A Visit to Down House by Claire Bellanti

Charles Darwin formulated his concepts of evolution and natural selection in a Victorian home south of London, where he lived a gentleman scholar’s life with his wife and children from 1842 until his death in 1882. On a recent trip to England to walk in the footsteps of Jane Austen, I also visited Down House. As with Jane Austen’s cottage in Chawton, I was very aware of the creative mind which was nurtured and protected within the buildings and grounds.

You might ask “Why Charles Darwin in a publication about Jane Austen?” Could there be two more different characters in 19th century Britain? Perhaps they have more in common than we realize at first glance. When JASNA-SW celebrates the 100th anniversary of the publication of Sense and Sensibility next spring, we will learn much more about the connections between Jane Austen and Charles Darwin.
from Professor Peter Graham. Dr. Graham will be the keynote speaker of our celebration, and will tell us about “Sibling Rivalry in *Sense and Sensibility* and Charles Darwin.” Be sure to put the dates of the JASNA Super-Regional Meeting, May 14-15, 2011, in your calendar now. You won’t want to miss the provocative and enlightening talks about *Sense and Sensibility* and especially, Dr. Graham’s thesis on Darwin and Austen.

Down House is located near the village of Downe, nearly 15 miles southeast of London. While staying in London after a walking tour of Jane Austen country, my husband, Bob, and I decided to take the trip to Down House one morning. Earlier this year we had seen the beautiful movie, *Creation* (starring Paul Bettany and Jennifer Connelly), which was filmed partly at Down House. In addition, we spent 8 days in the Galapagos Islands several years ago and were steeped in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin’s observations of his nearly five-year voyage around the world. To get to Down House, we took a 15 minute train ride from Victoria Station to Bromley South. Right outside the train station, we picked up a bus that took us to “central” Downe and stopped right in front of the church. The tiny village has a miniature round-about, a tree in the middle of the crossroads with a bench surrounding the tree for waiting bus patrons. From Downe we walked about ten minutes up Luxted Road to the house itself.

Claire  

Bob

Darwin and his wife Emma moved into the house in 1842, while Emma was expecting their third child. Due to Darwin’s ill-health, they were looking for a restful country house, away from London, but close enough to provide ready access to the London community of important scientists of the day (e.g., Joseph Hooker, Asa Gray, Thomas Henry Huxley and Charles Lyell). Emma and Charles eventually had ten children, two of whom died in infancy and Annie, who died at ten years old, causing great anguish for her parents.

The original house was built in the 1730’s and modernized once in the late 18th century, but Charles Darwin was constantly remodeling it to suit his growing family and research requirements. Wings were added and spaces were enlarged, three story bay windows were devised and a new kitchen designed. Over the forty years Darwin lived there, the house grew substantially and the grounds were drastically changed. Today, the lower floor of the house has been restored by English Heritage to resemble the house as it would have looked when Darwin lived there based on photographs from the 1870’s. Many original furnishings and artifacts have been returned to the house by his descendents. As you walk through the house, you can hear and see a room by room commentary with a hand-held multi-media guide which adds immeasurably to the visit. The hallway closet is a jumble of toys and sports equipment, just as a big family would have left it. In the drawing room, the portraits and Emma’s grand piano are reminders of Victorian life. The most moving room in the house is Darwin’s study, with his books, his
hat, catalogue drawers, wheeled armchair, and the hipbath behind a screen evoking the brilliant man of ill-health who worked out one of earth’s greatest mysteries. The upstairs rooms are devoted to exhibits and timelines, such as artifacts of the Darwin children, a display (with a ghost and creaking boards!) of Darwin’s cabin on the Beagle, and children’s activities.

