

## Jane Austen First Editions: Aves and the Sparrow

This year, 2018, marks the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Jane Austen's final completed novel, *Persuasion*.

Janeites will of course know that, although its four volumes carry an imprint date of 1818, *Northanger Abbey: and Persuasion. By the Author of "Pride and Prejudice," "Mansfield Park," &c.* actually appeared in print in 1817, and very probably on 20 December 1817.<sup>1</sup> New College Library is fortunate to hold a copy of this first edition, along with first editions of both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*—first editions then of four of Austen's six completed novels.<sup>2</sup> This very good fortune the Library owes to two New College men and Old Wykehamists, born thirteen years apart: one still very renowned today, especially in Oxford circles; the other did not live long enough ever to be so. Both also have in common remarkable soldierings in the Second World War.

Writing *Persuasion* took Jane Austen almost exactly a year; she began it on 8 August 1815, completing it on 6 August the following year.<sup>3</sup> Following her death in July 1817, it was published posthumously as volumes three and four of a four-volume set, priced at twenty-four shillings a set, in a print-run of 1,750 copies, which was quite a large one by the standards of most early nineteenth-century British novels. Her *Northanger Abbey*—the first printing of that novel as well—occupied volumes one and two of the set. Austen, though, might well have hoped with reasonable justification for *Northanger Abbey* to have been published as *Susan* (its prototype version) some fifteen years earlier, in 1803. Although its initial composition has been tentatively dated to as early as 1794,<sup>4</sup> most likely 'Susan' was penned during 1798 and 1799, as Austen's sister, Cassandra, recalls. In the spring of 1803, the copyright of the manuscript 'Susan', a two-volume novel, was sold to the London publishers, Crosby and Co., who in 1793 had published William Godwin's *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*. The gentleman transacting the sale was William Seymour, a lawyer acquaintance acting on behalf of Henry Austen, Jane Austen's brother. The sum received was a modest £10. Not until 1809 was *Susan. A Novel. In Two Volumes* published anonymously.<sup>5</sup> But this was not Austen's 'Susan', and its London publisher was John Booth, not Benjamin Crosby. Publication of this other *Susan* (a different novel entirely) may have prompted Austen under a pseudonym<sup>6</sup> to write vexedly on 5 April 1809

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<sup>1</sup> David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen*, rev. edn (Winchester, 1997), p. 84, cites various newspaper advertisements of 1817 which locate 20 December 1817 as the actual date of publication.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey: and Persuasion*, 4 vols (London, 1818), New College Library, Oxford, BT3.2.4,5,6,7; Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility: A Novel*, 3 vols (London, 1811), New College Library, Oxford, NB.168.21,22,23; Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park: A Novel*, 3 vols (London, 1814), New College Library, Oxford, BT3.2.1,2,3.

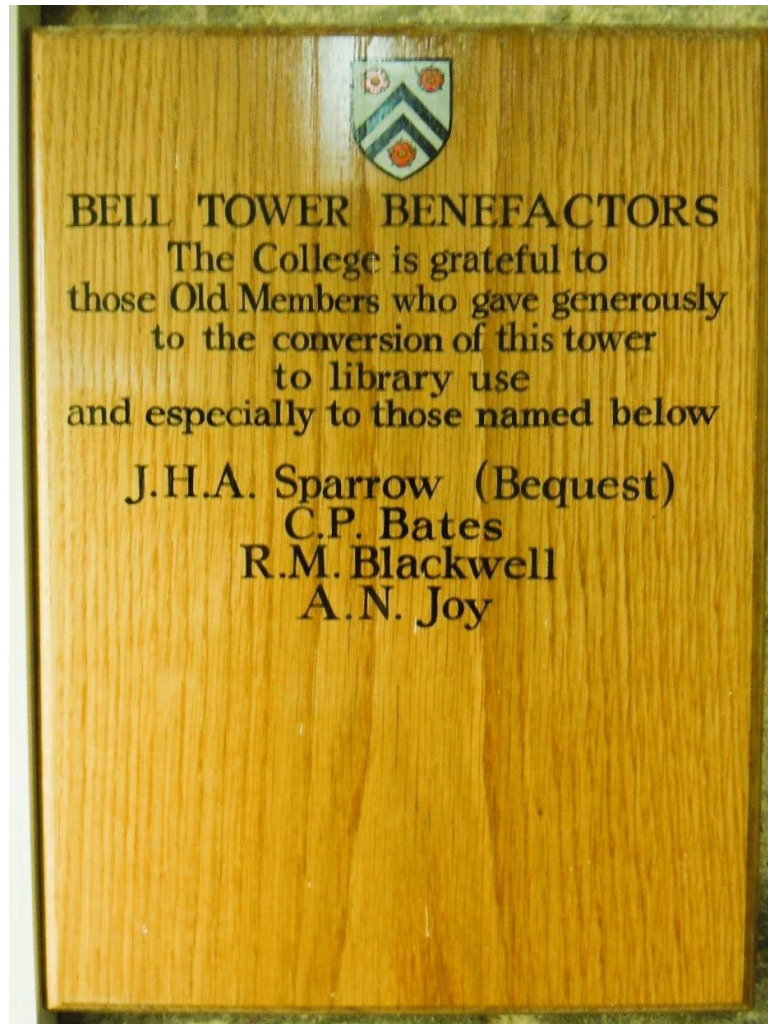
<sup>3</sup> Gilson, *Bibliography*, pp. 83–4.

