

## Doc Chat Episode Fifty Three Transcript

### The Misses Porter, Sister Novelists in the Age of Jane Austen (April 21, 2022)

CARMEN NIGRO Okay. Hello, and welcome to Doc Chat. I'm Carmen Nigro. Doc Chat is weekly program series from NYPL's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Charles Kikendall [phonetic] Carter, Curator -- Assistant Curator of the library's Pforzheimer Collection of Shelly and His Circle, is joined by Devoney Looser is Regional Professor of English at Arizona State University and author of the forthcoming book, "Sister Novelists: The Trailblazing Porter Sisters who Paved the Way for Austen and the Brontes," which we expect in September of this year. Charlie and Devoney will discuss the Pforzheimer Collection's large collection of Jane Porter Papers, which was a major source for Devoney's book. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. Make sure you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so everyone is included. Once we begin the question-and-answer segment, make sure that you can put all of your questions into the Q & A tab. We won't really be looking at the chat for questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. So without further ado, I'll turn things over to Charlie Carter, who will introduce us to Jane Porter and the archive of her papers at the library.

CHARLES CARTER My thanks to you, Carmen, for that introduction, and thanks to all of you out there for attending. I want to start things off by introducing everyone to the original steward of the archival collection that Devoney [inaudible], Jane Porter herself. Jane Porter -- that's her on the left -- was born in December of 1775 in Durham, England, about 60 miles from the Scottish border. At age four, after her father died, she moved to Edinboro with her family, which included her little brother, Robert Kerr Porter, who grew up to become a well-known painter and diplomat, and her little sister, Anna Maria Porter, pictured here on the right, who became a writer like Jane did. The Porter's mother was acquainted with the mother of Walter Scott, who is said to have played with the girls when he was a boy. Jane outlived both of her siblings, and as a result, she became the custodian of their papers, which is why our collection of Jane Porter papers includes letters to Jane, letters to Robert, and letters to Anna Maria. I'll talk more about the papers in just a minute, but first just a bit more on Jane Porter and her literary significance. Jane Porter was an innovator in the field of historical fiction. Her most famous novels, "The Scottish Chiefs," -- I have the 1810 first edition right here in my hand -- is a romanticized account of the life of Sir William Wallace during the first War of Scottish Independence from England during the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Some of you may be most familiar with Mel Gibson's version of Sir William Wallace in the 1995 movie "Braveheart," though you may be

disappointed to learn that "The Scottish Chiefs" lacks Braveheart's famous mooning scene. Upon publication, "The Scottish Chiefs" was immediately popular, and its endurance was such that by the mid-20th century, 140 years later, it was included in the beloved "Classics Illustrated" comic book series, as pictured here. The comic book includes a brief biographical blurb about Jane Porter, which I've shown part of here. But remarkably, there's never been a full-length biography of Jane Porter. Devoney's forthcoming book will be the first. Jane Porter and her siblings had a wide and varied social circle, a fact which is reflected in the letters to them, the Libraries of Jane Porter Papers. Containing over 1800 items, mostly letters, the Jane Porter Papers constitute the largest archival collection held by the library's Pforzheimer Collection, where I am now. The Papers were acquired in 1966, and when they arrived, they were bundled in fascicles and loosely bound into rust-colored boards, like these shown here, with printed spine labels. I really like the Green Grocers apostrophe in the word "letter's". These boards reflect the curatorial work done to the collection after Jane Porter died, when they were bought by Sir Thomas Phillipps, the eccentric and voracious 19th-century collector of manuscripts. Phillipps' amassment of all different kinds of manuscripts was so vast that after he died and his estate was settled, it took decades worth of auctions to get rid of everything. The original, much larger archive of Porter Papers owned by Phillipps was split into auction lots. Our piece of it at the New York Public Library is a particularly large chunk, but there are chunks of it elsewhere, at the Huntington Library in California, and at the University of Kansas, for instance. Devoney's been coming to the Pforzheimer Collection for years to study the Jane Porter Papers. During the pandemic, she won a grant to have the papers fully digitized so that she could continue to work with them while the library was closed to the public. Thanks to here, they're now available to all for free in the New York Public Library's digital collections. Because the Jane Porter Papers contain such a large number of manuscripts, and because they span over half a century, they're an incredible resource for all kinds of scholarship beyond literary studies. For one, they provide a really good way to see changes to the British postal system and the culture of correspondence over time. Here, for instance, is a letter Jane has written to Anna Maria from 1816. Look at the address in the middle. Maybe you can tell it was originally addressed to Jane, whose name has been scratched out with Anna Maria written over it. Jane was being thrifty, reusing a letter cover from a letter that was originally sent to her from someone else. And here, over 30 years later, is an envelope to Jane Porter. Commercially produced envelopes, like this one, only begin to appear in the 1840s. The Jane Porter Papers provide a really good view to how quickly they were adopted by the mail-sending public. And, of course, the Jane Porter Papers tell us a whole lot about the literary women to whom most of the correspondence is written, Jane and Anna Maria Porter. As I've said, Devoney made great use of the collection while writing her book, which comes out in September. Now I'm going to turn things over to Devoney to talk about a few specific pieces from the Porter Papers, and what we can learn from them.

