CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Ebb and Flow of Existence

This is a history of three or four thousand people, who lived in agitated times. It is a story—or ninety-eight stories—about a small town, and an inquisitive, illiterate woman, Marie Aymard, who lived there throughout her life. It is the story, too, of an extended family over space, and over the historical time of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Marie Aymard's family, over five generations, and over the course of their unlikely lives, ending with the death of her great-great-granddaughter in 1906. It is an inquiry into the changing possibilities of historical investigation in our own times, and into the infinity of sources or evidence about past lives.

The small town is Angoulême, in southwest France, and in Marie Aymard's lifetime it was known as a place of "disquiet," introversion, and endless legal-financial "affairs."[1] Two generations later, it was a society, still, of "the most fatal immobility," as Honoré de Balzac wrote in the sequence of novels that he described as a "drama with three or four thousand personalities." To become unprovincial, in Balzac's novel of paper and printing, *Les illusions perdues*, was to "se désangoulêmer," or to "de-Angoulêmize oneself."[2]

The history begins in the winter of 1764, with two pieces of paper. One was a power of attorney to which Marie Aymard attested, as part of her "researches"—in her own expression—into the fate of her late husband, a carpenter who emigrated to the island of Grenada, and who had become the owner, or so she had heard, of "a certain quantity of Negroes." The other was a prenuptial contract that was signed a few weeks later by eighty-three people in Angoulême, on the occasion of the marriage of Marie Aymard's daughter to the son of a tailor.[3] These two acts or agreements, drawn up by a notary in the town, were the point of

departure for a history that proceeds from an individual to her own connections, and to their connections, and to a very large historical inquiry: a history by contiguity of modern times. There was a seamstress living in poverty in Montmartre in Paris, in the generation of Marie Aymard's grandchildren's grandchildren, and her sister, a street seller; a naval pharmacist in Tahiti; the widow of a disgraced banker in Le Mans; and the cardinal-archbishop of Carthage.[4]

The family's lives take unanticipated turns, and so do the stories of their acquaintances and neighbors; this is a history in the spirit of the *gazza ladra*, the thieving magpie who flies away with teaspoons and plates and shiny new coins.[5] It is infinite, or incipiently infinite, in that there is no end to the information, diversions, and episodes of ordinary life. It is about contiguity in space, and in the space of social relationships; the inquiry starts with Marie Aymard's family, with the larger social network of the eighty-three signatories of the marriage contract of 1764, and with the even larger society of the 4,089 individuals who were there in the parish registers of the town in the same year. It is also about contiguity in time, and the overlapping generations of family life, as the story continues into the eventful historical time of the French Revolution, and of the economic changes of the nineteenth century. It is inspired by an interest in other people's lives—in what happened next, and what it meant—and by an exhilarated, exhausted sense of the possibilities of historical inquiry.

The history of Marie Aymard and her family is a journey in space and time, and it is also my own journey. I happened to go into a bookshop in Florence in the summer of 1980, and happened to see a history journal, *Quaderni Storici*, with an article—Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni's manifesto of a prosopography from below, or of a history that is full of individuals and stories, and is not of necessity a history of the great and the celebrated—that made me wish I could be a historian.[6] Fifteen years later—in Angoulême, near the railway station, in the unromantic setting of the Archives départementales de la Charente—I was captivated by archives, and have never wanted for a moment to lose the spell.

The technology of doing history has changed almost beyond recognition over the forty years since 1980, and that, too, is part of the story of

this book. I have been lingering in the virtual space of the website of the Archives municipales d'Angoulême, or being distracted, on 795 different days since the spring of 2012, and have 1,348 pages of images of my handwritten notes. But the sense of touching the history of individual lives is still there, and the sense of infinite possibilities. It is joyous to lose oneself in such a sea; "e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare."[7]

This is a history that has been an encounter, throughout, with novelists and the novel. It is a sequence of incomplete stories, like *A Sentimental Journey*, Laurence Sterne's novel without an ending; one of the ninety-eight stories is about the little spotted dog of Sterne's daughter Lydia, which was stolen on a quiet street in Angoulême in 1769.[8] The most poignant events of *Les illusions perdues* were set on the corner of the same street, where six of Marie Aymard's granddaughters were living in 1837. The lives of the nineteenth-century family are a history, like Emile Zola's own great human comedy, the *Rougon-Macquart*, of the children and grandchildren of a matriarch in an apparently isolated provincial town, who made their way, over five generations, to the distant corners of France.

