



Reading at Godmersham: Edward's Library and Marianne's Books

GILLIAN DOW

Gillian Dow is Executive Director of Chawton House Library and Associate Professor in English at the University of Southampton. *Uses of Austen: Jane's Afterlives* (2012), edited with Clare Hanson, shows how Austen's life and work is being re-framed and re-imagined in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and culture. Her most recent edited collection, with Jennie Batchelor, is *Feminisms, Fictions, Futures: Women's Writing 1660–1830* (Palgrave, 2016).

THIS SHORT ARTICLE IS, in some ways, a speculative detective story. It is my own attempt to flesh out the story of a historic library collection that has been attracting increasing interest from scholars and visitors alike in the last decade. In some ways, the library is an entirely typical English country house library, put together largely in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with a sense of furnishing a large and prestigious house with the embellishments requisite for the English upper classes. And in some ways, it's entirely untypical, for this is a library collection well known to, and used by, Jane Austen herself. My tale is a tale of two houses: Godmersham Park in Kent, a fine Georgian mansion house, built in 1732, and Chawton House, an Elizabethan manor house with splendid Jacobean and later features. The estates are linked by their shared owner, Edward Austen, later Knight, Jane Austen's third eldest brother. It may even be possible to recreate—digitally, and perhaps physically—this library collection for the benefit of both scholarship and the general reader, for we have the 1818 catalogue of the library at Godmersham Park, recording every title in the collection. And we have around one third of the original library on loan to us at Chawton House Library from the Knight family, as the Knight Collection.

My story is also a tale of many readers. The most famous reader linked to the library collection at Godmersham Park is Jane Austen herself. Readers

of her letters cannot fail to notice several references to being in the library; in delightful quiet, perusing works she has already consulted, eschewing billiards for cosy family discussion. But others have made extensive studies of Jane Austen's reading, in the pages of *Persuasions* and elsewhere. Here, I am more interested in readers who have left very few traces, whose stories have to be hunted down and interpreted from scant archival resources.

As David Allan notes in an excellent recent study of reading in the Georgian period, the eighteenth century was a period of an explosion of literacy in all classes, and ideas of appropriate reading material, and the serious nature of reading, were discussed and debated in the private—and crucially the public—sphere (12–15). It was a period, too, of increased access to the printed word. Book historian James Raven observes the broad sweeps of the changes: “Books in England in the fifteenth century, many manufactured abroad, circulated to relatively few. Four hundred years later, after successive transformations of the trade, books, printed and marvellously diverse in subject, size and price, had become part of the fabric of life” (351).

The Godmersham Park library was being put together at the height of this explosion in print culture, as part of what was necessary for a gentleman to demonstrate his affluence, and his cultivated ideas. In 1732, the same year as the building of Godmersham Park in Kent, Hogarth placed his group portrait of the Cholmondley family in the library. That painting makes a statement about this new room as the heart of the home, and it marks the Cholmondley family themselves as educated and aspirational. George Cholmondley, Viscount Malpas, commissioned the work from Hogarth as a tribute to his recently deceased wife, Mary: next to leather-bound and gilded books, the entire family seems modern and enlightened.

Most works in the Godmersham library date from 1700 onwards, but there are a number of seventeenth-century works included and even a handful of books produced in the 1500s. The library includes books in several languages as well as English. There are texts by classical Greek and Roman writers and philosophers. There are a substantial number of French books, including works by major figures in eighteenth-century French philosophy, such as Voltaire and Rousseau, several books in Italian, and at least one in German.

Much of what is in the Godmersham library definitely reflects the interests of many such country house libraries at the time. It's a representative collection from this perspective. There are books on travel, history books, many works on religion, examples of conduct literature, books about architecture

and painting, parliamentary records, works on science and medicine, dictionaries, and works on grammar. There are books on farming, agriculture, and horsemanship as well as on gardening and landscape, and there are also a number of books on Kent and the local area. As one would expect, there are works by many of the major literary figures, including Shakespeare (three different editions of the complete works), Milton, Dryden, and Pope. Both Thomas Knights—the elder and the younger, who made Edward Austen his heir—subscribed to the latest, fashionable publications. Bluestocking Elizabeth Carter’s learned and authoritative translation of Epictetus was widely praised as an example of the best scholarship: it was a must-have for the landed gentry, and there are not one, but two copies in the Knight family collection. Like a great many of the great families of England in the mid-eighteenth century, Thomas Knight subscribed to Sarah Fielding’s *Memoirs of Socrates* (1762) and Hawkesworth’s *Telemachus* (1768).

