Introduction

And, after all, we have lives enough of Jane Austen . . .

Virginia Woolf, A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN, 1928

'To be burned', Cassandra Austen wrote in 1843 on a bundle of letters sent between Jane and herself over many years. She later told her niece Caroline that she had indeed burnt 'the greater part' of her sister's letters. Even among those letters which remained, as Caroline Austen noted, several 'had portions cut out'. What dark secrets of Jane Austen's life were lost forever on Cassandra's bonfire? What shocking admissions or scandalous remarks could have been thought so discreditable that they must be consumed in the flames? None at all, we are assured by later members of the Austen family. There was nothing in the least shameful in any of the letters which Cassandra chose to burn. It was merely that aunt Jane was given to expressing herself in rather too 'open and confidential' a manner. After all, had not aunt Jane herself written in *Persuasion* that 'no private correspondence could bear the eye of others'? Cassandra had merely been acting in a spirit of sisterly tact when she chose to suppress some of Jane's private confidences.

Tact was the polite term which the Austens often invoked to justify their habit of suppressing awkward or embarrassing facts.

It was tactful to make no mention of Jane's 'mad' brother George, sent away from home as an infant and never afterwards referred to. It was tactful to pass over the details of Jane's aunt Leigh-Perrot's trial for grand larceny at Taunton assizes. Above all, it was tactful to censor the evidence of Jane Austen's scabrous and invective wit. Three days before she died, Jane Austen wrote a short satiric poem. She had been unwell for several months, confined to her bed with fevers and frequent backache, and had been recently moved from her home at Chawton to lodgings in Winchester, where she could be attended by Mr Lyford, the Surgeon-in-Ordinary at the County Hospital. It was St Swithin's day – 15 July – and the Winchester races had just begun. St Swithin was buried in Winchester and the coincidence of these two facts – the races and the saint's shrine – provided her with comic material. But the real themes of this curious little six-stanza poem are death and immortality. Jane Austen pictured the saint leaping from his shrine to curse the depraved subjects of Winchester for idling their time away at the races. 'When once we are buried you think we are dead/But behold me immortal!' Three days later, in the early hours of 18 July 1817, Jane Austen died, aged forty-one. Cassandra copied out this last poem and even underlined those words, 'When once we are buried you think we are dead/But behold me immortal!' But the version of immortality which this poem represented was not of a kind that recommended itself to later members of the Austen family. Knowing that she was about to die, having made out her will and taken Holy Communion with her brothers, Jane Austen had spent her last conscious hours dictating a satiric incantation which took the form of a malediction. 'By vice you're enslaved/You have sinned and must suffer . . ./You shall meet with your curse in your pleasures.' The last words she ever wrote took the form of a curse.

The fate of this last poem is indicative of how the family dedicated themselves to idealizing Jane Austen's posthumous reputation. Her brother Henry had the bad taste to mention it in the 'Biographical Notice' which he published shortly after her death, even exaggerating the poem's proximity to the hour of her demise. 'The day preceding her death she composed some stanzas replete

with fancy and vigour,' he wrote. But Jane's niece Caroline Austen and nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh were horrified that such 'light and playful' verses should be remembered as the last things their aunt had composed. Caroline protested that 'the joke about the dead saint, & the Winchester races, all jumbled up together, would read badly as amongst the few details given, of the closing scene'. Accordingly, all references to the poem were deleted from subsequent editions of Henry's 'Biographical Notice'. James Edward Austen-Leigh made no mention of it in his *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), and it was omitted by William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh from their book *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*, published in 1913.

Instead, the family preferred to cherish the memory of Jane celebrated in some elegiac verses composed by her eldest brother James. '. . . Not a word she ever penn'd/Which hurt the feelings of a friend,' he wrote (this of the woman who had once exhorted Cassandra to 'Abuse everybody but me'). James went on: 'And not a line she ever wrote/Which dying she would wish to blot.' This claim was true, though hardly in the way that James Austen intended it. It was not Jane Austen who wished to blot out scandalous lines or censor satirical thoughts. But there were many other Austens who *did* wish to blot them out. Caroline Austen disapproved of the notion that any of Jane's early satirical writing should be published; 'one knows not how it might be taken by the public,' she wrote. She similarly deplored the thought of publicizing anything about Jane Austen's emotional life. 'I should not mind *telling* any body, at this distance of time,' she wrote to her brother, James Edward Austen-Leigh, in 1867, 'but printing and publishing seem to me very different from *talking* about the past.' In his *Memoir* of 1870, Austen-Leigh was accordingly discreet: 'I have no reason to think that she ever felt any attachment by which the happiness of her life was at all affected,' he wrote. Jane Austen's great-nephew, Lord Brabourne, was inspired by similar feelings of family delicacy when he published the first bowdlerized edition of Jane Austen's *Letters* in 1884. 'No malice,' he insisted, ever 'lurked beneath' Jane Austen's wit. Where this was not the case, Brabourne sought to make it so by carefully omitting from his

edition any malicious reflections that Cassandra had allowed to escape the flames. Henry Austen's unfortunate reference to his sister's final poem was carefully censored, but another sentence from his 'Biographical Notice' was widely proclaimed: 'Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or forget.' That was how the Austen family were determined to remember her. Discreetly, they adjusted the records of her life in efforts to ensure that that was how the world should remember her too.

