

## *May, Lou & Cass, Jane Austen's Nieces in Ireland* by Sophia Hillan

May, Lou and Cass are Marianne, Louisa and Cassandra Knight, the youngest daughters of Jane's wealthy brother, Edward Austen Knight. Brought up in well-mannered Georgian times to be respectful, conservative and courteous to all, the two younger Knight sisters lived out their adult lives on a rebellious island with French ideas of which England "wished to define itself against." (Amanda Vickery – *Do not Scribble*). Cassandra and Louisa were the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> wives of Lord George Hill and all three Knight sisters are buried in the most northern county of Donegal.

The English view of the nineteenth-century hardships of Irish history (famine, and land wars) is revealed in the letters of Jane's nieces. Jane was right when she wrote to her niece Anna LeFroy that she ought not attempt to write about Ireland, knowing nothing about its ways and being "*in danger of giving false representations.*" As newcomers her Knight nieces had need to heed Jane's advice. Ms. Hillan, Belfast-born author and first woman director of Queen's University's Institute of Irish Studies need not. She interweaves the period and the politics of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> C. with the well researched lives of four generations of Austens, Knights, Hills and Ward/Mulhollands. Their family trees on the end papers are very helpful in following all the Edwards, Cassandras, Henrys, Charles and Marys.

Marianne, like Jane whom she most closely resembled in looks and character, also depended on a male relative to provide her with a home in her 90<sup>th</sup> year. Like Jane and her Steventon home, Marianne was most affected at the loss of her Godmersham home. At age 17 she had taken over the running of the household when her sister Fanny married, nursed her father until he died when she was 51 and cared for her brother Charles and his rectory house in Chawton for fourteen years. She then moved in with the youngest Knight, John and his wife, awaiting the decision of brother Edward on where they were to live – just as Jane depended upon her own brother Edward, Marianne's father, for a home. After John's death she moved to Ireland at age 78 to help sister Louisa care for her dying husband, Lord George. Marianne began her life as Emma and ended it as Miss Bates.

What would Jane Austen have said about the similarities in the lives of her nieces and nephews with the story lines of her novels? An elopement between Fanny's brother, Edward, and her step-daughter, Mary Knatchbull, (echoes of Wickham and Lydia) brought about family discord and severed the relationship between father and daughter. Cassandra Jane, like Anne in *Persuasion*, waited eight years to marry her true love, Lord George Hill, because of her poverty. Uncle Henry Austen's bank failure had lost their father, Edward Knight, £15,000. The sons made careers for themselves and his daughters had to marry well.

A piece of evidence about Fanny, Lady Knatchbull, partially vindicates her of the unkind words she wrote her sister Marianne about their Aunt Jane in a "strange and disturbing letter" of 1869. "*Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so refined... very much below par as to good Society and its way... brought up in the most complete ignorance of the world and its ways...*". At the age of 82, Fanny was suffering then from memory loss with the mind-altering disease of dementia. Another extraordinary revelation was an argument overheard by Louisa as a child. She had heard Cassandra trying to convince Jane to change the ending in *Mansfield Park* and have Henry Crawford marry Fanny. And aren't we glad that Jane was confident enough in her view to not yield to a beloved sister's persuasions.

A second reading of *May, Lou & Cass, Jane Austen's Nieces in Ireland* is a must and rewarding.