarkable sweetness of temper & benevolence of character," to which

he joined great personal advantages ... and that even to the last. When the Admiral left England in February [1850] (though in the 71st year of his age) his tall, erect figure, his bright eye & animated countenance would have given the impression of a much younger man; had it not been for the rather remarkable contrast with his hair, which, originally dark, had become of a snowy white.²

"To the last," too he kept a cool head and his sense of humor. Two years later, at the age of seventy-three, in the final year of his life, Charles was leading the attack on Rangoon. With a sense of occasion, he granted Spencer Ellman, Captain of the *Salamander*, the privilege of opening the bombardment. To heighten the drama of this event, Ellman trained his gun on a large pagoda and fired it himself, holding his fire until the Admiral's vessel, a steam sloop, stood in a direct line between the *Salamander* and his target. As the shot whistled over his head, Charles dryly remarked to the officers grouped around him, "The man who fired that shot is looking for promotion."³

The one thing the sailor brothers shared was a profound religious faith; and the Hubbicks went as far as to call "their religious life ... the mainspring of all their actions."⁴ It was a faith common to the Austens, Jane included. But for Francis it was God in the seat of judgment, religion in its severe and disciplinary aspect; and, where religion played its part, this is what came to the fore in the regulation of his ships and the upbringing of his children. Charles, too, applauded his ships' Chaplains for preaching against swearing, profanity, drunkenness and the other disorders endemic to shipboard

1 MS Rice Papers (quoted in Hammond, 1998, pp. 329–32).

2 Family papers (quoted in *Family Record*, pp. 238–39).

3 *Annual Report of the Jane Austen Society for the Year* (1970), p. 8.

4 *Sailor Brothers*, p. 114.

life; he was always ready to lead Sunday worship at sea; and we know from his diaries and journals that God was never far from his thoughts. However, this was a God of love, of compassion and forgiveness, and it is these qualities that shine through his life both amongst his family and at sea.

Francis and Charles are not to be numbered among the heroes and great commanders of Nelson's Navy. Were it not for their sister, they would be forgotten. However, by 1865, the year of Francis' death, his nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh was already collecting materials for his aunt's biography, the *Memoir of Jane Austen*, published five years later. In its opening pages, alongside their sister, the sailor brothers are given pride of place. For the reception of Jane Austen, the book was momentous. Inspiring a host of essays and reviews, it opened the flood-gates of criticism and appreciation. Overnight, the novelist for a few was transformed into a popular author. Before long, the tide of interest reached Francis and Charles, and at the turn of the century Francis' grandson, John Hubback, now a prosperous Liverpool grain-merchant, helped by his daughter Edith, put his hand to the writing of *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers*, the family tribute which set this present book in motion.

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