

Emma at the State Library of New South Wales

In May this year, the State Library of New South Wales hosted JASA's President at an evening to celebrate a very special copy of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Many JASA members also attended. In the comments below, Maggie Patton, Manager of Research and Discovery, discusses the publication history of Austen's novels, and the provenance of the Library's extremely important acquisition.

In 2017 the State Library of New South Wales acquired a first edition of Austen's *Emma*, the last novel that Jane Austen completed and published before she died in July 1817.

As part of the acquisition process, research was undertaken on the publishing history of *Emma*, and the importance of Austen's writing in 19th century Australia. This research on provenance and context is an important aspect of any significant acquisition made by the Library.

Austen's earlier novels, namely *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, were published by Thomas Egerton of Whitehall. Austen had fallen out with Egerton over the publication of *Mansfield Park* and transferred to the publisher John Murray for the publication of later editions of that book and the first edition of *Emma*. The dispute with Egerton was apparently over the poor quality paper and mistakes in the text. The novels were published at the author's expense, with profits to the author only after payment of a ten per cent commission to the publisher.

Two thousand copies of *Emma* were printed in 1816, and 1250 copies were sold within the first year. The three-volume set of *Emma* was sold for £1 1/- (one guinea). An estimate of equivalent

value today is approximately \$134.00.

The first edition of *Emma* was published in three volumes, just 19 cms tall. In bibliographic terms this is called a 'duodecimo', meaning that the pages are exactly one-twelfth of the size of the standard paper sheet that went through a printing press. The pages of the copy purchased by the Library are uncut (untrimmed), and bound together in grey-blue paper boards, with white paper back-strips and printed paper spine labels. This would have been the original binding in which readers purchased the novel from the bookseller in 1816. [Some volumes were sold unbound, allowing the new owner to add a monogrammed binding or similar – Editor] The physical condition and binding are important considerations when we acquire rare books.

Emma is the only one of Jane Austen's novels to bear a dedication, unwillingly made, to the Prince Regent, who was apparently a great fan of her work. She wasn't such a great fan of the Prince Regent. While Austen saw the publication of *Emma*, both *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published after her death.

The first edition acquired by the Library was owned by a private collector for over 30 years. A bookplate at the front indicates that Frank Hogan owned the



Susannah Fullerton with the State Library's copy of *Emma*

volumes before the private collector purchased this copy. Frank J. Hogan (1877-1944) was an attorney, President of the Washington DC Bar Association, and founded the firm of Hogan & Hartson in 1902. He was a dedicated collector of English and American literature. On his death, Hogan decided not to bequeath his collection to an institution, but to disperse it through auction to allow others the opportunity to develop their own collections:

There is something sacred in the spiritual and intimate companionship of a book, and I do not deem it fitting that these friends of many happy hours should repose in unloved and soulless captivity. Rather, I would send them out into the world again to be the intimates of others, whose loving hands and understanding hearts will fill the place left vacant by my passing (Keller, p. 30).

Since we are part of an institution that acquires material for use by the public,

we are not sure we would agree with Hogan's sentiment.

Jane Austen's novels brought her little personal fame during her lifetime. Like many female writers, Austen chose to publish anonymously, and it was only among



SLNSW first edition copy of *Emma*: Dedication page; Chapter One, first page; Spines. Photos: State Library of NSW.

members of the educated or higher classes that her authorship was known.

Between 1832 and 1833, a London publisher, Richard Bentley, produced a standard series of Austen works, each novel published in a single volume with an engraved frontispiece. The Bentley series would have the greatest circulation amongst readers in the 19th century. The State Library has a set of the Bentley series in the David Scott Mitchell collection.

Publication of the first significant Austen biography, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, by Austen's nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh in 1869, introduced Austen to a wider public, and dramatically increased her popularity and critical standing. In his memoir, Austen-Leigh recounts his Aunt Jane's comments before she began writing *Emma*: 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like'.

Jane Austen once told a niece that "3 or 4 Families in a country village is [sic] the very thing to work on" (Le Faye, p. 275) and that is the approach Austen takes in *Emma*.

Despite her works being re-published several times during the 19th century and remaining in print ever since, her 'reading public' between 1821 and 1870 was small compared with the known audience for Dickens and his contemporaries. Her novels received few reviews and were not bestsellers.

In 1923 R.W. Chapman collated a five-volume set of works of Jane Austen. Scots born, Oxford-based scholar and publisher Robert William Chapman (1881–1960) is generally credited with establishing Jane Austen's literary status in the 20th century. The State Library acquired a first edition of Chapman's collation in 2016.

Despite Jane Austen being regarded as one of the greatest writers in the English language, the State Library did not have a first edition of any of Jane Austen's works. This may reflect the nature of the Library's 19th century collections,

which were developed by a series of male Principal Librarians and Library administrators who concentrated on the development of a vocational, scientific and historiography collection rather than on arts and literature. The Trustees of the Free Public Library of Sydney – as the Library was known in 1870 – were intent on developing an institution 'with an intellectual character'. Reading novels was seen by many as a frivolous pastime.

In 1870 a collection of 'unworthy' novels was removed from the Library's collection and sent to the Hospital at Rozelle 'as a valuable addition to the patients' library'. The list of novels removed included the dubious but fascinating titles of *Rough and Smooth*, *Nanette and her lovers*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Respectable Sinners*, *Tempter and the Tempted*. Also included in the disposal list were early editions of Austen novels – *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* – and another subversive tale, *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Bookseller advertisements for the sale of Jane Austen novels appear in Australian newspapers from the 1840s. James Edward Austen-Leigh's biography was widely reported in Australian newspapers including the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Argus* and the *Adelaide Observer*. The following extract was included in the *Adelaide Observer* on Saturday 7 October 1871:

There are some people who cannot see anything in Miss Austen's novels – 'common-place stories about common-place people!' – while there are others who have gone so far as to divide the world into two parts – those who do and those who do not admire them. And this division is not so arbitrary as might at first be imagined, for it is only the cultivated mind that can thoroughly appreciate the truth of her minute delineations,

and the exquisite humour that pervades every line of her writing. Literary men are warmest in their admiration, such as Coleridge, Southey, Scott, and, in later days, – Macaulay and Thackeray. Scott says of her: – 'That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary common place things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me'.

We are pleased to now own a first edition of one of Jane Austen's most significant works! We have a fantastic rare book collection and it is well known that our holdings of early books printed in Australia are unrivalled – from the very first book printed in 1802. Less known are our extensive collections of rare international publications acquired by the Library from 1826 to the present day – thousands of significant works and first editions including Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Ben Jonson, Dickens, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and now, thankfully, some significant women authors such as Jane Austen.

– Maggie Patton

Bibliography

Le Faye, Deirdre (ed), *Jane Austen's Letters*, Third Edition, OUP, 1995.

Keller, D.H., *David Anton Randall 1905–1975*, Metuchen, Scarecrow Press, 1992.



Maggie Patton introduces the State Library of NSW event.