

Jane Austen—The Divine and the Donkey

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The Reverend James Stanier Clarke has always had bad press in Jane Austen circles. Various described as a nuisance, pompous, simple-minded and a blockhead,¹ he is generally perceived as a cross between Mr. Collins and Sir Walter Elliot. However, he endured three years aboard a British man-o'-war, survived twenty years of royal service under a capricious and demanding royal master, the Prince Regent, whilst earning the respect of one of the greatest English painters of any age. Perhaps it is time for a reappraisal of this much-maligned man, who was, after all, the first published author Jane Austen ever met.

Born in Minorca in 1767² (not 1765 as Chapman states) where his father was chaplain to the governor, James Stanier Clarke was the eldest of four children. His brother, Edward, a brilliant mineralogist, tended to overshadow him throughout his life. The family removed to England and at the age of 23, after taking holy orders, James was appointed to the rectory of Preston in Sussex. After five peaceful years, and to the family's surprise, Clarke entered the Royal Navy as a chaplain.³ Appointed to H.M.S. *Impétueux*, a seventy-four-gun, third-rate vessel,⁴ he sailed out to join the Channel Fleet. Interestingly, his ship, formerly the *Amérique*, was given to France by the United States, and captured by the English in 1794.⁵ It was on board H.M.S. *Impétueux* that James served under the “distinguished naval character about the court” whom he described in a letter to Jane Austen some twenty years later.⁶ Alas, the truth was less prosaic than Clarke would admit, and, in fact, the man was a procurer for the Prince Regent.⁷

Captain John Willett Payne, as brave as he was dissolute, had seen action as captain of H.M.S. *Russell* during the Glorious First of June battle in 1794, for which he was decorated. He was, however, a bad influence on the Prince Regent⁸ and a prime mover in the illegal royal marriage with Maria Fitzherbert. Other women were introduced to the Prince by Captain Payne, rather less distinguished than Mrs. Fitzherbert. “Jacko” Payne was much taken with Clarke and ultimately brought him to the notice of the Prince Regent, who appointed him domestic chaplain and librarian, thus ending Clarke's naval career.

A pastel portrait by John Russell, executed about this time, shows James as a smart young man, with his own hair powdered, looking very pleased with himself: aquiline nose, haughty eyebrows and altogether just the type for a Royal Librarian.⁹ The commencement of royal duties also coincided with his publishing career. *Naval sermons preached on board H.M.S. Impétueux*, published in 1798, was quickly followed by a discourse on Ireland, more sermons, a history of shipwrecks and five other publications, totalling some nine works published by the time he encountered Jane Austen. His *Life of Admiral Nelson* in 1809 was an important work, and one shamelessly plundered by Robert Southey for his study. However, poor Stanier Clarke

fell into the trap of larding known facts with hearsay anecdotes; this weakness, coupled with a plodding literary style, did not bring him the credit he deserved.¹⁰

Life at Court, however, suited James very well. He revelled in the bustle of the Pavilion at Brighton, society at Carlton House and frequent invitations to Petworth House, the home of Lord Egremont. It was at Petworth House that a very curious event took place, during 1813. Members of the Royal Family were staying with Lord Egremont when news came through of a glorious victory by the Allies at Leipzig. The royal brothers, in high spirits, persuaded Clarke, after he had retired, to come down again to toast the Allied victory. Meanwhile a young donkey was tied by its legs and introduced into his bed, where it lay very quietly till the parson again retired to rest. The uproar that ensued can well be imagined, and a print circulated in 1814, showing the event, scandalized the cloth!¹¹