This family tradition of producing censored versions of Jane Austen's life and works has had its inevitable effect on subsequent biographies, most of which have been based upon the tactful memoirs of later Austens. 'Family disagreements, to say nothing of family quarrels, were unknown to them,' wrote Elizabeth Jenkins in *Jane Austen: A Biography* (1938), exactly as the Austens themselves would have wished. 'They were a devoted family,' wrote David Cecil in *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (1978), preferring to gloss over the fact that one Austen son was excluded from the family entirely, while another son was sent away for adoption by wealthier relations. Tact is a commendable quality, and a biographer who insists on challenging such benign assertions may risk appearing as not merely tact*less* but as impertinent and prurient. But there are more important qualities than delicacy, as Jane Austen's own writings suggest. Much as she may admire a proper sense of discretion, her strongest commendations are always bestowed on frankness and openness. Yet it is these very qualities that have been chiefly absent from traditional accounts of her life. What is a biographer to make of the strange silences created by the family policy of censorship: blank years, for which no letters exist; mysterious gaps in the family record? How should we interpret these enigmatic *lacunae*? In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen comments on the joy with which Fanny Price seizes upon a 'scrap of paper' containing a brief message from Edmund Bertram. 'Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author – never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer. The enthusiasm of a woman's love is even beyond the biographer's. To her, the hand-writing itself, independ-

ent of anything it may convey, is a blessedness.' The distinguished author of these lines would understand the frustrations of a biographer who well knows that so many of his subject's most revealing letters have been deliberately destroyed.

During my researches for this book, I made several discoveries concerning the circumstances of the Austen family which may help to piece together some of the missing elements in Jane Austen's life and work. If the portrait which emerges is less saintly and serene than the one with which most readers are familiar, it has at least, I hope, the virtue of greater authenticity. I have, as Jane Austen once wrote, 'endeavoured to give something like the truth with as little incivility as I could'. Often the most beguiling of literary forms, biography may also be the most complacent. Unlike a novel, which relies upon the arts of invention and surprise to tease our expectations with a narrative whose conclusion is unknown, a biography is a story whose plot and characters are often disconcertingly familiar. In a sense, a biography is like a novel written backwards; taking as its starting point the well-known achievements of its subject's maturity and tracing back the hints of inspiration which brought those great works into being. Blessed with the comfortable benefits of hindsight, a biographer may be tempted to describe the steady progress of genius from earliest childhood glimmerings to full adult brilliancy. Awkward gaps in the record may be invisibly repaired in the interests of a seamless narrative; discordant notes may be ignored as irrelevant to the central themes. Yet life itself is not lived backwards, but forwards, with no foreknowledge of what the next day, or the next year, may bring. The girl of fifteen, whatever her dreams or fantasies may be, has no predestined sense that she is to become a famous author. Her mind is filled only with the thoughts and imaginings of a girl of fifteen. Accordingly, in this biography I have sought, as far as possible, to present each moment of Jane Austen's life as it was experienced *at the time*, not with the detached knowingness of hindsight.

This is a biography written *forwards*. In formal terms, it does not adopt the 'objective' view of a modern biographer but, like a novel, presents events through the perceptions of its principal

characters (with only such occasional authorial interventions as might be permitted to the 'omniscient narrator' of a fictional work). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland protests against history for being dull and tiresome. 'Yet I often think it odd,' she adds, 'that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs – the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.' In this biography, the speeches put into people's mouths are *not* invention, and those who wish to verify their accuracy may find the sources in the footnotes. Nothing is spoken which cannot be authenticated, and no incident presented for which there is not documentary evidence. But in the disposition of a character's thoughts, as in the interpretation of his or her actions, there is some degree of invention. The novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were not published until 1811 and 1813 respectively but had existed in draft forms (as 'Elinor and Marianne' and 'First Impressions') for some fifteen years before they appeared in print. In this biography I have drawn quotations from the later published works as indications of earlier unpublished preoccupations. This may be called 'invention', but I hope the insights thus obtained may justify the liberty I have taken. Similarly, the discoveries I have made are not marked out for special attention in the text since, though they may be new to us, they were not so to the Austens, whose lives I present from their own perspectives. These 'new' facts are therefore silently introduced through the consciousness of whichever character they most directly concern. Most readers, I believe, will not wish to have their reading interrupted by obtrusive scholarly claims. For those who are more inquisitive about such matters, the footnotes will supply all the necessary information.

During the time that I have been writing this book, Jane Austen has rarely been out of the news. When I began it, the newspapers were filled with angry reactions to the suggestion, first published in the *London Review of Books*, that she might have had lesbian feelings towards her sister Cassandra. Shortly afterwards, my own researches into Austen family dealings with the East India Com-

pany provoked a lurid headline: '*Jane Austen's father was an opium smuggler.*' Since then, there have been various film and television adaptations of Jane Austen's works as well as innumerable literary sequels. Jane Austen has never been more popular, yet it is surprising how little we really know about her, and what fierce reactions are produced by any attempt to question that benign view of her character which her family were so anxious to perpetuate. Writing in the *Athenaeum* in December 1923, Virginia Woolf declared: 'Anybody who has the temerity to write about Jane Austen is aware of [two] facts: first, that of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness; second, that there are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult to the chastity of their aunts.' I have had the temerity not only to write about Jane Austen, but to do so in a manner which challenges the familiar image of her as a literary maiden aunt. This is not because I wish to offer any slight to her genius. It is because I prefer to present her *not* in the modest pose which her family determined for her, but rather, as she most frequently presented herself, as rebellious, satirical and wild. 'Pictures of perfection as you know,' she wrote to her niece Fanny Knight in 1817, 'make me sick & wicked.'