

# **No Myopic Mirage: Alexander and Patrick Russell in Aleppo**

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## **Abstract**

Alexander Russell, M.D. (1715?–1768), with the Levant Company in Aleppo between 1740 and 1753, wrote *The Natural History of Aleppo* (1756); the 1794 edition was edited by his half-brother, Patrick Russell, M.D. (1726–1805). In the two editions these Scottish doctors enthusiastically describe Aleppo's opulent and orderly world. An abbreviated version, *A Description of Aleppo and the Adjacent Parts* (c. 1757), presumably for popular consumption, presents some of Alexander's observations. By exploring this description, traditionally placed within the Natural Scientific tradition of the eighteenth century, the aim of the essay is to explore concepts across the academic divide between history and anthropology.

[Aleppo] [History of Medicine][historical anthropology][Alexander Russell][Patrick Russell][eighteenth-century travellers][Ottoman empire][Syria]

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### **Introduction**

From Herodotus (c. 450 BC) and other classical writers onwards, travellers explored the Levant and brought back ethnographic information about Aleppo and its environs through their travel writings. Manuscripts on the experiences of travellers, explorers, naturalists, and colonial administrators grew in number from the eighteenth century onwards. These travel writings contain a wealth of information about the cultures and peoples of the Middle East and provide “a fascinating array of perspectives on a set of historical, literary and cultural relationships about which lively debate is certain to continue” (Starkey 2001: 6). The Russells, as medical practitioners who stayed for years in Aleppo, can avoid the condemnation meted out to more recent travel books, Paul Theroux’s *The Pillars of Hercules: a grand tour of the Mediterranean*, for example. There is a danger that such observations are based on superficial contact and that accidental events may mistakenly be given deeper, if pleasant, meaning: “Across the low hills some miles further on were minarets and citadel on a bluff, and squat buildings: Aleppo. After all the small towns and villages of the Turkish Hatay, this was like my myopic mirage, the distant vision which blurs and produces a sort of Middle East capriccio, blending beautiful rotting buildings with ugly new ones, the whole of it sifted and sprinkled with dust. Many places in the eastern Mediterranean looked that way to me, a hotchpotch of building styles surmounted by earthen-colored domes and the slender pencils of minarets ... the chaotic and friendly city of Aleppo” (Theroux 1995: 426–7, 429).

Anthropology’s philosophic and scientific antecedents lie in the Enlightenment, with the beginning of scientific methodological recording based on the idea that Natural Scientists could discover the truth about how the world operated through empirical investigation. Documentaries provided by travellers, full of ethnographic content, were often placed in an historical framework along with conceptions of “the primitive”, “the savage”, the “exotic Other”. These books were the basis of many political and philosophical theories from Rousseau to Marxism, and Lévi-Strauss. Many British anthropologists see the core of their discipline has become refocused primarily onto applications of anthropology: gender, health, and development studies. These genres, a number of texts with a shared set of conventions, by-

pass much of the philosophical and anthropological debate favoured in France and stimulated by Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu and Edward Said — ideas that could be usefully associated with the study of travel literature or historical descriptions.

### **1. Historical Anthropology?**

Anthropology and the associated study of ethnographies, nevertheless, have been through a recent revolution that has gained increasing momentum since the 1970s. This revolution has blurred disciplinary boundaries and has changed the nature of the questions some anthropologists are asking today. Indeed, one could contend that the discipline itself has changed though still based primarily on research through field studies.

Ethnography has been defined as “the study of a group of living people – how they live, how they interact, what they believe, how they behave, what kinds of objects they use, and what they do. It focuses on one group at one place in time – ethnographers ... generally spend a great deal of time living with and interacting with the group of people they are studying.”<sup>1</sup> Today, ethnographers no longer assume that culture (or identity) is a given with different parts of the social structure functioning to complete the whole, but argue, rather, that it has to be explained. If culture persists, or identities of ethnicity, gender, religious group and so on are key features of culture marked by cultural boundaries, then we must try to understand how they are constructed and reconstructed over time.

Many anthropologists, from Structuralists to Marxists, have turned to history and to historical ethnography as the way forward, whilst some anthropologists, including John and Jean Comaroff (1992) and Marshall Sahlins (1985: 136–56), advocate a genuine marriage of history and ethnography with research focused on the intersection of culture and history. The anthropological “school” of thought known as Historical Ethnography has emerged from this revolution, an approach coming primarily from the University of Chicago. As Marshall Sahlins wrote: “Practice has clearly gone beyond the theoretical differences that are supposed to divide anthropology and history” (1985: 72). For Sahlins, historical ethnography often focuses on the

politics of colonialism and its historiography — as it is reflected, for example, in myth, ethnography and material culture. A study using the Chicago School approach would also be termed “historical anthropology”, often as a study of a present-day culture in which the anthropologist takes account of that society’s historical background through life histories, myths, material culture, but as it effects the present dynamics of social change or social memory.

Sahlins’ approach goes beyond Evans-Pritchard’s famous Marett lecture, given in 1950, that exhorted structural-functional anthropologists to include a study of history in their methodology: “What anthropologists [ethnographers!] have in fact chiefly been doing is to write cross-sections of history, integrative descriptive accounts .... at a moment in time” (1950: 118–24). Evans-Pritchard did not argue that anthropology should be history but should be like history in its methodological procedures. He identified three levels of anthropological inquiry of increasing abstraction, each of which Evans-Pritchard thought had parallels to historiography: first, the anthropologist initially tries to understand another society and to translate it into his/her own society’s terms. The only difference here between the historian’s and the anthropologist’s approach is that the historian depends on engaging indirectly through the medium of archives whilst the anthropologist uses direct fieldwork encounters and participant observation. Secondly, after extracting data from archives or field experiences the anthropologist and the historian try to make their object worlds sociologically intelligible. Thirdly, “the anthropologist compares the social structures his analysis has revealed in a wide range of societies” (1950: 149).

So how does ethnography relate to historical description? We do not need to assume that ethnography is a distinct discipline from history. As Anthony Giddens wrote: “If social science is not, and cannot be, the history of the present, and if it is not, and cannot be, concerned simply with generalizations out of time and place, what distinguishes social science from history? I think we have to reply, as Durkheim did ... nothing —nothing, that is, which is conceptually coherent or intellectually defensible. If there are divisions between social science and history, they are substantive divisions of labour; there is no logical or methodological schism” (1984: 358).

