

Jane Austen's Favourite Nephew

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I am going to talk about Jane Austen's favourite nephew who happens to be my great grandfather.

James Edward Austen-Leigh's attraction for us today is that it is to him that she gave the famous description of her method of work, and it is he who wrote *The Memoir of Jane Austen*—the only account we have by one who knew her.

I think we probably all agree that in most speeches about our favourite author the best bits are those quotes from Jane herself. I shall not deny you the pleasure of hearing these in due course, but I am going to give this talk backwards because although I will speak about her relationship with this particular nephew, I want to begin with the nephew himself and tell you something of his subsequent career after his aunt's death.

First, I think we should get his name straight. He was the son of Jane's eldest brother, James, and was christened James after his father and Edward after his uncle and godfather. For more than half his life he was called Edward Austen. When he was a boy he was one of three people in the family of that name, the other two being, of course, his uncle and his uncle's eldest son. But in 1812 when Edward was 14 years old, his uncle inherited Godmersham Park, and he and all his children took the name of Knight. Edward then became the only Edward Austen. What I want to make clear is that his name was Edward. Jane Austen called him Edward, his sister called him Edward, his mother called him Edward, his wife called him Edward, and when he died, the letter of condolence written by his lifelong friend Sir William Heathcote, referred to him as Edward.

I believe it must have been Dr. Chapman who first referred to him as James Edward in order to make a distinction between the many other Edwards in the family, Bridges and Cooper, as well as Austen.

Personally, I find it quite excruciatingly offensive to the eye to read in recent publications concerning the family the cumbrous appellation of James hyphen Edward space Austen hyphen Leigh. Hyphens were not much used in the nineteenth century; the Leigh Perrots had no hyphen, neither had the Bigg Withers. The practise of hyphenating surnames was made necessary, as I was told by an aunt who was born in 1881, when telephone books came into use. Certainly the biography published in 1912, *James Edward Austen Leigh*, written by his daughter Mary Austen Leigh, contains no hyphens for either his name or hers.

Now, having established that point, I would like to tell you a little bit about Edward's early adult life, because the events and courtship leading up to his marriage do seem rather to echo Jane's novels.

Neighbours of the Austens in Hampshire were Mr. and Mrs. Chute of The Vyne, a large country house now owned by the National Trust. Edward and his father hunted with The Vyne Hunt and it was at the Chutes' hospitable house that Edward first met his future wife, rather as Elinor Dashwood first met Edward Ferrars at Norland Park.

Emma Smith was the niece of Mrs. Chute, and one of a large gifted family. Her brother, like Sir Walter Elliot, was a baronet. He lived at Suttons, the family seat in Essex. The widowed mother and her remaining eight sons and daughters had removed on the death of her husband to Tring Park near Oxford, another impressive place, later home of Lord Rothschild. I mention these things so that you can discern the very different levels of income and indeed society between the Smiths and the Chutes and Edward Austen.

After he left Oxford, Edward lived with his widowed mother, Mary, and his sister, Caroline, in very reduced circumstances in various rented and borrowed houses in Berkshire. His father had died in 1819 of the same illness that killed Jane, and Edward's uncle Henry, a failed banker, was now the vicar of Steventon. Edward was twenty-four when he took holy orders and became a curate at a church in Newtown. As his daughter Mary was later to say of him in her memoir, although he performed Sunday duty very regularly, he went a "great deal into society, dining out constantly and sometimes going to balls. . . . He hunted two or three times a week" (*JEAL* 30).

This is hardly the picture of a clergyman's calling as we perceive it today. But George IV was on the throne and certainly neither Henry Tilney, nor Mr. Collins nor Mr. Elton nor Dr. Grant appear to have been overburdened with clerical responsibilities. You note I am not including Edmund Bertram.

A future sister-in-law, looking back, years later, remembered Edward as being "very good looking and bright in manner . . . a great favourite with Uncle and Aunt Chute. He came again later to The Vyne when I was more able to value his powers of conversation and to see how acceptable his presence was in a country house among a party young and lively and full of enjoyment . . ." (*JEAL* 32). One thinks of the Musgrove family at the Great House at Christmas time, and even of Mansfield Park on one of its better days.

