



The INNER LIFE *of*
EMPIRES

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY

EMMA ROTHSCHILD

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TO VICTORIA

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IDEAS AND SENTIMENTS

The age of revolutions of the eighteenth century was a time of transformation in political and economic relationships, and in ways of thinking about the world. This book is about some of the changes of the times, from the point of view of a large, odd, and enterprising family, the Johnstones, and of their households, friends, servants, and slaves.

The four Johnstone sisters and seven Johnstone brothers grew up in Scotland in the 1720s and 1730s and made their way, in imagination or in reality, to the extremities of the British, French, Spanish, and Mughal empires. Two of the brothers became rich, in many scenes and over many setbacks. The family lived at the edges of the enlightenment, and they were friends, at least from time to time, of David Hume, Adam Smith, and the poet James “Ossian” Macpherson. They were unusually in-temperate, unusually literary, and there were unusually many of them.

All I knew about the Johnstones, when I came across the oldest brother’s letter book in a library in Edinburgh, was that another brother, John, had been a candidate in a contested parliamentary election in 1774, in Adam Smith’s home town of Kirkaldy.¹ They were not a celebrated family, even at the moments of their greatest successes. But they lived amidst new empires, and they were confronted throughout their lives with large and abstract questions about commerce and the state, laws and regulations, and slavery and servitude. They were expressive

observers of the “Anguish Vexation & Anxiety” of modern life, in the oldest brother’s words, and of the changing scenes that Elizabeth Carolina Keene, who married John Johnstone in Calcutta in 1765, described as the “troublesome, fluctuating state of human affairs,” in the “constitution of states and empire.”²

The history of the Johnstones is a story of the multiple or multiplier effects of empire, in which individuals at home were connected, by information and expectations, to events in the East and West Indies. It is a family history, in the sense that the sisters and sisters-in-law in the Johnstones’ story, including the sisters who stayed at home in Scotland, were at the center of the exchanges of economic, political, and personal information in which the family prospered. It is also a history of other people in the family’s lives, and in particular of two individuals—a young woman known as “Bell or Belinda,” who described herself as a native of Bengal, the “slave or servant” of John Johnstone, and Joseph Knight, the African slave whose lawsuit against Margaret Johnstone’s son-in-law ended slavery in Scotland—who are the most important figures in the story, in the retrospect of two centuries of public life.³

The economic and the political were intertwined in the Johnstones’ lives, and so were the public and the private, commerce and law and conscience. Their history is a vista of the new ideas and sentiments of the times and of the eighteenth-century enlightenment. The political thought of the philosophers of enlightenment was concerned in multiple respects with the dilemmas of overseas commerce and conquest.⁴ The relationships of the Scottish enlightenment to the Johnstones suggest a more intimate proximity, to the domesticity of empire.

The Johnstones were not themselves economists or geologists or historians. But they were involved throughout their lives with the philosophes of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, and with the milieux of the enlightenment, in the sense of the booksellers, proof-correctors, lawyers, and clerks by whom the “lights of science” or the “atmosphere of society,” in the description of their friend the philosopher Adam Ferguson, were “communicable to others by mere information.”⁵

The Johnstones’ history is a story of how individuals made money in the eighteenth-century empires, and especially of making money by the use of information. It is also a history of the institution of slavery, from the East to the West Indies. At least six of the seven brothers became owners of slaves. Two of them were public opponents of slavery, and one was a prominent defender of the slave trade. The Johnstones flourished in the half century that has been identified, since the imperial histories of the nineteenth century, with the political institutions of modern times: a new British empire in India, a new land empire in North America, and a new and more enlightened (or less benighted) Atlantic economy in the West Indies and Spanish America.⁶ It was a founding period of modern ideas in a vaster sense: of the competitive economy, of individual rights and the government of law, and of industrial or industrious transformation.⁷ It was a time when *laissez-faire* was new and when even the idea of the economy or of economic life—of a distinctive space or territory of economic exchanges—was unusual and insecure.⁸ But the Johnstones’ empire, or the empire of economic opportunity to which they looked forward, was not the empire that was eventually founded. Their history is in this respect a story of

possible futures that did not come to be, and of life in uncertainty, including uncertainty about the frontiers of economic life and the frontiers of the law.

The sisters and brothers lived at a time in which even the distinctions that were most self-evident a generation later—between law and political power, or private and public life, or the economic and the political—were the subject of endless, anxious inquiry: over “what was, and what was not law,” in the oldest brother’s words, or “what [was] the state,” or who was a servant and who was a slave.⁹ The idea of empire was itself, in the Johnstones’ and their friends’ understanding, an idea about interior as well as exterior influence, “empire” in the sense of dominion or information or the power of words. Their story is a portrait of the outer lives of the sisters and brothers and of their households—of their voyages and marriages and debts, their petitions and packages and lawsuits. But it is also a history of their inner lives and of what the new ideas of the time, and the new connections of empire, meant to this eighteenth-century family. It is about large and abstract ideas in the lives of individuals who were not themselves philosophers or theorists of enlightenment. The frontiers between philosophical and political and popular ideas were indistinct, like so many other frontiers, in these new and modern times: a world of “internal and external sentiment,” in David Hume’s description of the “fluctuating situations” of moral evaluation.¹⁰

The Johnstones were no more than minor figures in the public events of the times, and they had an unusual capacity in their political ventures for being on the wrong side of history, or the losing side. But they left

behind them an amazing amount of evidence or traces of their lives: lists of things to do, wills, codicils, mortgages, diaries about carrots, inventories, complaints about torture to the Privy Council, evidence in favor of Armenian plaintiffs, letters about bundles of muslin, lists of the names of their slaves, decrees of alimony, annuities to their servants, descriptions of the different kinds of paper used in Persian correspondence, marriage settlements, mausolea, lawyers' invoices, love letters from their lawyers, legal documents in successive lawsuits against each other and against others. They were interested in family history and in the techniques of searches in libraries; they wrote letters about sorting letters; and they were complicit, or so it seems, in the falsification of the records of their own dates of birth. There are traces of all the sisters and brothers, the most successful and the most obscure, and of many of their servants and slaves.