<sup>4</sup> This proposition is first set out in C. S. Emden, 'Northanger Abbey Re-Dated?', *Notes and Queries* 195 (19) (1950), 407–10, and later delineated in C. S. Emden, 'The Composition of Northanger Abbey', *The Review of English Studies* 19 (75) (1968), 279–87.

<sup>5</sup> The copy held by the Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 823 Su81, is the one examined for description in Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling with Christopher Skelton-Foord and Karin Wünsche, *The English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles: Volume II: 1800–1829* (Oxford, 2000), p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Austen wrote to B. Crosby and Co. under the pseudonym M<sup>rs</sup> Ashton Dennis, enabling her pointedly and provocatively to sign her letter with the initials 'MAD'. However, another copy of this letter in Austen's own hand, which she had sent to Crosby, now held by the British Library (Add. MSS 41253B, fol. 12) has been revealed to be a palimpsest, a revised inked version over her pencilled draft of the letter; and the pencilled draft she had signed, 'J. Austen'. Evidently, by revising her signature to that of Mrs Ashton Dennis's, Austen had thought better of revealing her authorship of 'Susan' at this point in time. See Arthur M. Axelrad, "'Of which I avow myself the Authoress . . . J. Austen": The Jane Austen-Richard Crosby Correspondence', *Persuasions* 16 (1994), 36–8 <<https://jasna.org/persuasions/printed/number16/axelrad.pdf>> (Accessed: 1 April 2018).

to her would-be publishers, Crosby and Co. about the hitherto non-appearance in print of her 'Susan'.<sup>7</sup> It may also have prompted her to rename her novel 'Catherine', which name indeed finally stuck as her heroine's name for *Northanger Abbey*. Henry Austen bought back in 1816 from Crosby the manuscript and copyright of 'Susan' for the sum 'Susan' had originally been sold for. *Northanger Abbey* was eventually published (with *Persuasion*) with an 1818 imprint—and by Lord Byron's publisher, John Murray, located in fashionable Mayfair, a publisher far and away more prestigious than Crosby.



A plaque in New College's Bell Tower, where John Sparrow's first edition copy of *Northanger Abbey: and Persuasion* is now held, recording his generous bequest

New College's first edition copy of *Northanger Abbey: and Persuasion* was formerly owned by John Hanbury Angus Sparrow (1906–1992).<sup>8</sup> John Sparrow was a scholar of both Winchester College and New College, who was elected in November 1929 to a prize fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford and awarded an Eldon Law Scholarship. He would

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Mandal, 'Making Austen Mad: Benjamin Crosby and the Non-Publication of *Susan*', *The Review of English Studies* 57 (231) (2006), 507–25.

<sup>8</sup> John Hanbury Angus Sparrow is the subject of two full-length biographies: an official one by John Lowe (a New College man), *The Warden: A Portrait of John Sparrow* (London, 1998), and another very recent one by Peter Raina, *John Sparrow: Warden of All Souls College, Oxford: "I loathe all common things"* (Oxford, 2017). For an excellent short account of Sparrow's life, see also: Robin Briggs, 'Sparrow, John Hanbury Angus (1906–1992), college head', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (8 October 2009) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/51324>> (Accessed: 15 March 2018).

go on to be elected Warden of All Souls on 1 March 1952 at the age of 45, retiring from the position at the end of Trinity term 1977, aged 70. In 1956, he was made an honorary fellow of New College. Prodigious Latinist and bibliophile (he was President of the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles), John Sparrow was a phenomenal and immensely cognizant life-long collector of books, who loved libraries. Nicolas Barker describes him as ‘one of the great collectors of our time, a generous friend to libraries and other book-collectors, as rare as any of his books’, and he recalls Sparrow’s assessment of All Souls’s Codrington Library as the country’s most beautiful room constructed to hold books.<sup>9</sup> Sparrow might well have become Bodley’s Librarian in 1945, had he let his name be put forward; certainly, in 1931 he had been offered a sub-librarianship at the Bodleian Library by its then Librarian, Dr Edmund Craster, which he declined.<sup>10</sup> All four institutions, Winchester, New College, the Bodleian, and All Souls were to benefit from Sparrow’s will.<sup>11</sup>