Where I think the collection differs very slightly from other country-house libraries of this nature is in the holdings of novels: there are a significant number of novels in the library. The implication is that the family at Godmersham (or at least some members) were not only novel-readers, but also valued their novels enough to retain them, accommodate them on the library shelves, and document them in the catalogue along with the rest of the collection. Jane Austen said of her family that they were “great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (18–19 December 1798), and we see that very clearly in the library catalogue.

So what did this library look like? Well, we have almost no sense of the interior, but we do have a sense of the exterior. The plan reproduced in Nigel Nicholson’s *Godmersham Park, Kent: Before, During and After Jane Austen’s Time* shows it as the north-facing room at the bottom left, one wall entirely windows and—if the plan is to scale, which we cannot take for granted—the largest room in the house (20–21). There were book cases along the east, south, and west sides of the room, and the books were catalogued according to the case they were in. “I am now alone in the Library, Mistress of all I survey,” wrote Austen in a letter to Cassandra from Godmersham Park (23–24 September 1813). Here she harnesses the power of Cowper’s rhetoric, with her reference to his “Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk,” beginning “I am monarch of all I survey.” The grandeur of the setting alone might have inspired the comparison. One can never be entirely sure how seriously to take Austen’s letters to her sister since the style is invariably light and teasing. Yet a more serious point may be inferred: Austen was indeed “mistress” of the literature of her age. A voracious, and critical, reader—particularly of the

novel writers who were her contemporaries—she could claim to be “Mistress” of the books on the shelves.

The number of female-authored novels in the Godmersham library collection is striking. Sarah Scott, Frances Brooke, and Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni represent the fiction of the 1760s. Many of the women writers were Austen’s contemporaries. Jane Porter and Jane West both find places on the shelves, as do Hannah More and Sophia and Harriet Lee. Frances Burney is represented, although, curiously, not by her *Camilla* of 1796—to which both Jane Austen and “Mrs. Knight, Godmersham” subscribed—but rather by *The Wanderer* of 1814. The most represented woman novelist in the Godmersham Park library of 1818, after Jane Austen herself, is Maria Edgeworth. Her *Harrington* and *Ormond* (1817) are there, as are *Patronage* (1814) and *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809). Did Jane—or indeed, Cassandra—Austen have an influence on the book buying at Godmersham Park? The majority of these female-authored novels date from *after* 1808—that is, after Edward Austen’s wife, Elizabeth, died. Did the literary aunts insist the young Godmersham nieces must have a female hand guiding their reading? In the absence of any purchasing documentation, this suggestion can only be speculative.

We know Jane Austen read Mary Brunton in the library at Godmersham Park because she has very amusing comments to make on *Self-Control* (1811):

I am looking over *Self Control* again, & my opinion is confirmed of its’ being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura’s passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does. (11–12 October 1813)

There are some pencil marks in the Godmersham copy of *Self-Control*. “Stupid” and “Foolish” are written in pencil in the second volume, which seems to chime nicely with Austen’s opinions as recorded in her letter. Other volumes in the collection contain marks of readership too. An 1809 edition of Elizabeth Montagu’s letters contains a great deal of underlining that suggests to me that someone has gone through it paying a great deal of attention to the syntax. But the hand is not clear enough to say whether these marks may have been made by Jane Austen herself—and of course many, many generations of readers had access to the books during and after her lifetime.

How do we get at the preoccupations of Edward Knight, library owner, himself? We know, after all, that he sat in the library. Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra, “The Comfort of the Billiard Table here is very great.—It draws all the Gentlemen to it whenever they are within, especially after dinner, so

