

'Jane's Fame' - Frank Underwood

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It is a truth (that is becoming) universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen (and her works) is enjoying tremendous popularity in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Why is this? What is this increasing appeal to our post-modern society?

There are many possibilities why this is so, not least the influence of the media on all things Austen - films, TV and recent research on all aspects of Jane Austen have projected the novelist's work, life and times forward to our times.

It could be that the element of fantasy, the costumes, landscape and manners of what is loosely called the Regency (c.1790-1820*), suggest a bygone age of elegance, decorum, taste and perfection. But do these 'pictures of perfection' (as Jane Austen described them) give a false impression of an age which was not all it seemed?

Revolution, progress, reform and immense social change brought about a transition from what was essentially an agrarian to an industrial society, in England at least, and an already expanding overseas empire (notably India and the West Indies) paved the way for the long Victorian period.

Jane Austen (1775-1817) therefore lived in times of immense social and political change, which was not always evident in her writings. Why did she not touch upon such vast issues?

She concentrated her focus upon the small, semi-rural communities that she knew and understood - her Highburys, Merytons; the large country estates such as her Pemberleys and Rosings. Where urban areas are mentioned, such as Bath, Bristol, London, Liverpool, they are often with caution, disdain or even opprobrium.

One thing is certain; her landscapes were based on places she herself visited or was resident in; Bath, London, Oxford, Winchester, Southampton and others, were towns and cities she or her family moved to during her lifetime. Her 'world' however, still remained largely the rural south of England, mostly untouched by the encroaching industrial age.

This almost bucolic, idyllic, unspoiled England still resonates today, rightly or wrongly. Our 21st century society has been recently described as rootless, futile, aggressive and anomic (a phrase used by sociologists to describe normlessness, transitoriness etc).

Therefore 'looking back' to an often imaginary 'Golden Age' where everything was correct, polite, elegant, but also romantic and stylish, seems to be a just panacea to our brutal, impolite, directionless age.

Could Jane Austen's books, her wit (often wicked wit), her characters and landscapes, be the reason why people, young and old, choose this period to study

and re-enact? Possibly, but I think the issue is more complex. There has been recently much more research on the period and the life and work of Jane Austen. Her music for example is coming under close observation, and is one of the projects our Jane Austen Group is looking at.

Jane Austen will always be a symbol of the good, the clever, the accomplished woman who somehow stands 'outside' time, yet also belongs to that often misunderstood period known as 'The Regency'.

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A musician and tutor, Frank Underwood is founder of the Oxford Jane Austen Project group which looks at aspects of the life, work and times of the novelist. The two main projects are Jane Austen in Oxford, and Jane Austen's Music. For further details contact via the website:

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** Note: the actual Regency was from 1811-1821, a ten year period from when George Prince of Wales (1762-1830) was made regent until his coronation as George IV. In terms of style (costume, manners etc) it could also be said to cover the period 1788-1838, almost up to the early Victorian period.*