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Emma Rothschild, *An Infinite History: The Story of a Family in France over Three Centuries*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. 464 pp. Appendix, notes, and index \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780691200309. \$32.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0691208183.

Review by Katherine A. Lynch, Carnegie Mellon University.

Emma Rothschild's *An Infinite History* was a long time in the making, as the author reports in the book's introduction. Its own story began in Florence in 1980 when the author encountered an article in *Quaderni Storici* by Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni on the value of studying the life histories of ordinary people with the methods of micro-history.^[1] Reading this article made her wish she could be a historian. The other main inspiration was Rothschild's research experience in the departmental archives of the Charente in 1995, where she was "captivated by archives, and ... never wanted for a moment to lose the spell" (p. 2). Long years of research there, in the archives of the city of Angoulême and elsewhere enabled the author to trace the lives of various members of a genealogically-defined family from the mid-eighteenth to the late-nineteenth century. The book recounts the histories of ninety-eight selected members of a French family over time beginning in the eighteenth century, and those of the several thousand non-family members with whom they were associated and for whom sources were available. The resulting book is a large set of stories about these individuals, and of episodes in their lives based on records of their births, marriages, and deaths as well as their business and other career activities. One of the family's members was a very public figure under the Third Republic.

The study begins from two notarial documents in 1764 regarding the life of one Marie Aymard (1713-1790). She was an illiterate woman living in Angoulême, the widow of Louis Ferrand, with five surviving minor children. One foundational document of the study is a power of attorney that Marie Aymard delegated to one Pascal Chauvin whom she employed to inquire on her behalf into the fate of her master-carpenter husband. He had left Angoulême a decade earlier to work for two years for a planter in the West Indies under a contract of indenture. The terms of Ferrand's exact fate were of particular interest because he was rumored to have amassed a "small fortune" abroad (p. 17) including a number of slaves.

The second document is the marriage contract of Aymard's daughter, witnessed by eighty-three persons whose names appear in it. The signing of the marriage contract in the presence of family members and important friends of the family was a well-known ceremony in the life of families with property. Rothschild begins her study of Marie Aymard's family by trying to trace the lives of the signatories of the marriage contract and of people with whom they had documented

associations. The list of names of those present for the signing of the marriage contract constitute what the statistically-minded call a “sample of convenience.”

Given that Aymard and her descendants were mainly ordinary people, members of the lower and lower-middle classes, it is frequently difficult to trace them with much continuity. Most descendants appear by name in only one or two sources throughout their lives. Rothschild’s solution in these cases is to turn to the lives of others who were acquainted with members of the original sample, or, over time, their descendants. For example, when Rothschild discovers that she is unable to document the history of Marie’s husband due to a lack of documentation on him, she turns to the life of the man to whom Marie had delegated her power of attorney. His life is more fully documented in the records available to the author. In this way, Rothschild is able to avoid complete “dead ends” in her search for information about family members and/or the contexts of their lives. In the present example, she recounts the story of Louis Ferrand’s employer, Jean-Alexandre Cazaud, giving readers a glimpse of the West Indian world through which Aymard’s husband passed. By using what is available to her in the way of primary sources, Rothschild provides readers with contextual information about the wider social and economic conditions in which Marie Aymard’s family and descendants lived. Thus, the book provides not only a set of stories about individuals, what the author calls “small histories,” (p. 6) but also the larger world. In total, the book focuses not only on the ninety-eight family members, but also those who were documentable as being associated with them.

Thematic topics covered in Rothschild’s account of the lives of Marie Aymard and her descendants include economic history, histories of France’s administrative state and church during the Revolution, relations with the West Indies, and France’s later colonial empire in Africa. The book begins and sometimes circles back to Angoulême itself, documenting, for example, changes in the city’s architecture as the result of the Revolution, but the book is not an urban history per se.

Given the difficulties of tracing members of the family through time, and in order to provide some comparison with the sample group’s experience, Rothschild looks for other groups whose experience she can tap, at least in the aggregate, in order to make up for the lack of evidence on family members. For example, she reports on the results of an aggregate study of the several thousand Angoumois whose names appeared in the parish registers of the town during the same year (1764) in which her two fundamental documents were signed.

The “infinite” of the title refers to the fact that trying to trace people over time and space through nominative records can lead the historian on a search that never ends. There is always another person to trace, another set of records to inspect. Starting from a list of named persons rooted in a particular time and place, and then tracing them, along with descendants or acquaintances through their lifetimes, can indeed take one on an increasingly wide (if not literally infinite) set of searches. Writing of the original group of eighty-three persons in her list of marriage contract witnesses, Rothschild uses a formal term from the language of sampling: “[the original study group]... is composed of a well-defined sampling ‘universe’ (eighty-three individuals, together with other individuals connected to them by specified relationships) the task of linking them to others for the other individuals connected to them by specified relationships) and a process, of looking for the other individuals, that is potentially endless” (p. 56).

Chapters one to three are closely based on the original 1764 documents and lay out biographical details about Marie's children and those associated with them. In chapters four and five, Rothschild broadens her lens to study the impacts of the Revolution and Empire upon Angoulême while searching among Marie's descendants for those people who were involved in larger historical dramas. Studying the pre-revolution as well as the years of the Revolution itself, Rothschild focuses on various local conflicts involving church property, commercial crises in the region, and problems of debtors and creditors. It was not that Marie Aymard's children or grandchildren were always directly embroiled in these local conflicts. Rather, Rothschild is constrained to tell the stories that have left the most information in the evidentiary records available to her.

