

## The New College Porters

Robinson Tower, where the Porters' Lodge is situated today— Holywell Quadrangle, New College, Oxford



clearly pre-dates Scott's first novel. Certainly, it would have seemed an historical novel to Poles themselves, who saw in Porter one who was championing their nationalist cause. A member of Tadeusz Kościuszko's own family wrote a letter in French to Porter, extolling her: 'Vous êtes pour tous les Polonois cette divinité qui la première ait élevée sa voix, du fond de l'impériale Albion, en leur faveur'.<sup>7</sup> Scott might well have read *Thaddeus* when it appeared (he knew both Jane and Anna Maria Porter from their childhood days in Edinburgh), and Porter's novel might indeed have served as inspiration for his writing *Waverley*. New College Library's copy has its own Scottish connections. It was formerly part of the *Bibliotheca Lindesiana*, a magnificent nineteenth-century private library assembled in Scotland, and it carries the heraldic bookplate of Alexander Lindsay, the 6th Earl of Balcarres (1752–1825), with volume three of this four-volume set bearing the inscription 'Balcarres 1815'.<sup>8</sup>

Porter next wrote *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), another historical novel blockbuster of its day—and the other book on which her fame now largely rests—relating the tale of William Wallace (d. 1305), the valiant Scottish insurgent against England's Edward I. New College is fortunate to hold a first edition copy, again with an interesting Scottish provenance. Our copy, in a fine twentieth-century George Bayntun (1873–1940) binding, once belonged to the Glasgow businessman and photographer Leslie Hamilton Wilson (1883–1968), and it bears his bookplate.<sup>9</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.3–7

<sup>7</sup> Porter, *Thaddeus* (1831), pp. xv–xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Porter, *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, 4th edn., 4 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.11–14.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Porter, *The Scottish Chiefs. A Romance*, 5 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810), New College Library, Oxford, NB.66.3–7.

This copy contains one inked-over word in volume one, as well as an extensive section of text inked over in volume two, along with the marginal note: 'This was a mis-print'. These inked-over lines were indeed excised by Porter for her second edition, which was published the following year (1811), as she describes them: 'alterations from the original text . . . suggested by a more mature deliberation, than circumstances would allow [me] to dedicate to the first composition of these volumes'.<sup>10</sup>

Bookplate in



was published the following year as '*Being a sequel to The Scottish Chiefs by Miss Jane Porter*', though this attribution—intended to capitalise on a well-known novel and author—is erroneous.)

Jane Porter's next novel was again an historical fiction, this one relating a tale of the 1720s

If Scott acts as touchstone, fairly or unfairly, for literary and publishing history assessments of *Thaddeus* and the *Scottish Chiefs*, then for *Duke Christian* it is Jane Austen—and specifically *Emma* (1816)—that acts likewise. In both instances, though, Porter inescapably suffers by such comparison. (How could she not?) These two books—*Emma* and *Duke Christian of Luneburg*—are, for both women, a fourth major novel to appear in print. But the literary fortunes of both novelists were moving in very different directions. Once again, off the back of Porter's previous—though declining—successes, a decision was taken for her new novel, *Duke Christian*, to be produced in a very respectable print run—of 3,000 copies—and Porter received a pleasing payment of £630 from Longman's, in expectation the novel could live up to the popularity of her previous books. But *Duke Christian* received comparatively little notice from critics, and must be judged a relative failure. *Emma* had appeared (at the very end of 1815) with her publishers John Murray in a print run of 2,000 copies—the largest to date for Austen—and it attracted a favourable review in *The Quarterly Review* by no less than the great Walter Scott. But it is to whom both women dedicate their novel—and the authors' very different responses to the prospect of royal favour—that comparisons are inevitably drawn.

As is well-known, following written confirmation in November 1815 from royal librarian, James Stanier Clarke, that Austen might indeed dedicate her soon-to-appear *Emma* to the Prince Regent, Austen did just that; the dedication reads: 'TO / HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS / THE PRINCE REGENT, / THIS WORK IS, / BY HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S PERMISSION, / MOST RESPECTFULLY / DEDICATED, / BY HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S / DUTIFUL / AND OBEDIENT / HUMBLE SERVANT, / THE AUTHOR.'<sup>20</sup> (Can one almost detect a shade of ironic bandying about on Austen's part with those three Highnesses?) Following publication of *Emma*, though—when the royal librarian next suggests to Austen in March 1816 that 'when you again appear in print you may chuse to dedicate your Volumes to Prince Leopold: any Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg, would just now be very interesting'—her response, though politely phrased, is unequivocal and forthright:

You are very, very kind in your hints as to the sort of Composition which might recommend me at present, & I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem.— . . . No—I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way.<sup>21</sup>

How different is Porter's response when she is confronted five years later with a similar request! In the letter (cited earlier) of 23 September 1821 to her brother Robert—by which time the Prince Regent had ascended to the throne—Jane Porter relates how 'Sir Andrew [Halliday] suddenly asked me, whether I had ever turned my mind towards the interesting annals of His Majesty's Hanoverian ancestors? Sir Andrew goes on to suggest Duke Christian of Brunswick-Lüneburg as the biographical subject for her next novel: 'I can assure you, nothing would please

manuscripts by the royal librarian to aid her research, and she duly writes the novel about the heroic exploits during the Thirty Years' War of King George IV's ancestor, Duke Christian. If Porter



consistent with a work wherein imagination is allowed to make up for the deficiencies of actual tradition'.<sup>28</sup> But this is merely a conceit. The liberties the writer has taken are considerable: Porter has Sebastian survive the 1578 Battle of Alcácer Quibir,

The remaining Porter in our library is another composite publication—this time the work of two Porter siblings—and once again a novel of renown. But the authorship of *Sir Edward Sæward's Narrative of his Shipwreck . . . Edited by Miss Jane Porter* (1831) was for a long time held as uncertain. The preface by the editor—whom Jane Porter always acknowledged to be herself—sets up a construct that 'manuscript books,