![Emma’s sundial](image)

**Emma’s sundial**

It is in the gardens that I sensed clearly that Darwin’s research was a part of his everyday life. Unlike scientists today, he literally lived with every experiment. Darwin had greenhouses constructed so he could carry out his botanical experiments comfortably; the greenhouses remain and are filled with orchids and carnivorous plants – some of his favorite species for experimentation. There is a field entirely devoted to growing grassland fungi (and is still a working experiment). A weed patch demonstrates natural selection in plants. One of the most interesting elements of the garden is the “worm stone,” a large, flat stone, which was placed by Darwin’s son Horace to demonstrate how worms are responsible for aerating and restoring soil as the displaced earth gradually sinks the stone (the stone remains as originally positioned, only sinking deeper into the ground with each passing year). Darwin’s “Sandpath” or thinking path has been restored. Emma was responsible for the Victorian flower gardens near the house, and her sundial has been restored to its former position.

When I visit the cottage at Chawton, I am reminded that Jane Austen was a human being, not just a famous name from the past. Visiting Down House, too, is an experience that helps to humanize this great thinker. Charles Darwin loved both family and science. As you walk through the house and grounds, he loses the mystique of a historical figure; you cannot help but become aware of his humanity. I hope you will join us on May 14, 2011 to learn more about the links between Austen and Darwin.

JASNA Southwest is an official region of The Jane Austen Society of North America and includes Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and Ventura Counties. The membership year runs from January 1 to December 31. Dues are $15, and may be sent to Carla Washburn, Membership Chairperson; P.O. Box 612; Tujunga, CA 91043. If your mailing label indicates 2011, thank you for renewing your membership! If it indicates 2010, we have not yet received your renewal for the upcoming year. Please join us and share the joy of Jane Austen’s legacy with fellow Janeites throughout Southern California.
Mark your calendar now for our upcoming

**JASNA SOUTHWEST**

**GALA SUPER~REGIONAL**

**SPRING MEETING**

MAY 14 – 15, 2011

The Daughters of Colonel Thomas Carteret Hardy by Sir Thos. Lawrence

honoring Sense and Sensibility on the occasion of 200th anniversary of its publication, the first of Jane Austen’s novels to hit the bookstores and circulating libraries of the day! The headliners for this two-day event, to take place at the Huntington Library and the Westin Pasadena Hotel, include several JASNA favorites:

**PETER GRAHAM**, Professor at Virginia Tech and author of *Jane Austen and Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists*, describes these two near-contemporaries as “superficially conventional people who remained, at heart, uncompromisingly determined to keep faith with their respective vocations.” Peter will explore how sibling relations in *Sense and Sensibility* tallies with the Darwinian theory of sibling differentiation.

**ALICE VILLASEÑOR**, current Director of Public Humanities Initiatives for USC’s Joint Education Project and visiting fellow at the Chawton House Library and **RUTH BLANDÓN**, Assistant Professor of English at East Los Angeles College, will highlight the feminist issues in Kandukodain Kandukondain, a little known Bollywood adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Huntington Library Curator **MARY ROBERTSON** will prepare us to enjoy a special exhibition, “Revisiting the Regency: England, 1811-1820” which will be on display at the time of our visit.

**JOAN KLINGLE RAY**, Professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, former JASNA President, and author of *Jane Austen for Dummies*, will engage both your sense and sensibilities when she discusses “Jane Austen’s Most Problematic Novel” at the Sunday breakfast meeting at the Westin Hotel.

Dancing at a Saturday night Assembly Ball, **Mela Hoyt-Heaydon’s** Regency Headpiece workshop, and shopping at our own recreation of Bath’s Milsom Street are among the many elegant entertainments which we’re preparing for your enjoyment!
DONOR REQUESTS: Of course, mounting exciting meetings such as these is expensive. You can help by becoming a JASNA Southwest Patron. Your gift will place you in the best company during out upcoming Spring Event:

Colonel and Mrs. Brandon’s Party $200 or more
The Reverend Edward and Elinor Ferrar’s Acquaintance $100 ~ $199
Sir John Middleton’s Club $50 ~ $99
Mrs. Dashwood’s Circle $25 ~ $49

JASNA is qualified as a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Please note that contributions to JASNA’s Regions are deductible for federal income tax purposes and will be acknowledged in our printed programs. Checks may be sent to Treasurer Jody Gunn; 685 W. Grand View Avenue; Sierra Madre, CA 91024. THANK YOU!