As anthropologists, do we also need to consider whether ethnographic descriptions in historical texts are merely a micro

version of a macro social history, or something more in line with the ethnographies we traditionally produce? One additional problem is how can one combine ethnography and history in such a way as to capture some of the dynamics of, say, the Levant, without losing contact with the specificity of local cultural concepts or the essence of local historical power dynamics?

As early as 1904, the "Historicist" Franz Boas went as far as to suggest that "we find in anthropology two distinct methods of research and aims of investigation: the one, the historical method, which endeavours to reconstruct the actual history of mankind; the other, the generalising method, which attempts to establish the laws of development" (1904: 513–24). One can combine these two traditional polarities, anthropology and history, by applying an anthropological approach to the study of an ethnographic description, such as *The Natural History of Aleppo*,<sup>ii</sup> containing a description of the City, and the Principal Natural Productions in its Neighbourhood. Together with an Account of the Climate, Inhabitants and Diseases: Particularly of the Plague (1756). The book was written at a time before anthropological traditions and philosophies had been developed or played out. Is *Aleppo* an "ethnography" at all, in the modern anthropological sense, a term that is appropriate, for example, to Donald Cole's *Nomads of Nomads* (1975) but not necessarily to *Aleppo*?

In his Marett lecture of 1993, J. D. Y. Peel, in his concern for narrative in historical anthropology, identified a triangle of relations. First, relations between ethno-history, which he defined as "historical representations current in any social setting or people" (1995: 583), and the change sequences it represents. Secondly, relations between the past or change sequences and the social forms of the present; and, thirdly, relations between the system of power and the representations of the past, that is ethno-history. Peel also abandoned the definition of historical anthropology as "traditional histories of tribal peoples" and, importantly, recognises that "narrative, as the most spontaneous form of historical representation, has a central role in this complex of relations" (1995: 583). Does this also apply to a description such as *Aleppo* that, like narrative, is full of descriptions of memories of events and experiences?

Many of the methodological issues involved in any "historic" approach remain unresolved. New Historicists criticised the traditional

tendency to treat historical narratives (that is, the recounting a succession of events) in a vacuum, as if the historical description had no cultural context. Historians such as Steven Greenblatt (1980) argue that the best framework for interpreting historical narrative is to place a text in its cultural and historical context in the light of contemporaneous debates. History and culture, seen previously as the “backdrop” to foregrounded text are, instead, an integral part of the text itself. It might well be useful to adopt a New Historicist stance but if, according to this tradition, there is no “objectivity”, how can we explore a text written in the Natural Scientific tradition?

Furthermore, the text can be read as an autobiographical memoir, as a souvenir of life experiences and social memories; as a record of extant scientific, social and medical knowledge, as well as mapping the social space of the eighteenth-century “Islamic city”. As Michel Foucault stated: “It’s not a matter of locating everything on one level, that of the event, but of realising that there is actually a whole order of levels of different types of events, differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce (Gordon 1980: 114). Michael Heckenberger applies this to his analysis of history: “History, like culture, is not only perspective but scale dependent: what is appropriate or critical at one level of analysis is invisible, subdued, or irrelevant at another.”<sup>iii</sup> All these perspectives are part of a major project to study the text. The purpose of this essay is to outline such possibilities and set the scene for a subsequent in-depth analysis as the text is subsequently deconstructed.

## 2. The Russells and their Text

An eighteenth-century text, written in what is known as the Natural Scientific tradition, is used to begin to explore ideas about the interaction of history and anthropology. The text used to illustrate this essay is an abbreviated version, first published in 1757, of Alexander Russell’s *Natural History of Aleppo* (1756). Dr Alexander Russell (1715?–1768) worked with the Levant Company in Aleppo from 1740 to 1753. Originally from Edinburgh, the brothers were, no doubt, influenced by great philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Given the size and

importance of the city, it is surprising that so little has yet been written about the city: nor is there, as yet, a book dedicated to the Russells.

Alexander and Patrick Russell, physicians from Edinburgh, enthusiastically describe Aleppo's opulent and orderly world of the mid-eighteenth century in *The Natural History of Aleppo* (1756): described by Sarah Searight as "a delightful and exhaustive survey of the society, flora, fauna and particularly the plague" (on which Patrick became an expert) of a major Ottoman city. It is a better known and better written example of erudite travelogue, feeding "somewhat indigestibly the [West's] growing curiosity in the eastern Mediterranean, the Levant and Egypt" (1969: 77). Yet it escapes many of the features of a classical travel narrative: initiatic quest, nostalgia and deception — and is more than just an ethnographer's diary. There is no traveller's failed journey of disorder or disappointments here. Instead the Russells' writing is straightforward, and well ordered, in the Natural Science tradition that predates the nostalgia beloved of latter travel writers in their subsequent search for the exotic.

Alexander Russell began writing *Aleppo* shortly after his arrival in Aleppo in 1740 and which owed its origin to the suggestion of his friend, John Fothergill, M.D. The first volume contains a description of city and inhabitants; Volume II includes natural history, descriptions of Syria and Aleppo, with details about culture and customs, monuments, and common diseases: including a vivid description of the effects of smallpox. It was well reviewed by Dr Samuel Johnson in the *Literary Magazine*, translated into German by Gronovius, and described by Pinkerton, *Voyages and Travels*, as one of the most complete pictures of Eastern manners extant. As Robert Irwin noted, "in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [*Aleppo*] was regarded as the classic and authoritative source on everyday life in a Muslim country" (2001: 4–6).

An abbreviated version, *A Description of Aleppo, and the Adjacent Parts*, presumably for popular consumption, was published in Volume II of *A Compendium of the most Approved Modern Travels* in 1757, with excerpts from other travellers, including the Reverend Henry Maundrell, chaplain in Aleppo from 1696 to 1697 (Maundrell 1757), Dr Richard Pococke who visited Aleppo in 1743 (Pococke: 1743–1745), and Alexander Drummond, who first visited Aleppo in 1745 (1754: 184) and later became its Consul between 1754 and 1756 and to whom Alexander Russell dedicated the first edition of *Aleppo*. The

last chapter of the 1779 version of Henry Maudrell's book is a summary of the detail presented in Volume II of the *Natural History of Aleppo*.

