

Muted Merriment: Christmas Celebrations in Jane Austen

HUGH McKELLAR

Toronto, Ontario

If, today, a mother of six children were expecting in early December the arrival of a seventh, who then proved dilatory about being born, all fingers in the family which were not crossed would be reaching for the panic button, for a wholly non-obstetrical reason: how were they ever to be ready for Christmas? Should they extend, accept, or forget about invitations? Would the older children suffer lasting trauma if Daddy chauffeured them to their school concerts but could not safely stay to applaud? Dare he venture to the office party alone, and could he be trusted to behave himself while there? How should the tree be obtained, the decorations put up, the baking done?

Few such considerations would have agitated the inhabitants of Steventon Rectory in December 1775. They and their neighbours assuredly looked forward to “due celebration of that festival which requires a more than ordinary share of private balls and large dinners to proclaim its importance” (as ch. 24 of *S&S* ends by informing us), but felt no compulsion to begin toiling towards it as soon as the leaves fell. Only Jane Austen’s sailor brothers survived long enough into Queen Victoria’s reign to witness most of the trappings of what we consider a “traditional Christmas.” Greeting cards, for example, had to await the introduction of cheap postage rates in 1840—the same year as the Queen married Prince Albert, who was determined that his children should have the kind of homey German Christmas which his father had never bothered to arrange for him and his brother after their mother ran away. Only in 1843 did another erstwhile neglected child, Charles Dickens, publish *A Christmas Carol*, and thereby provide the English-speaking world with a pattern of warm, domestic celebration fit to complement and reinforce the royal family’s practice. Lacking both precept and example for the kind of Christmas festivities we cherish, the characters in Jane Austen’s novels take to the year’s end an approach which in our day would be deemed casual if not callous; but after glancing at what they do, we may be able to discern the ground rules which they are following.

Even the families which gather for the holiday contrive to introduce at least one element which seems to us discordant. The Gardiners’ custom of spending a week with the Bennets, where they will be within easy reach of the Philipses, is logical enough; but they leave their children in Gracechurch-street, presumably in the care of nursemaids and other servants, instead of bringing them to Longbourn, as they do the following summer on the first stage of their excursion northward with Elizabeth. (This point is confirmed by the children’s behaviour when Elizabeth, on her way to Hunsford in March, stays overnight at their home: they crowd the staircase for a glimpse of the cousin “whom they had not seen for a

twelvemonth".) While the Gardiners stay, they and the Bennets do "not once sit down to a family dinner"; but, except for the officers quartered in Meryton, how can the "four-and-twenty families" with whom the Bennets exchange visits be sufficiently free of commitments to their own relatives to accept invitations to Longbourn? Again, Lady Susan invites herself to Churchill in December without suggesting that she is moved by an urge to spend Christmas with her only relatives, as she would surely do if she judged such a plea likely to soften the heart of her hostess—who seems mildly rather than bitterly disappointed at having to cancel her own plans for spending Christmas with her parents. Nor does Catherine Vernon, even in her eagerness to separate her brother Reginald from Lady Susan, remind him that he can and should spend Christmas with the elder de Courcys, especially since she cannot.



"The first part of Mrs. Gardiner's business was to distribute her presents."

At Mansfield Park the tie between Christmas and family obligations is even slacker. Julia, who has been supporting the Rushworths, through the rigours of their honeymoon, is expected home, but sends word that she prefers to stay in London. The irreproachable Edmund sets off on December 23 for the home near Peterborough of his friend Owen, with whom he is to receive deacon's orders within the week; when he fails to return promptly, Mary Crawford wonders if he is detained by the Owens' "Christmas gaieties." (Presumably the ultra-select social circles which Mrs. Robert Watson graces in Croydon indulge in comparable diversions, but she makes no mention of them in the offhand invitation she extends to Emma at Hallowe'en; perhaps she means to retain the option of shipping Emma home if she proves unworthy of inclusion in such festivities.)

"Gaieties" could not, apparently, begin before December 25, for Mrs. Norris tells Sir Thomas that, had Maria and Julia been at hand, "a ball you would have had this very Christmas." She acquiesces sulkily, perhaps because she can regard it as less than a real Christmas ball, in his arranging a dance for December 22 out of consideration for William Price, who must rejoin his ship on the 24th; like Mrs. Bennet, he manages to collect on short notice "twelve or fourteen couple" of presentable guests who can spare an evening, indeed a night, from their own Christmas commitments and preparations—or were they making any? We can accept William's departure deadline, since defence of the realm overrides family loyalty; but why can Edmund not stay till at least Boxing Day? Why do his plans for ordination not include his parents' presence? And why is the ceremony scheduled for Christmas week rather than, as it normally would be in our day, for Pentecost (Whitsuntide), which follows hard on the ordinands' graduation from theological college?

Regency England had no such college for Edmund to attend; he would have finished his arts courses well before reaching the minimum age (23) for entering deacon's orders. Nor could ordinations outside of London easily be arranged when Parliament was in session, and all bishops were on duty in the House of Lords. Since Peterborough was not, like Durham or Winchester, a richly-endowed diocese, home might be the only place where its bishop could afford to spend the parliamentary recess, and conducting an ordination would incommode him very little. Having satisfied himself by a personal interview of Edmund's fitness for ordination, he could proceed directly to the laying-on of hands without having to worry about placing in a parish a young man who was already sure of Thornton Lacey, and eventually of Mansfield.