Jane Bites Back by Michael Thomas Ford
Reviewed by Sheila F.T. Sandapen

Jane Austen has been brought back in many incarnations in recent years and her popularity shows no sign of waning. It is fitting then that in Michael Thomas Ford’s novel Jane Bites Back, it turns out Miss Austen never left us and is in fact still kicking around -- as a vampire. This Jane living under the pseudonym of Jane Fairfax was “made” around her 40th birthday and shortly after faked her death. Forced to move every twenty years because she shows no signs of aging, which in the pre-Botox era was highly suspect, Jane now lives in upstate New York where she owns a bookstore.

Jane the vampire is not a creature of the night that inspires terror. She can and often does eat food (although has no true appetite for it), goes out in daylight and contemplates getting a boyfriend. When she does feed on human blood she doesn’t drink to kill and her victims are only mildly inconvenienced. Jane the bookstore owner is more of a force to be reckoned with as she is perpetually a) annoyed by the fact she can no longer collect royalties on her books which continue to be bestsellers b) frustrated she can’t get a publisher interested in her manuscript Constance – and slightly worried that she no longer has what it takes as a writer c) irritated by how her books are often misconstrued. This oft times crabby Jane denies responsibility for creating the most romantic hero of all time in the person of Mr. Darcy. Jane flatly states she wasn’t trying to create the ideal man, but simply writing a novel about women having choices. She is slightly contemptuous of the publishing machine that rakes in cash by producing puppets, cookbooks, workout books and romances in her name.

While I confess I am not a fan of most of the Jane Austen related sequels, prequels and re-imaginings, Michael Thomas Ford strikes the right chord. He is not trying to emulate Austen’s style or rewrite her novels. His portrayal of Austen as a woman who has lived for centuries and has learned to constantly reinvent herself an is consequently bemused by the hoopla that surrounds her work and historic self, is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the times we live in. If he does manipulate a few facts in Miss Austen’s life, it can be forgiven under the general suspension of disbelief the story requires.

The latter part of the novel becomes extremely plot centric. Jane’s “sire” reappears in her life and attempts to rekindle a long dead romance. It would spoil the element of surprise to give away his identity...
but Ford’s choice is a plausible and inspired one. Jane finally finds a publisher and becomes an overnight success and discovers a long ago rival is still alive – because she too has been made into a vampire -- which prompts Jane to wonder if her “sire” had slept his way through English literature, a comment anyone who has taught an introduction to literature class will appreciate on multiple levels. The rival is vanquished (albeit only temporarily) and Jane starts to make peace with her vampire existence and potential.

This book is intended to be the first in a new series and I look forward to seeing how the vampire Jane and her world develops. While it may not be great literature, it is a great read and a pleasant way to spent an afternoon or two. Miss Austen would approve.

___________________

Sheila Sandapen holds a doctorate in English literature and teaches literature and composition in Philadelphia.

**Posting from Portland: Report from the JASNA AGM**

*by Diana Birchall*  
Excerpts from my blog, [http://lightbrightandsparkling.blogspot.com/](http://lightbrightandsparkling.blogspot.com/)

*Juliet McMaster and Diana Birchall (in Dottore di Peste mask) at the Bal Masque*

Managed to fit everything into a carry-on – not easy, as both Venetian masks and rainwear had to be stuffed in. At one time I thought I’d have to wear my tricorn hat on the plane, and wondered how they’d profile me. But it was an easy flight. Arrived too late to register and sign up for the banquet table for Saturday night, so just had a hamburger and turned in, though didn't sleep much (missed my cat Pindar's pointy little feet running over me all night). In the morning I bore down on the conference registration table which was to open at 8, but I was leaving on the Columbia River tour at 8. So I pushily demanded they open, in fine operatic New York street style, which bad behavior was worsened by my cutting dead conference organizer Susan Schwartz by not recognizing her, until she had to protest, "Diana, we have met *many* times before!" This kept happening all morning as I failed to recognize one old friend after another and tried to pass it off with witty repartee, most unsuccessfully.

