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Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, Isabelle Chave, and Marion Trévisi, eds., *Destins croisés de deux familles nobles de l'Ancien Régime à l'Empire. Lettres d'Auguste d'Estourmel, Charles de Beauclerc et leurs familles (1784-1816)*. Limoges: Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2015. 1345 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, index. 45€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-84287-660-9.

Review by Jonathan Dewald, University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

This is a fine edition of an extraordinary series of documents: 640 letters (filling an imposing 1,200 pages of printed text) from members of two aristocratic families, running from 1784 through 1816. Even that summary understates the collection's importance, for it builds on an earlier work by the same editorial team: an edition of more letters and journals concerning one of the writers in the present volume.^[1] The editors also supply impressive introductory essays, orienting the reader to the collection as a whole and exploring some of its main themes. It's something of a disappointment that the collection offers little about the Revolution, for none of the families' letters survive from early November, 1788 through late February, 1796. (Readers can find more information about those years in the earlier volume; there we learn for instance that Auguste d'Estourmel played a role in organizing the flight to Varennes.^[2]) As compensation, the letters offer extraordinary insights into how this group of nobles interacted with the Napoleonic regime.

Personal documentation of such scope and coherence is unusual for any era, and historians will find these letters relevant to a wide range of important topics. The letter writers discuss religious feelings, friendships, marriages, business dealings, and politics. They share health tips and complain of ailments, and one offers extended discussions of childhood and parenting, illustrated with details from his own week-to-week experiences. A significant minority of the letters come from women, and the letters by men as well provide important insights into the roles, experiences, and outlooks of women. That role was important, as Marion Trévisi explains in her introductory essay (pp. 51-66). To the end of her life, Elizabeth de Maizières more or less ruled her adult d'Estourmel children. Among the Beauclerc, Antoinette de Beauclerc also made important decisions about property, children's educations, and choices of residence, despite being a full generation younger than her husband.

The editors provide a series of helpful, clear genealogies, but otherwise offer rather little guidance on placing these families within the complex, changing grid of French aristocratic status. Their reticence is perhaps appropriate, given the complexity of the answer. Both the Estourmel and their somewhat less eminent friends the Beauclerc came from the high provincial nobility, but in the Old Regime, neither family could move comfortably in the highest levels of society. They had no role at court, and none held peerages. They resided occasionally in Paris, but could not afford to imitate the grand style of the great aristocracy.^[3] That said, when in need, they could call on court connections, getting support from ministers and even from Marie Antoinette herself. They held high military positions, and they married with prominent families like the Clermont-Tonnerre and the Lameths.

The collection's central figures, Auguste d'Estourmel and Charles de Beauclerc, met as novice knights of Malta, the crusading monastic order that until 1798 ruled the island of Malta, and immediately became intimate friends. They remained close until Auguste's death in 1814, but events soon set them on divergent life tracks. Auguste took his monastic vows, remained in the order until its dissolution during the Revolution, and lived celibate thereafter, mainly at his sister's estate. Charles returned to secular life in 1784 at his family's insistence. The death of his older brother had made him heir to his family's name and properties, and his family insisted that he live up to that position by marrying.

But his happy marriage and prosperous family life did nothing to diminish the intensity of Charles's affection for his old friend. Among its other interests, the collection shows how powerful eighteenth-century friendship might be, and how flowery was the language in which it was expressed, as when Charles described the "bonheur" he had felt as a young man "de pressentir...que nous passerions, en poursuivant la même carrière, toute notre existence d'un auprès de l'autre et que nulle circonstance serait capable d'atténuer le titre d'inséparables que les personnes de notre connaissance la plus intime se plaisaient à nous donner (p. 595) The editors delicately sidestep the possibility that the friendship shaded into homoerotic feelings or actions. It would be a question worth pursuing.

We have only one side of the correspondence between them, for Auguste eventually asked that his own letters be destroyed, apparently because of religious scruples (pp. 500-501). Nor do we have the vast majority of Auguste's letters to his other correspondents—his older half-brother, his sisters, or his niece. But we do have numerous letters from Auguste to his mother, and above all we gain a vivid sense of his presence from the letters he received. He clearly had as powerful an impact on his family as on his friend.

That impact seems to have derived partly from Auguste's intense, often anguished spirituality. In the letters of his that survive, he worries about his inability to pray whole-heartedly and about the depth of his sinfulness (p. 462). Having returned to Malta after a time in prison, ruminating on France's ongoing turmoil, he explains to his sister that "ce qui me console, c'est que cela devait être ainsi. Nous approchons la fin des temps" (p. 409). In 1787 he described his decision to stop going to the theater, despite the urgings of his half-brother and sister-in-law (p. 154). A decade later, he urged that his nephews and nieces be kept away as well, given "le danger qu'il y a d'y exposer le salut de son âme" (p. 436). If the rest of his family did not fully share these commitments, they all (even his worldly half-brother the general d'Estourmel) showed Auguste respect and deference. He apparently represented an extreme version of his family's larger outlook.