No doubt he liked *Persuasion* (and *Bleak House*). In a sermon he preached on ‘The Sin of Pride’ on 23 November 1975 in the University Church at Oxford, Sparrow references *Persuasion*’s Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall in the county of Somerset, alongside Charles Dickens’s Sir Leicester Dedlock of *Bleak House*, to illustrate the difference between vanity, Sir Walter’s vice, and pride, Sir Leicester’s.<sup>12</sup> Both characters he describes as old friends. He also wrote about *Northanger Abbey*. Though he acknowledges the dangers inherent in trying to ‘identify the creations of a novelist with persons who actually existed’,<sup>13</sup> in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1954, Sparrow constructs an argument that another Winchester scholar and New College scholar and fellow, the humourist and cleric, the Reverend Sydney Smith (1771–1845) might have served as the model for Austen’s hero of *Northanger Abbey*, the Reverend Henry Tilney. (That he was disposed to discussing parallels between real people and characters in novels is most apparent and most well-known from one of his Clark Lectures of 1965 at Trinity College, Cambridge. Sparrow considers how James Forth, Professor of Etruscan in Oxbridge University from Rhoda Broughton’s novel, *Belinda* (1883), Roger Wendover, Squire of Murewell in Mrs Humphry Ward’s *Robert Elsmere* (1888), and most notably the Reverend Edward Casaubon of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72) each resembles the Reverend Mark Pattison (1813–1884), Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, the subject of Sparrow’s Clark Lectures.<sup>14</sup> Another New College fellow, Professor Richard Ellmann (among other literary critics) would later take issue with Sparrow’s Pattison-Casaubon construction, which was played out ping-pong style across the pages of the *TLS* over several months of 1973.)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Barker, ‘John Sparrow (1906–1992)’, [preface to]: Christie’s, *Printed Books from the Celebrated Library of the late John Sparrow, O.B.E., Warden of All Souls College, Oxford: Wednesday, 21 October 1992 at 10.30 a.m. precisely* [Catalogue of sale no. 4852 held by Christie’s, London] (London, 1992), pp. 9, 7, Durham University Library (Palace Green Library), PG 018.2 PRI.

<sup>10</sup> Lowe, *Warden*, pp. 117–18, 68–70.

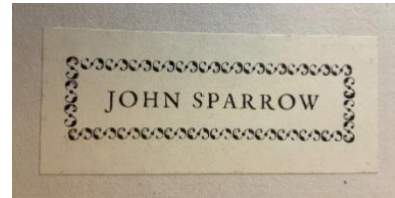
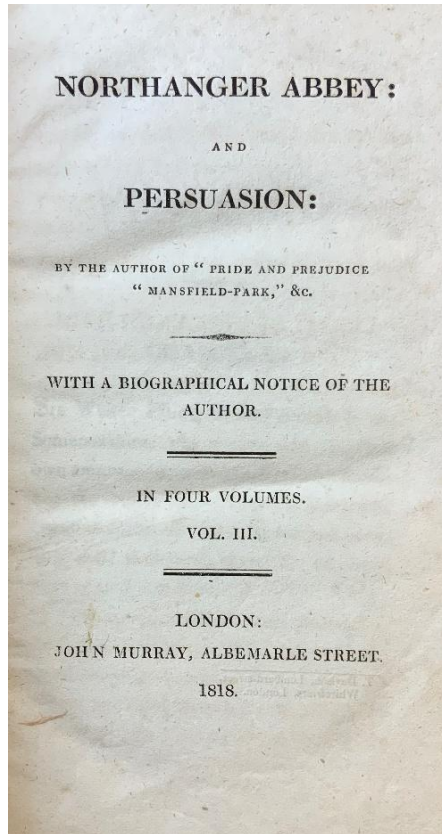
<sup>11</sup> In addition to the Codrington’s now holding John Sparrow’s papers and his magnificent 2,000-book collection of Renaissance Latin verse, the librarians at each of the Codrington, New College, and Winchester also selected twenty-five books from Sparrow’s collection to receive as bequests, and the Bodleian could select fifty. See *ibid.*, p. 240 for brief details of other bequests John Sparrow made.

<sup>12</sup> John Sparrow, ‘The Sin of Pride’, *Words on the Air* (London, 1981), pp. 139–40.

<sup>13</sup> John Sparrow, ‘Jane Austen and Sydney Smith’, *The Times Literary Supplement* 2735 (2 July 1954), 429.

<sup>14</sup> John Sparrow, ‘Pattison and the Novelists’, *Mark Pattison and the Idea of a University* (London, 1967), pp. 1–30.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ellmann, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands: Some Biographical Speculations’, *The Times Literary Supplement* 3702 (16 February 1973), p. 165; John Sparrow, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands’, *TLS* 3706 (16 March 1973), 296; Richard Ellmann, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands’, *TLS* 3708 (30 March 1973), p. 352; John Sparrow, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands’, *TLS* 3713 (4 May 1973), 501; John Sparrow, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands’, *TLS* 3719 (15 June 1973), 692; Richard Ellmann, ‘Dorothea’s Husbands’, *TLS* 3720 (22 June 1973), p. 720. Colin Kidd has recently written that ‘[t]he desire to find an original of Mr Casaubon has turned into one of the more enjoyable, if recherché, snark-hunts in modern literary scholarship’, *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain’s Wars of Mythography*,



John Sparrow's bookplate

Title page of John Sparrow's copy of *Persuasion*  
New College Library, Oxford, BT3.2.6

Novels mattered to John Sparrow, just as they did to *Northanger Abbey*'s Henry Tilney. In Austen's novel, Tilney refutes the common assumption that men do not read fiction, which thereby characterizes him as a positive foil to the boorish James Thorpe. With the sole exception of Matthew Lewis's violent shocker, *The Monk* (1796), Thorpe derides all novels (particularly Fanny Burney's) published since Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* had appeared in 1749.<sup>16</sup> Tilney's defence of popular fiction chimes accord with the narrator's own viewpoint that novels are unfairly dismissed as 'trash', and that contemporary novelists therefore have been made 'an injured body' by their reviewers.<sup>17</sup> The discussion between the heroine, Catherine Morland and her eventual husband, Tilney permits Austen herself to take issue with the type of gender and genre stereotyping which minimized both Austen's earnings and her critical reputation throughout her lifetime:

[C.M.] "But you never read novels, I dare say?"  
[H.T.] "Why not?"  
"Because they are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books."  
"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all of Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure." [...]