A utilitarian Starbucks cappuccino "set me up for ever," as Lydia said, and 90 Janeites briskly boarded two busses for a long ride through farmland and rain forest on a lowering, gloomy day. We stopped for a
short hike to a stream, where the air smelled like champagne poured over moss: exhilaratingly refreshing. (Um, there were proper loos as well, I don't mean to make it sound like we dampened the stream.)

We drove on to the little town of Cannon Beach (a cannon washed up there once, also a whale). Lovely evocative beach, windswept under dark clouds, with a striking monolith called the Haystack that's on all the T-shirts and tote bags sold in the rather twee town. Pretty wooden houses, obviously subject to lots of weather, many Historical. The main street mostly consisted of art galleries, cafes, teashops, bakeries, a bookshop, and more galleries, and we were there for an hour and a half; enjoyable, though we'd probably rather have been dropped off at the tidepools of the Monolith. But we walked on the beach, and bought local specialties at the bakery (a maple bar doughnut and marionberry turnover). We got the idea that October is a slow month, when a lady ran breathlessly out of one of the tea shops and asked with great excitement, "Are you off those two buses that just arrived in town? I saw them! My friend said, my lord, look, there are two buses full of people pulling into town!" We calmed her, and went on.

**Jane Krisel and Diana at The Haystack  Kristin Szilagyi, Nancy Gallagher at Astoria Tower**

Back on the bus we drove to lunch at a former cannery on the river. Attractive place with a river view, buffet lunch (rather disappointedly fishless). Then we drove to the Astoria Tower, rather like Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park, with historical drawings on it, and Nancy Gallagher and I walked up the whole thing - around 200 winding iron stairs, like the one the murder victim died on in *Murder Must Advertise*. Not great for my knee, but the view was worth it, and you only live once.

Next stop, Flavel house in Astoria, a dark and damp looking Victorian house. I'd spied a local heritage museum and asked the tour guide about it, and she said it was mostly exhibits about the people who had lived here on the Oregon coast. And she told me that when Oregon became a state (1859), it voted to go "free," and African Americans were allowed to live there for a period of three years. At the end of that time, they were free, but they had to leave town immediately, or be beaten and hanged by the Ku Klux Klan! Apparently Oregon had the biggest Klan west of the Mississippi! Who knew? I didn't. So the heritage museum had a lot of Klan stuff, and no wonder they took us to the moldy Victorian place instead. Then the drive back to the Hilton, an intense hour spent book shopping at the Emporium (enough books so that I *did* have to wear the tricorn hat on the plane home), then dinner at a nice Thai restaurant.
Friday

A meeting of authors with Jane-related stories in the forthcoming Random House anthology, *Jane Made Me Do It*: Diana Birchall, Laurie Viera Rigler, Laurel Ann Nattress (editor), Margaret Sullivan, Stephanie Barron, Syrie James.

But that's starting the story of this event-packed day at the end. The day properly began with a visit to Voodoo Doughnuts. Having been told on all sides that Voodoo Doughnuts were a major Portland experience, Jane and I walked to this iconic little shop (the neighborhood was seedy, but the doughnuts were glazed) and gamely waited on a long line. Worth it: colorful and scrumptious doughnuts!

