


Jane Austen on the Rideau Canal

A soft summer evening in the 1830s—a lockmaster and his staff lounged around smoking their pipes, chatting and quaffing fine 3 week-old whisky and beer. After a while, the lockmaster raised his hand to stop the banter. As befitted his age and rank, he felt it necessary to introduce the men to some of the higher things in life, such as an appreciation of literature. With a judicious choice of author, he might also hope to bring some of the younger men to recognize and accept why things were as they were—railing against the establishment was not only unwise but demonstrably wrong!

Miss Austen’s well-known and interesting work, *Pride and Prejudice*, was the ideal choice. It showed the constraints that army officers laboured under—low salaries for low-ranking officers—if they had little or no social standing, promotion and marriage prospects were poor or non-existent. Much the same was true of lawyers, who were somewhat less respectable than army officers. The clergy had the same prospects. No doubt about it, boys—no bed of roses.



 Jane Austen, from a drawing by sister Cassandra.

The lockmaster was familiar with the intemperate outbursts of the youngsters, who railed against the unfairness of it all. His clinching argument was always the

same—God’s design of creation was calculated to bring about the general happiness and well-being of the labouring man, and this was clear in the social and physical order of things. In fact, even pagans knew this—the Romans extolled the strong link between the army and discipline. A man’s lot in life is fixed—be content with that.

Over time, there were many authorities that the lockmaster brought to bear on the objectors. The genial churchman, William Paley, was comfortingly clear that the world was unfolding just as God intended. Malthus could be relied upon to show that unbridled appetites among the working classes had made their struggle for existence more severe, since their labour was all that they had to sell to provide subsistence. Among the lock staff, there were those who glimpsed that the old economist, Adam Smith, might have been right after all to emphasize the importance of specialization of functions and division of labour, making it possible for those with above-average skills to prosper. The lockmaster puffed on his pipe and remarked sagely that with some self-restraint, a man could do well in this country and have reasonable expectations of some of the comforts and decencies of life.

The lockmaster borrowed books from the local Church of England clergyman that showed an iron link between the labour of the working class and the accumulation of wealth by property owners. The development of the arts and sciences was made possible through the far-sighted use of the surplus. In his informal seminars, the lockmaster praised the efforts of men such as John Beverley Robinson who promoted tirelessly a modified British social and educational system to deliver such benefits for Upper Canada.

Over time, things changed. The increasing use of machinery, coupled with specialization, the spread of the railways and freer trade, changed the balance between agriculture and industry along the Rideau Corridor. The rise of salaried managers marked the shift away from personal supervision by owners, but did nothing to make working life any easier. In fact, such managers could push harder, since they had a single focus.

The lockmaster sowed far better than he knew. Head wreathed in pipe smoke, his avuncular life lessons, lubricated by beer and whisky, proved the words of the poet:

“And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God’s ways to man.”

