



On Valentine's Day in Mount Victoria, the uppermost tiny village of the Blue Mountains, the old Mt Vic flicks movie theatre hosted *Emma*, a comedy-drama based on the novel of the same name by Jane Austen.

In a 'sold-out' pre-screening illustrated talk, historian Hilary Davidson, a 'mountains girl,' regaled her audience with details of clothing in the age of Jane Austen—all the better for us to appreciate the social complexities of dress in the Regency period of the film that would follow.

Starring Anya Taylor-Joy as Emma and with sumptuous, historically accurate costuming by Alexandra Byrne, the film was directed by Autumn de Wilde and written by Eleanor Catton. Davidson spoke enthusiastically and knowledgeably of her subject and in the interval signed copies of her elegant publication, a thing of beauty in itself, titled *Dress in the Age of Jane Austen*.

Hilary knows her Jane and it's all in the detail ...

REVIEW

JANE AUSTEN: VISIONS OF EMPIRE EXPRESSED THROUGH DRESS

Emma was Jane Austen's most provincially set work, where lives and daily dramas played out in a cornucopia of fashion dissemination. Here is a novelist whose close observation drew on all the classes and circles of her society, examining every detail for social meaning. Fashion was the subject of constant surveillance, seen and absorbed, passed on at a personal level. Regency clothing in the eighteen hundreds was the essential determinant of personal and social identity.

Davidson's writing is clear, clever and engaging, using as source material Austen's life, letters and novels as the entry point into her exploration of Regency clothing. The pattern she weaves is determined by the precision of Austen's gaze, from the daily minutiae, the production and aesthetics, to its social meaning and position in the wider world, and how important these were to people of her class, showing that at heart the Regency village used clothing consumption to convey social values.

A number of quotes from the text will indicate to Jane Austen fans the rich material within the book. Chapter headings and relationships between the layers in arranging the era of Regency is inspirational. They are headed 'Self', 'Home', 'Village', 'Country', 'City', 'Nation', then 'World', with Austen squarely at the centre, cycling out with each chapter, examining the personal, the social, national and global aspects of the material history of clothing at the time. All is written as a comprehensive piece of serious scholarship, yet in friendly conversational tones and profusely illustrated with drawings, prints, embroideries, watercolours, fine paintings and hand-coloured comic etchings of the time. Davidson's enthusiasm shines through years of dedicated study.

Jane Austen was bourgeois—a gentlewoman coming from a middle-class aristocracy. The people she observes so closely had access to fashionable clothing. Their stronghold was the countryside, their living privileged from urban lifestyles, impossible without a minimal wealth provided from the acres, farms and estates surrounding the villages that comprised the greater part of Britain. Davidson talks

about 'how closely men's dress related to the countryside' ... durable and practical. How 'fashion penetrated provincial places and how improvements in travel and post facilitated new systems of fashion exchange.'

She explains that the biggest distinction in Regency sartorial convention was between 'undress', day clothing, and evening and 'full' dress, often just called 'dress'. She quotes *The Lady's Magazine* outlining the regulations of custom according to the time of day: 'In the morning the arms and bosom must be completely covered to the throat and wrists', while 'in the evening arms could be bare above the elbow, and neck and shoulders unveiled, creating an enduring template for female evening dress'. And explains also how this activity took a full hour and a half, to dress appropriately for dinner.

London had the best tailors, though travel had its problems and 'transport affected people's relationship with clothing'. Packing for 'travel required conscientious thinking about ... Ironing gowns crumpled by packing required a flat iron. Gowns were laid lengthways and folded, there was an art to doing it well ... velvet was rolled'.

A delightful poem is printed in one of Fanny Knight's pocket books advising readers (both men and women)...

'Women are thus instructed:

With linen and stockings and shoes first begin,
Then your Night-cloaths and Petticoats neatly put in.
Next your dresses compleat, for each part of the day.
With your Handkerchiefs, Caps, all in Gala array,
Then your Ribbands, Fans, Flowers and Gloves long
and short.

With your Coombs, and your brushes of every sort, And
snug in your corner your Trinket-box place,
No Cosmetics you want with that beautiful face,
Some needles, and thread. With your Thimble combine,
For one stitch timely set in the end may save nine,
A spare pair of Garters and Lace add to these.
For the rest I will leave you to do as you please.'

'Light fabrics and revealingly cut gowns allowed women to 'glow' from their exertion, while their companions perspired manfully into the layers of linen and wool encasing their bodies, neck to wrist and knee, though breeches and pantaloons made from stretch material like black silk jersey could make moving a little easier. One of the advantages of breeches as evening wear was a full bend of the knee; the tightness of non-knitted pantaloons somewhat curtailed nimbleness.'

Gentry women gave their cast off 'old' clothing to their parish poor; but disposed of rags worn beyond usefulness to collectors who sold them on to the paper-makers. Indeed, Jane Austen's novels were written and printed on the final vestiges of Regency clothing, showing how sensible recycling was in operation 200 years ago.

The 'manufacture of textiles would define the British empire in the nineteenth century with the influence of the Napoleonic Wars on fashion and the trade in dress goods'. 'The growing quality of textiles and their increasing market share were key markers of the industrial revolution that transformed Britain and the nation's dress'. Wool was the greatest British fibre and Britain's 'glory', the 'traditional heart of its national textile identity, and the backbone of its internationally acclaimed menswear in tailoring', spreading from within the country to encircling the globe, as did underwear. As Davidson notes, 'even Napoleon wore flannel underwear'.

'The nation and its nationalisms were intertwined in dress, from sewing outwards', the colour choice of threads and ribbons, all these small choices 'encapsulated the bigger picture of Britain's sartorial, commercial and manufacturing

position' on the emerging world stage. All is exhaustively documented and related to our day and age. Decades of sea victories and personal friends returning from war; all made their mark. There are various lists of garments, tantalising and fascinating with their global connections. Davidson: 'Hidden in these names is Britain's complicated relationship with Europe, and with itself as a nation, mobilising outwards through War to create new inward visions of itself, all expressed through dress.' And this is how, 200 years ago, Internationalism was born.

'For a woman who never left England', Davidson reminds us: 'Jane Austen was in touch with the world; and the world fundamentally supported the ordinary business of Regency dress.' 'People read Austen for the pleasure of how well she reads people. Her life and work encompassed a period when reading the inherent social markers of people's dressed bodies was an observation central to creating identity, itself expected to be commensurate with appearance.'

Thanks to the work of Jane—and Hilary—the 200-year-old fascination with Austen's age will show how we as 'ordinary' people can understand our own relationships with clothing. That dress, with all its accoutrements of frippery and finery, helped in Austen's time to define shifts in a society that echo still up to the present day, not only through the observations of Austen's relatable, fictional characters, but in how 'real' people dressed, all thankfully noted and documented through the highly polished lens of clothing.

Helene Markstein

Dress in the Age of Jane Austen: Regency Fashion
Hilary Davidson — Yale University Press