But at a time of year when Parliament was certain not to be sitting, the boarding-schools where actual and potential MPs stowed their sons could safely throw their charges back on their families' hands. Parents might use the vacation period to assess or hasten their children's progress in learning: young Tom and Edmund Bertram have to declaim verse to their father's satisfaction. The less demanding Musgroves leave Louisa convalescing at Lyme while they receive their younger children at Uppercross for the celebrations which irritate Lady Russell; but they

bring with them the little Harvilles, whose parents can have no more compunction than the Gardiners about being parted from them at Christmas. Although Lady Susan would think nothing of leaving Frederica at Miss Summers' establishment till New Year's, or indeed till doomsday, not even the kind-hearted Vernons propose inviting her to Churchill until her bungled flight leaves them no choice.

This problem will confront John and Isabella Knightley eventually though not immediately, since their five children result from a mere seven years of marriage. Although they come nearer than any other Austen characters to celebrating Christmas as we might, even they continually "do the right thing for the wrong reason." With a full complement of offspring and nursemaids, they travel sixteen miles well before December 25 to revel for ten days in the company of all their living close relatives, but they choose their time because John, as a lawyer, must be back in London on the 28th. Besides, while the law-courts were closed in August and September, they were neglecting Highbury in favour of the sea-air of South End, and giving the children extra time to learn tricks for Isabella to show off on morning visits to her former neighbours—who, like their Meryton and Mansfield counterparts, cannot be too engrossed in their own preparations to spare her and her troupe the time of day.

Only on Christmas Eve do the Knightleys forsake Hartfield for Randalls, whose mistress is practically a member of the family, and whose master, disappointed by the postponement of his son's promised visit, has opened his door to someone else with no relatives nearby: Mr. Elton. Such an invitation would be no kindness to a modern clergyman, even to one missing his distant family, because he would have at least one service to conduct during that evening. But, in days when candles provided the only feasible source of illumination, churches held very few services after dark; Mr. Elton need not watch even his wine consumption, since only on Christmas morning will he be on duty for the service which the snow, combined with resentment of his unexpected proposal, keeps Emma from attending. Mr. Woodhouse's agitation over that fall of snow might well have struck a chord in *Emma's* first readers: in both Europe and America, 1816 was long remembered as "the year without a summer," and snow was unusually plentiful in Britain for a few years before and after it. Those snowy winters happened to coincide with the childhood of Dickens, who gathered, and later convinced his multitudes of readers, that snow is an essential ingredient of a proper Christmas. (Had he cast a weaker spell, could "White Christmas" have achieved, let alone maintained, its all-time primacy in record sales?) But to the guests at Randalls, who lack exposure to Dickens' compelling instruction, the snowfall is much the same kind of nuisance as Mr. Elton's proposal is to Emma—uncalled-for and annoying but hardly catastrophic, since it does not prevent the Knightleys from returning to London on schedule.

Had snow continued to fall heavily just then, though, serious inconvenience could have resulted—and not just for Mr. Elton, whose arrival in Bath might have been delayed till Miss Hawkins had bestowed her affection elsewhere (for all she had, that wouldn't take long). Bills and

wages were still being paid not by the week or month, but by the “quarter”, as had been customary since the time when people were less apt to refer to calendar dates than to saints’ days. Accounts were supposed to be settled on Lady-day (March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation); St. Peter’s Day (June 29); and Michelmas (September 29, when Mr. Bingley’s lease of Netherfield begins). Christmas should have completed this sequence, and for the poor it sometimes did: “Boxing Day” gave dissatisfied servants a chance to pack their belongings and set out in search of a better position, with their quarter’s wages to sustain them till they found one. Wealthier people might, however, delay settling their accounts until early January; thus Mrs. Jennings cannot wait to travel with the Middletons from Barton Park to her London house if she wants her household to run smoothly during the winter, for she must pay the wages of her skeleton staff and the bills they have run up with tradesmen for supplies during her absence.

People who could afford to spend the winter in Bath if not in London likewise do not arrive there before mid-January; if they stay six or eight weeks, they can still be home to meet their obligations by Lady-day. Even Mrs. Thorpe, whose means are limited, must have travelled in mid-month, since she was at home during the last week of her son’s Christmas vacation from Oxford, when he brought James Morland to stay. Perhaps, like many people in her position, she was also awaiting the quarter’s payment from a trust fund administered by a lawyer; if snow kept John Knightley away from his office too long, his firm’s clients might have trouble laying hands on enough money to keep their dependents and creditors happy. No such problem can afflict Mr. Collins, for he agrees to Charlotte’s scheduling their wedding for just after New Year’s, never suspecting that she might be anxious to wring from Christmas all the happy memories she could.

The Christmas celebrations Jane Austen depicts have emerged from the cloud which, in the 1650s, the Puritans had cast over them—not because they grudged people a chance for merry-making, far less because they deemed the birth of Christ not worth celebrating, but because they felt the fourth-century Church had exceeded its authority by selecting a particular date for observance of an event for which the Gospels do not indicate even a time of year. However, pressure to avoid celebrating had not yet been replaced by pressure to celebrate regardless of inclination and expense, even in “the felicity of unbounded domesticity.” By expecting only moderate pleasure from low-key Christmas festivities, Jane Austen’s characters and contemporaries at least avoided both the hopes of euphoria and the dejection over its absence which now render early January the busiest season for distress centres and psychiatrists.