

‘Si constante et si sûre’: testimonies of Rothschild friendships

Melanie Aspey describes a new addition to the Archive: a collection of letters addressed to James and Betty de Rothschild which highlights their extensive network of contacts.

Of the many thousands of letters addressed to the Rothschild family in France, preserved in The Rothschild Archive in London and the Centre des archives du monde du travail in Roubaix, very few are of such an intimate nature as those in a collection that was presented to the Archive in late 2005. These letters are the primary evidence of the development of the business of the Paris bank, many of them from leading protagonists in the tumultuous political life of the country during the nineteenth century which the Rothschild family endured and survived. Whether concerned with the purchase of shares in the French railways or of a bird of paradise,¹ the letters are a vivid testimony of the way in which the business and social lives of the Rothschild family were inextricably linked.



James de Rothschild,
Hippolyte Flandrin.

Opposite
Betty, *La Baronne James de*
Rothschild, Jean-Dominique
Ingres, a painting displayed
at the Louvre in 2006 as
part of a major retrospective
of the artist's work.





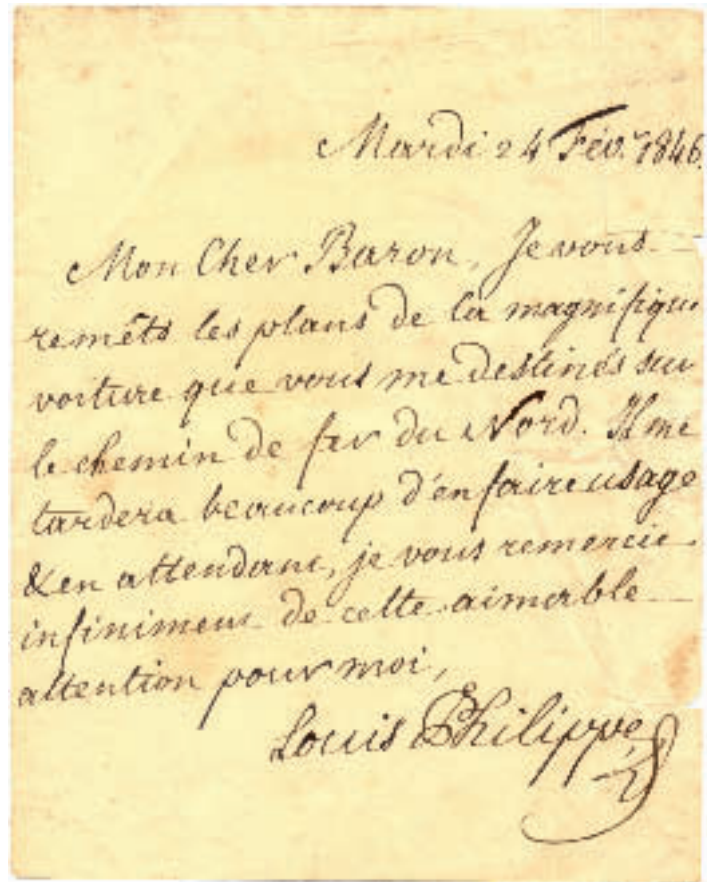
Letters written to Betty de Rothschild by Marguerite d'Orléans, Princesse Czartoryska.

Like her close contemporary, Charlotte, Baroness Lionel de Rothschild (1819–1884) Betty was a Rothschild daughter as well as a Rothschild wife and mother. Charlotte's father wrote to her at the time of her marriage about her new responsibilities, reminding her to 'find out what is happening in London ... go visiting every Sunday'. While excluded from a direct role in the business, the Rothschild women nevertheless made their own contributions to the advancement of the family. Hospitality played a key part of the development of the Rothschild business, the splendour of which was noted by Lady Granville, wife of the British Ambassador to Paris in the 1830s, in a letter to her sister. 'On Saturday we dined at a sumptuous feat at Rothschilds'. She reported that the hostess, Betty de Rothschild, 'just out of her nursery ... does the honours of her house as if she had never done anything else'. The letters in this collection underline the significance of the role of the women of the family.

