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A Stabbing in Chawton, Jane Austen and Emma

A brutal act like stabbing is not the kind of behaviour that Jane Austen condones in her novels. Yet in March, 1814, just weeks before Fanny Price's exemplary conduct in Mansfield Park (May 1814) could be judged by readers as a testament to her integrity or to her primness, Jane Austen supported the acquittal of a ten year old Chawton boy accused of stabbing a young man.

In one of her few letters to her sister Cassandra in that year, she refers to her brother Edward's 'correspondence with Mr Wickham on the Baigent business', and is pleased that a lawyer friend of the Honourable William Wickham (1761-1840), who 'is to be on the Grand Jury', has written letters helpful to the boy's expected acquittal on the first charge.¹ Having read the letters herself, Jane Austen tells her sister that '[t]hey are such thinking, clear, considerate Letters as Frank might have written', so 'he must be an Excellent Man'.² Frank was reputedly Jane Austen's favourite brother, who rose to be Admiral of the Fleet in the Royal Navy, and regularly corresponded with her. Jane Austen's comment that '[t]his business must hasten an Intimacy between his [Wickham's] family and my Brother's [Edward's]' suggests that she almost views the violent act as fortuitous, since it might lead to the elevation of Edward's social standing. Her subsequent plea to Cassandra to speak of it to no-one as the letters sent to Edward had been done so 'quite confidentially' since she believed Mr Wickham's friend to 'be one of the Judges',³ reveals the power of patronage even in the courts of law, provided that it was discreet.

The 'Baigent business' was the stabbing of Stephen Mersh by James Baigent(t), who was the son of William (1765-1838) and his second wife Elizabeth Baigent (d. 1845) of Baigens farm, where the Baigen family had lived for over a hundred years.⁴ James was tried in Winchester in March 1814, having been detained in custody at Prowling Devizes for over a month, according to a letter to William Wickham from Sir Thomas Miller (c.1734-September 1816),⁵ who was the Member of Parliament for Portsmouth from 1806 until his death in 1816, and the Baronet of Chichester from 1772 also until his death, and was thus a very influential man. Sir Thomas wrote on February 5 1814 to William Wickham to arrange a meeting with him in Alton to investigate the 'evidence brought against' James.⁶ Sir Thomas had clearly been a family friend of the Austens for some time as a visit by him in 1809 is recorded on the same day as Jane Austen's father had gone to Winchester to see his son George, who had severe learning difficulties and did not live with his family.⁷ James was acquitted at the end of March and pronounced a free man,⁸ so the intercedence of Jane Austen's family and friends had proved to be effective.

The stabbing incident took place after Jane Austen had begun work on Emma (1815) in January 1814, in which in Volume Three, Chapter Three, she describes how Harriet Smith was assaulted 'by half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy'—all of them gypsies camping near Highbury.⁹ This is the only incident in Jane Austen's fiction that is remotely violent. The event '[w]ithin half an hour...was known all over Highbury'.¹⁰ The

small community was aghast, although Harriet recovers and no lasting harm is done. This incident is one of many in *Emma* reminding us that Emma Woodhouse's privileged and sheltered life is not shared by most people. In fact the principal lesson which Mr Knightley teaches Emma is to treat others in an inferior position—like Harriet—with sufficient respect to help them without raising their expectations too high to risk disappointment. He also positively encourages the marital match between Harriet Smith and a respected local farmer, Robert Martin, a man with 'good sense and good principles'.¹¹ Robert Martin's social position and reputation resembled those of Jane Austen's neighbour, William Baigent, James's father, who was described as "many years a respectable inhabitant".¹²

It is possible that the early intervention of Jane Austen's family and friends, made with the kindest of intentions towards the farming Baigent family, did not help James Baigent in the long run. Four years after his acquittal and after the death of Jane Austen, James was imprisoned for three months for being an accomplice to James May, convicted of stealing a duck, who received a prison sentence of six months.¹³ After his father's death at the age of 73 in 1838, James moved away with his widowed mother to Millbrook. He was described by his step-sister Jane Andrews as 'very odd and queer during the time and often in low spirits' when, in late September 1851, now 30 years of age, he went up to "Chawton Shrave" with a gun and umbrella'; '[h]is body was later found in nearby woodland with "part of the head blown away".¹⁴

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¹ Deirdre le Faye (Ed.), Jane Austen's Letters (Oxford, 1997), 258-9.

² Ibid, 259.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jane Hurst, Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society Newsletter, Vol. 44, Autumn 2005.: <http://www.fieldclub.hants.org.uk/publications/news44/build44a.html>

⁵ Sir Thomas Miller, Letter to the Right Honourable William Wickham, February 5, 1814: 38M49/6/16/6 (Hampshire Record Office, Winchester).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Deirdre le Faye, A Chronology of Jane Austen and her Family (Cambridge, 2006), 374.

⁸ Robin Vick, 'Rural Crimes', Jane Austen Society: Collected Reports 1996-2000 (Chawton, 2000), Vol. 5, 43; Deirdre le Faye, A Chronology of Jane Austen and her Family (Cambridge, 2006), 476.

⁹ Jane Austen, Emma (New York, 1993), 214.

¹⁰ Ibid, 215.

¹¹ Ibid, 305.

¹² Hampshire Chronicle (17 September 1838), cited by Jane Hurst, in Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society Newsletter, Vol. 44, Autumn 2005.

¹³ Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Saturday July 18, 1818.

¹⁴ Hampshire Chronicle (15 November 1851), cited by Jane Hurst in the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society Newsletter, Vol. 44, Autumn 2005.