

Preface

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, participation in many a branch of English foreign trade was either monopolized by a favored joint stock company or restricted to members of a particular chartered society (for example, the Merchant Adventurers, the Eastland Company, the Levant Company). Very often these chartered companies restricted their membership to Londoners and to “mere merchants,” excluding retailers, manufacturers and ship captains. By contrast, participation in the newly developing trades to North America and the West Indies—particularly after the termination of the Virginia Company in 1624—was open to all subjects of the Crown. With the gates ajar, a numerous and motley band of small venturers—including retailers and ship captains—pushed into these new and promising American trades. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, it had become apparent that most of this huckster horde lacked the resources to carry on transatlantic trade efficiently and profitably, and that a contraction in the number of participating firms was already in progress. Thus, even though the merchandise turnover in all branches of the Atlantic trades continued to expand until the American Revolution, the number of English and later Scottish firms involved was progressively reduced, leaving such trades in the hands of much fewer but considerably stronger houses.¹ In eighteenth century London, these fewer and stronger American houses (even if collectively never as weighty as the firms trading to Europe and the Mediterranean) could cut most respectable figures. In the contemporary outports, their equivalents were even more important, dominating the commercial life of such places as Glasgow, Liverpool and Bristol.

Success in any open trade was not just success for an individual or a firm; it might also open new prospects of advancement for a whole family. Kin might help a growing firm with capital, credit, reputation and a useful circle of acquaintances in all sorts of places. In return,

the partners in a successful firm might help their kin with employment, orders for goods, credit, introductions, and opportunities for advantageous investment, as well as with that subtle, indirect transfer of prestige and business standing that might be thought of as “reflection of the lustre of success.” Conversely, of course, there was the ever present threat that a declining or failing firm could drag families down with it.

Many decades ago, when I first began my research in early modern British foreign and colonial trade, I dreamed of finding somewhere, perhaps in the muniment room of a country house, the complete records of one of the more successful firms, one that had proved its fitness by surviving for two or more generations in the hazardous North American trade, particularly in its most important branch, the trade to the Chesapeake. With the passing years, I came to perceive that there was no reason why such a complete archive should have been preserved anywhere. Business records are normally destroyed after they have ceased to have any current or potential use. A few items are, of course, spared the fire or the shredder because they relate to some special circumstance, such as a lawsuit or a trust or other inheritance.² Even those deliberately retained for a time are likely to be preserved over the centuries more by chance than by design.

Thus I learned that even the most energetic researcher is unlikely to find a complete archive of any relevant seventeenth or eighteenth century firm. When he or she does find business records that chance has preserved, they are likely to be mere fragments: accounts without the relevant correspondence, or vice versa. If some correspondence turns up, it usually proves to be (outgoing) letterbooks without the parallel incoming letters, or, in fewer cases, incoming letters without the matching outgoing correspondence. Like other historians working on similar imperfect materials, I soon decided that one could not wait for a perfect trove to turn up but had to work with the material available; in this spirit, I published a number of articles on seventeenth or eighteenth century firms based on characteristically fragmentary evidence. In the course of preparing one such piece (on the London Scottish merchant James Russell),³ I realized that the available fragments could be used to reconstruct not merely the activities of a firm but the history of a family over many generations, a family in this case whose history touched Scotland, England, Mary-

land, Virginia and India in the century and a half between the Union of 1707 and the Mutiny of 1857.

My experience with the Russells led me to wonder whether an equivalent reconstruction could be attempted for other London mercantile families, particularly the Perrys, who were exceptionally important in the trades to Virginia and Maryland almost a century before Russell. (For four decades they appear to have been the most important British firm trading to the continental colonies.) Elizabeth Donnan had published an article on them in 1931, but, as she was very much aware, it was only a beginning.⁴ Her work was based entirely on printed sources and, because of the chronological distribution of those sources, necessarily emphasized the later history of the firm under Micajah Perry the younger, to the neglect of its earlier and more important history under his grandfather, Micaiah Perry the elder. This chronological imbalance also led to an interpretive distortion, with an overemphasis on the importance of the planter consignment trade and a relative neglect of other modes of mercantile operation used by the firm. I had reason to believe that enough additional material was available to enable one to reconsider the character of the firm presented by Donnan and place its story and the saga of the Perry family in a much wider context.

