



# Book Reviews

## MAKING A TRADE OF HER WIT

### *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind*

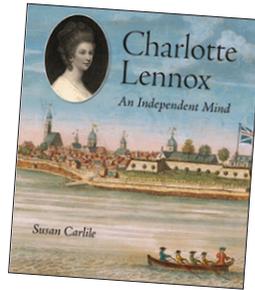
By Susan Carlile

University of Toronto Press (2018)

xxvi + 489 pages

16 b/w and 12 color illustrations

Paperback/ebook, \$44.95



Review by Kelly M. McDonald

Several threads connect writer Charlotte Lennox (circa 1729–1804) to Jane Austen (1775–1817). Most notable is Austen’s epistolary notice to Cassandra Austen (January 7, 1807) of rereading Lennox’s most celebrated novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), which has spawned Lennox–Austen academic examination.

Lennox’s personal history, like Austen’s, is complicated by a lack of primary evidence from the author’s hand. The contention that Lennox’s vast literary output of novels, poems, plays, criticism, and translation deserves study gains an important advocate in Susan Carlile’s cradle-to-grave biography, *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind*. This account surely will raise Lennox’s ranking among the female writers of her era.

Carlile opens with a well-imaged set piece placing Lennox at the “imposing front door” of Samuel Richardson’s home. It is undeniable that Lennox knew important people and secured connections to well-placed patrons. Hampered by financial problems much of her life—she was orphaned early and suffered an unhappy marriage—Lennox clearly sharpened her pen in order to survive.

While Carlile demonstrates Lennox’s inner passion—that “need to write,” from a very early age—she mines the author’s two “American” novels to reconstruct Lennox’s childhood after her military father was posted to Colonial New York. Occasionally, where source material is lacking, Carlile returns to Lennox’s publications. Readers who argue against personal history ending up in an author’s fiction will find this shortcoming analogous to Austen’s work being combed for corroboration about unknowable facts in her personal life. Even if Lennox’s earliest novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart, Written by Herself* (1750), could be confirmed as thinly disguised autobiography, the strategy here produces repetitious instances of “might have” deductions.

Carlile’s argument is at its most compelling when setting out how Lennox managed to pursue writing as a profession, portraying the people who helped (or hindered) her, and depicting the general

milieu—including 18th century England’s publishing and theater worlds. The book includes an extensive bibliography, concise endnotes, and a detailed index. This results in a pleasurable massive tome that ably presents Lennox in this first biography of the writer in more than 50 years. *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind* will induce the curious to move beyond an obligatory, cursory read of *The Female Quixote*, if only to appreciate Lennox as a precursor of Jane Austen and Frances Burney.

*Kelly M. McDonald collects original manuscripts and ephemera relating to the family of Emma Austen Leigh. She will discuss the Austen “sisterhood” at the 2019 JASNA AGM.*

## A SENSE OF INTIMACY

### *The Chawton Letters*

By Jane Austen

Edited by Kathryn Sutherland

Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, in association with Jane Austen’s House Museum (2018), 128 pages

16 color illustrations, hardcover, \$25

Review by Juliette Wells

Why, you might ask, does the world need a little book that contains just 13 letters—11 written by Jane Austen—when we already have the complete edition of *Jane Austen’s Letters*, thoroughly annotated by Deirdre Le Faye? Because it is an absolute pleasure to savor a sample of Austen’s well-observed, witty letters, beautifully presented and thoughtfully introduced. Le Faye’s edition, while packed with valuable information, is not especially rewarding to browse, given the density of text. By contrast, *The Chawton Letters* replicates many of the pleasures of perusing a handwritten letter.

The content and design work together seamlessly so that readers can fully appreciate Austen’s artistry as a letter writer. Editor Kathryn Sutherland, a trustee of Jane Austen’s House Museum and a plenary speaker at JASNA’s 2020 Annual General Meeting in Cleveland, distills her considerable expertise about Austen’s authorship for the benefit of a wide audience. The

brief chronology she has prepared shows how each letter fits into Austen's life and career.

