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PART I

AS ACTORS

Building Careers and an Empire

Scottish Families, 1760s–1790s

Status, Patronage, Education, and Wealth

*We always retain a partiality for whatever we have been once accustomed
to but more particularly if we have been so in youth.*

—Thomas Munro

*T*he years from the 1760s to the 1790s, the formative years of Thomas Munro, John Malcolm, and Mountstuart Elphinstone, saw Scotland's "Age of Improvement" at its apogee.¹ For the middle and upper ranks in Lowland Scotland it was an intellectually stimulating and culturally cohesive period, despite some religious divisions. The same issues were discussed and the same books read by the nobility and their tenant farmers, by lawyers, doctors, and clerics, and by merchants and manufacturers, mostly on subjects relating to the material and moral progress—the "wealth and virtue"—of the Scottish people. The Munro, Malcolm, and Elphinstone families belonged to different status groups within Scottish society—the Glasgow merchant community, the rural Kirk gentry, and the landed aristocracy, respectively—giving them different social, professional, and political advantages. But the families were all members of

the middle and upper ranks that were most involved in and most affected by the practical and intellectual developments of the time.

Thomas Munro was born at Glasgow on 27 May 1761, the second child and second son in a family of five boys and two girls. In a “self-portrait” drawn for his mother when he was twenty-two years old, Munro describes himself as resembling a picture he has seen of Don Quixote: about six feet tall, “as lank and meagre as him with a complexion no ways inferior . . . I would say that I am a person of a grave appearance and of a discrete [*sic*] and sober deportment.” Elphinstone, who was not prone to flattering people, described Munro as a man of “great natural genius” and of “sound sense . . . good humor . . . and philanthropy.”² Munro was partially deaf, the result of a childhood bout with measles; a handicap that probably hindered his access to certain appointments during his early career. The Munros were typical but minor members of Glasgow’s merchant community who did well during Thomas’s childhood in the 1760s and 1770s. His grandfather, a tailor, raised the family’s economic status through successful investments in American tobacco. His father, Alexander, worked in a bank before joining the family firm and acquiring a small country estate near Glasgow which provided him, albeit marginally, with the gentlemanly social status that enabled four of his five sons to enter the East India Company’s service.³ But he had few of the influential contacts necessary to oil the wheels of promotion for his boys. Once in India, they had to make their own way, hampered further by their father’s bankruptcy as a result of the collapse of the tobacco trade during the American Revolutionary War.

Munro arrived in India in 1780, served with the Madras army during the Second Anglo-Mysore War (1780–84) and spent the years from 1784 to 1788 on various garrison postings. He then obtained an appointment under Captain Alexander Read in Governor-General Lord Cornwallis’s intelligence and supply service, where both men remained until the conclusion of the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1790–92). From 1792 until 1799 Munro served as Read’s assistant in organizing the revenue system of the Madras presidency’s newly acquired Baramahal district, but he returned to intelligence and supply duties during the brief fourth and final Anglo-Mysore War in 1799, followed by a prestigious appointment as second sec-

retary to the postwar commission for the settlement of Mysore. A term as senior revenue collector for another newly acquired district, Kanara, from July 1799 until October 1800, established his reputation as an administrator; a reputation he enhanced between 1800 and 1807 with a controversial but ultimately successful administration of a large and turbulent region that had been ceded to the company by the nizam of Hyderabad. After twenty-seven years in India, Munro returned to Britain in 1807, officially on leave although frequently consulted by company and board of control officials on matters relating to Indian governance. He returned to Madras in 1814, newly married and holding an influential and prestigious position as judicial commissioner. During the Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–18) he commanded a reserve division of the Madras army with great success. After a brief visit to Britain in 1819, he returned to India as governor of Madras, where he remained until his death in 1827.