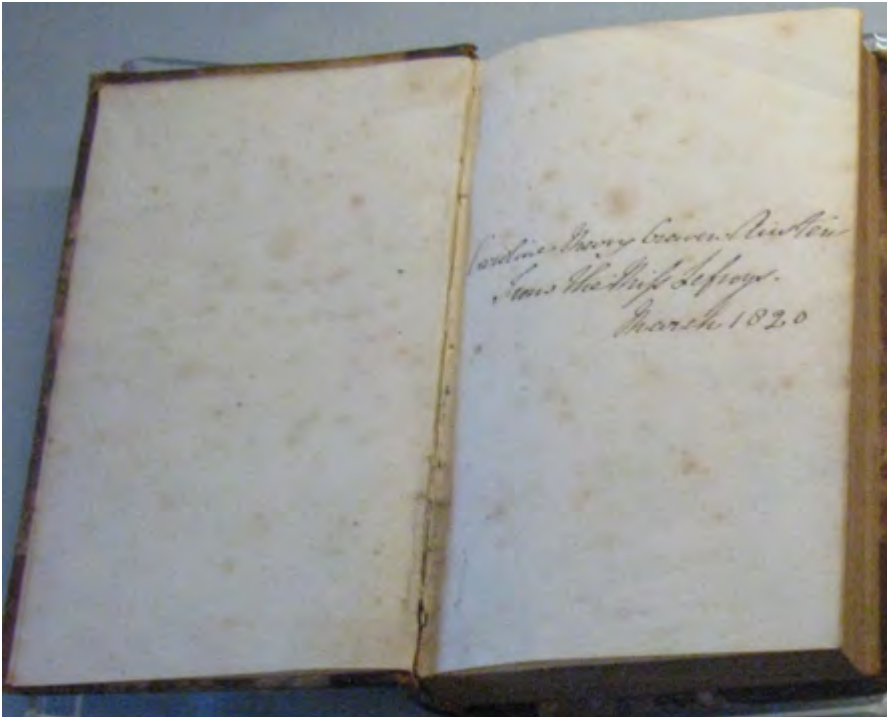
that my Br Fanny & I have the Library to ourselves in delightful quiet” (14–15 October 1813). And we know—thanks to Linda Slothouber’s brilliant study of him as land-owner and gentleman farmer—a great deal about his preoccupations in that area. But I wanted to know how he got his books, what he thought about his reading, whether there was any evidence at all of his literary tastes, other than the mere presence of books on his library shelves. Owning a book, as we all know, doesn’t mean we read it. So I thought I would start by looking at the evidence available from Edward’s tour in continental Europe.

Edward toured in Europe in 1786, as a young man of eighteen. Many young men took the opportunity of the grand tour as an opportunity to buy books on foreign shores and to do a great deal of reading. We have Edward’s journal from this trip from Godmersham Park to Neuchatel in Switzerland. What thoughts on the literature of the age are contained within those pages? What foreign publications does he buy in the bookshops of the towns he passes through? Ah, dear reader, not one. Edward’s journal is entirely concerned with the logistics of his trip and his thoughts on the surrounding countryside:

July 23 Left Rheims half after four in the morning the air rather cool—changed horses at petites loger and breakfasted at Chalon sure Marne, the veivs continue much the same as when we first entered Campagne; from thence we changed horses at La Choupee, and thence at Vitry le Francais, the country within six miles of Vitry—[illegible] most delightful; from the top of a tolerable high Hill you have fine views of a rich fertile Valley almost entirely covered with viniyards, and different kinds of fruit tree. (23 July 1786)

So I turned to another unpublished source in the Chawton House Library collection to see if it would give me a better sense of the family who owned the Godmersham library. Louisa Lushington, born at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the daughter of Sir Henry Lushington, British ambassador to Naples, gives a wonderful description of her stay with the Knight family at Godmersham in 1821. Louisa is a literary lady, and her journal, written when she was in her late teens, is an extremely lively read: she’s witty, engaging, and describes the people she meets and the places she visits most entertainingly. Alas, in her account of her time at Godmersham, there is not one mention of being in the library or reading of any sort, except that “Mr Knight read short evening prayers; this I liked very much” (19 August 1821). In fact, what Louisa describes—and very entertainingly at that—is a hunting, fishing, and shooting kind of a family, who love outdoor activities of all kinds.

The amusement of the next day was dragging the river & fishing, I cannot say I much enjoyed seeing the poor fish gasping for breath



Caroline Austen's copy of Cowper's Poems, Volume 1. Donated by Sandra Clark to Chawton House Library.

& struggling, tho' Mr Charles Knight did assure me they jumped about because, poor things, they were happy to get out of the water, where they were very near being drowned.

It was increasingly apparent that, despite manuscript evidence of the family at *play* being available, my investigation of the Knight family as a community of *readers* was doomed.

And then, something happened that made me rethink my approach entirely. In June of this year, one of our great supporters, Sandra Clark, came to Chawton House Library bearing gifts for us: first editions of Frances Burney's *Camilla*, several books about Jane Austen, and—wonderfully—a little collection of books that had belonged to one of Jane Austen's nieces, Caroline Austen, daughter of her brother James and sister of James Edward Austen-Leigh, who was to write a memoir of Jane Austen.

