

**The Female World of Love & Empire:
Women, Family & East India Company Politics at the End of the 18th Century**

In 1975, in the first issue of the first volume of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg published a pioneering article on 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America'. Using evidence gleaned from diaries and personal correspondence, Smith-Rosenberg examined the intense female friendships that proliferated among propertied North American women from the 1760s-1880s, and suggested 'an alternative approach to female friendships—one which would view them within a cultural and social setting rather than from an exclusively individual psychosexual perspective'. Seeking to liberate the analysis of female friendships from the trammels of Freudian psychodynamic theories about same-sex relationships, Smith-Rosenberg argued that 'female love' between women played normative and instrumental roles in heterosexual family life. Immersion in shared reproductive functions within marriage, she argued, 'bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy', creating 'a specifically female world...built around...single-sex or homosocial networks'. In 'a world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless trooping of women to each others' homes for social purposes', she suggested, middle-class American women occupied a universe 'inhabited by children and other women'. Kinship figured centrally in Smith-Rosenberg's model of this female separate sphere: 'ties between sisters, first cousins, aunts and nieces provided the underlying structure upon which groups of friends and their network of female relatives clustered', allowing families to provide care for children in outposts that stretched progressively across the American continent. These female friendships and the rituals through which they were enacted sustained 'an

apprenticeship system' which 'carefully trained daughters in the arts of housewifery and motherhood' while linking 'the generations together in shared skills and emotional interaction'.¹

Smith-Rosenberg's article offered a major contribution to the late twentieth-century feminist project of writing women back into the historical record, making an historiographical intervention which claimed roles for women as purposive historical agents whose life stories—even if they unfolded in the domestic rather than the public sphere—deserved to be interpreted. In this article, forty years on, I revisit and resituate Smith-Rosenberg's influential paradigm of the female world of love and ritual, testing the utility of this model of propertied women's experience for analyses of gender that build on but also question the pioneering feminist scholarship of the 1970s. In this, my approach today reflects the agenda set by the inaugural issue of *Gender & History* in 1989, in which the editorial collective sought to move beyond 'the early, compensatory phase of women's history' by using feminist insights 'to encourage research not only on gender and women but also on how other divisions—of race, class, religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation—have redounded on both ideas about gender and the experiences of women'.² What happens if we explore the female world of love and ritual outside the bounds of church and home by interrogating propertied white women's strategic use of female emotion and sociability in the contexts of war, politics, and colonialism? Like Smith-Rosenberg, I take private correspondence and diaries written by women as my chief primary sources, but (unlike her) I locate these materials both in conventionally female local, domestic settings and in transnational and imperial contexts traditionally associated with the masculine public sphere.³ Examining the letters and letter-journals

¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs*, 1 (1975), pp. 2-3, 9, 10, 11, 16.

² The Editorial Collective, 'Why Gender History?', *Gender & History*, 1 (1989), pp. 1-6, citation p. 1. See also Jane Rendall and Keith McClelland, 'Leonore Davidoff and the Founding of *Gender & History*', *Gender & History*, 28: 2 (2016), pp. 283-287, and Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, 'Blood, Contract and Intimacy: History and Practice with Leonore Davidoff', *Gender & History*, 28: 2 (2016), pp. 288-298, esp. pp. 291-292.

³ For the problematic relationship between gender and the public and private spheres, see for example Lawrence Klein, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1995), pp. 97-109, and Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History',

of a network of kin that stretched from the Scottish Highlands to London, Jamaica, the West African coast, Madras and China, I explore the ways in which women associated with the East India Company (EIC) deployed female love, friendship and rituals to promote their families' accumulation of wealth, status and power even as they nurtured and socialised Company children. By tracing the instrumental use of female love at once within domestic reproductive strategies and transnational patronage systems, I draw attention to British women's active entanglement in the work of empire decades earlier than historians conventionally date European women's participation in imperialism on the Indian subcontinent. Eighteenth-century Company women, I argue, used the language of love and affection not only in domestic social and cultural rituals but also in the cut-and-thrust manoeuvring of trans-imperial politics—in and beyond Britain. The labour of their love was integral to the expansion of merchant capitalism and war capitalism alike; it fostered the East India Company's development from an embattled trading cartel into a dominant, global territorial power.⁴

* * * * *

My central protagonists are three female friends and relations: Eliza Davidson, née Pigou (1750-1791), her cousin Mrs Chitty (?-1814) and Eliza's sister-in-law, Lydia Falconar, née Davidson (c. 1744-1818). Notwithstanding their birth into propertied families whose men-folk figure prominently in histories of British merchant capitalism and empire, precisely because they were female, these women's identities and kinship ties remain obscure in key respects. As gentlewomen, they did not serve formal apprenticeships and as women they did not attend universities; despite their deep entanglement in its business, they were excluded by their sex from official employment in the EIC

Historical Journal, 36 (1993), pp. 383-414. For efforts to rethink the conventional history of gender and empire in this context, see esp. Kathleen Wilson, 'Rethinking the Colonial State: Family, Gender, and Governmentality in Eighteenth-Century British Frontiers', *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), pp. 1294-1322.

⁴ For the model of eighteenth-century historian as merchant capitalism, see esp. Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600-1757* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), chap. 1, and for 'war capitalism' as an alternative formulation of these processes, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), pp. xv-xvi. Neither model systematically scrutinises the role of propertied women within processes of capitalist growth, a central theme explored from an English national perspective in Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

service. In consequence, basic biographical information about them is often lacking, conjectural or incorrect in historical accounts. Eliza Davidson's parentage (unlike her husband's) is unclear; Lydia Falconar's birthdate (unlike her brother's) is estimated by family and local historians.⁵ Because she never married—the 'Mrs' was honorific—Mrs Chitty's identity is especially elusive: not only her parentage and birth date but even her given names are absent or opaque in surviving records, and her date of death is speculative.⁶ Written out of even their own family histories, these women are unsurprisingly absent from conventional narratives of Britain's imperial expansion.

If knowledge of these women's biographies is marked by gaps and ambiguities, the significance of Davidson and Pigou men for eighteenth-century merchant capitalism is well recognised. As Pigous, both Eliza Davidson and Mrs Chitty belonged to a kinship network of Huguenot origin that played vital roles in Indian Ocean and Atlantic World commerce and empire. Frederick Pigou (1711-1792) was the uncle of both Eliza Davidson and Mrs Chitty. He had first served the East India Company as a supercargo in Canton, trading in Chinese tea, silk, porcelain and Indian cottons from 1734 to 1756—a highly risky but immensely lucrative business that underpinned his subsequent career as an EIC Director (1758-1777) and his development of a mercantile empire focused on gunpowder production that stretched from Asia to the Atlantic colonies.⁷ Frederick's brother, Crommelin Pigou (d. 1779), was also active in EIC business, and like Frederick was

⁵ For Eliza Davidson, see the conflicting inclusion and exclusion of her in the list of the children of Frederick Pigou (who appears instead to have been her uncle) in Marika Sherwood and Kathy Chater, 'The Pigou Family across Three Continents', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society*, 28 (2005), pp. 409, 414. She is given the correct death date (1791) but the unlikely birth date of 1736 and described as Frederick's daughter in <http://thepeerage.com/p64714.htm#i647135>. For the Grant and Davidson genealogies, see David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 48-59, and <http://www.dcedin.co.uk/TNG/familygroup.php?familyID=F658&tree=tree1>.