Yet Auguste was also a man of the Enlightenment. He shared his contemporaries' fascination with botany, and at the dissolution of his order he contemplated becoming a physician, in hopes "d'être utile à mes semblables, surtout à la campagne" (p. 424). He also shared the era's enthusiasm for economic development.^[4] Nor did his spirituality prevent him from taking a tough-minded, detail-oriented approach to business matters. Before the Revolution, he played an important role in managing his order's properties, and the experience served him well in later years.^[5] Napoleon's seizure of Malta (a brief prelude to the invasion of Egypt) led to two years of semi-imprisonment, but once freed Auguste moved in with his family and took the lead in managing its properties. On behalf of his siblings, he watched over grape harvests and timber sales, arranged leases, searched for documents concerning property rights, and offered advice (pp. 629, 1190-96). His family was properly grateful. Shortly before his death, his sister thanked him "de surveiller à Brugny (one of the family's principal estates) tous mes intérêts" (p. 1261). Auguste d'Estourmel shows the complicated ways in which eighteenth-century men and women might combine apparently diverse commitments.

His friend Charles de Beauclerc offered a less intense, less puritanical version of the same fundamental pattern. Happily married and a contented country gentleman, the father of two daughters and a son, Charles remained deeply concerned with religious questions. He hoped one day to inherit a fragment of the true cross (a relative had promised to bequeath it to him) (p. 778), and described to his friend his

satisfaction “de revoir ... se rétablir insensiblement la religion de nos pères que des philosophes fanatiques voulaient saper jusque dans les fondements” (p. 972). In an earlier letter, he attributed to the philosophes “tous les maux qui sont tombés sur nous” (p. 614). Vigilance was still needed, of course, for the philosophers’ books remained available, a danger from which the young had to be protected. Hence his own library was “épurée de toute espèce de romans” (p. 972).

Yet Charles’s own language to his friend betrays the influence of Enlightenment sentimental novels, and his wife (he wrote) was “enthousiasmée des ouvrages de Mme de Genlis,” which the family used as a guide in educating its daughters (p. 606). In the spirit of Rousseau, Beauclerc delighted in playing with his children, and insisted on advanced education for his daughters as well as for his son (p. 970; see also Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie’s introduction, pp. 23-34). Like his friend, he saw no contradiction between intense piety and tough-minded, acquisitive economic practices. “Nous sommes toujours à l’affût des acquisitions territoriales à faire dans ces contrées,” he reported (p. 944), and he described with satisfaction his success in gaining higher rents from his tenant farmers (pp. 973, 1171).

Given this complex mixture of values, it is not surprising that the d’Estourmel and Beauclerc welcomed the Napoleonic regime, though the warmth of their welcome is surprising. Of course they were delighted at Napoleon’s restoration of Catholicism and reconciliation with the papacy (p. 774). In 1805 Louise de Clermont-Tonnerre (Auguste d’Estourmel’s niece) was among those received by the pope during his visit to Paris (pp. 802-4). But the families seem to have been enthusiastic also about Napoleon’s success in restoring French grandeur. In 1805, Charles de Beauclerc wrote his friend that “c’est un bien beau moment que tu auras vu la capitale,” referring to “l’allégresse, suite de l’enthousiasme général que causent les nouveaux avantages obtenus par les Français en Allemagne,” and by hopes that these victories would lead to a lasting peace (p. 855). The families also had good reason for appreciating the regime’s internal functioning, for in fundamental ways they benefited from it, perhaps more than from the Old Regime. Having successfully served in the armies of the King, the Convention, and Napoleon, Louis-Marie d’Estourmel counted as a notable of the regime. He served in the Corps Législatif and Senate, and visited Saint-Cloud and Malmaison (pp. 1002, 1208). Having established himself as a country gentleman in the Beauce, Charles de Beauclerc socialized regularly with Napoleon’s prefects (p. 692) and enjoyed influence with other Napoleonic officials (p. 1076). Because the collection ends in 1816, we cannot assess the families’ long-term adaptation to the world that 1789 made, but they seem to have been well positioned to succeed in it.

Destins croisés is a remarkable book that combines editorial erudition, documentary richness, and a startling degree of narrative coherence. Some of that coherence derives from the monumental historical changes that the d’Estourmel and Beauclerc had to navigate, but the book’s coherence equally reflects the letter writers’ own ways of understanding and describing their lives. Charles de Beauclerc in particular saw his life as involving visible progressions and critical turning points. Even as the events of his life unfolded, he brought to them an autobiographical awareness, a sense of the coherence of his life trajectory, centering on his friendship with Auguste d’Estourmel, his domestic happiness, and his increasingly solid position as a country gentleman. No 1,300-page book can be described as altogether easy reading, but neither does *Destins croisés* read as a typical document collection.

There remains one nagging question about the collection, as about any such project in the current, electronic age: Simply, is paper still the best medium for a publication of this kind? Certainly there would be benefits to some form of electronic publication, notably the option to search the text for specific topics. The editors have done a heroic job in producing an index of the names and places mentioned in the text, itself filling forty-seven pages, but when it comes to themes, topics, and keywords, readers are on their own. As a result, the book is less useful than it might have been, and less likely to reach readers who might benefit from it. There are very good reasons for the editors’ choice, but electronic resources have changed the logic of documentary publication. Relevant to so many domains of historical investigation, this collection also illustrates *a contrario* the advantages the electronic age offers us. [6]

NOTES

[1] Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, Isabelle Chave, and Marion Trévisi, *L'Horizon méditerranéen, 1779-1799, Lettres et journaux de voyage de Louis Marie Auguste d'Estmourel (1754-1814)* (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2011).

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 166-172.

[3] Natacha Coquery, *L'hôtel aristocratique. Le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998) provides an outstanding description.

[4] *L'horizon*, p. 65.

[5] *L'horizon*, p. 28.

[6] For my own summary of some of these issues, see <https://jonathandewald.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/do-humanities-professors-dream-of-electric-sheep/> (consulted 30 May 2016).

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