Alexander Russell, M.D., F.R.S. was born about 1715 in Edinburgh the third son, by his second wife, of John Russell of Braidshaw, Midlothian, a reputable lawyer in Edinburgh. Alexander was educated at the High School, Edinburgh and at the University of Edinburgh (1732–1734), at a time when the city was flourishing as a centre of the arts and philosophical thought. In 1734 Russell was one of the first members of the Medical Society of Edinburgh University. He went to London in 1740 and arrived in Aleppo the same year to be physician to the English Factory with the Levant Company from which he resigned in 1753. We can speculate that he obtained this post through the good offices of another brother, William Russell, F.R.S., Secretary to the Levant Company.

Alexander learnt to speak Arabic fluently, an important attribute for any fieldworker in the region. His use of Arabic, in preference to Turkish, in footnotes shows that he was familiar with the language. Alexander acquired influence with the Governor (or Pasha) of Aleppo<sup>iv</sup> and people of all ethnic groups and classes through his medical practice. The Pasha of Aleppo granted Patrick the rare privilege of wearing a turban, an honour rarely given to Europeans. There was a high rate of sickness including dysentery, malaria, other endemic diseases, and major outbreaks of plague every few years when all Europeans stayed indoors (Davis 1967: 75). Although he witnessed outbreaks of the plague between 1742 and 1744 it was a period of relative prosperity in the city. In the Natural Scientific tradition, he collected botanical specimens and also exported many valuable Arabic manuscripts from Aleppo to Britain. After Alexander left Aleppo he returned to England, in February 1755, via *lazarettos* in Naples and Leghorn, in order to continue his research on the plague. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in May 1756; in 1760 he obtained his L.R.C.P. and a M.D. from Glasgow and was appointed physician to St Thomas Hospital, London, in the same year. He died 28 November 1768 in his house in Walbrook of putrid fever, attended by John Fothergill and Pitcairn.<sup>v</sup>

Alexander's half-brother, Patrick Russell, M.D., F.R.S., was born in Edinburgh on 6 February 1726/7 and was also a physician with the Levant Company in Aleppo from 1750. In Aleppo he assisted his

brother Alexander in the practice and took over his brother's post there in 1753, a position that he held for eighteen years, until 1771. He experienced the food shortages of 1751, inflated food prices and bread riots. He witnessed the plague between 1760 and 1762, which reduced the population of Aleppo to around 150,000. By the 1760s the English trade was fading in Aleppo. Whilst in Aleppo he wrote "An Account of the Late Earthquakes in Syria" (1760: 529–34). In December 1768 Alexander and Patrick published an account of inoculation in Arabia (1768: 14), when Alexander was informed that inoculation against smallpox was practised by Bedouin. Patrick subsequently settled in London in 1772 where he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1777. In 1781 he went to India to join his younger brother, Claud, in Vizagapatam. There he served the East India Company as a botanist and physician in the Carnatic from 1785 to 1789, publishing extensively on snakes, insects and fishes. He died in 1805, aged seventy-eight, after a brief illness. He never married.

After Alexander's death in 1768, the second edition of his *The Natural History of Aleppo and parts adjacent....*, was revised, enlarged, and illustrated with notes, and edited by Alexander's half-brother, Dr Patrick Russell (1726–1805). This second edition was published in 1794. In addition to references to plagues (1794 (II): 336 ff), there is a detailed description of local diseases and epidemics recorded between 1742 and 1753 (1794 (I): 298–333, 344ff. Gelpi 1987: 131–4), discussion of the "Aleppo boil" (1794 (II): 79), and notes on infant mortality (1756 (II): 79, 83). Its botanical chapter, substantially revised by Patrick in the later edition of 1794, is even written with post-Linnaean terminology provided by the great aristocrats of the Enlightenment, Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) and the Swedish botanist, Daniel C. Solander (d.1782), disciples of Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), after their voyage on the *Endeavour* with Captain James Cook between August 1768 and July 1771. In 1882, selections from *The Natural History of Aleppo* were translated into Arabic by Wadi' 'Abd Allah Qasan as *al-Ifranji fi Halab* [Foreigners in Aleppo].

In Aleppo, Patrick became an expert on the bubonic plague after making epidemiological observations in the area and, based on his *Treatise on the Plague* (1791), included a section on the subject in his edition of *The Natural History of Aleppo* of 1794. *A Treatise of the Plague* provides case studies of communicable diseases, especially the

bubonic plague in eighteenth-century Aleppo, its hospitals, and quarantine procedures (1791: 1–70). He gave a detailed breakdown of mortality estimates (7,767 in 1761 and 11,883 in 1762). In May 1761 he recorded 171 deaths with the figure rising to 670 by the beginning of June when he used to treat three to four hundred people in an afternoon (Jayakody 2001: 39–40). He describes (1791: 9) how 1756 was a bad winter with heavy snow and great loss of life, with resulting crop failure and subsequent danger of famine. By 1757 bread was scarce and the governor sold his supplies at excessive prices. In the winter of 1757–1758 hunger was widespread: many were unemployed. As a result, epidemic diseases effected the malnourished and as many as 40,000 died of starvation, cold and disease. There were further food shortages in 1761 and 1764–1768 (Marcus 1989: 356). One can speculate on the association of spread of the plague with the movement of large caravans from the East.

Whilst many travellers' accounts (some listed below) were based on short visits and inadequate contact with a community, the Russells' description of Aleppo is based on lengthy residence and intimacy with the local people. Given their established position as medical practitioners, the Russell brothers were free to enter homes of all local communities. The book may well reveal local philosophical thought and intellectual information that need to be assessed in the light of contemporary Arabic and Ottoman texts, as well as assessed in the light of extant contemporary knowledge of the city in other Western sources.

### **3. What of Aleppo?**

We can begin to investigate the complex involvement of the writers with the city of Aleppo as described in this text. In order to pursue this theme, this essay selects Russell's descriptions of places for leisure pursuits: courtyards, bathhouses, coffee-houses and gardens. Many ways of interpreting the narrative can be explored to provide multi-layered meanings, including the social interaction of different classes and ethnic groups, gender relations, economic livelihoods and political relations, local indigenous scientific knowledge and medical practice, beliefs and customs, and the Aleppine sense of identity.

