

*H-France Review* Vol. 12 (May 2012), No. 62

Jacqueline Letzter, *L'épopée américaine de la famille Stier d'Anvers. Entre Deux Mondes*. Brussels: Editions Racine, 2011. 232 pp. Preface, introduction, illustrations, bibliography, and index. €19.95 (pb). ISBN 978-2-87386-681-5.

Review by Janet Polasky, University of New Hampshire

Jacqueline Letzter's title is aptly chosen. *L'épopée américaine de la famille Stier d'Anvers. Entre Deux Mondes* is a history of a family deciding between two worlds at the end of the French Revolution. The family of Henri Joseph Stier left Antwerp in 1794. While most émigré Belgian nobles fled east to the German principalities or Vienna when French revolutionary armies returned a second time, the Stier family boarded a ship in Amsterdam bound for America. Letzter draws on a rich collection of journals and letters to explore the contrasts between an aristocratic Europe left behind, an agricultural America discovered, and a Napoleonic Europe imagined.

The recently ennobled Stier family had enjoyed a life of ease among the patrician elite of Antwerp, living between three houses: a house in town; Cleydael, a fourteenth-century château; and the more recently built "Mick," also in the countryside. Heirs to Rubens, they had amassed a renowned art collection. Well-to-do *rentiers*, the family's three children were well educated. Son Charles like his father had received a law degree from the Catholic University of Louvain, and daughters Isabelle and Rosalie were trained by the English Canonesses of the Holy Sepulcher in Liège. When they sailed, Isabelle, twenty-six years old, was accompanied by her husband, Jean Michel van Havre and their three-year-old daughter, and Charles, twenty-four, was accompanied by his wife Mimi (van Havre). Rosalie was sixteen and the subject of much parental concern for her social future. Accompanied by two servants, the family lived in Philadelphia before moving to Maryland and Virginia. The distance separating the parents from their adult children as they all adapted to the new lives they had chosen gave rise to a steady correspondence, discovered in 1970 by an archivist in Antwerp.

The earliest letters between family members bemoaned what had been lost even as they became accepted into the elite circles of the American capital. It would be difficult to get accustomed to this life, they wrote each other and the friends left behind. Letzter notes that everyone worked, and the Stiers could not long ignore "the frenzy of work" in materialistic America (p. 29). In Europe, as Letzter and the Stiers explained, they cultivated their art collection and presided over charitable endeavors, since they regarded working for a living as mundane and vulgar. Many of their first letters focused on the entrepreneurial spirit of the Americans, sometimes envied as industrious and daring, other times pitied as obsessive and narrow-minded. They resolved to live like Americans, which meant investing in commercial opportunities, buying a house, land, and slaves.

That adaptation posed different challenges for each of them. Women's lives in America contrasted starkly with the brilliance of the balls and festivities they remembered from Antwerp. The youngest, unmarried Rosalie, alone fluent in English, complained that she was pulled from Europe before she could experience the pleasures of the social world of Antwerp. She remarked on the narrowness of interests of American women. She complained that all they thought about was family life inside their houses. Besides, women were never part of the society of men in America. "Low spirits," she wrote her

brother, constituted a common malady among women in Virginia (Rosalie Stier to Charles Stier, Philadelphia, June 1795, p. 40). Her spirits improved after she attracted the interest of the eligible bachelors of Annapolis. Charles advised his older sister Isabelle to seek inspiration in Rousseau's heroine of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and she passed along similar advice to Rosalie, who answered that she could certainly manage a house with skill, but a girl her age should instead devote herself to dancing and dressing well.

From the beginning, the Stiers complained that they could not trust their domestic help as they did the long-time family servants who attended them in Europe. The father regretted that he would have "to buy some Negroes; that disgusts me" (Henri Stier to J. B. Cogels, Annapolis, 18 October 1795, p. 43). The women complained of all the tasks that fell to them, from caring for children and sick parents to cooking, all because they could not secure reliable help. They were prisoners of their houses, Isabelle complained, unable to amuse themselves as should be their lot, or would have been their lot in Europe. The republican nation states that seemed inevitable with the benefit of hindsight, loomed as uncertain in this revolutionary era, especially to émigrés caught trying to decide between two very different worlds separated by an ocean. In one of the earliest letters, Henri observed to his son, "all of the universe is in crisis" (Henri Stier to Charles Stier, Philadelphia, 19 June 1795, p. 35).