1700–1870 (Cambridge, 2016), p. 2. For Kidd's discussion of the Casaubon-Pattison formulation, see *ibid.*, pp. 15–20.

<sup>16</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, vol. 1, pp. 93–5.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 61–2. Jane Austen and her family were also 'great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so', as she writes in a letter (The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, MA 977.3) of 18 December 1798 to her sister, Cassandra Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deidre Le Faye, 4th edn (Oxford, 2011), p. 27.



“I am very glad to hear it indeed, and now I shall never be ashamed of liking Udolpho myself. But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly.”

“It is *amazingly*; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do – for they read nearly as many as women. I myself have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas.”<sup>18</sup>

A Christie’s 1992 auction sale catalogue<sup>19</sup> of books from John Sparrow’s ‘celebrated’ library, following Sparrow’s death earlier that year, records his owning a second edition copy of *Mansfield Park* (one of 750 copies printed), which was published in February 1816 by John Murray, priced eighteen shillings for the three-decker. (Sales were slow and poor of this second edition, which meant it had to be remaindered. As Austen retained the copyright of her novel, publishing at her own expense on a commission basis—of 10%—to Murray, she initially bore a financial loss. 498 copies were unpurchased even by January 1820, only to be sold off by further dropping the price to just two shillings and sixpence a copy.)<sup>20</sup> The Christie’s sale catalogue also lists significant first edition copies of novels Sparrow had owned, including Richard Graves’s *The Spiritual Quixote: or, The Summer’s Ramble of Mr. Geoffry Wildgoose* (1773) and the same author’s *Columella; or, The Distressed Anchorite* (1779), Fanny Burney’s *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), John Agg’s *The Pavilion; or, A Month in Brighton* (1817), James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and Walter Scott’s *Woodstock; or, The Cavalier* (1826). Several works by Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762–1837), a distant relative of Austen’s by marriage, make up lot 81 in the catalogue.<sup>21</sup> It is quite probable that the peerage-fixated Sir Egerton Brydges served as a model for Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*.<sup>22</sup> Egerton Brydges was the younger brother of Austen’s mentor, great friend, and close neighbour, Anne Lefroy (1749–1804), known as ‘Madam Lefroy’. Austenian provenance clearly must have mattered to Sparrow. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen references not only Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) but also Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797),<sup>23</sup> and we know that John Sparrow owned a copy of *The Italian* bearing the ownership signature of Anne Lefroy. The book-collector and bibliographer, Geoffrey Keynes notes this, with a supposition that Austen, therefore, had read *The Italian* in this very copy that belonged to said Anne Lefroy.<sup>24</sup>

New College’s first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was also owned by John Sparrow, and bequeathed to the Library.<sup>25</sup> This was the first of Austen’s novels to be printed. It was published in three volumes anonymously—written ‘By a Lady’—around 30 October 1811, in a print run of possibly 750 or 1,000 copies, priced fifteen shillings a set.<sup>26</sup> It was her

<sup>18</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, vol. 1, pp. 249–52.

<sup>19</sup> Christie’s, *Printed Books*.

<sup>20</sup> Gilson, *Bibliography*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>21</sup> However, in a will he drafted in June 1941 (Wadham College Archive, Oxford, Maurice Bowra Papers, WA 210/11, cited in Raina, *Sparrow*, p. 146), Sparrow wrote he was leaving ‘all books and MSS. by or forming part of my collection of the works of the following writers: T. J. Mathias, Sir Egerton Brydges, Archdeacon Wrangham, Capel Lofft’ to the book-collector, bibliographer, and novelist Michael Sadleir (1888–1957), who would however predecease Sparrow.

<sup>22</sup> See Jocelyn Harris, *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression: Jane Austen’s Persuasion* (Newark, Delaware, 2007), p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, vol. 1, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Keynes, *Jane Austen: A Bibliography* (London, 1929), p. xxiv.

<sup>25</sup> Once again, in his will of June 1941 (Wadham College Archive, Oxford, Maurice Bowra Papers, WA 210/11, cited in Raina, *Sparrow*, p. 145), Sparrow wrote he was leaving ‘my copies of the first edition of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and of the French translation thereof’ to the Jane Austen scholar, R. W. Chapman (1881–1960), who also would predecease Sparrow. (Dorothy D. Forster’s book label is also on the inside cover of volume 1 of New College Library’s copy, NB.168.21.)