⁶ The catalogue entry for her letter-books at Christ's College, Cambridge lists her simply as 'Mrs Chitty', and the archivist notes that there is no information on how or why her papers were deposited (personal communication). Internal evidence from the will of Catherine Henrietta Chitty (spinster of St John, Hackney, Middlesex) proved in London in 1814 suggests that Mrs Chitty died in this year. The National Archives, Kew (henceforth TNA), PROB 11/1558/174.

⁷ Sherwood and Chater, 'The Pigou Family', esp. pp. 409-413.

sufficiently wealthy and influential to be elected a Director.⁸ Other Pigou men of this era served the Company as soldiers, civil servants and merchants.⁹ Captain Peter Pigou (1732-83) of the Company's maritime service, a contemporary and kinsman of both Eliza and Mrs Chitty, was fully alive to the commercial potential of Indian trade. He shipped 'a large and curious hydraulic machine' fitted with an organ that 'played a multitude of tunes' from London to Madras in 1775 and orchestrated its laborious transport to Hyderabad, reputedly selling this gigantic mechanical novelty at vast profit to an Indian prince.¹⁰

Like the Pigou cousins, Eliza's husband and her in-laws, the Davidsons and Grants, were descendants of early eighteenth-century merchant capitalists who exploited a dense network of kin to secure employment and wealth outside British domestic markets. Alexander Davidson (1740-1791) and Lydia Falconar née Davidson (c. 1744-1818) were the children of John Davidson of Drumhall (near Cromarty) and Janet Grant of Dalvey, twenty-five miles from Inverness. It was through their mother Janet's natal family that the Davidson siblings, their in-laws and their progeny gained access to the interconnected Atlantic and Indian Ocean mercantile worlds. The early eighteenth-century Grants of Dalvey were impecunious Highlanders, tainted politically by the family's Jacobitism and constrained financially by the low productivity of their agricultural lands.¹¹ Like many of his compatriots, Janet Grant's brother Alexander (1705-1772) left the Highlands as a youth to seek his fortune in Jamaica. Rising rapidly into the landowning, slave-holding class, Alexander Grant consolidated his wealth by marrying Elizabeth Cooke (1717-1792), a wealthy planter's daughter. Returning with his wife to Britain in 1737, Grant created a transoceanic mercantile enterprise, based in London but eventually extending from the Caribbean to the west

⁸ George McGilvary, *Guardian of the East India Company: The Life of Laurence Sullivan* (London: Tauris, 2006), p. 129.

⁹ Sherwood and Chater, 'The Pigou Family', pp. 408-416.

¹⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 62, 1 (January 1792), pp. 13-17. The machine was reportedly worth £9,000.

¹¹ For the economic context of Highland colonial expansion in this period, see Andrew MacKillop, *'More fruitful than the soil': Army, Empire and the Scottish Highlands, 1715-1815* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000). For the wider Caribbean context of this migration, see Douglas Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

coast of Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Family identity and family labour were pivotal to Grant's economic strategy and success. 'Grant strove to reunite his severed family ties on returning to Britain', David Hancock has observed. 'He acted as the clan's London agent', and (lacking children of his own) employed a plenitude of nephews and male cousins in his London counting-houses and his colonial outposts. Together with his Davidson nephews and great-nephews, the male Grants of Grant Castle and the Grants of Monymusk House supplied Sir Alexander with a formidable (and elastic) mercantile labour force.¹²

Just as the Pigous' family gunpowder business straddled the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds, so too Alexander Grant's commercial empire defied conventional models of the so-called 'triangular trade' between Britain, Africa and the Atlantic colonies.¹³ To be sure, the nodal points of Grant's commercial networks included counting-houses in London, four Jamaican plantations and the West African slaving station of Bance Island, where he placed his nephew Alexander Davidson as one of two agents of his slave factory in the later 1750s. But Grant also invested heavily in East India Company stock, and thereby gained prime access to the Asian textile markets monopolised by the Company's merchants. Textiles, and above all else cottons from India, allowed European traders to barter successfully for slaves on the West African coast.¹⁴ Rather than triangular, this trade was roughly quadrilateral—circulating capital, commodities and persons between Asia, Africa, the Atlantic coast and Britain. Not content with the grip he had gained upon this reticulated trade from the purchase of India stock and the placement of his Davidson nephew at the Bance Island slave

¹² Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, pp. 48-59, citation p. 52.

¹³ For the analytical limits of the geographical parameters 'Atlantic World' paradigm, see Michael A. McDonnell, 'Paths Not Yet Taken, Voices Not Yet Heard: Rethinking Atlantic History', in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2005), pp. 45-61.

¹⁴ For Indian cotton and West African trade in this period, see Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, pp. 32-38; Coleen Kriger, *Cloth in West African History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), esp. pp. 37-39; Pedro Machado, "'Awash in a Sea of Cloth": Gujarat, Africa and the West Indian Ocean Trade, 1300-1800', in Prasanna Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello (eds), *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 161-179; George Metcalfe, 'A Microcosm of Why Africans Sold Slaves: Akan Consumption Patterns in the 1770s', *Journal of African History*, 28 (1987), pp. 377-394; and Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 135-138.

factory, Alexander Grant petitioned the East India Company Directors in 1759 to appoint Alexander Davidson to a Writership in their civil service, an employment that combined direct access to Indian textiles with political power on the subcontinent.¹⁵ Duly entering the Madras civil service in 1760, Alexander Davidson rose successively from Writer to Junior Merchant, Senior Merchant and Council member, enjoying a brief tenure as acting Governor of Madras from 1785-1786 and serving as Chief at the trading station at Vizagapatam until his death in 1791.¹⁶

We know of the contributions made by the Grant, Davidson and Pigou men to this burgeoning imperial world because they were employed in commercial and political institutions whose activities are documented in institutional archives. As women, Eliza Davidson, Lydia Falconar and Mrs Chitty figure only fleetingly in these public records. Capturing their histories requires access to an alternative archive. Only the exceptional survival of a rich cache of private letters reveals their intense love and friendship and the vital roles that women such as these played in the production and reproduction of imperial power.¹⁷ Hundreds of pages of correspondence between Eliza Davidson, Mrs Chitty and Lydia Falconar survive, dating from 1778 to 1791. These documents record in dense detail the daily lives of kin who were separated by vast geographical distances but remained intimately connected by ties of affection, financial interest and the shared care of children. They serve as a counter-point to the EIC's official archive, which is dominated by bureaucratic prose that privileged contractual order over family feeling.¹⁸ At once intimately domestic and intensely political, simultaneously private and public, the copious correspondence of these three women

¹⁵BL, A&AS, IOR/B/75: Court of Directors Minutes, 5 April 1758-2 April 1760, entry for 24 October 1759, p. 488. Davidson's appointment was noted on 7 November 1759 (p. 501).

