

## The Review

# Shared humanity:

a Jane Austen bicentenary

### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

**Iain Bamforth**

86 Rue Kempf, 67000 Strasbourg, France.

**E-mail:** [iainbamforth@orange.fr](mailto:iainbamforth@orange.fr)

### Memories of Holland

From the Dutch of Hendrik Marsman

*Thinking of Holland  
I see broad rivers  
slowly chuntering  
through endless lowlands,  
rows of implausibly  
airy poplars  
standing like tall plumes  
against the horizon;  
and sunk in the unbounded  
vastness of space  
homesteads and boweries  
dotted across the land,  
copses, villages,  
couchant towers,  
churches and elm-trees,  
bound in one great unity.  
There the sky hangs low,  
and steadily the sun  
is smothered in a greyly  
iridescent smirr,  
and in every province  
the voice of water  
with its lapping disasters  
is feared and hearkened.*

This is my translation of the work which was voted by Dutch readers as their favourite poem of the century. Four years after publishing it, Hendrik Marsman drowned in the English Channel in 1940 on the way to Britain when his ship was torpedoed by a German submarine. The translation of *Herinnering aan Holland* was commissioned by the Written World Project and broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland in 2012.

**Iain Bamforth,**

GP, Independent Scholar, Freelance Public Health Consultant, Strasbourg, France.

For more details of the book please visit [www.carcenet.co.uk](http://www.carcenet.co.uk)

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp13X665332

The most important thing about 'Classics' is that they are shared. They are experiences we all have in common. Or at least things that we can refer to in common. As such they are links between us which form the very substance of our culture. And they do this, it seems to me, whether or not they are particularly great art. But when they *are* great art, and we recognise in the shared experience they afford truths about our own humanity, exquisitely expressed, that is something special indeed.

Three-quarters of a mile to the south west and almost within sight of our bedroom window is the room where Jane Austen wrote or completed all of her six novels. It was in that room, exactly 200 years ago this 28 January, that she took delivery of her own copy of the newly published *Pride and Prejudice*. And on the celebration day itself a family of our friends who had been involved in the preparation arrived there at 5 am to find the BBC already installed. The father is a trustee of the museum; the daughter was to play the contemporary piano for the broadcasts throughout the day; the mother had arranged the cake, with its facsimile of the title page, to be cut on the evening news. Albeit by proxy, we too felt involved.

Like many who went straight into medicine from a narrow education in science I came late to the classics. I could easily have never come at all. I grew up thinking that Jane Austen was one of those stuffy writers you were supposed to read but never did. It was that word 'supposed' that turned you off. Nothing could be more calculated to make you read something else. The urge to read for pleasure must surely come from inside, and that 'supposed' is not a good way to start.

For some reason I gradually did get involved. My closest encounter with our own legend down the road was a few years ago when I was allowed access to her personal collection of musical scores, three volumes of which are written in her hand, (that was how you got your music in those days: you borrowed it and copied it.) I had just been trying my own hand at writing music, as part of a year of music with the Open University, and I knew how impossible it seemed to be to avoid mistakes. But one of the wonders of those precious, densely-written pages, as I turned them with my white-gloved hands, was the total absence of corrections. Subsequently, with two friends, I performed

### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

**James Willis**

28 Borovere Lane, Alton, Hants, GU34 1PB, UK.

**E-mail:** [jarwillis@gmail.com](mailto:jarwillis@gmail.com)

a few of the songs there in the museum. One of the friends, a soprano, had been a patient, with the special bond of having been one of my 'mums'. The other friend accompanied on the box piano straight from the figured bass in (photocopies of) Jane Austen's handwritten manuscripts.

And so it goes on. I studied *Northanger Abbey*, the first of Jane's completed books, in another part of my Open University course. And with another friend, a historian, I devised an entertainment based on it for our little drama group.

And so it goes on. A wonderful and ever-growing enrichment to our lives.

Jane Austen's House Museum has averaged 35 000 visitors in recent years, from 136 different countries in the last two. That is the measure of the human bond that the sharing of great art can bring. And that is the measure of how deeply human experience is shared.

The RCGP is one of many organisations to have chosen the wonderful motto *Cum Scientia Caritas*. In recent decades the College, and this Journal, have been big on the science part. But the humanity, which is at least as big a part of medicine, and the very heart of general practice, has retreated into second place. Alec Logan, over many years, has made a huge contribution to redressing that imbalance with his gloriously eclectic *Back Pages* section of this journal. His best legacy, as he leaves us, would be for the College to reassert the centrality of the humanities, and the great shared heritage of art itself, in our unique, all-inclusive generalism.

**James Willis,**

GP (retired), Author.

<http://www.friendsinlowplaces.co.uk/>

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp13X665341