<sup>26</sup> Gilson, *Bibliography*, p. 8.

baby, the very first of her novels to appear in print, and it occupied a special place in her affections.<sup>27</sup> By 1811, Austen had already experienced disappointment at the hands of two publishers. Benjamin Crosby had so far failed to publish ‘Susan’. A previous attempt with a different publisher, Cadell and Davies in the Strand—one of the leading publishers of the period, who published Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Smith (so perhaps an over-ambitious choice for an unknown novelist)—was an abject failure. In a letter dated 1 November 1797, which survives in St John’s College Library, Oxford, the Reverend George Austen, Jane’s father had offered ‘a Manuscript Novel, comprised in three Vols. about the length of Miss Burney’s *Evelina*’<sup>28</sup> to Thomas Cadell. This was the manuscript of Jane Austen’s ‘First Impressions’, an earlier version, very probably, of what became *Pride and Prejudice*. *First Impressions* would appear in print in 1801 as a *four*-volume novel. But, as with ‘Susan’, it was a different ‘First Impressions’ that came out, this one written by Margaret Holford and published by William Lane’s popular Minerva Press.<sup>29</sup> Austen’s ‘First Impressions’ had been summarily ‘declined by Return of Post’, sight unseen by Cadell, as the words added to the top of George Austen’s letter record. This had been an inauspicious start to Jane Austen’s writing career.

The publisher and bookseller, Thomas Egerton was chosen to publish *Sense and Sensibility*, which was ‘Printed for the Author’, that is, published on a commission basis with Austen retaining her copyright. Egerton operated his ‘Military Library’ business in Whitehall, which focused on producing military and political publications, and he may also have run a circulating library. Jane Austen’s brother, Henry acted for her; Henry had been in the Oxfordshire Regiment of Militia from 1793 till 1801, which suggests a connection with Egerton and may partially account for the selection of Egerton as publisher. When she wrote to Cassandra on 25 April 1811, Jane Austen was correcting proofs of *Sense and Sensibility* and wishing the printing process were speedier:

I have scarcely a hope of its being out in June.—Henry does not neglect it; he *has* hurried the Printer, & says he will see him again today.<sup>30</sup>

The printer was Charles Rowarth, who would in time be responsible for printing sixteen of the twenty-seven volumes of Austen’s novels which appeared prior to January 1818. Kathryn Sutherland further suggests the selection of Thomas Egerton as publisher may have been due to Charles Rowarth’s being a mutual acquaintance of the now-banker Henry Austen—Rowarth did printing jobs for Henry’s bank—and of Thomas Egerton—Rowarth printed his military publications.<sup>31</sup> The first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* entirely sold out in less than two years, as Austen’s letter of 3–6 July 1813 to her naval captain brother, Francis Austen records:

<sup>27</sup> In her letter (British Library Add. MS 36525, ff. 7–8) dated 25 April 1811 to sister Cassandra, written while Jane Austen was seeing *Sense and Sensibility* through the press, Austen wrote: ‘I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child’, *Letters*, ed. Le Faye, p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Letter dated 1 November 1797 from George Austen to Thomas Cadell, St John’s College Library, Oxford, MS 279 <<https://editions.mml.ox.ac.uk/editions/austen-letters/>> (Accessed: 1 April 2018). (Both George and Henry Austen studied at St John’s.) The first of Fanny Burney’s four novels, *Evelina, or, A Young Lady’s Entrance into the World*, 3 vols (London, 1778) was hugely popular, a publishing sensation of its day, which quickly went through numerous editions.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Holford, *First Impressions; or, The Portrait*, 4 vols (London, 1801), listed in Garside et al., *English Novel*, pp. 135–6.

<sup>30</sup> British Library Add. MS 36525, ff. 7–8: *Letters*, ed. Le Faye, p. 190.

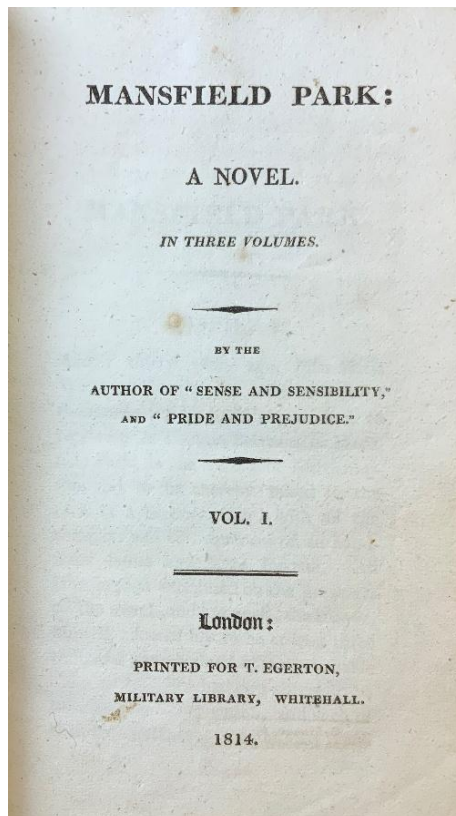
<sup>31</sup> Kathryn Sutherland, ‘Jane Austen’s Dealings with John Murray and his Firm’, *The Review of English Studies* 64 (263) (2012), 107.