In her new biographical study Laura Schor describes Betty's advancement in society; her friendship with Queen Marie-Amélie brings her into the most exclusive and influential social circles in Paris. Betty 'joined the charitable endeavours that constituted part of the accepted role for society ladies' and developed a 'public role as a philanthropist'.² Letters in the collection underline this view. Here are ten letters from the queen, all but one (from Malvern in 1858) written from Claremont, the Surrey estate where she spent her years of exile. Three of the letters seek Betty's intervention to help secure appointments for the queen's protégés, three men who have all provided services and friendship to the queen and her family and for whom she hopes that positions might be found in the Rothschild bank in Paris. One letter written by the queen to James de Rothschild, from Neuilly on 12 November 1829 makes a direct appeal to him to assist the career of Eugène de Sabor who was at school with her son. The remaining letters are largely expressions of thanks for good wishes and gifts for 'les exilés de Claremont', and the final letter, written on 21 February 1865, a year before the queen's death, contains the good news of the impending homecoming from Brazil of François d'Orléans, her third son, and his wife, especially welcome to her after the harshness of the winter which the 85-year-old queen has found a particular trial. Betty's gift – a bottle of Bourbon – was perhaps intended to alleviate at least some of its worst effects.

Letter to James de Rothschild from Louis Philippe, King of France, 24 February 1846. The king returns plans for a magnificent carriage that James intends for him on the Rothschilds' Chemin de fer du Nord.

Below
Telegram from Adolphe Thiers to Betty de Rothschild from Versailles, to where the government and troops were evacuated from Paris.



Two notes from Marie-Amélie's second son, Louis d'Orléans, written in March and April 1866, offer the hope that Betty's letters to the queen might themselves survive. Having asked Betty what he should do with her letters to his late mother that he has found among her papers, he confirms that he will make them ready to send back to her. Letters from three more of the queen's children feature in this collection: Ferdinand-Philippe, Henri, Duc d'Aumale and Marie-Clémentine, underlining both the strength and the longevity of the ties of friendship between the two families.

Betty's philanthropic commitments are demonstrated in a short series of letters from other members of the family. Isabelle d'Orléans writes on 11 July 1875 to enlist Betty's help in establishing a foundation to assist victims of the recent flood, especially children; Marguerite d'Orléans, Princesse Czartoryska writes on four occasions during 1872 and 1873 to acknowledge Betty's donations to the *Souscription Nationale* and to ask her to take tickets for the lottery of St Casimir, a Polish foundation for orphans. (The place from which she writes, the Hotel Lambert, Paris, became the scene a century later for the sensational balls staged by Marie-Hélène de Rothschild.) The most lyrical tribute to Betty's philanthropic activities however comes from a politician, Adolphe Crémieux, who places himself at her feet and declares that her great charity to the poor and hungry will be recognised by God.

Twelve letters to Betty from another politician, Adolphe Thiers, span 31 years. Looking back on her friendship on 23 February 1871, days after he was elected head of the provisional government, he remarks that it has been 'si constante et si sûre'. In 1866, at the end of the Austro-Prussian war, he warns that great attention should be paid to Bismarck. Did Betty remember this when the victor of the Franco-Prussian war occupied James's rooms at Ferrières where Thiers had been such a frequent guest of the Rothschild family? The latest dated communication from Thiers in this collection, written from Versailles following 'La Semaine Sanglante'.

‘Madame et très chère amie – je vous remercie de votre souvenir – j’ai été assez heureux pour sauver mon pays de l’anarchie mais il faut le tirer maintenant des horreurs de l’incendie.’

Although undated, the letter that is probably the earliest in the collection, almost certainly written in 1818, from Jacques Laffitte, banker and statesman, contains the only sour note. Laffitte reports to James about a meeting that has taken place during the morning (Thursday, 21 May) to discuss the scope of foreign houses operating in France. James’s wish to participate in a state loan, notes Laffitte, is seen as a threat to the dignity of the government, undermining the character of benevolence and nationality that he and his group want to bring to the financial operation. The context for this letter can be found in Niall Ferguson’s account of events at the time.³ Ferguson refers to Laffitte’s memoirs, in which he claims that James was excluded from the French reparations loan in 1817 explicitly on religious grounds, primarily at the instigation of Alexander Baring. James explored the motives of his rivals in letters to his brothers and concluded that Laffitte himself was not the enemy. ‘I am having another meeting with Laffitte tomorrow and then I shall write and tell you how everything stands and you can write and say whether we should come forward on our own or not. Laffitte is proving to be a good man, indeed a very decent and worthy man for whom we must have every respect. His word is sacrosanct. He has promised that I should do it with him in partnership and so he has told the others, “If Rothschild is not included, I will go and make an offer to Rothschild on my own”’.⁴

The remainder of the letters addressed directly to James demonstrate the distance the ‘foreigner’ has travelled since those days and underline his skill in steering a steady course through revolutionary times. ‘There is but one power in Europe, and that is Rothschild’, wrote French socialist Alexandre Weill. ‘He no longer needs the State, but the State still has want of him’. And not just the French state. Francisco Martinez de la Rosa, Spanish Prime Minister, writes in 1834 inviting the Rothschilds to become bankers to the court of Spain and to lay the foundations for public credit; in the following year James’s great interest in the affairs of his country is noted by Portuguese statesman José da Silva Carvalho (letter of 14 November 1835).