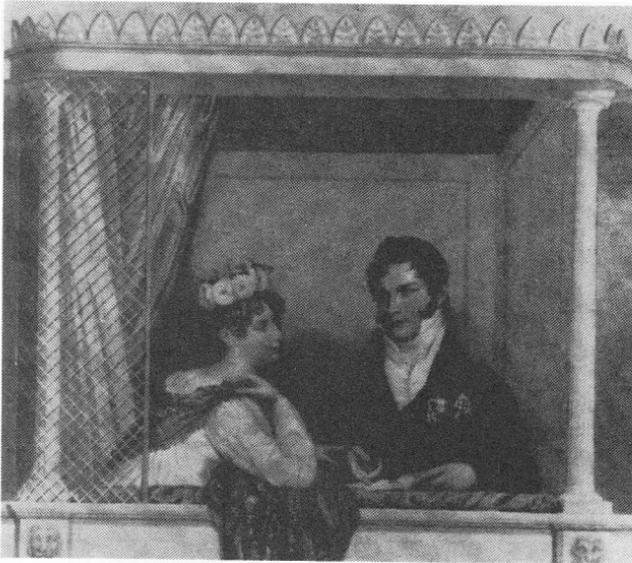
A more sober event during 1813 for James Stanier Clarke was when he was empowered to offer Walter Scott the Poet Laureateship. Scott gracefully declined the post in favour of Robert Southey.¹² (Scott's modesty and talent were rewarded seven years later when he was knighted.) Robert Southey was the author who termed Clarke "a most extraordinary blockhead" when both men were in the running for the post of Historiographer Royal in 1812. The Prince Regent gave preference to his librarian and Clarke used the title thereafter.

The Spring of 1815 saw Clark escorting Walter Scott on a tour of the fabled Carlton House, and later a private dinner was given by the Prince Regent for Scott with every civility bestowed on him.¹³ Just six months later came Jane Austen's invitation to visit the library at Carlton House, with James Stanier Clarke again in attendance. No dinner from the Prince for Jane, but Clarke made the visit comfortable. What did they discuss? Walter Scott's visit, Waterloo, the weather, Miss Austen's new book, the Stuart manuscripts? Did Jane go unescorted? Perhaps her brother Henry's house-keeper, Madam Bignon, attended her, as Henry himself was ill.

All fascinating details of the visit are lost in the mists of time, except the sure knowledge that Clarke invited Jane to dedicate her next novel to his royal master. Jane's letter a week later to confirm this¹⁴ brought forth Clarke's request for a future novel to include a clergyman not unlike himself!¹⁵ Jane did not reply immediately, but in December she was anxious about the binding of the dedication copy of *Emma* and wrote to Clarke to assure him of the early dispatch of this copy to Carlton House.¹⁶ In reply James again importuned Jane to write a clergyman into the next novel plus a naval character! His own book, *James the Second*, was about to be published, and he was escaping the critics by visiting Petworth "where your Praises have long been sounded as they ought to be."¹⁷

Three months passed before Clarke wrote to Jane from Brighton to thank her for *Emma*. The Prince Regent and Lord St. Helens, a distinguished diplomatist, headed the list of nobles who praised *Emma* and its author. More to the point, James Stanier Clarke was about to take promotion as Private English Secretary and Chaplain to Prince Leopold,¹⁸ suitor to Princess

Charlotte (who was at this time second in line to the throne). England was full of excitement at the prospect of a royal marriage. Princess Charlotte, a wayward girl, had fallen for the young Prince of Coburg when he had arrived in London in the suite of the Tsar during 1814¹⁹ (Jane wrote to Cassandra: “do not be trampled to death in running after the Emperor”).²⁰ The Royal Family was hoping this marriage would restore the public esteem lost through the illness (madness) of the King, the separation of the Regent and his wife, and the royal princes living with dubious mistresses.



Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold at the Opera. From the painting by George Dawe.

Clarke has often been ridiculed for asking Jane Austen to write a historical romance around the House of Cobourg [*sic*],²¹ but he was more astute than he has been reputed to be. What could be more charming than a respectable authoress such as Miss Austen giving the seal of approval to this young couple's alliance? The great mass of people wanted a respectable royal family and this was an opportunity to exploit the situation. The home purchased for the newlyweds was Claremont Park in Surrey. Jane Austen had seen the property in May 1813 en route to London,²² and so could picture the happy couple in the year before the Princess died in childbirth. By that time, November 1817, Jane Austen, too, was dead.