You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S.&S. is sold & that it has brought me £140—besides the Copyright, if that sh<sup>d</sup> ever be of any value.—I have now therefore written myself into £250.—which only makes me long for more.—I have something in hand—which I hope on the credit of P.&P. will sell well, tho' not half so entertaining.<sup>32</sup>

Almost exactly two years to the day of *Sense and Sensibility*'s first appearing, Egerton published a second edition.<sup>33</sup>

*Mansfield Park*, in Austen's own assessment 'not half so entertaining' as *Pride and Prejudice*, was the work that she had in hand in July 1813. Its first edition was published by Thomas Egerton, again on a commission basis (its second edition by John Murray). It appeared, most likely on 9 May 1814,<sup>34</sup> in three-decker sets priced eighteen shillings a set, in a print run of probably 1,250 copies, which had sold out by 18 November 1814.<sup>35</sup>

One of those first edition copies, now in New College Library, was bequeathed to the College by one Nigel Aves Watson (1919–1942). Its companion piece (so to speak) in the Library is a copy owned by John Sparrow of an 1806 edition of Mrs Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* (1798), the play whose performance is central to the plot of *Mansfield Park*.<sup>36</sup>



Title page of Nigel Watson's copy of *Mansfield Park*  
New College Library, Oxford, BT3.2.1

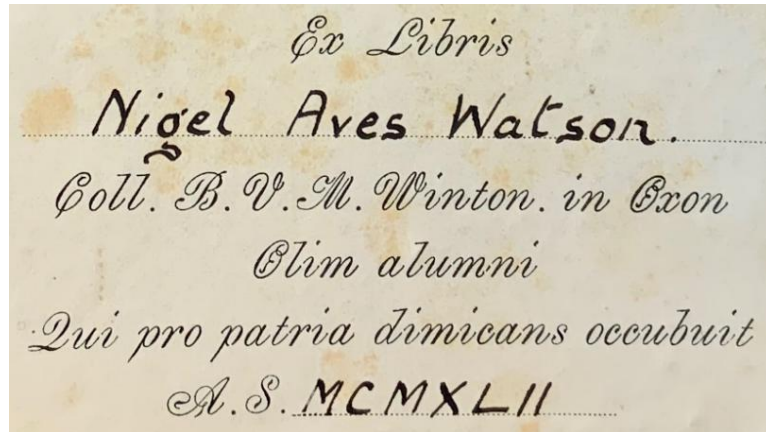
<sup>32</sup> British Library Add. MS 42180, ff. 9–10: *Letters*, ed. Le Faye, p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> The second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* appeared on or around 29 October 1813: see Gilson, *Bibliography*, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> In a letter (Kent History and Library Centre, U951/C112/1) dated 18 November 1814 to her niece, Fanny Knight, Jane Austen wrote: 'You will be glad to hear that the first Edit: of M.P. is all sold.—Your Uncle Henry is rather wanting me to come to Town, to settle about a 2<sup>d</sup> Edit:': *Letters*, ed. Le Faye, p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, *Lovers' Vows; a Play, in Five Acts; altered from the German of Kotzebue* (London, 1806), New College Library, Oxford, RS3904(1).



Ex libris of Nigel Aves Watson

Just twenty-two years old when he died, Watson was one of the 2,370<sup>37</sup> Old Wykehamists who served in the Second World War, one of the 401 mentioned in despatches<sup>38</sup>—and one of the 269 who gave their lives. A 1937 house photograph of him shows him from his days at Winchester College.<sup>39</sup>



House photograph of Nigel Aves Watson at Winchester College in 1937  
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

A short biography of Watson can also be found in the *Wykehamist War Service Record and Roll of Honour*, which was published in 1947 by P. and G. Wells of 11 College Street in Winchester (situated next-door-but-one to the house at 8 College Street where Jane Austen had died 130 years earlier). From this vivid portrait we learn specifically that he loved birds, as befits his middle name. The recollection speaks to a nature-loving, principled, courageous young man, and it warrants transcribing in full:

<sup>37</sup> These numbers of men are given in E.R. Wilson and Malcolm Robertson, 'Editor's Note', to *Wykehamist War Service Record and Roll of Honour* (Winchester, 1947), [unnumbered preliminary page], New College Library, Oxford, OX1/WYK.

<sup>38</sup> The *Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, the 22nd of June, 1943* 36065 (24 June 1943), 2854 records 'Lt. N. A. Watson (170340). (Killed in action.)' as one of those mentioned in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in the Middle East, 1 May to 22 October 1942.

<sup>39</sup> Winchester College, *Watson, Nigel Aves: Winchester College at War* <[https://www.winchestercollegeatwar.com/RollofHonour.aspx?RecID=306&TableName=ta\\_wwiifactfile&BrowseID=2](https://www.winchestercollegeatwar.com/RollofHonour.aspx?RecID=306&TableName=ta_wwiifactfile&BrowseID=2)> (Accessed: 15 March 2018).



NIGEL AVES WATSON (C [i.e. Du Boulay's House, informally known as Cook's], 1933–38), born December 8, 1919, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Richmond Watson, of Chalfont St. Giles, came to Winchester from Orley Farm. Small of stature, always a little suffering in health, with no aptitude for games, he did not seem marked out for fame at School. But he had a passionate love for Nature, birds, trees and flowers, which he communicated irresistibly to those around him. His contemporaries will not easily forget the House bicycle rides after wild flowers; or May dawns on Cheesefoot Head listening to birds. He was a skilled photographer, especially of Nature subjects; a writer of verse, and a plucky runner across country. Leaving Winchester a School prefect in April 1939, he went for three months to Lausanne; then to New College.