DEVONEY LOOSER Thanks, Charlie. It's such a treat to talk about the Pforzheimer Collections Jane Porter Papers, and I want to start by thanking you for your brilliant cataloging of this collection, very little of which is yet in print. I've used these papers over the course of about 15 years, from a period when they were entirely -- almost entirely unprocessed, so selfishly, I wish I'd had the benefit of your expertise earlier on. But I'm grateful that many more will have access

to it now in its digitized version, and I truly hope there's a resurgence of work on the Porter sisters. I know -- I've seen in the audience there are some other Porter scholars who are here on this call and just really thrilled and hope there will be a true resurgence. If there is, it's thanks to the vision, labor, and access that you, Charlie, that Curator Elizabeth Denlinger, and that the Pforzheimer made possible. So it strikes me as truly strange that so little critical attention has been paid to these once famous literary sisters who were formerly global celebrities and household names. And I should add that I hadn't heard of Jane and Anna Maria Porter until I began working on a book on British women writers in old age that was eventually published in 2008. It includes a chapter on the challenges Jane Porter faced as a writer in late life. She lived to age 74. The Pforzheimer's Papers are especially strong in material from this era of her life, from 1820 to 1850, and at first, using them, I didn't know that I would write her biography. But as I began to read these sisters' fascinating and sometimes heartbreaking papers in several libraries in the US and UK, I was struck by the previously untold stories they held. It was easy to draw the conclusion that the Porter sisters had been wrongly forgotten by literary history. Between them, they published a remarkable 26 books, with several international best sellers, but it was painful to realize from their private writings, that the Porter sisters had themselves actually watched the credit for their innovations be gradually handed over to someone else. Their thunder was stolen by Sir Walter Scott's greater fame, as he was wrongly given credit for the literary method the Porter sisters themselves had pioneered. So as I fell down the rabbit hole of these Porter Papers, I became determined to try to piece together the stories of Jane and Maria's challenging and colorful lives. The younger sister, Anna Maria, actually went by Maria, and I think she pronounced it "Maria." As Charlie mentioned, my biography will be published in September by Bloomsbury, and I think they've captured so much with this cover design, with the sister's faces peering out as if from a book shelf. Authorship was absolutely central to their identities. They were widely recognized as geniuses at a time when middle class women were expected to settle into small, quiet lives as wives and mothers. So the Porter sisters never married, and they always struggled economically despite their great fame. They also each privately struggled with thwarted desires for romantic happiness that they had given to their fictional heroes and heroines. And the sisters absolutely fell hard when they fell in love, and they privately recorded it in their letters to each other. So I think you can see why I'm excited to tell stories of all kinds. And I want to tell you a little bit about a few significant documents from the Pforzheimer's Porter Papers. So I've tried to select out several that may also interest teachers and students of the romantic period and of Jane Austen's fiction. Jane Austen was the Porter's exact contemporary, but there's no evidence they ever met. Very little information about Jane Austen's life survives, as we know, some 160 letters, but there are actually about 8,000 total pages of material in the Pforzheimer's Jane Porter Papers alone. So it was tough to make some choices about what to give you a glimpse at here. There are just so many gems. This one we're looking at is the "Character of the Late Mrs. Robinson," who's usually styled the British [inaudible] extracted from a letter to a lady. It's a fascinating piece by Jane Porter, and it was written when she was in her later -- sorry, in her mid-20s. It's a moving five-page memorial to the writer Mary Robinson, who was a famous poet and novelist who just died at the age of 43 in the year 1800. So Mrs. Robinson had become a notorious figure as a married actress who then became the first mistress of the young Prince of Wales around 1780.

