

Review: Rory Muir, *Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune: How Younger Sons Made Their Way in Jane Austen's England* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2019) 384pp. ISBN 978-0-300-24431-1, £25.00.

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READERS OF *PRIDE and Prejudice* know that the Bennet family's lack of a male heir profoundly impacted the novel's protagonists. Yet Rory Muir's *Gentleman of Uncertain Fortune* indicates that had the Bennet family had five sons (rather than daughters), their fate would have been almost as precarious.¹

In his latest monograph, Muir explores important social questions surrounding the fates of the younger sons in the landed gentry who were 'spares who never became heirs'.² Muir acknowledges that this is not 'history from below', and that even describing it as 'history from the middle' is misleading.³ Instead, the book identifies a sub-section of Georgian society which has been neglected in the historiography, focusing not on the new blood of the nouveau riche that grew in prominence in Hanoverian society, but on how the 'old blood' tried, and often failed, to annex space for themselves in an increasingly prosperous country. Many biographies have explored the careers of individual notaries, soldiers and politicians, such as Muir's own two-volume biography of the Duke of Wellington, and Jacqueline Reiter's 2017 book on John Pitt, Earl of Chatham.⁴ Meanwhile, others have examined specific career paths in depth, with notable examples including Peter Mathias's 1984 work, and Alannah Tomkins's 2011 article on the legal profession.⁵ However, *Gentleman of Uncertain Fortune* is the first

¹ Rory Muir, *Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune: How Younger Sons Made Their Way in Jane Austen's England* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2019) pp.viii-ix. Subsequently Muir, *Gentlemen*.

² *Ibid.*, p.x.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.x-xi.

⁴ Rory Muir, *Wellington: The Path to Victory, 1769-1814* (London: Yale University Press, 2013); Rory Muir, *Wellington: Waterloo and the Fortunes of Peace, 1814-1852* (London: Yale University Press, 2015); Jacqueline Reiter, *The Late Lord: The Life of John Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017)

⁵ Peter Mathias, 'The Lawyer as Business in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Enterprise and History: Essays in Honour of Charles Wilson*, ed. by D. C. Coleman and Peter Mathias (Cambridge:

comparative study of the options available to 'younger sons', shedding new light on the challenges and uncertainties that pervaded each profession.

Muir draws together a wide array of secondary sources, memoirs, letters and diaries, into a veritable gold mine of information, which deftly weaves the social and historical context together with the perspectives and experiences of individuals. The book is thoughtfully arranged, beginning with two chapters offering vital contextual overviews on the family unit at the turn of the eighteenth century and the purchasing power of money during the period. The latter topic often causes consternation for researchers, and previous attempts to address this have only been partially effective.⁶ Yet Muir does not solely focus on figures, instead demonstrating that even within the gentry, there was a complex interconnected web of hierarchies, politics and patronage, where those with less money sometimes enjoyed a higher status than their more affluent acquaintances.

Chapter three offers the first detailed analysis of a career path, focusing on the Church. Muir highlights that incomes for clergymen were often meagre, forcing vicars to administer multiple parishes simultaneously, and that, paradoxically, a training in the pagan classics, not theology, characterised the university education that prospective curates received. Muir also emphasises the recurring theme, across all professions, that patronage was paramount in securing promotion. Those expecting to be promoted through their superiors noticing their work were doomed to disappointment. Muir posits that where vicars were able to secure multiple parishes to supplement their incomes, this was usually the result of having multiple patrons they could rely upon.⁷

Medicine is chapter four's focus. Muir argues that, like many of the professions, medicine was not usually associated with the landed gentry, and, surprisingly, its associated social standing was not high, though physicians were more respected than apothecary-surgeons due to a mixture of tradition and their

Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp.151-167; Alannah Tomkins, 'Who Were His Peers?: The Social and Professional Milieu of the Provincial Surgeon-Apothecary in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Social History*, 44.3 (2011) pp.915-933.

⁶ See, for example, Richard Holmes, *Redcoat: The British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket* (London: Harper Collins, 2001) pp.xxi-xxiii.

⁷ Muir, *Gentlemen*, pp.57-58.

university training.⁸ A common thread throughout the work emerges here, as Muir notes that new recruits to the medical profession were often harshly treated, although they were not subjected to the bullying that was commonplace in the Navy.

In the next two chapters, Muir explores two strands of the legal profession, looking at barristers (chapter five), and then attorneys and solicitors (chapter six). In both cases, a successful career was often an elusive dream, particularly for aspiring barristers, requiring long periods of study and obscurity, which dissuaded all but the most tenacious.⁹ Surprisingly, Muir also finds that attorneys lacked respectability, despite the fact that a large proportion came from the landed gentry, unlike the other professions he examines. For Muir, this lack of respectability indicates that younger sons had to resign themselves to the reality that their career choices often resulted in an inevitable eroding of their social status. This raises questions as to whether there was a psychological impact on these men as they exchanged their place in the social hierarchy for a relatively meagre wage. While Muir is unable to explore this question in the monograph, this is an area which merits further examination.