Chapters six and seven return to episodes of "family time" in Angoulême, in this instance to the lives of Marie Aymard's grandchildren, with some discussion of how the lives were directly affected by the Revolution, for example, by their work for the new revolutionary administration or their service in the army. In chapters eight and nine, Rothschild emphasizes the nineteenth-century history of family members. Here, she engages with larger debates about the economic modernization of France, addressing the facts of the persistent importance of traditional sectors of the economy such as administration, the military, and banking in the lives of Marie Aymard's descendants. The persistence of these pre-modern economic sectors is unsurprising, given that Angoulême was a prosperous but "unindustrial" town (p. 230).

Rothschild does not inform her study with explicit hypotheses about the history of the family that she hopes to test, nor does she pursue strong arguments. Rather, she draws her readers' attention to her book's larger narrative goals and methods by occasionally sign-posting what the book is about or ruminating on basic concepts that she is using, for example distinguishing "family time" from "historical time" (p. 88). Family time involves individual events like baptisms and marriages considered in all of their individuality, while historic time refers to broader, important events.

Yet, Rothschild denies that she is studying "family history" (p. 197). Rather, she has written the history of a family, or better yet of some individuals with roots in the family of Ferrand/Aymard and some individuals who associated with those persons, traced and described across several centuries. And though Rothschild sees her work as a set of micro-histories, which are usually associated with the close study of a very limited number of individuals in a specific time and place, she occasionally seems frustrated by the constraints of the approach and the fact that so many of Marie Aymard's descendants lived quite ordinary lives. The sparse documents in which they appear simply do not allow the author to link individual lives to larger events with much depth or continuity.

Rothschild here refers to a well-known analytical problem with studies based on nominative record linkage. Ordinary people's lives in the European past are not well-documented. It is difficult to trace them across time and space. Given this difficulty, how can records on ordinary individuals be made to yield much general meaning or significance for historians? This problem—of using records on named individuals to yield important historical findings—has been addressed most fully in a quantitative, demographically-inflected approach to family history. In this well-known branch of historical research, scholars use explicit rules of record linkage and statistical analysis to piece together records on the baptism, marriage, and burial records of named individuals one by one. Then they aggregate these records to build broad, significant

historical findings. Indeed, studies based on these linked and aggregated records provide the foundation of our understanding of Europe's pre-industrial social, economic, and demographic life through formal methods of "family reconstitution." While briefly acknowledging this kind of nominative record linking, Rothschild sharply distinguishes her project from it, given her stated desire to focus on individuals one by one and to sketch the particulars of their lives.

And yet, while she is committed to methods of micro-history and to a focus on the particularities of the lives of named individuals, Rothschild also seems eager to fit the individuals she is studying into the larger history of France. She is not content to limit either the geographical or generational "space" or historical depth of her study as is the case with many micro-histories. Indeed, the author seems almost apologetic that the vast majority of her subjects were in no way "important" in larger historical trends, whether economic or political. The study thereby reveals some tension between the originally-stated interest in the lives of the the obscure, the ordinary people, and important people who most directly participated in "historical time," as she sees it.

This problem is partly solved in chapter ten. Here, Rothschild finally has an individual who was both a member of Marie Aymard's lineage and a very important person in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. His life story was intertwined with so many of the features of French society that the author has only been able to describe briefly in earlier chapters. The difference is that the author now has a good array of primary and secondary sources to tell her story. She is no longer limited to short sketches of bits of individual lives, who are difficult for readers to keep track of, but instead treats her readers to a sweeping, fascinating account of the life of Charles Martial Allemand Lavigerie (1825-1892), the oldest grandson of Marie Aymard's oldest grandson. The author readily acknowledges the turn that her study has taken once he comes into focus: "In a history that started with an illiterate widow of whose existence there is almost no evidence, and in which almost everyone is obscure, Charles Martial is larger than life. He transforms the limits of the story, or turns it into a different kind of history. He is a historical figure..." (p. 266)

Telling the life story of Martial allows Rothschild to return to the topic of France's colonial empire, this time in the Middle East and North Africa, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. As Director of the *Oeuvre des Ecoles d'Orient*, Martial first became widely known for his preaching and fund-raising to support Christian education and publishing as well as his leadership of aid to his coreligionists in Lebanon who were being killed in large numbers by Druze militias. Later awarded the Légion d'Honneur and made Bishop of Nancy, he served as Archbishop of Algiers and began an order of priests who served in Africa: the so-called "White Fathers" for the robes they wore. Endlessly satirized by anti-clerical Republicans, Martial nonetheless supported the "armed expansion" of France overseas, defending the church's well-known role in the nation's *mission civilisatrice* of empire. The book ends by illustrating the value of biography, which can allow historians to explore one well-chosen subject's life through time and space while adding insight into major topics in France's modern history.

While admiring the amount of effort that Rothschild spent over the years tracking down her individuals, readers may finish the book unclear about her major findings. She sometimes engages with interesting debates, for example about the persistence of traditional sectors in France's economy in the nineteenth century. Yet these reflections are regrettably short and episodic, in the manner of her biographical sketches of the family of Marie Aymard. It is when Rothschild breaks out of the constraints of micro-history with her study of a cosmopolitan figure

like Martial that she is best able to illuminate the life of an individual and a society at the same time.

NOTE

[1] Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "Il nome et il come: Scambio ineguale e mercato storiografico," *Quaderni Storici* 14, no. 40 (1), *Questioni di confine* (gennaio / aprile 1979): 181-190.

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