

International News

GREEN AUSTEN

by Colin Carman

The version familiar to most readers of Jane Austen is that her fiction is concerned solely with social manners and customs, to the exclusion of her characters' natural environs—but that version bears little resemblance to reality.

My book project, tentatively titled *Green Austen*, repositions Austen in the context of contemporary environmentalist theory by focusing on the role of the English countryside, specifically dirt and grounds, in her juvenilia, major novels, and unfinished prose works. The research library in Chawton House provided me with an array of rare works related to landscape design, botany, and Romantic-era theories of nature and the sublime.

I brought only one of Austen's novels with me from home: *Mansfield Park*, the earthiest of her major works. Fanny Price rhapsodizes on what she calls the "sublimity of Nature," sublime enough that "all painting and music" and "poetry" can be left behind. Always deferential, Fanny attributes such nature enthusiasm to Edmund, but it is she who teaches her future husband to "feel in some degree."

Earlier in *Mansfield Park*, the sixth chapter is even more precisely detailed as Austen gives us the historical context for Fanny's resistance to what was termed landscape "improvement" and her embrace for, and surrender to, all of nature wild and free. Austen even names names: Humphry Repton (1752–1818), the landscape gardener whom the Crawfords recommend to the wealthy but dimwitted Mr. Rushworth. The head gardener at Jane Austen's House Museum, Celia Simpson, reminds us that Repton designed the grounds at Mrs. Austen's cousin's estate, Stoneleigh Abbey, in Coventry, which Jane Austen visited in 1806. Repton was fashionable but also controversial in his day, for he helped to shift the garden, and the practice of landscape gardening, from the exclusive domain of aristocrats to the middle classes.

Of particular interest to me is how Repton's reputation for improvement joins Austen's major motif—that is, the project of female self-improvement and the pursuit of happiness. Each of her bonneted heroines can be seen as a kind of "before and after," akin to the leather-bound "Red Books" that Repton created for his 200 or more clients. These were the original watercolors of the estate with his modifications overlaying the grounds.

I traveled to the Hampshire Record Office to examine the poem "Dirt and Slime," written by James Edward Austen-Leigh, Jane



Colin Carman at Chawton House

Austen's nephew and the family biographer, preserved in his original hand. Mocking the proto-Romantic tone of his own father's poetry, Austen-Leigh writes

For much he praised each noble tree
Each hillock, valley, down and lea
And all such daisyish stuff
But the tenacious dirt and slime ...
I ne'er can praise enough.

Green Austen is an effort to reconceive, and to update, the 19th century's greatest British novelist in terms that are urgently 21st century. Austen gives us glimpses of that basic "sublimity of Nature," not merely as a backdrop but as a living and breathing entity that unites and levels all living things. Austen's fiction highlights our sensitivity to nature—and without that fundamental insight, we go on at our peril.

Colin Carman, PhD, is an assistant professor of English at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, Colorado. In 2019, he received the JASNA International Visitor Program fellowship, which provides support to work on a creative or scholarly project in Austen's village of Chawton, England, for up to six weeks. He earned his PhD and MA from the University of California, Santa Barbara.