

The Variety of Life in Wartime England

Jane Austen's England

By Roy and Lesley Adkins.

Viking, 2013. xxvi + 422 pages.

52 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$27.95.

Review by Sayre Greenfield.

Undercutting the view of Jane Austen's society as genteel and elegant, this social history begins its description of the period from 1770 to 1817 as one of "an austere, wartime England," but Roy and Lesley Adkins do not insist on this view throughout their book. Instead, they concern themselves more with "reflecting the variety of life at that time," and this variety of experience, from the gentry down to the poor, provides the strength of this volume.

The chapters move through the stages of life, from weddings to births to childhood, and indeed all the way to the grave, although the middle chapters split into various human activities and preoccupations: the home, clothes, religion, money, amusements, transportation, crime, and medicine. Such an arrangement does not guarantee a smooth reading. The authors jump from one subject to another, startlingly at times. They follow a paragraph on the pleasures of listening to church bells with one on cock-fighting and segue from a discussion of census figures to a consideration of racial prejudice. One can argue, however, that if the chapters lack smooth unity, so does human existence, and the occasional jumble of impressions may imitate life better than



giving air to her geraniums

a tightly argued, highly-focused view.

The impressions of England in Austen's time assembled here derive from journals, diaries, and letters, supplemented

by newspaper extracts, song lyrics, and other contemporary texts to provide a kaleidoscope of comments on each cultural phenomenon. Rather than building upon previous histories, the Adkins quote the texts of the time. Certain observers of life come back repeatedly in the book, particularly some diarists known well enough to have merited a nineteenth- or twentieth-century edition of their journals. Reverends James Woodforde in Norfolk and William Holland in Somerset feature prominently, as does a governess from the north of England, Nelly Weeton. Those reporting their travels about the country include the impecunious aristocrat John Byng, German visitor Carl Philipp Moritz, and American visitor Benjamin Silliman. Many other voices chime in, some quite unfamiliar and some better known, such as Dorothy Wordsworth and Gilbert White. Jane Austen herself frequently appears, mostly in contributions from her letters, but sometimes quoted from her novels, though, in a couple of places, the details are inexact: Robert Ferrars appears as Edward's older brother, for instance.

As an antidote to Austenland-style fantasies, the book mostly provides a view of what Jane Austen did not write about in her novels, but what she had to deal with or be aware of in her life. Discomfort, poverty, and disease repeatedly appear, but not to the exclusion of pleasures and progress within the culture. Mostly, it is the day-to-day experiences on which the book proves most enlightening: the purchase, lighting-power, and smells of candles, the methods of washing clothing, children's toys, cooking, and relations between servants and masters. Town and country receive equal attention, and travel around England on horseback, in a coach, on foot, and along the new canals, forms a considerable thread of interest.

Besides the material conditions of life, attitudes of the English are frequently represented, including some differentiation by class. The chapter on religion, for instance, gives not only the parsons'

point of view but that of tithe-shy parishioners. The chapter on fashions spends as much time on the mundane garments of stockings, breeches, and petticoats as it does on high

feminine couture, though on this latter point the text provides a pleasant little poem that describes what it takes to clothe a lady with her tucked gowns and cork rumps, which concludes: "But never undress her—for out of her stays, You'll find you have lost half your wife." Not content to describe clothes at their peak of use, the chapter then follows them into the rag business.

With such wide coverage, the book might serve as a reference guide to the culture of Austen's time. Certainly it will prove a useful source for those seeking details about daily life in the era, and the excellent notes allow one to trace every reference to a precise source. The design of the book, however, does not encourage a merely referential use. Though the index lets one find, for example, the wages paid to quite an assortment of workers, some pieces of information are not so easy to locate. The clarifying distinctions between rectors and vicars would be hard to find unless one knew to look for "tithes" as the pertinent issue, for the index provides no entry under those titles of church office, and one would have to confront the undifferentiated thirty-three references under "clergymen." Of course, one could logically go to the chapter on "Sermons and Superstitions" and simply read it all. Such straightforward reading is probably the best approach. The data collected here deserves appreciation in all its fragmented variety, and the reader is unlikely to tire given the abundance of views and information represented.



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