Aleppo was, until the end of the eighteenth century, the Eastern metropolis in the Levant, a gateway to the main corridor between the Orient and the Occident. “The mosques, the minarets, and numerous cupolas form a splendid spectacle, and the flat roofs of the houses which are situated on the hills, rising one behind another, present a succession of hanging terraces, interspersed with cypress and poplar trees” (1757: 1). It is, therefore, appropriate to understand the vitality of East-West contacts stimulated by its position as entrepôt. From this perspective, too, it is important to explore contacts between the people of the Levant and European travellers as exemplified in the *Aleppo* text, to try to understand more of the history of East-West contact in a major Ottoman city such as Aleppo.

According to Alexander Russell’s figures, Aleppo was the third largest metropolis in the region in the eighteenth century after Constantinople and Cairo: “The inhabitants of the city and suburbs of Aleppo are computed at about 235,000, of whom 200,000 are Turks, 30,000 are Christians, and the remaining 5000 Jews” (1757: 71) — but cosmopolitan Aleppo was more impressive, as ‘Ali Bey recounted in the early nineteenth century: “[Aleppo] being continually frequented by a crowd of Europeans and strangers from every nation on account of its commerce, it is almost as well known as any European city.”<sup>vi</sup>

Aleppo was an important trading centre between Asia and Europe, linked by caravan across the eighty miles of desert and mountains to the Mediterranean ports of Lattakia, Antioch (Antakya) and Scanderoon (Iskenderun), where merchants waited for infrequent ships. The city also commanded the shortest land route across deserts via the Euphrates to Persia and India, and along the caravan routes to Mosul, Baghdad and Basra in Iraq. Other regions in Aleppo’s hinterland included southern Anatolia, Smyrna (Izmir), and the routes south to Damascus. It was an emporium through which passed traders and travellers (several of whom record friendship with the Russells), government officials, military personnel, pilgrims to Mecca and Jerusalem, and officials from the East India Company on the “Great Desert Route” overland to India, especially around 1750. Alfred C. Wood described Aleppo as “the terminus of the great caravan routes from Persia and Mesopotamia” carrying Persian silk and Indian spices, first on the overland route until goods were transported by the East India Company via the Cape of Good Hope and then brought to

London and sold on to the Aleppo market (Wood 1935). Again, anthropological studies on economic issues such as exchange and trade may be usefully considered as part of a larger study of the text.

Bedouin from the Arabian and Syria Deserts worked as camel drivers on the great caravans, and herders of sheep and goats from local villages in the Pashalik visited the city. The most important exchange was Persian and Syrian silk and cotton, fruit, dyes, goat's hair and coffee, for English woollen cloth and Indian spices. Ottoman silk fabrics impressed everyone as symbols of power, elegance and luxury, and trade in textiles served to transmit artistic ideas between East and West.

Before the nineteenth century, Aleppo had a reputation for being one of the fairest and cleanest of cities. "The mosques, the minarets, and numerous cupolas form a splendid spectacle, and the flat roofs of the houses which are situated on the hills, rising one behind another, present a succession of hanging terraces, interspersed with cypress and poplar trees." This description is echoed in the account of the city, its people, politics and antiquities published in 1787 in *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* by the French savant, comte Contantin Francois Chassboeuf. Comte Constantin François de Volney (1757–1820), who visited the city in 1783, noted: "The city is in itself one of the most agreeable in Syria, and perhaps the cleanest and best built of any in Turkey. On whatever side it is approached, its numerous minarets and domes present an agreeable prospect to the eye, fatigued with the continued sameness of the brown and parched plains" (Volney 1787: 148–49).

### *The "Islamic" City?*

As part of this discussion, I have suggested that, in analysing a so-called social history, ideas developed for application in present-day societies may be applied to these texts to provide additional perspectives in our analysis of the text. We can take, for example, Janet Abu-Lughod's relatively straightforward ideas about the "Islamic City" (1987: 155–7) and use them to reflect on the Russells' descriptions of Aleppo. Abu-Lughod identified three Islamic elements that led to the rise of Islamic cities. First, the distinction between members of the *umma* (Muslims/citizens) and outsiders leading to

juridical and spatial distinction by neighbourhoods; secondly, the segregation of sexes by gender leading to spatial organisation and virtual complete division of labour: and, thirdly, a decentralised system of land use and government regulation over space. The elements she identified as “non-Islamic” included climate, terrain, technologies of construction, circulation, production, political variables (rulers versus ruled), inter-communal strife, and levels of internal and external security.

Aspects of these core features of the traditional “Islamic City”, identified by Abu-Lughod, are all apparent in the Russells’ description of Aleppo, but whether these are specifically “Islamic” or not is debatable (Marçais 1928: 86–10; von Grunebaum (1955); Lapidus (1959); Hourani and Stern 1970). In Russell’s description these included the foundation of the city following military conquest, with its focus being a military garrison (*amsar*) in the citadel (*al-qal‘ah*). Alexander Russell also mentioned law courts and other administrative institutions; a large Friday mosque (*masjid al-jami‘*) in this important settlement in the Pashalik; religiously endowed schools (*madrasah*) near mosques, and crafts associated with educated strata of society. He also detailed specific commercial districts around and within the city. Russell describes the industry for he visited textile workshops: “A vast number of hands are employed in the silk and cotton manufactures. Besides large factories, where a great many looms are kept under the same roof, a multitude of inferior artisans have one or two looms in their own houses” (1794 (I): 161).

Other core elements of the “Islamic” city as described by Abu-Lughod and featured in *Aleppo*, included a structured road pattern, numerous craft shops with concentrations of craft types together, light industry in the markets and in separate industrial quarters, caravanserais/khans, or inns located near main routes, customs offices (*gumruk*), banking facilities, and financial offices. Interestingly, there is even an illuminated push-button scale model of Aleppo in the newly designed Ethnographic Museum in Leiden, which is used to illustrate the concept of the Islamic city to children, an exhibit that clearly reflects descriptions of the town in *Aleppo*. Nevertheless, these ideas on the “Islamic City” have been much discredited in recent years, notably by Dale Eickelman (1974: 274–94) and, again, these ideas could be judged in the light of an analysis of *Aleppo*.