¹⁶ Charles C. Prinsep, *Record of Services of the Honourable East India Company's Civil Servants in the Madras Presidency. From 1741 to 1858* (London: Trübner, 1885), p. 42. See also Henry Davidson Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras 1640-1800: Traced from the East India Company's Records Preserved at Fort St George and the India Office, and from Other Sources*, 4 vols (London: John Murray, 1913), III: pp. 103, 200, 228, 319, 545, 556.

¹⁷ The historical value of family letters such of these is noted for example by Barbara Caine, 'Letters between Mothers and Daughters', *Women's History Review*, 24 (2015), pp. 483-489. Historians' reluctance to insert women into transnational and global histories is discussed by Barbara Bush and June Purvis, 'Connecting Women's Histories: The Local and the Global', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), pp. 493-498.

¹⁸ For Company bureaucratic writing as both genre and process, see Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

illuminates the East India Company's reproductive underside, revealing a female world of love and ritual that undergirded and participated in the male exploits of trade and warfare that more typically structure imperial narratives.¹⁹ Historians conventionally begin their narratives of British India with Clive's victory at Plassey in 1757; my alternative history begins instead in 'Mrs Grant's garden' in Calcutta, where Eliza Pigou married Alexander Davidson in 1768.²⁰

* * * * *

Alexander Davidson's marriage to Eliza Pigou in 'Mrs Grant's garden' saw the fortunes of two successful clans of transoceanic merchant capitalists grow intertwined. An alliance that held the potential to consolidate and amplify the wealth and status of each kin-group, this union relied for its success upon bureaucratic and fiscal calculation, political *nous* and the canny negotiation of patronage networks. But it also hinged vitally on women's work—on the production, socialisation and careful placement into gainful employment or marriage of children. Mortality dominates histories of British colonialism in the Company era: in Philip Curtin's evocative phrase, the European experience of the tropics was *Death by Migration*.²¹ The Davidsons' family history reminds us forcibly however that white colonial expansion in this era of excess mortality was possible in significant measure because the British birth-rate reached unprecedented heights in these decades. In the Scottish Highlands, Alexander Davidson's sister Lydia gave birth to at least twelve children, of whom eight survived infancy and adolescence (and of whom at least five were despatched to colonial employments).²² Even in the more challenging reproductive conditions of Madras, Alexander's wife Eliza produced six children who survived infancy between 1769 and 1782. The

¹⁹ Two studies that explore similar practices and processes in North American colonialism are Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁰ Their marriage record is British Library (Henceforth BL), African and Asian Studies (henceforth A&AS), N/1/3 f.71.

²¹ Philip Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²² Twelve children are listed in <http://www.dcedin.co.uk/TNG/getperson.php?personID=I1263&tree=tree1>; of these, at least eight reached the age of 20 and two (including Alexander Falconar) survived into their 80s.

eldest of their progeny, Betsey, having married her Highland cousin Alexander Falconar, in turn gave birth between 1793 and 1812 to fourteen children, thirteen of whom were born in Madras.²³ David Arnold describes as ‘deathscapes’ the looming images of excess mortality that dominated the Romantic imagination in the Company era, but British commerce and rule in India must also be understood to have rested on burgeoning birthscapes.²⁴ Successful reproductive regimes lay at the heart of Company capitalism, and these regimes in turn rested on women’s labour.

How did Company families reproduce themselves, given the diasporic dispersal of their human personnel? Sexual unions between British merchants or military men and indigenous women played vital roles in making empire sustainable in both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds, and the past two decades have rightly seen increased attention paid to the incidence of cross-cultural family formation.²⁵ In an ironic departure from historiographical conventions that typically privilege dominant elites, however, we know much less about the white marital family of the Company era than we do about British men’s relations with their Indian concubines. Company historians repeatedly note that British men far outnumbered British women in eighteenth-century India—an assertion that has discouraged writing British women into Company narratives.²⁶ Yet the production of white legitimate children required the cohabitation of married couples, and among the governing elite in the Company’s three Presidencies, the co-residence of British husbands and wives was hardly uncommon. Eliza Davidson herself appears to have been born to her Pigou father in India, and having married Davidson in Calcutta 1768, she continued to reside on the subcontinent

²³ See <http://www.dcedin.co.uk/TNG/getperson.php?personID=11165&tree=tree1> .

²⁴ David Arnold, ‘Deathscapes: India in an Age of Romanticism and Empire, 1800-1856’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 26 (2004), pp. 339-53.

²⁵ See esp. Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Christopher Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India 1773-1833* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), and Perry, *Colonial Relations*.

²⁶ Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780-1868* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014). More broadly, see P.J. Marshall, ‘The Whites of British India, 1780-1830: A Failed Colonial Society?’, *International History Review*, 12 (1990), pp. 26-44. Tillman Nechtman argues that ‘British women who actually went to India in the eighteenth century...represented such a small community as to be almost demographically insignificant’. Tillman Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 188.

with him, bearing daughters at roughly annual intervals—punctuated by occasional miscarriages and infant deaths—throughout the following decade, until at last in 1782 she gave birth to their one surviving son. The couple’s eldest daughters were dispatched to Britain to the care of their paternal relation, Lady Grant, in the 1770s, ensuring their socialisation as Europeans while allowing Eliza to continue breeding Davidsons in Madras. She travelled from India to England with her youngest children in 1784. Within two years, Eliza had settled her three youngest surviving daughters and her son with her cousin Mrs Chitty in a house at Gower Street in Bloomsbury. She returned to Madras with her eldest daughter, Betsey—now seventeen, and approaching a marriageable age.²⁷ The rich archive of private correspondence documenting the Davidson-Chitty-Grant-Pigou diasporic family circle dates from this period and continues until Eliza’s death in India in 1791.

The correspondence that connected Mrs Chitty and the Davidsons in the 1780s reveals a female world of love and ritual familiar from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s pioneering article, a domestic realm focused on the reproduction of the family in which the intense ties of women’s friendships were voiced in passionate expressions of mutual love. Entrusted in 1786 with the care of her cousin Eliza’s youngest children, Mrs Chitty kept a daily letter-journal recording life in her household, a document she sent to Eliza in several annual instalments. From the outset, the entries in this journal underlined the emotive connections that bound the two women. Having received a letter from Eliza in February 1786 reporting the imminent departure of her ship from Gravesend, Mrs Chitty recorded that ‘it occasioned many tears and was so fraught with affectionate expressions & thanks to me, that they fell involuntarily’.²⁸ Eliza’s letters to Mrs Chitty likewise emphasised the physical force of her emotional ties to her cousin: ‘the satisfaction you always express in receiving my letters ever makes my eyes sparkle with joy; and my heart feels a kind of united sensation of pain

²⁷ Not yet developed by the Duke of Bedford’s wife, Lady Gertrude Leveson-Gower, Gower Street was a bucolic setting with ready access to the British Museum gardens and extensive fields nearby. The actress Mrs Siddons, who purchased a house in Gower Street in this period, described it as backing onto countryside. Henry Wheatley, *London Past and Present: Its History, Associations and Trades* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 134.

