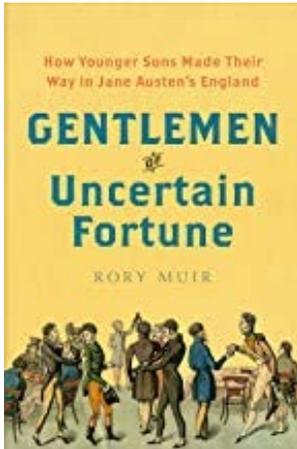


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Muir, Rory. *Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune: How Younger Sons Made Their Way in Jane Austen's England*. New Haven: Yale University, 2019. 384 pages. \$35. ISBN: 9780300244311

“The rule was the eldest son entered the Church, the second the Navy, the youngest was articled to a noted attorney.”¹



In the late 18th and early 19th Centuries families of the aristocracy and the gentry tended to be much larger than those of the 21st Century. Laws and tradition ensured that, when applicable, the eldest son inherited any title that his father held and usually his estate. Even if the father wanted to equitably distribute his wealth among his children he was often restricted by what he could because his land and property was “entailed”, which meant it he could not sell it and had to pass it on to his oldest son or if there was no sons to the eldest nephew. For the eldest son who stood to inherit everything, this was the way things were meant to be. For the sons, who inherited nothing but their family name, this meant that unless steps had been taken to ensure they had some

kind of occupation to support themselves, they would be destitute and condemned to a life of poverty. While

Their father and after his death, their elder brother, might give them some help in establishing themselves in a career, but they would be expected to become independent and make enough money to be able to support a wife and family, before they could contemplate marriage. What would they do for a living? What careers were open to the younger sons of good families in Briatain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? How could a gentleman work for his living without ceasing to be a gentleman?”²

Rory Muir attempts to answer these questions in this book. It should be noted that it only looks at the sons, because the daughters were expected to marry and be supported by their husbands. Furthermore, “The focus is on young men born in the second half of the eighteenth century, and in particular the generation who came of age around 1790, just before the long war with France broke out in 1793. This was the generation of the Duke of Wellington and Jane Austen and her brothers; of George Canning and Lord Castlereagh; of Walter Scott and William Wordsworth. . .”³

¹ *The London Tradesman*, 1847. Dr. Muir says this was an exaggeration and that there was no rule.

² Pages viii - ix

³ Page ix

Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune examines in detail at the various career paths that the sons could take. Many may be familiar with the army, but the author also looks at:

- The Church
- Medicine
- The Law
- Banking and Commerce
- Civil Office
- The Navy
- India

For each of them the author examines

How it was decided what career the son would choose.

Who was likely to choose that career.

What the social implications of having it were, because some considered beneath the aristocracy.

What would it cost the father to set him up? (In many ways it was similar to buying an apprenticeship that a middle or working class father would have to pay for his sons.) These costs could be quite expensive. . . a commission in the army would cost a minimum of £400 or more.

Additionally, Mr. Muir delves into such topics as

The different paths within the occupation. For example if the son was interested in the law, does he become a barrister, an attorney, or a solicitor? And if so, how does he do it?

What were the chances of success with in each of the careers? What were the risks? (For the army and navy these risks were considerable).

How much money could the individual expect to earn?

What the impact of having relatives or family friends who can help him in his career. (This patronage was often called influence.)

The author uses numerous contemporary accounts to bring to life the experiences of the men who chose these careers. You can read in their own words why they chose the occupation, the feelings about their work, and problems they encountered over the years and how they solved or did not solve them.

Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune is a fascinating study of a topic that is often mentioned in passing in social histories, memoirs, letters, and diaries of the period, yet few books talk about it in detail. *Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune* not only provides background for those interested in determining why an individual became a clergyman, military officer, a lawyer, doctor, or banker; but also what his life was like once he joined the profession. .

On a side note, this would be a great gift for fans of Jane Austen or the Brönte Sisters.
Highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: September 2019