Like the Munro family, John Malcolm's family were impoverished, but they enjoyed greater access to patronage. Born 2 May 1769, John was the fourth son of the seventeen children of George and Margaret Malcolm of Burnfoot in Dumfriesshire. Eight years Munro's junior, he was a large, generous, versatile, and ambitious man with an ability to get on well, at least superficially, with people from all walks of life, and the industry and talent to convert a limited formal education into an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters at Oxford University. Lord Clive, while governor of Madras, described Malcolm as having "extensive knowledge, activity and distinguished excellence of temper."⁴ Malcolm's father had been educated for the church but, owing apparently to a speech impediment, had to struggle to support his large family as a tenant farmer. The Malcolms, however, belonged to the landed and clerical groups which had traditionally dominated Scottish life. Despite their present reduced circumstances, they enjoyed higher social status than the Munros. John Lockhart, Walter Scott's biographer, mentions that John Malcolm's grandfather Robert Malcolm had "found refuge [at Burnfoot] after forfeiting a good estate and a baronetcy, in the *affair* of 1715," an observation which suggests that Robert Malcolm, who was a church minister, was also a Jacobite. Although Lockhart was not above including gossip as well as facts in his memoir, Malcolm confirmed that the family had moved to Burnfoot soon

after the 1715–16 rebellion, telling Scott that the farm had only been “the House of the Malcolm’s since 1719 A.D.!!”⁵

John’s mother, Margaret Pasley, was a great-niece of Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto, the first baronet, and the sister of Admiral Sir Thomas Pasley and of John Pasley, a wealthy London merchant. Elizabeth Elphinstone, wife of Mountstuart’s uncle and patron, William Elphinstone, mentions in her diary that she was on visiting terms with the Malcolms, while members of the Johnstone family of Alva, long prominent in Scottish political life and friends as well as landlords and patrons of the Malcolms, sat in Parliament and in the proprietors and directors courts of the East India Company. According to contemporary observer Thomas Somerville, Sir William Pulteney (a member of the Johnstone family who changed his name on his marriage to the immensely wealthy heiress to the earl of Bath) introduced “all the sons of Mr. Malcolm of Burnfoot . . . into the career of prosperity.” Sir William was a prominent political figure, an elder of the general assembly of the Church of Scotland and had considerable influence at India House.⁶

Malcolm’s relationship with the Elliots of Minto was that of distant cousin; the two families had been joined three generations before John Malcolm met Lord Minto, the governor-general of Bengal from 1807 to 1813. The connection was tenuous but patronage was still so important at the end of the eighteenth century that advantage was taken of very remote relationships. Families were usually aware of distinguished connections, particularly if they could be useful.⁷ Malcolm was of the same generation but eighteen years younger than Minto; judged by the standards of Hanoverian Britain, it was natural and acceptable for him to make the best possible use of this connection. The Malcolm family had fallen on hard times and Malcolm’s ambition and self-promotion, his relentless lobbying of potential patrons, and his obsession with professional recognition probably owed something to a desire to reestablish the family’s status in Scotland as well as to improve his own.

Malcolm arrived in India in 1783 and served his “apprenticeship” as a cadet and ensign in the Madras army for seven years, until his regiment was posted to support the nizam of Hyderabad’s force during the Third Anglo-Mysore War (1790–92). He had learned sufficient Persian to act as

interpreter to the nizam's troops, and this experience convinced him to pursue a diplomatic career. Health problems sent him to Britain in February 1794, but he returned the following year as secretary to the commander in chief of the Madras army. In 1798 he became assistant to the company's resident at Hyderabad, and towards the end of 1798 accompanied the governor-general, Lord Wellesley, on a voyage from Calcutta to Madras. He returned to Hyderabad early in 1799 in the dual capacity of political officer and infantry commander during the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. At the war's conclusion in June 1799, he was appointed first secretary to the commission for the settlement of Mysore, with Munro as second secretary. Malcolm's great opportunity came when Wellesley appointed him envoy to Persia, a mission lasting from December 1799 to May 1801. On his return he acted as Lord Wellesley's personal political agent on several Indian missions. But on the outbreak of the Second Maratha War in August 1803, ill health forced him to relinquish to Mountstuart Elphinstone a much-valued appointment as political assistant to General Arthur Wellesley. From December 1803 until June 1806 Malcolm was engaged in negotiations with various Maratha leaders, with a brief hiatus in 1804 when he displeased Lord Wellesley. In 1807 he served briefly as resident at Mysore, an appointment he had received in 1803 but previously consigned to a deputy. He also got married. But Mysore was a career backwater and in 1808 he undertook a largely unsuccessful mission to the Persian Gulf, followed in 1809 by an equally unsuccessful mission to settle a mutiny at Masulipatam, and in 1810 by an unsuccessful mission to Persia. He spent most of 1811 at Bombay, working on his *History of Persia*, and in 1812 returned to Britain where he remained for five years, occasionally consulted by the board of control on Indian army matters. Malcolm returned to India in March 1817 and carried out both political and military duties before and during the Third Maratha War (1817–18), after which he administered a large area of Central India previously under Maratha rule until 1821. At first he had hoped to be appointed governor of either Bombay or Madras; when these prestigious posts went to Elphinstone and Munro, he hoped to be made lieutenant governor of Central India. Disappointed in this as well, however, he lived in Britain from 1822 until 1827, when he returned to India to succeed El-