But *An Infinite History* is a story that is without a sense of destiny, or of the development of character over time. It is "flat" and "positivist," as in the naturalist novel, in Zola's description; an "exact study of facts and things."[9] It starts with an observation of the present and an assumption about individuals in the past, that everyone, without exception, exists amidst relationships or networks of exchange, news, and information. "It is impossible to understand the past" without being interested in the present, Marc Bloch wrote in 1940, and for the historian of the medieval countryside, to look at the shape of the fields was as important as to be able to read old records.[10] It is important, in our own times, to observe the conversations and silences in the streets: to look around, now, and to see everyone, essentially without exception, telling stories and looking at images and sending messages, and to ask, How would it be if everything had always been like this?

It was the marriage contract of Marie Aymard's daughter in 1764, even more than the power of attorney, that was the point of no return for the historical journey, and for the book. There has been something endlessly distracting about the occasion and the names. Over the two

pages of the signatures, there are different inks and different flourishes, children's names ("Rosemarin") and imposing names ("Marchais de la Chapelle"), names that are crowded together and names that are impossible to read; it is as though the eighty-three signatures arise from their place on the page. "Every single piece has a principle of motion of its own," as Adam Smith wrote of the "game of human society."[11]

So the initial expansion of the story of Marie Aymard into a larger history of modern times was an inquiry into the signatories of the marriage contract, and their own social relationships. Who were all these people, and why were they there, on a dark afternoon in December 1764? The history of the signatories has been an alarmingly inconsistent enterprise, in which the process of looking for individuals by name is one of error, repetition, chance, and reading the same pages of registers over and over again. It is a sort of detection, with an unseemly interest in other people's lives, a multiplicity of confused identities, and relationships of which it is possible to make sense only by going far back and far forward in time. It led on, in turn, to a larger inquiry into the social relationships of Angoulême, or to what seemed, at first, to be a detour into orderliness. This became a list, and a social network visualization, of everyone who was present, or was mentioned, in the registers of the Catholic parishes of Angoulême in 1764: the virtual society of 4,089 people. It was an effort to arrive at some sense, or any sense, of completeness—of the population in which the histories of Marie Aymard and the eighty-three signatories were situated.[12]

The subsequent expansion—together with most of the book—has been an extension of the historical inquiry, not in space or in the social space of connections, but in time. To find out who all these individuals were, in the end, was to find out what happened next. So the story has become a history of the years preceding the French Revolution in Angoulême, and the legal affairs of the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s; of the French Revolution in the town; of the changing destinies of Marie Aymard's grandchildren over the revolutionary and Napoleonic period; and of the nineteenth-century economy of credit, taxes, the colonies, and the church, from the perspective of an obscure place and an unknown family. It is a story, like so many nineteenth-century histories, of

revolutionary politics, of migration, social change, and economic opportunity, and at the same time a story of immobility. It is a history, through the lives of these individuals and of others connected to them, of the transformations of modern times.

A Story about Information

"Everything is grave, serious, and important" in the records of civil registration, Marie Aymard's grandson declared in 1826, in a marginal annotation of the register of births of the Atlantic port city of Bayonne; "all the enunciations they contain should be in conformity with the most exact truth."[13] It is these universal archives, over the course of two centuries—the records and registers of ordinary life—that are at the heart of this inquiry. They are no more, on occasion, than lists of names and dates.[14] But they are also full of stories. They are archives that can be read as literature, and as history. They can be reduced to numbers, and they can be adorned with the apparatus of historical scholarship, of the footnote, and of the critique of sources.[15]

The registers of births, marriages, divorces and deaths have led to other, even more austere archives, or to the records of economic life—the incipiently universal records of taxes, of who lived next to whom, in the old tax islands of Angoulême; the "registers," "bundles," and "sacks" of the reports of subaltern jurisdictions that one of the archivists of the Charente found in an attic in 1858, covered with an "extremely inconvenient dust;" the notarial acts, records of entitlements and expectations; the registers of revolutionary property and of who bought who else's house—and to the census, cadastral, mortgage, and succession records of the nineteenth century.[16]