This little collection of books was never held at either Godmersham Park or Chawton House, but I am delighted that we can provide a home for it now at Chawton House Library. It consists of Robert Burns's *Poetical Works*,

William Cowper's *Poems*, an 1813 edition of Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis's *Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes*, August von Kotzebue's *Plays*—which includes the play that, in a translation by Elizabeth Inchbald, is performed in *Mansfield Park*. In the edition of Genlis's *Théâtre*—a gift to Caroline from her Aunt Cassandra in 1813—we can clearly see markings, underlinings, and, wonderfully, a sketch of a dog. These books were loved and treasured, kept together throughout Caroline's life. She clearly read and reread them.

Looking at these books that once belonged to Caroline got me thinking about the women in the families, who were, of course, much more likely to be in the library than hunting and fishing out of doors. And it made me think of one of Jane Austen's nieces, who lived at Godmersham Park for a great deal of her adult life, unmarried, mistress of Godmersham, and hostess for her father, Edward Knight, until his death. Her cousin Caroline Austen, meeting this young woman, whom she hadn't seen for many years, shortly after Jane Austen's death, wrote about the meeting in a letter from Steventon to her brother James Edward Austen-Leigh, then at Exeter College, Oxford: "She is certainly I think pretty, but I never saw her look anything like beautiful. Her greatest personal recommendation to me, is being very like poor Aunt Jane" (qtd. in Le Faye 599).

I'm talking, of course, of Marianne Knight, Edward Knight's third daughter. Like all his children, she was born an Austen and adopted the Knight name in 1812. Known as "Aunt May" to later generations, she never married. She lived at Godmersham until her father's death in 1852, then at Chawton with her brother Charles Bridges (1803–1867), and, after his death, at Bentley with brother Brook John. Finally, in 1878 she joined her niece Cassandra Hill, living out her final years in Ireland. Louisa Lushington describes Marianne in 1821, just as she has taken on the responsibility of being mistress of Godmersham Park on the marriage of her elder sister, Fanny:

Miss Knight, the eldest unmarried daughter is about nineteen & has management of the family, table etc. she is very pretty in every way, face, and figure, large hazel eyes, pretty nose, very small mouth, a good complexion with a good deal of colour, her face is rather round than oval, and she has very pretty brown hair, dark eye-brows, and eye lashes. (19 August 1821)

We learn little more about Marianne from Louisa's account, but the responsibility of managing the family, table, etc. at Godmersham Park must have been considerable. I wanted to learn more. At Chawton House Library, in the remainder of the Knight family library, are some of Marianne's books: Maria Edgeworth's



Marianne Knight's copy of Patronage, from the Godmersham Park library, now in the Knight Collection, Chawton House Library.

Tales of Fashionable Life (1809) and *Patronage* (1814). Both are signed clearly, “Marianne Knight.”

The inscription of “Marianne Knight” in the *Tales of Fashionable Life*, published in 1809, interested me since the family didn’t adopt the name Knight until 1812. Who knows who recommended *Patronage* to her? It’s perhaps a little too advanced a read for the thirteen-year-old girl she would have been on its publication in 1814. Still, Marianne seems to have treasured these books, perhaps in memory of Aunt Jane, or indeed Aunt Cassandra, who seemed to have shared the same views on “good” literature for young women. Certainly, Maria Edgeworth was a favorite author of the older generation of women readers.

I couldn’t help feeling mournful when I looked at Marianne’s books, now part of the Knight Collection and recorded in the *Godmersham Park Library Catalogue* of 1818. For Marianne had an itinerant later life, in part—although not exclusively—because of her longevity. When her father, Edward Austen Knight, died at age eighty-five in 1852, her eldest brother, Edward Knight, who inherited, wanted totally vacant possession of Godmersham, despite the fact that his home had long been the Great House at Chawton. Ultimately, Edward Knight the younger did not return to Godmersham Park but rented it to tenants in late 1853. In her book on Jane Austen’s youngest nieces on the Knight family side, Sophia Hillan describes the departure from Godmersham Park in 1853 most evocatively.

Marianne . . . was the only one left utterly bereft: having given her

late girlhood and all her adult years to the care of her father and the estate, and having lived nowhere in her life but Godmersham, she would now, in her fifty-second year, have to find a new home. No longer Miss Woodhouse, she had suddenly become poor Miss Bates.

. . . It was Marianne and her elderly aunt Louisa Bridges who carried out the real, heartbreaking work of emptying the family home, staying on until everything was gone in January 1853. (149–50)

These words led me back to the *Godmersham Park Library Catalogue*, where I was absolutely sure I had seen the date January 1853. And indeed I had.

