

MAGGIE LANE, *JANE AUSTEN'S WORLD* (1996)

RICH AND POOR

The society of the eighteenth century was rigid and hierarchical, maintained by deference from below and paternalism from above. There was a greater degree of social mobility in Britain than in other European countries, but by and large it was influence, rather than merit that enabled a man to advance.

During Jane Austen's lifetime this rigidity was beginning to break down, as the middle classes became more numerous, more prosperous and more aspirational. The novels of her maturity demonstrate an awareness--somewhat uneasy---of these pressures from below. The assumptions of natural superiority entertained by her class were being challenged.

THE ARISTOCRACY

After the monarchy, at the top of the social pyramid came the 200 or so families whose head was a peer of the realm (Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount). By 1780 some had incomes touching £50,000 p.a., derived mainly from rents but often also from government office. Their country seats--of which some had more than one--were on a magnificent scale and were administered not so much as homes but as local power bases and centres of impressive hospitality. Here, and in their grand town houses, which they occupied during the parliamentary season, from January until July, they entertained, conspired, arranged dynastic marriages, dispensed political influence, and ran the country.

THE GENTRY

Like the aristocracy but in a smaller way, the landed gentry also derived their incomes from rents. About a thousand of them, in Jane Austen's day, were titled, but the great majority were not. The two titled ranks were baronet, whose title passed to his eldest son, and knight, whose title died with him. The wives of both ranks took the title of Lady, along with their husband's surname: Lady Bertram, Lady Russell, etc. When a character in Jane Austen is known by her Christian name together with the title Lady such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Lady Anne Darcy--it means her father was a peer and she retains her birthright title, whomever she marries.

The House of Commons in Jane Austen's day was made up of the landed gentry, titled or untitled, together with the sons or other close relations of peers, and members of the Irish peerage.. Others of this class were public figures locally, becoming Sheriffs of their county, Justices of the Peace and magistrates. Many others, of course, simply lived quiet private lives, without much exertion of any kind; even so, they would be looked up to as the squires of their local communities. Sharing tastes and outlook with the landed gentry, and almost certainly intimately related to them, the minor gentry were younger sons and their families whose incomes derived chiefly from the fruits of their professions. The three professions open to gentlemen were the Church of England, the armed services and the law.

THE NEW MIDDLE CLASSES

Surgeons and apothecaries, teachers and musicians, merchants and attorneys held a dubious place in society--they were educated men, but without "breeding" or "good connections". Beneath them were the tenant-farmers, tradesmen and clerks who constituted the lower middle class. The term middle classes, incidentally, was first used in 1797, and the term working classes in 1813. Before that the usual words for the levels of society were ranks and orders; the phrase "the lower orders" persisted into the twentieth century.

LABOURERS, SERVANTS AND THE POOR

Of course the vast majority of the population lived out the whole of their miserable lives labouring or serving others. The Industrial Revolution had already begun to create the horrific living conditions of the great manufacturing towns in the Midlands and North, but this was unknown to the people of Jane Austen's world; it took the Victorians to discover what had happened in their own country. To Jane Austen, the lower orders would have meant servants, labourers on the land, and paupers, their existence accepted as part of the natural order of things. Armies of servants were employed in the great houses, while anybody with any pretensions to gentility employed at least one servant. The average wage of an agricultural labourer in the period was seven or eight shillings.