Aleppo, founded in the fourteenth century BC, was incorporated into Ottoman Empire in 1516/7 as the chief town of an Ottoman *vilayat*, dominated by its citadel. The Russells experienced Aleppo under the reigns of Sultan Mahmud I (1730–1754), Osman III (1754–1757) and Mustafa III (1757–1774). Whilst the Ottoman Empire was still a great military power until the 1760s, its suzerainty was lightly felt in the surrounding Syrian Desert. It might be more appropriate for any study of the text to address Ibn Khaldun’s ideas on the rise and fall of empires, favoured by anthropologists such as Richard Tapper (1983), rather than continue to overwork the model of an “Islamic” city.

### *Social Stratification*

There have been many recent studies of social stratification in the region such as that by Van Nieuwenhuijze (1965).<sup>vii</sup> Again, applying similar Marxist anthropological perspectives to any discourse on the text may well help us to understand the class structure of Russell’s Aleppo in the eighteenth century. Russell identifies Turkish-speaking groups as the Osmanli i.e. those in the service of the Porte, and the “Turks”, dominated by their “*Bashaw*” and retinue; The *Effendees* included the *ulama*, spiritual leaders, legal experts and scholars, who spoke Arabic and some Turkish, and other men of social distinction, the *Aghas*, that is, those who rent land, Muslim merchants who have some influence on the city council (*divan*) and come from well-established families. He had contact with *celebi* (Turkish), meaning “gentleman”, a group that included doctors, builders, money lenders, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, and cloth merchants as well as those trading in pharmaceuticals, spices, coffee and paper. Through the Levant Company he met the city’s élite, the export-import merchants (*tujjar*). Christian and Jewish counterparts addressed respectfully as *khawajas*. He also mixed with “true Arabs” or “Bidoweens”, by which he meant Bedouin living in tents, as well as those who lived in lower-class areas of the town working as labourers and servants, whom he called “Moors”. Apart from distinguishing the various Christian and Jewish groups, he noted both Muslim Sunnis (Sonnites) and Shi‘i (Shites). He found the lowest social group included prostitutes, entertainers and servants (Marcus 1989: 51).

There was a strong if isolated community of European merchants who were resident in the *khans* of Aleppo with well-structured communities from Holland, Greece, France and Italy. Officials at the English Factory included a consul, vice-consul, chaplain, doctor and treasurer, with as many as forty factors, storemen, porters and dragomans (often Italian, Greek or local Christians). Most of those working with the Levant Company stayed in Aleppo for seven to ten years but they had a conservative social circle, few learnt Arabic or Turkish, and few associated outside their own community.

The Russells' description is made up of many descriptive fragments though thoroughly based on personal experiences. Alexander Russell, for example, describes local foods in detail with a list of one hundred and forty one local dishes (1756 (I): 100–15) and was entertained lavishly when the harvest was rich and food prices low: there was always a worry in case the harvest failed in the agricultural lands of northern Syria and southern Anatolia. Alexander recounts: "The [Syrian] Merchants commonly dine in their apartments in the Khanes; some have victuals sent from their own kitchen, but many content themselves with bread, cheese, and fruit, or perhaps a Kabab from the bazar. Their chief repast is supper, at their own houses" (1756 (I): 143–4). Hot, unsweetened coffee and tobacco were consumed, from adolescence by both men and women, throughout the day and even at night. "If they happen to awake in the night, they sit up, fill their pipe, have a dish of coffee made, and sometimes, especially in the long winter nights, eat some of their sweet pastry, and thus sit till they drop asleep again" (1757: 80–81).

In contrast to many of the Levant Company merchants, Russell appears to have been regularly entertained in "Turkish", Christian, Jewish and other houses. He reported that the Muslim population were tolerant of Christians and Jews but speaks of "insolent petulancy" rather than mutual respect between communities. He gives us detail about dialect, attitudes, customs and traditions, dress and commerce, providing a valuable insight into the way of life in Aleppo. Indeed, it is his detailed descriptions of the various communities in Aleppo that are so valuable. He records the obsessive attention given by Aleppines to the complexities of their elaborate and stylish dress codes (fur, silk, gold thread), and notes their preoccupation with elaborate rules of etiquette and ceremony dictating proper behaviour in different situations (1756 (I): 73–94, 115–19, 172–7). He found a sombre,

hardworking local community whose activities centred on the family, the mosques, the *khans*, the *bagnios* (described in 1757: chapter I), the coffee-houses (1757: chapter II) and visits to the surrounding gardens (1757: chapter III).

*Bagnios: purity, gender and leisure*

Other elements of the city included public water facilities such as fountains and the baths (*bagnios/hammam*). Abraham Marcus, using Court records, found that thirty-two bath-houses were within the city walls, especially near the central bazaar, seven in the busy centre of Banqusa, seven in the northern district and the other three in the west of the city (Marcus 1989: 287).

Furthermore, Russell's descriptions of the public baths reflect so many ethnographic themes studied by anthropologists: purity and pollution, gender relations, the behaviour of different religious groups, seclusion of women, daily routine in urban spaces. Russell recounts that "in the city are a number of public bagnios, which are frequented by people of all sects and conditions, except those of high rank, who generally have them in their own houses" (1757: 67). In 1752 several bathhouses were exclusively reserved for Christian women in the walled city and in Christian quarters in the north. The Christian clergy, at least, periodically warned against excesses of the bathhouse (1757 (I): 136–7, 188, 254).

Russell describes the different procedures of the *bagnio*, with its benches, fountains and separate rooms, depilatories (*dewa*), massage (1757: 68–69), servants and relaxation. After a session in the bathhouse a man "goes out to the great room, where he generally smokes a pipe, drinks coffee, and perhaps eats some fruit before he dresses." (1757: 69). Aleppines believed in the virtues of cleanliness but Russell found that some only visited the bathhouse once or twice a fortnight, so that children were especially liable to skin diseases. He contends that "frequent use of the bagnio, may be one principal reason why their labours are much easier than those of the women in England." (1757: 76) and also describes special visits to the bathhouse by women after childbirth. Russell describes the bathhouses in detail. "A few of the *bagnios* are solely for the use of men, and others are appropriated to the use of women: but the generality of them admit both sexes, though at different times; the men in the morning, and the

women in the afternoon” (1757: 67–68). Hammam Yalbougha al-Nasri (established 1491 and frequently rebuilt), for example, is still open to women from noon to sunset and to men in the evening.