Edward was staying as a guest at Tring Park when he proposed to Emma. Emma's eldest brother, Sir Charles Smith, noted in his diary:

20 September, 1828: I was much surprised by a letter from Tring announcing a marriage to be between Emma and Edward Austen.

(Hampshire Record Office)

Here is what Emma, herself, had to say:

We read *Emma* in the morning. After luncheon Mamma and Fanny went to call on Mrs. Badcock. We all walked towards the woods at Terrets and during the walk I was engaged to marry Mr. Austen. On our return home Mamma was spoken to and most kindly gave her consent. I afterwards walked with him in the shrubbery. Mr. Lacey dined here. Music.

(JEAL 36)

Imagine! They walked in the shrubbery! Just like Mr. Knightley and Emma. What a picture of circumspection and restraint these words suggest. Very different from the various presentations on the screen we have had lately inflicted upon us with Captain Wentworth kissing Anne Elliot on the public street, behaviour unlikely to take place even today between a captain in the Royal Navy and a girl with any pretensions to gentility.

But to return to Charles Smith. He might well have been surprised that his sister, who had turned down three previous suitors (one of whom became chaplain to Queen Victoria), should succumb to the charms of a penniless clergyman, who had only the distant hopes of an aunt, Mrs. Leigh Perrot, a person every bit as capricious as Mrs. Churchill of Enscombe. And since Edward had already greatly displeased her by taking orders (one thinks of Mary Crawford), she seemed hardly a prospect to depend upon.

The importance of money, even as in Jane Austen's novels, was not under-rated. It was perfectly understood by all concerned, and no one was shy of mentioning it.

As Jane herself wrote to Cassandra of another marriage—"As to Money, that will come you may be sure, because they cannot do without it" (*Letters* 231).

And it did come. Contrary to all expectations Mrs. Leigh Perrot was quite delighted by this good match. She wrote, "My dear Edward, I thank you for your early communication which gratifies every feeling more than I can express" (*Austen Papers* 277). And she promised him an income of £600 a year. Mrs. Chute, who was Emma's godmother, who had promoted the attachment by frequent invitations to The Vyne, also offered to contribute an allowance, since, as she said, she never spent the whole of her income. Then Emma's mother proposed that the young couple should take up their abode at Tring Park, allotting a separate suite of rooms for their use. Thus Emma, whose loss from the family party was dreaded by her sisters and brothers, would, like that other Emma, for the time being, at least, not have to leave home.

One of her sisters wrote to Mrs. Chute:

[Emma] does not seem to have a care for the future, and I must hope that though she may not have the luxuries she will never want the comforts of life. . . . Edward is to give up his curacy at [Christmas] at Newton and he

has settled . . . to take his curacy [here] which will then be vacant; he will only have twenty pounds a year with it, he does not take it for anything but an occupation as the twenty pounds will only serve him to pay a substitute when he and Emma want to go out. . . . Their establishment will not be extensive. He keeps his pony-chaise and two horses and a groom; she is *not* to have a maid, but to learn to manage for herself, and when they travel about they must go as they can. He will have six hundred a year which with the addition of hers will make eight hundred and fifty, and Mamma says while they live here they ought to save at least half of it. . . . Charles and Spencer like their new brother exceedingly. . . ." (JEAL 42)

Here is a continuation of Charles Smith's diary:

Sunday, 28 Sept. Morning church Tring . . . E. Austen preached a very excellent sermon. . . .

December 16, 1828 Emma was married at half past ten to Edward Austen. After the ceremony they went to Suttons. Mr. Fowles performed the marriage ceremony. I gave Emma away.

(Hampshire Record Office)

This marriage took place only eleven years after Aunt Jane had died. One thinks with what pleasure she would have viewed this match of her favourite nephew. It was almost like Elizabeth and Darcy all over again, only it was Edward who was moving from poverty to luxury. What a welcome and honoured guest she would have been in that enlightened household where the reading of *Emma* was an occupation for the mornings!

