

*The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History*. Emma Rothschild. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 9780691148953

One of the difficulties of teaching world history is getting students to think in terms of broad historical processes without losing sight of the human element that makes the study of history so compelling and enriching. This reality makes works that portray abstract themes through the lives of individual people, places, and things attractive and valuable. In her book *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History*, Emma Rothschild attempts to speak to the personal significance of the macro-level changes that occurred between the early eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through the story of the Johnstone family from Dumfriesshire, Scotland. Rothschild's project is expansive, relating the lives of four surviving sisters and seven brothers (not to mention extended family and associates) who variously married and moved to France with a Jacobite rebel, worked for the East India Company in India, served as Governor of West Florida, owned a plantation in Grenada, rubbed shoulders with David Hume and Adam Smith, came out on the losing side of the court case that ended legal recognition of slavery in Scotland, won and lost many parliamentary elections, and so on. Through an exploration of the adventures and misadventures of the Johnstone family, Rothschild provides a special glimpse into topics such as slavery, empire, and enlightenment and how individuals experienced and interpreted the changes that were happening around them (i.e. their "inner lives").

The first three chapters of the book provide a general narrative of the history of the Johnstone family, tracing them from their modest origins to their global adventures to their return to Scotland and their final years. These chapters introduce both major characters and significant themes or occurrences that are constantly referred back to in the rest of the book. For

example, we learn about Alexander, who, after serving as a soldier in North America purchased a plantation in Grenada that he left to his older brother James after dying without an heir; about Betty, who played a crucial role in the family as a relayer of information and letters; about William, the wealthiest of the brothers, who married a rich heiress and took her last name; about George who served as Governor of West Florida from 1764 to 1766 (immediately after the Seven Years' War) and was later sent to America during the Revolutionary War as a member of a peace and reconciliation commission; and about John, who was forced home from India after controversy erupted over his participation in the standard custom of receiving gifts from Indian officials. As disparate as these individuals' lives were, Rothschild shows that it is absolutely necessary to look at them as a whole family as their successes and failures intersected at almost every step. Additionally, Rothschild introduces several other important characters connected to the Johnstone's: a slave from India, owned by John, named Bell or Belinda, who was accused of murdering her newborn child in 1773 and went down in history as the last person recognized by Scotland's courts as legally enslaved; and Joseph Knight, a slave owned by the son-in-law of Margaret Johnstone, who successfully petitioned to the Supreme Court of Scotland to end his enslavement in 1778, thus ending legal slavery in Scotland.

The next three chapters build on the narrative of the Johnstones' lives to explore larger historical themes. Chapter Four is a subtle and evocative discussion of how the lives of the Johnstone's intersected with larger debates about mercantilism and laissez-faire economics during the time period in which they lived. Rothschild argues that the Johnstone's were proponents of a "moderate empire," in which the state provided a secure environment for commercial dealings but did not interfere in the activities of individual economic actors. According to her, this reflected the family's status as both embedded in the mercantilist system

but also pursuing economic advancement outside of it. While she argues that this vision of economic empire was ultimately not possible given historical contingencies, she could be clearer in explaining why this was so and providing more historical background for readers who are less familiar with this topic. Nonetheless, the dialogue she establishes between economic theory and the lives and choices of economic actors provides a valuable perspective on the development of the modern economic world. Similarly, in Chapters Five and Six, Rothschild uses the Johnstones' lives as a lens into the immense topics of slavery, information, and enlightenment. She introduces the idea of "multiplier effects" of empire to explain the domestic effects of empire abroad through people like the Johnstones, even though people like them made up a tiny percentage of Britain's population. Unfortunately, Chapter Five does not cohere as well as Chapter Six, perhaps because the overarching theme of empire is simply too broad. Although "enlightenment," the theme of Chapter Six, is also very broad, Rothschild breaks down enlightenment into different levels (the "sect of philosophers," literary and political milieux, and a general disposition) and shows how the Johnstone's experienced and lived out each of these levels of enlightenment, thereby calling into question the accuracy of demarcating separate spheres of enlightenment activity.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, Rothschild assesses the attractiveness of writing a history of the inner life and the difficulties encountered in such an undertaking. She underscores the limitations sources (or lack thereof) impose on historians and how these limitations are distributed unequally among historical subjects. She exposes this inequality in the case of the slaves (and one-time members of the Johnstone family) Bell or Belinda and Joseph Knight. Although the historical record indicates through public documents how these individuals fit chronologically into the family members' lives, the family's letters leave us in the dark about

what the Johnstone's thought about the human beings they purported to own. Rothschild poignantly raises the possibility that the Johnstone's thought of them very little at all. While this kind of ambiguity is extremely unsettling to the scientific side of a historian, it provides the kind of fuel that young historians need to ruminate on the ethical implications of history and history writing. Rothschild concludes that modern technologies, such as the digitization of archival materials, allow microhistories such as hers to realize a new depth and draw on broader sources of information but nonetheless still leave historians feeling that that last elusive morsel of information is out there somewhere, waiting to be found.

There are many things that Rothschild does very well in *The Inner Life of Empires*. The book is obviously meticulously researched and draws on a range of sources. It includes rich detail and is extensively footnoted. Rothschild's sources allow her to paint a full and vivid picture of the family without having to stray into the realm of speculation. The true holes in her sources are apparent, and she uses them to comment on the problems of writing history, especially a history that aims to be intensely personal. Her argumentative style tends toward subtlety, requiring the reader to pay close attention to how she builds her chapters. She succeeds in painting big ideas in a human dimension, illustrating the significance of such abstract themes as enlightenment and laissez-faire economics in personal terms.

Nevertheless, there are some shortcomings to this book, not all of which are necessarily the fault of the author. The Johnstones were a large family, and readers may find it difficult to keep track of them. A family tree would have aided in visualizing the relationships between extended family members. The size of the family also means that a considerable portion of the book is concerned with introducing the basic facts of their lives. Because of this, there is a lack of space to examine more intensively the broader historical significance of some of their

experiences at home in Scotland and abroad. Additionally, the subject matter of the book is not always discretely organized. For instance, there is no single chapter where Rothschild tells the entire story of Bell or Belinda; instead, discussions of her are scattered across chapters two, five, seven, and eight. Finally, Rothschild uses many short quotes from primary sources to bring her material to life. In moderation this enlivens her prose, but in some places the flow of sentences is disrupted by an overzealous deployment of such quotes, many of which are unnecessary.

There are a range of possibilities for those interested in using this book for courses they are teaching. Because its geographic coverage is so broad, instructors in World, European, Indian, and American history courses may all find *The Inner Life of Empires* to be relevant to their material and to provide anecdotes and examples to fit into lectures. However, in terms of assigning it as reading for students, instructors of survey classes may find it difficult to identify specific passages that provide enough background information about the family and clearly place their lives in the context of larger historical themes to be useful and comprehensible. Those teaching classes on historiography or research methods may also find this book helpful. Especially because it is heavily footnoted, *The Inner Life of Empires* could be used as an example of how to use a wide range of sources to tell a family story as a global history. Additionally, Rothschild's frank discussion of the limits of history and the difficulty of capturing the inner life of historical subjects would be good reading for students who are learning to work with primary sources and to wrestle with the methodological obstacles commonly faced by historians.

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