This history has been an encounter, from the outset, with the domineering technologies of the contemporary information society. It is about "personal connections," or "friends, family, and groups," as in the social networks of modern times: "bringing people closer together—whether it's with family and friends, or around important moments in the world."[17] The universal archives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life are also the record of connections, and even of moments in the world. But they

are evidence of the occasions for conversation or exchange, rather than of the content of the exchanges: of the possibility of "personal influence" and "opinion"—or the conditions that have been the object of the sociology of social networks—rather than of opinions and ideas.[18]

In the economics of social networks, which is one of the inspirations of the book, there are resources available on a scale that is unimaginable in historical inquiry: a survey, in a recent study, in which the investigators "asked every adult in each of 35 villages to name the person in their village best suited to initiate the spread of information."[19] There is nothing of this in the history of Marie Aymard and her family, amidst a continuing exchange of news and information that extended over time and space and the Atlantic Ocean.

The records of the town were full of "informations," in the legal sense of the expression: reports of insults and injuries and atrocious calumnious songs. But there were no published sources of news, amidst the printers and papermakers of mid-eighteenth-century Angoulême, and very few books.[20] Even the nineteenth-century family of Marie Aymard—with the exception of the cardinal, and of his second cousin once removed, who kept an inexpensive restaurant in Paris with her two sons—left very few traces.[21] There are only a handful of personal letters that I have been able to find, written in the 1880s by the cardinal's sister, Louise Lavigerie—with whom the book ends—and conserved in his archives in Rome. It is the multitude of very small histories, in these circumstances, that is an approximation to the endless, inexorable evidence of modern exchanges.

The history of Marie Aymard's family has been an encounter with a different dominating technology, as well, or the search for genealogy: a lineage from the individual in the present to ancestors in the past, or a "chain of histories of unions."[22] This, too, is one of the oceanic industries of modern times, with "billions" of records and "millions of family trees," "bringing together science and self-discovery" to help "everyone, everywhere discover the story of what led to them."[23] It is a product, in its modern form, of the period since the 1990s; which is a form, or an archive, that changes continuously over time.[24]

The technologies of ancestry have been a continuing presence in this inquiry, even though the story, which is essentially matrilineal, is only in part a history of unions. The central figure in the financial history of the nineteenth-century family, as it turned out, was the oldest daughter of the couple in the marriage contract, Jeanne Allemand Lavigerie, who lived with her four sisters, was never married, and died in 1860 at the age of ninety-one, a few minutes' walk from where she was born. The history of the family has been a story about time, in the sense that it has followed (or tried to follow) the children and grandchildren as they moved forward in historical time, and over the course of their own lives, into an imagined and unknown future, one step at a time. It is told, at least to some extent, from their own perspective, or from the perspective of the individuals amidst whom they lived. But this is very different from the view of their eventual posterity, after ten or more generations. It is horizontal and historical, and not vertical or genealogical; it is about how it really was, and not "who I really am" (the unknown "I" in an unimagined future).

There are other respects, all the same, in which the historian's and the family historian's inquiries are not always so distinct. The sources are similar, or identical; the story of Marie Aymard and her children is a history of other people's ancestors. The family historian asks, "Who am I, really?" (or "What led to me?"), and she also asks, "Who were they, really?" those distant forefathers and foremothers, in their different, distant world. This, too, is a kind of historical insight. It is a way of imagining the past, to discover the streets in which the ancestors grew up, and the individuals amidst whom they lived. Connections are a matter of historical circumstance, and elective affinity, as well as of descent. Marie Aymard's youngest grandson, when he was married in 1839 to a lemonade seller, in a small industrial town at the confluence of the Seine and the Yonne, declared that all his grandparents were dead, and that he did not know where they lived, or when they had died.[25] The five unmarried sisters were so important in the story, as will be seen, because of their own economic circumstances, and their connections to their nieces and great-nieces.

The book has been a process of discovery, and also of "search": of searching in the sense of the distracted, iterated, inconsequential process of looking (or finding) that is as much a part of the vista of modern times as seeing images or sending messages. This is a family history that has been the story (a romantic story) of provincial archives, in Angoulême and elsewhere. It is filled with descriptions of pieces of paper that are faint and unphotographed. But there are other sources, especially in relation to the nineteenth-century history: newspaper reports of tragedies at railway stations; histories of Mesopotamia and studies of the color-giving properties of plants; commercial directories and judgments about the jurisprudence of banking supervision—sources, or texts, that can be read and searched online. There are many of the parish records, too, and most of the civil registers, that can be read online, of which some—a proportion that is increasing over time—have been indexed or transcribed.