In September 1939 he immediately registered, but was not accepted till 1940, meanwhile taking a War Degree. After serving in the ranks, he received a commission in January 1941 in the 10th Royal Hussars. In spite of his love of peaceful pursuits, "he took to soldiering like a duck to water," writes his Squadron-Leader in England. "The Colonel marked him down as they type we could trust to do the right thing at the right time." He left for Libya in September 1941; fought Rommel in January 1942 and again after bouts of illness at Alamein. Offered a Staff job because of his recurring dysentery, he refused to leave his beloved tanks, and was Killed in Action on November 3, 1942. His Colonel wrote: "Nigel had twice previously been recommended by me for a decoration. He certainly deserved one and had he lived would have got one. He was a fine and well-loved officer." He was Mentioned in Despatches in June 1943 for his services in the Middle East, May – October 1942. His brother C. I. [i.e. Colin Irving Watson] was also in (C.)<sup>40</sup>

It is poignant to note that when he was a member of Winchester College's debating society, the seventeen-year-old Nigel Watson on 23 February 1937 gave a speech 'clearly and unhesitatingly delivered' to oppose the Motion of the debate, "'That this House is of the opinion that if you desire peace you should prepare for war'". Winchester College's magazine, *The Wykehamist* records Watson's criticism of how government attitudes might percolate down

to the public who acquire a war mentality: they like the idea of war without ever knowing what war is really like. One of the greatest of modern crimes is that children are not educated to realise the horror of war.<sup>41</sup>

The Motion was, however, carried. But a year later on 3 February 1938 at the same school debating society, Nigel once again spoke in opposition to a Motion, which this time was "'That this House would welcome the State prohibition of gambling'". On this occasion his 'interesting and witty' speech helped ensure the Motion was very decisively defeated.<sup>42</sup> Other issues of *The Wykehamist* bear witness to his photography skills, which are given special mention at the annual exhibition of the school's photographic society,<sup>43</sup> and, at greater length, to his love and knowledge of ornithology. He was a member of Winchester College's natural history society, lecturing to the society on 24 October 1937 on

<sup>40</sup> Wilson and Robertson, *Wykehamist*, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> *The Wykehamist* 826 (9 March 1937), 342. I am pleased to record my considerable gratitude to Suzanne Foster, Winchester College Archivist for locating and supplying me with copies of relevant materials from Winchester College's magazine and from the Winchester College Archive.

<sup>42</sup> *The Wykehamist* 839 (1 March 1938), 506–7.

<sup>43</sup> *The Wykehamist* 832 (26 July 1937), 416–17.

“Unresolved Bird Problems”. His passion and expertise are apparent as he highlights the unexplained disappearance of bird species from parts of Hampshire, provides an account of a blackcock tournament (a display among cock birds), and discusses bird egg colouration. The magazine records the natural history society’s gratitude to Nigel and comments how his lecture ‘should stimulate men to make inquiries into bird life’.<sup>44</sup>

Nigel Aves Watson’s name appears in the very fine memorial to New College men who gave their lives in the Second World War, located in the Cloisters of New College. He was one of twenty-five New College men who lost their lives in 1942 and his name is given at the bottom of the memorial’s second column listing:



Second World War memorial [detail]  
Cloisters, New College, Oxford



Second World War memorial  
Cloisters, New College, Oxford

<sup>44</sup> *The Wykehamist* 835 (20 November 1937), 463.

Alongside that 1947 Winchester biography of Watson, a man of action on the battlefield, we could set the verse epitaph John Sparrow composed for himself, wittily and self-deprecatingly, which records a failing of his, procrastination:

Here, with his talents in a napkin hid,  
Lies one who much designed, and nothing did:  
Postponing and deferring, day by day  
He quite procrastinated life away,  
And when at length the summons came to die  
With his last breath put off—mortality.<sup>45</sup>

Sparrow's wit was renowned. His close colleague at All Souls, Edward Hussey would deliver John Sparrow's funeral address on 29 January 1992 at the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Iffley, where Hussey drew attention to

what many of us, perhaps, will think of first and last will be: his kindness and his jokes. . . . His kindness, when offered, was offered unconditionally, without reserve or differentiation. . . . As for his jokes: his wit was verbal, fed by his life-long fascination with the forms and meaning of words.<sup>46</sup>

However, on a serious-minded note, both these New College men most decidedly distinguished themselves militarily. Lieutenant Watson of the Tenth Royal Hussars, Royal Armoured Corps was killed in action during the Second Battle of Alamein, whose Allied victory was absolutely pivotal to the Second World War's North Africa Campaign. He is buried in the El Alamein War Cemetery in El Alamein, Matruh, Egypt; his tombstone bears the noble epitaph, 'sans peur et sans reproche'.<sup>47</sup> Watson was killed, indeed, the day before General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma (1891–1948), commander of the Deutsches Afrika Korps was captured by Captain Grant Allen Singer (1915–1942), captain of Watson's own Tenth Royal Hussars regiment. Captain Singer himself died in action the day after this great feat.

