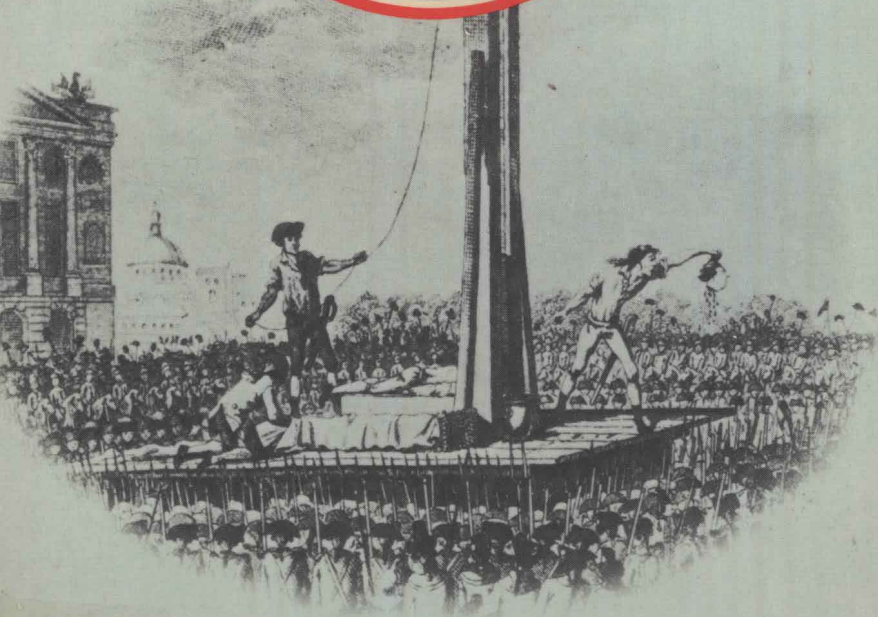


# JANE AUSTEN & THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



Warren Roberts

# JANE AUSTEN AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Warren Roberts

*Associate Professor of History*

*State University of New York at Albany*

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS NEW YORK

© Warren Roberts 1979

All rights reserved. For information write:  
St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Printed in Great Britain

First published in the United States of America in 1980

ISBN 0-312-43993-8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Roberts, Francis Warren.

Jane Austen and the French Revolution.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817—Political and social views. 2. France—History—Revolution, 1789-1799—Influence on literature. I. Title.

PR4038. P6R63

823'.7

79-19838

ISBN 0-312-43993-8

# Preface

Nothing would seem more unnecessary than another book on Jane Austen, particularly after the spate of articles and books that appeared as a result of the recent bicentennial. In fact, these publications are only part of a larger outpouring of studies that shows no signs of abating. One wonders what remains to be said about a novelist whose complete writings are contained in six volumes of modest size (in the Oxford edition of Austen's novels) plus a volume of correspondence. One particularly wonders about what can still be said about Austen when one contemplates the names that figure in the Austen criticism. Has any other English novelist attracted the interest of such a distinguished and varied group of writers as Lionel Trilling, E. M. Forster, C. S. Lewis, Edmund Wilson, Mark Schorer, Arnold Kettle, Kingsley Amis, F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, Malcolm Bradbury, Gilbert Ryle, Brigid Brophy, Geoffrey Gorer, Lord David Cecil, Virginia Woolf, David Daiches, D. W. Harding, Raymond Williams, Tony Tanner and Ian Watt? The above list does not even include the Austen specialists, whose journal articles and full-length studies contain some of the finest twentieth-century criticism. The Austen criticism covers a vast range of topics, reflecting the disciplinary affiliations of those who have produced it, including literary scholars, novelists, psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists.

No historians are on the above list, and to my knowledge none have published separate studies on Austen. As varied and superb as the Austen criticism is, I believe that it can bear a historical study, and I am not alone in that belief. As B. C. Southam said to me, a preponderance of Austen criticism, something over ninety per cent in all probability, has been written basically without a historical framework, as if the novels were timeless. In Southam's opinion a historical study is precisely what is now needed. I hope that this book is an answer to that need.

