Preface

“No amount of scientific analysis or synthesis can take the place of that crucial act of human empathy by which the historian identifies with another time and place, reenacting the thoughts and reliving the experience of people remote from himself.” Family biography is one of the most promising avenues to empathetic recreation of the past, since it must stress the concrete and the circumstantial. Flesh-and-blood personalities make day-to-day decisions, cope with the routine operation of institutions around them, and respond to economic pressures, social imperatives, and cultural norms. Properly described, the responses of a limited group or clan over several generations to these pressures and norms can throw light on the wider society—its structure and its values.

This book is intended to illuminate the process of “coping” with the issues and challenges the eighteenth century presented to one socially mobile French family, the Depont of La Rochelle. Fortunately, the sources and the experiences of the Depont family were sufficiently rich and varied to make it possible to treat a whole range of issues in French and early modern European history. What were the approved avenues of social ascent? How and why did a mercantile, Protestant family abandon the Atlantic slave and sugar trade to enter office, buy land and rentes, and convert to Catholicism? What were the psychological effects of this metamorphosis? What was the “mentality” of an anobli, a social hybrid like Paul-François Depont? What kind of landlords did newcomers make? Were they more businesslike, more entrepreneurial than the older landed families, or does land management seem to have rules of its own, unaffected by the temperaments of individual landlords? What kind of public administrators did parvenus like Jean-Samuel Depont make? Was “new blood” a sure road to innovation and reform or was the newcomer likely to enjoy the emoluments of his new-found status even more than the Old Guard? What was the impact of a Parisian culture on a young provincial raised by an economy-minded rentier and a Catholic convert? If Paul-François Depont was ambivalent and even anxious about his recently acquired status, and if Jean-Samuel, his son, paid for his prodigious
capacity to adapt to Parisian standards of behavior with a kind of professional lassitude, Charles-François, his grandson, could turn to politics in the next generation of family ascent. This young “DePont” worried less about land and annuities, status and life-style, and much more about law and politics, constitutional reform and “la Nation” as the century drew to a dramatic close.

One of the purposes of the book is to trace the emergence by 1800 of a new elite, a social amalgam of landlords, administrators, and professional men, capped by political liberalism and a national awareness. These families would govern France for another century. The history of the Depont family in the eighteenth century is a case study in the making of a nineteenth-century Notable. Yet, at the same time, it is a story about real people who responded, not as a “class” or a sociological category, but as human beings laden with ambiguity and inconsistency who could not see the larger “trends” and “forces” the historian identifies in retrospect. I attempt to capture these ambiguities and nuances in human behavior as well as to identify the major challenges and constraints French society presented to the Deponts over a century. I make no apology for a narrative format; the issues in the field are interwoven into the story.

Within the limits imposed by the sources and common sense, I have tried to allow the Deponts of La Rochelle, Metz, and Paris to reveal their attitudes and values: not only what they experienced, but also, where possible, how they experienced it. Tone and texture are as much my concern as What and Why. At the very least, I hope the reader will enjoy having lived chez the Depont family as much as I have.