

Who was Tom Lefroy

Jane met an agreeable young Irishman, Tom Lefroy, at possibly four balls, on one visit to the house where he was staying and on one visit he made to the Austens in January 1796.

She refers to him on very few occasions in letters to her sister; 'very gentleman-like, good-looking, pleasant'. She had been flirting ('imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together') and Tom was teased about her ('he is so excessively laughed at about me at Ashe, that he is ashamed of coming to Steventon, and ran away when we called on Mrs Lefroy a few days ago'). Of the ball at Ashe she says 'I look forward with great impatience to it as I rather expect to have an offer from my friend in the course of the evening'. Nothing came of this – Tom had already met the girl he was to marry. His hostess, Jane's good friend Madam Lefroy, took fright at Jane's interest (a poor country clergyman's daughter would be a most unsuitable match for this young man expected to climb to great heights) and arranged for Tom to be sent off to London to continue his legal studies at Lincoln's Inn. Jane had been unaware of the threat she posed. This episode recurs many times in her writing.

The Lefroys

The Lefroy family, from Cambrai in France, were Huguenots who fled persecution about 1580. They first settled in Flanders, now a geographical area covering part of France & the north of Belgium. The situation there was very unsettled owing to the Reformation, ongoing civil wars and the disruption caused by revolving French, Spanish and Austrian rule. (A junior branch of the Lefroys of Carrigglas built a house named Cambrai at Knockyclovaun, Killaloe, in the early 20th century (Henry M. Lefroy's son.))

The Lefroys moved to Canterbury in England where there was a Calvinist and Huguenot hub. Many Walloon and Huguenot refugee families were granted asylum. Edward VI gave them the use of the western crypt of Canterbury Cathedral for worship. They were engaged in silk-dyeing.

In the 18th century Anthony Lefroy, 1703-1779, was a banker in Leghorn, Italy, in partnership with another Protestant refugee, Peter Langlois, and married his daughter Elizabeth. She had four brothers, all wealthy, with no issue and eventually their fortunes came to the Lefroys. Anthony and Elizabeth had three surviving children, two of whom are of interest:

- (1) Isaac Peter George Lefroy 1745-1806 went into the church and his uncle, Benjamin Langlois, bought him three presentations for the living of Ashe, 2 miles north of Steventon in Hampshire. He arrived there in 1783. His wife, Anne Brydges, Madam Lefroy, was Jane's very good friend. There were seven children. The Austens were the nearest neighbours.
- (2) Anthony Peter Lefroy 1740-1819 was bought a commission in the army by the same Benjamin Langlois and joined the 33 Regiment stationed at that time in Limerick in Ireland. He married 1765 Anne Gardiner (note that Jane used this name for the

benevolent uncle in *Pride & Prejudice*) - they had 11 children and Tom was the first son. Anthony Peter remained in Limerick.

Thomas Langlois Lefroy 1776-1869

Tom was very bright, matriculated at Trinity College Dublin at fourteen, won many honours, graduated BA in 1795 and LLB in 1797. The family expectations were on him to rise in distinction and haul the rest up. At Trinity the College Historical Society, a very eminent debating society, had been suppressed because of infiltration by United Irishmen – Tom negotiated the reinstatement of the society and became secretary. Other contemporary members were Robert Emmett and Wolfe Tone, ‘all that delirium of the brave’ ‘for whom the hangman’s rope was spun’ (W.B. Yeats), leaders in the insurrections that led to the 1798 Rebellion. Another contemporary was Daniel O’Connell, champion of Catholic Emancipation (which Tom opposed). But for all the political excitement and upheavals of the time Tom remained a true blue tory.

Tom’s health broke down in 1795 and a holiday was to be the cure. He spent Christmas with his Uncle George at Ashe and met Jane.

Tom was of unquestionable probity, extremely hard working, with a strong professional ambition – his tutor at Trinity, Uncle Benjamin and others talked of Tom as principled and responsible, quiet and religious, always top of his class. Uncle Ben wrote: ‘A good heart, a good mind, good sense and as little to correct in him as ever I saw in one of his age’. Perhaps the ‘relationship’ between Jane and Tom was all in Jane’s imagination.