# Acknowledgements

As the idea for this book came to me while I was on sabbatical leave, it is only fitting that I should thank my university for making that leave possible. My colleagues, both in the History and English departments, have given timely and helpful criticism on the manuscript as it has passed through its various stages. That some of them will scarcely recognise what they find is in no small part the result of their probing and helpful comments. I should now like to thank Professors G. J. Barker-Benfield, Robert Hoffman, Thomas Barker, Kendall Birr, John Reilly, Robert Donovan, Deborah Dorfman, Walter Knotts, Edward Jennings and Walter Goldstein, all colleagues at The University at Albany, and James Sheehan, Alistair Duckworth, Marilyn Butler, Gina Luria and Frank Bradbrook for their invaluable help. Finally, I should particularly like to thank B. C. Southam for telling me that a historian could have something to say about Jane Austen and that I should go ahead and write the book.

# Abbreviations

E	<i>Emma</i>
L	<i>Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others</i>
MP	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
NA	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
P	<i>Persuasion</i>
PP	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
SS	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>
MW	<i>Minor Works</i>

References to Jane Austen's works are to R. W. Chapman's editions:

*The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols., 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-4)

*Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1954)

*Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952)

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION	i
1 POLITICS	12
2 WAR	68
3 RELIGION	109
4 WOMEN AND THE FAMILY	155
CONCLUSION	203
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Index</i>	218

# Introduction

Jane Austen was born at Steventon Rectory in rural Hampshire on 16 December, 1775, and died at Winchester on 18 July, 1817, at the age of forty-one. She spent all of her life in southern England, never travelling abroad, or for that matter into the Midlands or northern counties. She never married, living her entire life with her close and protective family. Along with her sister Cassandra she received a genteel education, spending several years at boarding school, first at Oxford and then at Abbey School, Reading. While the Austens belonged to the gentry, their modest income put them towards the bottom of that class in the economic sense, which helps to explain the limited schooling of the two sisters. But girls did not pursue higher education in the eighteenth century, and the learning of the Austen girls was by no means deficient for their sex. The Reverend George Austen and two of his sons, James and Henry, took a lively interest in the education of both Jane and Cassandra. The family read together, giving Jane an audience for the precocious writings that began to flow from her pen in 1788, when she was twelve. Like other girls of their class, she and her sister probably had visiting masters who taught the female accomplishments. Cassandra drew, Jane played the piano, and both of them sewed and embroidered. They attended Assembly Hall dances at nearby Basingstoke and at the homes of friends and relatives. Life for the two sisters and the entire Austen family was quiet and domestic, reflecting the values of a country village with its church and rectory.

The world of Steventon was insular and self-contained and its rhythms were agrarian. The Reverend Austen took an active interest in agricultural developments, and the home farm with its five Alderney cows provided the family table with much of its daily fare. The household had its own dairy, baked its own bread, and brewed its own ale. Sewing and darning was not a genteel pastime, but a necessity. The village of Steventon was but a row of cottages, most families in the parish living in farm houses scattered across the countryside. In all, the parish included something under two



hundred households. The Rectory, which burned down in 1826, was situated on a lane alongside a few cottages and across from a large barn. It was a square Georgian house, plain both in design and construction, with walls free of ornamentation and floors covered with common-looking carpets. The road leading to the Rectory was unpaved and required periodic shovels of gravel to be passable. Behind the house there was a garden from which two hedgerows radiated, one of them running up a hill and ending half a mile away at St Nicholas's Church. To visit that church today is to have a sense of what Jane Austen's world, at Steventon, was like. Looking across the surrounding countryside one sees undulating fields that, after much attention—they are not particularly fertile—still yield their annual harvests. The church itself is on a scale with the village, its walls enclosing a space little larger than an ordinary room. Built in the thirteenth century, it would have been adequate for the village services given by Austen's father in the eighteenth century. Life at Steventon was rural, small of scale, and had about it a certain timelessness. The qualities and contours of this world left a permanent impression on Austen's thought and outlook. The twenty-five years that she lived at Steventon were what might be called the root part of her experience.