Edward and Emma stayed at Tring Park for five years before moving into a house of their own. Their eldest three children, the first of ten, eight sons and two daughters, were born at Tring. The eldest son was named Cholmeley, Mrs. Leigh Perrot's maiden name. Frank Austen who at one time had also had expectations had also named a son Cholmeley, but that child did not survive. Eventually the old lady died. She was 92, and her will like Mr. Dashwood's and "like every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure." Although she had told Edward that she would leave him Scarlets, he was by no means certain that this would prove to be the case. To quote from Mary Austen Leigh, "Mrs. Leigh Perrot's old servant, Hannah, showed our father after her mistress' death her latest will lying in a drawer not even folded up. He would not read it, but placed it in a cover which he sealed in the presence of his mother and aunt and the servant and remained uncertain as to its contents for the next four days." Although she left many thousands of her husband's pounds to her own Cholmeley relations, Mrs. Leigh Perrot did bequeath Scarlets to Edward (91), together with enough money to produce an income of £500.

In 1837 Queen Victoria ascended the throne and the Victorian era began. In 1837 at the Herald's office, Edward Austen, in accordance



Mary Augusta Austen Leigh, author of *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen*, written when she was 81 years old and published by John Murray in 1920. She also wrote a biography of her father, *James Edward Austen Leigh*, which was printed for private circulation in 1911. The above portrait of Mary as a young woman is from a crayon drawing by Edmund Havell.



(James) Edward Austen (Leigh) from a portrait painted by Margaret Carpenter in 1829 when Edward was 31 years old. His wife, Emma, wrote in 1831 to her aunt Judith Smith: "I am going to indulge myself by having a likeness of Edward taken [by Miss Corbaux] as the one by Mrs. Carpenter is not satisfactory." Is it too much to suggest that there appears to be a history of unsatisfactory portraits in the Austen family?

with his aunt's will, took the name and arms of Leigh at a cost of £150. Mary writes, "our father could have put Leigh before Austen, had he chosen to do so" (*JEAL* 94). Leigh had been his grandmother's maiden name, and his great uncle James's name before he added the Perrot, again, on inheriting an estate. Changes of name were quite usual in those days, and it is interesting to note that for several generations the Chutes of The Vyne—who had a habit of dying without leaving an heir—would pass on the estate and the name to some collateral nephew or cousin on condition he became a Chute.

Edward at once began on renovations to Scarlets, which still stands in Wargrave, Berkshire, and which had been built by James

Leigh Perrot about 1770. Mr. Repton, the landscape gardener, was engaged as the adviser. Money does not seem to have been spared.

Nor was it spared later when Edward built at his own expense a school alongside the new church he now served at Knowl Hill, and installed his butler as the school teacher. Using his capital in this way began to tell on Edward's ability to maintain Scarlets. After he had spent thirteen happy years there with his wife and family, the Bishop offered him the living of Bray, a charming parish on the banks of the Thames near Windsor. As Mary says, it was one of the best pieces of preferment in his gift. It was worth £500. Edward concluded that if he took this living and rented Scarlets he could replenish the £2,000 of his capital which he had spent (185), and which he felt he ought to do for the sake of his children, who, I may say, very much disliked having to leave the home in which several of them had been born and others had grown up. Edward intended to remain at Bray for only seven years, but in fact he never returned to Scarlets; it was subsequently sold to the tenant and the money used to establish his son Cholmeley in the publishing business. What would poor Mrs. Leigh Perrot have thought? She who had counted on the infant Cholmeley being the ultimate owner of her beloved Scarlets.

It was at Bray that Edward wrote *Recollections of the Early Days of The Vyne Hunt*, published in 1865 by his son's firm Spottiswoode and Company. It is signed with true Austenian modesty: By a Sexagenarian.

The idea had been suggested to him by an old friend he had met by chance at Hampton Park. The events are narrated in a series of letters. In the first he says, "You must expect a little egotism when you call on a sexagenarian to recount his own recollections; but I will try to say as much of other people and as little of myself as I can" (2). Since these recollections go back to his own childhood and before, the reader is presented with a vivid picture of the sport and manners of country gentlemen and their servants in the times of Jane Austen.

