

The Regency shines in period city

By Paula L. Stepankowsky

One of the few American cities with an entire section in existence when Jane Austen wrote was the intriguing setting for the 1994 annual general conference of the Jane Austen Society of North America.

Steeped in old-world architecture, jazz, and French and Spanish tradition, New Orleans offered many sights, sounds, and tastes for the more than 350 JASNA members who came to hear about "Jane Austen and the 3 Rs: Rebellion, Revolution and the Regency."

For those not used to 85-degree temperatures in November, the New Orleans climate was a bit of a shock. Postponing the conference a month, to November, seems to have been the right thing to do.

The conference opened on Friday afternoon, earlier than usual, to accommodate more plenary sessions, which JASNA members have said they wanted.

After a welcome by JASNA President Garnet Bass, Ruth Perry, a literature professor at MIT, traced Jane Austen's connections to the West Indies in a talk on "A Thinking Woman's Guide to British Imperialism."

After a tour of "The Picturesque Garden" in Jane Austen's time, given by Mel Bertolozzi of Loyola Marymount, the connections between Jane Austen and Byron were explored by Rachel Brownstein, professor of English at State University of New York.

Dr. Brownstein combed Jane Austen's works and letters for references to Byron and traced other connections between the two. Jean Bowden, curator of Jane Austen's House in Chawton, pointed out that it is Lady Caroline Lamb's first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* that is on display in the house. The volatile Lady Caroline was Byron's mistress for a time.

Dr. Margaret Anne Doody, director of comparative literature at Vanderbilt University, led off a full slate of speakers on Saturday. Dr. Doody, who is editing new editions of Jane Austen's works, spoke on the topic "A Regency

Walking Dress and Other Disguises: Jane Austen and the Big Novel."

Dr. Doody spoke of how Jane Austen rediscovered writing after her move to Chawton in 1809 and realized that her early style of writing was no longer in fashion in the increasingly serious and propriety-conscious 19th century.

"Austen knew she was guilty of sparkle; she had inherited sparkle from the 18th century," Dr. Doody said.

Gradually, she worked her way toward a new style of writing, toward "the big novel," the larger tradition of prose fiction going back to Greek and Roman times, Dr. Doody said.

"But the challenge Austen offered to other novelists wasn't taken up until later, by which time she was considered quaint," Dr. Doody said.

Morning breakout sessions covered such topics as the ballroom and Regency society, Jane Austen and Margaret Drabble, and a reassessment of Jane Austen and feminist literary criticism.

The highlight of the afternoon plenary sessions was an opera based on *Lady Susan* by composer Joanne Forman. Funded by a grant from JASNA, the opera featured most of the nuances of the Austen original, with the singers taking on a variety of roles. The production was simply staged, but the music and lyrics amply reflected Jane Austen's ironic tone.

Afternoon breakout sessions featured such talks as "Jane Austen's Women in Love," by Dr. Juliet McMaster; "Civility as Rebellion in *Pride and Prejudice*," by Dr. Joseph Wiesenfarth; and "Women's Education During the Regency: Jane Austen's Quiet Rebellion," by Dr. Barbara Horwitz.

A popular addition to the AGM schedule on Saturday evening was a Regency Fair, at which regions displayed the increasing number of items inspired by or related to Jane Austen and her times.

A big group gathered around a photograph of a portrait said to be Jane Austen by a man writing a biography of James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's librarian.

R.J. Wheeler, an antiquarian book dealer in England, claims in a soon-to-be-published book about Clarke that the woman shown is Jane Austen as she looked when she visited Carlton house in November of 1815. A story elsewhere in this issue describes the portrait and what JASNA members thought of it.

Susan McCartan, secretary of the British Jane Austen Society, opened the banquet with greetings from across the Atlantic and a report on activities of the JAS. All then rose to toast Jane Austen. Harpist Margaret Knight entertained after the banquet by singing songs that would have been familiar to Jane Austen.

A tour of an 18-century-style estate filled with period furniture and decorative arts capped the weekend.

Longue Vue House was built by cotton broker Edgar Bloom Stern and his wife, Edith, after World War II, but it could stand in for any Palladian country house of Jane Austen's 19th-century England.

After a tour of the gardens and house, JASNA members had brunch under a tent set up on a soggy lawn. By the end of the morning, some people had sunk halfway to their ankles in the turf.

In keeping with the Sunday theme, Bruce Stovel of the University of Alberta offered new insights into a series of prayers written by Jane Austen.

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