



Jane G. Austin-with-an-“i”

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What's in a name? In the case of American author, Jane G. Austin-with-an-“i,” confusion and obscurity!

The confusion is easily cleared, since it results from the coincidence of a name so similar to the celebrated earlier English author Jane Austen-with-an-“e.”

Jane Austen-with-an-“e” (1775-1817) lived and died in England. Her novels, which include such classics as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1815), deal with contemporary issues of class and gender in the lives of women of gentility in early 19th century England.

Jane G. Austin-with-an-“i” (1831-1894) lived and died in New England. Her best-received works were historical novels about her Plymouth Colony ancestors.

Born Mary Jane Goodwin in Worcester, Massachusetts, and educated in private schools in Boston, at the age of 19 she married Loring Henry Austin of Boston and Concord. The couple had four children: Lillian (1851), LeBaron (1853), Isabella (1854), who died in infancy, and Rose Standish (1860).

Austin turned to writing while her children were small. Her first book, *Fairy Dreams*, a rather stiff little fantasy for children, was published in 1859 and was followed shortly thereafter by several adventure novels. These early offerings were neither original in theme nor practiced in technique. Over the next 20 years, however, Austin continued to polish her skills with a series of light novels of high sentiment and implausible derring-do.

Around 1880, Austin began to find her own unique “voice,” turning to subjects and stories with which she was intimately acquainted, first to more realistic stories of New England and, finally, to historical novels about Plymouth Colony.

Austin had grown up with stories of the Pilgrims and, as an adult, is known to have spent summers in Plymouth. Her Pilgrim novels show a strong acquaintance with Plymouth's geography of both the 17th and 19th centuries.

Through her father, Isaac Goodwin, Austin was descended from *Mayflower* passengers Robert Warren, Myles Standish, John Alden and Priscilla Mullins. Through her mother, Eliza Hammatt, she was descended from *Mayflower* passengers John Howland and Elizabeth Tilley. It is perhaps fitting, however, that the hero of Austin's first historical novel was an ancestor shared by both her father and her mother – Francis LeBaron.

The actual recorded facts of Francis LeBaron's life are scanty indeed. As told by James Thacher in his 1832 *History of the Town of Plymouth*

A French privateer, fitted out at Bordeaux, cruising on the American coast, was wrecked in Buzzard's Bay. The crew were carried prisoners to Boston; the [ship's] surgeon, Dr. Francis LeBaron, came to Plymouth, and having performed a surgical operation, and the town being at the time destitute of a physician, the selectmen petitioned the executive, Lieut. Governor Stoughton, for his liberation, that he might settle in this town. This was granted, and he married Mary Wilder, and practiced physic here during his life, but died in 1704, at the early age of 36 years...

Francis and Mary LeBaron had three sons: James born in 1696, Lazarus in 1698 and Francis in 1701.

Building on these bare bones, Austin used her penchant for romantic and implausible adventure to weave a spellbinding (and highly fictional!) story of love and honor and secret identity in the Old Colony. *A Nameless Nobleman*, published in 1881, was an instant success, running through at least 37 editions.

Nobleman opens with a handsome young French baron, disappointed in love, who forsakes his native land and renounces his ancestral estates and titles. The scene then turns to 17th century Massachusetts and the simple (but noble) New England maiden Molly Wilder, tending the shipwrecked and injured Frenchman (now a doctor) who has found his way to her father's farm. *Francois le baron* becomes Francis LeBaron, love and marriage follow (after the inevitable - and fictional - complications), and Dr. LeBaron becomes an honored member of the community, a true American with no regard for noble lineage as demonstrated by his continued refusal to divulge his title, and the father of a singular upstanding son named Lazarus. In Austin's wildly imaginative story, further perils ensue. French temptresses of noble birth ply both father and son with their charms; Francis is kidnapped (by the pirate Blackbeard, no less!) but eventually finds his way home to truehearted Mary and a long, happy life.