phinstone as governor of Bombay. Malcolm retired to England in 1830 and died there three years later.

Unlike Malcolm, Mountstuart Elphinstone had no need to search for patrons or pursue distant relationships to further his career. As aristocrats who had for centuries played leading roles in the political life of Scotland, the Elphinstones enjoyed high social as well as political status. Born on 6 October 1779, Mountstuart was the fourth and youngest son of the eleventh Lord Elphinstone. Described in later life by Lord Ellenborough as “a quiet, mild, temperate man,”⁸ Elphinstone was intelligent, introspective, and moody. He suffered intermittently from depression and physical symptoms that suggest he may have also suffered from migraine-type headaches: severe head pain and “liver complaints.” Elphinstone’s father, a general officer, was one of sixteen Scottish representative peers in the House of Lords from 1784 until his death in 1794, and the governor of Edinburgh castle during Mountstuart’s childhood. Lady Elphinstone was a niece of the third earl of Bute, George III’s prime minister (1762–63). One uncle, George Keith Elphinstone, was an admiral who was raised to the peerage as Viscount Keith; another, William Elphinstone, was an influential director of the East India Company.⁹

Admiral Keith and William Elphinstone controlled a patronage network that provided access to careers in the navy and India—and also, on occasion, a formidable Whig opposition to Henry Dundas’s Tory domination of Scottish political patronage. The groups in Scottish society who benefited most from such patronage were the well-educated, but often impecunious, middle and higher ranks. Although a relatively high proportion of Scottish applicants for company appointments were from landed gentry or legal families,¹⁰ Mountstuart Elphinstone’s social status was higher than most.

According to the historian of the Elphinstone family, William Elphinstone promoted the careers of five of his nephews, in particular Mountstuart, his brother James, and his cousin John Adam, all of whom went to India. They “owed their progress . . . in that service, in greater or lesser degree, to the influence and assistance of their . . . uncle,” an opinion borne out by Mountstuart Elphinstone’s many expressions of appreciation to both William Elphinstone and Lord Keith for their interest.¹¹

Mountstuart had easy access to a coveted civil writership in the Bengal presidency, a better springboard to a successful career than a military cadetship. The Bengal civil service, headed by the Supreme government at Fort William, was more prestigious than those of Madras and Bombay and offered greater opportunities for advancement.

Elphinstone arrived in India in 1796 and was appointed to a junior writership at the company's post at Benares, where he remained until 1801. He then spent two months studying at the recently founded Fort William College before travelling to Pune to serve as assistant to the governor-general's agent at the peshwa's court. In August 1803 he replaced the ailing Malcolm as Arthur Wellesley's political assistant during the Second Maratha War, and at the end of the war obtained the post of resident at the court of the raja of Berar at Nagpur, where he remained until 1808. Elphinstone then requested and obtained the position of envoy to the court of the Afghan prince, Shah Shuja. On his return from this mission he was appointed resident at Pune, where he remained from 1810 until the outbreak of the Third Maratha War in October 1817. During the war, despite his civilian status, he was given authority to direct the conduct of the war within the peshwa's territories. Shortly after the war ended he was appointed governor of Bombay, a position he held from 1819 to 1827. When he retired from the company's service in 1827 he had spent thirty-one years in India without taking any home leave. He died in 1859 after a long and uneventful retirement spent pursuing his scholarly interests in England.