Class issues are reflected in the use of the bath-houses, for “The Turks at Aleppo being much addicted to jealousy, they confine their women as much as possible, and seldom allow them to visit even their own sex. The husband is however obliged to suffer them to go often to the bagnio” (1757: 87). Women brought their children along, as well as food, drink and entertainers, “the bagnio being the principal place where they have an opportunity to shewing their fine cloaths, of seeing company, and enjoying a free conversation even with their own sex, it is not to be wondered that they are very fond of it (1757: 70). The women also “refresh themselves at intervals, by going out into the other rooms, where they smoke, converse, and drink coffee, with some of the various parties that are commonly there.” (1757: 69–70). Rich women would rent the bathhouses for private parties and in Ramadan the baths and coffee-houses were kept open all night when the crowds were entertained with puppet shows, jugglers and tumblers (1757: 91).

Other differences of gender, social class and the daily cycle are described in *Aleppo*. The town was surrounded by privately-owned gardens and orchards that were popular places to relax and picnic under the shade of the trees. Some of these gardens were just outside the walls in the old moat (*khandaq*) and provided most of the seasonal fruit and vegetables for the town. Aleppines would bring picnics, musicians and buffoons to entertain them. Women particularly enjoyed these outings, yet “The ladies, even of the greatest distinction, are obliged to walk on foot, both in the city, and when they go to a garden at a moderate distance” (1757: 80). In the 1750s “Turkish” women were restricted to visiting the gardens on Mondays, Thursdays and saints’ days (1757: 87); in contrast, only a few of the Christian wives were allowed to go to the gardens two or three times a year to go to the gardens and others “though they are not a mile from their houses, never see one in their lives” (1757: 89).

#### *Coffee-houses, storytellers, and puppeteers*

The coffee-house was the domain of men, equivalent in function of sessions at the bathhouse for women (Hattox 1985: 160). As in the

London coffee-houses, men relaxed, exchanged gossip and smoked a water pipe or two before evening prayer. “The coffee-houses ... attract the notice of a stranger .... They are found in all quarters of the town, and some of them are spacious and handsome. They are gaudily painted, and furnished with matted platform and benches; those of the better sort have a fountain in the middle, with a gallery for musicians” (1756 (I): 23). After supper “many of the ordinary people go to the coffee house, where they pass the time till evening prayer, and then retire. People of rank sometimes visit after supper, but seldom are seen abroad later than ten o’clock.” (1756 (I): 143–4). In contradiction to his description of the coffee-houses as “spacious and handsome”, he noted that “The coffee-houses of Aleppo are frequented by none but the vulgar” (1756 (I): 23, 146–7; 1757: 81). Upper-class men tended to enjoy leisure pursuits at home: music, reading, storytellers, buffoons and dancers.

Russell recounts how the frequenters of coffee-houses “are there entertained by a concert of music, a story-teller, and obscene kind of puppet-show, and sometimes by jugglers and tumblers”. These entertainments were based on oral tradition, in contrast to the world of the mosque, which is based on Qur’anic texts and their interpretation. The storyteller, often recounting tales from the “Arabian Nights”, and a large repertoire of exotic stories full of genies, magic, supernatural birds, erotic veiled dancing girls, entertained the crowd. These tales were also retold by women in the privacy of their bedrooms, to send their menfolk to sleep. “Many of the people of fashion are lulled to rest by soft music, or Arabian tales, which their women are taught to repeat” (1757: 81). Russell only found two volumes of this scarce book in Aleppo, and only with two hundred and eighty “Nights” so, with difficulty, had a copy made for himself.

Although Russell described the puppet shows, musicians, jugglers and tumblers in coffee-houses as “their [Aleppines] only public entertainments” (1757: 81), storytellers, puppeteers and musicians also performed in marketplaces, festivals, weddings, and in private homes. The puppet shows were pageants rather than dramas, full of jokes, silly plots, obscenities,<sup>viii</sup> and proverbial wisdom. These were in the form of shadow plays (*khayal al-zill* or *karagöz*), common throughout the Ottoman Empire and Persia, with the central character of Karagöz; other characters no doubt reflected stereotypes of local ethnic groups as they do today at Metin And (1979) describes: the

invincible woodcutter-“Turk”, “Kurd” (traditionally vacant but haughty), “Armenian” (humourless), “Arab” (beggar or coffee grinder), “Jew” (moneylender or pedlar who knew only broken Turkish), “Persian” (traders in carpets or a money lender who recites poetry and rides a horse) and the “Frank” (depicted as a physician or merchant, speaking bad Turkish). They were interspersed with satire, *risqué-revue*, relating to local government officials and their social policies, Aleppine story-telling tradition relied on mimicry and dialectic eccentricities, with stock phrases, puns, slapstick, monologues, *double entente* and everything done to music, by disreputable musicians. Russell recounts how storytellers sometimes broke off in the middle of stories leaving listeners to speculate on the probable outcome like any good soap-opera until the next day (1756 (I): 148–50). His descriptions reflect that of Thévenot (1665: 66–67):

I think, that among their Diversions I may reckon Puppet-plays; for though the Turks suffer no images among them, yet they have puppets .... Now they are commonly Jews who give shows, and I never saw any but them play. They play not as in France and other Countries of Europe, but place themselves in a corner of a room, with a cloth hung before them; and in the upper part of that piece of hangings there is a hole or square window, about two foot every way, with a piece of thin white stuffe over it; behind this they light several candles, and having with the show of their hands represented many animals upon this cloth. They make use of little flat figures, which they move so dextrously behind the cloth, that in my opinion it makes a prettier show, than our ways does; and in the mean time they sing several pretty songs in the Turkish and Persian languages, but on most nasty subjects, being full of obscenities; and nevertheless the Turks take great delight in seeing of them.

