

JOHN GEORGE COOKE AND HIS LITERARY CONNECTIONS

A number of the New Zealand Company settlers had literary connections. Browning's friendship with the cousins William Curling Young and Alfred Domett may be cited; Charles Armitage Brown, friend of Keats, ended his days in New Plymouth; Thomas, brother of Matthew Arnold, enlivened Nelson for a short time; and Mary Taylor, friend of Charlotte Brontë, climbed up Mount Victoria at Wellington in 1848 to watch for a ship which might take to Yorkshire her appreciation of *Jane Eyre*.

One such settler not previously noted is John George Cooke, who makes several quite dramatic appearances in the margins of literary history. In addition to associations with Trelawny, the friend of Shelley and Byron, with Armitage Brown, and with the Carlyles at Cheyne Row, Chelsea, Cooke had the distinction of being a relation of Jane Austen. It seems therefore worthwhile to assemble here some of the facts of his life.

The Cookes were from Devon, where they had been landowners and shipowners at Kenbury and Topsham. A seventeenth-century ancestor, Francis Cooke, was made a Canon of Winchester by the patronage of Bishop Trelawny. By 1750, John George's grandfather was established at Greenwich as Treasurer of the Hospital. One of his sons, John, who became a noted naval captain and died heroically on the *Bellerophon* at Trafalgar, merits an entry in the *DNB*. The eldest son, Christopher, born 1759, was a Naval Agent, and profiting greatly by the French Wars, bought himself a country estate, Ashgrove, at Sevenoaks, Kent, and set up there as a landed gentleman. His first wife, sister of Admiral Sir Manley Dixon, died in 1806. He then found a second wife in the household of his neighbour, Francis Motley Austen of Kippington. She was Elizabeth Austen, the second daughter, by this time a widow with two children. Her second marriage in 1810 to Christopher Cooke brought her six more.

Here, then, is one link between Jane Austen the novelist and John George Cooke. Mrs Cooke's father, Francis Motley Austen, was cousin to Jane Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen of Steventon. It was Mrs Cooke's grandfather, Francis Austen, who had given his young nephew George a chance in life when the boy was left destitute in 1737 by his father's early death. Francis sent George Austen to Tonbridge school, 'whence he became a Scholar of St John's College, Oxford,' says Chapman.¹ 'He was later a Fellow of his College, and taking orders obtained in 1761 the living of Steventon by presentation from his kinsman Thomas Knight of Godmersham.'