The warmest relations between the Rothschild family and the Turkish state are declared in letters to James and to Betty. Fuad Pasha, Turkish delegate to the Paris peace conference of 1856 following the Crimean war, wrote to Betty in 1858, noting, ‘J’ai écrit quelque choses en turc dans votre album. Vous m’avez défendu de faire des compliments, mais vous ne pouvez pas m’empêcher de dire la vérité’. The sensitivities of diplomacy are acknowledged by Mustafa Reshid Pasha writing in March 1856. He thanks James for sending his son with a letter and for the demonstrations of friendship which it contained. He wishes James to know that his son was received with all the respect that is owed to the Rothschild family, which never ceases to show its sympathies for Turkish interests.

The revolution of 1848 left the Rothschild business intact, and the family at the centre of a social circle that was, in part, dispersed by exile. Family correspondence already in the Archive records much of the panic that swept through the ranks of the Paris Rothschilds, with only Charlotte, Baroness Lionel’s phlegmatically-expressed belief that ‘it will never do to give up hope of a brighter European, a Rothschild future’ representing a positive attitude. Several correspondents offer reassurance and even a note of regret. On the notepaper of the *Gouvernement Provisoire*, Louis Blanc dissociates himself and his government from a printed circular demanding the surveillance of the Rothschilds and that they be compelled to lend money to the government (letter of 29 February 1848). Louis-Eugène Cavaignac writes cordially about arrangements for meetings; Louis-Antoine Garnier-Pagès, mayor of Paris, sends a receipt and note of thanks for James’s subscription of 50,000 francs for the wounded and the workers. The prefect of police, Louis-Marie Caussidière, who ordered James to appear before him on a charge of smuggling bullion out of the country in dung carts, writes from the Market Street Hotel, Philadelphia on 10 February 1854, thanking the former accused for his kindness and services during the writer’s current misfortune.

The services that the Rothschild family provided to their friends and clients is amply demonstrated in many of these letters, perhaps most extensively in those from Prince Metternich, his wife and son. Mélanie, Princess Metternich acknowledges a seemingly endless supply of fabrics and hats which Betty directs to Vienna; the purchase of Parisian gowns on her behalf is also entrusted to Betty. Metternich and his wife reveal the extent of their attachment to Betty's father, Salomon von Rothschild, in several letters including one of condolence on his death in July 1855.

Among the other correspondents is a familiar figure from Rothschild history, Prince Pückler Muskau, the German writer and traveller, who observed Nathan Mayer Rothschild at work in London. Travelling, he reveals here, both explicitly and implicitly, can be something of a trial and a writer's words can sometimes return to haunt him. In Malta, in February 1836, he reports his assessment that Greece is 'un pays beaucoup barbare que l'Afrique', and announces that in spite of no reply to his two previous letters to the Baron he intends to draw 10,000 francs on the Paris house. Perhaps incautiously, in view of his previously expressed statements, he writes to James from Athens later that year, attempting to dig himself out of a small hole. The account of his journey in France has just appeared in translation and he hopes that Betty will not associate him with the badly expressed description of her. The slashes to the pages indicate that the mail has been disinfected, a precaution against the periodic outbreaks of cholera.

Occupying just one archival box and representing a tiny proportion of the Archive's holdings, these letters are evidence of the success of the Rothschild family's integration into the very heart of French life in the nineteenth century. These testimonies to their constant and sure friendship provide valuable new resources for historians of the period and are all the more welcome additions to the Archive in view of their unexpected discovery.

Melanie Aspey joined The Rothschild Archive in 1994 and has been Director since 2004.



Notepaper of Orléans House, the Twickenham home of the exiled Henri d'Orléans, Duc d'Aumale.

NOTES

1 RAL 000/1618 letter from Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, 7 July 1845 requesting a subscription of 30,000 francs in the Chemin de fer du Nord; letter from Clemens Wenzel, Prince Metternich, 1 December 1831 asking Betty de Rothschild

to buy a bird of paradise from a market in Paris for his wife and to send it to Vienna.
2 Laura Schor, *The Life and Legacy of Baroness Betty de Rothschild* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p.105.

3 Niall Ferguson, *The World's Banker: The History of the House of Rothschild* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p.152.

4 RAL XI/109/9, letter from James de Rothschild to his brothers, 14 February 1818.