#### 4. Influences?

As part of a larger study of the *Aleppo* text, it will be important to discover how much of the account is directly influenced by the writings of other travellers. Sibte Ibn al-‘Ajami wrote his *Kunuz ad-dhahab fi tarikh Halab*, a description of the topography, buildings, events and ways of life of Aleppo in 1415 (Sauvaget 1950). Antonio Tenreiro was one of the first Portuguese to travel from Aleppo to

Basra, in 1523 (and back in 1528). From the late sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century, the occasional European traveller visited Aleppo, leaving us with as many as twenty-three published accounts of the city (Marcus 1989: 379). Venetian and Genoese merchants traded there long before the seventeenth century: while Venice continued to trade with the Orient, Venice remained the centre of European civilisation. In 1563 the Venetian writer Caesar Frederick visited Aleppo. Other travellers to the area included the Scot, William Lithgow, who having ostensibly walked from Scotland, called the region “an earthly paradise” in 1610 though he was warned by the Venetian Consul in Aleppo of wild Arabs in the desert. The poet and gentleman, George Sandys (1578–1644) made a visit to the city in 1611; Henry Blount (1602–1682) toured the Levant and published *Voyage into the Levant* in 1636 with careful notes about commerce and natural history. He spoke of the “incredible civilitie” of the “Turks”, despite his accounts of “Turkish” methods of torture. Other travellers who described Aleppo include Jean de Thévenot (1687 (II): 31–32); and Laurent d’Arvieux in Syria in 1664 (1735: 411–28) who was French consul at Aleppo 1679 to 1686 and who is cited in *Aleppo* (1794).<sup>ix</sup>

Another Scot, John Campbell, arrived in Aleppo in August 1669 “in a ragged and weather beaten condition”. His travels were written up by Richard Bell, who was a consul in Aleppo. William Beawes<sup>x</sup> who travelled to Basra leaving Aleppo in August 1745 is quoted freely by Rennell. F. Hasselquist described Aleppo as “the prettiest town in the Turkish Empire” when he visited the city in 1751 (Hasselquist 1766: 398). Other travellers to Aleppo who might have known the Russells included Hunter in 1767, Coote in 1771 (Coote 1860: 198–211), Parsons in 1774, the meteorologist Colonel James Capper (1743–1825), of the East Indian Company, probably *en route* to India via Syria in 1778–1779, and Samuel Eyers in 1783.

There is no space in this essay to analyse the influence of *Aleppo* on other eighteenth-century travel literature on the Pashalik though some examples can be cited. Bartholomew Plaisted estimated the caravan he travelled with from Basra to Aleppo included 2000 camels, later joined by the Baghdad caravan, totalling 5000 camels (about 400 laden, the rest for trade in Aleppo) and 1,000 men (Carruthers 1929: xxxiii). He reached Aleppo on 23 July 1750 and left Scanderoun (Iskenderun) on 11 August 1750 (Plaisted 1757: 59–128). His short

description is a summary extracted from the 1757 version of Alexander Russell with whom he “had the pleasure of being acquainted” (Carruthers 1929: 58). It is even entitled “A description of Aleppo, and the adjacent country” (1757: 107–13). He appears to tire of his task of summarising Russell’s Chapter III (1757) or Volume II of the 1756 edition. “It would take up too much room to describe the vast variety of fine flowers, herbs and plants to be met in these parts, and a catalogue of their names only would be very tedious, for which reason we shall omit them” (Carruthers 1929: 113). Nevertheless, the Russell’s text contains a wealth of indigenous knowledge of medical and other plants and animals alongside their accounts of medical practice.

Carsten Niebuhr used Carmichael’s work in his account of Aleppo in 1765–1766 (1774–1780). but Patrick Russell used Niebuhr’s map in *Aleppo* (1794). Major James Rennell (1831) was indebted to Dr Patrick Russell for *The Journal of Mr. Carmichael’s route across the Great Desert between Aleppo and Basrah, in 1751*. In a paper published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, read to the Royal Society on 17 March 1791, Rennell acknowledges “the manuscript copy of his [Carmichael’s] journal was obligingly communicated by my friend Dr Patrick Russell.” Text-building of this type was typical of pre-twentieth-century texts — particularly Islamic ones! — a practice which was, of course, central to Edward Said criticisms in *Orientalism*.

We are relatively clear about travel writing and the associated Orientalist developments after 1801, in contrast to classical philosophies or medieval pilgrimage traditions, but *Aleppo* was written in a period bridging the two eras. Did the Russells, for example, make a distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident”? How consistent were their perceptions of the Orient in the social space of Aleppo? Whatever else, the Russells’ work seems to be thoroughly and perceptively researched at a time when Europeans had little interest in, and less understanding of, the Muslim faith and cities, like Aleppo, where it was practised.

Its additional importance lies in the fact that the text predates nineteenth-century empire building. The discipline of history itself might be studied as an artificial academic construct that has developed in line with the evolution of Western scholarship that has blossomed since the rise of imperialism associated with colonialism in the

nineteenth century. A study of the text and its rationale, therefore, could well shed light on the later emergence of Orientalist traditions so ingrained in nineteenth-century colonialism and imperialism. So much has been written about the rise of Romantic Orientalism in the nineteenth century that it seems important to explore perceptions of the city by European travellers just before this time, to try to understand more of the history of East-West contact in the Levant.

In addition, a thorough analysis of the text may well shed light on the extent to which the text coloured subsequent travellers' descriptions of Aleppo written in the "Orientalist tradition". For example, did the book influence Burckhardt's accounts of Aleppine life between 1809 and 1811: the *suqs*, the *khans* and caravans, the *hammam*, weddings, horses, food and women? Russell mentions that "Wine and spirits are only drunk by the licentious and irreligious Turks" (1757: 84). Behaviour became so bad that in 1764 the governor ordered the closure of the coffee-houses after sunset due to problems with alcohol and prostitution. This order was repeated in 1767, all to little effect. In the 1810s Burckhardt found "young Janissaries heated with brandy and amorous passion" fighting between themselves outside a prostitute's door.

