

Austen scholar discovers sad fate of Jane's secret brother

by Rajeev Syal

WITHIN the large loving family on which Jane Austen drew for her inspiration lay an uncomfortable secret: a disabled brother who was rejected and cast out into poverty.

New evidence reveals that George Austen, Jane's mentally handicapped brother, who was sent away to a strange family as a child, was left to survive in hardship.

His fate stands in stark contrast to the genteel middle-class affairs Austen chronicles in *Sense and Sensibility* and other works. David Nokes, professor of English literature at King's College, London, who has investigated George's life, said: "He was living with a poor family and in poor conditions. Jane Austen's family appear to have been embarrassed by his disability."

While Jane was sent away to boarding school and enjoyed a vibrant social life that later inspired her novels, George was passed on to a family so poor that his foster father was forced to steal to feed his dependants.

Scholars have puzzled over what befell the boy because he is mentioned in only a handful of letters written by the Austen family when he was very young. But Nokes has found documentation which he believes solves the mystery.

Using parish records and unseen correspondence from George's foster parents, Nokes has established that George was born in 1766. His parents recognised that he was not "normal" at an early age: he was thought to be epileptic and deaf.

In one of the last references in family letters, the Rev George Austen wrote in 1770 that his son's wellbeing was not improving: "God knows only how far it will come to pass, but for the best judgement I can form at present, we must not be too sanguine of this head; be it as it may, we have this comfort, he cannot be a bad or a wicked child."

Nokes's documents prove that George was sent away between the age of five and seven. The Austen family paid



Cruel times: George Austen lies in a pauper's grave, while Jane is in Winchester Cathedral

for him to be placed with Francis Cullum, a parish clerk in Monk Sherborne, a village near Basingstoke, Hampshire.

George's foster father struggled to survive with no land or crops and with less than £20 a year to feed a family of 10. He would have been regarded as "uneducated" — most of his children, according to records, were illiterate.

Less than 20 miles away in Steventon, the village where Austens lived, Jane enjoyed the comforts of a large parsonage, in which she composed some of her early works. Her cleric father was not rich, but he had a library and he supplemented his income with private tuition.

Cullum, by contrast, turned to crime. In 1809, he was prosecuted for sectioning off common land and claiming it as his own. A year later he was caught stealing manure from his neighbours' plots, and fined 10 shillings. It is believed that George's parents would have sent money to Cullum for their estranged son, but there is no evidence of it. When his

parents died — his father in 1805 and his mother in 1827 — George was left nothing, although one of his brothers later gave him money.

He is thought to have remained in the village. When Jane died at 41 she was buried in Winchester Cathedral. George died aged 72 and was buried in an unmarked grave in All Saints Church in Monk Sherborne.

Throughout her life, Austen praised her family. She once wrote of relations, after they had looked after her during a mild illness: "If I live to be an old woman, I must expect to wish I had died now; blessed in the tenderness of such a family, and before I had survived either them or their affection."

Austen experts believe that to the modern eye the decision to send George away may seem cruel, but at the time it was unremarkable.

Tom Carpenter, a trustee at Jane Austen's house in Chawton, Hampshire, said: "It can seem shocking now, but in an era when there was

no treatment or hope it was all they could resort to. It was a taboo of that time because everyone was helpless in the absence of treatment and medical knowledge."

David Selwyn, author of books on the Austen family, said: "The Austens were not poor, but were not rich and may have found it difficult to bring up a child with disabilities. It was easier then to send a child away and try and forget about him."

Others believe the underlying cruelty of Austen's world crept into her writing. In *Persuasion* she wrote: "The real circumstances of this pathetic piece of family history were, that the Musgroves had had the ill fortune of a very troublesome hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his 20th year; that he had been sent to sea because he was stupid and unmanageable on shore; that he had been very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved."

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FROM ALAN ALBERT.

HUSBAND	WALTER WALLAGE AUSTIN		
BORN	1902/3	AT	WOLVERTON
BAPTISED		AT	
MARRIED	25/10/1930	AT	
DIED		AT	
FUNERAL		AT	
FATHER	? ORNHAL AUSTIN	MOTHER	

WIFE	ANNIE KEZIA BATES		
BORN	1906/7	AT	
BAPTISED		AT	
DIED	12/11/1990	AT	
FUNERAL		AT	
FATHER	JOHN BATES (OR ALFRED JOHN)	MOTHER	

CHILD

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

WOLVERTON PARISH REGISTER OF MARRIAGES 1838-1993

WALTER WALLACE AND ANNIE KEZIA AUSTIN, IN MEMORIAM.

**AUSTIN
ANNIE**

Died 12 - 11 - 1990
In loving memory of
a dear mum, sadly
missed. Loved
always, Reg & Eileen.

B.6. 10/11/2000

AUSTIN ANNIE

Died 12.11.1990.
In loving memory of
a dear mum.
Sadly missed.
Loved always
Reg & Eileen

B.6. 9/11/2007

ANNIE AUSTIN

Died 12 - 11 - 1990
In loving memory
of a dear mum.
Sadly missed,
loved always.
Reg & Eileen.

B.6. 9/11/2001

**Annie
AUSTIN**

12.11.1990
In loving memory of
a dear mum.
Sadly missed.
Loved always.
Reg & Eileen

ANNIE AUSTIN

12/11/1990
In loving memory of a
dear Mum, sadly missed.
Forever in our thoughts,
Loved always,
Reg and Eileen.

B.6. 13/11/2002

B.6. 13/11/2008

**In Loving
Memory of
Annie Austin**

Died
12th November 1990
Dear Mum, sadly
missed, loved always.
Reg & Eileen. XX

ANNIE AUSTIN

Died 12.11.1990
In loving memory of a
dear Mum.
Sadly missed.
Loved always.
Reg & Eileen.

B.6. 7/11/2003

B.6. 12/11/2004

ANNIE AUSTIN

12/11/90
In loving memory of
dear Mum
Sadly missed,
Loved always.
Reg and Eileen

B.6. 12/11/2004

AUSTIN Annie

Died November 12th
1990.
In loving memory of
dear Mum.
Sadly missed
Loved always.
Reg and Eileen.

B.6. 10/11/2005

AUSTIN Annie

In loving memory of
Dear mum.
Died 12.11.1990.
Sadly missed.
Loved always.
Reg & Eileen

B.6. 9/11/2006