

Murder Most Foul!

Jane and the Waterloo Map

By Stephanie Barron.

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Review by Sue Parrill.

In this her thirteenth Jane Austen mystery novel, Stephanie Barron provides her usual suspenseful and historically accurate tale with Jane Austen as the detective who unravels the mystery, this time getting hit on the head in the process. The novel begins in London on November 13, 1815, only five months after the Battle of Waterloo, and concludes on November 23. At this time, Austen was actually in London with the three-fold aims of negotiating with publisher John Murray for the publication of her new novel, *Emma*, of proofreading the novel, and of helping to nurse her brother, Henry, who has been ill of a fever.

While on a visit to Carlton House, the Prince Regent's luxurious London home, at the invitation of the Prince Regent's chaplain, James Stanier Clarke, Jane finds a dying man, Colonel MacFarland, on the floor in the library, who utters the words "Waterloo map" as he dies. Jane immediately sets out to discover how this man, a hero of Waterloo, died and who killed him. After initially having her ideas about the cause of death rebuffed by the court physician, Matthew Baillie, she wins his confidence and his assistance. Another valuable ally is her old friend and

admirer Raphael West, whom she met in Barron's last novel, *Jane and the Twelve Days of Christmas*. During the course of the novel, Jane, West, and Henry Austen pay a visit to Sir Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, to give him the Waterloo map and to involve him in the quest for the murderer. About half way through the novel, Jane's niece Fanny joins her aunt in London and proves to be as intrepid as her aunt in seeking to solve the mystery. Fanny even participates in a scheme to unmask the artist who drew the Waterloo map.

As anyone familiar with Jane Austen's life during this period knows, James Stanier Clarke was the Prince's chaplain, and at the time of the novel, he invited her to visit Carlton House and suggested that she dedicate her next novel to the Prince. Although Austen despised the Prince, she agreed to the dedication, which her publisher concocted, but she politely declined to write the novel about a clergyman which Clarke suggested should be her next literary effort. Barron's characterization of Clarke, whom Jane calls a "ridiculous little man," is reminiscent of Mr. Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice*. Matthew Baillie was also an historical figure, as was Raphael West, a painter and the elder son of a more famous painter, Benjamin West. However, that Raphael West and Jane Austen had tender feelings toward each other, as the novel suggests, or that West was a government spy, as he is said to be in this novel and in Barron's last novel, is entirely unsubstantiated. He appears to have stepped into the role filled in earlier novels by the fictitious "Gentleman Rogue," Sir Roger Trowbridge, also a government spy, for whom Jane had feelings but who died in the seventh novel of the series, *Jane and the Ghosts of Netley*. The two servants in James's household are also historical figures—Madame Bignon, to whom Austen left 50 pounds in her will, and Manon, who had been the servant of James's wife, Eliza.

The novelist supplies an exotic poison, a mysterious map, a secret code, a hidden

treasure, and various enigmatic minor characters to keep the reader and the amateur sleuths off balance.

There's plenty of danger, Jane herself being hit on the head while entering her residence (and seemingly more concerned with the damage to her hat than to her head), Baillie apparently ill at the hands of the poisoner, and West immured and on the verge of suffocation. However, as we expect, Jane solves the case and saves her friend's life.

As is usual for Ms. Barron, the novel is full of telling details about Austen's interests and activities in London in 1815. She is proud of her ensemble on the day she visits Carlton House—her Prussian blue French wool dress with dull bronze trim, her hussar bonnet, shoes in dull bronze, and a sable muff. She goes shopping with Fanny to Wilding and Kent, linen drapers, in Grafton House, on the corner of New Bond and Grafton Streets. She is pleased to have enough money from the sale of her books to indulge in a few luxuries. She is also impatient for chapters of *Emma* to arrive from Murray so that she may begin proofreading.

Possibly because of the London setting, the presence of famous personages, and the ties with Austen's actual experiences, this novel may be the best of a really good series. Too bad that our detective has only two more years to live, but perhaps the baton may pass to Fanny.

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