To reconstruct that experience, it is necessary to look at the larger eighteenth-century world that lay beyond Steventon. After the convulsions of the seventeenth century life in England became more settled and stable as political compromises were made, and as there was less willingness to spill blood over religious differences. Several generations of violence led to greater circumspection, and the lessons of science furthered rational modes of thought. The pomp and heroic grandeur of one age yielded to the propriety and correctness of another, just as metaphysical speculation gave way to the more careful probings of empirical investigation. The thinkers of the age were content to ask less in order to understand more clearly, and felt a flush of confidence over scientific achievements and the age of progress that followed therefrom. A tragic view of life was replaced by one that was benign and hopeful and regarded man not as a fallen creature but intrinsically generous and morally good. Social life became more refined and cultivated, furnishings more elegant, language more precise, houses more comfortable and commodious, and life within the family more intimate. While the distribution of wealth continued to favour the few at the expense of the many, there was an overall increase of wealth; life for the

propertied classes was better than ever. The England of the eighteenth century was self-confident and proud of its achievement, proud of a political system that was admired and praised everywhere, proud of its overseas possessions, and proud of an economy and fiscal system that was second to none. The term 'civilised security', which so aptly has been used to characterise the age, applies not only to measurable, positive material conditions but to a collective state of mind. The stability of eighteenth-century England was more than political and economic; it was also psychological and emotional. Even the riots, which were endemic, were carefully controlled and did not threaten established relationships. Problems there were, problems aplenty, but they occurred within a framework that was stable and relatively impervious to such stresses and strains as welled up from within the social body. While England was hardly a macrocosm of Steventon, both worlds were orderly and subject to controls and limits that were fundamental to the age as a whole. If life at Steventon was not a reflection of the age it did blend into it.

Austen's outlook was influenced by her experience at Steventon, in the midst of her family and friends, but it was also shaped by the larger eighteenth-century world. Careful scholarship has identified the writers that she knew and judiciously considered their effect on her thought.<sup>1</sup> To go through a list of these authors is to encounter names that both mirrored the age and defined its outlines. Those authors helped Austen find her bearings inside her world. Her value system and special qualities of mind, her brittleness, refinement, precision, control and clarity all relate to the eighteenth-century civilisation from which she sprang.

Much of the Austen criticism views her fiction as a reflection of the quiet, rural life that she did in fact live, and much of it sees the mode of her thought and prose as eighteenth-century, as to a large extent it was. But Austen was not just of the eighteenth century, and her world was by no means completely calm. She was thirteen in the summer of 1789, when forces were unleashed in France that set that nation and every nation of the western world on a different course. Life was no longer the same and never would be again, so great were the transformations that flowed from this crucial historical moment. This was so in France and throughout the continent, and it was so in England. England was shaken politically by the French Revolution and drawn into a struggle for survival that lasted almost to the end of Austen's life. The years of international peace that followed

Napoleon's final defeat were years of profound uneasiness and political restiveness throughout Europe, and perhaps most acutely in England. So the clear outlines of Austen's world became blurred as she passed from youth into adolescence; the stability of the eighteenth century broke down dramatically before new and devastating forces that passed across the Channel from France. While Austen's root experience was provided by Steventon and conditioned by the larger characteristics of eighteenth-century life, she underwent a quite different experience as the stresses and strains of the Revolution entered the rural calm of her world and disrupted its accepted ways. The impact of the French Revolution on Austen's thinking and writing is the subject of this study.

It is a subject that has received but limited treatment. For this there are reasons. Austen never referred to the Revolution in any of her novels, at least directly, nor did she do so in any of her extant correspondence. In the second half of the nineteenth century the members of her own family assumed that she had lived outside the political storm that raged away during her lifetime. Her niece Caroline discussed this point after a visitor asked what Austen's 'opinion on the great public events of her time had been', and mentioned that, after all, she had been a 'young woman, able to *think*, at the time of French Revolution'. Reaching into her memory, this niece searched for clues about 'what part such a mind as her's had taken in the great strifes of war and policy which so disquieted Europe for more than 20 years'. Having retraced her 'steps on *this* track' she was able to find 'absolutely nothing'.<sup>2</sup>