We know, at least, that the *Aleppo* text was a model for the mid-nineteenth century ethnographer and lexicographer, Edward W. Lane, as Lane acknowledges in his preface to *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836). For example, in Aleppo the coffee-house was also used for indoor games: "Within doors their entertainments are playing at chess, draughts, *mankala*, *tabuduk*, and the play of the ring" (1757: 81), many of which are described in detail in a Cairene context by Edward W. Lane's *Manners and Customs in Modern Egypt* (1836). Russell's *tabuduk* is Lane's *tab wa-dukk*. Lane certainly continued the Russell tradition of exquisite recording and careful observation in *Manners and Customs*. Edward W. Said associated Edward W. Lane with the rise of Romantic Orientalism, in the light of which Said talks of "Dr Russell's 'account of the people of Aleppo' (a forgotten work)" (1978: 159–60). Irwin (2001) concludes his review article by stating: "had Said actually bothered to look at *The Natural History of Aleppo*, he would have discovered that it provided the perfect model for *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. The second chapter, which is extremely long, covers matters such as population, language, dress, consumption of coffee and tobacco,

eating habits, religious ceremonies, family life, entertainments and funerary rites — all the sorts of things that Lane's book later covered. There was no reason why Lane, a remarkably pious and earnest character, should have sought to conceal the chief source of his inspiration, and it is sad to find Said's disparaging Russell's achievement and questioning Lane's integrity in order to prop up what is essentially a false genealogy of Orientalism" (Irwin 2001: 6).

### **5. Interpretation?**

The Russells followed the Natural Scientific philosophy behind the Enlightenment whereby a detached observer was considered to be exempt and could, according to this tradition, "objectively" determine the true causes of events. Descriptions are precisely recorded and detailed. However, did they come to understand the Aleppines through a fiction of participation as medical practitioners narrating past experiences or, rather, by remembering the intimacy of associated sensory experiences? Nevertheless, without the Russell's thorough immersion in the culture of Aleppo, the beliefs, social expectations and cultural values of the Aleppines would have remained elusive. The Russells are unsentimental empirical investigators who tried to view their subject matter systematically and scientifically rather than emotionally. But we have to remember that just as ethnographic fieldwork notes today are "written fiction", any coherent narrative may well be based on abstractions from reality.

A thorough interpretation of *Aleppo* should, therefore, be multi-layered, offering the historian many different possibilities for interpretation. As Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote: "Much has been heard lately ... on the question of whether anthropology ... properly belongs to the sciences or to the humanities ... To the contrary, anthropology seems to us to be distinctive in that it cannot be reduced to either dimension. It is clear that history, on one side, and natural science, on the other, concern themselves with the same reality, but at different levels" (1978: 23). Though the narrative is apparently straightforward, based on careful, sensitive observation and well-established contacts, is there a real meaning to the narrative to be found beyond the Russell's immediate account of what took place in eighteenth-century Aleppo? In Levi-Straussian tradition we can search for "underlying

structures” through a system of relations — or look for recurring motifs, symbols and binary oppositions. As Greg Dening stated: “The past, which we are mythically confident is knowable as such, is only known through symbols whose meaning is changed in the reading of them and in the preserving of them. Histories are the product of that dialectic between discovery and invention” (1991: 355).<sup>xi</sup> From this Structuralist perspective, history is mediated through symbolic systems with their own logic and deep cultural order that is influenced and structured by the past.

For Sahlins, history is seen as the organisation of the past in terms of the present. He sees all knowledge as constructed in the present where there is no “real” past to be decoded. He also argued that there are different ways of understanding the past, just as we analyse the present in different ways. To study History as an Anthropologist requires “the articulation of an objective history” such as the text on Aleppo with “a subjective history” partly in the actual events, dates, people and descriptions of the people themselves, and, more significantly, in the light of comparative archival material that influenced the writers. Until the accounts of other travellers and local accounts of life in Aleppo in the eighteenth century have been used to provide a comparative perspective we have, like so many more recent unique ethnographies of more isolated communities, scope for only limited interpretation. By exploring an ethnographic account, traditionally placed within the Natural Scientific tradition of the eighteenth century, we can recognise that both history and anthropology have particular ways of writing or speaking — and that through a combination of approaches, hidden voices may be discovered and the role of meaning in history can be clarified.

A postmodernist deconstruction of the text may not simply establish dialogue (as it does in the Chicago School) between the two disciplines of history and anthropology, but it might go further to enable us to reflect on the application of anthropological techniques and frames of thought to the analytical medium of “ethnographic discourse”. Just as we study “ethnographies” of recent communities, so can one, at least to an extent, use anthropological concepts to study older texts? One can attempt to decode the realities of the cultures Russell describes beneath the surface of this apparently straightforward narrative. The dual responsibility for such a discourse is enormous for it involves a duty to the original writers, as well as

those reading any subsequent “translation” of the text — and in the tradition of New Historicism to place the text in its historical context in relation to contemporaneous issues and anxieties in the societies in which the authors participated. The real challenge is how to understand the process of transmission of meaning through cultural signs and symbols in the narrative so that we can present a pre-colonial Arab/Ottoman world through a text written by two enlightened medical practitioners from Edinburgh — and to a post-colonial audience.

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#### NOTES

Note: This is the final draft of the article published in *History and Anthropology* (December 2002/January 2003), which unfortunately contains several errors that are not in this version!

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- i <http://www.webarchaeology.com/Html/ethnogra.htm> on 2 August 2002.
- ii Hereinafter, *Aleppo*.
- iii <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/mheckenb> on 14 September 2002.
- iv According to Russell (1797: 313–4), the Governor of Aleppo was usually a Vizir Pasha who held office only for a few years, the Pashalik extending from Iskanderun to the Euphrates and from 40 miles north of Aleppo to 50 miles to the south east.
- v *Gentlemen's Magazine* 1768: 109.
- vi Written between 1803 and 1807.
- vii Though hardly in the region of Aleppo, A. S. Bujra's thoughtful and thorough account of a town in the Hadhramaut (1971) also provides a useful model.
- viii J. de Thévenot (1665–1684) wrote "Then followed a scene with the 'fair ladies' which I may not describe, not even in Latin": 67.
- ix See Goutalier (1997) for a detailed account of D'Arvieux's adventures.

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- <sup>x</sup> W. Beawes, *Narrative of a Journey from Aleppo to Basra in 1745* in Carruthers 1929: 1–40.
- <sup>xi</sup> G. Dening, *A Poetic for Histories: transformations that present the past* in Biersack 1991: 355.