

A Different Kind of Sequel

May, Lou & Cass: Jane Austen's Nieces in Ireland.

By Sophia Hillan.

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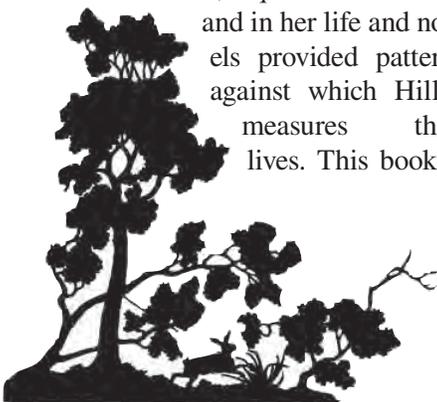
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Review by Susan Allen Ford.

What happens next? It's a question that "the perfect happiness of the union" seems, rather firmly, to preclude. We want to know about the operations of time and chance on Mr. Knightley, or Elizabeth Bennet, or even Mr. and Mrs. Collins, and though the termination of Jane Austen's biography is more decided, the lives of her siblings or of particular nephews and nieces become interesting because of their connection, their insights.

In *May, Lou & Cass: Jane Austen's Nieces in Ireland*, Sophia Hillan, formerly Assistant Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University of Belfast, focuses on a part of the family less familiar. This book charts the history of the three youngest daughters (of the eleven children) of Jane Austen's brother Edward Knight, heir to the Godmersham and Chawton estates: Marianne, known to the family as May (1801–1895), Louisa (1804–1889), and Cassandra (1806–1842). Jane Austen is certainly a presence through this book: she played with her nieces, described them to Cassandra, inquired about them,

and in her life and novels provided patterns against which Hillan measures their lives. This book is



Silhouette cut by Jane's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. Courtesy of *A Room of One's Own* Press in the publication *Life in the Country*.

particularly interesting, however, not for its insight into Jane Austen but for its insight into the lives of the Godmersham family, its view of the turbulent history of nineteenth-century Ireland, and, most crucially, its stark image of the problems faced by women, particularly unmarried women, during that period.

The stories of these sisters are shaped by three principal forces: the 1808 death of their mother, Elizabeth, in childbirth; the financial losses suffered by Edward because of the failure of Henry Austen's bank and the need to settle a lawsuit challenging his right to the Knight estate (£20,000 and £15,000, respectively); the conditions of dependence and service that defined women's lives. The narrative of the youngest, Cassandra, is the shortest. After a romance disrupted for a period of seven years (because of her fiancé's mother's veto "on acct. of not money enough"), in 1834, at St. George's, Hanover Square, Cass married Lord George Hill, son of the second Marquis of Downshire. Lord George was committed to improving the lives of the tenants on his estate in Donegal through a more scientific approach to farming. In the next eight years, much of it spent in Ireland, Cassandra bore four children, dying in childbirth in 1842.

After Cass's death, the unmarried Louisa took on the care of her sister's children and household. Five years later, she and Lord George married in Denmark in order to circumvent Lord Lyndhurst's Act, which made marriage to a deceased wife's sister illegal; in 1851, the House of Lords examined the marriage in order to validate their children's legitimacy. Louisa survived her husband, living in Ireland until her death in 1889.

Marianne's life spanned the century and most clearly represents the plot of the daughter, sister, and aunt dependent on the good will *and* health of her male relatives. At her sister Fanny's marriage, the 19-year-old Marianne took over as the female "head of the family," in Fanny's words, including running the household at Godmersham, a role she fulfilled

until her father's death in 1852. After that, provided only with an annuity of £200, she lived with her brother Charles, Rector of Chawton, until his death in 1867, then with her brother

John until his death in 1878. That year, homeless again, she went to Ireland to help Louisa care for the dying Lord George. At the age of 83, Marianne moved permanently to Donegal; after Louisa's death in 1889, at the sufferance of the nephew who had inherited Lord George's estate, she lived with an unmarried niece. Marianne died at 94.

Hillan's skillful narrative casts an intriguing light on the Knight family: their interests (birding, gardening); the family dynamics (including the separation between the older and the younger members); the attachment to home (i.e., Godmersham) not shared by the second Edward Knight, who, on inheriting, first rented and then sold the estate.

The Ireland the three women discovered was, as Jane Austen advised her niece Anna, a place where manners were different (18 August 1814). It was a time of famine, agitation for land reform and home rule, boycotts, and violence—often incomprehensible to the women reared in the comforts of Godmersham, not to mention other members of the Anglo-Irish gentry. But, Hillan suggests, these women brought with them a "quality of detached compassion . . . which, having learned to love the place, they tried to pass on to the next generation." In this book Sophia Hillan reveals a vanished world and forgotten lives while defining another way in which the Austens were connected to the world beyond Hampshire and Kent.

Susan Allen Ford is Editor of *Persuasions and Persuasions On-Line*.