²⁸ Mrs Chitty’s Journal (henceforth MCJ), Christ’s College, Cambridge, 12 February 1786.

and pleasure', she wrote from Madras in 1788.²⁹ 'Could you but see my throbbing heart, you would pity its palpitations', Eliza exclaimed to Mrs Chitty two years later, when her daughter Lydia—cared for by her cousin at Gower Street for four years—arrived safely in Madras.³⁰ From her home in the Highlands, Lydia Falconar entered actively into these sentiments, notwithstanding—or, perhaps, precisely because—she had herself met neither her sister-in-law Eliza nor Mrs Chitty. On receiving of box of Indian gifts from Eliza in 1785, Lydia wrote feelingly that 'my family have found a mother indeed in you, my most amiable, considerate & condescending sister...the much Loved Miniature has revived me—I must wear it constantly in my Bosome—it has sett me a ranting for a sight of the original'.³¹

Descriptions of ranting and weeping in their private letters expressed more than merely conventional sensibilities: Company women deployed this emotive language of homosocial love to reinforce and legitimate the circulation of children between adults within the extended kinship group, exchanges necessitated both by shortages of capital at home in Britain and by the dearth of British personnel in the Company's Indian domains precipitated by excess mortality. In Inverness, Lydia Falconar's daughter Eliza—strategically named after her aunt Eliza Davidson née Pigou—was destined by her impecunious parents for Madras via Gower Street, where tutelage in Mrs Chitty's genteel household would prepare her for the imperial marriage market. 'I know you will have the goodness of heart to make allowances for the unpolished manners [sic] of a Scotch Girl', she wrote to Mrs Chitty in 1788. 'Believe me my Dear Madam your Letters to Mamma have excited in me an Affection bordering on that due to a Parent.'³² Again and again in these letters, parents keen to press the superior claims of their children to the care, attention and patronage of influential Company cousins and in-laws emphasised that these relatives had effectively become their

²⁹ Eliza Davidson (henceforth ED) ED to Mrs Chitty (henceforth MC), 25 March 1788, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 130.

³⁰ ED to MC, 3 August [1790], BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1B, fol. 372.

³¹ Lydia Falconar (henceforth LF) to ED, 8 August 1785, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 43 verso.

³² Eliza Falconar to MC, 12 December 1788, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 246.

children's loving parents. On her return to Madras in 1786, Eliza Davidson was accompanied both by her eldest daughter and by Alexander Falconar, her sister-in-law Lydia's eldest son, whom Eliza's husband was determined to place in the Company's service. Lydia's letter of thanks described Eliza as 'a blessed instrument to my Family—your unbounded generosity to my Son, whome you have now made your own by a Costly adoption...excite[s] a Gratitude, a Love too big for utterance'.³³

Acting as foster mother in Madras to her Scottish sister-in-law's son, Eliza herself relied upon her cousin—'Camden Chitty', as she called her—to mother her Indian-born children in London. Upon arriving 'home' to Madras in 1786, Eliza reported to her husband that she had left their children in good health in the care of Mrs Chitty, 'who I am confident will be to them a tender Mother'.³⁴ A vital role of Mrs Chitty's daily letter-journal to Eliza was its attestation that, notwithstanding her status as a childless spinster, Mrs Chitty was a loving mother to Eliza's children. The tears and kisses repeatedly recorded in this document provided vital physical markers of Mrs Chitty's love, potent reminders that her adoptive motherhood of the Davidson children was rooted in both sentimental and bodily substance. 'Your letters have frequently made me cry but they have been tears of comfort I look round your dear family with the affection of a Parent & when I give them the morning & evening kiss think what pleasure it would afford you,' she wrote Eliza soon after her cousin's departure.³⁵ A year later, recording her delight at receiving Eliza's first letters from Madras, Mrs Chitty noted that 'tears of joy instantly diffused themselves, and the perusal of the contents was a painful pleasing pleasure. I gave your surrounding family the parental kiss'.³⁶ References to kissing, cuddling and tickling Eliza's children were common in Mrs Chitty's journal. The infant Alec Davidson, just four years old when his mother left him in Mrs Chitty's care, shared his foster mother's bed in Bloomsbury—he was, Mrs Chitty recorded, 'my dear little bed fellow'.³⁷

³³ LF to ED, 11 February 1786, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 49-49 verso.

³⁴ ED to AD, 22 June 1786, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 55.

³⁵ MCJ, 17 Feb 1786. For the historical uses and cultural significance of kissing, see Karen Harvey (ed.), *The Kiss in History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 7.

³⁶ MCJ, 6 March 1787.

³⁷ MCJ, 24 October 1786.

When illness in the household forced her to send Alec temporarily to other accommodation, Mrs Chitty reported, he 'was very coaxing for me to sleep with him that he might tickle me'.³⁸ Describing her happy return to 'my little flock' after another absence, Mrs Chitty noted that 'my great girls received me with so much affection that I was much flattered by their sensibility..... I find I love them too well and can dwell forever upon the subject. I feel myself perfectly happy in the prospect of sharing my Boys [sic] Bed,' she concluded.³⁹

The preservation of Mrs Chitty's journal with its daily entries allows us to situate her reiterated verbal and physical expressions of love within their social context, as rituals of domestic and imperial life that worked to ensure the reproduction of both the Davidsons' nuclear family and much wider kinship networks. Sunday worship in a family pew at Percy Chapel, attendance at the Foundling Hospital to hear charitable sermons, morning visits to the local bathhouse to strengthen Alec's 'Indian' constitution through daily immersion in cold water—these were the carefully-orchestrated quotidian practices which, through ordered routines, constituted the fostered children in Mrs Chitty's household as a loving family in the absence of their biological parents. Birthdays, as Mrs Chitty recorded on the anniversary of Mary Davidson's birth, 'are Galas with us', ritualised events on which the children's 'healths are drunk in the Kitchen' by the servants and lessons were shortened to allow the treat of chicken curry to be consumed in the parlour.⁴⁰ Visiting, a social ritual Smith-Rosenberg described as central to the female world of love and ritual in propertied American families of this period, was likewise central in Georgian London. Governed by precise etiquette and strict rules, visiting was a key practice employed by adult members of the British elite for marking social inclusion and exclusion.⁴¹ It was also a practice that was animated by the conspicuous presence of women's children. With Alec, Mary, Harriet and Lydia Davidson in tow, Mrs Chitty trod

³⁸MCJ 24 March 1786.

³⁹ MCJ, 3 November 1786.

⁴⁰ MCJ, 15 and 10 October 1786.