After the ball at Ashe Tom was sent back to Lincoln’s Inn in London where he was reading for the Bar and lodging with Uncle Benjamin Langlois. He was called to the Irish Bar in 1797 and became engaged to his best friend’s sister, Mary. She was the daughter of Jeffry Paul, who owned much property and a mansion at Silver Spring in Co. Wexford, Ireland. Wexford was a hotbed of insurrection, very dangerous, and the Paul family were sent away to Wales for their safety. The father joined the Yeomanry and fought at New Ross and Wexford. The family home was looted and sacked. Tom and Mary were married at Abergavenny in Wales and returned to Dublin in due course. Mary’s brother died suddenly leaving her the heir to the Paul estates; unexpectedly Tom became a man of substance. Mary and Tom had four sons and three daughters.

Tom rose rapidly to prominence at the Irish Bar: King’s Counsel 1806, King’s Serjeant 1808, bencher of the King’s Inns 1819, MP for the University of Dublin 1830-1841 and Baron of the Exchequer. He spoke often in the House of Commons. He was appointed Lord Chief Justice 1852-1866, and died in 1869 at Newcourt near Bray. At the end of his life he admitted to a nephew that he had a ‘youthful admiration’ for Jane Austen.

About 1810 he bought the estate of Carriglas in Co. Longford from the Newcomens. A grand house had been designed by a prominent English architect (James Gandon) but only the stables and courtyard had been built, surrounding a much earlier building. Tom’s eldest son, Anthony, married the daughter of Viscount Lorton of Rockingham, a son of the Earl of Kingston who had

properties in Longford and Leitrim. Because Anthony became MP for Longford, Tom built the present house (architect Daniel Robertson). It is still in the family hands: a 600 acre estate, new hotel (environmentally sound, natural light, grass roofs), lace museum, houses and school being built, golf. Tom Lefroy also had a property at Leeson St, Dublin and Ballytruckle, Co Waterford.

The Canadian connection

A few months before Jane's death in 1817 a son was born to the Revd John Henry George Lefroy, Tom's second cousin, now the incumbent at Ashe. This was Gen Sir John Henry Lefroy (1817- 90), soldier, scientist and colonial administrator, a very eminent man. He studied astronomy and was sent to Toronto in 1842 to take up the superintendency of the partially completed observatory. He led an expedition to the northwest to ascertain the geomagnetic characteristics of British North America, met George Simpson and the Revd James Evans and undertook a 5,000 mile trek that lasted 18 months. They wintered at Chipewyan October 1843-February 1844 taking readings every hour. He returned to Canada 1846-53, was involved in scientific work, helped found the Royal Canadian Institute, was deeply concerned about 'the general condition of the Indians'. His work on scientific and military subjects and autobiography were published. Later he was governor of Bermuda and governor of Tasmania.

And Mount Lefroy, on the BC/Alberta border in Yoho National Park, SW of Lake Louise, was named for him by George M. Dawson in 1894. A portrait of him in the field by Paul Kane, 1845, entitled 'The Surveyor', was sold by the family for \$5,062,500, bought by Kenneth Thomson and donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Subsequent generations of Lefroys and Austens intermarried.

Apparently this episode did not blight Jane's life: she started writing her most cheerful novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, a few months later.

Sources

www.ancestry.co.uk

William Austen-Leigh *et al*, *Jane Austen: a family record*, Konecky & Konecky, 1989

Dictionary of Canadian Biography

Dictionary of National Biography

Family History Wayback Machine

www.irishidentity.com (from Lt Col. Patrick Lefroy, in the *Longford Historical Society Journal*, 1983)

Jane Austen's Letters, ed. by Deirdre LeFaye, 3rd ed., Oxford, 1995 (letters 1 and 2)

Landed Estates Database

Limerick Post, 10 March 2007

Joan Klingel Ray, 'The one-sided romance of JA and Tom Lefroy', *Persuasions*, 28:1, 2007

www.wikipedia.org