A generation ago, three noteworthy studies appeared embodying such a combination of business and family history: Richard Pares' 1950 study of the Pinneys of Bristol; Michael Flinn's 1962 study of Crowleys, the great ironmongers; and Ralph Davis's 1967 study of the Levant-trading Radcliffes.⁵ The Pares and Davis studies were based in good part on substantial bodies of business and family papers preserved in country houses and transferred relatively recently to university and public libraries and county archives. Flinn, however, found to his sorrow that all the Crowley business records had long before been destroyed, but as partial consolation he did have access to some family and estate papers. For the Perrys the initial prospects were even more daunting. No cache of Perry business or family papers has been found, or, I fear, is likely to be found. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of historically significant evidence has turned up in a wide variety of places. Since Donnan wrote, additional correspondence touching the Perrys has been published by Virginia specialists. More important, though, are the large manuscript collections in Virginia and the District of Columbia which were

found to contain scattered correspondence to and from the firm. In England, the most important sources, in addition to the obvious wills and Colonial Office series at the Public Record Office, proved to be court records, including those of Admiralty, Exchequer and Chancery. Of these, the richest for the Perrys was Chancery. Almost sixty years ago, George Sherwood alerted his fellow early American genealogists to the riches that could be found in Chancery bills and answers as well as in the better known Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills.⁶ Sherwood devoted most of his attention to the first two-thirds of the seventeenth century. Since his time, the library of the Society of Genealogists (in London) has acquired a microfilm of the privately prepared Bernau Index to Chancery proceedings. This index, despite its technical difficulties, is extremely useful for the post-Sherwood period, particularly when one is dealing with as distinctive a name as Micajah Perry. In addition, the Society of Genealogists also possesses a valuable set of notes prepared by the late Major G. S. Parry, calendaring a great number of references to persons named Parry or Perry in Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills and Chancery proceedings of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of course, since neither George Sherwood nor Major Parry was automatically interested in topics that attract the attention of a modern economic or social historian, it was necessary in every case to go from their notes to the archival documents themselves to obtain or confirm the information needed. Other “leads” had to be generated and pursued by the usual methods of historical research.

After assembling a wide variety of scattered data surviving in repositories in England, Ireland and the United States, I realized how much of the story of the Perrys could now be told and where major gaps persisted. Almost no personal correspondence has come to light, nor have any balance sheets or similar general accounts of the firm. But historians, like archaeologists, are used to working with fragmentary evidence. Enough has survived to make possible the reconstruction of the complex rise and fall of the Perrys of London—family and firm.

When one attempts to write the history of a family, one necessarily becomes involved in its genealogy. I am aware, though, that for many professional historians, even one page of genealogy may be a page too much. I have nevertheless devoted a good deal of space (particularly in Appendices C and D) to the pedigrees of the Perrys and

kindred families. In this I have not been particularly interested in what may be termed longitudinal or serial genealogy and have not striven to pursue the family lines of descent into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similarly, I have investigated the antecedents of the Perrys only from the moment when their Exeter ancestor first became a merchant in the reign of Henry VIII. I was, however, much more interested, as the reader will discover, in what may be called the latitudinal or structural genealogy of the family: the contemporary relationships of the London Perrys and their partner Lane to other families in Devon, London, Northamptonshire, Ireland, Virginia and elsewhere. I hope that the fuller delineation of these connections will help the careful reader understand a good bit more about the world in which the Perrys lived and the character of some of their migratory and other major decisions.

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Perry of London