Sutherland's exceptionally lucid introduction explains how to approach the letters themselves, both as a conversational form of writing and as physical objects. Headnotes and annotations preceding each letter aid understanding without overwhelming detail. Sutherland's fresh transcriptions from the manuscripts preserve Austen's delightful variety of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, fully achieving the editor's goal of providing "as much of the flavor of the handwritten page as possible without rendering its presentation unnecessarily fussy or obscure" (31).

Intensifying the sense of intimacy, too, are the color photographs of each letter. Unfortunately, most are in close-up, with some words of every line cut off from view. Given the legibility of Austen's handwriting, it seems a shame not to be able to read each page fully. My only other quibble with this lovely volume is a minor error in the provenance of one letter, which I noticed because of my own research. The American Austen collector Charles Beecher Hogan bought the topaz crosses given by Charles Austen to his two sisters, plus the letter of Austen's recording the gift, not in 1966, as Sutherland states (37), but in the 1920s, when he was an undergraduate at Yale.

Altogether, I recommend *The Chawton Letters* highly, whether you're new to Austen's letters or feel that you already know them well.

*Juliette Wells is the Elizabeth Connolly Todd Distinguished Professor of English at Goucher College in Baltimore. She is the author of Reading Austen in America and Everybody's Jane: Austen in the Popular Imagination—and is at work on a third book, tentatively titled American Janeites.*

## ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

### *Women Writers and the Nation's Past, 1790–1860: Empathetic Histories*

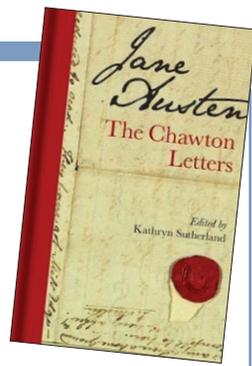
By Mary Spongberg

Bloomsbury Academic (2019)

viii + 235 pages, hardcover, \$114

Review by David Wheeler

While mainstream historiography is constructed by those in power, those on the margins offer alternative narratives. Here, Mary Spongberg examines women historians as they consciously challenge the dominant story of Britain. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot remarks on authorship: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. ... [T]he pen has been in their hands" (vol. 2, chap. 11). Spongberg chronicles the women who took the pen from David Hume and Edmund Burke. She explains how, borrowing from gothic and sentimental fiction, the technique of evoking empathy



and employing forms usually associated with female writers focused on historical queens to tell an alternative story.

Justifying the Revolution of 1688, male historians privileged "the masculine realm of Parliament" over "the feminized realm of monarchy," creating "a complex gendered politics" (2), whereby foreign, Catholic queens corrupted and emasculated English kings and engaged in foreign intrigue to undermine Parliament and implement absolutism. Spongberg's female historians relate an opposing story: "At particular times of crisis, ... the narrated royal life became a site where women writers empathetically identified with queens, using their peculiar circumstances to reflect upon the condition of all women under patriarchy" (57). These women used novels, memoirs, personal letters, and collective biography to probe the boundaries between state and court, public and private.

Austen's *The History of England* often evokes Catherine Morland's remarks in *Northanger Abbey*: "But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. ... [T]he men all so good-for-nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome" (vol. 1, chap. 14). Written "[b]y a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian," the *History* includes such gems as "N.B. There will be very few Dates in this History," and that Lady Jane Grey was "famous for reading Greek while other people were hunting."

While we "historicize" the novels, it's hard to take Austen's teenage project seriously. Yet Spongberg does. Recalling the succession struggles, with contesting heirs and with women often powerless, we cannot help thinking of inheritances, heirs, and estates in Austen's novels—dynastic politics on a sparer scale.

Spongberg began the book "as a set of case studies" (155). Consequently, it is arranged chronologically by historian, and we are repetitiously told fragments of the same royal stories throughout. Organizing the book around the historical figures would have provided more coherence. *Women Writers and the Nation's Past*, nonetheless, is interesting and provocative—well worth reading.

*David Wheeler is professor of English at Georgia Southern University and has published widely on Austen and other writers of the long 18th century.*