The history of the Johnstones and of their extended households is a story of women and men who were involved in one way or another in each other's lives, and in the vast changes of the times. But the evidence of the lives of the different individuals is extraordinarily diverse and disproportionate. It is as though there are some who can be seen in intimate detail, and from multiple points of view, and others who are a blur, or figures in a distant landscape. There are some, like Bell or Belinda, who have no names (or only the most implausible of names), no dates of birth or dates of death, and whose words are no more than the words of the clerks of courts. Joseph Knight, who was brought from Africa to Jamaica when he was "very young," remembered only that he

could not remember: “he does not know anything of his being sold.”¹¹

The family’s story is a microhistory, or a prosopography, a history of persons (of the face or the person in front of one’s eye.) It is inspired in this respect by the prosopographies or family histories of the Roman empire, and the Johnstones were in a sense a very Roman family: “new men,” or men who wanted not to be new, in a new empire.¹² It is inspired, too, by the microhistories of early modern Europe and the “prosopography of the lower orders,” in which the poor as well as the rich can be the subject of a qualitative history.¹³ It is a case study of the Johnstones and their extended connections.¹⁴ But the history of the Johnstones is also a new kind of microhistory, in several different respects. It is a large history in relation to space, in the sense that the brothers, two of the women with whom they lived, and at least four of their slaves moved over very great distances, and in the sense that the story of the Johnstone sisters is a history, in part, of the consequences at home in Scotland of distant events.¹⁵ It is a history of individuals of diverse legal conditions and social classes: a story that includes mistresses and servants and slaves in the same history. It extends across the frontiers between different kinds of historical inquiry, in that it is a history of economic life, of political ideas, of slavery, and of family relationships. Economic evidence, in the family’s history, has been a source for political history, political evidence has been a source for the history of sentiments, the history of the law has been a source for family history, and family relationships have been a source for the history of enlightenment.¹⁶

The Johnstones' history is a new kind of microhistory, too, because it is an exploration of new ways of connecting the microhistories of individuals and families to the larger scenes of which they were a part: to important or "macrohistorical" inquiries. One connection is that the individuals are themselves important (as Joseph Knight was important). Another is of illustration, as the history of the Johnstones is an illustration, or a case study, of the larger history of their times. Yet another is of representativeness, or of the absence of representativeness. The new possibility, in late-modern microhistories, is of connecting micro- and macrohistories by the history of the individuals' own connections.¹⁷ It is this possibility that I have tried to explore in the Johnstones' story: to proceed, encounter by encounter, from the history of a family to the history of a larger society of empire or enlightenment or ideas. But the Johnstones' history is also the story of disconnections or discontinuities: of departures and loss, and of individuals (like Bell or Belinda) who vanish without trace, or out of history. This, too, was the experience of eighteenth-century commerce and eighteenth-century empires.

The prospect in these new kinds of microhistory is of a new way of thinking about one of the oldest historical inquiries, or the history of the inner life. This is a history, in Adam Smith's description, that recounts the unfolding of public events by leading the reader "into the sentiments and mind of the actors."¹⁸ It is an eighteenth-century sort of history, in the sense of a history of the ideas and sentiments of large numbers of people and how these ideas change over time.¹⁹ The distinction between the inner and the outer life, or between an

interior, private existence of the mind and an exterior universe of events and circumstances, is very difficult to identify in the lives of the Johnstones (as it is in our own lives). So too is the distinction between the intimate and the official, the universe of sentiment and the universe of reason. Adam Smith used eleven different words to describe the inner experience in the first few lines of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.²⁰ These elusive, fluctuating conditions are alluded to amazingly often, as will be seen, in the evidence of the Johnstones' lives and of the other people in their households.

The Johnstones' history begins, in what follows, with the narrative of their lives: setting out from their home in the west of Scotland, establishing themselves in Calcutta, Grenada, and Pensacola, coming home from the empire, and recollecting their earlier existence, as elderly men and women. I will use their own words, to a great extent, and the words of contemporary records; I have made no changes to the spelling of eighteenth-century letters and other writings. Their history in the first three chapters of the book is more like a novel than like an epic or epopeia, in Sir Walter Scott's distinction: "rather a history of the miscellaneous adventures which befall an individual [or a number of individuals] in the course of life, than the plot of a regular and connected epopeia, where every step brings us a point nearer to the final catastrophe."²¹ But it is not a novel, or a historical novel. It is an eighteenth-century history, and one which has conveyed in a very exigent respect the limits of historical inquiry. The limits have their own story, and this is the subject, or one of the subjects, of the endnotes that are a substantial part of the book.