News from Europe revealed a continent in flames. The Belgian refugees, who chose to emigrate to America for its enlightened politics and economic opportunities, were convinced that America would never be subject to the revolutions that they saw as endemic to Europe. Charles wrote a friend in Europe that the American constitution was truly the expression of the national will. The ocean assured peace from foreign invasions. While Europe was rocked by a decade of explosions, the Americans seemed to progress gradually and "naturally," at least while the Federalists were in power. Both generations of the family condemned the Jacobins in France, and distrusted Jefferson and his "democrats." The Stiers were divided over Napoleon—Charles was enraptured by the rising French star while his father distrusted him—but they all worried about the egalitarianism rife in America and promoted by Jefferson and his associates. Their letters reveal a world where everything was new and subject to change, both the emerging democracy in America and a Europe engulfed in the midst of ever-widening revolution.

Letzter notes that the Stiers asserted their Belgian identity in the New World decades before the independence of the Belgian nation officially established the Belgians as a people. Perhaps to distinguish their home from the French forces of occupation, they referred to "la nation Belgique" (Henri Stier to Charles Stier, Philadelphia, 19 June 1795, p. 36). More often, they remembered life in the city of Antwerp and contrasted America with the continent of Europe. This was an era of shifting identities.

The letters selected by Letzter are rich in observations, amply explained in the introductions to the four sections of the book and in the many substantive notes. These interjections explain the differences in generations in the experience of assimilating to American life. The Stiers have "fallen out of your cast without being able to fit into theirs," Henri observed in a letter to his son (Henri Stier to Charles Stier, Annapolis, 7 August 1797, p. 63). His son replied that only the most persistent Europeans would succeed in adapting to America, and it seemed for some time that the Stiers would be among them. However, just as the parents completed the construction of Riversdale, a spacious and imposing house in Maryland, complete with a chapel, land for planting and grazing animals, and slaves, the French extended an amnesty to exiles who returned by 22 September 1802. Charles, who had returned to Antwerp, urged his parents and sisters in sixteen letters sent through different ports to come home where they would be received by their friends and family into a life whose habits were ingrained. He persisted, writing that the Revolution had not really made that much difference, noting that they could

now resume their old lives. The parents, especially, were reluctant to leave the home where they were at last settled and content.

Jacqueline Letzter is herself a traveler between two worlds, as she explains in her introduction. Like the Stiers, she writes, she discovered the importance of her Belgian identity in America. A professor of French literature at the University of Maryland, she too came to the United States from Belgium “on the threshold of adulthood”(p. 11). She discovered Riversdale on a walk and found a path to the correspondence of its earliest residents in a book her husband found in a local bookshop.[1] Letzter introduced Jacques De Decker of the Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique to this neighboring estate and the story of its original occupants, the first Belgians in Washington, D. C. De Decker wrote the preface to this first of

two volumes. Letzter now lives in Nice where she directs a study abroad program for the University of Maryland. She is also working between two disciplinary worlds in this book of history. She pursues all of the names that figure in the letters with the care of a genealogist and supplies biographies for her readers. She locates places and explains the terms of the treaties. Letzter is attentive to detail, noting, for example, that the Stiers’ house in Antwerp is now the headquarters of the Belgian-American Association.

The reader might have wished for a fuller description of the history of the French Revolution as it played out in the Belgian provinces. That would have provided some context to the correspondents’ views of French rule, taxation, and the place of the nobility in Antwerp society. Readers might also have difficulty following the archival research trail, because the archives are not fully identified, nor are the methods of selection of the letters transparent. Finally, although Letzter discusses the family relations as revealed through the letters, that explanation would be deepened if set within the context of other late eighteenth-century correspondence recently studied by Sarah Pearsall, Dena Goodman, and Konstantin Dierks, among others.[2]

These letters construct what would come to be seen as the stereotypical differences between the Old and the New World. Charles wrote Isabel that Europeans were used to lively disorder, preferring it to “the monotonous tranquility” of America. Even though Europeans found their children charming, he added, they sought the stimulating company of other adults for conversation. America was a domestic haven; Europe remained the world of salons. In Europe, as opposed to America, he promised his family about to join him again in Antwerp, even after they danced the revolutionary Carmagnole, they would still have their cooks, nuns, servants, clerks, and tenants to support them in the lives to which they were accustomed (Charles to Isabelle, Antwerp, 1 November 1802, pp. 176-77). This book about the early American republic as seen from a Belgian perspective and revolutionary Europe as understood by aristocrats across the ocean is rich in detail and fits well within the context of Atlantic history.

## NOTES

[1] Margaret Law Callcott, *Mistress of Riversdale: The Plantation Letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert 1795-1821* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

[2] Konstantin Dierks, *In my Power: Letter Writing and Communication in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

University of New Hampshire

[Janet.Polasky@unh.edu](mailto:Janet.Polasky@unh.edu)

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172