



A REMARKABLE CONNECTION TO JANE AUSTEN CAN BE FOUND IN DUBLIN, AND IT LEADS TO A LINK TO INSPECTOR MORSE, AS SUSANNAH FULLERTON REPORTS

# Jane and the Archbishop

St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin is not perhaps the first place you would go looking for a Jane Austen connection, but it has a very interesting one. In the west aisle of the south transept there is an impressive monument to Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin. Born in 1787, Whately was a rhetorician, logician, economist, academic, clergyman, prolific author and church reformer.

Born in England and educated at Oxford (where he became professor of political economy), he was consecrated Archbishop of Dublin in 1831. It was a surprise Whig post, challenged unsuccessfully by the opposition in the House of Lords, and Whately went on to make his mark on the Church of Ireland. He supported state endowments of Catholic clergy, he argued for common education for Protestants and Catholics alike, worked hard to alleviate the hungry in the terrible famine years, and he even supported freedom of speech for atheists, a most unusual stance for a clergyman of that era. He published books on religion (his handbook *Christian Evidences*

was translated into twelve languages), on logic and on rhetoric and wrote a popular primary school textbook on money that was even translated into Maori. Whately was something of an eccentric as he made his way around Dublin, wearing a long white coat and with a huge white dog at his side. He loved puns, good talk and wit.

It comes as no surprise that a man who loved playing with words and had a good sense of humour should appreciate the novels of Jane Austen. In January 1821 John Murray's periodical *Quarterly Review* contained a review of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. It was unsigned, but had been written by Whately. This review is considered to



Right, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, c 1799, painted by James Malton (1761-1803). Far right, Richard Whately was the Church of Ireland's Archbishop of Ireland, 1831 to 1863



be “the most important early nineteenth-century statement on Jane Austen” after that written by Walter Scott (his unsigned review had appeared in March 1816). Whately did mis-spell her name as “Austin”, but he recognised her brilliance as a writer and helped to establish her reputation. Marilyn Butler argues that Whately’s long review was “probably more important for her reputation than the pieces by Walter Scott and Henry Austen”.

Whately’s review remarks that Jane Austen is “evidently a Christian writer”, but also praises her for not making religion too intrusive in her books and for not pushing upon her readers “a dramatic sermon”. Clearly he approves of the lessons she does give: “The moral lessons also of this lady’s novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward, but spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story; they are not forced upon the reader, but he is left to collect them (though without any difficulty) for himself: hers is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life; and certainly no author

has ever conformed more closely to real life, as well in the incidents, as in the characters and descriptions. Her fables appear to us to be, in their own way, nearly faultless ... the story proceeds without the aid of extraordinary accidents; the events which take place are the necessary or natural consequences of what has preceded; and yet ... the final catastrophe is scarcely ever clearly foreseen from the beginning, and very often comes, upon the generality of readers at least, quite unexpected. We know not whether Miss Austen ever had access to the precepts of Aristotle; but there are few, if any, writers of fiction who have illustrated them more successfully.”

He contrasts Jane Austen favourably with her contemporary Maria Edgeworth who, he feels, uses strident didactic methods to get across her moral point.

Whately also compared Jane Austen’s skill in characterisation to Shakespeare’s and wrote perceptively on *Mansfield Park*. Of Fanny’s rejection of Henry Crawford, he said: “Fanny ... is armed against Mr Crawford by a stronger feeling than even her disapprobation; by a vehement attachment to Edmund. The

silence in which this passion is cherished – the slender hopes and enjoyments by which it is fed – the restlessness and jealousy with which it fills a mind naturally active, contented and unsuspecting – the manner in which it tinges every event and every reflection, are painted with a vividness and a detail of which we can scarcely conceive anyone but a female, and we should almost add, a female writing from recollection, capable.” *Mansfield Park* was his personal favourite among her books.

He finds much else to praise – Austen’s ability to create convincing fools (he singles out Mrs Bennet, Mr Rushworth and Miss Bates), the fidelity of her detail, the effective use of letters within her novels, her convincing heroines, and the truth of her descriptions. *Sense & Sensibility* is listed as his *least* favourite of her works, and he concludes by stating that perhaps *Persuasion* is her finest book. “In the humorous delineation of character it does not abound quite so much as some of the others, though it has great merit even on that score; but it has more of that tender and yet elevated kind of interest which is aimed at by the generality of novels, and in pursuit of which

they seldom fail of running into romantic extravagance: on the whole, it is one of the most elegant fictions of common life we ever remember to have met with.”

Perhaps Whately privately thought that Sir Walter Elliot could have done with reading the Whately primary school textbook on the subject of money. It is interesting to reflect on the words of one of the very first readers of *Persuasion* when we are, this year, celebrating the 200th anniversary of the publication of that same novel.

Richard Whately married in 1821 and he and his wife had five children; a monument to him can be found in the cathedral. Their only son in turn produced descendants. In 2009 the TV programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* focused on the actor Kevin Whately, best known as Sergeant Lewis in the wonderful *Inspector Morse* TV series. Lewis, in the novels and TV adaptations, is presented as somewhat uncultured in his tastes – while Morse quotes AE Housman and listens to Wagner, Lewis prefers to go and watch the football. However, it was revealed in *Who Do You Think You Are?* that Kevin Whately was the great-great grandson of Richard Whately, a man also closely associated with the city of Oxford but, most importantly, a man with the taste to appreciate Jane Austen’s novels.

As one of the first to write about her books with discrimination and high praise, as a distinguished clergyman who ranked Jane Austen “nearly faultless” as a writer, Whately was an important person in Jane Austen’s critical heritage. Inspector Morse, surely, would have been impressed by his sergeant’s illustrious literary connection. ✍️

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Far left, this monument to Archbishop Richard Whately can be found in the west aisle of the south transept of St Patrick’s Cathedral. It was sculpted by Sir Thomas Farrell (Susannah Fullerton). Left, Kevin Whately, the actor known for playing Sergeant Lewis in the television series *Inspector Morse*, is descended from Archbishop Richard Whately (ITV)