The moment has arrived when literary critics have become more aware of the importance of viewing Austen against the historical background of her age. B. C. Southam has recently issued an appeal to historians 'to offer us a helping hand'. He adds that 'more and more critics are venturing into this (to them) strange territory, and Jane Austen studies seem set on a historical course for some years to come'.<sup>3</sup> Thus far historians have only added to the misunderstanding of Austen by perpetuating the myth of her remaining aloof from the great events of the day. In Volume XII of the *Oxford History of England* J. Steven Watson says that Austen seems to have been unaware 'of the events of the outside world'.<sup>4</sup> Elie Halévy writes in his authoritative *England in 1815* that Austen was 'ignorant of the brutal and unclean aspects of life' and, isolated from the outside world, she portrayed the 'petty jealousies and hatreds, the littleness and the meanness which characterized social relations in the

country and the provincial town'.<sup>5</sup> G. M. Trevelyan refers to Austen's novels as evidence of English complacency during this time of turmoil.<sup>6</sup> Thinking of the tranquil world of Austen's novels, Winston Churchill wrote, 'what calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the Napoleonic Wars.'

Just as historians have contributed to a misunderstanding of Austen, so too have some of the literary critics who have looked for connections between Austen and the history of her time. Arnold Kettle has argued that 'the rise and development of the English novel, like any other phenomenon in literature, can only be understood as a part of history'.<sup>7</sup> Taking his cue from Georg Lukàcs he found 'an atmosphere of stability and security and also a certain complacent shortsightedness' in the eighteenth-century novel that he feels Austen 'emphatically shares'. He infers that Austen should be seen not against the background of the Revolutionary Age in which she lived but as a representative of a stable order that had already, in 1688, experienced its revolution. Austen's class, the gentry, had come to power at the end of the seventeenth century and continued to reap the benefits of victory throughout the following century. These conditions contributed to a complacency within the gentry that Austen reflected in her fiction. This 'limitation must not be ignored or glossed over'. Arnold Hauser levels the same charge against Austen, regarding her as 'ill-informed' and unaware of the political issues of her day. In her novels 'social reality was the soil in which the characters were rooted, but in no sense a problem which the novelist made any attempt to solve or interpret'.<sup>8</sup>

This is a view that Lionel Trilling has rejected. In the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, given in 1969-70, he said:

The once common view was that, although her characters are rooted in social actuality, Jane Austen does not conceive of society as being in any sense problematical, as making issues by reason of the changes it was undergoing in her time. In the present state of opinion about the novelist there is little disposition to accept this. On the contrary, a large part of the interest of her work is now thought to lie exactly in the sensitivity of her response to social change.<sup>9</sup>

To examine Austen's response to social change inevitably means

considering the impact of the French Revolution on her life and writing. Her lifetime exactly coincided with a decisive period of change, when the old, hierarchical society of England came under heavy attack, struggled for survival, made various adjustments, but nonetheless emerged from the Revolutionary period profoundly altered. If Austen was not just alive in her times but alive to them, as Trilling maintains, one must understand the times if one is to understand both her and her novels.

Trilling himself made two brilliant contributions to that understanding in essays on *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, published respectively in 1954<sup>10</sup> and 1957<sup>11</sup>. One of his students, Avrom Fleishman, sees *Mansfield Park* appearing at a crucial point in the transition of English society to the modern age, when there was a fear that the French Revolution would spread to England. He argues that the themes of *Mansfield Park* grew out of Austen's responses to the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars and their impact on English life.<sup>12</sup> Alistair Duckworth, believing Austen to have been deeply aware of social change, traces her response to it through an examination of the improvement theme in her novels.<sup>13</sup> Like Fleishman, Duckworth finds a conservatism in Austen's reaction to change that links her to Edmund Burke and the organicist political theory that was a counter to the radical ideology of the Revolution.