⁴¹ Even 'public' entertainments ostensibly open to all displayed these exclusionary rituals, as demonstrated by Hanna Greig, "'All Together and All Distinct": Public Sociability and Social Exclusivity in London's Pleasure Gardens, ca. 1740–1800', *Journal of British Studies*, 51 (2012), pp. 50-75.

the streets of Bloomsbury on sociable visits. Mrs Barlow, Lady Blunt, Mrs Brodie, Lady Burgoyne, Mrs Casamaijor, Mrs Devaynes, Lady Edmonstone, Lady Gordon and Lady Grant were among the many propertied women she visited with her foster brood, and who in turn made official calls to Gower Street (often accompanied by gaggles of their own children).

* * * * *

Mrs Chitty's letter-journals provide ample evidence of her active participation in a female world of love and ritual, testifying to her immersion in a domestic circle alive with intense female friendships. Much of her daily life focused on the loving socialisation of children within the family and a homosocial circle of London ladies. Yet Mrs Chitty's diaries, and the wider correspondence of her Davidson in-laws, also provide a window onto women's place in the Georgian political and imperial order, a perspective that suggests the need to push beyond Smith-Rosenberg's paradigm of an enclosed, domestic female world of love and ritual. The practice of visiting itself illustrates this wider political universe. For although Mrs Chitty's journal makes frequent references to domestic sociability with elite women and their children, visits to and by a wide range of London gentlemen are also commonplace in this document. Some of these men were related to Mrs Chitty or the Davidsons by blood and some were accompanied by their wives, but others feature in the diary as lone men intent on conducting business. Unsurprisingly, uncle Frederick Pigou and his sons were frequent guests at Gower Street —these men were closely tied to the Company but were also blood relations of Mrs Chitty, Eliza Davidson and the Davidson children. More surprising is the prevalence of visits to and by men such as Mr Boileau, James Baillie of Bedford Square, Alexander Brodie, Peter Corbett, William Devaynes, Mr Luard, Lord Macartney, Sir Hector Munro and Captain Robinson.

Who were these men? Scrutiny of Mrs Chitty's circle of male friends reveals four overlapping nodes of mercantile and colonial capitalism. In keeping with her Pigou lineage, Huguenot descent was prominent in her social circle: the Boileau, Devaynes and Luard families all,

like the Pigous, were of immigrant French Protestant stock.⁴² East India Company interests, again unsurprisingly in light of the Pigou and Davidson family histories, were also conspicuous: all of the men who visited the Gower Street household at frequent intervals can be linked to India through substantial stock holdings and/or appointments in the civil, military or marine service. Highland Scots were also highly visible in Mrs Chitty's social network, a regional focus that reflects the Davidsons' ties, through the commercial empire established by uncle Alexander Grant, with mercantile, political and landed interests that radiated out from Nairn and Inverness to the Atlantic and India. This Highland node also featured significantly in a fourth financial interest that figured prominently in Mrs Chitty's circle: investment in Caribbean plantations, slave-holding and governance. Like Alexander Grant and Alexander Davidson, the Baillies, the Devaynes and the Luards all invested heavily in Caribbean slavery, or in the African trade that supplied Caribbean plantations with their unfree labour. These were absentee owners, but they were neither passive nor ephemeral traders: when he testified before a Parliamentary committee investigating opposition to abolition of the slave trade in 1790, James Baillie of Bedford Square (?1737-1793) noted that he had lived and worked in the West Indies from 1755 to 1771; decades later, in the 1830s, his children remained the legal owners of hundreds of enslaved persons on the family's Caribbean plantations.⁴³

Why did these wealthy and powerful men take the trouble, again and again, to visit or to invite into their homes a spinster so obscure today that we know her only as 'Mrs' Chitty, a woman whose daily life orbited around the tickles, the sniffles, the lessons, the tantrums, the bathing and the medicinal dosing of four foster children (the eldest of whom, in 1786, was only fifteen)? By reading Mrs Chitty's letter-journal to Eliza Davidson alongside letters from Davidson kin resident in India and Scotland, we can see the women's world of love and ritual in new light, as a domestic

⁴² For Huguenot families and economic development, see Robin Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage: The History and Contribution of the Huguenots in Britain* (2nd, revised edn, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001).

⁴³ For his parliamentary seat and testimony, see <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/baillie-james-1737-93>. For his West Indian estates and his heirs compensation claims, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146633538>.

space connected through sociability to economic and political labour and power, a dynamic system that depended on the concerted work of men and women. Love and emotion were integral to the work Mrs Chitty conducted with these men, their wives and their kin, but so too were the distribution of material goods, money, tactical information and political patronage—vital aspects of Company sociability in which men, women and children were alike entangled. Mrs Chitty's social circle—both male and female—provided a matrix of support for her difficult navigation, as an unmarried foster mother, of the challenging shoals of Company parenthood. At the same time, as the recipient of lengthy letters from Alexander and Eliza Davidson, she was a font of valuable information on the Company's trade and government in Madras, a region repeatedly threatened and chronically impoverished in these years by recurrent warfare with Indian princes such as Tipu Sultan (1750-1799). Through her diary and correspondence, we can follow Mrs Chitty's perambulations with the Davidson children from home to home in Bloomsbury and beyond on visits to her network of friends and relations, treading a careful path between supplicant, benefactor, giver of gifts, mother, cousin, merchant, banker, news-agent and family ambassador as she conducted the female work of love and empire.

Gifts of Indian goods, repeatedly detailed in Eliza and Mrs Chitty's correspondence, illustrate the interlinkage of women's emotional worlds with the imperial markets over which Company men presided. Gifts given to or by her own and Eliza's connections were important markers of integration into Company patronage networks and were duly noted by Mrs Chitty in her letters to Madras. 'Captain Robinson came to dinner & was friendly as ever is and brought me a pot of ginger the best I ever eat [sic] from the East Indies', she reported in February 1786, noting a month later that she had received a gift of Souchong tea from this strategically important male friend.⁴⁴ Eliza's frequent gifts of Indian luxuries from Madras, similarly, allowed her to thank and reimburse Mrs Chitty for her maternal care, while affording her cousin material means for cultivating valuable

⁴⁴ MCJ, 17 February 1786, 31 March 1786.

Company patrons on behalf of the Davidsons and their children. A striped muslin petticoat woven in Bengal, brought to Mrs Chitty from Madras by Mrs Anstruther, like the box of curry powder and Indian pickles carried to Gower Street for Eliza by Lieutenant Macaulay, were thank-you gifts which, worn on the body or consumed in Mrs Chitty's parlour, would remind her through the senses of her cousin's deep affection and high status, the two women's physical distance notwithstanding.⁴⁵ Other gifts more overtly combined family love, female friendship and political strategizing. The 'pretty gold shirts' and ivory work-boxes Eliza dispatched to Mrs Chitty, Mrs Devaynes and Lady Macartney in 1789 were gifts to loving friends, but they were also presents offered to women who, through birth or marriage, were connected to uncles, cousins and husbands who controlled EIC stock, patronage and policy. It mattered whether these women displayed these presents to other men and women during the ritualised social visits that punctuated Mrs Chitty's diary. After attending the christening of Mrs Devaynes's daughter Juliana—for whom the absent Eliza Davidson was named a godmother—Mrs Chitty reported sadly that 'the baby was neatly dressed but not in the Calicoe [sic] you gave her'.⁴⁶ She struck a happier note later in the month, in describing an evening spent at the home of Alexander Davidson's influential relation, Lady Grant, together with several other ladies, Captain Robinson and the Davidson children—the latter dressed in Company commodities that included nankeen and muslin. Their hostess, Mrs Chitty observed, 'was very gracious [&] had the India silk in a night Gown coat you gave her very smart and well dressed she was'.⁴⁷

Gift exchanges such as these located Mrs Chitty and her charges within a moral economy in which sentiment and calculation, family feeling and conspicuous consumption, homosociability and heterosociability, often overlapped, reinforcing affective claims with material self-interest.⁴⁸ In Mrs

⁴⁵ ED to MC, 26 February and 25 March 1788, BL, A&AS, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol 114, fol 132.