John Sparrow would enlist on 1 September 1939 and the following year, at the end of May 1940, he was gazetted to the Coldstream Guards, whose history and record he would duly later compile with the military historian, Michael Howard.<sup>48</sup> Duties included his mounting guard at Buckingham Palace; September 1940 saw Sparrow, as Coldstream Guards platoon commander, then guarding Prime Minister Winston Churchill at Chequers. In February 1941 he was promoted to Captain and became Military Assistant to Lieutenant-General Colville Wemyss (1891–1959), Adjutant-General to the Forces. June 1941, Sparrow was posted to Washington in the US, returning to England and the War Office in March 1942—and a promotion to Major—to report formally and at length on Army morale.<sup>49</sup> March 1944 saw him reach the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, and he was

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<sup>45</sup> Sparrow, 'Growing Old', *Words*, p. 74. This verse also appeared in: John Sparrow, *Grave Epigrams and Other Verses* (Burford, 1981), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Hussey, funeral address for John Sparrow (29 January 1992), The Sparrow Papers, Codrington Library, All Souls College, Oxford, cited in Raina, *Sparrow*, p. 775.

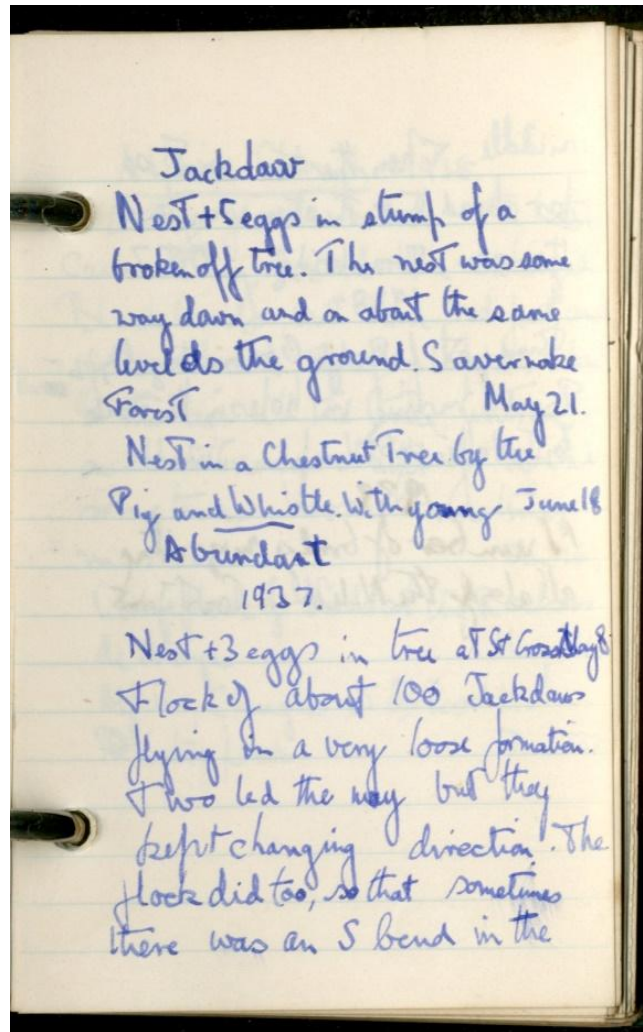
<sup>47</sup> Find A Grave, *Lieut Nigel Aves Watson (1919–1942): Find A Grave Memorial*, no. 55973265 (5 August 2010) <<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55973265>> (Accessed: 15 March 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Howard and John Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards 1920–1946* (London, 1951). Brief details of Sparrow's own record of service appear on p. 512.

<sup>49</sup> The resultant report printed by the War Office and restricted at time of issue is: J. H. A. Sparrow, *Morale* (The Second World War 1939–1945, Army) (London, [1949]), Imperial War Museum, London, LBY 26083.

finally demobilized from the Army in June 1946 and awarded an OBE on account of his morale work.<sup>50</sup>

Four years after John Sparrow receives his OBE, a much less heralded but infinitely fitting tribute is paid to Nigel Watson. *The Wykehamist* of 18 October 1950 records the grateful acknowledgement of Winchester College's natural history society to Mrs G. Richmond-Watson for her gift of 'four small loose-leaf notebooks containing the Bird and Botanical notes of her son, the late N. A. Watson', a committee member of the natural history society in his final year at school. The donation, the magazine records, is 'of especial value'—'a source of information which will always be relevant to Winchester natural history'.<sup>51</sup>



N. A. Watson, 'Notes on birds', Notebooks, Winchester College Archives, Winchester, F6/6/228  
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Christopher Skelton-Foord  
Librarian  
New College, Oxford

<sup>50</sup> *Fifth Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, the 4th of June, 1946* 37598 (13 June 1946), 2771 records 'Lieutenant-Colonel (temporary) John Hanbury Angus SPARROW (130081), Coldstream Guards' honoured with appointment to Officer of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

<sup>51</sup> *The Wykehamist* 965 (18 October 1950), p. 176.