

Some Words of Jane Austen

Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism

by Laurence W. Mazzeno.

Camden House, 2011. 301 pages.
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Review by Kelly McDonald.

Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism, by Laurence W. Mazzeno, will make shelf-challenged booklovers willingly dust off more space. In this compilation of reviews and essays from the 1810s through 2010, Mazzeno has given Austen scholars a useful reference tool. It is especially well-suited to students and readers wishing to broaden their understanding of past and current writings. Mazzeno's commentary concisely focuses on the essence of any given essay, and then ties it into the field of broader criticism.

The objective of the book was twofold. "First, of course, it is an attempt to see how Austen has fared as the object of critical inquiry. But second, it is, in post modern critical terms, intended to gaze at the gazers." It is this last, Mazzeno's evaluation of the various works upon which he gazed, that I find the most worthwhile, and personally informative.

Mazzeno bows to the field that "has been plowed before" by pointing readers to the seminal works of Brian Southam (*Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, published in 1968, and *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, 1870-1940*); as well as more recent texts by Claire Harman (2009's *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*) and Joanne Wilkes (*Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 2010). His brief summary of this early period (covering 1811 to post World War I) in the first chapter serves as an introduction for what will come. A section which looks at James Edward Austen Leigh's *Memoir of Jane Austen*, its influence and shortcomings, is followed by a consideration of early attempts at Austen biography. Mazzeno's commentary pointed me towards many pieces I

wished to investigate further. Each chapter handily concludes with a "Works Cited" section.

Presented chronologically, the layout allows readers to pinpoint an era (say, Austen criticism and feminism, Chapter five, covering the years 1976-1990). There are actually three chapters covering this same period, "Austen Among the Theorists" and "Traditional Criticism" being the other two. This method coalesces the disparate essays written during such broad periods of time.

Historians will welcome the breadth of essays discussed, especially in the earliest chapters (the thoughts and reactions of the first generation audience). Historians of literary criticism will, of course, be able to appreciate the development from "appreciation" to a tighter critical methodology. There are many useful mini-sections, for instance the brief consideration of the name well-known to every Austen scholar: R.W. Chapman and the Oxford edition of Austen's works. Cecil, Jenkins, Lascelles, Le Faye, Duckworth, even the rise of the Austen societies, all come under Mazzeno's gaze. I appreciate that Mazzeno includes Austen *biography*. Whether slim (Helen Lefroy's "succinct introduction") or expansive coffee table books (Deirdre Le Faye's *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels*), Mazzeno has found it prudent to present the broad fabric of Austen scholarship, which provides readers across many areas of study with a quick and easy reference.

Section headings make finding particular sets of studies an easy task. The index is well drawn, allowing readers direct access to the well-known names, as well as those currently carving out an Austen niche for themselves (for instance, Sue Parrill on Austen films or Alice White on the works of Fanny Caroline Lefroy). Citations of a mere topical nature are slim, despite the appearance of headings such as feminism, education (in Austen's fiction), or irony (in Austen's fiction). More along this line would have been

welcome, but this is a very small criticism. The chronological bibliography at the rear, although duplicating lists included at the ends of chapters, is a handy

reference and a practical use of forty-one pages. Mazzeno's style of writing makes the chapters accessible to all readers, and his insights are discerning. Whether a student looking for sources for a paper, a professor looking to broaden knowledge of the gamut available, or an interested reader of Austen's popular novels, the text should be a nice addition to one's personal collection and a worthwhile purchase for larger academic libraries.

This collection of essays may not be a book to sit and read cover to cover, but the hours the reader spends perusing various chapters are well rewarded with a growing list for further reading. Austenean literature is constantly being augmented; Mazzeno's summation is a useful tool for assessing past writings and past approaches, a solid base upon which to build further scholarship. Mazzeno's last chapter, "Speculations on the Future," candidly concludes with the idea that "the works she [Austen] has left us are likely to compel our attention for decades to come." *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism* is one of a series of "Literary Criticism in Perspective" written for Camden House. Mazzeno has authored several titles in this series, including one on Charles Dickens.

Kelly M. McDonald presented a paper on art and music in Sense and Sensibility at the Fort Worth AGM in 2011. Researching the life of Emma Austen Leigh (1801-76), Kelly has written articles for Persuasions, Persuasions On-Line, and Jane Austen's Regency World.