Five years later he was prevailed upon to write the *Memoir* of his aunt. It was with reluctance that he undertook the task, being aware of "the extreme scantiness of the materials out of which it must be constructed." He knew, however, that there was no one else who would do it if he did not. Mary writes, "he agreed to put down what little there was to say. His interest grew as he wrote; he appealed to other members of the family, some of whom had long been unseen by him" (JEAL 261). Although Edward Austen Leigh had written one sermon, and often two, every Sunday of his life, and had educated his own boys at home so successfully that the three youngest had all won top scholarships to Eton, he claimed that he was not accustomed to writing for publication. In my view, however, the cadences of the opening sentence of the *Memoir* are as felicitous as anything written

by Jane Austen: "More than half a century has passed away since I, the youngest of the mourners, attended the funeral of my dear aunt Jane in Winchester Cathedral."

The *Memoir* appeared on December 16, 1869, though dated 1870, and was published by Richard Bentley, who had brought out all Jane Austen's novels in 1832, the first publisher to do so since her death. As Mary Austen Leigh writes: "The book was very well received and reviewed, and many interesting letters arrived both from known and unknown correspondents expressing the pleasure they had derived from reading it" (*JEAL* 264).

At the end of his life, as Edward began to fail in health, he was assisted in his work by his fourth son, Arthur, my grandfather, as curate. He died in 1874. The memorial in Bray church states in part:

The Rev. James Edward Austen Leigh
For 22 years Vicar of this Parish.
His Parishioners and other Friends desire thus to record
their affection for his memory;
their admiration of his character and their recognition of his work.

Now, having got to the end of the life of Edward Austen Leigh, I shall, as I told you, turn to the beginning: to the birth of a son to James vicar of Steventon and his second wife, Mary Lloyd. Anticipating Mary's imminent confinement Jane writes on the 17th of November 1798 to Cassandra at Godmersham: "I believe I never told you that Mrs Coulthard and Anne, late of Manydown, are both dead, and both died in childbed. We have not regaled Mary with this news." Later in the same letter she writes, "I have just received a note from James to say that Mary was brought to bed last night, at eleven o'clock, of a fine little boy and that everything is going on well." Two months later she is writing, "Mary grows rather more reasonable about her child's beauty, and says that she does not think him really handsome . . ." (50).

The years passed by. In 1808, when Edward was ten we find a large family party staying at Godmersham. Jane writes: "Edward and Caroline seem very happy here; he has nice playfellows in Lizzy and Charles. They and their attendant have the boys' attic" (191). Their attendant! One thinks of Mrs. John Knightley and her competent number of nursery-maids.

Jane must naturally have felt a closeness to Edward and Caroline. For one thing they were living relatively near to Chawton; for another they were growing up in Steventon Parsonage, the very same house in which she, herself, had lived for twenty-five years, with the same sort of income and with a clerical father interested in academic pursuits. Naturally she would sympathize more with this family than with the sons of her rich brother Edward at Godmersham of whom she was later to write: ". . . these two Boys who are out with the

Foxhounds will come home & disgust me again by some habit of Luxury or some proof of Sporting Mania" (344). In fact, with the exception of Edward, Jane Austen seemed rather to prefer her nieces to her nephews. One thinks of Fanny Knight, and Anna Austen and little Cassy, the daughter of Charles, and it was to Edward's sister Caroline, aged ten, that she wrote, "Now that you are become an Aunt, you are a person of some consequence & must excite great Interest whatever you do. I have always maintained the importance of Aunts as much as possible . . ." (428).

In due course of time Edward was entered at Winchester College, where Dr. Gabell was the headmaster, a man, who, we are told, made a particular point of teaching his pupils to express themselves in good clear English. No doubt that meant appreciating good written English, too. Edward had read and loved two novels signed By a Lady, without having any idea who she was. What restraint James and Mary must have exercised in not telling him that the author was his own aunt. Henry Austen, however, used no such self-control and hearing a titled lady praise *Pride and Prejudice* could not help boasting that it was written by his sister. The secret was no more. Edward, aged fifteen, at Winchester, wrote these verses to his aunt:

To Miss J. Austen

No words can express, my dear Aunt, my surprise
 Or make you conceive how I opened my eyes,
 Like a pig Butcher Pile has just struck with his knife,
 When I heard for the very first time in my life
 That I had the honour to have a relation
 Whose works were dispersed through the whole of the nation.
 I assure you, however, I'm terribly glad;
 Oh dear, just to think (and the thought drives me mad)
 That dear Mrs. Jeuning's good-natured strain
 Was really the produce of your witty brain,
 That you made the Middletons, Dashwoods and all,
 And that you (not young Ferrars) found out that a ball
 May be given in cottages never so small,
 And though Mr. Collins so grateful for all
 Will Lady de Bourgh his dear patroness call,
 'Tis to your ingenuity really he owed
 His living, his wife, and his humble abode. (JEAL 7)