The book bears the true mark of a creative talent. Austin's characters are so sympathetic and her details so vivid that a casual reader may forget that *Nobleman* is fiction. The overly elaborate plot, however, stands in the way of complete immersion in the tale. A review of the historical facts shows the enormous liberties that Austin took in advancing the drama of her story line (altering not only the number of LeBaron's sons but even the text of his tombstone, which still stands on Plymouth's Burial Hill). Claims of unwritten family tradition are sometimes made on Austin's behalf. It is worth noting, however, that Austin's brother John Goodwin wrote a significantly different account of Francis LeBaron.

By the time her next Pilgrim book was published in 1889, Austin had simplified her approach, promising readers that "they shall not be misled as to facts, though these be strung upon a slender thread of romance, and I will beg them to ground themselves well upon the solid Plymouth Rock." In *Standish of Standish*, she allowed the inherent drama of the story to shine through. The pivotal and documented facts of the early years of Plymouth Colony were faithfully represented, embroidered with imaginative characterizations and relationships, amid vivid descriptions of daily life and events. Many details and events are not in the historical record - but none are contradicted by it. Austin tied the story strongly to the contemporary town of Plymouth and, in a few instances, even added footnotes (following a particularly detailed and accurate description of Myles Standish's sword, she wrote "This sword may still be seen in Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Massachusetts").

Standish of Standish was both well loved and influential. Austin's detailed vision of the domestic arrangements that might have surrounded the famous harvest feast of 1621, the "First Thanksgiving" - a golden afternoon, the long outdoor table laden with food, its centerpiece a turkey stuffed with beechnuts - was the first in popular literature. It became the inspiration for several artists and painters, whose works then created the visual ideal that we all still hold in our imagination.

Austin's next two books repeated this pattern. In 1890, she wrote *Dr. LeBaron & His Daughters* (Lazarus LeBaron, one of the three sons of Francis LeBaron, had 14 children - 7 of whom were girls). Unfortunately, the story is overambitious in scope, introducing dozens of characters and the happenings of an event-filled 50 years (including the Revolutionary War). Without a true focus, none of the actual historical residents of Plymouth spring to life. The most memorable character in the book is totally fictional - Mother Crewe, an old woman who, driven into madness, curses the families of those who have harmed her daughter.

Austin then returned to the Pilgrims with *Betty Alden: the first-born daughter of the Pilgrims* (1891). Even though *Betty Alden* also introduced a large number of names and events, it succeeds because a limited number of well-drawn characters - first-generation Priscilla and John Alden and Myles and Barbara Standish, and second-generation Elizabeth Alden and Lora Standish - provide focus throughout the narrative.

Austin's final book, *David Alden's daughter and other stories of Colonial times* (1892), was a compilation of short stories previously printed in various magazines. In the preface, Austin noted that, when some of the stories were written, "the author was in the first flush of delight and surprise at discovering the wealth of romance imbedded in that 'Forefathers Rock' which to many observers still appears a mere mass of granite, stern, cold, and sad" and admitted to a "certain fermentation of fancy," telling this story on herself:

...the author recalls with rather rueful mirth the reproof received from an aged relative who, after vainly inquiring for 'the documents in the case' of William Bradford, remarked: - 'You have no right to defraud people by pretending to have what you have not.'

Jane G. Austin's books are little known today (and a search on ebay will demonstrate the continuing confusion between our Jane G. Austin-with-an-"i" and the more famous English author of the similar name, Jane Austen-with-an-"e"). The best of Austin's books, however - *A Nameless Nobleman* (taken with a large grain of salt), *Standish of Standish* and *Betty*

Alden – are still well worth reading. The on-line used and rare book service “abebooks” (dogbert.abebooks.com) was recently offering over 100 copies of Jane G. Austin’s Pilgrim books, ranging in price between \$5 for a copy of *Standish of Standish* in less-than-perfect condition to \$1968.75 for Clarence Darrow’s inscribed copy of *Betty Alden*.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For additional biographical information, consult the excellent Website on Jane G. Austin by Megan Fox at <http://web.simmons.edu/~fox/jga.html>

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