After he jilted her, she became a famous author, and by the late 1790s, she'd become an important mentor to the Porter Sisters. Robinson was, however, a very risky friend to have for a young, unmarried woman. The Porter Sisters would have been seen as guilty by association with Robinson, a so-called fallen woman. So Jane Porter privately found this mistreatment of fallen women very wrong, but when she was asked in polite company once whether she'd been a friend to Robinson, she denied it. She felt incredible guilt over that denial, and she tried to lessen her guilt, I think, by writing the memorial you see here. I described this episode more fully in "Sister Novelists," but the document itself shows that Jane Porter felt she couldn't put her name to any praise for Mrs. Robinson. She pretends her words are extracted from the letter of a lady, but they were actually her original words from her own pen. And she writes of Robinson as the most charming and most unfortunate of women in this piece. She writes of her domestic sorrows that led to her sacrificing her honor to the Prince of Wales. And Jane asks the world to remember her genius and forgive Robinson her errors, defending her as lovely Magdalene. And Jane had considered seeking anonymous publication for this memorial, but there's evidence that her sister, Maria, talked her out of it, fearing that too many people would recognize that Jane was the author. So it's a document that reveals a difficult episode of friendship, mentorship, and authorship and would be interesting to teach in any classroom unit on women writers, reputation, friendship, mentorship, and anonymity. The next document is more directly connected to Jane Austen's literary career, and it's a letter from royal librarian James Stanier Clarke to Jane Porter sent from Carlton House on March 24, 1821. So this is some four years after Jane Austen's death. And the name James Stanier Clarke might be familiar to those of you who know Austen because she also exchanged letters with Clarke. He was the clergyman librarian who tried to give her unwanted writing advice after she dedicated "Emma" to the Prince Regent in 1815 and visited Carlton House with Clarke, the librarian, as her host. So this Porter letter is dated six years after that, in 1821, and later that spring, the Porter Sisters themselves would accept a similar invitation from Clarke to tour Carlton House. The letter shows Jane Porter angling to get Clarke to ask the king, so he was no longer the Prince of Wales or the Prince Regent, but was now King George IV, to ask the king to allow her brother, Robert, to dedicate his next book by permission to his Royal Highness. Interestingly, it was Jane Porter writing and handling this matter. Jane and Maria both frequently did their brother's literary work for him as his agents and ghost writers, we might call them. So in this letter, Clarke asks Jane to promise that her brother's book will contain nothing of a political nature. And Jane, since she was the one secretly rewriting and editing this book, could probably make that promise. Her experiences with Clarke would end up changing the course of her literary career. Jane Austen has once refused Clarke's suggestion to write a historical novel about royal ancestors, but Jane Porter, when she was presented with a similar opportunity at Carlton House after meeting with Clarke, actually accepted such an invitation. And Porter, we now know, did so in the hope that the king would reward her with a royal pension. It was the same man who'd been the faithless lover of Mary Robinson 20 years before, yet Porter decided to take on this assignment, and my biography describes the aftermath of that choice. It's an episode that could be used with students to reveal how wise Jane Austen was to distance herself from Clarke and the king, and Clarke's letter could also show how difficult it was for a woman writer to say no to a royal representative or to try to gain royal favor and patronage during this period. The next document