The conference began with a delightful panel organized by Maggie Sullivan, "Team Tilney Explains it All," featuring a very well-spoken, polished, confident, dishy Mr. Tilney. Then Stephanie Barron, the popular mystery writer, addressed an enthusiastic crowd of over 600 in her plenary talk. Breakout sessions followed. I introduced my long-time online friend Ellen Moody at her talk, "People that Marry can never Part: Real and Romantic Gothicism in Northanger Abbey," and then attended Miriam Rheingold Fuller's talk on the Domestic Gothic. During the lunch hour we crammed in a visit to the Portland Library to see an exhibit of 18th century books and Gilray prints (with a pit stop at a very up-market Goodwill!), and then lunch at an outstanding Lebanese restaurant, Habibi. Next was a country dancing exhibit at the Portland Art Museum, and we nipped into the museum itself for a glimpse at the paintings. Last but not least was the late evening meeting of my fellow Austen anthology authors, at which the literary gossip was so delicious and high powered, my lips must be sealed.

Saturday

Had a bad night, tossing and turning with repining at not being as successful a writer as Stephanie, Syrie, and Laurie. But lo! a new day brings new feelings, and a cappuccino works miracles, as does a little nap. Got to the conference just in time to hear Juliet's beautiful talk, rich with her learning and love of Austen. From there it was straight to another excellent talk, Gillian Dow of Chawton House Library spoke on the French Gothic novels and what Jane Austen was satirizing in Northanger Abbey. She has a real gift for presenting complicated information in the most lucid, delightful, stimulating way. Sailing on the wings of these talks I headed the South Park seafood restaurant, for the lunch I had organized of "online friends." It's always enormous fun to be face to face with your best e-mail correspondents! We sat in a lovely room at adjacent tables, ate good seafood, and I can't tell you what a jolly time "we 17" had!
Back at the conference, I split two talks, and heard half a presentation about Gothic architecture, and half a presentation about the cultivation of pineapples in *Northanger Abbey*. After these talks, I had a meeting with the others on tomorrow’s panel for tomorrow, Joan Ray, Kimberly Brangwin, William Phillips - all so funny, it will hardly matter if I can't rise to the occasion! Then rushed to Powells, for a happy booky hour and some more elixir of life (cappuccino). Then a brisk walk back to the hotel to change for the Banquet and Bal Masque. To be continued tomorrow, with a costume extravaganza!

**Sunday**

The Bal Masque was hands down the most fabulous costume ball ever held at a JASNA AGM. The majority of the conference goers were costumed, in Regency dress, Halloween costumes, masks, or whatever took their fancy. The ball opened with a promenade as we circled around the room, showing off our finery, and then the English country dances began. There had been workshops to teach the moves, so it looked most accomplished and you could imagine you were back in the 18th century…though the Regency gentleman wearing rabbit ears, Jane Austen and her Sea Monster, and a variety of ladies with purple or green hair, gave a delirious air of surrealism to the elegant proceedings. A real fancy dress ball, and everyone was enjoying themselves so much, the air almost sparkled.

Sunday morning, the conference closed with the traditional brunch, and our panel "Dispute without Mayhem," in which Joan Ray, Philip Williams and I, refereed by Kimberly Brangwin, attempted to conjure up witty arguments about *Northanger Abbey*. I was a bit nervous, not being one who can think on my feet (I used to need a pen, now need a computer), but it seemed to Do. After a visit to friends in Beaverton who have a real beaver dam and six cats, I flew home to such a rapturous welcome from Peter, Paul, and the three cats, that I don't know why I ever go away.
“Immediately surrounding Mrs. Musgrove were the little Harvilles, whom she was sedulously guarding from the tyranny of the two children from the Cottage, expressly arrived to amuse them. On one side was a table, occupied by some chattering girls, cutting up silk and gold paper; and on the other were tressels and trays, bending under the weight of brawn and cold pies, where riotous boys were holding high revel; the whole completed by a roaring Christmas fire, which seemed determined to be heard, in spite of all the noise of the others.... It was a fine family-piece.”