These are familiar sources that pose unfamiliar questions. The oldest of Marie Aymard's sons to survive infancy, Gabriel Ferrand, was for a time, in the 1790s, the archivist of the Charente. The page of the parish register on which his baptism was recorded is missing in the online images of the register.[26] He was married in Angoulême in 1763; a large inkblot obscures the name of the bride.[27] In 1793, amidst the turmoil of the revolutionary market in religious property, he purchased a lease on a "former church"; the page on which the transaction was recorded is missing in the online register of leases.[28] There was once a picture of him (or a picture of a picture); it has not been seen since 1910.[29]

Even in the (continuously changing) universe of printed sources, the limits of the inquiry—into one family, in a small provincial town—are elusive.[30] So the circumstantial history is itself a vista or an image of modern times. There are so many historical journeys that are now possible, virtual and otherwise, and so many possibilities, too, for being distracted, or for following long, circuitous diversions. This is a history that is local, and micro in size, and that has become larger by contiguity—by following individuals into the settings of their families, friends, and neighbors, and in their own journeys in space and time. It is a flat and positivist history, in the sense of being adorned, or overadorned,

with endnote references (many of them to the municipal archives of Angoulême). But it is also an opportunistic story, of individuals glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, or at the edge of the screen. It is a history, as so often in the online universe, of both solitude—"forever voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone"—and agoraphobia.[31]

A Historical Story

The history of Marie Aymard and her family is a vast story, of the long French Revolution and of the economic revolution of the nineteenth century. It is in the spirit, like so much in twentieth-century historical inquiry, of a history seen "from below," and in particular of histories that seek to tell a large or important story through the history of an individual, or a place, or a family, or a profession.[32] This is an established, capacious genre, in respect of different times and places; one of the inspirations of the book is the microhistory of early modern Italy, and another is the "history of the world of San José," with its parish registers and "tiny facts," its gaze "in all directions."[33] The inspiration in the realism (and naturalism) of the novel is even vaster, from Shanghai to Montmartre.[34] The changes in access to information that have been the condition of the inquiry, including information about individual lives, are literally worldwide.

The story is idiosyncratically French, in that it is inspired by the amazing abundance of records and registers in France. There were nineteen notaries practicing—or being indolent, according to a royal edict of the following year—in Angoulême in 1764, and they produced at least a thousand notarized acts over the course of the year; "archives are infinitely precious," as a minister of the interior wrote in 1829, in a circular received in the departmental archives of the Charente.[35] The story is inspired, too, by a generation (or more) of histories of unexceptional lives in the French provinces—of the idyll of "certain, verifiable facts," and of the conviction that a thousand pages about an individual "who existed" can be a journey, in the end, into the history of modern times.[36] It is in the lineage of microhistories that are variable in scale, as well as in exemplarity (or representativity), and it is an attempt to make sense

out of "the trajectories of thousands of people," in an inquiry that is intermediate, or "meso-," between the micro and the macro.[37] It is a "social history of individuals," and of the multiplicity of sources in respect of family life.[38] It draws on efforts to connect micro- and macrohistories by the individuals' own connections, including networks of friendship, place, and family.[39]

The ninety-eight stories in the book are inspired, at the same time, by a different and more dispersed historiography, in histories of economic life. The story started with an exceptional (illiterate) individual, and ended in an entirely unforeseen destination, in nineteenth-century finance and the nineteenth-century church. It is in the spirit of the new economic history to which Marc Bloch once looked forward, in which the "political," the "economic," and the "religious" would be intertwined, in contrast to a ("bloodless") history of "a world without individuals."[40] Bloch's new history, with its "marvelously disparate character" of materials, is now a flourishing, eclectic, and worldwide subdiscipline, in which economists use "many . . . kinds of evidence," economic historians use "uneconomic" sources, and historians of economic life use legal, visual, and economic sources in a multiplicity of different inquiries.[41]

The history by contiguity in which this book is an experiment—the story of three or four thousand people—is an effort to put together the individual and the collective, the economic and the political, a history from below and a history of the largest events of modern times. It is an inquiry into the circumstances of individual lives, and into the "why," as well as the "how," of economic changes and political events.[42] Causal histories are a repudiation of the most profound condition of historical inquiry, which is to try to understand the lives of individuals in the past, and to be a history, always, of "human consciousnesses."[43] But we think in whys as well as hows. So the book is about a multitude of very small histories, and about the possibility of edging toward understanding and explanation (as in the children's game of Grandmother's Footsteps) in very small steps.