⁴⁶ MCJ, 9 May 1786.

⁴⁷ MCJ, 20 May 1786.

⁴⁸ For a wider discussion of the significance of gifting in Company families, see Margot Finn, 'Colonial Gifts: Family Politics and the Exchange of Goods in British India, c. 1780–1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40 (2006), pp. 203–231.

Chitty's world, moreover, love and ritualised sociability were fully compatible with the cash nexus. Many luxuries sent by Eliza from India were intended and indeed deployed as gifts to family, friends and patrons. But other goods were destined for sale, and Mrs Chitty seamlessly combined her maternal exertions with mercantile transactions in domestic settings. In April 1786, she reported to Eliza, Miss Luard called to inquire about Harriet Davidson's health '& to take the pieces of Muslin & Calico you desired me to dispose of—I have sold them for 19 guineas & could not do better [as] the money is certain'.⁴⁹ The sale of the six pieces of silk Mrs Chitty received from Eliza in June 1786 required complex negotiations that extended over time and geographical space. Having paid the customs duty due on the silks in east London, she decided that the Davidson girls were too young for such finery and determined to sell them among her Bloomsbury and West End friends. The ever-solicitous Captain Robinson valued the silks for her at a guinea each. This proved an unduly pessimistic estimate. Taking little Alec with her, Mrs Chitty visited Lady Grant, who paid her six guineas for several of the silks; two days later Miss Buchannan, visiting Gower Street, paid six and a half guineas for others.⁵⁰ These sales were not exceptional events in Mrs Chitty's diary, nor were they transacted in a sphere separate from domestic sociability. In October 1786, she held a dinner party attended by Lady Grant, Mr and Mrs Devaynes, Captain Robinson and Lydia Davidson. Just as her guests assembled, Mrs Chitty reported, Mrs McLean 'came with a Miss Hancock to see the silks—the Lady was going out of town the next day and I was obliged to admit her particularly as she had frequently called when I was from home'. After inspecting the silks, her visitor agreed to make a purchase. 'I was quite elated thinking I should get the 7 guineas', Mrs Chitty noted, before observing that 'Maria made us a delightful curry'.⁵¹ The new year saw Mrs Chitty extend her mercantile operations from London to Bath: at a sister-in-law's request, she sent her remaining Indian silks to Somerset for sale, 'and hope[d] she will be able to dispose of them'.⁵²

⁴⁹ MCJ, 11 April 1786.

⁵⁰ MCJ, 6 June, 16 June, 23 June, 25 June 1786.

⁵¹ MCJ, 26 October 1786.

⁵² MCJ, 14 January 1787.

If the retail of fashionable Indian textiles was business Mrs Chitty conducted primarily with other women, management of her own and the Davidsons' complex finances repeatedly saw her consult with men. Remitting money from India was a fraught and protracted process even in the best of times, and endemic warfare further undercut the late eighteenth-century Madras money market.⁵³ The Company suspended payment of the salaries of senior civil servants for extended periods so as to channel all available funds into military campaigns against Tipu Sultan; combined with the demands of a large family and his own expensive tastes, these measures ensured that Alexander Davidson was mired in debt, owing large sums both in India and in Britain.⁵⁴ Mrs Chitty's efforts to redeem the bills he sent from Madras occupied much time and effort, and saw her travel on a circuit that encompassed Bloomsbury, her uncle Pigou's West End residence at Berners Street and the City of London. Advised by uncles, male cousins and senior Company officials such as Peter Corbett, she received payments and paid debts totalling thousands of pounds. Domestic sociability and high finance went hand-in-hand as Mrs Chitty executed her daily business. March 1786 saw no fewer than five visits with uncle Frederick Pigou to discuss strategies for redeeming a bill for £400 Alexander Davidson had sent from India but inconveniently made out to Eliza Davidson, who had already sailed for Madras.⁵⁵ The Company men with whom Mrs Chitty routinely socialised assisted her and her Pigou kinsmen in these complex financial transactions. Alexander Brodie, MP for Nairnshire and himself a retired Company civil servant, advised Mrs Chitty on the problematical bill for £400 in 1786; when her money worries persisted into 1787, Peter Corbett at the East India House offered financial assistance in the event that the Davidsons' promised payments failed to materialise with the season's ships from India.⁵⁶ Corbett's offer reflected ties of instrumental sociability that

⁵³ For the problem of remittances and its social consequences, see Margot Finn, 'Frictions d'empire: les réseaux de circulation des successions et des patrimoines dans la Bombay coloniale des années 1780', *Annales*, 65 (2010), pp. 1175-1204.

⁵⁴ Alexander Davidson (henceforth AD) to ED, 10 April 1789, MSS EUR E 300/1B, fols 223 verso-224 verso; ED to [Frederick Pigou], 23 February 1791, MSS EUR E 300/1B fol. 405; ED to MC. 21 February 1791, *ibid.*, fol. 436.

⁵⁵ MCJ 4, 5, 17, 26 and 28 March 1786.

⁵⁶ MCJ, 5 March 1786, 25 February 1787. Corbett served the EIC for fifty years, notably at the Bengal warehouse, and was pensioned off as a senior official shortly before his death in 1802, age nearly 80. See *Asiatic Annual Register*, 4 (1802), p. 122 and *Gentleman's Magazine*, 92 (1802), p. 855.

routinely crossed gender lines and stretched from London to the subcontinent. Eliza Davidson wrote frequently to Peter Corbett from India, thanking him for his kindness to her children at Gower Street, begging patronage for her Highland kin, and reporting that Corbett's son—like his father, employed in the Company service—was safely ensconced in the Davidsons' home outside Madras—recovering under her maternal care from a tropical fever.⁵⁷

Bound together through sociability and the care of children, through gifts and sales of exotic material goods and by complex financial dealings, Mrs Chitty's social world was also powered by the political imperatives of Company patronage. Appointments to India were restricted to the Directors elected annually by Company shareholders, a monopoly they guarded zealously and deployed strategically to reward selected family and friends.⁵⁸ Like the networks that distributed the spoils of parliamentary and Crown patronage in these decades, Company offices and promotions routinely mobilised elite women alongside elite men in social settings.⁵⁹ Mrs Chitty's care for the Davidson children, all destined by their parents for employment or marriage in India, drew her ineluctably further into the coils of Company patronage. This political business was riven by internecine factional disputes that were heightened by a chronic imbalance between the number of available Company appointments and the number of clamorous candidates for employment. Competition for patronage played out in the very parlours where Mrs Chitty displayed the Davidson children, gifted and retailed Indian luxuries and dined on curried chicken. The expressions of tender love that recurred in women's letters, the strategic exchanges of Asian luxuries, the constant round of visits to each other's homes—these were the fertile soil upon which Mrs Chitty and her circle cultivated their Company identities and thence their Company patronage.