Marilyn Butler, in her recently published *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, goes further than any present study in seeing Austen's novels not as a record of provincial insularity but revealing the author's social engagement and responses to the problems of the Revolutionary age.<sup>14</sup> Butler makes her case by placing Austen's novels against the background of contemporary fiction, in which a war of ideas was conducted by Jacobin and anti-Jacobin writers, those who responded favourably to the ideology of the French Revolution and those who stood behind the traditional order. Both types of novel had distinctive formal characteristics, treated certain themes, and rested upon a composite of attitudes that reflected a particular social vision. Butler argues that Austen's novels are linked, at one point after another, with the anti-Jacobin novels that appeared in such large numbers, many of which she read, and whose point of view—and ideology—she shared. What Butler does not show, because it is outside the scope of her study, is how Austen arrived at the ideology, other than by reading novels. As the dust cover of her book says, 'It is often said that Jane Austen in the countryside

remained isolated from the great events of her time. But she was not isolated from reading novels, and novels carried controversy.' How Austen experienced the great events of her time Butler does not attempt to explain; her interest is in the connection between Austen and other novelists. The advantage of Butler's approach is that it indicates one source of Austen's partisanship, showing how she relates to the literature of ideas; its limitation is that it does not explain how Austen connects with the actual process of historical change. If it can be shown how the political turbulence unleashed by the French Revolution entered Austen's world and affected her own life her novels can be seen in a different light, not just as a response to other fiction but as a record of her own experience.

This is precisely what I hope to do. As I will explain, Austen was connected to the great events of the day in a surprising number of ways, often through the members of her own family, whose lives were deeply affected by the political upheaval in France or who were active participants in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. For me, much of Austen's fascination is that she made a deliberate choice not to discuss directly the events that so disturbed her world, and yet incorporated many of her responses to those events into her writing. To examine her way of doing so is to enter into the very workings of history, thanks to Austen's ability to pick up the vibrations of a society that was in the throes of change and to incorporate them into her fiction. Her way of doing so was not that of an active propagandist in the war of ideas, of a Burke, Fox or Wordsworth, but a person who, as she experienced change, worked out her responses to it in her novels. Precisely because of this relationship between her experience and her novels her writing is charged with a tension that reflects and indeed is part of the history of her time. To read Austen is not only to see, as one can, how she responded to change and became politically aware, it is to enter into the life of her time in a way that one can do through no other novelist. As Fleishman has written, 'Jane Austen has become the novelist we lean on most heavily to tell us what it was like to be alive in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.' I would add that no other writer, and indeed no other evidence, brings out as well the qualitative change that occurred in English society as it was assimilating the stresses of the Revolutionary Age.

Austen does this in part through what Trilling calls the 'hum and buzz of implication', the small actions, tone, emphasis, gesture, and words that a novelist uses with a special frequency or meaning.<sup>15</sup> But

she also evokes that change through a careful choice of themes and a highly diverse set of *dramatis personae*, whose dialogue and actions reveal Austen's own stand on some key contemporary issues. So her novels are an invaluable way to have a sense of what it was like to go through a critical period of social change, and they tell us what one highly perceptive member of English society thought about it.

It need hardly be said that Austen's response to change reflects her own social position as a member of the English gentry. She was not an unthinking representative of her class, but viewed that class critically. According to one school of thought, Austen was a subversive, hostile to her class although not its declared enemy, while another school regards her as a pillar of the Establishment and even a reactionary. In fact, she was neither, but a person who was deeply affected by the historical impulses of her age and at the same time sought to understand change and its consequences for her class. As she lived through the Revolutionary Age she hoped, as a member of the gentry, of traditional landed society, to see the members of her class adjust to a world that was changing before her, but also she was aware of their shortcomings. Neither attacking nor defending her class, she examined its chances of survival.

I trust it is clear by now that my subject is not just Jane Austen and the French Revolution, if by the Revolution one means the period of French history between the meeting of the Estates General in 1789 and the establishment of the Consulate in 1799. Rather, my subject is the impact of the Revolution and its ideology on England and on Austen, and not just from 1789 to 1799, but to the end of her life. In some respects a more appropriate title for my study would have been 'Jane Austen and The Age of Democratic Revolution'. The advantage of this title is that it draws attention to a larger pattern of change of which the French Revolution was but a part. Some historians now regard the many conflicts that broke out in Europe and America after 1760 as preludes to the cataclysmic events of 1789. Beneath the apparent stability of the eighteenth century change was taking place, as seen in the many political collisions and the rise of a new economic order that ultimately altered every phase of life and was already making an impact at the time of Austen's birth in 1775. England played a major role in these changes, in the war with the American colonies, the bitter struggle for political reform, and the industrial breakthrough of the 1770s. James Watt took out a patent on his steam engine in 1769, in 1775

the American colonies broke into rebellion, and in 1776 Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*.