*Persuasion*

A crowd of nearly 150 created our own fine family-piece as we celebrated Jane Austen’s Birthday and the joys of the season at JASNA Southwest’s Winter Event at the Los Angeles Athletic Club on Saturday, December 4th. This event was especially festive, with holiday music, wassail and traditional Christmas pudding as well as three enjoyable and erudite presenters and an elegant luncheon menu based on eighteenth century recipes, designed by Dr. Jan Fahey and prepared especially for us by Athletic Club chef Boris Cheryak!

Jan started the program by detailing the history of England with intriguing parallels to the availability and popularity of various foods. Author Kirstin Olsen then regaled us with tales of her personal cooking experiences, attempting to recreate authentic historical recipes, and acquainted us with what we might have expected in terms of ambiance and menu had we been guests at the dinner given by the Grants for Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, William Price, Mary and Henry Crawford, Edmund Bertram, and of course, Fanny Price. Culinary Historian Richard Foss concluded his fascinating discussion of drinking habits and liquid refreshments popular in Jane Austen’s day with our traditional birthday toast. Had Jane Austen herself been there to celebrate with us the 235th anniversary of her birth, she would have remarked, as did many of the attendees, that this was the best JASNA SW birthday gala ever!
Around the Reading Groups

The Long Beach Reading Group - Contact Gerda Kilgore at 562.496.4452 • gskmuc@verizon.net

The Orange County Reading Group - Contact Anna Freeman at 949.786.7170

The Pasadena Reading Group - Contact Margery Rich at 626.614.8697

The Riverside Reading Group With Friends of Temecula Library. Contact Rebecca Weersing at 909.699.7814 • teamausten@hotmail.com, or Lois McMillan at 951.301.8827 • ronlomcmil@aol.com

The San Fernando Valley Reading Group - Contact Gina Gualtieri at 818.788.4383 • gmgualtieri@yahoo.com

The Ventura Reading Group - Contact Lillian Goldstein at 805.644.4238 • email goldstein@vcss.k12.ca.us

The West Los Angeles Reading Group - Contact Clara Browda at 310.278.8759

The San Diego Region - Contact Leila Dooley at 760.726.7815 • leila@nctimes.net or leila1@peoplepc.com

Welcome, Recent New Members: Camille Balsamo-Gillis, Audrey Bilger, Sandra Bosachin, Renate Buerner, Robert Cannon, Susan Carlili, Marcee Chipman, Mary D’Angelo, Brian Davis, Laurie Davis, Natasha Duquette, Annette Gordon, Patricia Hadden, Judith Herman, Elizabeth Khaled, Maureen Mabry, Celia Milburn, Angelica Rogers, Susan Share, Caroline Taylor.

We’re delighted to welcome you to our ranks, and hope to meet you soon at a Reading Group or an upcoming JASNA~SW event.

Not receiving Reading Group information or other timely news via our monthly Email Blasts? Perhaps your email information in our database is insufficient or outdated. If you would like to update, or if you know of an upcoming event of interest to JASNA SW members, please contact Email Coordinator Carol Krause at infinitexy@aol.com.

We sorry to report that Michael San Miguel, husband of Pasadena Reading Group member Gayle San Miguel, died in a fall this past summer. An ardent conservationist and bird watcher, Michael, aged 70, was conducting a spotted owl survey at the time of his death. Our condolences to Gayle and her family.

We would also like to extend heartfelt condolences to longtime Janeite and former JASNA SW Board member Natasha Zwick and her family on the recent death of her father, Barry Zwick, a former Los Angeles Times editor, celebrated travel writer, and teacher.

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Vice-President for Programs Jana Bickel
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This is the last newsletter prepared by the inimitable team of Diana Birchall, Editor and Carol Krause, Production Coordinator. We wish to thank Diana and Carol for their hard work and dedication over the past several years... brava! and to welcome Board member Jana Bickel to the editorial helm. If you would like to contribute news or articles for possible publication, please contact Jana at janabickel@earthlink.net.