

Report on JASNA meeting 16 November 2013

On an extremely cold and snowy day twenty-five members and guests attended our meeting. In our first presentation, Margaret Crichton and Randie Lind introduced their topic for group discussion, 'The Gaining of Experience'. Margaret talked about contemporary 'experience': a value on virginity in unmarried ladies but flagrant infidelity amongst the married leaders of society. Randie spoke to the experience opportunities for men before marriage: prostitutes and mistresses, dancers, models and artistes. We divided into groups; discussion was summed up by the group leaders. Group 1 concluded that experience for the upper classes was not necessary as status was more important than passion. But lower class women had to do the best they could to raise their position (e.g. Lucy Steele). Group 2 discussed Mrs Clay, experienced and conniving – if she had had an affair with young Elliott would he have abandoned her? And was Mr Knightley always in love with Emma – or when did he have his epiphany? Group 3 found that Mr Wickham was the most experienced and that Mr Darcy may have had a mistress – but poor Mr Collins had no experience at all and most likely suffered from Asperger's syndrome. Group 4 thought that Mr Knightley (the perfect man for Jane Austen!) and Emma would have been the local leaders in kindness and charity, rather than the Eltons.

After tea Professor George Colpitts (University of Calgary) presented a most interesting and informative talk entitled 'The Arctic Absurd: Nineteenth-Century Literature and the Debate about the North-West Passage 1800-1850', examining the influence and impact of Arctic exploration on writing and art. The Arctic fuelled Britain's romantic impulse and fascinated Victorians – voyages represented Britain's outward gaze.

Colpitts described the origins of interest in the North-West Passage. Ferdinand Magellan had sailed round South America in 1520 and had found a passage (the Strait of Magellan) – so why would there not be a complementary passage in the north also? Early cartographers such as Ortelius and Mercator had mapped an ice-free passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the north – and these maps, with their challenging possibilities, fired imaginations. In the early eighteenth century Sir Arthur Dobbs, an Irish MP, started to push for exploration and initiated the word 'passage', a much more evocative word than 'strait' or 'channel'. The government offered a prize for the location of this passage.

Colpitts went on to outline the part played by Sir John Barrow, second secretary to the Admiralty and founder member of the Royal Society (who diverted naval resources to exploration in the north), and other influential powers in pursuing the government-funded quest for a North-West Passage against a growing flood of opposition expressed in the form of satire, both in print and art, from those who believed that such exploration was futile. The nay-sayers did not believe that Britain needed expensive Arctic exploration to prove British ethos; and a minor war raged in the press, such periodicals as the *Quarterly Review* actually defaming such eminent explorers as John Ross. In the end the detractors prevailed; but the geographical knowledge and awareness gained by the explorations for both the North-West Passage and the fate of the last Franklin expedition were enormous – and naval expertise was tested.

The Arctic is again in international news, imposing itself on the popular imagination, just as in the nineteenth century, since the planting of the Russian flag under the North Pole and the ongoing debate over sovereignty of nations in the region. And, in a curious link between past and present, Parks Canada continues to search for the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, Franklin's lost ships.