Writing was an infectious occupation, especially in this, the most literary branch of the family. Edward's father, James, according to Mrs. Austen, possessed "Classical Knowledge, Literary Taste and the power of Elegant Composition . . . in the highest degree" (AP 265). Perhaps some of this descended to his children, for soon both Edward and Caroline were hard at work. In a letter to Cassandra Jane says, "Edward is writing a Novel—we have all heard what he has written—it is extremely clever; written with great ease and spirit; if

he can carry it on in the same way, it will be a first-rate work, & in a style, I think, to be popular.—Pray tell Mary how much I admire it” (462). That same summer, she had written to Caroline, “Edward’s visit has been a great pleasure to us. He has not lost one good quality or good Look, & is only altered in being improved by being some months older than when we saw him last. He is getting very near our own age, for *we* do not grow older of course” (460).

On her birthday, December 16, 1816—it was to be her last—Jane wrote to Edward. He had just arrived home from Winchester, was now eighteen and was considered grown up.

My dear Edward,

One reason for my writing to you now, is that I may have the pleasure of directing to you *Esqre*. I give you joy of having left Winchester. Now you may own how miserable you were there; now, it will gradually all come out—your Crimes & your Miseries—how often you went up by the Mail to London & threw away Fifty Guineas at a tavern, & how often you were on the point of hanging yourself. . . .

Can you wonder that her nieces and nephews loved this aunt? Later in the same letter she continues:

By the Bye, my dear Edward, I am quite concerned for the loss your mother mentions in her Letter: two Chapters & a half to be missing is monstrous! It is well that *I* have not been at Steventon lately, & therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them;—two twigs and a half towards a Nest of my own, would have been something. I do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety and Glow. How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour? (468)

This famous and much-quoted description is especially interesting because Jane so seldom uses any sort of metaphor in her novels. The only one I can think of is Jane Fairfax being “wrapped in a cloak of politeness.”

Edward cannot have gone immediately up to Oxford, for a month later we have Jane writing to Caroline.

We were quite happy to see Edward, it was an unexpected pleasure, & he makes himself as agreeable as ever, sitting in such a quiet comfortable way making his delightful little Sketches.—He is generally thought grown since he was here last, & rather Thinner, but in very good Looks. (471)

She continues in the same strain to her friend, Alethea Bigg, We have just had a few days’ visit from Edward. . . . He grows still, and still improves in appearance, at least in the estimation of his aunts, who love him better and better, as they see the sweet temper and warm affections of the boy confirmed in the young man. (475)

Six months after writing these words, Jane Austen at age 41 was dead of Addison's disease, a complaint now completely curable. Her last communication to Edward was addressed to him at Exeter College, Oxford. Though dying, and in pain, she still retained her sense of humour.

In concluding, I should like to read to you a part of this most beautiful and moving letter. The next time you are in London, you might want to look at it. It is in the British Library.

Mrs. Davids, College Street, Winton
Tuesday May 27

I know no better way my dearest Edward, of thanking you for your most affectionate concern for me during my illness, than by telling you myself as soon as possible that I continue to get better. I will not boast of my handwriting; neither that, nor my face have yet recovered their proper beauty, but in other respects I am gaining strength very fast. Mr. Lyford says he will cure me, & if he fails I shall draw up a Memorial and lay it before the Dean & Chapter, and have no doubt of redress from that Pious, Learned, and Disinterested Body. Our lodgings are very comfortable. We have a neat little Drawing room with a Bow-window overlooking Dr. Gabell's garden. . . .

God Bless you my dear Edward. If ever you are ill, may you be as tenderly nursed as I have been, may the same Blessed alleviations of anxious, sympathising friends be yours, & may you possess—as I dare say you will—the greatest blessing of all, in the consciousness of not being unworthy of their love. *I could not feel this.*

Your very affectionate aunt,
Jane Austen

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