CHAPTER 1

From Edinburgh to Aleppo

A physician has numberless opportunities of giving that relief to distress which the wealth of India could not purchase.¹

At the heart of this chapter is the family background and education of Scottish half-brothers, Alexander and Patrick Russell, who authored Aleppo. Though the first edition (herein Aleppo) was published in 1756, nothing substantial was published about the Russells in the eighteenth century. Several book reviews appeared and there were brief articles in popular journals.² Other information can be gleaned from eulogies to Alexander by the English Quaker philanthropist, John Fothergill,³ and to Patrick by his brother, Claud Russell (1732–1820) and the British surgeon, Sir Everard Home FRS (1756–1832). In line with the scientific traditions of the Enlightenment, few biographical elements were overtly incorporated by Alexander or Patrick into their own writings.⁴

The geographical remit of this Part begins in Edinburgh then follows Alexander’s professional career abroad in Aleppo (1740–1754) and London (1755–1768). Patrick’s professional career had five phases: Aleppo (1750–1771); Edinburgh (1772–1775); London (1775–1781); India (1781–1789) and London again (1789–1805). As a result of their upbringing and medical training in the University of Edinburgh’s Medical School, then one of the leading institutions in its field in Europe, the Russells’ lives reflected an ever-expanding network of connections within Scotland with a cultivated aristocracy of landed gentry and middle-class merchants at “home”; with friends, colleagues and family “near-abroad” (London); “middle-abroad” (Rotterdam, Leiden and Paris); “abroad around the Mediterranean” (Levant, Constantinople, Smyrna (now

called İzmir), Algiers, Livorno, Venice and Minorca); and “far-abroad” (India, West Indies and Pennsylvania).

Despite the Acts of Union in 1707, many Scots, educated in Scottish and European traditions, saw themselves as Europeans rather than British: though they took advantage of opportunities in the metropolis of London and in the emerging British Empire. J. G. A. Pocock has even suggested that Scottish Enlightenment was a part of Scottish Unionism; that, in fact, “Britain” was an Anglo-Scottish creation – certainly Patrick’s brother, Balfour Russell, was listed as “Scoto-Britannus”, in the University of Edinburgh records — whilst the Europe of the Enlightenment is an Anglo-French condominium. As this part explains, the Russells reflect these multiple identities: Lowland Scots, British and European.

Affluent social networks in Edinburgh revolved around commerce, nobility and the kirk in the early eighteenth century. Edinburgh’s other critical institutions included its municipal council, the university and professional medical bodies. By 1725, a patronage system existed in Scotland that helped to secure political majorities in Scotland and Westminster. It was through this system that lucrative posts in the East India Company (and possibly a few in the Levant Company) were assigned. English rather than Scots, became the tongue of Edinburgh’s landed, professional and mercantile classes. The nobility included landed gentry and gentlemen (including clergymen and university professors) and it was these local elites who became the agents for improvement and for the intellectual flourishing of the Scottish Enlightenment in Lowland Scotland.

The Russells came from a well-connected and long-established Lowland Scots family and took part in the elite social life of the literati. Patrick and Alexander were two of several sons of John Russel/Russell WS (1671/1672–27

7 Though a trivial detail, at Tron Kirk, one of the most influential churches in the heart of Edinburgh, where he was an Elder, John Russell of Braidshaw held reserved seats 32 and 33 in December 1744 near those of many advocates and noble families: thus, in a small but significant way reflecting his high standing in Edinburgh society.