⁵⁷ ED to Peter Corbett, 30 July 1788, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 144-144 verso; ED to PC, 6 February 1789, *ibid*, fols 167-169.

⁵⁸ H.V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. chap. 5.

⁵⁹ See esp. Elaine Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life, c.1754-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), *idem.*, 'Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), pp. 669-98; and Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 4.

We can see the confluence of love, ritual and empire in these Georgian women's lives most clearly in the concerted family campaign they orchestrated to obtain a Writership for Alexander Falconar—who was Lydia Falconar's son, Eliza and Alexander Davidson's nephew and (after their deaths) their daughter Betsey's husband. Schemes to effect this cherished goal dated from Eliza's brief residence in London in 1784-85. From Madras, her husband wrote advising her to feed information extracted from his letters to the friends and family with whom Eliza socialised in EIC circles, laying the groundwork for soliciting Falconar's appointment to the Company's civil service. 'You will please to shew it to Lady Grant, Mr. Pigou, Sir Hector [Munro], and to my other Friends', he wrote of one such extract in 1784. 'Hide no India secrets from Lady Jane Macartney—she bears a most excellent, amiable character.' Reporting that he had succeeded in placing his illegitimate son George in the Company army in Madras, he urged his wife to provide for Alexander Falconar. 'Do not try to get George a Writer[ship], he is too lazy', Davidson commented. 'Exert your interest for my Sister Lydia's eldest son.'⁶⁰ Desperate to ensure that their sister-in-law Eliza, whom they had never met, would take up this challenge, the Falconars wrote from the Highlands to abdicate their parenthood. Responding to a 'most affectionate, indulgent' letter from Eliza about their son's prospects, William Falconar announced that 'with unbounded cheerfulness & gratitude, [I] resign him over to you and his uncle, to use Him as you shall think proper....My Dear Madame henceforth He is yours, entirelie [sic] yours'.⁶¹

Having failed to achieve the coveted Writership during her brief sojourn in England, Eliza sailed for Madras with both her daughter Betsey and her nephew Alexander Falconar in hand, determined to continue her campaign from the subcontinent. The next years saw her bombard female and male friends and family alike with letters urging Falconar's claims to an appointment, emotive epistles she strengthened by gifts of Indian luxuries to influential Company women. Eliza

⁶⁰ AD to ED, 31 January 1784, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 11-11 verso, 12. See similarly AD to ED, 28-29 July 1784, *ibid.*, fol. 20 verso.

⁶¹ William Falconar to ED, 1 June 1785, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 37-37 verso.

entered without trepidation into the male world of the Company's Court of Directors, writing to William Devaynes—who she thought likely to become the next Chairman of the Court—that Falconar was 'an amiable Young man whom I love like my own son'. A godmother of Devaynes's infant daughter, to whom she sent gifts of Indian textiles, Eliza enlisted her female friends in her nephew's cause: 'I fairly tell you that I shall put my worthy friends Mrs Devaynes and Lady Macartney on your back', she told William Devaynes firmly.⁶² Within a day, she had written letters urging Falconar's case to both Lady Macartney and to Devaynes's wife Jane, enclosing her letter to William Devaynes in the letter to his wife with the instruction 'pray deliver [it] to him when in his gayest humour'.⁶³

By 1787, Eliza's determination to place her nephew securely into the Company service was rendered urgent by the prospect of his marriage to her daughter. Betsey, who confessed to have 'liked her cousin the first moment she beheld him in Gower Street' at Mrs Chitty's home, had 'resolved never to have any other' suitor, Eliza informed her cousin. The only impediment to the marriage was Falconar's lack of employment.⁶⁴ Cousin marriages such as this proposed union were common in Company circles, and in propertied British society more broadly, affording a simultaneous mechanism for solidifying families' emotional ties, political interests and economic fortunes.⁶⁵ Alexander's suit, moreover, if only he could be placed in a lucrative post and accumulate capital, promised to ease the Davidsons' chronic fear that premature death would leave their children without an adult male provider.⁶⁶ From 1787 to 1789, Eliza sent a stream of increasingly desperate letters to her Company contacts in London: in a begging letter to Peter Corbett in 1789,

⁶² ED to William Devaynes, 2 December 1786, MSS EUR E 300/1A fol. 67-67 verso, 68.

⁶³ ED to Lady Macartney and ED to Jane Devaynes, 3 December 1786, MSS EUR E 300/1A fols 69-70.

⁶⁴ ED to MC, 13 October 1787, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 77.

⁶⁵ Adam Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). A similar strategy was the marriage of brothers to women who were sisters. See Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and Their Relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶⁶ From his post in Vizagapatam, Alexander Davidson urged his wife in Madras against allowing a precipitate marriage. "I am very deeply in debt, if I die—or if he die—Lord have mercy upon the female part of our Family!" AD to ED, 16 June 1789, MSS EUR E 300/1B, fol. 286.

she noted that she had already written to Mr and Mrs Devaynes, Lord and Lady Macartney, John Sullivan and Alexander Brodie on this subject.⁶⁷

Mrs Chitty acted throughout this sustained epistolary onslaught as Eliza's henchman on the ground in Bloomsbury and the West End, armed with her cousin's instructions, letters and gifts as she made her way around the houses of influential Company men and women on sociable visits. The muslin shawl handkerchiefs Eliza sent to Mrs Chitty for her little Devaynes god-daughters, she observed, would afford her cousin an opportunity to plead with Jane Devaynes for 'this most particular favo[u]r'.⁶⁸ Partial success came in April 1789, when Mrs Chitty recorded a visit to her at Gower Street by EIC Director William Devaynes, who expressed with sorrow his inability to secure a Writership for Falconar, but offered to appoint him to a cadetship in the Company's army instead.⁶⁹ At long last, in July, the women's concerted appeals to their male and female patrons secured the desired goal. 'Mrs Devaynes came to tell me she had carried the point, your last letter...open'd her eyes & her heart, involuntarily I fell on my knee kiss'd her hand & burst into tears', Mrs Chitty reported to Eliza, noting that Lord Macartney had called on her at Gower Street soon thereafter and had promised to despatch official notice of the Writership to India.⁷⁰ For the Davidson children, their cousin Falconar's appointment to the Company service proved more than timely, for their parents both succumbed to the Indian climate in 1791. Working his way steadily up the hierarchy of the Madras civil service, their cousin Falconar—now the husband of Betsey Davidson and eventually the father of her fourteen children—followed in the footsteps of his elder kin and assumed responsibility for settling his young in-laws (and his Scottish siblings) into Company employments or marriages.⁷¹ 'Wrote Mrs Chitty & my mother—with Remittances to the former', his diary recorded in March 1797, reflecting the Bloomsbury spinster's continued role as foster-mother of his youngest

⁶⁷ ED to Peter Corbett, 6 February 1789, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 168-169. It was in this letter too that she noted that Corbett's son was convalescing in her Madras home.

