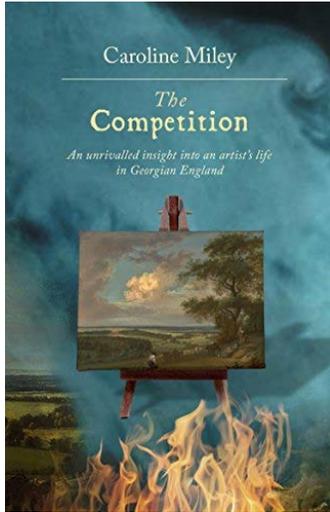


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Miley, Caroline. *The Competition*. Acacia Ridge, Qld: Greenslade Creations, 2016. ISBN# 9781925516333. Paperback. \$17.99/£13.99. Also available as an eBook. \$4



Many of our readers will be familiar with Caroline Miley. For those who do not, Caroline is a long time contributor to the Napoleon Series, who quickly became known for being our resident expert on art of the era. As importantly, she was the individual who conceived and ran the annual Napoleon Series Trivia and Humor Contest! This contest gave our readers an opportunity to test their knowledge on Napoleonic trivia and also demonstrate their sense of humor. The latter could be quite tricky because our readership is multi-national and humor sometimes does not always translate well or cross borders. . . especially since the two judges were Australian and American! For those who want to take a walk down memory lane, you can check out the first contest at:

[The 10th Anniversary of the Napoleon Series Celebration!](#)

However I digress. When Caroline told me about her book it sparked my interest. Which is a bit unusual. My taste in fiction tends to be historical military fiction, modern thrillers, and science fiction. Knowing that she was an accomplished art historian of the era I was curious to see if she would write a novel that both covered art and kept my interest. I half expected something similar to Jane Austen. I was pleasantly surprised! *The Competition* is the story of 31 year-old artist, Edward Armiger, who makes his living painting landscapes. He is good at what he does but has not attracted a rich patron who will take him to the next level. So he lives day-to-day or one could say painting-to-painting. He has to produce a painting that someone wants to buy or he will go hungry. One day an announcement is made by the British Institution, a society formed in 1803 to promote the art works of living and dead artists, that there will be a grand art competition. Its theme would be “The Spirit of the Present Age”. Any artist can enter a painting and all paintings would be judged on its merit and how it captured the theme. To ensure fairness, the judges would not know who painted any of the entries. The winner would receive a major commission and most likely an invitation to join the Institution.

The book is set during the Napoleonic Wars specifically during the first half of 1812. Except for about one year of peace in 1803, England has been at war with France for 18 years. Despite all its victories at sea, the country has had only limited success on the European continent. Wellington has forced France and its allies out of Portugal, but the reign of Napoleon is at its zenith, stretching from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Vistula River. With no end to the war in sight and the people have become war-weary. . . not so

much because of the casualties or even defeats, but the effect of it on the economy. British manufacturers, especially those in textile industry, are greatly dependent on foreign trade and most of the European markets have been closed to them by the French.

The time is also the beginning of Industrial Revolution. One of the book's subplots is the impact of the mechanization of the textile industry on the life of the traditional workers who are being replaced by machines. Many are thrown out of work. Suddenly they find themselves and their families hungry and eventually evicted from their homes when they cannot pay their rent. Soon the desperate workers take matters in their own hands and begin destroying the machines, burning mills, and even attacking the factory owners. These disaffected workers become known as Luddites. Eventually the military was brought in to restore order and lives are lost.

The author does a superb job of recreating life in the Regency Era. She uses Edward Armiger as bridge between not only the upper and middle classes, but also the working class and the poor. Early in the book he accepts a commission to document the building of an industrialist's new mansion in a series of paintings. His new patron is one of the nouveau riche who has made a fortune in the textile industry. While Edward is painting landscapes he also does drawings of the new machines and meets many of the workers. The more he sees their plight, the more he wants to help. Almost by accident he becomes involved with the Luddites. Soon Mr. Armiger has a problem. He earns his living by selling paintings to the upper class, to do this he has to paint things they want to buy. Yet as he is drawn into the changing world of the workers, the less interest he has in painting things that will sell.

Two things makes *The Competition* makes the book stand out. The first is the immense amount of research Ms. Miley has done to create the little details of life during that period. By doing so, she puts the reader in the shoes of the artist. She takes you into the coffee houses and taverns that the artists frequent for meals and drinks, but where they also go to discuss the latest news of the day, especially that which will affect them. Here Mr. Armiger catches up on the latest gossip and the politics of the world of art, such as who will be invited to join the British Institution this year? Whose work is considered too mundane or controversial for society? And what will be next year's trends?

The second strength of the book is the author's knowledge of art of the period and the techniques used to create it. Ms. Miley does this by taking the reader through Mr. Armiger's process from the moment he has the idea for the painting to its final framing. For example there are anecdotes about Mr. Armiger visiting shops that sell the pigments that he needs for his paints. The conversation with the merchant centers around which pigments will work the best for the effect he is trying to achieve with the painting, but also which ones he can afford. Once the pigments are bought the author returns to his studio and the narrative then describes the various methods he uses to grind the pigments and mix with a variety of oils to produce the paint. Because the author spends so much time on these details, the reader is left with a greater appreciation of what it took to make the great paintings of the time.

The Competition is not just a book. In addition to being an extremely talented story-teller, the author has not limited her tale to just words. Ms. Miley has also created a website that allows the reader to see the many famous paintings and places that she writes about. One of the paintings that is mentioned many times in the book is Benjamin West's painting of "Christ Healing the Sick" which debuted in 1812. Another is a contemporary painting of the interior of the British Institution by Thomas Rowlandson showing art students making copies of the art hanging there.¹ She even gets a bit whimsical and has a contemporary print of the Old Slaughter Coffee House, where Mr. Armiger spends much of his free time meeting with his friends. You can access the website at [Caroline Miley Writer](#).

Caroline Miley has a crafted a magnificent story about art and politics in England during the early 19th Century. Her passion for art and history comes through in every paragraph and because of this the reader will be drawn in to the story from the start! Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: November 2017

¹ Considering Ms. Miley never mentioned a female artist in the book, I was surprised by the number of female students in the painting.