is from a member of the Austen family itself. This is Jane Austen's younger brother, Charles, one of her naval brothers. Charles famously gave his sister's topaz crosses as gifts from his naval prize money. So this letter from Captain Charles Austen to Jane Porter is written a decade after Austen died, and scholar Ruth Knezevich and I published an essay about this, the relationship between the Porter Sisters and Charles Austen in the "Journal of Modern Philology," and this letter was crucial to our work. It suggests that Charles Austen intended to bring a letter of introduction from their brother, Robert, to the Porter women's cottage. And the two literary brothers, Charles and Robert, had recently met in South America and the West Indies and connected these two literary families. But Charles Austen says that he's been delayed from making his visit, having returned home to England to sick family members, and it's not known whether he ever made the visit. What is known from letters elsewhere is that Jane and Maria wanted to meet Charles because he was the brother of the late Jane Austen, whose fiction they so admired. So this letter from 1828 would make it clear to students that, contrary to long circulating myths, the Austen family was supportive of literary women, and that Jane Austen, herself, had many high-placed admirers in the first decades after her death. So this last letter would teach well alongside Austen's fiction, too, I think. It's from artist Charles Rivers, a man whose proposal of marriage Jane Porter has just rejected. His letter suggests he's taking the news very poorly, and it would be interesting to teach alongside Elizabeth Bennet's two rejected marriage proposals in "Pride and Prejudice," or alongside Captain Wentworth's letter to Anne Elliot at the end of "Persuasion." I can imagine students having very different responses to this approach and language from Mr. Rivers. He's writing this letter just after St. Valentine's Day in 1804, when Jane, who is then a 28-year-old bestselling novelist, was leaving her home in London to visit Bath, a notorious marriage market. So it's possible that Mr. Rivers was concerned Jane was going to receive a proposal of marriage there and was trying to get his in under the wire. But Mr. Rivers had known Jane Porter for years, and she never had any inkling that he was interested in her at all. And she confesses elsewhere to Maria that she finds Mr. Rivers to be a ridiculous, bothersome, obtuse, and pompous man, and I think his letter gives some sense of that. His response is addressing Jane as "my dearest of all dear friends." He complains about her calling him a friend shortly after that, however. He describes her rejection as "a most beautiful shock" and claims "I always thought our sentiments were reciprocal." His language starts to resemble a gothic novel. He tells her that for years he secluded himself from the world, and he writes, "Good God, with horror do I now see your letter which lays before me. Oh, this is insupportable. My hand trembles. My heart does cease to flow. My whole frame is struck as with death. Even that would be a pleasure." And he declares that he's going to have to remove himself from her, never intrude himself on her presence again. But this high-flung rhetoric is somewhat undercut by his PS, where he writes, "PS. At the request of your sister, I passed the evening at your home, and all was well last night." So if Rivers was hoping that Jane, as a great novelist, would be moved by his overwrought and cliched expressions of pain and passion, she absolutely wasn't. So these are just a few -- three forays into the stories that "Sister Novelists" pieced together from documents, and my publisher would absolutely want me to tell you that the book is now available for preorder in print and eBook and will be released on September 6, 2022. If you'd like to learn more, I'd welcome the chance to connect on social media or through my author website, [devoney.com](http://devoney.com), and I truly hope that "Sister Novelists" will

reach readers who will join me in efforts to bring back into view these trailblazing literary sisters who paved the way for Austen and the Brontes. The books should appeal, too, to viewers of Sanditon and Bridgerton who want to learn more about what real-life women writers faced during the tumultuous Regency period. So I absolutely couldn't have written this book without the help and vision of the Pforzheimer Collection and its staff, without the generous support of short-term fellowship from the New York Public Library. I'm so happy for this chance to express my gratitude publicly, and I look forward to continuing our chat with your questions.

CARTER Great. And joining us for the Q&A session is my boss, Liz Denlinger, the curator of the Pforzheimer Collection who's been our slide master. Liz, thanks for joining us. And you have a question for Devoney to start things off.

LIZ DENLINGER I do. I mean I think there are questions in the Q&A, but Devoney, that was fascinating, and I didn't know about the Mary Robinson. I don't know why. I should have known. But, anyway, totally fascinating. Fascinating that she couldn't own it. Kind of heartbreaking. But anyway, I thought I would ask, you know, since we've heard about the heartbreak and the failures, how do you think Jane Porter felt about her successes. I mean "Thaddeus of Warsaw" was, you know, the biggest after the -- well, before "The Scottish Chiefs." But those were her two most successful books, and I was just wondering what you could tell us about how she felt about being feted and being celebrated.

LOOSER Yeah, I think her character, which I hope I've been able to bring out in the biography, was she was very reticent, but at the same time, she was a very powerful individual. She was tall, and she could walk into a room and command it with her presence. She had a kind of regal, quiet presence. So I think she -- it took her a while to get used to celebrity, but I think there are parts of her letters that suggest that she eventually came to enjoy exerting her power, in some ways, publicly. But she usually did it through a kind of veneer of modesty as well. I mean, that was really important to her that she be understood as polite and modest. So I think she enjoyed some parts of celebrity very much, and other parts of it, especially early on, made her deeply uncomfortable. But there are lots of stories that she tells about what it was like to be looked at like an animal in the zoo at these literary parties as a celebrity.

NIGRO Thanks for starting off the questions, Liz. We do have a couple of questions in the chat, and if you have questions, please -- or in the Q&A tab. So if you have questions, please add them there. Our first one is from Sara [assumed spelling], who asks, "Devoney, do you have a favorite amongst the Porter Sisters novels?"

LOOSER I wonder if this Sara Faulkner. Anyway, am I allowed to say Sara is also a Porter scholar who's written a dissertation on the Porters. Hey, Sara. You know, this is a hard question because one of the things I want people to do is get a sense of the Porters' fiction, and so they published several books together, and "Coming Out; And the Field of Forty Footsteps" are two of their novels published together, and that's one that I often recommend to people as a favorite because then you can get a look at both of them at once. But I think, you know, that I have

many reasons for why I'd have other favorites. "Thaddeus of Warsaw" is a favorite and ought to be reread. I think it's very topical right now in that it's dealing with Eastern European refugees. And so I think this is a book that should really resonate in 2022. There are moments of absolute brilliance in it. I think maybe the hero cries a little bit too much for modern tastes, but maybe that's our problem.