⁶⁸ ED to MC, 1 February-1 March 1788, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fols 121-121 verso.

⁶⁹ MC to ED, 29 April 1789, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 205.

⁷⁰ MC to ED, 3 July 1789, MSS EUR E 300/1A, fol. 211.

⁷¹ His family life is documented in N.S. Ramaswami (ed.), *The Chief Secretary: Madras Diaries of Alexander Falconar 1790-1809* (Madras: New Era, 1983).

Davidson cousin, Alec.⁷² His fond uncle, Alexander Davidson, had spent his last years dogged by mounting debts and unpaid bills, but when Alexander Falconar retired with his wife and cousin Betsey to Edinburgh in 1809, he was sufficiently wealthy to purchase Falcon Hall, an imposing mansion in Morningside (previously the home of the Lord Provost) to which he added a neo-classical façade and life-sized statues of Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington.⁷³ It was a far cry from the impecunious Highland home of his youth.

* * * * *

The gaps that mark our basic biographical knowledge of East India Company women provide a telling reminder of the continued need for the work of recovery of women's lives initiated by earlier generations of feminist historians. Writing Mrs Chitty's story back into the narrative of Britain's empire likewise requires attention to the emotional regimes that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg both recovered and accorded historical value to in her pioneering article of 1975. At many times in any given day, Mrs Chitty inhabited a female world of love and ritual dominated by women and their children. Hers was a social life animated by intense female friendships and ordered rituals calculated to ensure the reproduction of her own and her cousin's family. But Mrs Chitty's history, and the biographies of her female contemporaries, must be understood as lives that—despite the structural inequalities of Georgian Britain's highly gendered society—played instrumental roles in the heavy work of managing imperial markets and politics.

Wealth accumulation through employment in the Company's Indian empire was a collaborative enterprise, a family business that required labour from both men and women. Reproductive labour—both the labour of biological birth and the hard graft of raising children to adolescence and socialising them to Company culture—was performed by an array of natural and

⁷² Ibid., p. 18 (28 March 1797). He noted Alec Davidson's arrival in Madras, as a cadet in the Company army, on 1 October 1798, advancing sums of 50 pagodas to Alec on 2 October and to one of Alec's sisters on 20 October 1798 (p. 23).

⁷³ <http://www.scotsman.com/heritage/people-places/lost-edinburgh-falcon-hall-1-3664151>.

adoptive mothers and fathers, actual and fictive parents drawn variously from the nuclear family, blood-kin, in-laws and influential friends. The spinster Mrs Chitty was an essential cog in the Davidson family machine, simultaneously cousin, mother, nurse, provisioner, saleswoman, patron and client to her adoptive brood and their parents. By reading her family letters we can locate Company women within a wider world of love and empire, a heterosexual universe in which women were employed in essential managerial roles notwithstanding their exclusion from official Company appointments.⁷⁴ Their social networks functioned as efficient factories for the production of East India Company personnel, and their homes functioned as effective investment houses for human and financial capital extracted from India. Dominant stereotypes of this era associated Company women with idle luxury and egotistical consumer excess.⁷⁵ Her contemporaries, however, clearly understood that Mrs Chitty's care of Company children was work that connected her to the business of empire. For the title 'Mrs' in eighteenth-century Britain denoted not mere marital status, but rather engagement in active employment: 'it described a woman who governed subjects (that is, employees or servants or apprentices)', Amy Erickson reminds us.⁷⁶

We see in Mrs Chitty's daily diary and family letters, and in the Davidson-Falconar-Grant-Pigou family nexus, a colonial empire that straddled the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds. But we can also discern in these sources fundamental differences between the gendered social practices of empire in Company India and the British Caribbean. 'Capital', as Catherine Hall has observed, 'was not anonymous—it had "blood" coursing through its veins and this had implications for how it functioned on both sides of the Atlantic'.⁷⁷ Historians have described both eighteenth-century Jamaica and Company India as 'failed' white settler societies, attributing the inability of British elites

⁷⁴ A fuller survey of her household duties would reinforce this point. Her primary care was given to the four Davidson children, but at various times in the later 1780s she also housed at Gower Street four other Company children (one of whom died in her home), exercised oversight over another, provided a home for her feckless brother's daughter Juliet and at least one of Alexander Falconar's sisters (sending Juliet Chitty and Eliza Falconar with Lydia Davidson to India in 1788).

⁷⁵ Nechtman, *Nabobs*, chap. 5.

⁷⁶ Amy Louise Erickson, 'Mistress and Marriage: Or, a Short History of the Mrs', *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), p. 39.

⁷⁷ Catherine Hall, 'Gendering Property, Racing Capital', *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), p. 30.

to take root in these colonies in part to the absence of white women who might serve as marriage partners for white colonial men.⁷⁸ Both the number of white marriages and their duration declined over the eighteenth century in Jamaica: ‘By the end of the century, the average Jamaican marriage barely lasted long enough to result in even one surviving child,’ Trevor Burnard asserts.⁷⁹ Single men who cohabited with women of African descent and absentee plantation owners with white families resident in Britain (such as Mrs Chitty’s friends, the Baillies of Bedford Square) were accordingly the norm in Caribbean capitalism, a fragile social formation increasingly conscious of its inability to reproduce itself, and increasingly determined to draw sharp racial distinctions between white and black persons.⁸⁰ Precisely because of the female work so successfully conducted by women such as Mrs Chitty, however, the demographic regime in India displayed quite different characteristics. Although white men significantly outnumbered white women on the subcontinent, British women were conspicuously present within the Company’s upper circles in India and—as Eliza Davidson’s childbearing attests—enjoyed considerable reproductive success there already in the eighteenth century. This progenitive tendency would increase rather than diminish in nineteenth-century British India, as the birth in Madras of thirteen of the fourteen children of Eliza’s daughter Betsey indicates. Having recovered these women and their reproductive work for the historical record, we can now begin to ask how the birthscapes of empire over which they presided played out across the subcontinent and in Britain, connecting the Indian and Atlantic colonial worlds to be sure, but also contributing to their widely different configurations of race, labour and power.

⁷⁸ Marshall, ‘The Whites of British India’; Trevor Burnard, ‘A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica’, *Journal of Social History*, 28 (1994), pp. 63-82.

⁷⁹ Burnard, ‘A Failed Settler Society’, p. 67.

⁸⁰ Hall, ‘Gendering Property’.