Both Elphinstone and Munro were well educated by all British and all rank contemporary standards when they went to India. Malcolm was not, but he recognized the disadvantages of his relative ignorance and took steps to educate himself. By the mid-eighteenth century, there was almost universal male literacy in Lowland Scotland, although the level of achievement varied from place to place. The original objects of Scottish education were to teach basic English literacy so that all people of all ranks could read the Bible and other morally uplifting literature and to provide a few years of instruction in Latin and Greek for those with the capacity to study for the church or the legal profession. In practice, public education was not available to all. Not all parishes had schools and in those

that had, long distances and rough terrain prevented many children from attending. Small fees were charged for instruction in English, Latin, and Greek, and until the late eighteenth-century it was normal for children from all but the very highest ranks to attend the same parish schools, bursaries being provided to enable talented poor children to attend higher educational facilities available only in large towns. Teaching methods were authoritarian and creativity was discouraged. School and university curricula had traditionally reflected the dominant position in Scottish life of the church and, to a lesser degree, the legal profession. By the 1760s and 1770s, however, although Latin and Greek remained important, demand was increasing, particularly in larger towns, for subjects of greater practical utility: mathematics, geography, history, European languages, sciences, and surveying and navigation. This demand reflected the increasingly materialist and cosmopolitan interests of the middle ranks of Scottish society and was fueled by two particular economic incentives. First, the general public wanted a curriculum that would be more relevant to the likely employment of most students. In 1700 the Glasgow presbytery suggested that no one intended for trades should attend the grammar school because studying Latin was “a meer loosing [*sic*] of so much time, and that of their best time for learning of things that may be more useful for them”—specifically geometry, geography, and history. The second motive for change was low teacher salaries, enforced under the 1696 Education Act. Although teacher’s pay became increasingly inadequate as the rate of inflation rose during the eighteenth century, pay raises were refused. Many competent men left teaching for better-paying clerical jobs in the new merchant houses and the East India Company, and it would have been difficult to recruit new teachers at all without Scotland’s surplus of relatively well-educated men who lacked the necessary patronage to acquire a church living, legal office, or Indian appointment.¹² To augment their salaries, teachers gave classes in extracurricular subjects outside school hours. The subjects varied from place to place according to demand and the expertise of the teacher. The emphasis, however, was always on utility.

The Munro family placed a high value on education. Thomas attended elementary school, Glasgow Grammar School and, from the age of thirteen to sixteen, Glasgow University, where he studied mathematics

and chemistry. Unlike Oxford and Cambridge, which remained largely the preserve of the aristocracy and Anglican clergy, Glasgow University catered to the sons of businessmen and tenant farmers, and was associated with the world of business insofar as professors aided and encouraged industrial inventors while engineers and businessmen provided facts for theoreticians. The late eighteenth century was not, however, an age of specialization; Glasgow students, many of whom founded and attended literary clubs similar to those patronized by Scotland's intellectual elite, were often well read on a wide variety of subjects, while Glasgow businessmen studied the theories as well as the practices of political economy. Munro was working in the accounting office of a Glasgow trading company when Adam Smith's seminal work on political economy, the *Wealth of Nations*, first appeared in 1776. He later recalled that "the Glasgow merchants were as proud of the work as if they had written it themselves; . . . some of them said it was no wonder that Adam Smith had written such a book, as he had had the advantage of their society, in which the same doctrines were circulated with the punch every day."¹³

Although Munro complained in later years of the "cold, lifeless reasoning" which students were forced, prematurely, to engage in at college, he seems to have acquired an excellent education and supplemented it with extensive reading. Soon after his arrival in Madras at the age of eighteen, he was recommended as "a learned man" to a Dr. Koenig, a disciple of Linnaeus who, three years earlier, had been engaged by the East India Company to visit Siam and the Strait of Malacca in search of plants and minerals. They discussed chemistry and Koenig asked Munro to correct the English of his botanical and chemical reports. Munro wrote to his father:

I altered most of the spelling, and . . . the arrangement of the words. He put a Greek book into my hands . . . the book did not give me much disturbance; but he talks Latin, Portuguese, and French,—his English is a mixture of all the three, which makes it very difficult to understand him. When he sees I am at a loss for any particular word, he gives me the Latin; if I still hesitate, he gives me the Greek, which is always an effectual method of making me understand.

Koenig had studied the Chinese method of reducing tin ore in Siam and Munro wrote "all the descriptions which the Doctor sends to Banks,