The Houstouns of Georgia

Johnston, Edith Duncan, Houston, Rab

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Foreword to the Reissue

Amercans’ search for identity has been long and varied, illuminating along the way the story of America itself. This massive, mobile nation comprises immigrants who have a strong sense of national identity, pledging allegiance to the flag. Yet these same people may still personally be lacking firm roots, concerned about the loss of community and collective memory in a rapidly changing and often unfamiliar modern world. If we know where we come from, it is so much easier to find out where we are and where we are going. Edith Duncan Johnston’s The Houstouns of Georgia (1950) is part of that journey, a rewarding mix of genealogy and history that takes us to the heart of early America and what it means to be American.

French historian François Weil identifies four “genealogical regimes” in American family history over the last three centuries. The first started with the initial European migration, as a quest for social status in an outpost of the British empire. The second began around the War of Independence and saw genealogy in Enlightenment terms, as an egalitarian, moral, and familial concern. The third, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, was characterized by a link between ancestral pride, a search for the origins of (white) racial purity, and the emergence of nationhood. Its expansion was fuelled by the advent of professional genealogy and a growing market for genealogical instruction, aids, and resources. Finally, present-day approaches come out of the questioning of authority and hierarchy (especially racial dominance) associated with the 1960s. Facilitated by the internet and developments in DNA science, modern American genealogy has
become much more inclusive and varied, dealing with diverse ethnicities. It is the second most popular hobby in the United States and the second-most common reason for using the internet. In 2017 Ancestry.com generated more than $1 billion in revenue (growing at more than 30 percent per annum) and had three million paying subscribers.

Published three years before a British American team introduced the world to the double helix, *The Houstouns of Georgia* comes from a distinct era. It is about people and the society and culture that formed them and was in turn shaped by them. The problem with DNA ancestry is that it prioritizes genetic relationships over social and cultural history. It tells us our ultimate origins but not how we came to be who we are. We are our experiences and memories, formed by the material environment in which we live and the human relationships we make, regardless of where we acquired our chromosomes.

The founder of the Georgia dynasty that so fascinates Johnston was Patrick Houstoun of Paisley, who came from what was then a small but growing burgh (town) to the west of Glasgow, Scotland. One of several Scottish lairds (gentlemen) who settled in Georgia the year after its foundation in 1733, he inherited a baronetcy in 1751, giving him the title Sir Patrick. He held several important Crown offices. One-fifth of the book is devoted to him, the remainder to his five sons, who together straddled the American Revolution and its aftermath. The author unpacks the family’s divided loyalties during the rebellion against George III, dealing with each of the sons in turn: Patrick Jr. and George were Loyalists; John and James were outstanding patriots; George McIntosh, the husband of the Houstouns’ only daughter, Ann Priscilla, allegedly betrayed the colonists’ cause. Following a range of occupations (medicine, law, planting, commerce, military) the menfolk were also prominent in public service (the women were there, too, but usually in the background). They held positions in all three branches of the government of Georgia as well as national posts, including in the legislative bodies of the colony and state, delegate to the Continental Congress and to the Constitutional Convention (William, the fifth son), and governor of Georgia during and after the Revolution. Descendants continued to be important, including Ann Priscilla’s son John Houstoun McIntosh, who was involved in
the annexation of East Florida. Born in 1878, Edith Duncan Johnston carried on the family tradition of civic duty in Savannah in the local and national Girl Scouts, Episcopal Diocese of Georgia, and in the cofounding of a Savannah historical organization. She died in 1963.

*The Houstouns of Georgia* is a book about a family in a specific time and place, but it illustrates many important elements within mid-twentieth-century history, genealogy, and society. One is the emergence of accurate, evidence-based genealogy. Donald Lines Jacobus established the first scholarly genealogy journal, the *American Genealogist*, in 1922. His aim was to set out how to use documentary evidence found in libraries and archives to cater to, but also to discipline, the emerging mass market for genealogy as both memory and identity. A prolific writer, he established rigorous methodologies, which are evident in Johnston's study. Johnston made exhaustive and meticulous use of a wide range of primary sources--mostly official records, family papers, and newspapers--all carefully and extensively footnoted and furnished with a full index.

Elements of cultural folkways such as kinship systems, originating in Ireland and Scotland, can be found in locations removed from areas more readily identified with Irish, Scottish, and Scots-Irish settlers, such as the Appalachians. Georgia is one. But the book is not just about Scots or Americans or Scots Americans. It is also about what the American political commentator Walter Lippmann termed, more than a century ago, an “Atlantic community.” He meant that Britain and America shared aspects of common cultural engagement and exchange. His call was lost for a time in the isolationism of American politics in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet a recognition of the “profound web of interest” among North Atlantic nations grew strongly in the very different climate of the 1940s and beyond. While they began in Georgia during the 1920s, Johnston's later labors, in a swathe of archives and libraries, located in the United States, Britain, and Jamaica, exemplify the spirit of this era.

This substantial history also adds greatly to our understanding of the transition from colony to state, through a richly detailed biographical study of two generations of a family that played a significant part in the process. That does not mean it is an integrated history of political, business, and social
life in eighteenth-century Georgia. The genealogical detail is sometimes minute, seemingly of family interest alone. Family history research is, after all, inherently personal in nature. Even when exploring a well-known historical event or actor as the catalyst for undertaking research, the perspective remains microhistorical because grand historical narratives of nationhood and belonging sit firmly within a familial context. The past is personal for most family historians, and this is especially true in Johnston’s book. As a genealogical study, *The Houstouns of Georgia* is more engaging than most; as a family biography, it is best appreciated as a labor of love.

It does, nevertheless, afford many arresting glimpses into a period of monumental change and thus helps us to develop an imaginative understanding of people in place and time. Because it is human in scale and covers private as well as public life, it draws us into a very different material and mental world, where family ties and close-knit webs of sociability pervaded religion, business, and politics. The noted British historian G. M. Trevelyan wrote movingly in 1949: “The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact, that once, on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another; gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.” It is this poetry that *The Houstouns of Georgia* captures so perfectly.

**Rab (Robert) Houston**

[http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/staff/rabhouston.html](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/staff/rabhouston.html)

Twitter: @ScotHistorian

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