NIGRO Nice. Another question is do you think the Porter Sisters would have been great friends with Jane Austen, and why do you think Jane Austen is known more than Jane Porter?

LOOSER That's a really good question. You know, I think everybody wants to believe that authors they love would like each other. So, you know, this probably says more about me, maybe, than these three figures. Certainly, the Porters we know, admired Austen's writing. Austen had one little sort of -- a little dig to make at one of Anna Maria's Porter's novels in her letters, and that's really the only evidence she left. I think they would have a lot to talk about, and so I'd like to think that they would have been friends. We know that in Jane Austen's earliest years, she was moderately successful as a novelist, but Jane Porter was actually the most famous Jane of the period where Jane Austen was first publishing anonymously. And I just think that's fascinating. I think I got only the first part of that question.

NIGRO The second part was why do you think she is -- why do you think Austen is known more than Porter?

LOOSER Yeah. I think some of what Austen has done has travelled forward more successfully, and I would say the comic part and the novel of manners parts have travelled forward, perhaps, better than the historical novel. And we see this in Sir Walter Scott's trajectory, too. I think fewer people read Scott today, in part because historical novels written in past centuries are kind of double removed, right? We're asking what does the 19th century think of the 16th century? And so I think it taxes us more to read historical novels from past centuries. But I think those of us who love historical fiction, it's absolutely worth doing. I would never want to say read Jane Porter instead of Jane Austen or read Anna Maria Porter instead of Jane Austen. I hope there's room for all of them.

NIGRO I've read a quote somewhere that says, "historical fiction is always a comment on the present." So I can see how that could age quickly. I have a question for Charlie, which is could you tell us about how you used these papers yourself when you were in grad school?

CARTER Well, I was teaching a class on special collections for library school students. This was before they were digitized. So I was teaching them how to sort of deal with library materials about which they knew very little. So I just sort of gave everyone a letter, told them nothing about it, and said, you know, transcribe it to the degree that you can. Try to figure out who wrote it, who it's to, where it came from, where it went, and it was a really good exercise in just encouraging these young soon-to-be librarians to sort of figure out as much as they can about an item that is not described in any way, which, as you know, Carmen, happens to us all the

time. I also think it's an exercise that could be really useful for other kinds of students, too, though, just as a thinking exercise.

NIGRO That's just absolutely good primary source analysis recommendation across the board. One more open question. "What would you tell the Porter Sisters?" I don't know what they mean, but let's see what you think.

LOOSER Well, I think I would tell them that their papers weren't saved in vain. You know, I think these papers have been languishing. I mean, certainly, they've been known of, but they've been languishing, largely unread, except by a small number of scholars, some of whom, again are here on this call, and I am glad to be part of this community with others working on this. But I think we'd want to tell the Porter Sisters that their papers were saved for a reason, and that I hope that, you know, that reason is that more of us can understand the joys and triumphs of their lives. So I'm glad that Liz asks me a question that allowed to bring those out, as well as the pains and difficulties of their lives, that they saved them in full color. And I think, in some ways, their letters are even more brilliant than their fiction. Their letters are honest. Their letters are detailed. And their letters just show the beautiful brilliance of this sisterly bond. So that's what I'd want the Porter Sisters to know, that that part of who they were has the opportunity to live on thanks to their saving those papers.

NIGRO What a nice note to end on. Thank you all for joining us today. I've dropped a few links into the chat for those who want to continue watching Doc Chats. There's some recordings. As well as the link to sign up for next week's Doc Chat. Next week we are -- I'll be hosting again, and we'll be exploring 125 years of the "Foverts," New York City's legendary Yiddish newspaper. We'll be joined by curator Lyudmila Sholokhova and NYU Professor Gennady Estraiikh. So without further ado, thank you so much for attending today. Before you go, we'd like to know -- or we're actually not doing the poll today. Links to these collection items and other resources, along with the video transcript of this episode will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which we will send out to all registrants. All previous episodes have been recorded and can be found on the NYPL blog as well. And Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Register for the next episode at the link in the chat and look for future Doc Chat event pages on NYPL's pro calendar, research newsletter, and social media. Thank you all once again for joining us today.