So why have I chosen the title *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*? Because Austen's world was largely untouched by these earlier developments. When I say Austen's world I do not mean England as a whole but the world of Steventon, the rural insular village life of northern Hampshire. The structure of life in Steventon was traditional, and its atmosphere and feeling reflected the stability of the eighteenth century. Austen's world was not that of London or the Midlands, it was not the scene of political conflict and industrialisation. Relatively impervious to the changes of the 1770s and 1780s, Steventon was not insulated from the tremors of the French Revolution and the profound impact on English life that they caused.

My way of showing how the Revolution entered Austen's world and affected her thinking and writing inevitably reflects my training as a historian. It is not the type of approach that is characteristic of Austen studies, or indeed of literary scholarship in any of its usual forms. In each of the four chapters I have tried to fit Austen into an historical framework; in constructing these frameworks I have described sets of conditions that do not relate in every particular to Austen but do delineate patterns of change that will serve as a useful background against which she can be seen. In the historical sections I hope to convey a vivid sense of how the England in which Austen lived was changing in response to the new burdens of the Revolutionary Age. Without such a sense it is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the type of experience that she underwent in living through such stressful times. I must say that deciding how much history to fit into the narrative was one of the most difficult of tasks. As readers bring different levels of historical understanding to such a book as this some will find my discussions more helpful than others. While those discussions could have been shorter, they could also have been longer.

Another problem was the paucity of biographical evidence pertinent to the study. If the reader's patience is sometimes tried by the piecing together of bits and pieces of biographical fact, it should be remembered that fragmentary as the evidence is there often was no other choice. Rather than abuse the author for his fragile constructions it would be kind to commend him for building so much out of so little! It would be well to remember that in none of Austen's writings did she as much as mention the French Rev-



olution, whose impact on her thinking and writing is the book's subject. One might well feel that faced with such difficulties the book should not have been written; it is hoped that the narrative that follows will justify the enterprise.

The argument is contained in four chapters. The first, whose subject is politics, maintains that Austen became keenly aware of some of the leading social issues of the day, that her novels contain a thoughtful, searching record of that awareness, and that she took a position on these issues that was ideological. The French Revolution had an immediate impact on England and initiated a political debate that pertained not only to how the Revolution was viewed but to internal, domestic issues. While not a propagandist, Austen was a participant in that debate. In showing how she argued her case I have drawn from a number of fine studies that beautifully show how engaged Austen was by the problems of the Revolutionary Age. My indebtedness to those studies will be apparent to the reader.

While it is well known that England's war with France is a theme in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* and that its presence can be felt in *Emma*, what Austen thought about the war during the long period in which it ran its course has not been thoroughly examined. Such an examination is the subject of chapter 2. I will show how profound was the impact of the war on England, the many points at which the war touched Austen's life, how she responded to it, and how her novels reflect that response. The underlying premise of the chapter is that the war was an outgrowth of the French Revolution and, as such, Austen's reaction to it relates directly to my subject.

Chapter 3, whose subject is religion, will pay particular attention to Austen's interest in Evangelicalism. The roots of Evangelicalism lay deep in eighteenth-century English life. While religious enthusiasm tended to die down in the eighteenth century, there were moments when accesses of emotional religious feeling would issue forth. The very quiet of England's religious life was a stimulus for these responses, which arose in various times and assumed different forms. While Methodism and Evangelicalism both grew up in the Church of England, the former broke away but the latter did not. Both experienced tremendous growth in the 1790s and in the early nineteenth century, and did so in direct response to the French Revolution. My discussion will be limited to Evangelicalism because of its relationship to Austen. In examining Evangelicalism and the change it wrought on Austen, I am treating a subject that at