While exploring banking and commerce (chapter seven), respectability and social standing re-emerge, with Muir positing that those who made their money from commerce were lower in the social hierarchy than those whose finances were supported by land holdings. In chapter eight, on civil offices, however, patronage again returns to the fore. Muir uses the examples of Arthur Wellesley's fruitless attempts to secure government positions for himself, early in his career, and later for his illegitimate son, to show that patronage was by no means a guarantee, a point which builds on the work of Karen Robson.¹⁰ In the process, Muir highlights relatively underexplored nuances in the patronage system, which has generally been characterised as one where the benefits of having a patron were both

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.87-88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.103-104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.165; Karen Robson, 'Military Patronage for political purposes: the case of Sir Arthur Wellesley as Chief Secretary of Ireland', in *Wellington Studies I*, ed. by Christopher Woolgar (Southampton: Hartley Institute, 1996), pp.115-138.

considerable and guaranteed.¹¹ As patronage was widespread within Georgian society, and its vital role in receiving promotion has been taken for granted, the established interpretation clearly now requires fresh investigation.

Chapters nine and ten examine the lifestyle and career options of recruits to the Royal Navy. This was a pragmatic choice for many, representing a traditional, patriotic, and respected career path, with limited financial burden for the family, as there were neither school fees nor a commission to purchase. Nonetheless, Muir challenges this narrative, finding that only one fifth of naval officers were from the landed gentry and bullying was a fact of life for new midshipmen. The Navy, Muir argues, was a vocational career, as success could rarely be measured by financial gain.¹² For those content to endure a modest income and prolonged absence from home in exchange for a respectable career that satisfied a desire for adventure, the Navy was amongst the best career options.

Chapter eleven explores the British Army, dispelling the misconception that all officers' commissions were purchased, since this applied to just twenty per cent of them during this period. Muir highlights that the Army was not suited to those with dreams of meteoric promotion, as ranks above Lieutenant Colonel were awarded by merit and seniority. Equally, he points out that, despite perceptions, the army did not provide the adventurous life which attracted some. Muir also shows that those who pursued a career in the army often found it difficult to marry, as their pay was insufficient to support a wife.¹³ Muir's findings throw into sharp relief a dichotomy between Georgian society's disdain for Britain's Army and the phenomenon of 'scarlet fever', identified in the work of Louise Carter, where some ignored the lack of respectability that came with being an officer's wife, in favour of the perceived glamour associated with the position.¹⁴ The way in which these divergent attitudes co-existed with, and were influenced by, the increasingly

¹¹ J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

¹² Muir, *Gentlemen*, pp.240-241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.273-275.

¹⁴ Louise Carter, 'Scarlet Fever: Women and the Military Man, 1780-1815', in *Britain's Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society*, ed. by Kevin Linch and Matthew McCormack (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014) pp.155-180.

successful exploits of Wellington's army in the Iberian Peninsula, is an important question, which although not explored by Muir, will hopefully be explored further by future scholars.

The final chapter explores career options in the East India Company. Muir argues that here, again, prospects were not encouraging, partly because the nature of Britain's intervention in India was changing. Many who went out could not afford the return voyage to Britain, becoming effective exiles, and many died due to disease.¹⁵ Particularly interesting is Muir's observation that, although racial prejudices were hardening during this period, those prejudices were often held by those who had just arrived in the region, and that greater exposure to Indian culture brought more enlightened views.¹⁶

Ultimately, Muir concludes, a man's career was dictated by his parents' priorities and finances while he was a boy. For those who could not afford their son's education, the Navy or East India Company were the logical solutions, which, alongside the army, were well suited to independently-minded children. Nonetheless, patronage was vital in determining the trajectory of an individual's career. The rewards from the respectable professions open to gentlemen were slow in materialising, and the sad reality is that life was a struggle for younger sons, whichever path they took.

Criticisms of this work are few. The most noticeable omission is a bibliographic essay, which has been an invaluable mainstay of Muir's other publications. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the quality of the research. Written with the light, engaging style, and deft balancing of detail, analysis and anecdote which are characteristic of Muir's work, this book is a model of interdisciplinary research, viewed through a historical lens. Muir has achieved an admirable mastery of a wider-ranging topic, offering a ground-breaking comparative study of the career options that faced younger sons of the gentry. More work is now needed to examine the impacts that his findings have on our understanding of wider social attitudes, particularly with reference to notions of masculinity, patronage and social mobility. *Gentlemen of Uncertain Fortune*

¹⁵ Muir, *Gentlemen*, p.310.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.295.

provides much food for thought and is therefore, essential reading for scholars and students of Georgian society.



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