The choice of historical scale or size is poignant, and it is ideological in the sense that it distributes the immense cemeteries of the dead into two classes, of the important (individuals with ideas and sentiments)

and the unimportant (individuals of whom there are no records, or nothing very much, and who can be counted, but cannot be understood). In choosing the history of individuals, which is small, the historian chooses to understand small and unimportant changes (except in the circumstance that the individuals are themselves important, like Marie Aymard's grandson's grandson, the cardinal). In choosing the history of the social economy, the historian chooses to live in a world of the past without ideas or hopes or friendships, and to understand important changes, like the causes of revolutions, or the rise of the modern economy. But these are not the only possibilities, and there are times—like our own times—when it is important, and even urgent, to try to understand political and economic transformation from the perspective of individuals and families: of ordinary life.

The individuals in this story—this history of economic life—lived in a period of change, the long French Revolution, that was a political event, with economic consequences and economic origins, and in a period of economic revolution over the course of the nineteenth century that had political consequences and political conditions.[44] But the view from below, which is the view from the perspective of a particular (obscure) family, is disconcerting in relation to some of the established distinctions of large-scale history. The lives of individuals do not divide themselves, effortlessly, into the economic and the personal and the political. Everyone's inner life is a jumble of high and low ideas. Religion is a faith, a practice, and an economic institution. Economic exchanges are interested and disinterested, public and private and intimate. Individuals are mobile or immobile in life, and also in imagination—in the information or misinformation they have about distant places and long-lost friends.

Angoulême was a place where very little happened, over the course of the French Revolution—or at least in the historiography of the revolution—and the family of Marie Aymard were invisible (with one, marginal exception) in the entire historiography. But the history of the revolutionary years from the perspective of an obscure place and an unknown family is itself, as will be seen, a large story. There is a revolutionary hero, of sorts, who grew up around the corner from the family,

and a heroine of the counterrevolution. The journeys of Marie Aymard's grandchildren were a history, in their own way, of the transformation of the conditions of life, over the revolutionary period.

The history recounted in this book is disconcerting, too, in relation to large presumptions about modern times.[45] Marie Aymard's nineteenth-century family were enterprising and industrious, or some of them were, in the vast economy of the state (and the church) more than in the market, and in a sequence of economic relationships that were indistinctly of the market and of the state. They were "uneconomic," in that they found advancement in the public and private services that loomed so large, then as now, in economic life. Their economic fortunes were determined, from time to time, by the choices of calculating, industrious women who never went anywhere at all—like Marie Aymard's granddaughters, whose lives (and savings) were at the center of the nineteenth-century story. The only person in the family who became important, in the history of the extended French economy, was Marie Aymard's grandson's grandson in Carthage: Charles Martial Allemand Lavigerie, visionary of humanitarian information, campaigner against the trans-Saharan slave trade, and a "marvelously adroit businessman," in the opinion of his critics, "a millionaire, a multimillionaire."[46]

The stories of Marie Aymard and her family are disconcerting, most of all, in the extent to which they subvert the asymmetry of time, or the affliction of knowing what happened next. To have almost no evidence other than the most ordinary of archives is to be obliged to follow the rhythms of ordinary life; to live in the present (of the individuals in the past) and in their (approximately) remembered past; to know nothing of their future, or of the large revolutions of which they were a part. It is to know almost nothing other than what they knew, or anticipated, or who it was amidst whom they lived. But this is itself a history of information, and of change over time.

The history of Marie Aymard and her family has been an experiment in thinking with numbers—in a world swimming in information—and an experiment in thinking with stories, in a world of endless storytelling. It has been inspired, throughout, by a sense of the incompleteness

and the immensity of historical sources: of the possibility of finding everyone (in the generation of the grandchildren's grandchildren, or in the parish records of Angoulême in 1764) and of the limits of even the most universal evidence. It is an infinite history in this respect as well. The only solace, along the way, is to try to be as obvious as possible about the sources and the statistics, and to hope that others will find more connections, more sources, and more hypotheses to be explored.[47] This is a good time for a story of living with uncertainty, and a story with no end in sight. It is a story of changing times from the perspective of a single, large, unequal family. It is a history, above all, of what it is like to live amidst events that are beyond one's control.

INDEX