In memory of Deirdre Gillian Gina Le Faye 26.10.1933 – 16.08.2020

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The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.

*Northanger Abbey*, Volume 1, Chapter 14

I can’t remember exactly when I talked about this passage with Deirdre Le Faye, who has died age 86. It must have been after the publication of the Cambridge University Press edition of *Northanger Abbey*, which she co-edited with Barbara Benedict, and which appeared in 2006, because we were talking about her work on that. It was certainly before her honorary doctorate, awarded at the University of Southampton in 2011. No matter: I remember our discussion vividly. We were sitting in the Great Hall at Chawton House, and I was quizzing Deirdre about her rejection of what she always called ‘lit crit’ (she could load the phrase with a great deal of disdain). Surely, I said, there’s a great deal of invention in biography, and perhaps even in editing? Leaving aside the destruction of Austen’s letters, and the necessary account that must be made of what’s missing, what’s there still needs to be interpreted. What of the gaps, the omissions, what of providing a reading of tone and style? “I deal in facts”, Deirdre said. And that was the end of that. The phrase ‘facts as crisp as lettuce leaves’ was one she herself used, on many occasions. It was cited in the conferment speech made at the graduation ceremony for her honorary Doctorate, which can be read here:

https://chawtonhouse.org/2020/08/a-tribute-to-deirdre-le-faye/
I knew not how to reconcile Deirdre's very different account of what she did to what I felt was the work of biography. But on this, as on many, many other things, she and I agreed to differ.

I first met Deirdre in 2005, when I took up my position as postdoctoral research fellow at Chawton House and the University of Southampton. I got to know her well because of her constant devotion to the Chawton House Library project, and support of me, personally, in a variety of my roles there. She was thrilled that the house had been saved for the benefit of the public, and that it was a centre for the study of women's writing, and she was delighted to be a Patron. She gave many talks at conferences and study days at Chawton House over the years, frequently causing some anxiety to the Chair of her panel because of her relaxed approach to keeping to her allotted time. When she launched her book *Jane Austen’s Country Life* at Chawton House in 2014, she spoke entirely without notes, and insisted on taking her watch off for the evening: I managed to coax her into finishing, but only so that we had time for questions.

Deirdre's theme, in her talks, never really changed, and could be summed up by the keynote that she gave at the New Directions in Austen Studies conference hosted at Chawton House in 2009, the bicentenary of Jane Austen’s move to the village. Although she was saddened that new Austen letters would almost certainly never come to light, she felt convinced that new evidence about the lives of the Austen family could be found via the papers of neighbours and relations in Steventon, Chawton, Godmersham, Southampton and Bath. The conclusion to that paper – a version can be found online – was in effect a call to arms for other researchers to pick up in the archives where she had left off.

I’m certain that one of the reasons that Deirdre made this call to arms was because she had thoroughly enjoyed her own research trips over the years, and wanted others to have that same thrill of the chase. She was a committed archival researcher, hunting down information about the extended Austen family and their acquaintances in local record offices, and in the homes of Austen-family descendants, many of whom she befriended. One of her descriptions of a research trip to a family archive in the 1980s that she sent me gave a hilariously Gothic account of the visit: encountering green mould on the flag stones, and ‘lavatory paper so damp it might almost have been previously used’. She certainly relished locating her visit in the steps of Catherine Morland, as well as Austen herself.

Even after her travelling days were over, and Deirdre called on the next generation to take up the reins, one of the things that always impressed me about her was her enormous appetite for work and research from her own home. She was always working on some new article, or note, or helping another scholar with their own endeavours. Indeed, her generosity to other scholars could be remarkable – she was a great one for sending little cards and relevant anecdotes, unprompted, and she was always quick to reply to direct pleas for her assistance. But one disagreed with her at ones peril. She was extremely stern, if, for example, one raised any questions about a certain Austen portrait. That, for Deirdre, was an unmentionable topic, and it shall go unmentioned here. In my years editing the Chawton House Library newsletter *The Female Spectator*, I was on the receiving end of many emails which began ‘Gillian! No! It is quite incorrect to…’ Nor did I ever manage to convince her that the French women writers I was interested in myself were *worth* reading, although she had – in the interests of completeness, and with a grim sense of duty – read a great many that the Austen women themselves would have read.
Deirdre's industry put most of us to shame. She was a true independent scholar, in the best sense of the words. She amused me with her accounts of her idleness too. In April 2015 – when she was, it must be remembered, already in her eighties – she wrote that it was so sunny that

I have lollèd in the back garden doing nothing except read and think, instead of sitting at my desk and working! This morning so far is rather overcast, hence dolce far niente must be put aside and stern Puritan work ethic return.

We had very different ideas about what leisure was! I valued Deirdre's friendship, and especially her correspondence, which could be full of gossip, scandal, and not-to-be-repeated comments about Austenian scholarship and Janeite devotees. She frequently had me laughing out loud at her descriptions of mutual acquaintances, and indeed her doctors in her final years. She rejoiced in being a 'Puzzling Case' for her medical team, turning accounts of what must have been extremely wearing and worrying appointments into amusing and carefully-crafted emails. She took being a correspondent seriously, and never forgot what my own family had been, or were due to be, doing. She never met my son, but she never failed to ask after him, or to send advice for books he might enjoy.

Deirdre's exhaustive approach to Jane Austen's life and work, and her devotion to those she met through her scholarship, meant that she was industrious to the very end. Although frustrated that motor neurone disease had robbed her of the power of speech, and what she called ‘the ability to appear in polite society’, she was typing until the last days of her life. Her last email to me expressed frustration with her computer system, and she turned it off to 'let the wretched thing regain some degree of normality'. Her
‘more anon’, and ‘Love and Freindship’ are left hanging in my inbox. Cassandra-like, I censor Deirdre's missives, whilst knowing that the Le Faye correspondence – scattered around her friends and colleagues across the world, in drawers and computers – must be prolific and contain a great many gems. It is, however, something of a comfort that her own books and papers – with their extensive marginalia, notes and ‘corrections’ – are to be held at Chawton House for the scholars of the future to deduce their own ‘facts’. Deirdre made this donation with a strong sense of her own legacy, and an even stronger wish to further the Austenian scholarship of the future. I hope that many will travel to Chawton House in her steps, and, in doing so remember a scholar whose ‘Love and Freindship’ for the library were generous to the end.