Three loose sheets inside the *Godmersham Park Library Catalogue* are dated January 14, 1853. These sheets of paper—presumably in Marianne’s handwriting—give an account of the checking and double checking that Marianne Knight and her aunt Louisa Bridges are doing against the *Godmersham Park Library Catalogue* of 1818. They list some books that are missing, some that have been “borrowed, by Aunt Louisa.” And most poignantly of all, they list the following:

Miss Edgeworth’s *Patronage*. taken from South Case. Slip 1. Shelf 3

Miss Edgeworth’s tales of fashionable life 6 vols. – 4th Shelf –

Northanger Abbey, *Persuasion*. 5th Shelf.

Sense & Sensibility, *Pride & Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* – 6th Shelf.

Holy Bible 2 vols. – taken from West Case. Slip 1. Shelf 2

Common Prayer from the same.

Two of these entries—the copies of Maria Edgeworth—are Marianne’s own books. “Books belonging to the Library Catalogue, now in the Drawing room,” we read.

Why move these books to the drawing room? What is the purpose of their removal, when the house is being prepared for vacancy, and presumably the aim is therefore to leave everything in good order? I’m not the only person who has wondered in recent years. Olivia Murphy, a former Chawton House Library visiting fellow, in an Appendix to her *Jane Austen the Reader: The Artist as Critic* (2013), speculated that these might have been Jane Austen’s own books (177–82). But Murphy didn’t know, then, that the copies of the Edgeworth novels belonged to Austen’s niece Marianne, and contained her marks of ownership.

The more I stared at this list of books, the more I looked at Marianne’s own copies of Edgeworth’s *Tales* and her novel *Patronage*, the more I read her own letters *after* she left Godmersham and thought about how difficult

1853 January 14.
 Books belonging to the Library
 Catalogue, now in the Drawing
 room.

Mrs Edgeworth's Patronage. taken from
 South Case. Shelf 3 - Shelf 3
 Mrs Edgeworth's tales of fashion etc
 6 vols. - 4th Shelf -
 Northanger Abbey, Persuasion. Shelf
 Sense & Sensibility, Pride & Prejudice,
 Mansfield Park, Emma - 6th Shelf.

Holy Bible 2 vols. taken from
 West Case. Shelf 1. Shelf 2
 Common Prayer from the same.

"Books belonging to the
 Library Catalogue, now in
 the Drawing room." The
 Knight Collection, Chawton
 House Library.

her itinerant life must have been after 1853, the more I see this loose sheet as a kind of code. I can't now read it otherwise than to say this is a message for an elder brother, Edward, who has behaved *far* less magnanimously to his unmarried sister, Marianne, than his father, another Edward, behaved to his sisters, Jane and Cassandra. Here are Marianne's own books, her treasured copies of Maria Edgeworth, signed with her own name. But because they are listed as "belonging to the Library Catalogue"—an odd turn of phrase, indeed—they must remain at Godmersham Park, even while Marianne herself must leave. Here are *all* of dear Aunt Jane's books, in which tales of displaced and impoverished women—the Dashwoods, Miss Bates, Miss Smith, Jane Fairfax, and many, many others—are central. Here is Maria Edgeworth, whose *Patronage* gives progressive views of women's roles in society. Most tellingly of all, here are a Bible and a *Book of Common Prayer*. Marianne may not have *intended* a pointed moral lesson to her brother; she seems to have born her displacement with remarkable fortitude. But I certainly see one in the

placing of these cornerstones of the Church of England next to novels tracing, for the large part, women's lives and fortunes. And I felt, on reading this list, indignant—and, indeed, upset—on Marianne's behalf.

This essay, as originally envisaged, was to be about private libraries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It ended up being much more about individual women readers and how to trace the book ownership of the female members of great estates. In particular, it is about unmarried women like Marianne Knight, of interest to us now only because her aunt, another unmarried woman, happened to be the greatest novelist of her—and perhaps any—generation. She had few, very few, books of her own. Those that she did have were consumed by her brother's collection when she had to leave her home. I'm going to continue to put Jane Austen and her nieces front and center in the Godmersham Park library project. If we end up recreating the Godmersham Park library virtually, or indeed recreating part of it physically, we will do it keeping in mind all of those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women who did not own their own libraries.

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Through reading books we hear their voices and understand their thoughts and feelings. Reading stirs my imagination, creates colourful pictures of the described characters and events in my mind, transfers me to other countries, continents or even to other worlds, introduces me to amazing people who live exciting lives, makes me laugh and cry. I can travel to wild jungles and deserts, to hot Africa and cold Arctic or wherever I like staying at home. However, some of my friends don't read at all or read very little. They say that they are too tired after school and can do nothing but watch