It is touching to note that James Stanier Clarke did not forget the modest author, for he acquired *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* when the two novels were published together just after Jane's death. His copy is still



The photograph of the memorial tablet in Tillington Church taken by E. Bragge (copyright Chris Viveash).

extant.²³ Clarke returned to the Prince Regent's household until 1821 when he was made a Canon of Windsor. Coupling this function with his duties as Rector of Tillington, a small parish near Petworth, he passed his later years with much less bustle than during the Regency. He died in 1834 at Brighton, aged 67. His funeral at Tillington was attended by his flock and by the painter J. M. W. Turner,²⁴ who was a frequent visitor to Petworth and who enjoyed Clarke's company.

No obituary appeared in the *Times* or local newspapers; just a few bald facts were published in the "Clergy Deceased" pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.²⁵ Although Jane Austen made gentle fun of him to the Austen family, in her letter of 1 April 1816 she termed herself his sincere friend.²⁶ Clarke's own words, perhaps, must be his epitaph: "Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature—no man's Enemy but his own."²⁷

NOTES

¹ Marghanita Laski, *Jane Austen and her World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), p. 104. David Rhydderch, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Art* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), p. 73. Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 32. Jack Simmons, *Southey* (London: Collins, 1945), p. 138.

² Tillington burial register for the year 1834, page 39, entry number 311.

- ³ *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1887), Vol. 10, pp. 429-30.
- ⁴ Third-rate refers to the guns a vessel could carry, *not* its condition or speed. Capt. T. D. Manning and Cdr. C. F. Walker, *British Warships' Names* (London: Putnam, 1959), p. 22.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- ⁶ R. W. Chapman (editor), *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), Letter 120a, p. 445.
- ⁷ Shane Leslie (editor), *The Letters of Mrs Fitzherbert* (London: Burns Oates, 1940), Vol. 1, p. 109: "reviled as a pimp."
- ⁸ *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 44, 1895, pp. 111-12, entry for John Willett Payne (1752-1803).
- ⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, European Ornament Gallery, inspected June 1993.
- ¹⁰ As 3 above.
- ¹¹ Francis W. Steer (editor), *The Letters of John Hawkins and Samuel and Daniel Lysons, 1812-1830* (Chichester: West Sussex County Council, 1966), p. 13. The engraving of this incident entitled "*The Divine and the Donkey—or Petworth Frolicks*" was published by W. N. Jones, 5 Newgate Street, London, in 1814.
- ¹² H. J. C. Grierson (editor), *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, 1811-1814* (London: Constable, 1932), Vol. 3, p. 344.
- ¹³ The Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, *Memoirs of the Court of England during the Regency* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1856), Vol. 2, p. 122.
- ¹⁴ R. W. Chapman: Letter 113, p. 429.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter 113a, p. 430.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter 120, p. 442.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter 120a, p. 444.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter 126a, p. 451.
- ¹⁹ The Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, Vol. 2, p. 155.
- ²⁰ R. W. Chapman: Letter 96, p. 388.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, Letter 126a, p. 451.
- ²² *Ibid.*, Letter 79, p. 307.
- ²³ King's College Library, Cambridge. Inspected September 1993, by courtesy of Peter Jones, Librarian.
- ²⁴ Jeremy Godwin, *Guide to All Hallows Church, Tillington* (Midhurst: Kerryprint, 1992), p. 4.
- ²⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, New Series, Vol. 3, January-June 1835, p. 328.
- ²⁶ R. W. Chapman: Letter 126, p. 452.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter 113a, p. 430.

The Royal Kalendar 1815 (London: Stockdale, 1815) shows Stanier Clarke at the head of over one hundred chaplains in the Prince Regent's household (p. 138). Also a certain Captain Cha. J. Austen is mentioned on page 166.